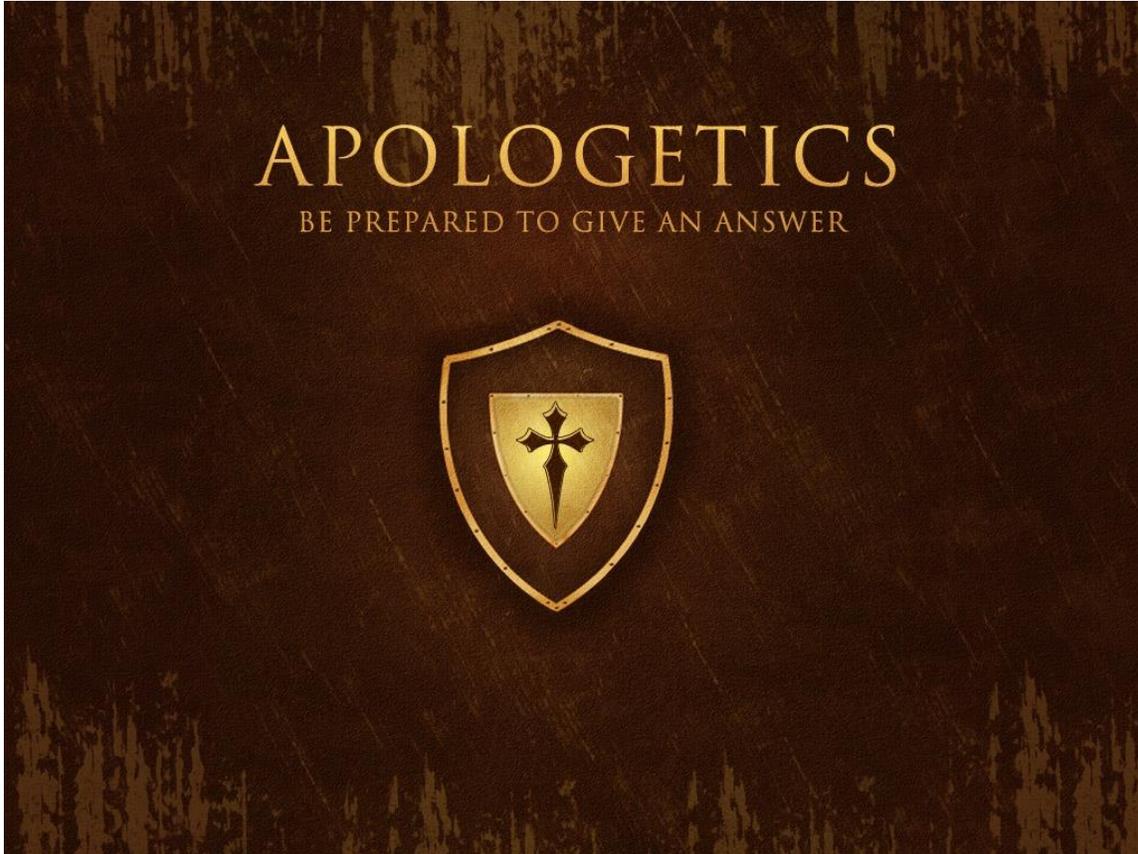


Know How to Answer: Introduction to Conversational Apologetics¹



“But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. 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).”

“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone (Colossians 4:5-6).”

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[Apologetics Research Society](#)

¹ I want to thank individuals such as the late [Dr. Greg Bahnsen](#) and organizations such as [Stand to Reason](#) for formulating much of this material.

I. Three Keys to Being an Effective Apologist:

1. "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord."
 - a. Remember that all knowledge is in Christ (Colossians 2:3), and that, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Proverbs 1:7)."
 - b. Our defense (apologetic) should be based unashamedly on the person of Christ as revealed in His word. We can show that any system of thought, if it's not based ultimately on biblical revelation, is inherently irrational.
 - c. Jesus provides a parable illustrating the difference between a wise man and a fool which confirms the wisdom of building one's life and position on the solid rock of God's word, on the biblical worldview: "Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock" (Matt. 7:24–25).
2. "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."
 - a. In obedience to Christ, we should continually study the Bible not just for academic purposes but for a changed life (cf. 1 Timothy 4:16)². Notice that we are called to give an answer to everyone (whether the intellectual or common man). This is the duty of all Christians not just those in the full-time ministry.
 - b. We should not be discouraged if the person is not persuaded, as long as we have given a good, biblical faithful reason for our faith. Conversion is the job of the Holy Spirit, not us; we are only to plant the seed.
3. "But do this with gentleness and respect."
 - a. The importance of prayer cannot be overstressed. The prayerless Christian is a powerless apologist.
 - b. The Christian must deal with the problem of pride because "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6)." If the unbeliever senses that you are filled with contempt or an air of superiority, he will not listen to you.
 - c. Remember that *unbelievers* are *people* before they are *unbelievers* so we must treat them with gentleness and respect. Jesus also died for them (although they have not responded yet) and it is our duty to treat all people with dignity. Unbelievers are human beings who have homes, families, emotions, needs, ambitions, fears, and frustrations, which are common to all men.³

