

1 **A Confessional Lutheran Understanding of Christian Apologetics and Its Practice**

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3
4 *Paul replied, “I am not insane, most excellent Festus, but I am clearly speaking words that are true and*
5 *sensible. Certainly the king to whom I am freely speaking knows about these things. Indeed, I cannot*
6 *believe that any of these things has escaped his notice, because this has not been done in a corner....” Then*
7 *Agrippa said to Paul, “In such a short time are you going to persuade me to become a Christian?” (from*
8 *a dialogue in Caesarea that included Governor Festus, St. Paul, and King Agrippa; Acts 26:25–28, EHV)*

9
10 *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (St. Paul to Christians in Rome; Rom.*
11 *10:17, ESV).*

12
13 *You are all partners with me in grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of*
14 *the gospel (Paul writing to Christians in Philippi while imprisoned in Rome; Phil. 1:7b, CSB).*
15

16 **APOLOGETICS ON RECORD YET DIFFERENCES REMAIN**

17 Confessional Lutherans have discussed, debated, encouraged, utilized, or in some way or another
18 dealt with apologetics for a long time. Our Evangelical Lutheran Synod has given it attention, perhaps more
19 than most. There have been Reformation Lectures printed in the *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* and *Sentinel*,
20 courses at both the seminary and college, and numerous synod resolutions (e.g., 1985, 2012, 2013, 2014,
21 2015, 2018, and 2019). And there are statements, including the “Doctrine Committee Apologetics Study
22 Document” (approved in 2012) that has been helpful and settling.¹

23 Yet in spite of statements and resolutions, confusion continues among us regarding what it is, its
24 purpose, its importance, its usefulness, or how to go about it.

25 My aim is twofold. First, to establish a biblical and confessional Lutheran explanation of Christian
26 apologetics by tackling head on two faulty or deficient understandings of apologetics (“two ditches” as I
27 call them), including the one with which we confessional Lutherans (understandably) wrestle. Second, to
28 encourage confidence in the proper use of apologetics among both pastors and laity.

29 I will be working with a simple definition that complements the 2012 “Study Document”
30 explanation:

31
32 **Christian apologetics is in the business of making the case for—giving evidence**
33 **for—the truth of Christianity, and in particular, the truth that Jesus is the Christ,**
34 **the Son of the living God, the only Redeemer from sin, death, and the devil.**
35

¹ The document reads in part:

The term “apologetics” refers to the defense of the Christian faith. Defending the Christian faith may include an explanation of the basic beliefs of Christianity. It may also include giving grounds or reasons for accepting the Christian gospel message as true or a refutation of criticisms of the faith, as well as exposing inadequacies in alternative religions and worldviews. . . .

The heart of Christian confession and defense is the gospel itself—the revelation of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God made flesh and his sacrificial atonement by which God justifies the sinner. As we can see from the apostles’ activity in the book of Acts, when Christians are called upon to defend the Christian faith or the gospel itself, they will always confess the person of Jesus Christ and his work and give witness to the gospel (Acts 2, 4, 19, 22, 26 etc.). . . .

Human reason is a gift of God (First Article in Luther’s *Small Catechism*), even though it is corrupted by human sin. We distinguish between a ministerial and a magisterial use of reason. Reason is used ministerially—as a servant—when it is an instrument in presenting and apprehending the gospel, and when it is used to show the foolishness of unbelief. Reason is used magisterially—as a master—when it stands in judgment over Scripture and its teachings, or when it reinterprets or dismisses clear teachings of Scripture to agree with human reason and experience. We reject the magisterial or critical use of reason applied to the teachings of Holy Scripture. . . .

The cause of conversion or regeneration is not to be sought in the human presentation of evidence and argument, as important as they are, but only in the inherent power of God’s word of the gospel (2 Cor. 4:6; Eph. 2:8,9; 2 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 1:23). . . .

The Christian confession and defense will always be done with the understanding that regeneration is only the work of the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace, word and sacrament, and is not aided or effected by man. The absolute predominance of *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *sola Scriptura* (*solus Christus*) will always be made clear in carrying out the apologetic task.... (<https://els.org/our-work-together/dc-2/apologeticsdoc/>).

1 **REASONS FOR STRUGGLES AND DISAGREEMENTS: THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL AND**
2 **EFFICIENT CAUSES**

3 Most of the confusion and disagreement regarding apologetics centers on the teachings found in
4 Article II of *The Formula of Concord*. In the *Epitome*, we read,
5

6 [W]hat kind of powers do human beings have after the fall of our first parents, before rebirth, on their
7 own, in spiritual matters? Are they able, with their own powers, before they receive new birth through
8 God’s Spirit, to dispose themselves favorably toward God’s grace and prepare themselves to accept the
9 grace offered by the Holy Spirit in the Word and the holy sacraments, or not? . . .

10 1. On this article it is our teaching, faith, and confession that human reason and understanding are
11 blind in spiritual matters and understand nothing on the basis of their own powers, as it is written, “Those
12 who are natural do not receive the gifts of God’s Spirit, for they are foolishness to them and they are unable
13 to understand them [1 Cor. 2:14] when they are asked about spiritual matters.

14 2. Likewise, we believe, teach, and confess that the unregenerated human will is not only turned away
15 from God but has also become God’s enemy, that it has only the desire and will to do evil and whatever is
16 opposed to God, as it is written, “The inclination of the human heart is evil from youth [Gen. 8:21].”
17 Likewise, “The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed, it
18 cannot [Rom. 8:7]. As little as a corpse can make itself alive for bodily, earthly life, so little can people
19 who through sin are spiritually dead raise themselves up to spiritual life, as it is written, “When we were
20 dead through our trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ” [Eph. 2:5]. . . .

21 3. However, God the Holy Spirit does not effect conversion without means, but he uses the preaching
22 and hearing of God’s Word to accomplish it, as it is written (Rom. 1[:16]), the gospel is a “power of God”
23 to save. Likewise, faith comes from hearing God’s Word (Rom. 10[:17]) . . . In this Word the Holy Spirit
24 is present and opens hearts that they may, like Lydia in Acts 16[:14], listen to it and thus be converted,
25 solely through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, who alone accomplishes the conversion of the human
26 being. For apart from his grace our “willing and exerting,” our planting, sowing, and watering, amount to
27 nothing “if he does not give the growth” [Rom. 9:16; 1 Cor. 3:7]. As Christ says, “Apart from me, you can
28 do nothing” [John 15:5]. With these brief words he denies the free will its power and ascribes everything
29 to God’s grace, so that no one has grounds for boasting before God (1 Cor. [9:16]). . . .

30 Therefore, we reject and condemn all the following errors as contrary to the guiding principle of God’s
31 Word: . . .

32 2. We also reject the error of the Pelagians, who taught that human beings could convert themselves
33 to God, believe the gospel . . . out of their own powers apart from the grace of the Holy Spirit.

34 3. We also reject the error of the Semi-Pelagians, who teach that human beings can initiate their
35 conversions by means of their own powers, but cannot complete it without the grace of the Holy Spirit.

36 4. Likewise, the teaching that, although human beings are too weak to initiate conversion with their
37 own free will before rebirth, and thus convert themselves to God on the basis of their own natural powers
38 . . . , nonetheless, once the Holy Spirit has made a beginning through the preaching of the Word and in it
39 has offered his grace, the human will is able out of its own natural powers to a certain degree, even though
40 small and feeble, to do something, to help and cooperate, to dispose and prepare itself for grace, to grasp
41 this grace, to accept it, and to believe the gospel. . . .

42 Therefore, before the conversion of the human being there are only two efficient causes,² the Holy
43 Spirit and God’s Word as the instrument of the Holy Spirit, through which he effects conversion; the human
44 creature must hear this Word, but cannot believe or accept it on the basis of its own powers but only through
45 the grace and action of God the Holy Spirit.³
46

47 **THE TWO DITCHES TO AVOID WHEN CONSIDERING APOLOGETICS IN VIEW OF *THE***
48 ***CONFESSIONS***

² “*Causa efficiens* = the efficient cause: a philosophical term used in theology indicating the prime or absolute cause or reason for an action or condition; the instigating cause” (David P. Scaer, *A Latin Ecclesiastical Glossary for Francis Pieper’s Christian Dogmatics* (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary, 1978).

³ *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Charles Arand, Eric Gritsch, Robert Kolb, William Russell, James Schaaf, Jane Strohl, and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 491ff.

1 One ditch into which many fall when it comes to apologetics is simply to ignore the bondage of
2 the will, fall into some form of Pelagianism, semi-Pelagianism, or synergism, and believe, teach, or act as
3 if man *can* “by his own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ . . .” (*Small Catechism*). This is done by
4 our evangelical neighbors, and done frequently. When one approaches the subjects of evangelism and
5 conversion handicapped—where the bondage of the will is denied or not fully grasped and where the
6 means of grace are therefore ignored—something else can easily be viewed as the efficient cause. Reason
7 rises to the surface. In his book *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*,⁴ Nabeel Qureshi describes how he wrestled
8 with the evidence for Christianity over against evidence for Islam. It is a fascinating and important read
9 as he is brought from a deep and committed Islamic faith to a confession of truth of the person of Christ.
10 It includes good and necessary apologetic material. However, an implicit and unfortunate teaching of the
11 book is that one can “by his own reason” believe in Jesus Christ. I could not find any reference to the
12 gospel as “the power of God for salvation” or that “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the
13 word of Christ” (Rom. 1:16; 10:17). Word and sacraments as the means of grace are not mentioned. One
14 is left only with reason. Perhaps this is why little attention is given to sin and forgiveness in the book.⁵
15 The age-old battle of Lutherans and their forefathers against Pelagianism, semi-Pelagianism, and
16 synergism is not over and never will be.

17 Another ditch, one that receives attention among us, is expressed in statements such as,
18 “Apologetics is *merely* preaching the law. It is an application of truth and fact that impacts the conscience
19 and drives one to repentance. It can reveal wrong thinking on behalf of those who contradict God’s Word.
20 Apologetics does not change the heart, only the gospel can do that.” Or, “While it can have a preparatory
21 function of clearing away obstacles which keep unbelievers from giving serious consideration to the claims
22 of Scripture, apologetics does not in any way effect conversion. That is accomplished only by the power of
23 the Holy Spirit through the Word of the Gospel. Apologetics *falls in the realm of the law*...”⁶ The
24 implication is if one does not accept the understanding of apologetics found or suggested in these
25 statements, he has fallen or is about to fall into some Pelagian/synergistic ditch. This would be true, *but*
26 *only if* the premise (“apologetics is *merely* law preaching”) is correct.

27 However, such statements, while seeking to be faithful to the biblical and Lutheran teachings on
28 the bondage of the will, the limitations of reason, the means of grace, the word alone, etc., do not apply
29 these teachings to apologetics as thoughtfully as they should, and therefore sometimes misapply them.
30 There can be a forced application of *the proper distinction between the law and gospel* paradigm that is
31 unnecessary and inappropriate. But most importantly, such statements fail to deal with the teachings and
32 examples of apologetics found in Scripture.⁷ Apologetics and the treasured doctrines mentioned in Article
33 II of the Formula of Concord, though paradoxical, are not contradictory.

34 For the record: There are two *efficient causes*, and two alone: “the Holy Spirit and God’s Word as
35 the instrument of the Holy Spirit” (Article II, *Epitome*; see above). Second, reason never can be an efficient
36 cause; it is limited, and, within natural man, is in a firmly established state of rebellion toward God. Finally,

⁴ Nabeel Qureshi, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014, 2016, 2018). The latest edition, due to the premature death of Nabeel in 2017, was copyrighted in his wife’s name, Kathryn Michelle Qureshi.

⁵ There is only a portion of one chapter where the author writes about the great comfort of forgiveness he is finding in Christianity (*ibid.*, 200–202).

⁶ The first quotation is a combination of statements (somewhat paraphrased) made by good Lutheran pastors. The second quotation is from “A Statement on Apologetics” (Mankato: *Evangelical Lutheran Synod Report 1985*), 70, emphasis added. This statement was drawn up by our seminary faculty, acknowledged by the Doctrine Committee as a “clear and concise summar[y] of how confessional Lutherans view [this matter],” and adopted by the 1985 convention. I met with the Doctrine Committee regarding this statement and made the point that whereas the statement was not wrong, it missed an important aspect of apologetics and therefore was open to misunderstanding. There was no disagreement at the meeting. “The Doctrine Committee Apologetics Study Document” (quoted above and also approved by the synod, 2012) clears up some of the deficiency.

⁷ Besides these shortcomings among us Lutherans, I have also observed a too simple, unrealistic, and misapplied understanding of reason, leading to an unnecessary precaution against the use of apologetics.

