

An Apologetics for Apologetics in the Local Church

Apologetics is often perceived by church leadership as only for those who are specially trained and not as an integral part of church ministry; hence, unfortunately apologetics is often relegated to the work of parachurch groups. Furthermore, many church leaders think of apologetics as only about winning arguments and that done often with a less than Christian spirit creating an indifferent if not hostile view of apologetics. This workshop looks at how Christian apologists can work to reverse the fragmented view of Christian ministry held by many church leaders and help integrate apologetics as an integral part of church ministry. Part of this means showing that apologetics is important to the work of the church not just as a methodology but as a way of thinking Christianly about life and scripture. The workshop aims at facilitating a discussion regarding the true nature and spirit of Christian apologetics.

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Introduction

- a. The doctrine of creation and apologetics.
 - i. We live in a rational structured universe, we think in logical form and learn the same way

- b. The doctrine of the church and apologetics
 - i. I Tim 3: 15 “if I [Paul] delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.” (ESV)
 - ii. John Stott makes an interesting observation:”conversion is not infrequently described in terms of a person’s response not to Christ himself but to the “truth”. Becoming a Christian is “believing in the truth” obeying the truth”, acknowledging the Truth. Paul even describes his Roman readers as having “become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching (doctrine) to which you were committed.” (Ro 6:17) *Your Mind Matters*, 69)

II. Apologetics in the church

- a. I Pet 3:15
 - i. We are to be prepared to make a defense (apologia) to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. . .”

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1. It is to be done with gentleness and respect
 - ii. A. T. Robertson: “ready with a spoken defense of the inward hope. This attitude calls for an intelligent grasp of the hope and skill in presenting it” (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol 6, p. 114)
- b. Phil 1:7- “in the defense and confirmation of the Gospel”
 - i. Lightfoot: defense (apologia) implies the negative or defensive side of the Apostle’s preaching, the preparatory process of removing obstacles and prejudices, so (confirmation) denotes the positive or aggressive side , the direct advancement and establishment of the Gospel. The two together will thus comprise all modes of preaching and extending the truth.” (Philippians,. 85)
- c. I Cor 9:3—Paul speaks of being ready to give his critics an answer (apologia).
- d. John Stott: “now all the verbs Luke uses here of Paul’s evangelistic ministry--- to argue, to explain, to prove, to proclaim, and to persuade---are to some extent ‘intellectual’ words They indicate that Paul was teaching a body of doctrine and arguing towards a conclusion. He was seeking to convince in order to convert.” (*Your Mind Matters*, 47)
 - i. Intellectual words
 - ii. Dispute (Acts 6:9-10; 19:8-9)
 - iii. Reasoned (Acts 18:4, 19; 24:25;
 - iv. Persuade (Acts 18:4; 19:26; II Cor. 5:11; Gal. 1:10)
 - v. Confute (Titus 1:9-10)

III. Bible examples of apologetics

- a. Gospel of John
 - i. Begins with “In the beginning (1:1)
 - ii. Ends with “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not in this book, but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name” (20:30-31 and 21:25)
- b. Apologetic Speeches in the Book of Acts
 - i. The theme of the Book of Acts
 1. Making Christ known
 - a. Acts 1:8 – To be witnesses
 - b. Acts 28: 31 – Preaching the Kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ
 2. The goal of making Christ known
 - a. Belief in Jesus as the Son of God, Savior of men
 - b. Repeatedly in the speeches
 - ii. Speeches in Acts (all have an apologetic structure)
 1. Acts 2: 22-38 (Peter)
 2. Acts 3:12-26 (Peter)

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3. Acts 7: 1-54 (Stephen)
 4. Acts 10:34-43 (Peter at Caesarea with Cornelius)
 5. Acts 13: 16-46 (Paul and Barnabas--Antioch in Pisidia)
 6. Acts 14: 14 – 19 (Paul and Barnabas at Lystra)
 7. Acts 17: 22 – 32 (Paul)
 8. Acts 24: 10-22 (Paul before Felix)
 9. Acts 26: 1 – 23 (Paul before Agrippa)
- iii. What do we learn?
1. Situations shape our presentation
 - a. A coherent message that requires a proper context for the soteriological message.
 - b. All have the message of Jesus and His Resurrection
 - c. There is always some form of an argument.

