

Forensics and Faithfulness: Defense in the Context of the New Testament

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Introduction

Apologetics has grown into a very involved discipline over the last two millennia. From the beginning, Christians have sought to answer challenges to their claims about Jesus. Those challenges have changed over the years, and apologetics has become a much more sophisticated endeavor than it was in the first century. From a simple defense of one's belief, it has come to include almost any intellectual encounter with unbelief.

Apologists appeal to a few Scripture passages to justify the endeavor, the one most often heard or read being 1 Peter 3:15: "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." Probably this verse is used more than others because it is a command, not just an example.

We all know that *ἀπολογία* is a term taken from the legal world to refer to the defense a person gave in court. I was interested when, a couple of years ago, I came across the book *The New Testament Concept of Witness* by Allison A. Trites,¹ a rather exhaustive study of the witness or forensic motif in the New Testament which includes defense.² Maybe there was something there that would provide a richer context for understanding Peter's exhortation.

As a justification for his work, Trites points out that in the New Testament, "μαρτυρία [one's witness or testimony] and its cognates greatly outnumber κήρυγμα [proclamation, what is preached] and

¹ Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977).

² Witness terminology in the NT includes such terms as *μάρτυς* (a witness), *μαρτυρία* (one's testimony), *μαρτύριον* (testimony, evidence, proof), *ἀπολογία* (defense), *ἀπολογέομαι* (make a defense), *διαμαρτύρομαι* (testify or warn), *πείθω* (persuade), *κατηγορέω* (accuse, bring charges against), *ὁμολογέω* (acknowledge or confess), and *ἀρνέομαι* (deny).

κηρύσσειν [to preach or proclaim].”³ He agrees with J. R. van Pelt who notes the importance of the concept of witness in the New Testament and in Christian life. “Not only in the primitive preaching,” writes van Pelt, “but also in all effectual preaching throughout the history of the Church, the gospel is conceived not as a speculative system, but as a witness to Jesus the Christ as being Himself God’s Witness to the world.”⁴ Michael Green quotes NT scholar E. G. Selwyn: “I sometimes wonder whether the term ‘kerygma’ has not been worked too hard, and whether the word *marturia* and its cognates would not describe better the primitive and indispensable core of the Christian message.”⁵ “The justice of his assertion,” says Green, “has impressed itself on me strongly.”⁶

Just a side note about Trites’ book. This book received some negative comments in the reviews to the effect, generally, that, on the one hand, he didn’t address issues he should have, while, on the other, he went a bit overboard sometimes with respect to the implications of the material he did cover. Nevertheless, even if in some instances we ought not to imbue a given text with all that the idea of forensics connotes, Trites’ study still highlights the juridical aspect of God’s interaction with the fallen world, what Richard Bauckham calls the “cosmic trial motif.”⁷ It is enough for the purposes of this paper to highlight the ideas reflected in the witness terminology and to draw connections between the teachings of Jesus, the records of encounters in the book of Acts, and Peter’s exhortation in his first epistle.

What I hope to show is that defense in the NT ought to be understood in light of the broader concept of witness as a subset of witness; witness bearing in response to a challenge. “Vindicating witness,” is a term Trites uses on one occasion.⁸ The larger goal is showing that the defense of the faith, understood simply as responding to challenges or even turning on the offensive to show the falsity of other beliefs, is incomplete by itself. We might be satisfied with a job well done when we present a good

³ Trites, *NT Concept*, 222.

⁴ J. R. van Pelt, “Witness,” in *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, ed. J. Hastings, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1908).

⁵ E. G. Selwyn, “Eschatology in 1 Peter, in Daube and Davies, eds., *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology*, 395; quoted in Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 76.

⁶ Green, *Evangelism*, 76.

⁷ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 389.

⁸ Trites, *NT Concept*, 133.

case, but if we want to be faithful to the NT concept of witness and defense, especially if we are going to quote Peter as justification for what we do in apologetics, it would be good to keep this understanding within our range of vision; to check in, as it were, from time to time to see if we are remaining true to what Peter likely intended and to the broader New Testament concept of witness and defense.

That apologetics and evangelism naturally go together isn't a new idea. Indeed, it was pressed home to me by a greater exposure to apologetics in Europe where terms such as "persuasive evangelism" are used.⁹ Closer to home, Greg Ganssle claims that "applied apologetics is evangelism and evangelism is applied apologetics."¹⁰ Thus, I am not saying anything new. My purpose is to come at it from the angle of the concept of witness in the New Testament.

The title of this paper is "Forensics and Faithfulness." The foregoing introduction explains the first term which will be my primary concern. Regarding faithfulness, while the witness motif provides the framework for understanding Peter's use of ἀπολογία, his main concern, I believe, was with faithfulness on the part of the new Christians. Persecution was coming, if his readers weren't already experiencing it, and Peter wanted them to remain firm in their faith, "so that the tested genuineness of [their] faith . . . may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:7).