1 distinguishing between law and gospel is the bread and butter of any pastor worth his salt; this distinction
2 always guides the called minister in preaching, teaching, mission work, evangelism, worship, confession
3 of sin, and making the case for the truth of Christ (apologetics).
4

5 **“MY REASON AND ALL MY SENSES”—WE CANNOT *NOT* USE THEM**

6 Our senses and reason obviously work together: Information or evidence comes to our senses—
7 we hear something (a train whistle, a classroom lecture, a directive from a police officer), we see something
8 (a speed limit sign, daylight coming through a window, the Grand Teton, an article from a newspaper
9 describing a court trial), we touch something (a hot forehead, a pulse on a wrist), we smell something, we
10 taste something, *and then* reason generally kicks in. Specifically, it makes a judgment of some sort. It may
11 not make a right or the best judgment, but it makes a judgment nonetheless: “a train is coming”, “my
12 professor is wise,” “I better slow down,” “it’s morning,” “that’s beautiful,” “the man is guilty,” “she has a
13 fever,” “he’s still alive,” etc. We conclude something is true or false, right or wrong, beautiful or ugly, a
14 good idea or bad idea, better or worse, smart or stupid, opinion or fact, myth or real history, important or
15 unimportant, binding or not . . . or something in between these extremes. That’s the connection between
16 our senses and our reason. That’s the way we are created. Some have keener senses than others. Some are
17 better at reasoning than others. Children are developing the use of their senses and reason. The elderly begin
18 to lose some of each. But typically, there is always this process. It’s built into us by nature; it’s unavoidable.

19 Reason is not pure evil. The eyes can look on a woman lustfully, but they can also admire the
20 beauty of sunrise or see that it’s time to get up by looking at a clock. The mouth can curse God, but it can
21 also request a glass of water because of thirst. Reason, as a gift from God, has legitimate and necessary
22 functions that cannot be classified as sinful. Reason can add, assess, conclude, solve a riddle, comprehend
23 calculus, and find a person guilty or not guilty based on the evidence. Reason does not reject everything
24 Scripture teaches or puts forth as true or factual. Reason weighs evidence, including the evidence given for
25 the truth of Christianity and Christ, and it can come to a conclusion. What reason cannot do and will not
26 do, what it will always reject and rebel against, is the truth of the bondage of the will and the doctrine of
27 God’s grace. Reason can accept some truths of Scripture, but it will reject all Scriptural teachings if it sees
28 these teachings somehow supporting the real implications of the law and the gospel. The true understanding
29 of the Old Adam and the true understanding of grace alone, Scripture alone, faith alone, and Christ alone—
30 these sinful reason will not tolerate.

31 But this same reason can still weigh evidence, even biblical or extra-biblical evidence in behalf of
32 the truth of Christianity and Christ—evidence that comes to the senses and upon which reason can make a
33 judgment.

34 This is the way evidential apologetics works.⁸ There is evidence that comes to the senses. Then a
35 judgment will or can be made. The healing of the blind man in John 9 is a classic example where evidence
36 comes to the senses and reason attempts or struggles to make judgments or come to conclusions:⁹

- 37 • *The neighbors*: “The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, ‘Is this not
38 the man who used to sit and beg?’ Some said, ‘It is he.’ Others said, ‘No, but he is like him’” (vv. 8–
39 9).
- 40 • *The Pharisees*: “‘This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How
41 can a man who is a sinner do such signs?’ And there was a division among them.” “The Jews did not
42 believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who
43 had received his sight.” “Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner.” “And they reviled
44 him, saying, ‘You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses’” (vv. 16, 18, 24, 28).
- 45 • *The parents*: “We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. But how he now sees we do not
46 know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself” (vv. 20–
47 21).

⁸ That is, evidential apologetics. Presuppositional apologetics is a different animal.

⁹ Verses quoted in this paper are from the ESV unless otherwise noted. *Emphasis* is mine.

- 1 • *The man himself*: “So they said again to the blind man, ‘What do you say about him, since he has
2 opened your eyes?’ He said, ‘He is a prophet.’” “Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do
3 know, that though I was blind, now I see.” “Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where
4 he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone
5 is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been
6 heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do
7 nothing” (vv. 17, 25, 30–33).

8 Reason can choose to deny what the evidence clearly states because reason will be ruled by one’s
9 will which is typically invested in one’s false belief system, religion, or worldview, not to mention what
10 the fall has done to reason. Therefore, a judgment may be right, or it may be wrong. “Yet many of the
11 people believed in him. They said, ‘When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has
12 done?’” (John 7:31). “There was again a division among the Jews because of these words [of Jesus claiming
13 to be the good shepherd who would lay down his life and take it up again for the sheep]. Many of them
14 said, ‘He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?’ Others said, ‘These are not the words of one who
15 is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’” (John 10:19–21). Reason can even
16 make a right judgment intellectually, but there may be no ascent of the will to what is clearly true.
17 Nicodemus: “Rabbi, *we know* that you are a teacher who has come from God, *for no one could perform*
18 *these signs you do unless God were with him.*” Christ: “Truly I tell you . . . *you do not accept our testimony*”
19 (John 3:2, 11).¹⁰

20 In the cases cited above (and below), I am mostly dealing with a unique kind of information that
21 comes to the senses: miracles. But whether the information is supernatural or natural (such as Jesus using
22 simple logic or quoting from the Old Testament in defending the truth, as do Paul and others in the book of
23 Acts and elsewhere), the process is still the same: the senses receive information—there is evidence—and
24 reason generally makes some sort of judgment.

25 THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

26 The question is not whether there is evidence that comes to the senses. It clearly does and that is
27 the nature of apologetics. Neither is the question whether reason is able to make a judgment. It certainly
28 does, even if it is wrong. But when considering the different apologetic texts in Scripture, there is one
29 question in particular I would call out-of-order: “Is this *evidence* for the truth of Christianity law
30 preaching?” Asking that question of apologetics is like asking, “Is *artwork* depicting the crucifixion of
31 Christ law preaching?” To make the point clearer, take the ultimate apology, the clearest evidence and
32 defense for the truth of Christ, and try applying the same question there: “Are the appearances of the
33 resurrected Christ law preaching?” This is not the right question. The question should be: “Are his
34 resurrection appearances *used in the service of*¹¹ the law?” But we can’t stop there as we consider various
35 Scriptural examples: “Are the appearances of the resurrected Christ ever somehow *used in the service of*
36 the gospel?” And we go one more: “Are there cases where the visible-to-the-eyes resurrected Christ are
37 used *in the service of* both?” We then need to apply these same questions to other apologies as well—all
38 those pieces of evidence that come to the senses and upon which reason can make a judgment. But then
39 follows this question, the answer to which is very important: “If apologetics is used in the service of the
40 gospel, how so?” And this question leads to another that is begged by the statements on apologetics
41 mentioned above: “Is it ever accurate to say that apologetics, somehow, is a *cause* of conversion?”¹²
42

¹⁰ We can argue about whether certain “believings” were real saving faith. But even if some were not, the point still stands that senses saw or heard, and reason made some sort of judgment regarding the person or work of Christ.

¹¹ By “in the service of,” I am including both intent (or purpose) and result. An apology presented may be *intended* to convict a person of sin and that also may be the *result*. An apology may be *intended* to lead a person to faith and that may somehow be the *result*. However, the intent does not always guarantee the result.

¹² The careful wording “efficient causes” by the confessors seems to raise the possibility of “non-efficient” causes. My conclusion and summary of this is found toward the end of this essay under the heading “Are There, Then, Non-Efficient Causes?”

1 There is a tightrope to walk here. But that walk must be guided by Scripture alone.

3 **APOLOGETICS IN THE FOUR GOSPELS**

4 The following sections from the gospels deal with apologetics—evidence that comes to the senses
5 and where judgments are or can be made. Is this evidence used in the service of the law, the gospel, or
6 both? If it is used in the service of the gospel, how can this be without violating and throwing overboard
7 the clear teachings on the bondage of the will and the two efficient causes? And can apologetics ever be
8 classified as a cause *in some sense* so it is distinguished from an efficient cause?

9 What follows is a sampling of verses¹³ (*emphasis mine*) along with comments:

10
11 — Matt. 9: ⁴But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? ⁵For which
12 is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? ⁶*But that you may know that the*
13 *Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins*”—he then said to the paralytic— “Rise, pick up your
14 bed and go home.”

15 **Comments:** This is one of the clearest passages in which proof is offered by Jesus for something
16 he has just done, as if Jesus is saying: “Yes, I, the Son of Man, have the authority to forgive sins, and here
17 is the evidence.” Is this evidence that is visible to those present used in the service of the law or the gospel
18 or possibly both? We let the words of Scripture speak for themselves: it is used in some sense in the service
19 of the gospel (“forgiveness of sins”). This does not, however, mean that forgiveness can or will be received
20 by anyone simply because he can reason. Nor does this exclude this proof being used in the service of the
21 law. The efficacy of the law or the gospel is not the question here. The proof for at least one of them—the
22 gospel—is.

23
24 — Matt. 11: ²Now when John *heard* in prison *about the deeds of the Christ*, he sent word by his
25 disciples ³and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” ⁴And Jesus
26 answered them, “Go and tell John *what you hear and see*: ⁵*the blind receive their sight and the lame*
27 *walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news*
28 *preached to them.*”

29 **Comments:** Jesus is telling John (and his disciples) to connect the dots—to reason and make a
30 judgment: “I am performing these miracles predicted of the Messiah in the Scriptures and I am preaching
31 the gospel to poor sinners, therefore, what is the reasonable conclusion? You asked me a question; I am
32 pointing you to evidence; so figure it out.” Is this being used in the service of the law or the gospel? If one
33 brings with him to the table a grasp of, for example, Isaiah 53 (which John undoubtedly did), then this is
34 used in the service of the gospel. If there is no understanding of personal sin and the vicarious Suffering
35 Servant, then the miracles referenced by Jesus could just as well be used in the service of the law.

36
37 — Matt. 11: ²⁰Then he began to *denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done,*
38 *because they did not repent.* ²¹“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For *if the mighty works*
39 *done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago* in sackcloth and
40 ashes. ²²But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

41 **Comments:** Here we have an instance where the miracles of Christ, according to his own words,
42 should have brought about repentance. That is, they were used in the service of the law (intent). And the
43 miracles of Christ would continue to be used in the service of the law for these unbelievers, now and in the
44 future, as a reminder of their rejection of the Christ. This does not mean, however, that miracles can only
45 be used in the service of the law. One should not say, “Aha! A clear example of proof being used to convict
46 people of sin. Therefore, this must be the case in all other places where proof is put forth.”

¹³ In my research I found over two hundred sections (individual verses or multiple verses) in the Gospels, Acts, and epistles that touched upon apologetics in some way or another. I narrowed this list down to a hundred and thirty-six that I consider to be more clear or pertinent to this discussion. For this list, see Appendix A. Applying the questions mentioned above (“Is this used in the service of the law, the gospel?” etc.) to these verses is appropriate in most cases. I have attempted to be fair in my choice of passages, listing those that appear to speak for themselves, the conclusions being fairly obvious.

1 — Matt. 12: ²⁴ But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons,
2 that this man casts out demons.” ²⁵ Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, “*Every kingdom divided*
3 *against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand.* ²⁶ *And if Satan casts*
4 *out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?* ²⁷ *And if I cast out demons*
5 *by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges.* ²⁸ *But if it is by*
6 *the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.*

7 **Comments:** This section is interesting for several reasons. First, based on what the Pharisees
8 observed, they judged Jesus to be in league with the prince of demons. They saw and dealt with the
9 evidence, but came to a faulty conclusion *because* they could not free themselves from and needed to
10 maintain their false religion. Second, Jesus uses simple logic to point out their irrationality, essentially
11 saying, “You Pharisees have checked your brain at the door.” Jesus uses both reason and his miracles in the
12 service of the law. The intent was to convict, even though that was not the result (as far as we know). But
13 it must not go unnoticed that he also says, “if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, *then the*
14 *kingdom of God has come.*” Which kingdom was he talking about? The kingdom of grace. Whether they
15 believed it or not, whether they understood it or not, his exorcisms also pointed to grace, and in that way
16 they are used in the service of the gospel.

17 — Matt. 26: ⁷⁴ Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know the man.” And
18 immediately the rooster crowed. ⁷⁵ And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, “Before the rooster
19 crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.

20 **Comments:** Peter had heard the prediction by Christ earlier. Then when Peter denied him, heard
21 the rooster, and remembered the words of Christ—seeing the prophecy fulfilled—he wept bitterly.
22 Fulfillment of prophecy used in the service of the law.

23 — Mark 16: ²⁰ And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and
24 confirmed the message [τὸν λόγον] by accompanying signs.

25 **Comments:** What message or what word was confirmed? “Whoever believes and is baptized will
26 be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (16:16). Both the word of gospel and the law
27 are confirmed (βεβαιουῦντος: “established”, “secured”) by the evidence of the miraculous and observable
28 signs of the apostles.

29 — Luke 2: ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that
30 will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the
31 Lord. ¹² And *this will be a sign for you:* you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in
32 a manger.”

33 **Comments:** Whereas the appearance of the angel of the Lord had just filled the shepherds with
34 great fear (an observance that was used in the service of the law), the baby in a manger was a sign of a
35 Savior who came to save people from sin (used in the service of the gospel).