² See appendix, "Eight Ways to Know Your Bible" for more details.

³ Even the evangelistic atheist Dan Barker once wrote, "Ridicule is rarely effective in changing someone's mind. No one likes to be laughed at. No one wants to be told they are a loser. How do you respond to ridicule? Combativeness creates enemies. The purpose of an evangelistic atheist should be to make a friend. To win them over to the reasonableness of freethought. You can't browbeat a person into friendship. "Onward, Atheist Soldiers" is the opposite of freethought. Friendship is only attained by attraction. The only way to attract someone is by being attractive. If you want to win someone to your side, then treat them like a friend. Respect who they are and where they are at this stage of their life. Show them that freethinkers are courteous and tolerant. You may not become bosom buddies,

II. Three Essential Skills for Being an Ambassador for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20a):

1. Knowledge (An accurately formed mind):
 - a. One must have some basic knowledge of the Scriptures since there is a message to be communicated.
 - b. One must have basic knowledge of the answers to the questions that will be asked. As Christians we get our answers to life's big questions from the Bible⁴.
 - c. As ambassadors for Jesus Christ, minimally, we must know the character, mind, and purposes of our king. You represent the very essence of Christ when at work, on campus and out on the streets.
 - d. Learn to talk in such a way that makes the message clear, compelling and accurate. Make sure you know the facts about the Bible. This can be achieved by investing time in studying the Bible, reading good books on Theology and learning from those who are mature in Christ.
2. Wisdom (An artful method):
 - a. Knowledge must be deployed in a skillful way. There's an element of wisdom, a tactical and artful diplomacy that makes his message persuasive.
 - b. When dealing with various people there are different tools that can be used to meet the needs of their hearts.
 - c. Learn from Jesus' encounters with others and the Socratic Method by asking questions that will help you understand the unbelievers thinking, frame work and spiritual convictions.
3. Character (An Attractive Manner):
 - a. Because an ambassador brings himself along in everything he does, his personal maturity and individual virtue can either make or break the message.
 - b. As an ambassador for Christ be aware of how you come across to others (in physical appearance, in speech and in life). Ask yourself, "What do others see in me or sense about me while dialoging or observing me?"
 - c. Being a man or woman of character involves working through your own shortcomings and seeking maturity in Christ through discipleship.⁵
4. These three areas: knowledge, wisdom, and character are the three areas all Ambassadors for Christ need to continue to grow in.
 - a. Sometimes the task can be confusing and even overwhelming, but breaking the job down into these three areas makes it simpler.
 - b. You can lay a foundation you can build on for the rest of your life. Plan to grow in knowledge, tactical wisdom, and character to be a high-impact ambassador for Jesus Christ.
 - c. If you are learning and growing in these three ways, you'll be able to say with conviction: "I am an Ambassador for Jesus Christ. I can explain precisely what that means, and I can clearly defend my conviction in the truth of Christianity in an attractive manner that commends the message."

but you can look into the future and envision a respectful, freethinking friendship. Isn't that what we ultimately want (Evangelistic Atheism: Leading Believers Astray, 1993)?" If this is what he calls unbelievers to be like, how much more us as Christians!

⁴ Since the beginning of time philosophers have tried answering life's big questions about Epistemology ("How do we know what we know is true?"), Metaphysics ("How did the universe come to be?") and Ethics ("What are the standards of right and wrong?"). Only Christianity can give a cogent answer to life's big questions.

⁵ Two scriptures that are good to keep in mind for growing in Christ are 2 Peter 1:3-11 and Hebrews 12:1. Also two books, "The Pursuit of Holiness" and "The Practice of Godliness" by Jerry Bridges are recommended books for growth.