Secular Greek and Old Testament Background

To set the stage for considering the forensic motif found in the New Testament, Trites describes what lay behind it in the Greek world and in the Old Testament.

In the Greek legal world, says Trites, "μάρτυς is originally a juridical term applied to a witness in a court of law. . . [It] is used of one who has direct knowledge or experience of certain persons, events or circumstances and is therefore in a position to speak out and does so."¹¹ The term was used in non-legal

⁹ Used by the Scottish pastor and apologist David Robertson and others. See <http://www.apologetics315.com/2013/03/david-robertson-interview-transcript.html>.

¹⁰ Gregory Ganssle, "Making the Gospel Connection," in Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Come Let Us Reason: New Essays in Christian Apologetics* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 5.

¹¹ Trites, *NT Concept*, 9.

contexts as well in which one might even call upon deity by means of an oath to bear witness on one's behalf.¹²

A rhetorical model of witness bearing developed where witnesses played on emotions rather than offering substantial evidence. Trites notes that Plato rejected this and thought of the factual approach as being the proper one. The witness's reputation as truthful was also important because his testimony could also include his opinions or convictions. "The witness takes a stand for the truths of which he is convinced. Thus the trial of Socrates shows that the practical act of being willing to stand for one's convictions is necessary when the testimony is given against the background of hostility and persecution."¹³ "Both witnesses to facts and witnesses to convictions," Trites says, "are of the greatest significance for the New Testament concept of witness."¹⁴

Shifting to the Hebraic world, Trites notes that the Old Testament lawsuit provides the primary background for understanding the New Testament concept of witness.¹⁵ He points out the frequency with which one encounters lawsuits or controversy addressed in a legal manner, such as in the book of Job and in the prophets, and especially in the controversy recorded in Isaiah 40-55. This OT background, says Trites, helps us to "appreciate the forensic character of the apostolic testimony—a point especially stressed in the Book of Acts. The emphasis upon persuasion, argument, reasoning and debate reflects the lawcourt background of the Old Testament legal assembly."¹⁶

On occasions of legal controversy in the Old Testament, witnesses were the primary way of proving one's case. They were not expected to be "merely objective informants," as we might expect today.¹⁷ The parties involved "serve both as witnesses *and* as advocates," Trites says. "It is the task of the witnesses not only to attest the facts but also to convince the opposite side of the truth of them (41:21-

¹² Ibid., 11,12. For an example of this in the NT, see Rom. 1:9.

¹³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴ Ibid., 15.

¹⁵ Ibid., 223.

¹⁶ Ibid., 23.

¹⁷ Ibid., 21.

4, 26; 43:9; 51:22; cf. Gen. 38:24-6).”¹⁸ The witness not only “[attempted] to win a verdict from the judge but to convince his opponent and elicit an acknowledgement of surrender from him.”¹⁹

Because of its importance for understanding the New Testament concept of witness, Trites devotes a full chapter to the controversy recorded in Isaiah 40-55 between Yahweh and the pagan gods represented by the other nations. “The debate is over the claims of Yahweh as Creator, the only true God and the Lord of history (40:25-31; 44:6-8; 45:8-11, 21).”²⁰ Yahweh brings charges and calls the nations to present their witnesses, and then calls Israel to be His witness. Quoting J. Muilenburg, Trites notes that “this passage [Isa. 41:1-29] is full of technical terms of the ancient Hebrew lawcourt: the ‘plaintiff, the witnesses, the bystanders, the accusation, the demand for a reply to the accusation and the verdict are all present’.”²¹ A representative passage is Isaiah 43:9-12:

All the nations gather together, and the peoples assemble. Who among them can declare this, and show us the former things? Let them bring their witnesses to prove them right, and let them hear and say, It is true. “You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior. I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “and I am God.”

Since the other nations have nothing to support their case, they lose by default. By contrast, Israel has witnessed the work and character of Yahweh. “Her task is to bear witness to all peoples and nations that Yahweh alone is God, and that beside him there is no Savior” (see Isa. 43:10,12; 44:8; Hos. 13:4.)²² After concluding that He alone is God, Yahweh offers an invitation:

¹⁸ Ibid., 46.

¹⁹ Ibid., 22. Trites uses the dispute between Judah and Tamar as an example (Gen. 38:24-26).

²⁰ Ibid., 45.

²¹ Ibid., 39; quoting J. Muilenburg, “The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66,” *IB*, v., 448ff.

²² Trites, *NT Concept*, 43-44.

Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me. “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance’” (Isaiah 45:21-23).