IV. Historical accounts of doing apologetics

- a. Bernard Ramm: “The apologetic activity of Christ and his apostles was continued in the early church. . . . In fact the earliest theologians of the Church were called apologists and the greatest treatise of the pre-Augustine era was Origin’s famous work *Against Celsus*. (*Varieties of Christian Apologetics*, 12).
- b. Consider also:
 - i. Athenagoras (2 nd Century)
 1. *A Plea for the Christian*
 - ii. Justin Martyr
 1. First apology (150) -Christians should not be punished just because they are Christians.
 2. Second apology (155?)
 3. *Dialogue with Typho the Jew*
 - iii. Irenaeus (120-203)
 1. *Against Heresies* – the Gnostic heresies
 - iv. Tertullian (155-235)
 1. *Prescription Against Heretics*
 2. *The Apology* – Against the charge of atheism
 - v. Athanasius (298 - 373)
 1. *On the Incarnation*
 - vi. Augustine (354-430)
 1. *Concerning Freedom of the Will; Confessions; City of God*
 - vii. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)
 1. *Monologion* = Faith seeking understanding
 2. *Proslogion* = ontological argument
 3. *Why God Became a Man*
 - viii. Thomas Aquinas (1225- 1274)

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1. *Summa Contra Gentiles* -apologetics for missionaries to the well-educated Muslim world.
 2. *Summa Theologiae* -Five Ways
- c. Neil Postman: “Medieval theologians developed an elaborate and systematic description of the relation of man to God, man to nature, man to man, and man to his tools. Their theology took as a first and last principle that all knowledge and goodness come from God, and that therefore all human enterprise must be directed toward service to God. Theology, not technology, provided people with authorization for what to do or think.” [*Technopoly The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 25-6.]
- d. Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, and Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* show that the church has been involved in the work of apologetics at least through the 20th century.
- e. Colin Brown: “In the early Church apologists like Aristides, Justin Martyr Tertullian and Origen raised the apology to the status of a distinct genre of theological literature.” (*Dictionary of N. T. Theology*. Vol 1, p. 51)
- V. Objections to apologetics
- a. Philosophical—a misunderstanding of the Bible’s view of philosophy
 - i. Col 2:8—“philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition”
 1. No argument against philosophy
 - ii. Acts 17:34—little fruit so he did not do apologetics when Paul went to Corinth where he claims he “did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” 1 Cor 2:1-2). However, in Acts 18:4 says: “And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.”
 - b. Theological—one’s view of humanity
 - i. Man is spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1) and therefore cannot know the things of God (1 Cor 2: 14)
 1. However the text is taking about the “deep things of God”.
 - ii. “There is something great about man, and we have lost perhaps our greatest opportunity of evangelism in our generation by not insisting that it is the Bible which explains *why* man is great.” (Francis A. Schaeffer. *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, , Vol. 1, 278)
 - iii. “All men have the truth” (Ro 1:18)
 1. NT scholar David Turner: “Although the unsaved *attempt* to obliterate the truth, it is inherent in their very beings.” (“Cornelius Van Til and Romans 1:18-31”*Grace Theological Journal*-Spr, 1981, p.52).
 - c. Contextual---one’s view of the Gospel is limited