36 — Luke 5: ⁶ And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were
37 breaking. ⁷ They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and
38 filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸ But *when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’*
39 *knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”* ⁹ For he and all who were with him
40 were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, ¹⁰ . . . And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be
41 afraid; from now on you will be catching men.”

42 **Comments:** Information comes to Peter’s senses—proof that this Jesus is no ordinary man—and
43 Peter rightly judges that he, a sinful man, dare not be the presence of this holy Whatever-He-Is sent from
44 God. Observable and miraculous information is used in the service of the law, followed by the word of the
45 gospel, “Do not be afraid.”

46 — Luke 16: ²⁷ “He said, ‘Then I beg you, father, send [Lazarus] to my father’s home, ²⁸ because I have
47 five brothers—to warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’” ²⁹ “Abraham said,
48 ‘They have Moses and the Prophets. Let them listen to them.’” ³⁰ “‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if

1 *someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.* ³¹ “Abraham replied to him, ‘If they do not listen
2 to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

3 **Comments:** This has become a *sedes doctrinae* for many when it comes to apologetics. And it is
4 important for apologetics. It has great application. But it does not cover all the bases; it is not intended to
5 answer any and all questions regarding the role of proof in evangelism and conversion. For starters, it should
6 be kept in mind that the rich man would not have been thinking of repentance for his brothers in a Christian
7 sense. The rich man, or any unbeliever, whether he be on earth or in hell, has no true understanding of the
8 cross. It is foolishness or a stumbling block to him. The gospel would never enter into the salvation equation
9 for him. The other difficulty of using this as the final and only word on apologetics is that it would then be
10 in conflict with other clear examples and teachings where such observable evidence of a resurrection
11 somehow accomplished what it would not accomplish with the rich man’s brothers. See comments below
12 on Luke 24 and John 20:19–29 where seeing and touching the resurrected Christ were used not merely in
13 the service of the law.

14 So, what *do* we take away from this account? First, Jesus was not saying that evidence of a
15 resurrection is unnecessary and would always do nothing. He *was* saying that no amount of evidence would
16 convince those who refused to believe, something confirmed in Acts as the apostles presented resurrection
17 evidence. People have no ability to accept Christ on their own, but they are very capable of rejecting him,
18 in spite of the evidence. The other thing to learn is this: apologetics divorced from “Moses and the
19 Prophets” (that is, divorced from *the Christ-focused and gospel-centered message of the Old Testament*
20 *Scriptures*—Luke 24:27) is totally useless. “Moses and the Prophets” is ultimately and primarily about
21 Christ. If all one hears is evidence for the existence of God, for Jesus of Nazareth as a real historical figure,
22 for the superiority of a young earth over against any form of evolution, or even testimony of a man
23 resurrected (all of which *are* important), I might just as well spend my time convincing him of the rules of
24 arithmetic, and leave it at that. Math won’t save him, and neither will believing that a man named Jesus
25 walked this earth, if that’s all he has. “Moses and the Prophets” teaches me that I am desperately wicked,
26 that God is a God of justice, but, *above all*, the good news that this Messiah alone is my righteousness,
27 sanctification, and redemption. What this text does *not* teach, however, is that apologetics is unimportant
28 or useless; it does not state that evidence cannot be used in the service of the gospel.

29 — Luke 24: ³⁶ As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to
30 them, “Peace to you!” ³⁷ But they were *startled and frightened* and thought they saw a spirit. ³⁸ And he
31 said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹ *See my hands and my*
32 *feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see.* For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I
33 have.” ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, *he showed them his hands and his feet.* ⁴¹ And while they still
34 disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, “*Have you anything here to eat?*” ⁴² They gave
35 him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and *he took it and ate before them.*

36 **Comments:** According to one understanding of apologetics (an incomplete one), these
37 appearances—and the lengths to which Jesus went *to convince them* of his resurrection—were unnecessary.
38 After all, if the disciples, just like us, could not by their own reason or strength believe in Jesus, all God
39 really needed to do was send a prophet simply to *say*: “Jesus who was crucified for you has risen.” No
40 appearances needed. Yet Jesus appeals to their senses and reason. He is directing the apostles and others
41 present to use their senses and reason; he is asking them to look at and touch the specific marks that
42 identified him as the one who really, truly was dead by crucifixion so they might believe and say, “It really
43 is you, alive, risen!” and thereby alleviate their fears and doubts. When doubts continued regarding his
44 identity (“maybe we’re seeing a ghost!”), he provided more evidence to confirm an obvious reality: “Watch
45 me eat some of your food right in front of you.” It was important and essential that Jesus confirm the reality
46 of his resurrection. What he did here and over the next 40 days was give them “many convincing [i.e.,
47 observable] proofs” (Acts 1:3, CSB) that begged for and demanded the only reasonable judgment. But it is
48 important to note that such appearances and proofs could be and were used in the service of the law as well,
49 even though being used in the gospel predominates.
50

1 — John 2: ¹¹This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his
2 disciples believed in him.

3 — John 2: ²³Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many *believed* in his name *when they*
4 *saw the signs* that he was doing.

5 — John 11: ⁴⁴The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face
6 wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.” ⁴⁵Many of the Jews
7 *therefore*, who had come with Mary *and had seen what he did*, *believed* in him.

8 **Comments:** A common feature in the Gospel of John is a miracle followed by believing: Evidence
9 (for his person or work) followed by faith. It is possible that some time before believing, these miracles
10 were used in the service of the law, to work contrition. But the context gives no evidence for this.¹⁴ One is
11 not allowed to import something into the text unless it is confirmed by parallel accounts or it is a clear
12 teaching from elsewhere in Scripture that demands such an interpretation. What we simply have in the
13 passages above is evidence (a sign, a miracle) followed by faith. In other words, these accounts are saying
14 evidence is being used in the service of the gospel. Again, this does not exclude miracles being used in the
15 service of the law, but that is not found here.

16
17 — John 6: ¹⁴When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “*This is indeed the Prophet who is*
18 *to come into the world!*” ¹⁵Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make
19 him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself. . . . ²⁶Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly,
20 I say to you, *you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the*
21 *loaves.*” ²⁷Do not work for the *food that perishes*, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the
22 Son of Man will give to you. . . .” ²⁸Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works
23 of God?” ²⁹Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”
24 ³⁰So they said to him, “Then *what sign do you do*, that we may see and believe you?. . . ³⁶“But I said
25 to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. . . .” ⁴⁰For this is the will of my Father, that everyone
26 who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last
27 day.” ⁴¹So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from
28 heaven.” ⁴²They said, “*Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How*
29 *does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?*” ⁴³Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among
30 yourselves. ⁴⁴*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.* . . . ⁵¹I am the living
31 bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that
32 I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” ⁵²The Jews then disputed among themselves,
33 saying, “*How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*” ⁵³So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you,
34 *unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.* . . . ⁶⁰When
35 many of his disciples heard it, they said, “*This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?*” . . . ⁶⁶After this
36 *many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.* ⁶⁷So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do
37 you want to go away as well?” ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, *to whom shall we go? You have the*
38 *words of eternal life,* ⁶⁹and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of
39 God.”

40 **Comments:** It is important to see how this account fits with previous and following sections of
41 John. The discourse follows the feeding of the five thousand. A miracle was performed that confirmed a
42 number of things, including Jesus as the bread of life sent from heaven. The crowd saw and partook of the
43 miraculous food and was then determined to make him king by force, for they judged him to be the Prophet.
44 How they understood “the Prophet” becomes clear in the latter verses. When they catch up to him the next
45 day, they are still determined to make him king. However, they do not believe in Jesus as the true bread of
46 life. One might conclude that the miracle, therefore, was not used in the service of the gospel because it
47 did not produce within them such a faith. But the distinction needs to be made between purpose and result.
48 I may intend one thing, but that may not be the result. The unfulfilled result does not negate the purpose or
49 intent. God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. But that result does not

¹⁴ This is not to suggest the law had not done its work prior to believing. Obviously it would have, necessarily.

1 happen. So, it can still be said that this miracle was used in the service of the gospel (“I am the bread of
2 life”) even though no one there believed it. Like the Pharisees above, these unbelievers were so invested
3 in their false worldview (a materialistic, heaven-on-earth, prosperity gospel) that they were blind to the
4 intent of the miracle, interpreted it according to their false theology (“you can and will give us everything
5 we need for the here and now”), and ended up just as firmly entrenched in their rejection of Christ as any
6 Pharisee or Sadducee. But there is something else to note here. Support for the bondage of the will and the
7 efficient causes is here: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” “Lord, to
8 whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

10 — John 10: ²⁴ So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense?
11 If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.”²⁵ Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe. *The*
12 *works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me,* ²⁶ but you do not believe because you are
13 not among my sheep.

14 — John 10: ³⁷ If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; ³⁸ *but if I do them, even*
15 *though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is*
16 *in me and I am in the Father.”*

17 — John 12: ⁹ When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on
18 account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ So the chief priests made
19 plans to put Lazarus to death as well,¹¹ *because on account of him many of the Jews were going away*
20 *and believing in Jesus.*

21 — John 14: ⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me,
22 Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰ Do you
23 not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak
24 on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the
25 Father and the Father is in me, *or else believe on account of the works themselves.*

26 — John 20: ³⁰ Now *Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples,* which are not written in
27 this book; ³¹ *but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and*
28 *that by believing you may have life in his name.*

29 **Comments:** See also the comments under John 2 and 11 above. One of the takeaways from these
30 verses is that the observable evidence of miracles is a reason to believe in Jesus. Again, evidence is being
31 used in the service of the gospel. I have always been confused by a broader interpretation of John 20:30–
32 31, as if “these” (v. 31) is talking about something other than “signs” (v. 30).¹⁵ Whereas the broader
33 teaching is true, viz., “*this gospel of John* is written that you might believe...,” it is quite difficult to
34 conclude on the basis of the Greek that this is the primary meaning of these verses.¹⁶ I don’t mind this
35 teaching at all, but we sell John short if we see it as the essential meaning here. The connection between
36 ταῦτα and σημεῖα is right there, it’s contextual, both within these two verses and in the broader context.
37 We therefore partially miss John’s apologetic thrust when we assume ταῦτα is something other than signs.
38 The meaning is clear: “These signs, performed by Jesus in the presence of his disciples, are written down
39 by an eyewitness so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you
40 may have life in his name.”

41 — John 12: ³⁷ Though he had done *so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him,* ³⁸ so that
42 the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Lord, who has believed what he heard from
43 us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”
44

¹⁵ For example, the headings for these two verses in the ESV, EHV, and CSB say, “The Purpose of *This Gospel*” (emphasis added) or something similar. It is more accurate to say, “The Purpose of These Signs”.

¹⁶ Σημεῖα whenever it is used in John is always a reference to his miracles, miracles that confirm and point to—are a sign of—the reality of his divinity and his work. Luther (see Appendix B, #7) and J. Ylvisaker (*The Gospels, A Synoptic Harmony*, 790) agree that “these” is referring to “signs”. See also “The Purpose of the Gospel of John According to John 20:30–31”, Michael K. Smith, “The Purpose of the Gospel of John According to John 20:30–31,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 56, 4 (December 2016): 296–304.

1 **Comments:** Though believing often follows the observable evidence of signs and miracles, that is
2 not always the case. The intent of the signs is clear (believing in Jesus, thus serving the gospel), even when
3 there is no such result. What such verses show us is that many will remain firmly entrenched in unbelief
4 in spite of the evidence; no amount of proof will change a thing.
5

6 — John 19: ³³But when they came to Jesus and saw that *he was already dead*, they did not break his
7 legs. ³⁴But *one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and*
8 *water.* ³⁵*He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true*, and he knows that he is telling the
9 truth—that you also may believe. ³⁶*For these things took place that the Scripture might be*
10 *fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken.”* ³⁷And again another Scripture says, “They will look
11 on him whom they have pierced.”