The Witness Motif in the New Testament

The apostles had a special role to fulfill in the proclamation of the gospel because they were eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus’ life. They “were to be Christ’s advocates, serving in much the same way that the witnesses for the defendant served in the Old Testament legal assembly.”²³ Trites states,

Luke-Acts presents the claims of Christ against a background of hostility, contention and active persecution. It is this which Peter, John, Stephen and Paul all contend with, and it is this which accounts for the large place given to legal terminology and to ideas drawn from the lawcourt. From the beginning the apostles are concerned not only with the facts of the life, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus, but also with the defence of their religious significance. They proclaim Jesus as Lord of all (Acts 10:36; cf. 2:36), the divinely appointed κριτής [judge] of the living and the dead (10:42). For them and their fellow Christians this involves acting as vindicating witnesses for Christ in the face of hostility and persecution. The Holy Spirit prepares them for this work.²⁴

I can only give a bare sketch of the witness concept in the New Testament. I will organize the material by personality rather than by book. Either way, there will be some overlapping. I’ll look briefly at the contributions of John, Luke, and Paul before finally turning to Peter.

²³ Ibid., 139.

²⁴ Ibid., 133.

John

C.F.D. Moule sees the Gospel of John as primarily a defense of the claims of Christ. “There is a strong case for the view that the Fourth Gospel is more intelligible as a skilful apology . . . than as primarily intended for the full believer.”²⁵ One thinks of John 20:31: “these [signs] are written so that you may believe.”

The apostles were eyewitnesses of the many events of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. What could they offer people who were *not* eyewitnesses to these things? Writes Michael Green, “They could bear their witness; that is all. They had two things to say. First, that they had believed, and had found the claims of the divine Teacher to be true in their own lives and experience. Second, they could give the evidence on which they had committed themselves. That is all a historical contemporary can possibly do for later generations or for those who were not there. And that is what John set out to do in his preaching and his writings.”²⁶

In his Gospel and Epistles,²⁷ John uses the μάρτυς word group more than any other New Testament writer, suggesting “that the concept of witness has also a more central theological significance for this writer than for all the others,” writes Lothar Coenen.²⁸

Earlier I spoke about the controversy recorded in Isaiah 40-55 between Yahweh and the nations and their gods. The cosmic lawsuit continues in the conflict between Jesus and the Jews seen especially in the Gospel of John. Richard Bauckham writes, “It is this lawsuit that the Gospel of John sees taking place in the history of Jesus, as the one true God demonstrates his deity in controversy with the claims of the

²⁵ C.F.D. Moule, “The Intention of the Evangelists,” in *New Testament Essays*, ed. A.J.B. Higgins (Manchester, 1959), 168; quoted in Trites, *NT Concept*, 78.

²⁶ Green, *Evangelism*, 75.

²⁷ The concept of witness is important in the book of the Revelation as well but I will not develop it here. See Trites, *NT Concept*, chap. 10, and L. Coenen, “Witness” (part), in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed., Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1975), 3:1046-47.

²⁸ Coenen, “Witness,” 3:1044.

world. He does so by calling Jesus as chief witness and by vindicating him, not only as true witness but also as incarnate representative of God's own true deity."²⁹

Trites points out similarities between that passage and the Gospel of John. In Isaiah, Yahweh contended with the nations and their false gods. In the first twelve chapters of John, one observes Jesus in frequent conflict with the Jews who "represent the unbelieving world in its hostility to God."³⁰ In Isaiah, "the debate is over the claims of Yahweh as the Creator, the only true God and the Lord of history . . . ; in John it is over the Messiahship and divine Sonship of Jesus."³¹ In Isaiah, Yahweh set forth the witness of fulfilled prophecy in the experience of Israel. In the Gospel of John, several witnesses are called forth.

C.K. Barrett writes:

'Witness' (μαρτυρειν, μαρτυρία) holds an important place in the thought of the gospel. The Baptist (1.7f, 15, 32, 34; 3.26; 5.33), the Samaritan woman (4.39), the works of Jesus (5.36; 10.2 5), the Old Testament (5.39), the multitude (12.17), the Holy Spirit and the apostles (1 5.26f.), God the Father himself (5.32, 37; 8.18), all bear witness to Jesus. Jesus himself . . . bears witness to the truth (18.37; cf. 3.11), in conjunction with the Father (8.13-18) whose consentient testimony validates his own. Witnesses in turn testify to the truth of the gospel record (19.35; 21.24).³²

In the New Testament as in the Old, people served as both witnesses and advocates. Speaking of John the Baptist, John writes, "He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him" (Jn. 1:7). Jesus himself does both: "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly

²⁹ Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 387.

³⁰ Trites, *NT Concept*, 79.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

³² C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John*, (London, 1962); quoted in Trites, *NT Concept*, 80. Richard Bauckham notes the importance of the number of witnesses in John: "Seven witnesses add up to complete, indeed superabundant witness, exceeding the Mosaic law's minimal requirement of two witnesses for adequate witness." Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 387.

things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things” (Jn. 3:11, 12; cf. 10:32-38)? John’s stated purpose for the book, noted earlier (20:30-31), also reflects this idea.

