

“*Relational Apologetics* is a rare book. It avoids the two extremes of painting apologetics as a purely intellectual encounter or of dismissing its relationship to evangelism altogether.” —**J. Thomas Bridges**, PhD, Phillip E. Johnson Chair of Science and Culture, and associate professor of philosophy, Southern Evangelical Seminary, and speaker, ReasonforTruth.org

“As Paul encouraged the Thessalonian believers, so Sherrard encourages us to go about our life and work in a way that makes the gospel believable and defensible.” —**James Flanagan**, PhD, president, Luther Rice Seminary

“Well-written, fast-paced, easy-to-read, [and] insightful in a wide variety of other ways. . . . Recommended.” —**Gary R. Habermas**, distinguished research professor and chair, department of philosophy, Liberty University and Theological Seminary

“A full-orbed and mature reflection on what it means to be an engaged follower of Christ in a radically skeptical age.” —**Craig J. Hazen**, PhD, founder and director of the MA program in Christian apologetics, Biola University, and author of the novel *Five Sacred Crossings*

“*Relational Apologetics* is a much-needed work that I heartily endorse. . . . [It] draws on the conviction, exemplified in the lives of Jesus and the apostles, that apologetics, as pre-evangelism, is most effective when it is done relationally.” —**D. Scott Henderson**, PhD, associate professor of philosophy and apologetics, Luther Rice University & Seminary

“It is good to have a concise means of sharing truth in an age of pluralism such as ours. Sherrard’s *Relational Apologetics* achieves this goal in a humble fashion. Here is an approach to defending one’s faith that is altogether new and refreshing while at the same time biblical and timeless.” —**Dylan Higgins**, teacher, and author of *The Emblem* and the *Lantern* series

“Michael Sherrard combines a profound Christian mind with a deep love for people. Throughout the pages of this book, you will see a winsome defense of Christian theism that engages rather than repels. In a ‘gotcha’

culture obsessed with caustic sound bites, Sherrard challenges Christians to do better—to love not only the truth but the ones who need it most.” —**Scott Klusendorf**, president of Life Training Institute, and author of *The Case for Life*

“*Relational Apologetics* is essential reading for all Christians who desire to effectively and faithfully engage the unbelievers in their lives.” —**David H. Leonard**, PhD, assistant professor of philosophy and apologetics at Luther Rice University, and founder of Calling and Culture (www.callingandculture.com)

“This is more than an ‘answers’ book. Yes, Sherrard provides answers. But he also includes content related to the all-important quality of being the kind of person people will hear. . . . If you are looking for a book that will guide you into becoming a better witness for Christ, your search is over.” —**Michael R. Licona**, PhD, associate professor in theology, Houston Baptist University

“I wish every believer would read this book. *Relational Apologetics* challenges, convicts, and equips us to lovingly reach out to people with the gospel and to live as the kind of humble and gracious apologists Jesus wants us to be.” —**Sean McDowell**, PhD, Biola University professor, speaker, and author

“Evangelism simply is *Relational Apologetics*. Sherrard’s new book clearly explains the Christian approach to sharing your hope in Jesus. It’s a must-read for everyone who loves God and people.” —**Andy Steiger**, director of Apologetics Canada

“Michael Sherrard has a pastoral heart and an evidential mind. He understands the critical role our personal lives have in communicating the gospel and he’s written a book to help others grasp the importance of our relationships when making the case for what we believe.” —**J. Warner Wallace**, cold-case detective, and author of *Cold-Case Christianity* and *God’s Crime Scene*

relational apologetics

DEFENDING THE
CHRISTIAN
FAITH WITH
HOLINESS
RESPECT
AND **TRUTH**

2ND EDITION

michael c. sherrard

 **Kregel**
Publications

*Relational Apologetics: Defending the Christian Faith with
Holiness, Respect, and Truth*

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*To the love of my life—my beautiful bride, Terri—
my precious gift, the mother and teacher of my children,
and my partner in preparing them and others to impact
our world for Jesus Christ*

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Preface

*As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet
of those who preach the good news!”*

—ROMANS 10:15

Beautiful Feet

Feet are repulsive. They are not objects of beauty. Yet there is nothing more beautiful than the feet of those who preach the good news of Jesus Christ. But while it is quite easy to say that the feet of those who preach the gospel are beautiful, these must be our feet as well. We must proclaim the hope found in Jesus. We all must be evangelists.

