

What is the Overall Apologetic Task?

Joseph M. Holden & Don Deal

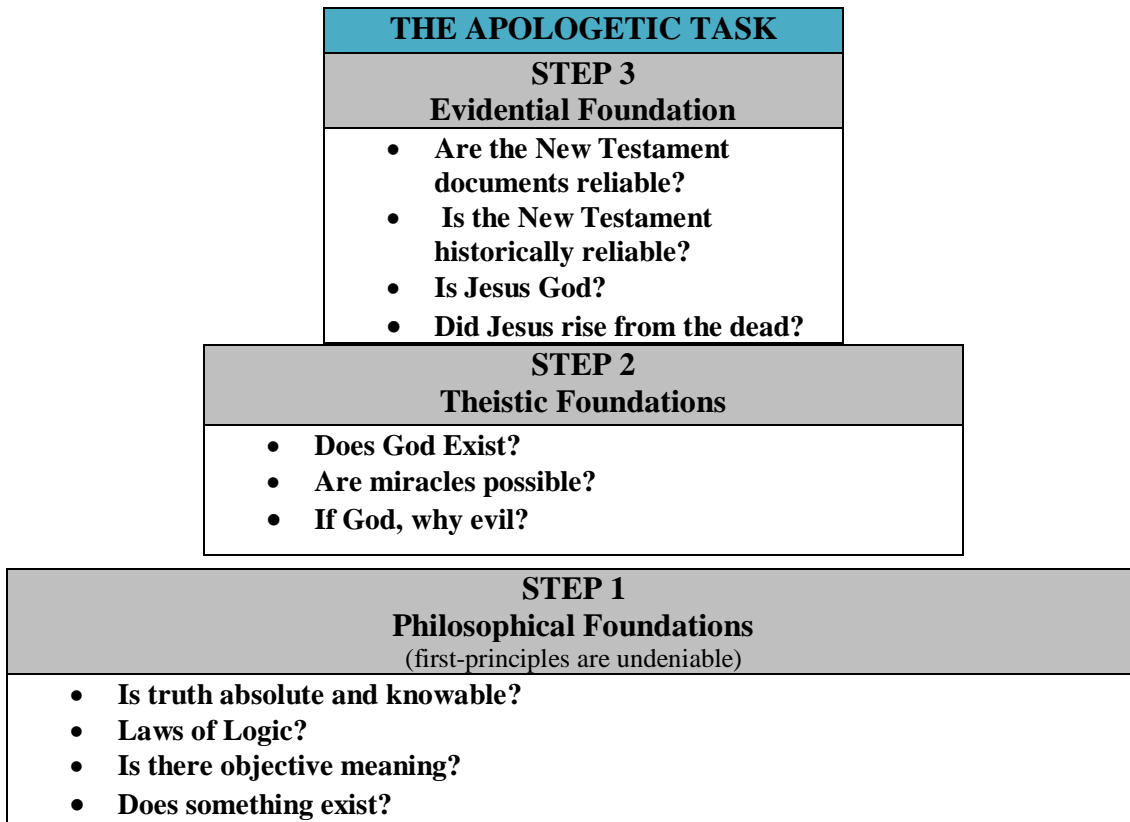
Copyright Joseph M. Holden and Don Deal, 2019. All Rights Reserved.

(*The Harvest Handbook of Apologetics*, Harvest House Publishing, 2018)

The ultimate goal of every Christian is to give a clear answer, or defense (*apologia*), to anyone who asks about the Christian Faith (1 Peter 3:15). In addition, since apologetics exists to aid and serve the gospel, this goal also involves presenting a positive case for Christianity, much like a lawyer argues his case in a courtroom. The process of achieving this goal is known collectively as the ‘apologetic task.’

From a classical point of view, accomplishing this task involves building an argument from the ground up in three successive steps. These foundational steps, in logical order, include: 1) Philosophical Foundation, 2) Theological Foundation, and 3) Evidential Foundation (some combine steps 1 and 2 together under one heading as worldview considerations). Each step of the task treats various issues crucial to offering both a defense of, and a convincing case for Christianity.