12 **Comments:** John is telling his readers they ought to believe Jesus died on the cross because he
13 clearly observed it, verified by the piercing and the flow of blood and water. One is to believe that Jesus
14 (earlier shown to be the Son of God by his words and deeds) was truly dead *on the basis of what John saw*
15 *with his eyes*. It’s a matter of historical record. To put it another way: the death of the crucified Christ is to
16 be believed not merely because the apostle says so, but because of his reliable eyewitness testimony.
17

18 — John 20: ¹⁹On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the
19 disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with
20 you.” ²⁰When he had said this, *he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad*
21 *when they saw the Lord.* ²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even
22 so I am sending you.” ²²And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive
23 the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness
24 from any, it is withheld.” ²⁴Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when
25 Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I
26 see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand
27 into his side, I will never believe.” ²⁶Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was
28 with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be
29 with you.” ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “*Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand,*
30 *and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.*” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “*My Lord and my*
31 *God!*”

32 **Comments:** Here are two points to add (or reemphasize) to what was said above regarding Luke
33 24: First, we see a close connection between the senses and reason working together on the one hand (“we
34 saw and touched, therefore it is him!”) and the proclaiming of the gospel on the other (“If you forgive...they
35 are forgiven”). That connection is real. The Office of the Keys would not be a reality without a resurrected
36 Christ, a resurrection confirmed by his appearances which in turn confirms the Office of the Keys.¹⁷

37 I also see here an instance where apologetics—viz., the appearance of the resurrected Jesus—is
38 used in the service of both the law and gospel. “Thomas, put your finger here, and see my hands; and put
39 out your hand, and place it in my side and know that your pride, your stubbornness, your unbelief are all so
40 clearly wrong.” “Thomas, put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in
41 my side and know that I, who died for you—for your pride, your stubbornness, your unbelief, your sin—I
42 am alive.” This explains Thomas’ confession of faith: “My Lord and my God.” Right then and there, the
43 law and the gospel were effective. The appearance (evidence) served both.
44

45 **APOLOGETICS IN THE BOOK OF ACTS**

46 The use of apologetics is just as extensive and clear in Acts.

47 **First,** Acts contains observable evidence upon which a judgment could or should be made:

¹⁷ This is similar to Rom. 1:1–4: “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the *gospel of*
God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was
descended from David according to the flesh and was *declared to be the Son of God* in power according to the Spirit
of holiness *by his resurrection from the dead*, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

- 1 — “After he had suffered, he also presented himself alive to them by *many convincing proofs*, appearing
2 to them over a period of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God” (1:3, CSB).
- 3 — “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, *a man attested to you by God with mighty works*
4 *and wonders and signs* that God did through him in your midst, *as you yourselves know*” (2:22).
- 5 — Acts 2: ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and *many wonders and signs* were being done through the
6 apostles.
- 7 — Acts 4: ⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we
8 are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, *by what means this man has*
9 *been healed*, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus
10 Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing
11 before you well.
- 12 — Acts 9: ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly *a light from heaven*
13 *shone around him*. ⁴ And falling to the ground, *he heard a voice* saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are
14 you persecuting me?”
- 15 — Acts 9: ³⁴ And Peter said to him, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed.” And
16 *immediately he rose*. ³⁵ And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the
17 Lord.
- 18 — Acts 9: ⁴⁰ But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said,
19 “*Tabitha, arise*.” And *she opened her eyes*, and when she saw Peter she sat up. ⁴¹ And he gave her his
20 hand and *raised her up*. Then, calling the saints and widows, he *presented her alive*.
- 21 — Acts 10: ³⁶ As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ
22 (he is Lord of all), ³⁷ *you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea*, beginning from Galilee
23 after the baptism that John proclaimed: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and
24 with power. *He went about doing good and healing* all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was
25 with him. ³⁹ And *we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in*
26 *Jerusalem*. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but *God raised him on the third day and*
27 *made him to appear*, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as *witnesses*, who
28 ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.
- 29 — Acts 13: ¹¹ “And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and *you will be blind and unable to see*
30 *the sun for a time*.” Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to
31 lead him by the hand. ¹² Then the proconsul believed, when *he saw* what had occurred, for he was
32 astonished at the teaching of the Lord.
- 33 — Acts 16: ²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners
34 were listening to them, ²⁶ and *suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the*
35 *prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were*
36 *unfastened*.
- 37 — Acts 14: ¹⁰ Paul said in a loud voice, “*Stand upright on your feet*.” And *he sprang up and began*
38 *walking*. ¹¹ And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in
39 Lycaonian, “*The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!*”¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and
40 Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the
41 entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the
42 crowds. ¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out
43 into the crowd, crying out, ¹⁵ “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature
44 with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who
45 made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. ¹⁶ In past generations he allowed all
46 the nations to walk in their own ways. ¹⁷ *Yet he did not leave himself without witness*, for he did good
47 by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food
48 and gladness.” ¹⁸ Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to
49 them.

1 — Acts 26: ²⁵ But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true
2 and *rational* words. ²⁶ *For the king knows about these things*, and to him I speak boldly. For I am
3 persuaded that *none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner*.

4
5 **Second**, this evidence is used in the service of the law:

6 — Acts 2: ³⁷ Now *when they heard this they were cut to the heart*, and said to Peter and the rest of the
7 apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

8 — Acts 9: ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven
9 shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “*Saul, Saul, why are you*
10 *persecuting me?*” ⁵ And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “*I am Jesus, whom you are*
11 *persecuting.*”

12 — Acts 5: ²⁷ And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest
13 questioned them, ²⁸ saying, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled
14 Jerusalem with your teaching, and *you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.*” ²⁹ But Peter and the
15 apostles answered, “*We must obey God rather than men.*” ³⁰ *The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom*
16 *you killed by hanging him on a tree.*”

17 **Third**, this observable evidence is also used in the service of the gospel:

18 — Acts 4: ³³ The apostles continued to *testify about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ* with great
19 power, and abundant grace was on all of them (EHV).

20 — Acts 9: ³⁴ And Peter said to him, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed.” And
21 immediately he rose. ³⁵ And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon *saw him, and they turned to the Lord*.

22 — Acts 9: ⁴⁰ But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said,
23 “Tabitha, arise.” And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. ⁴¹ And he gave her his
24 hand and raised her up. Then, calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. ⁴² *And it became*
25 *known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.*

26 — Acts 10: ³⁶ As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ
27 (he is Lord of all), ³⁷ you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee
28 after the baptism that John proclaimed: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and
29 with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was
30 with him. ³⁹ And *we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in*
31 *Jerusalem*. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but *God raised him on the third day and*
32 *made him to appear*, ⁴¹ not to all the people but *to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who*
33 *ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.* ⁴² And he commanded us to preach to the people
34 and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ To him all
35 the prophets *bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins* through his
36 name.” ⁴⁴ *While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.*

37 — Acts 13: ¹¹ “And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see
38 the sun for a time.” Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to
39 lead him by the hand. ¹² *Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was*
40 *astonished at the teaching of the Lord.*

41 — Acts 17: ² As usual, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days *reasoned with them from*
42 *the Scriptures*, ³ explaining and *proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and rise from*
43 *the dead*: “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah.” ⁴ *Some of them were persuaded* and
44 joined Paul and Silas, including a large number of God-fearing Greeks, as well as a number of the
45 leading women.

46 — Acts 28: ²³ When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers.
47 From morning till evening he expounded to them, *testifying to the kingdom of God* and *trying to*
48 *convince them about Jesus* both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. ²⁴ *And some were*
49 *convinced* by what he said, but others disbelieved.

50
51
52 **THE VERDICT: MANY TEXTS ARE USED IN THE SERVICE OF THE GOSPEL.**

1 Whereas most of the passages above are descriptions of what took place, they also confirm that
2 observable evidence is being used *not only* in the service of the law *but also*, many times, in the service of
3 the gospel. Consider these passages, some of which have already been quoted:

4 — Mark 16: ²⁰ And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and
5 *confirmed the message by accompanying signs*.

6 — John 20: ³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in
7 this book; ³¹ but *these [signs] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of*
8 *God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*.

9 — Acts 14: ³ So they stayed there a long time and spoke boldly for the Lord, *who testified to the message*
10 *of his grace by enabling them to do signs and wonders* (CSB).

11 — 2 Cor. 12: ¹² The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs
12 and wonders and mighty works.

13 — 1 John 1: That which was from the beginning, *which we have heard, which we have seen with our*
14 *eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—* ² *the*
15 *life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which*
16 *was with the Father and was made manifest to us—* ³ *that which we have seen and heard we proclaim*
17 *also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father*
18 *and with his Son Jesus Christ*.

19 — 2 Pet. 1: ¹⁶ For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power
20 and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but *we were eyewitnesses of his majesty*. ¹⁷ For when he received
21 honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is
22 my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” ¹⁸ *we ourselves heard this very voice borne from*
23 *heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain*. ¹⁹ *And we have the prophetic word more fully*
24 *confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the*
25 *day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts*.

26 — 1 Cor. 15: ¹ Now I would remind you, brothers, of *the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in*
27 *which you stand,* ² *and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—*
28 *unless you believed in vain.* ³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that
29 Christ *died for our sins* in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ *that he was buried, that he was raised on*
30 *the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,* ⁵ *and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the*
31 *twelve.* ⁶ *Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive,*
32 *though some have fallen asleep.* ⁷ *Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.* ⁸ Last of all, as
33 to one untimely born, *he appeared also to me*.

34 — Heb. 2: ³ *This salvation had its beginning when it was spoken of by the Lord, and it was confirmed to*
35 *us by those who heard him.* ⁴ At the same time, God also *testified by signs and wonders, various*
36 *miracles. . . .*
37

38 These and other sections:

39 1) All refer to evidence upon which a judgment can be made, and,

40 2) All claim that this evidence is somehow used in the service of the gospel. Specifically,

41 — Observable evidences (“signs”) “*confirmed the message*” of the apostles (Mark 16).

42 — Observable evidences (“signs”) are recorded “*so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the*
43 *Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name*” (John 20).

44 — Observable evidences (“signs and wonders”) “*testified to the message of his grace*” (Acts 14).

45 — Observable evidences (“signs and wonders and miracles”) are “signs of a true apostle” (2 Cor. 12).

46 — Observable evidence (the risen Christ) was “*heard . . . seen with our eyes . . . looked upon and . . .*
47 *touched with our hands,*” . . . *so that you too may have fellowship with us and . . . with the Father*
48 *and with his Son Jesus Christ*” (1 John 1).

- 1 — Observable evidence (the transfigured Christ) means “we have *the prophetic word more fully*
- 2 *confirmed*” (2 Pet. 1).¹⁸
- 3 — Observable evidences (numerous appearances of the resurrected Christ to different individuals and
- 4 groups over 40 days) were part and parcel of what was “*delivered to you as of first importance,*”
- 5 and linked with the gospel that saves and with the Christ who “died for our sins in accordance with
- 6 the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15)
- 7 — Observable evidences (“signs and wonders, various miracles”) “*testified*” to “*this salvation*” (Heb.
- 8 2).
- 9

10 **ANSWERING THE PARADOX: OFFERING EVIDENCE WHILE PRESERVING THE**

11 **BONDAGE OF THE WILL AND GRACE ALONE**

12 So here’s the all-important question: How can apologetics (making the case for the truth that Jesus

13 is the Christ by presenting evidence in which reason plays a role) be used in the service of the gospel without

14 denying the bondage of the will and the efficient causes of the word and Holy Spirit?

15 We cannot unmake what we are. We have senses and our reason. And whether right or wrong

16 reason can make a judgment. Reason, corrupted by the fall, cannot convince the will out of its hatred for

17 God. It cannot grasp Christ and his forgiveness. It cannot be an instigating cause of faith. Nevertheless, we

18 still have this reason that inevitably and naturally judges. We cannot avoid being creatures who will sense,

19 reason, and make judgments, even if we wanted to.

20 So here is the way the paradox can be answered. It is a narrow path. But I believe it steers us

21 correctly.

22

23 **Apologetics is used in the service of the gospel *insofar* as it**

24 **points to, implies, or confirms the truth of the gospel.**

25

26 This is what is seen over and over again in numerous examples of Scripture, all the while upholding

27 and acknowledging the precious means of grace. Reason can reason. But it cannot effect conversion. It

28 can hear what is to be believed, but it cannot enable one to believe. It can see or hear the evidence in favor

29 of the truth of the gospel, but it is not the power of God for salvation that creates faith. The gospel alone

30 does that. But the evidence—that which reason cannot or should not ignore—can imply, point to, or

31 confirm the word of the saving gospel which the Holy Spirit then uses to change the heart of stone within

32 the rebellious sinner into a believing heart now reconciled to God because of the work of Christ.

33 This allows Scripture to stand and speak as it does when it comes to the purpose and/or result of

34 apologetics (evidence used in the service of the law or the gospel or both) *and at the same time* the doctrine

35 of sin and the doctrine of grace remain firm and true.

36 Appendix B includes quotations from Dr. Martin Luther where he recognizes that the Gospels

37 contain proof, evidence, and eyewitness testimony used in the service of the gospel as explained above. For

38 example: “For since He shows Himself to be alive and, moreover, offers them His hands and side for

39 inspection, their eyes and reason are convinced that He is certainly risen from the dead. And so the Word

40 and the work agree with each other.” He even goes so far as to say these observable evidences and proofs

41 bring certainty.¹⁹

42 Luther sees these proofs—that are observed by the senses and upon which reason can make a

43 judgment—as working hand-in-glove with the Word, all the while teaching the bondage of the will and the

44 total inability of reason to be an efficient cause.

45 But why would God do this? Why use reason in such a way? For several reasons. First, we are

46 created by him with specific gifts and abilities he expects us to use, including reason. He does not ignore

47 who we are; rather he uses this attribute unique to human beings to lead to faith or, in the case of believers,

48 to strengthen faith. Second, reason is the only means given to us by which we can judge something to be

49 true or false, right or wrong, keeping in mind its appropriate and ministerial role. Apologetics is used so

¹⁸ I am assuming one of two interpretations and understandings of these verses.

¹⁹ Appendix B, # 5, 6, 8, 9.

1 one can say, “this is certainly true” (Luke 1:1–3),²⁰ or to say with Thomas, “My Lord and my God.” Third,
2 it sets Christianity and Christ apart from all other religions, their false messiahs, and their utopias. False
3 religions do not and cannot provide such evidence; not even close. Christianity is in a class by itself. Fourth,
4 it is time. In a culture where the Bible is readily dismissed as God’s word, a common ground that remains
5 is reason.