One more similarity. When we think of ourselves as giving a defense, we naturally think of the one questioning us as being in the place of a judge. In Isaiah, the nations are on trial and Yahweh is the judge (cf. Isa. 41:1).³³ In John, the Jews (and by extension the world) are on trial. Says Trites, “The lawsuit of the ministry implies that Jesus confronts men with a choice. When evidence is offered for the claims of Christ, men must decide for or against him, and by their choice they judge themselves.”³⁴

After Jesus’ ascension, his followers were to carry on the task of testifying and advocating (Jn. 15:27; 17:20; 19:35; cf. 1 Jn. 1:1; 4:14). In Jn. 15:18-16:11, Jesus foretells the hostility that will come on account of his name and promises the ministry of the Spirit in convicting the world. Later we see his prophesy about hostility borne out in the experience of his followers (Acts 4:18-21, 29-31; 7:54-60; 20:22-24; 26:15-18).

This witness continues after the deaths of the apostles to this very day. Jesus sends us into the world, and he prays for us (Jn. 17:18, 20-21). Although we are not eye-witnesses, we are advocates for Christ, says Trites:

This function was vitally important to the life of the early church, for it was only as the Holy Spirit continued to work through Christ’s witnesses that he could convince the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. It was not enough to have the accounts of the apostles’ testimony as they came to be written down; it was also necessary to have living advocates to present Christ’s case ‘so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and has loved them even as thou hast loved me’ (17:23). By this means the post-resurrection lawsuit over the claims of Christ is perpetuated, and the process of judgment continued.³⁵

³³ Trites, *NT Concept*, 39-40.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 122. Bauckham disagrees with Andreas Köstenberger on this. Bauckham holds that, “for both John and Luke witness is something that requires firsthand contact with the events in Jesus’ history” (*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 390).

Luke

The concept of witness is important for Luke as well; obviously so in the book of Acts, but also in his Gospel. During an appearance to his fearful disciples after his resurrection, Jesus states the gist of their witness this way: “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:45-49). A set of events; a group of witnesses; the empowerment of the Spirit. As with John, Luke’s understanding of the purpose of bearing witness went beyond merely giving the facts. Says Trites, “For [John and Luke] the significance of witness lies in its ability to induce faith. The operative question for Luke as for John is: On what grounds can people believe, or on what evidence ought they to believe?”³⁶

Luke takes us into the worlds of both the official lawcourts and the court of public opinion. The message of the apostles, in a nutshell, was that Jesus had been tried and found guilty in a human court but had been vindicated by his resurrection from the dead (2:22-24). *He* was shown to be the Righteous One (Acts 3:14; 7:52), not those who crucified him. They had crucified the Lord and Christ, and they must repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38). This conflict was all the more pronounced when the apostles faced the Sanhedrin who had condemned Jesus (Acts 4:17ff; 5:17ff).

As the apostles proclaimed the good news of Christ, the same charges that had been leveled against Jesus were now leveled against them, charges such as blasphemy (Mk. 14:64; Acts 6:11) and madness (Mk. 3:21; Acts 26:24). Jesus had to be put to death, and so did Stephen (Acts 7), and attempts were made on Paul’s life (Acts 5:30; 26:21). “In other words,” says Trites, “the Messianic Age continues, and the persecutions which characterize its presence are in evidence (cf. Acts 4:25-20 with Psa. 2:1f). It is to a

Köstenberger, by contrast, claims that “the twelve . . . function as representatives of Jesus’ Messianic community. Thus the responsibility of witnessing, while given primarily to Jesus’ first disciples, derivatively also extends to later generations of believers. Still, it is only on the basis of the word of the first disciples that later believers are able to bear witness (cf. [Jn.] 17:20).” A. Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples According to the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 199), 150.

³⁶ Trites, *NT Concept*, 128.

human judgment seat that the persecutions drive Christians, and it is there that they are forced to speak ‘before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities’ (Lk. 12:11).”³⁷

Jesus’ words in Luke 21:12-15 are of special significance for 1 Peter 3:15 and, I would say, for the whole NT understanding of witness and defense:

But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. *This will be your opportunity to bear witness.* Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand *how to answer* [ἀπολογέομαι], for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.³⁸

Luke 12:17 says more specifically that it will be “the Holy Spirit [who] will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.”

The apostles would face hostility as Jesus did, and when challenged to explain themselves, they were not to fear men but God, to confess Christ and not deny him. This is a call for faithfulness and a call to be mouthpieces for the Holy Spirit in proclaiming the testimony of Christ. This warning is echoed in 1 Pet. 3:14-15. The apostles would typically be called to defend *themselves* for their actions or words, but their main purpose was to bear witness for *Christ*. Furthermore, they shouldn’t be anxious about what they would say, for the Spirit would give them the words. This isn’t to say they shouldn’t *learn* anything; Jesus spent a lot of time teaching his followers. It simply means that the Spirit would use these opportunities to deliver the message He wanted to deliver.