III. Key Intellectual Sins Commonly Committed:

1. Arbitrariness
 - a. Ask yourself the following question when the dialoging with an unbeliever: “Is this argument arbitrary?”
 - i. First type of arbitrariness is mere opinion: Opinions are just opinions, they’re not necessarily true. People typically will have no basis for their opinions. Basic opinions aren’t relevant. Ask them what their evidence is for their view. Opinions are academically worthless.
 - ii. Second type is relativism: Someone may say, “That’s true for you but not true for me.” The problem with this argument is if all things are truly relative and everyone is right then no one can be wrong. If everything is truly relative then no one has any basis for calling anything right or wrong.
 - iii. Third type is ignorant conjectures (i.e., a guess or assumption based on prejudice or ignorance): Some people make claims without evidence (e.g., arguments that the Bible isn’t reliable). An unbeliever may say, “How do we know what was written back then is in our Bibles today, for all we know some scribe changed a lot of it!” Instead of defending the position that the Bible hasn’t been changed ask the unbeliever to produce evidence for his claim.
 - iv. Final type is unargued bias: Even if you show the unbeliever enough evidence for the consistency of the Bible the unbeliever will still have a problem with miracles because in his or her mind miracles are impossible. They rationalize, “There are no such things as miracles” in advance without any proof of this. In order to know absolutely that there are no miracles you would have to know all things (i.e., you would have to be God to know this). They tend to have an unspoken bias without proof.
 - b. Ask yourself the next question, “What is the consequence of this argument?” What is the fruit of this tree (Luke 6:43-44)?
 - c. Final question is, “What are the preconditions of this argument?”
 - i. In other words what would have to be true in order for a particular argument to be correct. Some unbelievers believe in the Big Bang theory. In order for this to make sense there has to be an intelligent designer. Something can’t come from nothing.
2. Inconsistencies
 - a. Ask yourself the following questions when the unbeliever is arguing against Christianity, “Are there any inconsistencies?”
 - b. The types of inconsistencies to look for are:
 - i. Logical fallacies (i.e., an error in reasoning often due to a misconception or a presumption). Example: An atheist may say that it is up to the Christian to prove God’s existence, when it actually both parties have a burden of proof.⁶

⁶ This is called a Burden of Proof error, basically when one places the burden of proof on someone or something that doesn’t deserve it. Both the Christian and the non-Christian has the burden of proof to show that their positions are correct.

- ii. Look for contradictory beliefs: On one hand your professor believes that our behavior is determined by antecedent factors and is predicable, yet when you take a test in his class he trusts that you will freely choose not to cheat.
- iii. Look for behavior that betrays his beliefs: They are being moral hypocrites and inconsistent. An example is saying that mankind are biologically controlled yet they show a person dignity by attending a funeral, on one hand they say man is nothing, but then live as if they have meaning or kiss their spouse and then say, “I love you.” He says one thing with his words but his actions betray it.
- c. Ask yourself the next question, “What is the consequence of this argument?” What is the fruit of this tree (Luke 6:43-44)?
- d. Final question is, “What are the preconditions of this argument?”
 - i. In other words what would have to be true in order for a particular argument to be correct. In order for anyone to condemn murder as objectively wrong there must be an ultimate moral law giver or all morals are relative.

IV. How to Engage The Unbeliever’s Worldview:⁷

1. Solomon has provided a two-step process for resolving the conflict between worldviews: “Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes (Proverbs 26:4-5).”⁸
 - a. Positively, you must present the truth and, negatively, you must warn of folly.⁹
 - i. In Proverbs 26:4 Solomon directs the wise man *not* to answer a fool according to his folly. He is warning you against reasoning with a fool *on his own terms*. Applying this to the apologetics enterprise, we can say that you should not reason with the unbeliever according to the assumptions of *his* worldview.
 - ii. In Proverbs 26:5 Solomon instructs you to temporarily stand on the assumption of the unbeliever, not as endorsing his worldview procedures. Rather show the unbeliever the vanity of attempting to explain the world and life from his own perspective.
 - b. In using this two-step process you will be showing the unbeliever that on his own autonomous presuppositions he cannot justify reality, knowledge, logic, morality or anything else.

⁷ A worldview is a lens through which we see the world. According to the late Dr. Greg Bahnsen it is a network of presuppositions (i.e., fundamental assumptions about reality, knowledge, morality and logic). For more information on the concept of worldviews please see the book, “The Universe Next Door” by James Sire.

