

September 29, 2019

GOD'S ASEITY AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR APOLOGETICS

Systematic Theology 1

(5 of 12 in a series on Scripture and God)

This morning we come to a point of transition in our semester. As I noted our first week, we're looking at the doctrines of Scripture and God. And, admittedly, the first Sunday I mixed these together by starting into the nature of Scripture by talking about God's aseity. Then, I noted that one implication of God's aseity is that God is self-attesting (or self-justifying). Therefore, we saw that since the Bible is *God's Word*, it must be self-attesting as well. Consequently, we don't look somewhere outside of the Bible in order to find something of greater authority to attest to the Bible (since there is nothing with greater authority than Scripture). Rather, we look to the Bible to attest to itself, and that is exactly what it does, claiming for itself that it is God's very words – breathed out by God.

And in the weeks following, we dove into looking at the doctrine of Scripture, speaking of its truthfulness, authority, clarity, and sufficiency. Well, beginning this week we're going to focus on study on the doctrine of God in particular. But, as I mentioned, this morning is going to be a bit of a transitional time in which I want to begin focusing on the doctrine of God but also asked a question that may have been lingering in our minds from that first Sunday. And that question is, "How do we defend the faith and argue for the things we've been looking at these past several weeks when we're talking to an unbeliever?" That is, I want to talk about apologetics.

Now, having said that, I want to note two things: 1) what I mean by apologetics and 2) why I think we should look at the issue of apologetics right now. So, let me begin with what I mean by "apologetics."

Apologetics is a term used to refer to that practice of defending the faith (typically against those who would oppose it). It comes from the Greek word *apologian* found in 1 Peter 3:15, where Peter writes, "In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect." The call to "make a defense" is what we term "apologetics."

And the reason I want to talk about it right now is really because of what I've already mentioned. It's because you may have already begun to think about apologetics after considering the self-attesting nature of the Bible. Perhaps you began thinking to yourself that this argument we looked at last week will go over successfully in a dialogue with believers, but what about unbelievers? You might say, "Sure, this will work if I am disciplining a believer, but apologetics is a task that we do in order to address unbelievers, so surely the nature of I take must change. After all, theology maybe can begin with accepting the Bible's claims for itself but apologetics with an individual who does not believe the Bible is God's Word must have a different starting point. You can't

argue for the validity of God's Word by pointing to God's Word when someone does not believe it's God's Word and carries divine authority in the first place."

And I think this approach seems to have a certain logic when we first hear it. After all, surely we have to start our argument from the basis of something we both accept as certain and sure and reliable and then try to prove the validity of God's Word. But, I want to argue that if we take as a starting point in doing apologetics something other than accepting the Bible's claims for itself, then we're not only making a mistake in doing apologetics, we're actually dishonoring the Lord.

The reason I believe we're dishonoring the Lord is because we're commanded, as believers, to submit ourselves to Christ's lordship and rule over our lives without exception. For example, we are told in 1 Corinthians 10:31, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." We are also told in Matthew 11:28, for example, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell," meaning, of course, that we are to be more concerned about what God thinks than about what man thinks. Therefore, it's clear that as believers our utmost concern is to love God, fear God above all, and bring glory to him in everything that we do.

Furthermore, a foundational part of loving God, honoring God, showing our right fear of God, and bringing God glory requires that we show a clear submission to his Word and recognize its authority. Glorifying God requires that we see his Word and make clear that we see his Word for what it is – the very Word of God. Accordingly, Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers." Thus, Paul wanted them (and us) to know that they (and we) honor God by recognizing the authority and nature of God's Word and founding our lives upon the authority of his Word.

So, that's clear. But let's then come back to our question, "How do we defend the faith, which includes believing that the Bible is God's Word?" How do we do apologetics, reflecting our commitment to the lordship of Christ in our lives, honoring God, and bringing him glory? And the answer is not that we should use criteria and standards that the unbeliever is willing to accept or that serve as some kind of neutral starting point for three reasons:

1. Every worldview has to begin with something that is self-attesting.

So, first, every ultimate authority is by nature self-attesting. If something is not self-attesting, then it is not seen as an *ultimate* authority. You can attest to different things all day long, but ultimately you have to find something that is your ultimate authority and can attest to itself. Every worldview has this. So, it is not a unique aspect of Christianity that we begin with something (or someone) which is self-attesting. Every worldview does this.

2. Honoring Christ and glorifying him (which we are commanded to do) demands that we recognize the authority of his Word. Or, to say it negatively, if we fail to recognize the authority of God's Word as God's Word, then we actually dishonor Christ before those with whom we are trying to defend the faith.