6 7 **BUT WHERE’S THE OBSERVABLE EVIDENCE FOR US? THE IMPORTANCE OF** 8 **EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY**

9 The miracles, fulfillment of prophecy, and the resurrection of Christ—proof for the truth of
10 Christ—were events that took place within the time and space of 1st century A.D. Palestine. That evidence
11 has come and gone. “Therefore,” someone might think, “believing for us is a matter of just hearing the
12 word since there is no such evidence for our eyes to see or our hands to touch.”

13 It is true we cannot reproduce *that* evidence.²¹ But there are two things to keep in mind. First, the
14 apostles and others who observed the evidence back then did not come to faith because the miracles and
15 resurrection of Christ were the efficient causes. They also, like us, could not “by their own reason . . .
16 believe in Jesus Christ or come to him.” What’s good for the goose is good for the gander. If evidence
17 plays no *such* role in our believing according to Scripture, then it played no such role in their believing
18 either. Yet, as was shown above, evidence was used in the service of the gospel. And this remains as true
19 for us today as it did for them back then.

20 That brings me to the second and very important point. The apostles were to bring the message of
21 Christ “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). And how were they to do that? *Merely* by telling or writing to
22 people that Jesus lived, died, rose, and ascended, and then proclaim forgiveness of sins, followed by an
23 exhortation to repent and believe? Get rid of the “merely” and the statement is better, but still incomplete.
24 So what did the apostles do beyond the *merely*? “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has
25 come upon you, and *you will be my witnesses* in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, *and* to the end of
26 the earth.” (Acts 1:8). “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the
27 dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all
28 nations, beginning from Jerusalem. *You are witnesses* of these things” (Luke 24:46-48; see also John
29 15:27). The noun “witness” (μάρτυς) is used 35 times in the New Testament. In all of these, with two
30 exceptions *possibly* (Rev. 2:13; 17:6), this noun always refers to one who saw, who heard, or who touched:
31 “We were there.”²²

32 And what they saw, heard, and touched was put forth as evidence, as in a courtroom where jurors
33 hear or see (and sometimes read) the evidence provided by witnesses. *Eyewitnesses* are always best. And
34 if these witnesses all agree, that’s even better. And just like a courtroom where jurors are to hear the
35 evidence, deliberate, and come with a verdict, so also the apostles were appealing to juror-like abilities of
36 their hearers or readers to weigh their testimony and come to a conclusion. They were seeking to persuade
37 and convince them. This cannot be denied. Their role as apostle *and as witness* to the life, death, and

²⁰ Luke 1:1–3: “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have *certainty* concerning the things you have been taught” (emphasis added).

²¹ People often fail to distinguish between *scientific proof* (dependent upon observation of repeatable events) and *historical proof* (normally associated with eyewitness accounts or careful investigation and research into past events in order to verify the events). Both are valid ways to prove something. But many, for some reason, think truth can only be established or confirmed by the scientific method, even though they do not live like this; in fact, no one does.

²² It is unfortunate that we often refer to Christians in general as “witnesses” who are to “witness” to their neighbor. We are not witnesses; not even close, at least in the NT sense. To call ourselves such actually waters down the import of this New Testament term, making it something other than what it is and detracting from its great apologetic value. (See also “Matthew 28:19 and the Mission of the WELS,” 44ff; report to the WELS Conference of Presidents, April 23, 2007).

1 resurrection of Christ could not be separated from one another. If he was an apostle, he was necessarily a
2 witness (Acts 1:21–22; 1 John 1:1–3; John 15:27). This witness role was not used incidentally, or even
3 occasionally. It was part and parcel to the apostles’ message. It was not something the apostles appealed
4 to just once in a while. In the evangelism sermons in Acts, the apostles almost always establish the factuality
5 of the resurrection of Christ by referring to their eyewitness status (2:32; 3:15; 4:13; 5:32; 10:39, 41; 13:31).
6 Paul also was obligated to let others know that he witnessed the risen Christ: “But rise and stand upon your
7 feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and *witness to the things in*
8 *which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you*” (Acts 26:16; see also 22:15). There is
9 no doubt that Paul in 1 Cor. 15:3–8 records six post-resurrection appearances to eyewitnesses, himself
10 included, as evidence for the truth of the gospel of forgiveness.

11 Eyewitness testimony *is* evidence. Two will do. Three is even better. But more than five hundred,
12 at different times, in different groups, sometimes individually, all saying the same thing?

13 Though the apostles spoke as if these events and the accompanying message of forgiveness were
14 true, they did not *merely* say, “Jesus suffered, died, and rose for the forgiveness of your sins, therefore
15 repent and believe.” Nor did they *merely* say, “Believe this because of my apostolic authority.” Instead,
16 their preaching was often accompanied by the “signs of an apostle . . . , including signs and wonders and
17 miracles” (2 Cor. 12:12). And, almost always, attached to the message of the gospel was the evidence of
18 their eyes and ears, what they saw and heard: “we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the
19 Jews and in Jerusalem. . . . [we] ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead” (Acts 10:39, 41).

20 This has tremendous practical application for us today. I often ask a sceptic or unbeliever if he
21 accepts certain historical events or persons to be factual, like the existence of Julius Caesar or specific
22 ancient empires. If yes, why? I am opening a door to the reliability of eyewitness testimony or to the
23 reliability of those who after careful research and investigation recorded the factual events and the words
24 actually spoken. When we place the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles before the sceptic, the atheist,
25 the agnostic, the Muslim, or the person who has not given his worldview or religion much critical thought,
26 we are not simply having them read or listen to “the Word of God” (though it is that), we are also having
27 them weigh eyewitness testimony; we are having them read or listen to reliable historical records. And we
28 can and ought to emphasize that. In most cases it would do no good to say, “Read this, it is the Word of
29 God.” They cannot relate to that; they do not share the same epistemology. They will not believe the Bible
30 is the word of God simply because I say so; that understanding usually comes after conversion. Besides,
31 this is not the approach of the apostles. Though they spoke authoritatively (at times) and corroborated their
32 apostolic authority with miracles, the evidence they most often placed before others was, “We were there,”
33 or, “Here is testimony of witnesses,” and therefore “These are reliable and true records,” something for
34 which they were willing to die.²³

35 Luther recognized this understanding and use of the eyewitness testimony in the gospels:

36 Christ’s resurrection is certified, first of all, by the testimony of His adversaries; then, by the
37 testimony of His friends; third, by the testimony of the Lord Himself, by revealing Himself to be alive
38 and by showing Himself; and fourth, by the testimony of the prophets and Holy Scripture. The guards,
39 the governor Pilate, as well as the chief priests and the Jews confess that Christ is not in the tomb. Next,
40 not only do Peter and John run to the tomb but also [Mary] Magdalene and all the other women and
41 disciples, and they find things just as the angels had said. Then, the Lord Himself comes to them as well.
42 He eats and drinks with them after His resurrection; talks with them; allows them to touch, feel, and clasp
43 Him; and says: “See my hands and my feet, that it is I Myself. Touch Me, and see. For a spirit does not
44 have flesh and bones as you see that I have” [Luke 24:39]. In short, during the forty days before His
45 ascension into heaven, He so convinces them that none of them can deny, but all must confess, that the

²³ Again, it is hard to underestimate the proof-text of 1 John 1:1–3: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” See also 1 Cor. 15:30–32.

1 Lord has truly risen from the dead. Finally, Holy Scripture is also in agreement, and the testimony of the
2 dear prophets. In this way, both friend and foe bear witness to the resurrection, and in addition to such
3 testimony there is the event itself as well in Scripture.

4 Upon such testimonies every Christian should joyfully and confidently rely and should believe
5 certainly and without any doubt that Christ rose from the dead on the third day. . . . We should rely on
6 these with certainty and not require any further special revelation. For myself, I am entirely satisfied by
7 these witnesses, so that I would not even wish to have some kind of special revelation and see Christ in
8 person. For even such a personal vision would not be as helpful as these testimonies. For because I have
9 often read that the devil often disguises himself in the form of Christ, I would be unable to believe such
10 revelations. But when Pilate and those who crucified Christ themselves confess that He rose from the
11 dead; then, that His disciples bear witness to the same thing; and Christ Himself bears witness; and the
12 writings of the prophets bear witness—that is more certain and convincing for me than any special
13 revelations.²⁴

14
15 One of the best ways to evangelize apologetically is simply to put in the hands of an unbeliever one or
16 more of these accurate historical accounts that were written by eyewitnesses or by those who had access to
17 the eyewitnesses and did the research. And the great thing about this apologetic approach—placing in their
18 hands the reliable words and accurate observations of witnesses—is the power of God for salvation is
19 embedded throughout.²⁵

20 21 **RETHINKING DEBATING AND PERSUADING**

22 Whether we are talking about biblical or extra-biblical apologetics, eyewitness accounts, or natural
23 law approaches, it is often said we cannot argue people into the kingdom of God for nothing good will come
24 of it. This is based, to some degree, on the assumption that trying to argue people into the kingdom of God
25 is relying on reason. Arguments and debates, the thinking goes, are merely attempts to persuade and
26 convince someone’s mind with rational arguments, therefore, the means of grace are pushed out of the
27 picture.²⁶

28 But what is overlooked is Paul and even Christ himself. They took on their opponents. And in
29 doing so their intent and result is evident. Consider Paul:

30 — Acts 17: ² And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he *reasoned* with them from
31 the Scriptures, ³ explaining and *proving* that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from
32 the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” ⁴ And some of them were
33 *persuaded* . . .

34 — Acts 18: ⁴ And he *reasoned* in the synagogue every Sabbath, and *tried to persuade* Jews and Greeks.

35 — Acts 19: ⁸ Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly over a period of three months, arguing and
36 persuading them about the kingdom of God. (CSB)

37 — Acts 19: ²⁶ And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul *has*
38 *persuaded* and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods.

²⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Brown (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955–), 69:288–289. References will be abbreviated *LW*. For a longer quotation of this, see Appendix B, #8.

²⁵ One of my frustrations has been to find a small paperback edition of the Gospel of John that does not have some editor’s introduction or conclusion that pushes decision theology or some version of the “Sinner’s Prayer.” Several years ago, we ended up cutting out about four pages of one version before we handed them out. Then I did find one that was “decision-free,” but when we ordered more later, the decision theology had been put in. I have now found one that is better, though not perfect. It can be bought in bulk so the price is only \$1.35/John. It is ESV and does not list chapters and verses (which I like for evangelism purposes). Go to www.biblesbythecase.com and type in “ESV Gospel of John, LARGE PRINT Reader's Edition (Paperback - Case of 50)”. The CSB will be coming out with the Gospel of John next summer, with no commentary.

²⁶ Luke 16:31 is used in support of this where Jesus says, “If they don’t listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be *persuaded* if someone rises from the dead.” But, as stated earlier, this verse is not to be applied across the board as if it is the only one that has anything to say about the use of evidence.

- 1 — Acts 26: ²⁸ And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you *persuade* me to be a Christian?” ²⁹ And
2 Paul said, “Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this
3 day might become such as I am. . . .”
4 — Acts 28: ²³ When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers.
5 From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and *trying to*
6 *convince* them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. ²⁴ And some were
7 *convinced* by what he said, but others disbelieved.
8

9 Some would point out that these attempts of Paul to prove and persuade were “from the Scriptures,”
10 and therefore he was relying on the power of the Word and not on evidence or reason. No doubt Paul did
11 argue from the Scripture, especially with the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles who accepted the Old
12 Testament as inspired—they had a common epistemology. But we also know that Paul’s (and Peter’s)
13 argumentation for the truth of Christ consisted of performing miracles (2 Cor. 12:12) and eyewitness
14 testimony. And even if Paul’s attempts to persuade and convince were only “scriptural” (which they were
15 not), the fact remains he was obviously appealing to the reasoning ability of the mind *of the unbeliever* in
16 order to persuade and convince him that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

17 The best way to explain this arguing or debating, this persuading and convincing, is found in what
18 was said before regarding apologetics in general: Arguments are and can (and even should) be used in the
19 service of the law, in the service of the gospel, and in the service of both; they can be used to lead people
20 to faith in Christ insofar as they point to, imply, or confirm the truth of Christ and his gospel. The gospel
21 is often embedded in the apology.²⁷

22 But there is one way in which we are not to argue: We want to win the argument with an unbeliever,
23 but for his sake, not for the sake of me winning. Arguing *while disregarding* the admonitions of Paul (“Let
24 your speech *always be gracious*, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each
25 person.” Col. 4:6), and the admonitions of Peter (“yet do it with *gentleness and respect*”, 1 Pet. 3:16), will
26 only make enemies of the cross enemies who now have an even better reason to justify their unbelief. This
27 is why St. Paul ruled out “quarreling” for God’s public servants (2 Tim. 2:24). His example, however,
28 allows for and encourages reasonable and even intense debate.