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- i. Ro 1:16-17 –Gospel of Christ fits within the larger
 - 1. Heb 4:2,6 –Gospel of God
 - 2. Matt. 9:35 –Gospel of the Kingdom
 - 3. Rev 14:6 –The eternal Gospel
- d. Epistemological—the view of theology is waning. Christianity is seen only as a relational issue and not an epistemological concern where there is a body of truth to be defended and communicated. It is all about community. Not an either/or but both/and.
 - i. The church is the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim 3:15)
- e. Practical—failure to understand the work of the Church
 - i. The relevance factor
 - 1. Josef Pieper says, “But especially to be regretted is the apologetic enthusiasm of the attempt to legitimize ‘Christian teaching’ through making it agree with the current fashion” Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, Intro. Roger Scruton. Trans. Gerald Malsbary (South Bend: St Augustine’s Press, 1998), 29.]
 - 2. Relevance is more important that the content of the message, it has been reduced to something quite minimalistic.
 - 3. People are more interested in worship style than of truth content. Everything is related to how this helps community rather than how this fits with a body of truth claims.
 - ii. The arrogance factor
 - 1. The arrogance of many apologists
 - iii. The professional factor
 - 1. Professionalization of apologetics
 - 2. Apologetics becomes very technical
 - iv. The fragmentation factor
 - 1. Fragmentation of beliefs
 - 2. Beliefs are held in isolation (apologetics built on system of thinking)
 - 3. “The nominalist atomizing and fragmentation resulting from a desacramentalized worldview needs to be named for what it is: a serious problem. The problem needs to be identified especially because some of the so-called younger evangelicals appear to accept and even to take some degree of pleasure in fragmentation...” [Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 94-5.]
 - v. The disposition factor
 - 1. The failure to develop the proper disposition for apologetics from the pulpit (Ti 2:1—“teach what accords with sound doctrine”)
- f. Technological
 - i. Technology has affected how we think about the church and the message

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1. “We need to know if television changes our conception of reality, the relationship of the rich to the poor, the idea of happiness itself. A preacher who confines himself to considering how a medium can increase his audience will miss the significant question: In what sense do new media alter what is meant by religion, by church, even by God?” Neil Postman. *Technopoly: the surrender of culture to technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 19.
2. “New technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think *about*, They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think *with*. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in *which* thoughts develop.” Neil Postman. *Technopoly: the surrender of culture to technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 20.
- ii. Technology itself creates a disposition—separation from physical reality; removal of the sense of space; a sense of anonymity
 1. Consider social media and texting. How does this affect the importance of person to person communication?

VI. The Church as community –the concern of apologetics

- a. Definition, “Church” means called out ones forming a group and assembly
 - i. We, who are in Christ, have been left in the world, but commanded to not be conformed by the world (Ro. 12:1-2).
 - ii. Our calling is about all of our life. When we witness it is not just about the content of our message. It is how we go about the Christian life in general as Paul mentions in Eph. 4:1 that “we are to walk worthy of our calling”.
 - iii. We live in a disordered world, the community of faith is to be an expression of the ordered life –people living in community
 - iv. The church as community must see itself as part of God’s narrative with the cross at the center
 - v. We are in the world, not of the world— beyond our individual commitment to godliness.
 - vi. The truth of Christ is materialized in the church and when we separate apologetics from the church we are only defending ideas in a vacuum. It may be necessary at times
 - vii. Maybe at times we are a little naïve regarding what constitutes worldliness. For example, few consider how some of the technology we use shapes the way we view reality, what we expect from life, how we understand the church, community, and a host of other matters essential to the church.
 - viii. Living in the world while attempting to reach the world without becoming like the world requires wisdom from God. While this is true of individuals, it must also be true of the community of faith as a whole.

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- b. Apologetics as theology—the content we defend
 - i. The pillar and ground of the truth.
 - 1. The pillar is what supports
 - a. We support the Christian view of man, God, history which is God’s narrative.
 - 2. The ground is the foundation
 - a. Theology is the work of the church which informs apologetics
 - b. Not just in what we defend, but how we live
- c. Apologetics in preaching
 - i. Preaching is the context for apologetics
 - ii. Preaching creates the disposition for apologetics
- d. Apologetics and the life of the church
 - i. It is the importance of living in community that keeps our work in perspective, that we are not just defending the Truth in some abstract way, but as part of the community of faith—showing why we believe what we believe as well as living within that community, not as professionals, but as members of that community living out the truth in community. So that the world may know what the Truth we defend looks like in a real world.
 - ii. Without this, apologetics has little or no context, which obscures its **authenticity** as a message that gives answers to the questions humanity asks in every generation. The truth of Christianity remains regardless how a Christian lives, but the world first judges its truthfulness by its power to inform man on how to live rightly. The legitimacy of our message is often determined, in the eyes of the world, by the efficacy of its evidence in our lives. For the Christian, apologetics is not just a theoretical game by which we can push people around; it is the search for and defense of the truth within the context of revelation from God. It is in the end, a matter of truth and error, life and death. We must be as accurate as possible when representing God and as persuasive as possible when engaging the unbeliever.