Sharing the gospel is not easy in our day. The world does not tolerate exclusive beliefs. We will be hated for preaching that it is only in Jesus that people can be saved. We will be called judgmental, arrogant bigots. We may lose our jobs, our friends, and even be alienated from our family members. Some may even lose their lives. But because there is nothing greater than knowing our Lord, we must sacrifice ourselves in love so that others may have the chance to know Him. That is why this book was written: to help you be able to defend your hope in Jesus and lead others to Him.

Now, I am not a genius. There is much yet for me to learn. This

book will not answer every question. I may even be wrong at some point. A great fear I have in writing is that my view on something may change, and then I will have in permanent form something I think is wrong. But using that kind of reasoning, I might later change my view back to what it originally was, and then I would be no worse off. Anyway, omniscience is not in the cards for any of us, so the best we can do is write with a limited amount of knowledge.

Why This Book Was Written

This book grew out of my students' desire to know both that Christianity is the "right religion" and how to communicate that truth to others. Many of them had friends who were skeptical of Christianity. They wanted to know how to maintain their relationships with them, while at the same time persuade them to follow Jesus. They were frustrated with not knowing how to answer skeptics' questions and respond to their objections. They were tired of the arguments that always seemed to accompany their talks about God. And, quite frankly, they were fed up with feeling belittled because of their belief in God. I imagine you can relate to this.

My students' desire to know how to defend their faith is a desire that I think most Christians have. It is my desire—one that led me to study religion, philosophy, and apologetics in college. The books I read were great. The lectures I heard were brilliant. Yet most of my students and fellow Christians would not have understood them. Furthermore, defending our faith cannot be reduced to an intellectual exercise. It is a relational experience.

Don't misunderstand me. I firmly support the academic efforts of brilliant scholars who seek to affirm Christianity through the highest levels of scientific and historical research and philosophical argumentation. It is certainly needed and has immense value. Having answers, though, is not enough. Christians need a way to communicate truth, not just collect it. And they need a method of communication that is suitable for the sidewalk and coffee shop, not just the

university. Formal debates are good, but they don't work well in your workplace or neighborhood.

Apologetics is a tool for all of us, not just the intellectual elite. Christians need a way to explain to their neighbor who is not a philosopher that absolute truth exists. They need a way to explain to their amateur skeptic classmate why belief in the resurrection is not foolish. Simply, they need a way to leverage difficult and intimidating questions for the gospel. We all must be able to answer how we know that Christianity is true. And we need a method that empowers us to use what we know rather than become paralyzed by what we do not. That is what this book provides.

Relational Apologetics is about how to share and defend your faith, non-scholar to non-scholar.¹ It will not delve deeply into the scientific and philosophical arguments for the existence of God and the validity of Christianity, but it will provide solid, simple, and easily remembered reasons why one should believe in both. It will also teach essential relational skills that are necessary to talk to skeptics and maintain a healthy relationship with them.² Healthy relationships combined with a reasonable explanation of a Christian's hope are the best type of apologetic, and they are something that all Christians can do.

What Is Apologetics?

Apologetics is simply a defense or justification for something, but in this context, it is the defense of and evidence for the Christian faith. Christian apologetics is a discipline that uses history, science,

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1. Even if you are a scholar, it is helpful to learn how to defend your faith in relational, nonacademic settings.
 2. Scholar and philosopher Gary Habermas modeled such skills in his friendship with former atheist Anthony Flew. The two had many debates about God and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Before Flew died, he changed from atheism to Deism (he still had some hang-ups about special revelation), and he credited much of this change to Habermas.

and philosophy to show that God exists and that He has revealed Himself most fully in Jesus Christ. Its purpose is to strengthen believers' faith and equip them with the tools necessary to explain the hope within (1 Peter 3:15).

