Chapter 1

"Why Do You Believe?"

The role of apologetics

As Christians we're always looking for opportunities to talk about Jesus Christ, but it's not always easy to get such conversations started. We hope that the way we live as Christians will provoke questions in the people we meet.

Fortunately opportunities arise wherever we are – at work, in leisure activities or during specific evangelism outreach. But even if people are truly interested in what we have to share, it's not always easy to take the next step. How can we make it clear that the Gospel has meaning for the people we're talking to? And how do we deal with difficult questions about the Christian faith? Can I truly believe in a good God, when there's so much suffering in the world? Why are there so many different religions? What is truth? Why are there so many different churches? Why have so many terrible atrocities been committed in the name of Jesus? How can you believe when so much contradicts your faith?

As Christians we believe in Jesus Christ, that he is the Son of God, and that it's of vital importance to know him. But how do you communicate that to others? These are the questions that "apologetics" deals with. Apologetics is the technical term for the effort to show why belief in Christ and the Gospel is reasonable – and relevant even to those who have not been brought up in the faith. It also addresses the critical questions asked by both non-Christians and Christians. The first two chapters of this book give a general introduction to apologetic witness and to

how to handle critical questions about the faith. In this chapter we think about apologetics as a biblical command for our time, and examine its importance by looking at the limitations of what apologetic argument can achieve. In Chapter 2 we will discuss the right attitude to handling difficult questions, and common points of contact and obstacles in conversations about God.

A biblical command

Justifying our faith is not just a Christian hobby, it's a biblical command. The apostle Peter exhorts us to "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15). This exhortation is not an isolated remark in the Bible. We also have the example of the prophets, the apostles and Jesus himself, who responded to all kinds of questions, both interested and critical, about faith. (For example, Isaiah 41:21–23; John 5:31–36; Acts 17:22–31; 1 Corinthians 15:1–8.)

Peter's exhortation relates closely to the way that God has created humanity and how he wants to deal with us. In the first and greatest commandment, God asks us to love him with all our heart, all our soul and all our mind (Matthew 22:37; in Deuteronomy 6:5 the "mind" is a part of the "heart"). God wants us to serve him with our whole selves, including our intellect. When we come to faith, our lives receive a new direction: we are no longer turned away from God, but towards him (however inadequately our lives may reflect this). Our minds play a part in that change of direction, or conversion. Paul calls us to change our worldly behaviour and "be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). When we encourage people in an evangelistic conversation to change the direction of their lives, we also address their thought processes, because the mind plays

a crucial role in the discovery of who God is and who he wants to be for them.

In Peter's direction we can unpack three elements of the biblical command to justify our faith. First, Peter tells us to give an answer to everyone "who *asks* you to give the reason for the hope that you have". This implies that the life of a believer should provoke questions. This is a crucial starting-point for all our conversations. However well we may be able to give reasons for our faith, our arguments will be empty and powerless if our faith doesn't show in our lives. When the Christian life is lived to the full, it is seen to be worthwhile and exciting; people will want to know what makes us different.

However, there is no need to wait until we are approached: we can ask people ourselves about the way they live their lives, and start from there to open a discussion about what gives us hope. Hope is perhaps the most important element here. What arouses interest is not simply that we are living a decent life according to God's commandments, but that our life indicates clearly that we have found hope, support, peace and a goal in our lives.

Secondly, Peter speaks of "the hope *that you have*". This is a message that we have processed and taken ownership of. You can't share the faith if it hasn't first become part of your own life. At the very least you must think and live through some of the questions relating to your faith before you are able to justify it to others. So being prepared to give reasons for your faith is not some abstract intellectual affair. For instance, before we can tackle the question of suffering, we must ask ourselves how we have responded to the grief or pain we have experienced or observed. Before we can tackle the issue of other faiths, we must have considered our own encounters with people who live good, faithful lives in obedience to other gods.

That's why the dialogue with non-Christians is always

two-way: when we encourage others to think, we are also made to think ourselves. We are forced to consider what exactly our hope is, and whether it has a solid foundation. Embarking on apologetic discourse involves risk, because sometimes we have to revise our thinking, letting go of some of our deeply held convictions. But if our faith in Jesus Christ is no illusion, we can trust that it is robust. If we continue to return to the foundation of our faith that is Jesus himself, our trust and our hope will only become stronger.

This brings us to a third element of biblical apologetics. Peter does indeed assume that Christian faith and hope is something personal, but it is definitely not merely a personal matter or a subjective feeling. When Peter speaks about hope, he doesn't mean people who are born with an optimistic character or who have decided at a certain moment to look at life from the sunny side. For Peter, hope is always connected with the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:3, 21). Personal faith is grounded in the hard facts, in the firm reality of God's working in the midst of history (1 Corinthians 15:1–8). That is why we can give reasons for our hope to others. It is not just an idea or emotion, but a reality which concerns everyone.