To be clear, this is not a particular argument we are after here, but to consider the big picture progression of ideas and the crucial issues that support the overall argument for Christianity itself. Arriving at incorrect conclusions for any one of these topics below may hinder one’s understanding and receiving of the gospel. The following chart offers an illustration of the progression of the steps and the topics involved.



Step 1: Philosophical Foundation

The first thing in our apologetic task to recognize is that not everyone holds the same worldview (the lens through which one interprets reality). Some have claimed there are as many worldviews as there are people in the world! That is to say, each person has a set of glasses through which they make sense of their life, data, and experiences. Sometimes this is why it is a challenge to get others to intellectually understand the gospel message. Everyone brings their own assumptions, whether right or wrong, to help make sense of the world. Therefore, Steps 1 and 2 address the unbeliever's worldview.

This difficulty led Francis Schaeffer to coin the term 'pre-evangelism' to refer to the work that needs to be done in one's worldview prior to receiving the gospel. To be clear, we always want to give the simple gospel message first! However, when objections arise and a

chronic refusal to receive Christ occurs, there may be worldview obstacles that are hindering their understanding of what someone might think is possible or intelligible. At this point, it is best to discern what exactly is hindering their progress towards Jesus. Most often, unbelievers go wrong in at least one of the three steps. Ultimately, we want to be sure their *worldview* is not holding back faith in Christ because of misunderstanding or incorrect conclusions. Steps 1 and 2 of the task are designed to address these issues. These include topics relating to the nature and knowability of truth (absolute or relative?), the laws of logic (rules of thought?), reality/being (does something exist?), logic (rules of thought?), and meaning (objective or cultural?).

The answers to these crucial issues make a big difference in what someone feels comfortable to accept as true when considering Christianity. For example, if truth is viewed as being relative to the feelings of the individual, the gospel “truth” would seem like nonsense (or at least have equal status with other mutually exclusive views) since it would be only your personal *opinion*.

Moreover, any absolute truth claims you may utter would appear to fall on deaf ears to the relativist, since the notion of absolutes (i.e., true for all people, at all times, in all places) is nonsense to them. In this condition, it would seem impossible for the unbeliever to ever receive our case for Christianity as “the truth.”

To be effective, it is best to treat the problem issues, thus removing (with the help of the Holy Spirit) intellectual obstacles to faith (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). For instance, to remove the truth obstacle discussed above, we need only explain that truth is *undeniable*, meaning that when you try to deny truth you actually affirm it. The same is undeniably true with logic, knowledge, meaning, absolutes, and other first principles in step 1 that form the bedrock to any worldview. Any attempt to altogether deny or relativize the topics in Step 1 is tantamount to affirming them. That is, to claim that, “Logic doesn’t exist” uses logic to deny logic! And the statement, “There

is no meaning,” is itself a meaningful statement! Likewise, to deny your own existence implies your very existence, since you would have to exist in order to deny your existence—*hence something undeniably exists*. The next logical question is then, “How did we get here?”

By helping the lost sort out the most fundamental issues in their worldview you are clearing an intellectual pathway to faith in Christ and a proper interpretation of the evidence in Step 3. After demonstrating that the basic philosophical topics in Step 1 are undeniable, we can then move on to the *theological* foundations of one’s worldview (Step 2).

Step 2: Theological Foundation

It is important to deal with Step 1 prior to Step 2 since we now intend to make use of the undeniable tenants such as truth, logic, knowledge, meaning, and being.

Step 2 addresses questions relating to: 1) God’s existence, 2) the possibility of miracles, and 3) the problem of evil. Each question in this section has the potential for a broad life-changing impact, which is why we call these “macro issues.” The logic behind this step is to help the lost sort through questions pertaining to God with a view to helping them interpret the tangible evidence presented in Step 3 (evidential foundation), thus having a good chance to receive Christ as Savior.

To begin, God’s existence is critical to eventually receiving Christ, since to offer Christ as the “Son of God” in Step 3 presupposes there is a real God that can have a Son. It would make no sense to speak of the Son of God if God did not exist. The same fate is true for the Word of God (Bible), acts of God (miracles), and the people of God (church). Christianity would utterly break down if God did not exist, nor would Christianity be convincing in the mind of the skeptic!