Apologetics is a necessary part of evangelism in our postmodern world,³ where many lies obstruct the truth of the gospel: *Truth does not exist. All religions are the same. The Bible was forged. The resurrection was a fake.* Faithful evangelism requires us to know the cultural barriers that keep Jesus out of our society. And more than know them, we must be able to remove them (2 Cor. 10:5).

There are various ways to go about this, but *Relational Apologetics* stresses the importance of your entire life becoming a defense of the Christian faith and an obstacle-clearing path to Jesus. As good ambassadors of our Lord and faithful stewards of the Word of Life, we must be prepared to engage this world with the gospel and respond to any challenges. We all must be apologists.

The Value of Apologetics

I often hear that apologetics has no value in evangelism, that all you need is the gospel. People say that you can't argue someone into heaven and apologetics has never saved anyone. They are right, mostly. The gospel is what saves, not apologetics. But people must hear the gospel to believe it and be saved. If you were to say that the Chinese language has never saved anyone, you would be right. But if you are going to preach the gospel in China, you had better learn Chinese. Good missionaries learn the language and customs of the people group they are trying to reach. I have never heard a missionary say, "I don't need to learn Chinese. I've got the gospel." That would be a ridiculous attitude.

Likewise, as good missionaries, we need words and concepts that

3. Another application of apologetics is pastoral. But that is another book waiting to be written.

are suitable to convey the truth of the gospel to our culture. We must learn to speak the language of our time.⁴ For example, say you meet a person who does not believe in truth. You tell him that Jesus is the only way to be saved.

“What do you mean . . . *saved*?” he replies. “Saved from what?”

“Sin.”

“What’s sin?”

“Sin is all the wrong things you have done.”

“I don’t believe in right and wrong. Truth doesn’t exist.”

“Yes, it does.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

Do you see how you are speaking a different language? If someone doesn’t believe in truth, *sin* is a meaningless word. It is gibberish and the gospel won’t be understood. Apologetics helps to create a common language between the skeptic and the believer. By enabling the Christian to explain things like the existence of absolute truth, apologetics allows the gospel to be heard.

An Apologetic Lifestyle

Speaking a different language is one reason people don’t hear the gospel. Another one is Christians. We have a reputation for being rude and arrogant hypocrites. Sometimes this accusation is justified. There are many Christians who are hypocrites, and conversations of faith can quickly turn into shouting matches because of us. You know. You may be guilty. However, whether it’s because of silence, an

4. In times past, one might not have needed apologetics, though it is abundantly clear that apologetics have been part of gospel sharing from the beginning (Acts 17:2–4; 18:4; 2 Cor. 5:11; 10:5; Phil. 1:7; Col. 2:4; 1 Peter 3:15; Jude 3). Particularly in the United States, previous generations grew up immersed in a Christian worldview, a set of beliefs that affirmed things like truth, sin, and a need for forgiveness. The culture spoke our language. But times have changed. The Christian worldview is gone and with it went a suitable language for gospel sharing.

unholy lifestyle, or just plain rudeness, *you* must not be the reason someone doesn't hear the gospel. And therein, again, is the reason for the title of this book.

Relational Apologetics is about your life becoming a defense of the Christian faith. Every relationship you have is an opportunity to connect people to their creator as you display your hope, both in word and deed. Defending your faith is not just about answering questions and "proving" that God exists. It is about showing that He is real by the way you live. It is about demonstrating the power of God through your holiness. And it is about drawing people to Jesus through your kindness.

The best apologetic for Christianity is holy people who speak the gospel with their mouths and show the gospel in every aspect of their lives. Truth has no power when it comes from the mouths of hypocrites. If we are to faithfully defend our hope in Jesus Christ, we must focus as much on who we are and how we talk as we do on what we say.

And so I ask that as you begin reading this book you search yourself. Pray that God will make you a worthy vessel of the gospel. Defending Christianity is a good and noble task, but if all you want to do is win an argument, your heart is not in the right place. Defending your faith is not an act of arrogance. It is an act of love. So pray that God changes your heart as much as your mind as you read.