C. (= Christian): *You're talking about having hope for the future as if it's something purely personal, as if everyone should have their own dreams. I wouldn't be able to live with that. If you hope something, you want to have a good reason for it, right? Christians have hope for the future because we know that we don't have to be afraid of dying. Death is the greatest enemy of humanity, and it's been overcome. Jesus is stronger than death, because he died and rose again.*

Marks of Christian witness according to 1 Peter 3:15

1. The hope displayed in the lives of Christians is challenging to non-Christians.
2. The Gospel is a message that Christians have come to own for themselves.
3. It is based on an objective truth, independent of the believer.

Apologetics in our time

This kind of witness has always been a mark of faith: in both the Old and the New Testaments, prophets and apostles enter debate and dialogue and give reasons for their belief in God. However, apologetics became even more important in the period of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. From that time on, Christians were continually called upon to justify their beliefs. Their faith was summoned before the court of human reason, which was determined to dispense with anything the modern mind found "unreasonable". Some defenders of the faith gave in to this pressure to make it acceptable and diluted their message accordingly. What resulted was a faith without miracles, without a reliable Bible, without the resurrection. But human reason is not adequate for dealing with God: he is so much greater than our minds that we can't just shrink him to fit our small human measures. Moreover, the Bible brings with it a whole vision of its own of what is sensible and intellectually justifiable. We shouldn't let people who have no concept of God determine what counts as reasonable in spiritual matters.

Over the last few decades, the scales seem to have tipped the other way. Many people no longer expect the Christian faith to be reasonable at all. They say that whether you're a Christian or not, belief is a personal matter, influenced by the individual's

experiences, feelings and convictions. You may be able to share these convictions and experiences with others, but you can't give arguments for them.

At first glance this development may seem to be an improvement: religious beliefs are permitted again and you're less likely to be attacked for being a Christian. It does, however, have an important consequence. Whenever religious beliefs come up in conversation, you can't get any further than simply exchanging opinions. "We each have our own opinions, so there's no need to discuss or defend them. Let's leave each other free to believe whatever we want, and everyone will be happy." In this culture, Christians will have to go against convention again, but in the opposite direction from before. People have become aware of the limitations of the human mind, but Christians now have to make clear that this doesn't mean that the mind doesn't count at all when talking about God and faith.

As Christians we believe that God gave us our intellectual capabilities, and he asks us to love and serve him "with all our mind". He has given us a very important place in the universe: he created human beings to take responsibility for their thoughts and their deeds. This is clear from the fact that we are not entirely subject to the laws of nature; we are not entirely governed by natural laws or instinctive urges that determine our behaviour, unlike the rest of creation. God guides us by his commandments and promises, but he does not force us to respond in a specific way. However, he does hold us responsible if we refuse to listen: that becomes clear from the condemnations of the prophets and from the judgment of Jesus on those who refuse to believe. This responsibility is implied in the belief that everyone will some day meet God as their judge. This responsibility for our own actions and decisions makes sense only if we have the capacity for making responsible

choices: that is why God has given us a mind and a will.

Later on we will see that the human ability to make responsible choices is limited in several ways. People are often trapped by their own feelings, by what drives them and by pressure from other people, but that is definitely not how God meant it to be. In discussions about faith you can help people to free themselves from these pressures: if you as a Christian assume that everyone is responsible for their own attitude towards God, you will need to help them to determine their attitude to God in a responsible manner. Giving them good reasons for your faith encourages this, for responsible choices are those for which you have good reasons. As Christians we are aware, more than most people, of the limits of the human mind, because we are aware of sin and all those other forces that can influence our thinking. But we believe that people are still responsible for their own actions and beliefs and that the Gospel can set them free to act and believe responsibly and rationally.

That is why evangelism is so very different from advertising or from propaganda. Of course we advertise the great God we have. But normal propaganda attempts to manipulate people. As long as people buy the "right" brand of car, clothes or beer, advertisers are not at all interested whether they make their choice on good grounds. Commercials are designed to persuade people to make choices on completely spurious grounds, by making you feel you belong when you buy the right trainers, or by suggesting that if you buy the right car you'll have the same success with women as the driver in the commercial. Evangelism should never manipulate. The evangelist wants people to choose God on good grounds, because he exists, because he is the goal of our life, and because only he can truly redeem us. Good evangelism enables people to decide freely and responsibly to follow Christ. This sets them free from the manipulative pressures and the paralysing

subjectivism and relativism in our late-modern society that so often imprison them.

The importance of apologetic witness in evangelism

1. It is a biblical command (1 Peter 3:15).
2. The prophets and apostles set the model.
3. It shows that the Christian faith is not about personal preference but about a truth for everyone.
4. The message of the Gospel is based on an objective reality, a hope that is given to us.
5. God gave us our minds to serve him.
6. In apologetic dialogue we set people free to choose their beliefs and commitments responsibly and on good grounds.
7. Evangelism differs from advertising and propaganda, because it does not manipulate.