Let me try to flesh this out a bit. God has told us that we can trust his Word as trustworthy and true. We know that. He's told us that we can base our lives on it and can see it as our ultimate authority. Now, suppose for a second that we wanted to say, "Well, let me just stop for a second and not accept God's Word as self-attesting. Let me see if I can come up with a reason why I am willing to believe it to be true (other than the fact that it is self-attesting)." In that act, we would be doing exactly what Eve did in the garden.

Think back to the Garden of Eden for a second. God had told Adam and Eve that they should eat of every tree of the garden except one. If they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would die. Then, Satan comes into the garden and gives Eve an opposing claim. He actually says that it would be good for her to eat of that tree that God had forbidden. Now, she is in an interesting position. She is hearing two opposing voices. So, what should she do? Well, she should have done is simply declared, "God has said otherwise, and he is the Creator and Lord of all things, so he must be obeyed. You are wrong because you oppose what God said."

Instead, what did she do? She removed herself from submission to God's Word and attempted to evaluate God's Word, trying to discern whether it sounded good to her. And in the end, she felt that she had come to a greater realization that what God had told her. She had thought herself to have become in that moment wiser than God. And so she did not accept God's Word but went against it. And we know what happened in the end. Quickly Adam and Eve realized what they had done, and they regretted it. Immediately the entire course of history changed. Immediately they began accusing others and excusing their own actions.

But where did it all go wrong? It all went wrong when Eve thought that she was wise enough and competent enough to serve as an evaluator of reality, truth, and the world around her without simply accepting the Creator's commands. That's where it all went wrong. That's where her rebellion began. Her rebellion began the second she was unwilling simply to say, "God has said it, and I submit to his Word."

Now, perhaps an illustration will help explain this. Consider my children. I tell them to obey me, and say I specifically tell them not to go out into the street. Next thing I know they're standing near the street and one of them says to the other, "Hey, Daddy told us not to go out into the street," and the other says, "Yeah, but, I'm trying to figure out if that really is the best thing or not." So, the first answers, "But you know it's not a good thing. Daddy told us it's not good to go out into the street." But the second responds, "Well, I'm not just going to trust Daddy's authority and word; I'm going to try to determine myself whether this is good or bad. I'm going to figure out my own reasons

for doing this. So, I'm going to wander around in the street for a bit, see if there is danger, and then perhaps I'll even arrive at the same conclusion as Daddy – that I shouldn't walk around in the street. In fact, if I did that, Daddy would be really proud of me because not only would I land at the right place (i.e., that I shouldn't play in the street) but I'll have figured out for myself, based on reasons that I've thought through myself, that playing around in the street is bad.”

Well, of course, that child would be wrong. I wouldn't be proud. I'd be upset and say, “Why did you rebel against me? I told you not to wander around in the street.” Now, it is true that the child might even arrive at the same conclusion – that he shouldn't walk around in the street. However, the fundamental problem is that he is refusing to recognize my authority and is rebelling against me. It is the child who says, “But Daddy said . . .” who is actually bringing honor to me, not the one who refuses to base his life, practice, and thinking on the authoritative word that I've declared.

This is what C. S. Lewis was talking about when he wrote, “The ancient man approached God . . . as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defence for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God is in the Dock.”¹

We cannot refuse to acknowledge the authority of God's Word in an argument with the unbeliever and think that we are somehow honoring God and his authority before the unbeliever. We're actually saying, “Watch; I can be wiser than God.” The only way we honor God and glorify him in our apologetic is if we unapologetically demonstrate from the beginning that we bow the knee to God's authoritative Word.

3. It's impossible to start from some place of neutrality. As has been said before, “Neutrality is a myth.”

The minute you begin an argument, basing your argument on the authority of something else as more ultimate than the Bible, you're necessarily making the decision not to acknowledge that the Bible is the ultimate authority for truth. It is like my son saying that he will wander around in the street when I've told him not to do that. Even if his aim is to prove me right, his actions are taking a decided stand against accepting the authority of my word, and when any of his siblings say, “Just obey Daddy,” it's because they're recognizing this as well. To start his argument by disobeying what I've commanded him to do is a dishonoring way to try to prove the reasonableness of my command. Similarly, to start our apologetics by not bowing our knee to the truthfulness, reliability, and authority of God's Word is to start our defense by disobeying God's commands that we accept his Word, bow the knee to the authority of his Word, and

¹C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 244.

bring glory to him in everything we do. There is no neutral starting point. Either we obey God by basing our beliefs on his Word or we don't.

Moreover, in Romans 1:18-23, Paul writes, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things."

If this is true (*and it is!*), then this means that the unbeliever has an axe to grind. He is going to employ his reason and every tool at his disposal to suppress the truth in unrighteousness, whether he is conscious of it or not. Therefore, what the unbeliever is calling "neutrality" or a "neutral starting point" is actually something he's trying to uphold as an ultimate authority in order to aid him in rebelling against God's Word as his final authority. And every argument he makes simply reveals the length to which he will go in his rebellion to suppress what he knows to be true in his heart.

