

Saved by Apologetics?



Christian apologetics provides evidence for the truth of Christianity and for the person and work of Christ. Evidence speaks to our senses and reason. That raises some questions for the Lutheran who has been taught to be careful when it comes to the use of reason. Can apologetics be used to convict someone of a false worldview or religion? Yes. Can it be used in a preparatory manner to clear away obstacles so one would be willing to hear the Gospel? Yes. Anything more than that? Yes.

Consider this. If an adult convert told you, “I believe in Jesus Christ because of my wife,” should you respond by saying, “No, you believe in Jesus because of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit”? You would not say that because both are true.

“Because” is being used in two different ways. In the second case, “because” is used in the sense of what actually turns the heart from unbelief to belief. As we say in the Small Catechism, “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts...” The Lutheran Confessions call this the “efficient cause” (Article II, Formula of Concord).

In the first case, however, something other than an “efficient cause” is understood. There are examples of “non-efficient” causes in Scripture. For example: *Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife* (1 Corinthians 7:16). The wife or the husband is not the Gospel, but they are being used in the service of the Gospel. Christians – by the way they live or by what they say (see 1 Peter 3:1-2) – can point to or imply the truth of the Gospel, which then alone converts a person dead in his trespasses and sins into a living believer.

Now take an example that speaks to apologetics. After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the plot was hatched to kill Jesus (John 11:53). A few verses later, John records this: *But the chief priests had decided to kill Lazarus also, because he was the reason many of the Jews were deserting them and believing in Jesus* (12:10-11). Did the miraculous raising of Lazarus cause these Jews to believe in Jesus? Not in the sense that a dead-man-now-alive was the powerful Gospel. But yes in the sense that a miracle and sign confirmed and pointed to the truth of Jesus as the promised Messiah, the Son of the living God, and the good news of salvation.

Apologetics—evidence for the truth of Christ—can point to, imply, or confirm the truth of Christ and His Gospel.

This is how Jesus Himself and His apostles made use of evidence. The fulfillment of prophecies by Christ, the miracles of Christ, the appearances of the risen Christ, and the appeal to eyewitness testimony were used consistently. This evidence was at times used in the service of the law (to convict one of sin – think of Peter and the great catch of fish in Luke 8:6-9). But such evidence was also used in the service of the Gospel by Christ himself:

- *“But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—then he told the paralytic, “Get up, take your stretcher, and go home”* (Matthew 9:6).
- *John ... sent a message through his disciples and asked Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” Jesus replied to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are told the good news”* (Matthew 11:2-5).
- *“Why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself! Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have”* (Luke 24:38-39).

- While he was in Jerusalem during the Passover Festival, many believed in his name when they saw the signs he was doing (John 2:23).

Evidence was used in the service to the Gospel by the apostles, too:

- “Fellow Israelites, listen to these words: This Jesus of Nazareth was a man attested to you by God with miracles, wonders, and signs that God did among you through him, just as you yourselves know” (Acts 2:22).
- This [raising of Tabitha] became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord (Acts 9:42).
- Then, when he saw [the miracle performed by Paul], the proconsul believed, because he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord (Acts 13:12).
- So they stayed there a long time and spoke boldly for the Lord, who testified to the message of His grace by enabling them to do signs and wonders (Acts 14:3).
- So we have recorded in the New Testament evidence appealing to the senses and reason being used in the service of the Gospel. Evidence testifies that something is true. Luke even calls such evidence “convincing proofs” (Acts 1:3).

At the same time, evidence can be ignored, denied, and misinterpreted:

- Even though he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him (John 12:37).
- “If they don’t listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be persuaded if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31).

- In Matthew 9, opponents of Jesus attributed His miracles to demonic powers (9:34).

In other words, when confronted with clear evidence, people willfully and sadly choose blind unbelief. With or without apologetics, the ever-powerful Word used by the all-powerful Spirit can be resisted with the result that many remain steeped in hostility toward God, wanting nothing to do with the love of Christ. Again, if conversion does take place, the only efficient cause is the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel.

So why present evidence? Why should Lutherans use apologetics? Clearly apologetics is an evangelism method in Scripture, especially in the Gospels and Acts. It approaches our neighbor with what God has given them: senses and reason. Christ and His disciples appeal to human senses and reason despite the fact they are limited and corrupted. In a world that continues to ask the age-old question “What is truth?” we not only have the truth but also that which points to, implies, and confirms it. Apologetics remains a serving platter on which the Gospel can be placed.

Is there some sort of danger in using apologetics? No more than sharing the law or even the Gospel. They also can be misapplied by the presenter or misinterpreted by the hearer.

What we confessional Lutherans have with apologetics is a biblically demonstrated way to communicate with a desperate and dying world. We can explain to our neighbor his sin, forgiveness in Christ, and the evidence that says this is certainly true. We then leave it in the hands of the Holy Spirit. “The wind blows where it pleases, and you hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

- Presenting evidence for the truth of Christianity
- Critiquing worldviews that oppose Christianity
- Fortifying believers with a proper interpretation of Holy Scripture
- Engaging unbelievers in conversations leading toward the Gospel proclamation of forgiveness in Christ



Recommended Reading:

David Thompson, “A Confessional Lutheran Understanding of Christian Apologetics and Its Practice”, LSQ 60, no 4 (2020): 291-344.

Available at: els.org/apologetics

“Q&A Leading to Christ” series of apologetics flyers:

els.org/apologetics/qalc



Websites:

The Center for Apologetics and Worldviews:

blc.edu/apologetics

ELS Evangelism Resources:
els.org/resources/evangelism

40+ Hours of Video Archives:
blc.edu/apologetics/events