29 We can and even ought to argue, debate, attempt to persuade and convince our unbelieving
30 neighbor, all the while loving him unconditionally, just as we were first loved and still need to be loved
31 every day by God.²⁸
32

33 EXTRA-BIBLICAL APOLOGETICS

34 The focus so far has been mainly on biblical apologetics—those utilized by Jesus, the apostles, and
35 others within the pages of Scripture. But what about apologies that come from outside of Scripture? Are
36 they somehow different? Yes and no. What both have in common is the same process: information or

²⁷ Martin Luther was “argued” into the kingdom of God. Though his conversion was instantaneous, there was in some sense a process taking place, and it was very argumentative both with God and himself. The *95 Theses* do not reveal a sinner saved by grace through faith alone. Some say that the concept of grace is not even found in *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518. Dr. Cameron MacKenzie cites Luther’s 1545 account of the “Tower Experience” which Luther writes about in his preface to the Latin edition of his works. There Luther, according to MacKenzie, seems to be saying that this experience did not occur until as late as 1519. In other words, this was one long argument. (Cameron MacKenzie, “The History and Theology of Martin Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation,” radio interview, *Issues, Etc.*, September 6, 2019).

²⁸ There are many who have been “argued” into the kingdom of God. I remember having miniature debates, if you will, with fellow students at Bethany, my girlfriend, and a professor. None of them were heated, but there wouldn’t have been anything wrong with that necessarily. I would say three other things were found in this “process.” One was compassion and patience shown by these Christians I spoke with (or argued with). Another was the increasing pressure of the law. Finally, there was Christ on the cross, for me. Other examples of being argued into the kingdom would include: C. S. Lewis, John Warwick Montgomery, Craig Parton, Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, Nabeel Qureshi, Lee Strobel, and many others.

1 evidence that comes to our attention, followed by the use of our reasoning faculties that can make a
2 judgment. If we object to the use of extra-biblical apologetics on the grounds that there is an appeal to
3 reason, we will also have to object to *biblical* apologetics as well. But this objection falls flat since Jesus
4 and the apostles put forth evidence that is directed toward man’s reasoning ability. The presence and
5 utilization of human reasoning therefore is not justification for dismissing extra-biblical apologetics.

6 Within Scripture and the Confessions, extra-biblical evidence is at times used in support of
7 Christian truths. The Lutheran Confessions put forth secular evidence a number of times to support biblical
8 doctrine (e.g., “Concerning Monastic Vows” in both the Augsburg Confession and the Apology). Peter
9 appeals to his hearers’ memory of current events (“just as you yourselves know”) during his sermon in Acts
10 2 in making the case for Jesus as the Christ. Paul refers to the growing seasons, the abundance of food, and
11 the satisfied hearts of his pagan listeners as a witness to the truth that there is one true providential God.
12 He uses a pagan altar’s inscription, “to an unknown god,” and a Greek poet to point to the biblical teaching
13 that there is one God who created and still governs all things (Acts 17:22ff.). He appeals to King Agrippa’s
14 personal recollection of events, which were a matter of common knowledge (“for this has not been done in
15 a corner,” Acts 26:26). The confessors and apostles do not *establish* doctrine on the basis of extra-biblical
16 sources, but neither do they refrain from using such sources to support or point to scriptural truth. This is a
17 proper application of the ministerial use of reason.

18 This is not to suggest that all apologies are equal (see below). But even the “less equal” apologies
19 —as long as they are based on or point to truth—can be beneficial and testify, albeit indirectly, to the truth
20 of Christianity and Christ.

21 **APOLOGETICAL APPROACHES**

22 Here are several ways to approach or understand Christian apologetics.

23 1. Biblical and Extra-Biblical Apologetics

24 *Biblical apologetics*: evidence or arguments found and utilized in the Bible.

25 *Extra-biblical apologetics*: evidence or arguments not specifically found in the Bible (nor are
26 they contrary to it) but can be used to support some truth found in the Bible and/or can be used to
27 refute or disprove some religion, worldview, theory, or teaching contrary to the truth or truths of
28 biblical Christianity.

29 2. Offensive and Defensive Apologetics

30 *Offensive apologetics*: reasons or evidence for believing the Bible, the Christian worldview,
31 and the truth of Christ himself.

32 *Defensive apologetics*: reasons or evidence given to reject what is false and therefore contrary
33 to the Christian worldview, biblical teachings and events, and the truth of Christ. This often takes the
34 form of answering objections.

35 3. Classical Arguments (Classical Apologetics)

36 This is a systematic way of describing apologetics, typically utilized in academia and taught
37 in certain college, university, and even high school courses. Classical arguments include:²⁹

- 38 • *Evidential and Historical arguments*: evidence for the resurrection of Christ and other miracles,
39 prophetic evidence, evidence for the reliability of the New Testament texts, legal arguments,
40 archeological evidence.
- 41 • *Cosmological arguments*: Contingency argument, Motion argument, Efficient Causality
42 argument, Change argument, Time and Contingency argument.
- 43 • *Anthropological arguments*: Aesthetic arguments (beauty, the arts, love, emotions), Ethical
44 argument, Truth argument, Conscience argument, Desire argument, Common Consent argument,
45 Blessedness argument, Perception argument, Existential argument, Pascal’s Wager argument.

29 This list of arguments describing Classical Apologetics is from Dr. Michael Berg’s course, “Philosophy 202: Apologetics” (2018 Spring Semester) at Wisconsin Lutheran College.

- 1 • *Scientific and Teleological arguments*: Consciousness argument, the World as Interacting Whole
2 argument, Design and Fine-Tuning argument.
- 3 • *Ontological arguments*: Degrees of Perfection argument, Origin of the Idea of God argument,
4 Finitude of Man argument.

5 It is not common to find an unbeliever or sceptic familiar with the different categories of Classical
6 Apologetics. More often, the unbeliever (and often the believer) has bought into a reason or reasons not to
7 believe in the truth of Christianity and Christ and likely assumes there are good reasons to believe in
8 something else. Plus, the unbeliever (and frequently the believer) has not thought much about the evidence
9 for the truth of Christ. Therefore, practically speaking, the best and easiest way to use apologetics is the
10 Offensive and Defensive approach. We see a good example of this in 1 Cor. 15 where Paul engages
11 believers at the congregation who somehow had concluded there is no resurrection of the dead. He uses
12 both offensive arguments (six separate eyewitness accounts of the risen Christ) and defensive arguments
13 (“If Christ is not risen, then your Christianity is dead in the water”). He points to the defensive approach
14 when he says, “We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God” (2
15 Cor. 10:5). Jesus spent a lot of time making the case for the truth of his person and work (offensive) and
16 similar amount of time demolishing the false beliefs and worldviews of those opposed to him (defensive).

17 However, in today’s climate not many think about or inquire about Christian apologetics or other
18 important questions. It’s not on their radar screen. They may never seriously consider questions such as,
19 “Might there be something wrong with my worldview?” “Is it true that Christianity and other religions are
20 social constructs?” “Does the scientific evidence really support evolution?” “Are the Gospels reliable
21 documents that accurately record the events and teachings of Jesus?” “Might there be something
22 fundamentally wrong with gender identity?” “Is it reasonable to believe that all religions are essentially
23 the same?” “Is it true that all people are basically good or can become good?” “Can we be confident that
24 there is nothing beyond the natural?” “Aren’t religions, including Christianity, based on nothing more than
25 blind faith?” “Is it reasonable to assume that miracles do not and cannot happen?” “Why would we want
26 to restrict marriage to a man and a woman?” “Can (supposed) contradictions in the Bible be shown not to
27 be contradictions?” “If God is all powerful and all loving, how can there be so much evil in the world?”
28 “Is atheism more reasonable than theism?” Most do not ask these questions, though they should.

29 And when these sorts of questions are asked, good answers are rarely provided. In fact, the false
30 answers are zealously taught, especially to the younger generations. And they are taught before learners are
31 even able to formulate questions.³⁰ Add to this that even though people yearn for truth, more and more are
32 convinced there is no such thing. It’s not easy.

33 The answers to the above questions all are connected to the truth of Christianity and Christ, in some
34 way or another. And the false answers provided are frequently the leaven that Jesus and Paul warn against
35 (Matt. 16:ff.; 1 Cor. 5:6; Gal. 5:9). What can help is to understand that the false answers to these questions
36 typically have their source in one of several worldviews: modernism (naturalism, materialism, evolution),
37 postmodernism (diversity, tolerance, constructionism, Gnosticism, same-sex marriage, gender identity,
38 etc.), and spiritualism (some sort of pantheism or paganism).³¹ It is the second of these—postmodern
39 constructionism and tribalism—which now holds much of culture captive, including trends in government,
40 education, corporate businesses, media, and much of what goes by the name of Christianity.

41 I have proposed a project where we not only provide answers, but also the questions, such as those
42 above (plus many more).³² By clarifying the questions and offering sound answers, we encourage the use

³⁰ I am convinced that so many of our young people have bought into deceptive cultural trends partly because answers are introduced to them before their critical apparatus has kicked in or because critical thinking used to discern between right from wrong—used to ascertain truth—has been discouraged and stifled. Group think is easier and more fun (you get to socialize!), but is also very dangerous and will prove to be seeds for persecution—the “mob mentality”.

³¹ See David Thompson, *What In the World Is Going On: Identifying Hollow and Deceptive Worldviews* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2010).

³² This has been done, of course, by many, including conservative Lutherans. But it would be helpful to have a simplified and centralized resource, with answers limited to two pages at an eighth grade reading level. This could

1 of critical thinking—reasoning—in the service of the truth. Not all answers to questions asked would point
2 to, imply, or confirm the truth of Christ directly. But they can open a door for the gospel. They can be used
3 in the service of the law or the service of the gospel. In doing so we better educate ourselves, our members,
4 and our children, in order to be “ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason
5 for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15).

6 7 **NOT ALL APOLOGIES AND APOLOGETIC APPROACHES ARE EQUAL**

8 The goal of Christian apologetics is always the same: to present evidence that can eventually lead
9 to the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, the only Redeemer. If apologetics is not
10 utilized with this goal in mind, it is not *Christian* apologetics, or at least not *good* Christian apologetics. If
11 I want to do nothing more than direct a social constructionist away from his worldview rather than lead him
12 to Christ and the Christian worldview, it would be better to have him watch a video of Jordan Peterson who
13 is more likely to convince him of the insanity of postmodernism. For us, it’s all about Christ. And to do
14 this we engage their mind, their reason—that unique, though corrupted, attribute common to all human
15 beings—that they may believe that Jesus is the Christ. We can relate to them and speak to them as if they
16 have this human ability, for they do.³³

17 But not all apologies are equal. Some defenses for the truth of Christianity *directly* point to the
18 gospel, whereas others can be used *indirectly*. Some apologies can be utilized in the service of the law and
19 sin rather *pointedly*. Others *indirectly* imply a divine moral law. A sound answer to the problem of evil
20 does not point directly to Christ, but in the end the ultimate answer *is* found in the cross of Christ. Another
21 person may justify his unbelief on the basis of Darwinian evolution, which calls for a dismantling (2 Cor.
22 10:5) by means of sound creation science that indirectly points to the truth of Christianity by the process of
23 elimination (“Okay, so what are the alternatives?” or “What theory, then, best explains the evidence?”).
24 Another may say, “All religions are basically the same” or “We all worship the same God,” which begs for
25 a simple lesson in logic, thereby revealing his nonsensical and false belief, which can also lead to his next
26 question, “But how do you know your Christianity is true?” To simply say to this and all such questions,
27 “Because the Bible says so,” is to devalue him by ignoring his “reason and all his senses” given to him by
28 his Creator and to deprive him of the evidence that God would want him to consider.

29 That being said, the case needs to be made for the *higher* apologies found and used in the Bible.
30 There are some who act as if apologetics is mainly about putting forth evidence for a special creation or a
31 young earth. There are others who focus on the philosophical arguments for the existence of God or natural
32 law/knowledge apologetics. I am not criticizing the great value of these apologies. They are important and
33 even necessary. But what I have observed is that the apologetics used by Jesus and the apostles can often
34 get short shrift or ignored all together, even by good Lutherans. The historical and evidential arguments
35 used in the Gospels, the book of Acts, and the epistles end up becoming simply one among many rather
36 than the best apologies.

37 There is a twofold reason these should be preeminent. First, both Jesus and the apostles used them.
38 Second, they point to, imply, or confirm the truth of Christ more clearly than any other apologetic.

be accessible online or in print and used as a supplement for catechesis (for both young and old), Sunday School, parochial schools, home schools, studies at church and home, individual use, etc. I have begun the process by gathering a list of over three hundred questions that are asked or should be asked and answered. They are arranged by topic (Evidence for God; Science, Creation, Evolution; Religions and Worldviews; Moral, Social; Cosmic, Philosophical; the Bible; Jesus; The Uniqueness of the Confessional and Biblical Lutheran Church; Personal). Anyone interested in helping with this project is invited to contact me. There is also the possibility of developing a confessional Lutheran apologetics study Bible with these questions and answers included.