It might be compared to the man who was determined that he was dead. So, one day someone asked him, "Do dead men bleed?" He answered, "Of course not." So, the individual took a pin, pricked the man's finger, and he started bleeding. Therefore, the man responded, "Well, I guess dead men do bleed." The man is so intentional on refusing to believe he's alive that he simply will not allow himself to come to another conclusion than that he is dead. The same is true with the unbeliever (apart from God's grace). There is a prior commitment of rebellion against the truth that guides their reasoning. And with each step of unwillingness to submit to God's revelation, their foolish minds and hearts are becoming more darkened. We cannot aid the unbeliever in affirming his rebellious worldview and starting point as an appropriate way to arrive at what is true. They will only arrive at truth and have true knowledge as they fear the Lord. This is why we read in Proverbs 1:7, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but fools despise knowledge and instruction."

So, how then do we defend the faith (which includes a belief that the Bible is God's Word) against the unbeliever?

We must *not* answer the fool according to his folly, and we *must* answer the fool according to his folly

In Proverbs 26:4-5, we read, "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes." I think this gives us both sides of how we must deal with the fool (i.e., the one who does not fear the Lord). Let's take the first half of this statement first. We must *not* answer a

fool according to his folly. Stated positively, we must presuppose the truth of God's Word in apologetics.

When the person asks you to give a defense or reason for your faith, you must not answer him according to his folly. That is, he's asking you the question from the perspective already assuming that the Word of God is not true. If he believed otherwise, he would bow the knee to Christ and believe his Word, wouldn't he? Remember, Paul knew the Thessalonians had bowed the knee to Christ because they received God's Word as it really was – *God's Word!*

So, the unbeliever is asking from the perspective as if the Word of God is not true, and you must make sure to let him know that you'll answer him but not according to his foolish thinking that the Word isn't true. Right from the start, you have to make sure that he sees that he is mistaken in his assumption.

It might be compared to the guy who asks you if you are still beating your wife. If you have never beaten your wife, then you can't simply answer, "No," can you? That would confirm the wrong presupposition held by the person asking the question that there once was a time when you beat your wife. Rather, you would say, "Hold on a second. You're whole question is wrong in its assumption, Sir. I've never beaten my wife – not now, not ever."

In the same way, you must make sure that you honor Christ and do not answer the fool in such a way that confirms his presuppositions about the truthfulness (or, from his perspective, untruthfulness) of God's Word. He may ask you why you believe the faith from a perspective that doesn't treat the Bible as God's Word, but you must answer him from a perspective that clearly understands and demonstrates that the Bible is God's Word. You must acknowledge the authority of God's Word as you defend the authority of God's Word.

Yet, as we read, the very next verse tells us, "Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes." The idea here is that after showing that we differ with him on our presuppositions and understand God's Word as true, we can then turn and show the foolishness of understanding the world from his position. That is to say, what if he says, "You Christians believe in an all-powerful, all-good God, but that's foolish because there's so much evil in the world." Well, what do we say to that?

There are actually a number of ways to go about answering that question, but one starting point is to say, "If you don't believe that God created the world but you believe that somehow we all just evolved from something or that everything that is here is naturally here, then why do you think there's such a thing as good and evil in the first place? You can't have evil if there's no standard of good, can you?" That is, we can show him that only Christianity actually provides a basis for recognizing good and evil in the world, and then we can talk to him about how the Bible deals with this question. We answer him according to his folly, showing him the foolishness of his assumptions lest he think himself wise. And we do not answer him according to his folly, answering him

from a perspective instead that honors Christ and his Word as our truthful and trustworthy authority.

What is our ultimate hope in the conversation, though?

What is our ultimate goal in this? Our ultimate goal is to be able to open a door for the gospel to be spoken. You see, only the gospel is the power to break through the rebellious and hard heart of the unbeliever so that he or she might have life. However, speaking the gospel is sometimes hard. How do you go from talking about last night's baseball game to saying, "Oh yeah, did you know that Jesus Christ, who is God the Son, lived a perfect life, died to pay the penalty for sinners, and rose from the dead on the third day so that if anyone repents of his or her sins and believes in him that person can have forgiveness of sins and live forever?"

Thinking about giving a reason for the hope within us, however, opens our eyes to any conversation. Any conversation in which an unbeliever says something about something being good or evil or logical or anything that only makes sense in light of the fact that God created us, we can turn the conversation and ask them to defend their faith. We might say, after they talk about the slander in the latest political campaign, "Why does that bother you? Why do you think there's evil? Where does evil come from?" And when they turn and ask us the same question, that is, when they turn and ask us to give a reason for our faith in Christ, we might answer them – both according and not according to their folly – and then speak the gospel to them so that they might believe.

May God grant us the grace to be ready at all times to give a defense for the hope that is within us. Amen.