Again we see evidence that the proclamation of the gospel had the goal of inducing faith in those who heard. Says Trinites:

³⁷ Ibid., 131.

³⁸ I don’t know that it is of special significance but, I find it interesting that Luke says the disciples shouldn’t be worried about how they would *defend* themselves, whereas, in parallel passages, Matthew and Mark say they should not be worried about what they would *say* (λαλέω) (Matt. 10:19; Mark 13:11).

This fact helps to explain the frequent use not only of διαμαρτύρεσθαι ([charge, warn, solemnly bear witness] 2:40; 8:25; 10:42; 18:5; 20:21, 23, 24; 23:11; 28:23), but also of πείθειν ([persuade] 13:43; 18:4; 19:8, 26; 26:28; 28:23; once, ἀναπείθειν, 18:13), and διαλέγεσθαι ([discuss or reason with] 17:2, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8,9; 24:25).³⁹

One senses the urgency in Luke's tone in his record of Paul's time with the Jews in Rome as he urged them to put their faith in Jesus: "From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying [διαμαρτύρομαι] to the kingdom of God and trying to convince [πείθω] them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets" (Acts 28:23).

For Luke, then, disciples of Jesus are given the task of bearing witness of him and the salvation he brings whether in preaching or in responding to challenges. Our testimony is not merely for the purpose of convincing people intellectually of truth but for persuading them to receive it.

Paul

As Jesus had declared that his apostles would be his witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), so later he told Ananias that Paul would be "a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15). Paul's purpose was to be a witness for Christ (22:15; 26:16; see also 23:11).

Because Paul wasn't an eyewitness to the events of Jesus' life, says Trites, "he adduces scriptural evidence: the evidence of the law and the prophets proves that Jesus (the man the apostles describe) is foretold and therefore of divine origin and authority"⁴⁰ (cf. Acts 17:2-3).

As Jesus had warned, Paul often found himself at odds with the citizens and governors in various towns and cities. He amused some,⁴¹ convinced some,⁴² and made a lot of people very angry.⁴³ He was

³⁹ Trites, *NT Concept*, 145.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 146 ; cf. 148.

⁴¹ The philosophers in Athens (17:32); Felix for a time (24:26,27).

⁴² For example in Pisidian Antioch (13:48), Thessalonica (17:4), Berea (17:12), and Athens (17:34)

⁴³ Businessmen in Ephesus (Acts 19); Jews everywhere.

called upon to defend himself before the Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 22 and 23), before the governor Felix in Caesarea (chap. 24), and before King Agrippa (chap. 26).⁴⁴ In obedience to Jesus, Paul was faithful to confess and not deny. Whether defending himself or a claim about Christ (Acts 17:2-3; 28:23), Paul almost always turned the opportunity into a proclamation of the gospel (or of the resurrection as a focal point of the gospel message). Defense and proclamation were a package for Paul. As one example, note his testimony when called before Felix:

Knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I cheerfully make my defense [ἀπολογέομαι]. . . . But this I confess [ὁμολογέω] to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust (Acts 24:10, 14, 15; see also 2 Tim. 4:16, 17).

We see this again in Paul's time in Rome. The Lord told Paul that it was necessary that he be a witness there (Acts 23:11), so even though he was officially sent to defend himself against the accusations of the Jews, Paul considered it his duty to bear witness for Christ and to defend the faith. Paul's claim to the church in Philippi that "I am put here for the defense of the gospel" is in the middle of a paragraph about preaching Christ (Phil. 1:15-18). Whether preaching or debating or giving a defense, Paul's goal was the proclamation of the gospel of Christ.

The Role of the Spirit

Any consideration of the witness motif of Scripture must give some attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in testifying about Christ. There is, first, the direct testimony of the Spirit. Jesus said that when he was gone, the Spirit would bear witness about him (Jn. 15:26; cf. 1 Jn. 5:6-8). Peter's evidence

⁴⁴ I find it a little ironic that Paul's speech in Athens, which gets most of the notice in contemporary discussions of apologetics, does not mention defense.

for the inclusion of the Gentiles in the gospel was the witness of the Spirit in those who believed (Acts 15:8).

Second, the Spirit bears witness indirectly; it is he who enables Christ's followers to bear witness. He prepares believers for their work as "vindicating witnesses for Christ in the face of hostility and persecution."⁴⁵ Recall Jesus' warnings and promises in Luke 12 and 21. The apostles would be called upon to give a defense, and the Spirit would give them the proper words. When he was about to ascend to the Father, Jesus told the apostles to wait in Jerusalem until the Spirit came upon them and empowered them to bear witness (Acts 1:4-8). We see this ministry in the life of Stephen, a man "full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5) who bore witness in word and act so powerfully that those who disputed with him "could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking" (Acts 6:10). Apologetics is an aspect of spiritual warfare, and, as such, is impotent to accomplish God's work apart from the enabling of the Spirit. Apart from that, it is mere debate.