I pray that if you need to repent of unfaithfulness to the gospel, God will convict you in the pages to come. My prayer is that this book serves you as you seek to be a faithful servant of Christ, committed to speaking truth in love to all you meet. And I trust that because you read this book, you will have a stronger desire, matched with an improved ability, to make much of Jesus Christ and not yourself.

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P a r t O n e

Who You Are

Chapter One

Holiness

The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.

—BRENNAN MANNING

The Obstacle of Hypocrisy

There are many obstacles to coming to Christ. For many it is not an easy road. There are family issues, intellectual objections, pain, unanswered questions, guilt, pride, and so forth. You do not need to be another obstacle for someone. Sadly, though, the hypocrisy of Christians is a reason—and a fair one—that people reject Christ.

I often hear pastors respond to the claim that there is too much hypocrisy in the church by laughing and saying, “Sure, the church is full of hypocrites, and what a good place for a hypocrite to be.”

Usually the pastor then adds that there is always room for one more, the idea being that all people are hypocrites at some level. But this should not be tolerated. Hypocrisy is a sin, a serious sin. It is a sin that Jesus addressed. And it is a sin that the church needs to destroy, not joke about.

It is true that people don't always live up to the standard they set for their lives, and it is true that the one who hates hypocrisy likely has moments of hypocrisy himself. There is one difference, though, between the Christian hypocrite and the non-Christian hypocrite. The Christian hypocrite claims to know God and His will. This is no small claim. It is the grandest of all claims.

Knowing God and His will should affect how a person lives. It's hard to imagine that someone could meet God and not be changed. What message is sent by people who claim to know God but live in direct contradiction to His commands? I think it sends the message that they are charlatans and liars. I think it makes the gospel look false and devoid of power. I think it shows that they do not really believe the words they preach. I think it shows that they do not know God.

The fact is, your life either draws people to Christ or it pushes them away. Whether you like it or not, you represent Jesus. Your words and actions have gospel implications, and your life is intended to be a light that guides people to Christ (Matt. 5:13–16). However, when your life is not in step with the gospel, your hypocrisy casts a shadow of doubt over the life-changing message of the cross (Gal. 2:14). For when you, a believer in Jesus Christ, are no different from the nonbelievers to whom you speak, the gospel appears to be nothing more than a fairy tale: a nice story that is without any real power.

If the gospel is to look real to a world that is perishing, you must not look like a fraud. It is for this reason that hypocrisy must be replaced by genuine holiness.

The Objective of Holiness

Christians are commanded to be holy like our God (1 Peter 1:15).¹ We are to pursue pure and righteous living, free from all sin. Perfection is our aim. This is a daunting task. It is overwhelming to know that our lives are to be holy acts of worship to our God (Rom. 12:1–2). Thankfully, pursuing holiness is not something that we do in our own strength. God is working in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure, and He will complete the good work He has started in us (Phil. 2:13; 1:6).

Even though God will accomplish His purpose in our lives, namely, our holiness, it is still our responsibility to kill the sin in our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:12–13). We must act on the power supplied to us every day and seek to become like Jesus. Holiness is a pursuit in this life, not a destination, and when we stop running the race to become like Christ, we will be overtaken by hypocrisy. This is precisely where many Christians are today.

Many of Christ's followers have traded in the pursuit of holiness for the pretense of holiness. It is much easier to pretend to be holy than it is to pursue a holy life. And the easiest way to fake a holy life is to point out the sin in others instead of searching for the sin in your own life. You likely know someone who does this. You may even do it yourself. But understand that God is no fool, and the ability to spot

1. Just to be clear, I need to make the distinction here between positional holiness and personal holiness. Positional holiness is something that true believers possess. It is not something that needs to be sought every day. It is something we receive as a result of our faith and hope in Jesus. Those who place their trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins are acquitted in the heavenly court of all crimes and sins and are set apart and consecrated unto God as a holy person. In that sense, all true Christians are holy (1 Peter 2:9). On the other hand, personal holiness relates to the lifestyle of a Christian. It involves the daily surrender of your will to seek to do God's will. It involves active commitment to live a pure and God-honoring life. From this point on, when I refer to holiness, I am referring to personal holiness.

the sin in others is no sign to Him that you are sinless. Rather, it is likely the sign that you are a hypocrite.