³³ This would fall under Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor. 9:22: “I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some.” Even though Paul approaches different audiences differently (compare, e.g., how he approaches the Jews in Antioch, Acts 13, to how he speaks to the pagans at Lystra in Acts 14 and the Athenian philosophizers in Acts 17) he always approaches them as if they can think and reason, all the while knowing it is the gospel that “is the power of God for salvation” and “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 1:16; 10:17).

1 Paul in 1 Cor. 15 directly connects his gospel of forgiveness to observed bodily resurrection
2 appearances. There are no less than nine appearances of Christ over forty days recorded in the historical
3 records we call the New Testament. Most who witnessed these appearances (perhaps all!) had been of the
4 mindset that Jesus would remain dead. And as Paul explains, these appearances confirm not only that Christ
5 was resurrected, but the heart and center of the gospel as well: the forgiveness of sins, the message that can
6 and does create and strengthen faith. The same is done with the miracles of Christ and the apostles³⁴ and
7 fulfillment of prophecy.³⁵ And in all these cases, the eyewitness verification if not stated implicitly is
8 indicated explicitly by the context and the manner in which these records are written.

9 The eyewitness testimony of the Apostles, the miracles of Christ, the fulfillment of prophecy, and,
10 above all the resurrection find no equal among all the apologies. Arguments against evolution are essential
11 in our day, but they do not *necessarily* point to Christ or the truth of the gospel. Biblical apologies are both
12 necessary and invaluable. The Christian should seek to be proficient in explaining these evidences to his
13 neighbor.³⁶ And if the Christian is not yet there or unable, he can always hand him the Gospel of John (see
14 footnote 25). We should encourage each other to go to these apologies when we can and even as soon as
15 we can (when appropriate). When we are asked to give a defense for the hope that we have, the resurrection
16 is the Ultimate Defense for the truth of the Gospel.³⁷

17 18 **ARE THERE, THEN, NON-EFFICIENT CAUSES?**

19 I go back to the question I raised earlier: Does the recognition of “efficient causes” in Article II of
20 the Formula of Concord³⁸ imply there are non-efficient causes when it comes to conversion? Understanding
21 how people answer certain questions will help. “Why are you a Christian?” or “What caused you to become
22 a Christian?” or “What led you to faith in Christ?” When people hear such questions, their minds don’t
23 necessarily or even usually think, “Oh, he’s asking me about an efficient cause.” They will typically assume
24 something prior to or less than an efficient cause, including, evidence or circumstances or people or events
25 or experiences or burdens that might have pointed to, led to, or confirmed the truth that Jesus is the Christ
26 the Son of God and resulted in faith. Some of these—people, events, evidence, etc.—could have been used
27 in the service of the law, and some could have been used in the service of the gospel. But what we should
28 not say is that these things are “law” or these things are “gospel.” That would be silly. The law is the law
29 and the gospel is the gospel. But there is the platter on which one or the other or both can be served.

30 So in one sense a person can say, “I was brought to faith by my spouse,” or “Because of these
31 circumstances in my life, I became believer,” or “I believe in Jesus as my Savior because of the evidence,”
32 or “I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, because of his miraculous signs.”

³⁴ “‘But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—he then said to the paralytic—‘Rise, pick up your bed and go home’” (Matt. 9:6). “These [signs] are written that you maybe believe....” (John 20:31). “They ... spoke boldly for the Lord, who testified to the message of his grace by enabling them to do signs and wonders” (Acts 14:3).

³⁵ “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them” (Matt. 11:3–5).

³⁶ What is also necessary these days is a familiarity of the reliability of the New Testament texts and manuscript evidence. It is often assumed that the Gospels are nothing more than legends or myths, developed over several centuries by well-meaning writers who lived in the second century or later; the New Testament, sceptics presume, could not have been written by eyewitnesses or those who walked and talked with the eyewitnesses. But the manuscript evidence says otherwise (see Appendix C: “Basic/General” and “Biblical Reliability”).

³⁷ Since the resurrection is true then every other argument and challenge to Christianity falls. However, this may not be realized right away by a Christian or applied consistently across the board, especially in the face of evidence that supposedly supports some other worldview or false belief. For that reason, other apologies against many false worldview assumptions can be very helpful and should be brought to bear. For if the false assumption remains unchallenged, it would easily come back to chip away at faith in the resurrected Christ.

³⁸ *The Book of Concord*, 494. See also footnote 2 and the quote from the *Epitome* above.

1 We have to be careful of limiting the word “cause” to only one meaning. It does not always mean
2 “efficient cause.” Would we really say to a person who told us he was a Christian because of his spouse,
3 “No you’re not. You are a Christian because of the power of the gospel.” We should not say that because
4 actually both are true. Neither would we say that the spouse was “law preaching” or she “falls under the
5 category of the law.” We could however say that the spouse was used in the service of the law or used in
6 the service of the gospel. She was “used to convince me of my false worldview” (service of the law), and/or
7 she was “used to point me to the amazing truth and comfort of forgiveness found in Christ alone” (service
8 of the gospel).

9 This is how apologetics and evidence are used in the New Testament. It is safe to say that
10 apologetics is a non-efficient cause. As seen in the examples of Jesus, the apostles, and the writers of the
11 New Testament, apologetics points to, implies, or confirms both the truth the law and the truth of Christ
12 and his gospel. And just as a believer can resist and say no to a spouse or friend who is trying to lead him
13 to Christ, so also one can say no to the evidence that is seeking to lead him to Christ. If one comes to Christ,
14 ultimately it is because of the efficient causes to which the spouse or the apology is pointing.

15 Apologetics is in a class by itself compared to other evangelism methods (like programs we come
16 up with to attract people to the gospel message or to our church) because it approaches our neighbor on a
17 ground we all have in common and because we find it used by the apostles and Christ himself. It has been
18 and still ought to be a serving platter on which the gospel can be placed. In a world that continues to ask,
19 perhaps more than ever, the age-old question, “What is truth?”, we not only have the truth, we also have
20 that which points to, implies, and confirms it.

21 22 **APOLOGETICS: THE HANDMAIDEN AND FRIEND OF THE GOSPEL**

23 Apologetics is not “merely law preaching”; neither is it simply “clearing away obstacles which
24 keep unbelievers from giving serious consideration to the claims of Scripture” (though it can and does serve
25 these purposes). Apologetics is also a serving platter on which the gospel can be placed. It is not as if we
26 make the case against false belief, then make the case for the truth of Christianity, and then “step out of the
27 way so the gospel can do its work” (as some claim). No. The gospel is or can be embedded in the apology.
28 This, as I have shown, is what is seen time after time in the words or examples of Christ and the apostles.

29 Is there some sort of implicit danger within or in using apologetics? No more so than in the proper
30 preaching of the law, or even the gospel. We know that when the law is preached, most will hear it only to
31 justify themselves self-righteously like the Pharisee in Luke 18 (10ff.) rather than repent. When the pure
32 gospel is preached, many will hear it in order to justify cheap grace (Rom. 6:15ff.). Just as the appropriate
33 preaching of the law or gospel is not the problem or evil (Rom. 7:12–13; Gal. 3:21), so it can be said of
34 sound apologetics. Though many misconstrued or ignored the evidence of miracles, that did not stop Jesus,
35 Philip, Peter, and Paul from presenting the evidence (John 6, Acts 8 and 14).

36 Are there times not to use apologetics? Of course: when the senses and reason are not what they
37 will be (as in the case of infants and children) or when they are no longer what they once were (among
38 those afflicted with dementia or other mental challenges). It also does not have to be used where there is a
39 common epistemology and the person asks, “What does God’s Word say?”, and all that is possibly needed
40 is the gospel undefended (but even here it is important to remember the apostles used apologetics with
41 believers to confirm the truth and comfort of the gospel—1 Cor. 15:1–11; 2 Pet. 1:16–21; 1 John 1:1–3).
42 At the same time, we *are not required* “to give a defense” if nobody asks us anything. We *are required*,
43 however, when we *are* asked: “always being prepared to make a defense to *anyone who asks you* for a
44 reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15). But even in non-asking settings, it is not inappropriate to
45 “put a stone in his shoe” with the hope that maybe he will ask us why we believe what we believe. If we
46 never engage our quiet and seemingly content neighbor, we will never know where he stands in the balance
47 of eternity and he may never hear the gospel.

48 We should never not use apologetics because we think it is implicitly harmful or dangerous or
49 because we are afraid the hearer will end up thinking he can by his “own reason or strength believe in Jesus
50 Christ.” The Holy Spirit will do his work when and where he pleases (John 3:8).

1 Still, we do need to guard against a misuse of apologetics in our preaching, teaching, and
2 evangelism, for the sake of our hearts and those under our care, for the *opinio legis* is ever present. We do
3 so by taking heed to the whole counsel of God, including the careful study and meditation of Holy Scripture
4 and our *Confessions*. We also need to watch our practice carefully, making sure the pure gospel
5 predominates and the sacrament is rightly and regularly administered (the more regular the better). This
6 sends a message to and distinguishes us from the pro-apologetics but anti-sacramental churches (not to
7 mention the great benefit of offering every-Sunday communion for us and our members).

8 But we also have to guard against an underuse of apologetics. Here we can plead guilty. Here we
9 have let non-Lutheran churches take the lead (and have been scared off by them at the same time). One of
10 the reasons C. S. Lewis, G. K Chesterton, Josh McDowell, Ravi Zacharias, Lee Strobel, Tim Keller and
11 others have been read and listened to is because they have tapped into something that resonates with the
12 nature of man: who and what God has created him to be. Man is an aesthetic, moral, rational, thoughtful,
13 fulfillment-driven, eternity-longing creature. Though corrupted and unable to grasp how and in whom these
14 God-given attributes will be truly satisfied, they still reside within man (Eccl. 3:11). We should not be
15 surprised that the Creator somehow uses these unique human aptitudes to point us to his Son in whom they
16 are and will be perfectly fulfilled.

17 Those who do not believe, teach, and confess the complete fall into sin and the pure means of grace
18 will fall into and encourage the misuse of apologetics. But those who view apologetics merely as law
19 preaching or as that which somehow only falls under the category of the law, will probably end up
20 encouraging its non-use and fail to recognize this most valuable platter on which the gospel can be placed.

21 When I was moving my belongings into the dorm of Bethany Lutheran College as an agnostic
22 freshman, one of the professors who watched me said to himself, “O boy, what do we have here!” Among
23 the usual, I was also carrying the stuffed head of a collie (stolen from a house I had broken into) which I
24 put on display in my room. It said something about me. I took a course from that same professor my first
25 semester called “The Case for Christianity.” I was amazed by what was taught and my worldview was
26 challenged. Could I be that off base? Could these strange students and professors be right who took the
27 Bible at face value? I would discuss and even argue with students, my girlfriend, and professors. At the
28 same time the law was pressing harder and harder upon me, for I had been enjoying and justifying a number
29 of sins. I still remember being alone one evening when other students were at the midweek Lenten service.
30 I was walking around what was then the football field for the Roman Catholic high school (now Bethany’s
31 soccer field). I was thinking about the cross of Christ. Especially the cross for one wretched sinner in
32 particular. I was brought back to my baptismal grace I had received as an infant. The cross alone did it.
33 And yet I cannot deny what the evidence was pointing me to all along.