Pause to recap

Before turning to Peter's epistle, it is worth summarizing the argument so far.

When Jesus' followers are called upon to defend themselves because of their faith in and obedience to Christ, they are to turn those occasions into opportunities to bear witness of Jesus. New Testament witness bearing and defense are not just confined to merely seeking a verdict about particular claims like the resurrection or Messiahship of Jesus or the fulfillment of particular prophecies. It points to Jesus, and, in the context of witness bearing, it calls for a decision. The gospel message isn't just a set of truths to be expounded or defended but a declaration of a person, Jesus Christ, which demands a response. *Κηρύσσειν* (to proclaim), one of three important New Testament terms having to do with the proclamation of the

⁴⁵ Trites, *NT Concept*, 133.

gospel,⁴⁶ also includes the goal of persuasion, but being a witness brings in the idea of reaching a verdict: Is this true or not?⁴⁷ And if it is true, it ought to be believed in the fullest sense; i.e., believed in.

1 Peter 3

An important theme in 1 Peter is a proper response to persecution. Christians were starting to suffer for their faith (3:8-4:2). He said that what was happening to the Christians was, literally, a “fiery experience to try or test you” (πυρώσει πρὸς πειρασμὸν ὑμῶν; 1 Pet. 4:12; see also 1:6-7). Peter encouraged them to stand firm as our Savior did who himself suffered in the flesh (4:1). According to Alan Stibbs, this persecution can’t be tied to any particular statewide persecution. “In iii.15ff.,” he writes, “the main danger seems to be from neighbours rather than the state.”⁴⁸ He disagrees with Trites who says, regarding this verse in Peter, “ἀπολογία is used to describe the defence made in a court of law (cf. Acts 25:16).” Trites quotes F. W. Beare with approval: ““This is certainly the force here, for the phrase παντὶ τῷ αἰτοῦντι ὑμᾶς λόγον [to anyone who asks you for a reason] can only apply to a judicial interrogation.’ The meaning is that the Christian is to be prepared to give his testimony on behalf of Christ when called upon to do so in a court of law.”⁴⁹ Stibbs, by contrast, believes that the use of “asks” in 1 Peter 3:15 “suggests ordinary conversation rather than an official enquiry. The words *always* and *to every man* make the reference completely general and comprehensive. The Christian must remember that anybody at any time may ask him to explain and justify his Christian confidence.”⁵⁰ Although most of the examples of defense in the New Testament *are* before governing officials, we also see Paul making a defense to a crowd in Jerusalem (Acts 22:1), and we still have the sweeping charge by Jesus that his disciples would be his witnesses to the end of the earth.

⁴⁶ See Green, *Evangelism*, 48.

⁴⁷ In an article on Johannine apologetics, Norman Geisler pointed out the aptness of the title of Josh McDowell’s book *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. See Norman L. Geisler, “Johannine Apologetics,” *Bib Sac* Oct.-Dec. 1979, 338.

⁴⁸ Alan Stibbs, *The First Epistle General of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 51.

⁴⁹ Trites, *NT Concept*, 213-14, quoting F. W. Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter* 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1961), 172.

⁵⁰ Stibbs, *Peter*, 135-36.

Peter had his own ups and downs with faithfulness under pressure. When Jesus was taken before the high priest Caiaphas, Peter was challenged about his friendship with Jesus and he faithlessly denied it with oaths (Mk. 14:66-72). Later, Peter and John were called before Caiaphas, and this time Peter faithfully proclaimed Christ (Acts 4:5-22). The second time they were called in, Peter said, “We must obey God rather than men,” and then he laid out the gospel message (Acts 5:27-32; see also 4:5-22). Peter knew about suffering for one’s testimony about Christ (Acts 5:17-18, 40-41; 12:1-5). When he called Christians to make their defense faithfully, he knew the consequences personally.

Any of us might have been tempted to clam up or to deny Jesus as Peter had done himself if challenged under the circumstances of the early church. Knowing that, he charged Christians to fear God and not men. He would have remembered this warning from Jesus recorded in Luke 12 that I didn’t include above:

I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! (Lk. 12:4,5)

Leading up to chapter 3, verse 15, Peter quotes from Psalm 34:

For “whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil” (1 Pet. 3:10-12).

In short, don’t respond to evil with evil. Peter had heard Jesus teach this (Matt. 5:39), and Paul taught the same thing (Rom. 12:21).

Then Peter continues with this:

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled,

but 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, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit (3:13-18).⁵¹

When people start demanding an explanation, Peter says, be ready to give it. But do it with gentleness and reverence, just as you should respond to persecution in general.