Traditionally, there have been strong reasons to support the existence of God rooted in the material world. Paul asserted in Romans 1:19-20 that we can know something about God

through the things He has made (creation), which have fostered various arguments for His existence. Among them are the cosmological argument (reasons from the universe as an effect to a First Cause), teleological argument (reasons from design in the universe to a Designer), moral argument (reasons from moral law to a moral Legislator or Law-giver), the argument from motion (reasons from motion in the universe to a first Mover), and the anthropological argument (reasons from intelligent beings to an Intelligent Cause). The cause responsible for all these effects seen in creation is recognized by Christians as God.

Following closely on the heels of God's existence emerges the question of miracles, namely, whether a supernatural event could occur in a world governed by the regular laws of nature. This question has an immediate bearing on the believability of numerous supernatural events mentioned in Scripture, including the incarnation and the crowning proof of Christianity—the *physical resurrection of Christ*. Furthermore, the importance of miracles, signs and wonders rests in the purpose it serves as the direct confirmation of God's message (Acts 2:22; Hebrews 2:3-4).

Some have a difficult time believing in miracles because they assume the laws of nature (such as gravity, strong and weak nuclear forces, etc) are regular, fixed and cannot be violated (e.g., David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Benedict de Spinoza). In the past, some have viewed these laws as *mandating* the way the universe *must unalterably* operate at all times. If this is the case, then miracles are closed off from our world which is seen to act like a rigid machine. However, for Christians, a better way to understand the laws of nature is recognizing that they are flexible and merely descriptive of the way the universe *usually* or *normally* operates.¹ If true, then it would seem possible for miracles to occur as *exceptions* to the laws of nature (not violations of), much like a break in the normal course of events to allow for the miracle, then afterwards the laws resume again.

What is more, if God exists, then miracles (acts) of God are possible. There simply is no reason to doubt the possibility of miracles if there is a God who can act.

Within Step 2, an additional sticking point often surfaces in the mind of the skeptic, namely, the problem of evil, which is generally addressed as a subset under God's existence known as *theodicy*. Though there are many challenging questions relating to evil, the most fundamental objection is: "If God is good and loving why does He allow evil to occur?", implying that God is to blame and is not as good or loving as He claims to be.

Christians have traditionally pointed out that since God gave humans free will, He took a risk knowing that evil could arise through its misuse. The answer to the question may be surprisingly simple. Perhaps God allowed evil to occur for the same reason good and loving parents allow their young children to play outside knowing the risks involved (injury). The alternative is in not allowing children to play at all in an attempt to remove the possibility of evil occurring. What kind of life would that be? It would probably foster more psychological evils as a result!

To put it another way, it is likely that God made evil possible by giving free will, but man makes evil actual by misusing freedom. In this case, God is only the indirect cause of evil, whereas, we are the direct and immediate cause of evil through our choices. If true, then blaming God for evil would be like blaming Henry Ford for all auto accidents!

But why does God allow evil to continue today? It's allowance would seem to portray God as lacking the power (impotent) or desire (malevolent indifference) to eliminate evil now. However, since evil emerges from a misuse of free choice, the only way to stop evil now with free creatures involved would be to remove freedom. This remedy would indeed remove evil, but it would also abolish the possibility of salvation, since it too is gained by freely receiving Christ. It seems best to allow evil and salvation (good) to co-exist until God sorts it out in the near

future, making it clear that it is better that evil exists and some are being saved, than no evil existing and nobody being saved.

The argument against God from the problem of evil is a dangerous one for the skeptic, since, ironically, it actually can turn into an argument in favor of God's existence. No one could claim that something is evil if they had no absolute standard of Good to measure it by. To put it another way, as former atheist, C.S. Lewis, once recognized in his book, *Mere Christianity*, you cannot call a line crooked unless you have at the same time an absolute standard (of a straight line) to measure it by. That is to say, no one can claim the world is *getting worse* if they do not have an absolute moral standard beyond the world of what is *best*.