⁸ For apologetic purposes a fool is one who does what “is right in his own eyes” (Prov. 12:15; Judges 17:6)—much like Adam and Eve when they evaluated God’s command and dismissed it on their own authority. Thus, the fool is one who “trusts in his heart” (Prov. 28:26; cp. Jer. 9:23), whereas the wise man hears a different call: “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding” (Prov. 3:5; cp. 22:19; Ps. 37:5). Ultimately considered, a fool is one who rejects God, the ultimate source of wisdom and truth: “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Ps. 14:1; 53:1). He is a fool because “the fear of the Lord is the *beginning*” of “knowledge” (Prov. 1:7; 2:4–6) and of “wisdom” (Prov. 9:10; cp. Job 28:28; Psa. 111:10; Prov. 15:33). Rather than building his life on the sure, rock-bottom foundation of God and his word, the fool builds his house upon shifting sand (Matt. 7:26) for he “does not know the way of the Lord” (Jer. 5:4; cp. Eph. 5:17). In rejecting God, the unbeliever necessarily becomes “futile in his speculations” (Rom. 1:21) so that he ends up worshiping and serving the creation rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:22–23, 25).

⁹ Be aware: though biblical apologetics involves these two steps, you do *not* have to use them *in this order*. The apologetic situation might require that the order be reversed. Nevertheless, *both* steps are necessary, even if not in any particular order.

- i. You want to show him the outcome of his worldview when his principles are fully followed out.
 - c. Positively, you are also showing that the proof of the Christian God is that without Him no one can prove anything.
- 2. Your task when dialoguing with an unbeliever:
 - a. Ask questions with a goal in mind to expose their weakness and flaws in a Godly manner.
 - b. Use open-ended questions such as, “What do you mean by that” or “How did you come to that conclusion.”
 - c. Always probe so the unbeliever exposes his or her own foolishness.
 - d. Finally show him/her that without the Christian God they cannot make sense of anything.

V. Tactics in Defending the Faith

- 1. The Value of Learning Conversational Apologetics:
 - a. Helps you present the truth clearly and cleverly.
 - b. Helps you to stop an aggressive challenger in their tracks and turn the tables.
 - c. Helps you to recognize someone’s bad thinking for the purpose of guiding them to the truth, yet remaining gracious and charitable.
- 2. These tactics should NOT be used as:
 - a. Tricks
 - b. Empty rhetoric
 - c. Clever ploys
 - d. Attempts to belittle or humiliate others.
- 3. Use questions instead of statements to make your point and move forward in a religious conversation.¹⁰
 - a. The first kind of question helps you to gain information.
 - i. Key Question: “What do you mean by that?”
 - ii. This can be asked when individuals use such statements as, “All religions are basically the same,” “The Bible isn’t reliable” or “I’m pro-choice.”
 - iii. This question tells you what the person thinks.
 - b. The second kind of question enforces the burden of proof rule.¹¹
 - i. Key Question: “How did you come to that conclusion?”
 - ii. This can be asked when individuals use such statements as, “The Bible has been translated and re-translated...” “The Bible is full of fables and myths.”
 - iii. This question tells you why they think the way they do and helps you to reverse the burden of proof.

¹⁰ The best way to communicate well in dialogue is to look at the best communicator who ever walked this earth, Jesus Christ, who was a master communicator and teacher. In Luke 10 while dialoguing with an expert of the law, Jesus asked the expert questions he already knew that the expert knew, so why did Jesus ask questions? To get the expert of the law to think. When we ask questions of someone we force them to think. Jesus, by having the expert of the law answer his own question, put himself in a situation where Jesus wouldn’t have to take a belief and force it on the expert. Instead, the expert himself will identify the answer himself so his argument isn’t with Jesus but with himself.

¹¹ Burden of Proof: The responsibility someone has to provide evidence or reasons for their view. The general rule is the person who makes the claim bears the burden of proof.