The Nature of Hypocrisy

Christians must be concerned more with their own sin than the sins of others. Jesus explained this while preaching on judgment during the Sermon on the Mount. He said, “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? . . . You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye” (Matt. 7:3, 5). Here we see that, according to Jesus, hypocrisy is the result of exposing your brother’s sin but not your own.

This was perhaps the greatest problem Jesus had with the religious leaders in His day. Jesus routinely called the Pharisees and Sadducees “hypocrites” because they were concerned more with condemnation than self-examination. They exposed the sins of others yet gave little consideration to their own. In fact, many of them did not even consider themselves to be sinners. But Jesus was not fooled. They were, according to Him, whitewashed tombs: something that looked good on the outside, but had death on the inside (Matt. 23:27).

This hypocrisy in the Pharisees stemmed from their misunderstanding of what it meant to be righteous and holy. They presumed upon their status as Jews, God’s chosen people, and did not believe that judgment was on them. Therefore, they were not concerned with holiness; they believed God had already made them holy. They misappropriated God’s favor and were blinded by an overestimation of their status. This is dangerous. Relying on past actions is the breeding ground for hypocrisy.

This same problem is in the church. Many Christians presume upon God’s mercy as they look back to some past prayer they prayed, and they use it as a license to sin as the Pharisees did. They believe they have escaped the penalty of sin, so they continue to sin. But

salvation comes through faith, and faith is active. True believers practice righteousness (1 John 3:9–10). They do not vainly cling to a prayer in their distant past and neglect present obedience. They trust in Jesus daily, and their good works show it (Matt. 5:16; James 2:14–26).²

A proper understanding of the gospel should cause Christians to actively pursue holiness. It should cause forgiven men and women to hate the sin that sent Jesus to the cross and motivate them to purge it from their lives. The good news of God’s mercy and kindness should lead men and women to repentance, not guilt-free sinning. Many Christians misunderstand this and exploit their “saved” status. They rest in their past and become numb to their sin while they judge the rest of the world. They pretend to be holy by showing how others are not. This type of living makes a mockery of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross.

The Holy Apologist

The way to avoid hypocrisy is to seek holiness daily by asking God to search your heart, petitioning Him for forgiveness, and embracing His power for repentance. Clothe yourself in humility. Submit your life to others. Do not think more of yourself than you ought. Understand that every day you must be concerned about examining your own life more than examining others. Ask the Lord to show you the sin that remains and ask Him to forgive you. Then you need to repent. Know that repentance is a practice of the righteous, not something that is only for “pagans.” Do not be a hypocritical Pharisee and pretend to be holy by judging other “sinners.” Rather, be holy and let the light of your life show the darkness of others’ sin.

A daily repentance, turning away from sin and toward Jesus, is perhaps the most important apologetic for God you can have. This

2. I do not mean to imply that salvation is the result of works. But those who truly know Christ and have been saved do good works. There can be no assurance of salvation without them. This is one of the major themes of 1 John (2:3–11; 3:4–24; 4:7–21).

is because your life must reflect your message, or your message will appear to be false. But if your message matches your life, you will be a light that is impossible to miss in a dark world.

Know that your personal holiness is a command from God, and it is one that has gospel implications. Your love and mercy toward others is evidence that God exists. Your changed life demonstrates the power of the gospel. Your life matters. It is not only the words of pastors and theologians that display the evidence and glory of God. It is you.

As we consider how to defend our faith, let us first make sure that our faith has changed us. Let us first ask ourselves if we truly hope in Christ, and then examine our lives to see if we are living as if we hope in Him. If our lives contradict our message, our defense of it will only further harden the hearts of skeptics against God. Therefore, let your life be an apologetic even before your words are.³

3. This does not mean that you should never directly expose the sin in another person. Christians are called to expose sin. However, such confrontation must only happen on the foundation of self-examination and personal repentance. Only Christians who are committed to removing their own sin are qualified to help others remove theirs.