Step 3: Evidential Foundation

The final step in clearing away obstacles to faith and presenting a clear case for Christianity involves evaluating tangible evidence. Evidence shows tangible consistency between the Bible and the real world, offering empirical support of the tenants of faith. However, many have become frustrated when the evidence itself does not convince the skeptic. At this point, more often than not, we recognize that there are deeper issues at play in how skeptics *interpret* the evidence. Atheists, Pantheists, and Christian theists clearly arrive at differing conclusions when viewing the same data. This is because evidence does not come with instructions on how to interpret the evidence. Interpretation is provided by one's worldview (this is why Steps 1 and 2 are crucial).

We are fortunate to live in an era when there is abundant evidence to support Christianity, Jesus and the Scriptures. The important topics in Step 3 are: 1) the *textual* reliability of the New Testament, 2) the *historical* Reliability of the New Testament, 3) the deity of Christ, and 4) His physical resurrection from the dead.²

Though there are fuller explanations of these topics throughout the chapters of this work, let's take a brief look at the evidence to grasp how they flow with our three-step process.

The *textual* reliability of the New Testament is overwhelming! A key factor in discovering whether Christianity is true is evaluate whether the biblical manuscripts are an accurate representation of the original. How can we know that an ancient document has been transmitted (copied) accurately? In simple terms, scholars analyze two important areas: 1) the number of manuscripts (more to compare to arrive at the original) and 2) the dates of the manuscripts (the earlier the better, since less chance for myth and embellishment to enter the text)

For example, scholars today have about 1,850+ manuscript copies of Homer's *Iliad*, with a gap of about 400-500 years between the original composition and our oldest copy. Many other works from ancient history, such as Plato and Aristotle's works have not fared better, often having more than 1,000 year gap between the original and our oldest copy, with less than two dozen manuscripts of each.

So how does the New Testament stack up in this ancient competition? We have nearly 30,000 New Testament manuscripts in various languages (versions), of these, more than 5,800 are in the Greek language, with the oldest verified copy (fragment) of a New Testament document from the Gospel of John, with a gap of fewer than 50 years from the original composition.³ No other ancient text comes close to the quantity or early dates of New Testament manuscripts.

Based on comparisons of the many manuscripts accompanied by early dates, scholars have estimated that the New Testament documents have been copied with about 99.5+% accuracy to the original. Thus, we have the more copies of the New Testament, and they are closer to the original Bible than any other ancient document is to their original work, and copied

at the greatest percentage of accuracy.⁴ This makes it relatively easy to render the Scriptures in the English language as a faithful representation of the original Bible.

The *historical* reliability of the New Testament is equally impressive. Archaeological and historical data have collected an impressive array of finds in the last one hundred years. To date, nearly 100 people mentioned in the Old and New Testament have been confirmed through historical and archaeological sources.⁵ Even Jesus of Nazareth is attested to in nearly a dozen non-biblical literary sources, often written by unbelievers, as well as the controversial James Ossuary (small stone box to place the bones of the deceased) bearing the names of Jesus, James, and Joseph.⁶

What is more, dozens of geographical markers in the Bible have been identified, including the temple mount area, pools of Bethesda (John 5) and Siloam (John 9), and many other locations.⁷ Remarkable, in spite of only 1% of all the sites in the Holy Land have been excavated!

The *deity of Christ* (incarnation) is an important topic in Step 3. Throughout the gospels, Jesus said and did things that are only appropriate for God. For example, Jesus forgave sins, described Himself in unmistakable terms of deity (John 8:58 cf. Exodus 3:14), the same titles used of Jehovah are also applied of Christ, and He received worship from His followers.⁸

Christ's status as the incarnated God-man (*theanthropos*, John 1:14) is crucial to apologetics, since He uniquely possessed two distinct natures (divine and human) in one person (the Son), makes Jesus uniquely qualified to be the perfect human offering for the sins of the world (representing mankind, the offender). He also had a divine nature, thus representing God's provision to remove sin, mediator, and the very expression of God Himself. Therefore, any sound defense of the faith should be Christocentric.

