

## Be Ready to Give an Answer.

It is clear that Peter instructed Christians to be ready always to give an answer to every man that asks him the reason of the hope that is in him. Unfortunately, many Christians misunderstand what type of answer Peter had in mind and how it should be provided. Most Christians think that if they are to fulfill Peter's instructions, they must learn various intellectual arguments aimed at convincing people that God exists, or that Jesus rose from the dead, or that the Bible is the infallible Word of God, or other such things. This is not at all what Peter had in mind. Let us consider I Peter 3:15 along with other scriptures to determine how we should understand him properly.

First, it should be noted that in order to fulfill this instruction, we must first "sanctify the Lord God in our heart." This is the essential prerequisite and in fact the only way we can "be ready" to give an answer. Notice Peter does not say, "First, learn whatever intellectual arguments necessary so that you will be ready to give an answer." No, he instructs us to do something spiritual- "Sanctify the Lord God in your heart." It is not an intellectual preparing but a spiritual preparing that is specified by the phrase "sanctify the Lord Jesus in your heart." The New American Standard Bible translates it, "*Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense.*" This indicates a cause and effect relationship. If we do not first "sanctify Christ as Lord in our heart," then we simply won't be ready to give an answer. But if we do sanctify Christ as Lord in our heart, we will be ready to give an answer.

So what does it mean to sanctify Christ as Lord in our heart? I suggest it can also be stated, "*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God*" (Romans 12:1-2). It means total surrender with nothing held back. After all, Jesus is Lord, the ruler and He owns me. I don't have a right to direct my life because it is now His. I am bought with the price of Jesus' blood. Unless and until this surrender is a reality in the life of a Christian, he will not experience what it means to walk in the Spirit. If not fully surrendered, his spiritual experience with Christ will be dysfunctional. In this condition, he will not be spiritually prepared to give an answer about the hope that is within him. In fact, that hope will be dim because the experience of Jesus living in him will be difficult to discern by him.

The true Christian life requires total surrender with nothing held back. ("*Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it*" Luke 17:33.) In this condition, the Spirit has free reign and the Christian is empowered by God's grace to walk in the Spirit and fulfill His good pleasure. As he walks in the Spirit, he experiences the reality of Jesus living in him. In this condition, he experiences the hope of eternal life. "*Christ in you, the hope of glory*" (Colossians 1:27). His hope is not generated from head knowledge. A man can know all the creeds and intellectually agree with all the doctrines of the Christian faith and yet not possess hope. Hope comes only when a man's experience is in harmony with his doctrine. Without his experience being in complete harmony with his doctrine, he really cannot possess hope and therefore cannot fulfill Peter's instruction. This is why Peter begins by saying, "Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts."

With all these things in mind, let us now consider the nature of the answer we are to give for the hope that is in us. Before doing so, let me address a common misconception relating to the Greek word "apologia" that Peter used when he said "be ready to give an answer." The Greek word apologia can mean "a defense" or "an answer." The KJV translates it *answer* while the NASB translates it *defense*. Many Christians mistakenly think that I Peter 3:15 teaches we must be ready to effectively debate those who argue against the tenants of the Christian faith. In other words, we should be ready to prove that what we believe is intellectually reasonable and logical. This is not what Peter is saying. He says, "Be ready always to give an answer to anyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you." Our answer, or "defense," is in response to someone who asks us a reason for the hope that is in us. Our answer is NOT in response to the skeptic who asks, "Why do you believe such an absurd thing?" Peter is indicating that the question being asked is coming from a person who is sincerely wondering why we have hope.

It **MUST** be noted that a major theme in Peter's first epistle is the **suffering** that Christians endure because they follow Jesus. The recipients of his letter were often threatened with death and had undergone much persecution. As the unbelievers observed the Christians suffering, they took notice that they seemed to have hope in spite of all the mistreatment and suffering. This undoubtedly caused some to ask Christians the reason

for their hope. It didn't make sense to them that they willingly endured so much suffering. Why did they have hope?