Stibbs sees in the verse a call to give a “logical account” because of the word λόγος.⁵² But λόγος here refers to the person asking a reason for the Christians' hope. BAGD assigns it the meaning of simply “giving an account” and that makes sense to me.⁵³ I'm not at all suggesting that our responses should *not* be logical. I'm just concerned that this could be taken to mean what we apologists might think of as a “logical account,” i.e., an array of sophisticated arguments and evidences. Would that have been likely in the first century? As their reasons for believing, early Christians would have had the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus along with the witness of the Spirit through signs and wonders and the changes that had taken place in their lives. It would have been perfectly acceptable for a Christian to say that he believed because he accepted as true the testimony of the witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus and had subsequently seen the work of God's Spirit in his own life and the lives of others. If this is all that Stibbs meant, then I am in agreement. My concern is that we can lift defense out of the realm of feasibility for a lot of Christians by pressing upon all the responsibilities or interests of a few.

⁵¹ See Appendix on the use of Isaiah in 1 Peter 3:14-15

⁵² Stibbs, *Peter*, 136. James Beilby makes the same point in his *Thinking About Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011), 39.

⁵³ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v., “λόγος,” 2a.

What does all this have to do with Christian witness? The two main prima facie points of Peter's exhortation are found in Luke 12: fear God and not men, and make a defense when asked. The latter, however, I submit would have been understood in the larger context of bearing witness as Jesus taught his disciples, that one should turn demands for a defense into opportunities to bear witness (Lk. 12 and 21).⁵⁴ He lived this out himself and he knew of Paul's ministry of defense and confirmation. Wayne Grudem also sees this as more than merely defending oneself:

[The] stance of Christians toward unbelievers must never be merely passive or neutral, and Peter does not stop with an admonition not to fear. He goes on to encourage preparation for active witness which will win the unbeliever to Christ. . . . Paul provides a good example of seizing the offensive and bearing testimony to Christ even when on trial himself (Acts 22:1-21; 24:10-24; 26:1-23, 25b-29). In hostile situations the opportunity for witness to Christ often comes unexpectedly; the Christian who is not always ready to answer will miss it.⁵⁵

Implications for apologetics

Two cautions come to mind from this perspective on 1 Peter 3:15.

First, over the years I've heard the concern voiced a number of times that evangelism and apologetics need to be put together. At some point in history apologetics became its own distinct discipline. Avery Dulles notes that as more educated people became Christians they brought with them questions from their studies in philosophy and questions about the relationship of Judaism to this new religion. Attacks became more intellectually challenging. "Empty rumors of atheism, immorality, and Thyestean banquets," Dulles writes, "began to yield to more serious and sophisticated charges."⁵⁶ Hans-

⁵⁴ Mark, who recorded what he was taught by Peter, has a parallel passage in 13:9-11.

⁵⁵ Wayne Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 153.

⁵⁶ Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 22.

Georg Link wrote that “in the early church Apologists like Aristides, Justin Martyr, Tertullian and Origen raised the apology to the status of a distinct genre of theological literature.”⁵⁷

That apologetics and evangelism are or ought to be closely connected is not a new thought. I quoted Greg Ganssle to that effect earlier. Francis Schaeffer, the Ravi Zacharias team, and others have sounded this trumpet for a long time.

However, it’s still the case that it’s possible, given the categorical distinction between the two, for someone to spend years “doing apologetics” yet rarely if ever make the move from defense to proclamation. Of course, some people will give their primary attention to the intricacies of apologetics while others will be more attuned to evangelism. But somehow the message hasn’t gotten through with a lot of apologists. A few years ago a well-known apologist and historian in Europe told me that a problem American apologists have is spending too much time talking to each other. A bit of an exaggeration, perhaps, but not without a grain of truth.

One very real possible hazard of forgetting that defense is an aspect of witness bearing is finding success in the wrong place. Too often it seems that the ultimate goal is successfully forming a sound argument. Make a good case and you’ve done your job.

A potential hazard of too closely identifying apologetics and evangelism is the possibility making Christian belief a merely intellectual affair and believing that the recognition of the strength of an argument constitutes saving faith. Paul’s warning in 1 Cor. 2:1-5 is often too lightly treated if mentioned at all in apologetics texts.

It isn’t always possible to make a clear presentation of the gospel with the expectation of having one’s interlocutor focus on it and give it serious attention. Nonetheless, we make a mistake if we make a habit of staying in the realm of debating ideas.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ “Glossary of Technical Terms,” in Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1975), 1:51.

⁵⁸ Examples of personal responses to Paul’s arguments for the faith are seen in Acts 17: when Paul made a case a synagogue in Thessalonica for the necessity of the death and resurrection of the Messiah (17:4), and after his speech in Athens

My second caution has to do with the relationship of lay Christians to apologetics. It is possible to so burden the ardent evangelist with notions of the necessity of deeply imbibing the many responses to postmodernism and naturalistic evolution and atheism and whatever the criticism du jour may be that he feels intimidated. We need to ask ourselves if we are being true to Peter's exhortation to point to 1 Peter 3:15 and then to the usual array of arguments and evidences. "To do this," we say or imply, "is to know this."