In addition, Christians have long recognized the *physical resurrection* of Christ as the central miracle claim in the New Testament. It has been said that the resurrection “is the capstone in the arch of Christianity, if it is removed all else crumbles.” There are several lines of evidence that support the resurrection as historical fact. They include:

- 1) Jesus’ burial tomb was found empty.
- 2) Jesus was seen by 500 witnesses, most of which (at least 250) were still alive when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 15:1-7.
- 3) Jesus offered Himself to be touched, and was seen on several occasions after the resurrection, including by the apostles (Luke 24; John 20, 21).
- 4) Mary encountered the resurrected Lord at the tomb (John 20)
- 5) The apostles’ lives were changed, transformed from cowards into lions for their faith and message, eventually being martyred for their faith.
- 6) The lives of some of Jesus’s critics were changed. Saul (later Paul) and James, the brothers of Jesus, were known skeptics of Jesus during his lifetime. After Jesus’s death, they became leaders of the new church.⁹ People will die for what they believe is true; not for what they know is false.
- 7) Something radical occurred to immediately change the long-standing dietary restrictions (kosher to non-kosher) and worship habits (Saturday to Sunday) of the apostles and early Jewish followers of Christ. The resurrection is the best explanation of these, and other facts, relating to the Christian faith.¹⁰

Conclusion

Each of the main steps contribute to forming the foundations of the overall argument for Christianity that takes into consideration the role that worldviews play in evaluation and interpretation of evidence. Though much more could be said regarding the case for Christianity,

this volume offers an excellent panorama of the crucial questions relating to this topic in more detail.¹¹ The evidence to support such a faith is solid, what remains is conveying the information in an understandable way to maximize its impact on the skeptical mind. Recognizing the important role of one's worldview in the interpretation process will ensure the evangelist's flexibility to engage in pre-evangelism when needed. The overall case for Christianity is strong, not because there are two billion Christians (and growing) in the world today, but because it corresponds to reality!

¹ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 458.

² There are several well-known modern apologists, who are contributors to this book, who have written extensively on these subjects such as John Warwick Montgomery, Josh McDowell, Gary Habermas, H. Wayne House and Norman Geisler to name a few.

³ More recently, Daniel Wallace of the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts announced that his team had discovered a fragment from Mark's Gospel which a paleographer dated to the first-century! If this discovery and analysis survive additional research, it will erase any significant gap between the original document and the oldest existing copy. See <https://voice.dts.edu/article/wallace-new-testament-manuscript-first-century/>

⁴ For more detail, see the chapter in this book by Don Stewart and Joseph M. Holden, "Are the New Testament Manuscripts Copied Accurately?"

⁵ See Joseph M. Holden and Norman Geisler, *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible: Discoveries that Confirm the Reliability of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2013), 261-264, 283-289, 295-305.

⁶ For a detailed description and case for authenticity of the James Ossuary inscription, see Holden and Geisler, *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible*, 310-315, 389-393.

⁷ For many more interesting finds see Holden and Geisler, *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible*.

⁸ Many important attributes of God listed in the Old Testament are used of Jesus in the New Testament;

| Attribute: | Old Testament | New Testament |
|---------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Shepherd | Psalms 23:1 | John 10:11 |
| First & Last | Isaiah 44:6 | Revelation 1:17 |
| Judge | Joel 3:12 | Matthew 35:31f. |
| Bridegroom | Isaiah 62:5 | Matthew 25:1 |
| Light | Psalms 27:1 | John 8:12 |
| Savior | Isaiah 43:11 | John 4:42 |
| God's Glory | Isaiah 42:8 | John 17:5 |
| Giver of Life | 1Samuel 2:6 | John 5:21 |

also, see Ron Rhodes chapter in this volume on the deity of Christ.

⁹ <https://raychoi.org/2012/06/01/what-happened-to-the-12-disciples-after-the-resurrection-and-ascension/>

¹⁰ See the chapter on the resurrection in this volume by Gary Habermas. Also see his work *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004).

¹¹ For more detail see Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, Updated and Expanded (Nashville, TN, 2017).