What is the basis for a Christian's hope? Is it because there is strong evidence that God exists? Is it because there is strong evidence that Jesus rose from the dead? Is it because there is strong evidence that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God that He has faithfully preserved? I believe that there is strong evidence for all these things but the evidence, though intellectually convincing, **cannot produce hope!** If a man's hope is based solely on such evidence, then his hope has no depth and if faced with the threat of severe persecution and death, it will evaporate. The hope that Peter is talking about is the sure promise of God itself (the Gospel) and the reality of it being lived out in us (*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*)

Therefore, if a Christian stoops to debating by using intellectual arguments that he believes prove things like the existence of God, Jesus' resurrection from the dead, etc., he is failing to fulfill Peter's instructions in I Peter 3:15. Instead of doing this, he should proclaim the Gospel itself for this is the objective reason for the hope that is in him. He can also testify about the reality of Jesus living in him which is evidenced by a completely changed life. These things answer anyone who sincerely asks a reason for the hope that is in the Christian.

When we understand this properly, then we realize why there is no record in the New Testament of any Christian leaders making intellectual arguments in order to prove that God exists, or that Jesus rose from the dead, or that the Bible is the infallible Word of God, or other such things. On the contrary, we see an excellent example of how Paul fulfilled Peter's instruction when we read the book of Romans. This is a letter he wrote to people he had not met. In it, he gave a very detailed answer for the hope that was in him. Being a lawyer, he did so in such a way that it truly qualifies as "a defense" for the hope that was within him. He did not give evidence for the existence of God. He merely stated it. He did not sight evidence that Jesus rose from the dead. He merely stated it. He did not give evidence that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God, he merely quoted it as if it is indeed God's Word. He did not try to prove that Jesus was God incarnate. He simply proclaimed it.

The book of Romans contains the message Paul proclaimed wherever he went. Its content is in harmony with Paul's testimony from his first epistle to the Corinthians.

*"Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect" (I Corinthians 1:17).*

*"My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (I Corinthians 2:4-5).*

Paul did not debate the Gospel. Rather, he proclaimed it. As he did in his epistle to the Romans, Paul publicly reasoned with people about the same things hoping they would hear and believe. Whenever they refused to receive it, he would not debate with them. Rather, he warned them and then left them and went to find other people who would hear and believe. Below is just one example Luke gives in Acts of Paul doing this. There are several others.

*But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:45-46 NASB).*

Luke records how Paul ministered the Gospel and thus fulfilled Peter's instruction.

*And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ" (Acts 17:2-3 NASB).*

Paul was fulfilling Peter's instruction. He was giving an answer (making a defense) for the hope that was in him. The hearers in this case included some Jews and also some Gentiles that had been exposed to the Jewish Scriptures. The recipients already believed in the existence of God and believed the Scriptures were God's authoritative Word. But many of them did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah or that He rose from the dead. So, Paul reasoned with them **FROM THE SCRIPTURES** giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer

(as a substitute sacrifice for sins) and rise from the dead. To make his case, he did not merely read passages like Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22. He reasoned with them from the Scriptures to demonstrate WHY the Christ had to suffer. This is exactly what Paul does in Romans chapters 1 – 3.

The reason why the Christ had to suffer is that sinful man is alienated from the Holy God, condemned and headed for eternal punishment. God, being perfectly righteous cannot let the guilty go unpunished. The sin had to be punished. If people come to the judgment with their sins, God has no choice but to send them to hell forever because He cannot simply excuse sin. Sinful man can do nothing to make himself acceptable to God. But God provided a way of salvation by sending His own Son to take the punishment we deserve. This is why the Christ had to suffer. There could be no other way of salvation. Since Jesus did come and complete His work, there is salvation and therefore hope that is based upon the sure promise of God. Paul's message gives the hearer the solid reason for the hope within him.

Seeing that there is no biblical record of leaders trying to convince people that God exists, or that Jesus rose from the dead, or that the Bible is the infallible Word of God, or other such things, why do Christians insist we need to do it? It seems as if they do not believe as fully as Paul believed that THE GOSPEL is the power of God unto salvation. Otherwise, instead of trying to prove things like the existence of God, that Jesus rose from the dead, the integrity of the Bible, they would concentrate on proclaiming the Gospel which is THE MEANS God has specified to save people.