Possibilities and limitations

So God has commanded us to witness to our faith and to give a reasonable account of the hope we have, even if confronted with tough questions. Nevertheless, there are limits to the scope of what such apologetic witness can achieve. It's important to understand these limitations, so that we don't give rise to unrealistic expectations in our audience, and so that we won't be disappointed ourselves.

First, belief is the result not only of knowledge and understanding, but of the *will*. It relates to what or whom we love and what's important to us. You can produce books full of sound arguments, you can have fantastic rhetorical skills, but if people don't want to believe, and don't want to give God a place in their

life, you'll get nowhere. Saint Augustine said, "reasoning with a stubborn opponent is pointless." The hearer has to be open to belief – or perhaps be broken open by the power of the Holy Spirit. Because belief is related not only to the mind but also to the will, people coming to faith not only need good reasons, they also need to be converted. You can, however, certainly give good reasons why that conversion, that turning towards God, is necessary. We know that it's hard to convince people of what they don't want to see, however true it is and however much they can harm themselves by their stubbornness. That's why the call to conversion remains an essential part of apologetic witness; the prayer for the Holy Spirit, who opens doors and hearts, remains indispensable. "And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ" (Colossians 4:3).

Belief also has to do with our *feelings*: our emotional world plays a vital role in what we do or don't find acceptable. That doesn't mean that we should stop giving reasons for our faith, but it does mean that all kinds of experiences and feelings will have to be taken into account. People are hardly ever set in motion by theoretical considerations – it is rather their experiences, their desires, their fears and ideals that move them. So these issues must be included in apologetic conversations, to connect them with God. Only when we critically reflect on our experiences and feelings can we discover which experiences lead us to God and which lead us astray; which desires are right, which fears are justified and which are not.

C.: *You say you can't accept that we need God to save us – but you seem to feel that very strongly. How come you're so absolute?… Of course your feelings are important, but you should look at them with a critical eye. In my own life I know my feelings have led me the*

wrong way time and again. I've thought I didn't need any help, but looking back, I've seen that I did. Can you relate to that?

Next, there's the issue of *the limitation of our understanding*. When we attempt to give reasons for our faith, we need to realize that we can never fully understand God, because he is infinitely greater than we are (Deuteronomy 29:29; Isaiah 55:8–9; 1 Timothy 6:16). Everything we know about God is blurred by our weakness and sin (1 Corinthians 13:12). God has made his purposes known to us, but much of what happens in our lives will remain unclear.

Finally, there's the issue of the *nature of our knowledge of God*. We must realize that we know God in a special way, the way that's appropriate for this very special relationship. There's nothing wrong with that: the way I "know" my wife is different from the way I "know" a mathematical proposition. It's important to understand this, because often people ask for the kind of knowledge about God that isn't possible. "I'm willing to believe in God, if you can prove to me that he exists." Often they ask for some sort of scientific evidence, the type of proof that works in our visible world – but in fact, in only very limited aspects of our visible world. In a courtroom, for example, you need a completely different kind of evidence: reliable witnesses.

I don't doubt at all that my wife loves me, but it's impossible to prove that in a scientific way. And I don't need to. I know it, because she tells me herself and because I trust her. A "proof of love" is a different kind of proof from the evidence that stones always fall downwards, or the kind of proof that is demanded in a court of law. That's also how it works with faith. We need to look for the type of evidence that's appropriate for knowing God. "Faith comes from hearing" (Romans 10:17), but it is not less certain for relying on "hearing", for it goes back to reliable witnesses, to a convincing declaration of love. Therefore "faith

is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1). We will elaborate on this issue of the evidence for the Christian faith in Chapter 6.

These four limitations of what apologetic witness can achieve don't mean that the command to give reasons for your faith should not be taken seriously. They do mean, however, that a balanced and rounded apologetic witness should address the people whom we meet as whole, entire and integrated persons. We must be aware of the friends we engage in dialogue as people who are responsible for their own convictions; as people with free will; with all sorts of feelings and experiences; as human beings who have been created to know God, yet who will never fully understand him.

Questions for group discussions or personal reflection

1. Are you ever confronted with difficult questions about the Christian faith? How do you feel when that happens? (Are you happy to find an opportunity for conversation? Slightly scared? Does it make you aware of similar questions of your own?) How do you react?
2. What do you feel you need to know in order to answer such questions? You could write down your ideas, and see how far this book helps you.
3. Why does God ask us to serve him with our mind (Matthew 22:37), and tell us that our minds should be renewed (Romans 12:2)? What does that mean for us?
4. Peter's exhortation to "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that

you have" suggests three things: (a) hope must be visible in our lives; (b) hope must be something that we have made our own; and (c) hope is not just about subjective feelings, but links us to a reality outside ourselves. Which of these three elements is most difficult for you? Do you see potential for growth in that area?

5. What do you consider the biggest obstacles for apologetic witness nowadays? How can we overcome them?

6. What is the difference between evangelism and advertising? How can we make that clear?