Not every unbeliever is a thorough-going skeptic or atheist or militant Bible debunker. And apologetical arguments can be very intellectually challenging. One obvious solution is to simplify such arguments for lay usage, and that is certainly helpful. However, we ought to pause and reflect on the question of just what it is that most lay Christians need. Are we addressing the questions most lay Christians are likely to encounter rather than (or, at least, in addition to) the ones *we* find interesting? Maybe apologetics should be thought of as a "need to know" matter. We should be prepared to help Christians answer the objections they hear.⁵⁹

The other side to this lesson is for lay Christians who simply can't get interested in learning about all the things we talk about. To say one isn't really "into apologetics" doesn't get one off the hook with respect to Peter's exhortation. One ought at least to be willing and able to give the reasons why he or she believes. It could be that what convinced a lay Christian to believe that had little or nothing to do with answers to tough questions will be exactly what another person needs to hear. The call to faithfulness still applies, and the Spirit is still there to enable us to give a meaningful response.

(17:34). When people see that something really is true, it is implicitly understood (or ought to be) that they have to make a personal response. When people do not act on the truths we intend to substantiate with our arguments, it may not be that they simply don't believe them. Maybe the significance of these truths hasn't been made clear. Our arguments *can* seem rather abstract and remote from "real life."

⁵⁹ Sean McDowell offer some helpful tips to apologists in his article "Why Apologetics Has a Bad Name," *Christian Research Journal*, volume 35, number 03 (2012), accessed online at <http://www.equip.org/articles/why-apologetics-has-a-bad-name/>

Appendix: The Use of Isaiah in 1 Peter 3:14-15

I find it interesting that the passage in 1 Peter contains a line that is found in Isaiah in the Septuagint. In Isaiah 8 we read God's warning about the coming invasion of Assyria. Notice His counsel:

Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and *do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy*. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread (Is. 8:12-13).

These words are almost word for word those in 1 Peter:

Isaiah 8:12b, 13a: τὸν δὲ φόβον αὐτοῦ οὐ μὴ φοβηθῆτε οὐδὲ μὴ παραχθῆτε, κύριον αὐτὸν ἀγιάσατε

1 Pet. 3: 14b, 15a: τὸν δὲ φόβον

αὐτῶν μὴ φοβηθῆτε μηδὲ παραχθῆτε, κύριον δὲ τὸν Χριστὸν ἀγιάσατε

This line doesn't appear a few lists I saw of quotes from the Septuagint in Peter. Dan Wallace may be right that, since Peter didn't say he was quoting the Old Testament, he may well have been employing what Wallace calls the "rhetorical use" of Scripture.⁶⁰ Not being a NT scholar, I certainly won't go to the wall about Peter's specific intent, but I still find the comparison interesting. In both situations the people of God are being attacked, and they are told to fear God alone and to hold Him alone in awe, not the enemy. Honor Christ by making your defense.

Wayne Grudem says that "there is no formal citation but simply a duplication of several expressions." He continues: "Peter is apparently borrowing a familiar phrase from the Old Testament but using it in a different context and with different application." The historical context is, of course, different, but the context of a proper response in the face of persecution in Isaiah gives the phrases borrowed special significance.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Personal correspondence, July 3-4, 2012.

⁶¹ Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 152.

Note also that previously Peter refers to Isaiah 8:8 where he says that the stone that the builders rejected has become “a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense” (1 Pet 2:8). E.G. Selwyn held that there was probably a hymn that was common in the early church to which Peter and Paul (Rom. 9:33) made reference which included references to Isa. 8: 10ff, 28:15ff, and Ps. 118:19ff.⁶² Whether this is so or not, it still may be of significance that Peter references the same chapter in Isaiah twice in 1 Peter 3.

W. Edward Glenny sees a direct connection between the contexts of persecution in Isaiah and in 1 Peter. He summarizes, “Thus 1 Peter uses the Isaiah 8:12d-13a citation in a context very similar to that in which it is found in the Old Testament. The Christian minority is to live boldly for God in the face of potential persecution, not fearing what the society around them might do to them but instead fearing and reverencing Christ. When the Christians are asked concerning their life-style they are to explain their ultimate hope: the revelation of Christ; and they are to combine this verbal witness with the attractive, godly lifestyle described in 2:11-3:9. As in Isaiah the sovereignty of God is a major foundation for Peter’s argument (3:12, 17). Peter also Christianizes the text by identifying the Lord as Christ. . . . The present study has shown that even though Peter changed some of the words in the Old Testament text he did not change the conceptual idea in that text but he instead Christianized it and adapted it to the needs of his readers.”⁶³

⁶² E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 268-77.

⁶³ W. Edward Glenny, *The Hermeneutics of the Use of the Old Testament in 1 Peter*, Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1987, 151, 52.