Maybe the problem is that they do not consistently engage in evangelism. Then, when they do engage in it, they typically find themselves talking with a skeptic. Rather than just warn the skeptic and walk away as Paul did, they sense a responsibility to continue the dialog since they don't often find themselves engaged in evangelism. Perhaps if they engaged in it much more, they would realize that instead of talking with the skeptics, it is far more productive to warn and leave them and then seek out those whom God has prepared to hear the Gospel and concentrate on proclaiming the Gospel to them.

Maybe the reason is a defective theology. For example, many Christians hold to an Arminian theology that teaches unregenerate man has the power within himself to seek God. Since in their minds, man has this power, it behooves the evangelist to do everything in his power to intellectually convince the unregenerate man to seek God by offering all sorts of logical evidence for things like the existence of God, the integrity of the scripture and Jesus' resurrection from the dead. They think that if the unregenerate man can be convinced of things like this, then he will more likely decide to become a Christian.

Someone might ask, "Why am I making such a big fuss over all this anyway? Does it matter that much if a Christian makes efforts to provide historical, logical or scientific evidence for things like the existence of God, etc?" I make a fuss over this because I think the Apostle Paul would make a fuss over it. He said to the Corinthians:

*"My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (I Corinthians 2:4-5).*

Paul also thought that if he resorted to using "wisdom of words," the cross of Christ would be made of no effect. (See I Corinthians 1:17.) I have watched public debates between Christian apologists and leaders of other religions or atheists. Generally, those who attend are already set in their thinking. Spectators from both sides usually go away thinking their side won the debate. The worst thing is that many go away thinking that two different views were presented and each view had some merit. This is not how the Gospel should be represented. It is not just another possible viewpoint. It is the only way of salvation and no other view should be given any credence whatsoever. Engaging in such a debate automatically gives the opposing view some credence. As a result, the cross of Jesus is made to appear less than what it is. It is emptied of its power in the eyes of many who watched. **THE GOSPEL IS NOT TO BE DEBATED!** The Apostle Paul refused to do so and so should we. It is the Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ. Let us represent it as if it is truly the only way of salvation purchased by the precious blood of Jesus.

Let us do as Peter instructed us in I Peter 3:15 but let us do so in accordance with the biblical pattern and with the full authority given us by Christ. Let us therefore sanctify Christ as Lord in our hearts so there is nothing held back whatsoever.

Unless we sanctify Christ as Lord in our hearts, our hope will be dim. To unbelievers, we will appear like everyone else, living our lives as if there is no God and no future hope. But if we sanctify Christ as Lord in our hearts, the Gospel will continually be in our hearts and minds and unbelievers that come in contact with us will notice something different about us. Our hope will be evident. Unbelievers will occasionally ask us a reason for the hope that is in us. When they do, we will have the privilege of proclaiming the same glorious truths that Paul recorded for us in the book of Romans.

***Let us preach the gospel, not debate it.***

Please understand that I am not saying that it is wrong to learn apologetic arguments. In fact, I would recommend that Christians read books that contain them. I think that such arguments have their basis in logic and as such can be employed in our meditations about God, Jesus and His wonderful Word to us. Yet, I think that many Christians have fallen into the habit of wrongly relying on the use of these extra-biblical, intellectual arguments as if they form a biblical basis for evangelistic outreach. It is impossible to convince a man to believe by simply addressing all of his intellectual objections.

The key element of evangelizing the lost is not the use of extra-biblical, intellectual arguments but rather, the communication of the gospel in such a way that the listener gains a mental understanding of its relevance so that it leaves an impression on his heart. As long as the listener understands our language, this can be accomplished regardless of his background, because all people have the same need! They are all sinners that have a false comprehension of their condition before God. If the listener gains a mental comprehension of the gospel in such a way that his heart is impacted, God is then able to regenerate him whenever He decides because the gospel is the supernatural seed of God. *“Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17)*. When we reason with people, let us use the biblical record as the foundation to demonstrate how God has poured out His mercy by coming to earth as a blood sacrifice who would bear the punishment people deserve in such a way that His righteous demands were fully satisfied.