



## **Persuasion as a Tool in Apologetics**

By Dave Van Bebber

I have recently had a growing interest in the field of apologetics. While I am still developing in the discipline, I do have a background in the field of communication. The formal study of communication gives me a unique perspective concerning apologetics. When working on my undergraduate degree, I was a member of four Intercollegiate Speech and Debate National Championship teams. It was during this time that I became interested in argumentation and persuasion. This eventually led me to the study of persuasion theory and to the study of Rhetorical Criticism as a graduate student.

Rhetorical theory and persuasion became the primary means for connecting me to the discipline of apologetics. After watching James White debate Dan Barker on the topic “The Triune God of Scripture Lives,” I became interested in Presuppositional Apologetics.<sup>1</sup> This method of apologetics contends that knowledge of God is continually being suppressed by non-Christians.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, I believe that one of the primary tasks an apologist takes on is creating a

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<sup>1</sup>Alpha & Omega Ministries, “Debate: The Triune God of Scripture Lives! James White vs Dan Barker” *YouTube*. Online video clip, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNZh-4pDio0&list=PLBby84KboLbEyJPHbScnM5bnHb6Kzp6YU&index=4> (accessed 16 February 2016).

<sup>2</sup>Cornelius Van Til, *Why I Believe in God* (New York, NY: The Fig Classic Series, 2012), Kindle Location 29.

rhetorical act that will convince a lost individual of the truth of the gospel.<sup>3</sup> It was this concept that compelled me into further study of apologetics. Greg Bahnsen, outlining some of the foundational components of the presuppositional approach, noted:

The apologist simply must not have an arrogant attitude in dealing with unbelievers. He must be gentle, patient, courteous, and unquarrelsome. These attributes come hard to most people who hold to strong doctrinal positions . . . It is easy to become head strong and zealous to dominate your opponent.<sup>4</sup>

Bahnsen's method caused a paradigm shift in my understanding of apologetics.<sup>5</sup> It forced me to see how my background in the field communication was a conduit into apologetics.

According to Robert Gass and John Seiter, "Persuasion is a central feature of every sphere of human communication. Persuasion is found wherever you find people communicating."<sup>6</sup> It is impossible for me or any person to escape persuasion. Through my study of persuasion and rhetorical theory, I observed that persuasive attempts surround people continually. I recently learned that apologetics derives its name from the defense given by Socrates in *The Apology*.<sup>7</sup> This classic example, recorded by Plato, was a speech offered to defend against false charges.<sup>8</sup> Being that this defense was a rhetorical act, it was persuasion.

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<sup>3</sup>H. Wayne House and Joseph M. Holden, *Charts of Apologetics and Christian Evidences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup>Greg L. Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith*, ed. Robert Booth (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2011), Kindle Location 1074.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 43.

<sup>6</sup>Robert H. Gass and John S. Seither, *Persuasion, Social Influence, and Compliance Gaining*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Pearson Education, 2003), p. 4.

<sup>7</sup>Kenneth D. Boa, "What is Apologetics?" in *The Apologetics Study Bible*, ed. Ted Cabal (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2007), p. xxv.

<sup>8</sup>Plato, "Apology" in *The Works of Plato*, ed. Irwin Edman. trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1956), pp. 59-88.

It is impossible for me, as an apologist, to remain neutral in regards to the use of persuasion when providing a defense of the faith.<sup>9</sup> In other words, I cannot escape my worldview as I will always be bound by it.<sup>10</sup> Ronald Nash defines a worldview as, “The total of answers people give to the most important questions in life.”<sup>11</sup> Even if my worldview changes, I am still going to be living within it. The creation of rhetorical acts are the creation of symbols, and symbols are persuasive by nature. As this is the case, I will always be contending for my worldview when exchanging symbols. Likewise, as a Christian, I will always be contending for my faith but doing so by intentionally and persuasively presenting the most coherent worldview is my ultimate calling.

When I began to interact with rhetorical theory, one of the first discussions addressed in my Rhetorical Criticism class was the pervasiveness of persuasive attempts. Edwin Black contends that scholars study spoken and written words, so they can better understand the human condition.<sup>12</sup> This seems to likewise be one of my primary goals as an apologist but with one other component added and that is to point others to the ultimate source of understanding. This ultimate source for understanding is the Triune God of Scripture. If I can understand the worldview of a lost individual and address those misunderstandings with *critical-rational arguments*, I have used persuasion. I have also been faithful to defend the faith.

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<sup>9</sup>John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Beliefs* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2013), p. 50.

<sup>10</sup>Ronald H. Nash, “What is a Worldview?” in *The Apologetics Study Bible*, ed. Ted Cabal (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2007), p. 923.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), pp. 7-9.

Engaging and interacting with worldviews is the basis from which I feel it is ethical for me to apply persuasion theory in apologetic encounters. If I truly believe that God has revealed himself to humanity, then any rhetorical artifact that I create in exchanging information about God will be persuasive. Jesus stated, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).<sup>13</sup> I cannot help but interact in a manner that will be persuasive. As an apologist I must live in a way that draws others to Christ, and I must be able to offer a spoken defense that will compel others to Christ.

I have lived much of my life as a Christian apologist, but I have struggled to acknowledge my engaging in apologetics. In the past, when I was trying to persuade people of the truth of the Christian faith, I denied I was practicing apologetics. I wrestled with the thought of using my formal communication training when doing evangelism. I considered it an ethical dilemma. Not wanting to employ the skills I gained when studying persuasion, I fled the notion of giving a reasoned, persuasive defense of the faith. Eventually, I came to the realization that the true standard for my ethical use of persuasion was Scripture. By using the same rhetorical principles of the apostles, I can be both a persuasive and an effective apologist. There are numerous examples of the apostles applying elements of persuasion theory in the book of Acts alone (i.e., Person-Centered Approach, Narrative Theory, Symbolic Convergence, and Coordinated Management of Meaning). With examples like these I have several principles in Scripture for using persuasion theory when presenting a gospel defense.

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<sup>13</sup>Scripture is taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, (The Lockman Foundation, Copyright © 1960,1962,1963,1968,1971,1972,1973,1975,1977,1995).

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