- c. Jesus spent more time asking questions (rather than making statements) to produce change and growth.¹²
 - i. Jesus used eight types of questions in Mark 8.
 - ii. He answered people with questions (Mark 8:5), gathered data by use of questions (Mark 8:5, 19-21), made statements by use of questions (Mark 8:12), communicated passion (Mark 8:17-18), used questions to correct people (Mark 8:21), sought feedback through questions (Mark 8:23), encouraged personal application through questions (Mark 8:27-29) and searched the soul of man by asking questions (Mark 8:36-37).
4. The Suicide Tactic:
- a. The suicide tactic makes capital of the tendency of some views to be self-refuting.
 - b. “Arguments” that commit suicide break a rule of logic: the law of non-contradiction.
 - i. The law of non-contradiction basically states that two contradictory statements can’t be true at the same time and in the same sense.
 - c. Self-refuting statements contradict themselves.
 - i. The instant a self-refuting statement is made, it’s false.
 - d. Examples of self-refuting statements:
 - i. “There is no truth.”
 - ii. “You shouldn’t judge other people.”
 - e. The Suicide Tactic (three steps):
 - i. First, identify the basic premise or claim.
 - ii. Then, determine if the claim contradicts itself.
 - iii. Finally, ask a question that graciously uncovers how the claim contradicts itself.
5. Sticks & Stones Tactic:
- a. This tactic helps you deal with an ad hominem attack.¹³
 - b. The goal of this tactic is to show that attacking a person or their character is not a legitimate argument.
 - c. When someone attacks you or your character simply ask:
 - i. What do they mean by that (ask for a definition)?
 - d. One of three things will be true of their definition:
 - i. It won’t apply to you.
 - ii. It applies to you, but it also applies to them in some way.
 - iii. It doesn’t matter that it applies to you.
 - e. Examples of ad hominem attacks:
 - i. “You’re so intolerant.”
 - ii. “You’re just homophobic.”
 - iii. “Why are you so narrow-minded?”

¹² For more details on this subject read the following articles [Ask Questions Like the Master Teacher](#) and [Jesus’ Use of Haggada-Questions](#). Also the books, “The Method and Message of Jesus’ Teaching” by Robert H. Stein and “All That Jesus Asks” by Stan Guthrie.

¹³ Ad hominem (Latin for “to the man”) Fallacy: An argument or attack up on an opponent in order to discredit their argument or opinion by attacking their opponent’s character rather than using reason to refute their specific argument. This is typically done because the individual attacking is unable to counter their opponent’s logic and intelligence.

VI. Summary:

1. All Christians are called to defend the faith (1 Peter 3:15; Colossians 4:5-6).
 - a. We must do this with gentleness and respect.
 - b. In preparing to give an answer it is necessary for us to invest in studying God's word and reading books on Christianity.¹⁴
2. We defend the faith by doing an internal critique of the unbeliever's worldview and show him/her the foolishness of such a view (Proverbs 26:4-5).
3. Final Thoughts:
 - a. Do not be discouraged if someone is not persuaded, it is God's responsibility to convert the soul. It is our job to share the good news.
 - b. C.S. Lewis (a former atheist) once said, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."
 - c. My encouragement is to continue sharing the good news with gentleness and respect to all men in order that they may see the light, as you do now!

¹⁴ Along with reading your Bible it is useful to purchase tools such as a Bible concordance, a Bible dictionary and a Bible commentary.

Appendix A

8 Ways to Know Your Bible

1. READ IT AS A TWO-WAY CONVERSATION. Imagine having a daily talk with God. You talk to him and he has something to say back to you. That's not a bad way to look at the Bible. Begin your reading time with prayer, asking God for understanding and guidance. Then be prepared to listen as he speaks through his Word.

2. READ IT IN DIFFERENT VERSIONS. Most people have a favorite version of the Bible. Nothing's wrong with that. But sometimes we get so familiar with certain words or phrases that they just don't mean much anymore. So grab a different translation and put a fresh twist on "that same old verse." Here are a few versions worth checking out at Biblegateway.com: The Message, New Living Translation and Contemporary English Version.

3. READ IT TO LEARN ABOUT A SPECIFIC TOPIC. Look up a ton of verses on angels, prayer, love, friendship, evil, happiness—whatever interests you. Many Bibles have indexes or concordances that list verses or passages related to major topics. Biblegateway.com has a button labeled "Topical Index." Use it to search out just about any area you can think of.

4. READ IT FOR THE BIG STORY. As you read the Bible, remember that there's a consistent theme all the way through: *After the world goes bad, God sends a death-defying Superhero (Jesus) to deliver humanity from destruction and darkness.* That's the whole story from Genesis to Revelation. Look for glimpses of this Big Story each time you read.