34
35 Soli Deo Gloria

36
37 [This was first delivered as an essay to the General Pastoral Conference of the Evangelical Lutheran
38 Synod, October 10, 2019, in Bloomington, Minnesota. A number of revisions have been included in this
39 version for the *Global Journal of Classical Theology*.]
40

Appendix A: Apologetic Passages and Sections from the New Testament

The Gospels

1. Matt. 2:1–2
2. Matt. 2:9–10
3. Matt. 3:16–17
4. Matt. 8:32–34
5. Matt. 9:4–8
6. Matt. 9:32–34
7. Matt. 11:2–6
8. Matt. 11:20–24
9. Matt. 12:1–7
10. Matt. 12:9–14
11. Matt. 12:22–23
12. Matt. 12:24–29
13. Matt. 14:26–33
14. Matt. 15:30–31
15. Matt. 16:13–17
16. Matt. 26:74–75
17. Matt. 27:54
18. Matt. 28:1–10
19. Mark 2:6–12
20. Mark 3:1–6
21. Mark 4:39–40
22. Mark 5:14–17
23. Mark 6:1–3
24. Mark 7:34–37
25. Mark 14:15
26. Mark 16:14
27. Mark 16:20
28. Luke 1:1–4
29. Luke 2:9–17
30. Luke 4:35–37
31. Luke 5:6–10
32. Luke 5:20–26
33. Luke 7:11–17
34. Luke 7:18–23
35. Luke 7:37–48
36. Luke 8:23–25
37. Luke 9:1–9
38. Luke 9:18–20
39. Luke 9:38–45
40. Luke 16:27–31
41. Luke 18:41–43
42. Luke 24:12
43. Luke 24:19–27
44. Luke 24:36–48
45. John 1:6–8
46. John 1:14
47. John 1:47–51
48. John 2:11
49. John 2:23
50. John 4:17–19
51. John 4:39–42
52. John 4:48
53. John 4:50–53
54. John 6:14
55. John 6:26–44, 51–53, 60, 65–69
56. John 7:2–5
57. John 8:28–30
58. John 9:3
59. John 9:8–12, 15–20, 24–38
60. John 10:19–21
61. John 10:24–26
62. John 10:37–38
63. John 11:14–15
64. John 11:41–48
65. John 12:9–11
66. John 12:17–19
67. John 12:37–42
68. John 14:8–11
69. John 15:24
70. John 15:27
71. John 17:4, 8, 17, 20
72. John 18:6
73. John 18:38; 19:4–6
74. John 19:33–37
75. John 20:6 – 9
76. John 20:18
77. John 20:19–23
78. John 20:24–29
79. John 20:30–31
80. John 21:6–7, 11
81. John 21:20–23
82. John 21:24–25

Acts

83. Acts 1:3
84. Acts 1:8
85. Acts 1:21–22
86. Acts 2:12–13
87. Acts 2:22–24, 29–32, 36–39
88. Acts 2:43
89. Acts 3:6–10
90. Acts 3:12–20
91. Acts 4:1–4
92. Acts 4:5–12

93. Acts 4:13–22
94. Acts 4:23–31
95. Acts 4:33
96. Acts 5:19, 21–32
97. Acts 8:5–8
98. Acts 8:12–13, 18–2
99. Acts 9:3–5
100. Acts 9:20–22
101. Acts 9:34–35
102. Acts 9:40–42
103. Acts 10:36–44
104. Acts 11:22–23
105. Acts 13:11–12
106. Acts 13:26–32
107. Acts 14:3
108. Acts 14:10–18
109. Acts 15:3
110. Acts 16:14
111. Acts 16:25–31
112. Acts 17:2–4
113. Acts 17:17
114. Acts 17:22–34
115. Acts 18:4
116. Acts 18:19
117. Acts 18:26–28
118. Acts 19:8
119. Acts 19:26
120. Acts 20:22–24
121. Acts 26:9–11
122. Acts 26:16
123. Acts 26:24–29
124. Acts 28:23–24

Epistles

125. 1 Cor. 15:1–11
126. 1 Cor. 15:12–19
127. 1 Cor. 15:29–32
128. 2 Cor. 10:4–5
129. 2 Cor. 12:12
130. Phil. 1:7
131. Phil. 1:16
132. Col. 2:8
133. Col. 4:5–6
134. Heb. 2:3–4
135. 1 Pet. 3:14–16
136. 2 Pet. 1:16–21
137. 1 John 1:1–3

Appendix B: Dr. Martin Luther on Proof, Evidence, Eyewitness Testimony in the Gospel of John

1. [On John 4:46ff.]

The nobleman comes to Christ and asks him to go with him and help his son. That was a kind of trust in the Lord Christ that he would help, but such a trust was still without the Word and rested entirely on the miracle, which the Lord had previously done in Galilee at the wedding. Undoubtedly, that's where he would have heard of Christ. From that event he gathered trust in the Lord Christ that he would also help him. Yet such is still not rightly believing, because as I said, the Word which faith listens to is not yet there. That's why Jesus comes at him somewhat harshly and says, "Unless you see signs and miracles, you do not believe." What he's saying is that faith should not rest on signs and miracles alone but rather on the Word. For signs and miracles can well be false and deceptive miracles and signs. Yet he who sticks to the Word cannot be deceived, because God's promise is certain and cannot lie. So although the Lord does signs and miracles to reveal himself and move the people to faith, his underlying intention is more that a person would look at the Word than at the signs, which only serve to bear testimony to the Word. Thus, it was not primarily his concern simply to help this or that sick person physically. His primary office was to point people to the Word and impress it on their hearts so that they would be saved by it.³⁹

2. [On John 14:11. *Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me; or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves.*]

Christ says: "If My preaching does not make you willing to believe that God dwells and is in Me and that I dwell and am in Him, then believe this because of the works you see before your eyes. These works, as no one can deny, are not human; they are divine. They prove and attest powerfully enough that He speaks and works in Me and through Me." These are the works and the miracles which He performed publicly before all the world—giving sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, healing to all manner of sick, casting out devils, and raising the dead—solely by the Word. These are not only divine works, but they are also witnesses of God the Father. Therefore he who sees and hears these sees God the Father in them; and he is not only persuaded that God is in Christ and that Christ is in God, but from them he can also be comforted with the assurance of God's fatherly love and grace toward us.⁴⁰

3. [On John 8:16]

Now Christ says: "We are two, I and the Father. I am an official Personage, as is borne out by John's testimony. The miracles and My heavenly Father also attest to this. I refer you to them, for My miracles corroborate My claim." All this tends to silence the Jews and to confirm and defend His office.⁴¹

4. [On John 1:14] *We have beheld His glory.*

What does this mean? The evangelist wants to say that Christ not only demonstrated His humanity with His actions, by dwelling among the people so that they could see Him, hear Him, speak with Him, and live near Him until His thirty-fourth year, by suffering cold, hunger, and thirst in this feeble and wretched human form and nature, but that He also displayed His glory and power in proof of His divinity. Of this He gave proof with His teaching, His preaching, His signs and wonders, convincing anyone of His Godhead who was not blinded and hardened by the devil, as the high priests and scribes were. By word and deed He proved that He was God by nature: He healed the sick and raised the dead; in short, He wrought more and greater miracles than any prophet before Him, in fact, than any other human being ever was able to do.

By way of illustration, as God brought forth heaven and earth through the Word, that is, through Him, even so He, too, performed all that He wished by uttering a word. For instance: "Little girl, I say to you, arise" (Mark 5:41); and: "Young man, I say to you, arise" (Luke 7:14); and: "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11:43); and to the paralytic: "Rise, take up your bed and go home, be delivered of your sickness" (Matt. 9:6); and to the lepers: "Be clean!" (Matt. 8:3; Luke 17:14). In a similar way He fed 5,000 men with five loaves of bread and two fish, prompting those who witnessed this miracle to say: "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world" (John 6:14). When a great storm arose on the sea and the Lord rebuked the winds and the sea, all those in His ship marveled, saying: "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey Him?" (Matt. 8:27). With His words He also exorcised the evil spirits. All this He could accomplish with a single word.⁴²

5. [On John 19:38]

³⁹ Martin Luther, *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. J. K. F. Knaake et al. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993) 52:516.16–34. I originally ran across a portion of this quotation in Ylvisaker, *The Gospels*, 158, which did not include a citation. Prof. Nicholas Proksch (Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary, Mankato, MN) was kind enough to research and locate the source, and then offer this English translation (2019).

⁴⁰ Luther, *LW*, 24:73.

⁴¹ Luther, *LW*, 23:343.

⁴² Luther, *LW*, 22:114.

For among such people Christ's death and burial is no more than any other man's death and burial. For us, however, who know and feel how much depends on our faith that our Lord Jesus Christ was died and buried, so that our faith may have certain evidence and a firm, strong foundation, these words are neither excessive nor superfluous. All these words serve to ground and confirm the Christian faith with certain evidence and witness so that we may be certain of salvation. That is why these words cannot be excessive or superfluous.

St. John records the narrative of how the event took place with all of its circumstances. First, he describes the persons who buried Christ; second, he indicates the mode, measure, and manner in which they buried Him; third, the day and the hour when it happened; finally, the place and the location where they laid Him. All these things, even though they seem plain and simple, are not to be regarded as trivial but carefully noted. For, as mentioned, they all serve as evidence and proof for our faith concerning that article. If the history is lacking and forgotten, then faith is lacking and extinguished as well.⁴³

6. [On John 19:41–42]

In sum, everything [i.e., the details regarding Christ's death and burial] had to serve to support and confirm our faith in this article [of faith that He was dead and buried] so that we might have certain proof and testimony that He is truly risen from the dead.⁴⁴

7. [On John 20:1]

For St. John did not write his Gospel for the sake of Christ (who has no need of it), nor for his own sake (for he played a part in it), but for our sakes, so that we too might believe and through faith obtain the power and fruit of the joyous resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus he himself says at the end of this chapter: "These signs are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that in Him you may have life in His name".⁴⁵

8. [On John 20:1]

Thus now the resurrection of our dear Lord Jesus Christ from the dead is adequately circulated and attested even among the Lord's adversaries. . . . All this happened for our benefit, so that it might serve to make us certain of this article [of the resurrection]. . . .

Christ's resurrection is certified, first of all, by the testimony of His adversaries; then, by the testimony of His friends; third, by the testimony of the Lord Himself, by revealing Himself to be alive and by showing Himself; and fourth, by the testimony of the prophets and Holy Scripture. The guards, the governor Pilate, as well as the chief priests and the Jews confess that Christ is not in the tomb. Next, not only do Peter and John run to the tomb but also [Mary] Magdalene and all the other women and disciples, and they find things just as the angels had said. Then, the Lord Himself comes to them as well. He eats and drinks with them after His resurrection; talks with them; allows them to touch, feel, and clasp Him; and says: "See my hands and my feet, that it is I Myself. Touch Me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" [Luke 24:39]. In short, during the forty days before His ascension into heaven, He so convinces them that none of them can deny, but all must confess, that the Lord has truly risen from the dead. Finally, Holy Scripture is also in agreement, and the testimony of the dear prophets. In this way, both friend and foe bear witness to the resurrection, and in addition to such testimony there is the event itself as well in Scripture.

Upon such testimonies every Christian should joyfully and confidently rely and should believe certainly and without any doubt that Christ rose from the dead on the third day. . . . We should rely on these with certainty and not require any further special revelation. For myself, I am entirely satisfied by these witnesses, so that I would not even wish to have some kind of special revelation and see Christ in person. For even such a personal vision would not be as helpful as these testimonies. For because I have often read that the devil often disguises himself in the form of Christ, I would be unable to believe such revelations. But when Pilate and those who crucified Christ themselves confess that He rose from the dead; then, that His disciples bear witness to the same thing; and Christ Himself bears witness; and the writings of the prophets bear witness—that is more certain and convincing for me than any special revelations.

A heart that holds this article of the resurrection of the dead as certain, however, is an especially rare bird on earth. For the world learns this article as if it were any other history or event. But that it should risk life and limb and everything it has on this—that will never result, for it is unsure of this article. About this article one should be utterly certain. For what makes a Christian is when someone holds this article to be the certain truth, so that he forsakes life and limb for it. That is why we preach this article, so that we may become certain of it and so that everyone may search his own heart and examine himself to see whether he, too, would die on account of this article. I am not going to talk about the fruit of Christ's resurrection now, for I have often preached about this on Easter: that the resurrection of the

⁴³ Luther, *LW*, 69:273–74.

⁴⁴ Luther, *LW*, 69:283.

⁴⁵ Luther, *LW*, 69:285.

Lord Christ brings with it redemption from sin and death. At the present, however, I want to preach on the text with reference to [Christ] Himself so that we may become certain of the history and story, and each one may regard this preaching as certain and sure.

That is what St. John intends when he so carefully describes the history, for he would like to make it so certain so that we do not have any doubts about it. He precisely describes the time, the persons, and the persons' actions, as befits a good historian.⁴⁶

9. [Sermon for Easter Tuesday Morning, John 20:19–23]

Now, on the evening of that Sabbath, the Lord Himself comes to the disciples through closed doors, stands in their midst, greets them kindly, and says, “Peace be with you,” as if He wanted to say, “Through Mary Magdalene, I had a proclamation brought to you that I am risen from the dead and ascend to My God and Father, yet in such a way that I am not ashamed to call you [My] brothers. And I receive you as My co-heirs in all that is Mine, so that My God is your God, and My Father is your Father, and the heaven I possess is your heaven. Now, so that you may be certain of this proclamation, I Myself have come here in My own person, and I offer you happiness and salvation as your glory and inheritance. And so that you may have no doubt about My resurrection, I am showing you My hands and My side. Here you see that I am the very one who was nailed to the cross by His hands and feet and whose side was opened by a spear.”

By showing them all this, Christ wanted, first of all, to strengthen their faith in this article. For since He shows Himself to be alive and, moreover, offers them His hands and side for inspection, their eyes and reason are convinced that He is certainly risen from the dead. And so the Word and the work agree with each other. The Word of Christ goes first, being proclaimed first through the angel, [then] through Mary Magdalene, and finally through the Lord Himself. Through this Word their hearts are inwardly enlightened, comforted, and strengthened through the power of the Holy Spirit. Next comes the work that Christ, in accordance with the Word, appears alive and by His appearing moves the disciples' eyes so that, since they are to be witnesses of His resurrection in all the world, they may not only hear of it but also see and experience it themselves. This is as Christ says to Nicodemus, *Quo vidimus testamur*, “We bear witness of what we have seen” [John 3:11]. Therefore, this appearance and revelation should be numbered with His other appearances and should establish and strengthen our faith in this article through the certain evidence and testimony of the Word and work.⁴⁷

Appendix C: Resources⁴⁸

— Basic/General

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⁴⁶ Luther, *LW*, 69:288–89.

⁴⁷ Luther, *LW*, 69:351–52.

⁴⁸ At least useful but not necessarily whole-heartedly endorsed.

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