5. READ IT TO LEARN ABOUT JESUS. After his resurrection, Jesus led his disciples in a "Bible study" about himself—and he started with the writings of Moses and went on through all the teachings of the Old Testament prophets ([Luke 24:27](#)). The point: Jesus is all over the Bible—including *the Old Testament*. As you read the Old Testament, look for glimpses of Jesus. For instance, every time you read about sacrifices in Leviticus, realize that each sacrifice points to Jesus—the ultimate and lasting sacrifice for our sins ([Hebrews 9:11-15](#)).

6. READ IT AS A RECORD OF MESSY HISTORY. Around 40 people from many different cultures and backgrounds wrote the Bible over a 1,500-year period. In the midst of all that history, you'll run across strange ancient rituals and practices. You'll find passages where God's people kept slaves, had dozens of wives, committed adultery, lied and cheated. The Bible really isn't the "clean and neat" book people often expect it to be. But it is honest and real. It also shows God's movement amid imperfect (and sometimes really messed-up) people. And this means our God can be trusted to stick with us no matter what.

7. READ IT INTENTIONALLY WITH A PURPOSE. While there are a lot of good ways to study the Bible, here is a method that works for a lot of people: Pick one book from the Bible and plan to read it from beginning to end over, say, a semester. If you haven't been reading the Bible for very long, pick one of the shorter New Testament books, like Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians or Colossians. Begin by reading a little bit about the book so you can understand why it was written. Two Bibles with good, short introductions (and many helpful study notes) are *The Life Application Bible* and *The Student Bible*.

Read a short section or chapter (around 10-15 verses) once. Ask yourself: *What does this passage say? What does it mean?* If needed, look up hard-to-understand words in a dictionary.

Read the short section again and ask: *What is one thing from this passage I can apply to my life?*

Ask yourself: *What in this passage is hard to understand?* Write down two or three questions you have about the passage and talk them over with a youth leader. Tell someone what you've learned from the passage

8. READ IT TO CHANGE YOUR LIFE. Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is full of living power. It is sharper than the sharpest knife, cutting deep into our innermost thoughts and desires. It exposes us for what we really are" (NLT). Read it with an open heart and attitude. Read it and let God's inspired words (2 Timothy 3:16) change you and shape you into a more godly and loving person (Ephesians 5:1-21).

Appendix B

Recommended Resources¹⁵

Websites:

Apologetics Research Society
www.evidenceforchristianity.org

Apologetic Press
<http://www.apologeticspress.org>

Does God Exist?
<http://www.doesgodexist.org>

Dr. Douglas Jacoby
www.douglasjacoby.com

Reasonable Faith
<http://www.reasonablefaith.org>

Stand to Reason
www.str.org

Books:

Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith (by Greg L. Bahnsen)

Christian Apologetics (by Norman Geisler)

Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues and Options (by Norman Geisler)

Introduction to Defending the Faith (by Robert A. Morey)

On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision (by William Lane Craig)

Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview (by J.P. Moreland & William Lane Craig)

Pushing the Antithesis: The Apologetic Methodology of Greg L. Bahnsen (Forward by Gary Demar)

Reason to Believe: A Response to Common Objections to Christianity (by R.C. Sproul)

Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics (by William Lane Craig)

¹⁵ Feel free to contact me at christianapologia@gmail.com for additional resources or questions and please see our website: www.evidenceforchristianity.org.

Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air (by Francis Beckwith & Gregory Koukl)

That's Just Your Interpretation: Responding to Skeptics Who Challenge Your Faith (by Paul Copan)

The Death of Truth: What's Wrong With Multiculturalism, the Rejection of Reason and the New Postmodern Diversity (by Dennis McCallum)

The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog, 5th Edition (by James W. Sire)

True for You, But Not for Me: Overcoming Objections to Christian Faith (by Paul Copan)

Articles:

Any Absolutes? Absolutely! (Dr. Norman Geisler)

Apologetics in Practice (by Dr. Greg Bahnsen)

Apologetics Training: Advice to Christian Apologist (William Lane Craig)

Fool Proof Apologetics (Dr. Jason Lisle)

Secular Response to the Problem of Induction (James N. Anderson)

The Christian Worldview, the Atheist Worldview, & Logic (Matthew Slick)

The Lord of Non-Contradiction: An Argument for God from Logic (James N. Anderson & Greg Welty)

Tools of Apologetics (by Dr. Greg Bahnsen)

Videos:

Basic Training for Defending The Faith (by Dr. Greg Bahnsen)

Tactics in Defending The Faith (by Greg Koukl)

How to Answer a Fool (by Sye Ten Bruggencate)