

Doctrinal Session: Incorporating Apologetics into the Ministry

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Disclaimers

I am unaware of what is currently being taught at Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary and Bethany Lutheran College in the field of apologetics.

I did not attend the August 2010 conference on apologetics in the classroom.

These are my thoughts on apologetics based upon my own research and study.

Apologetics defined and classified

Excerpts from the 8/11/2011 draft of the ELS Doctrine Committee statement on apologetics, “Confess and Defend”:

1. ... 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.
6. The Holy Scripture is the word of God and therefore is inherently powerful and self-authenticating. Historical and other external evidence and argument from sources apart from Scripture are a useful and important part of Christian apologetics in that they lay bare and condemn the presumption of unbelief and skepticism, but they neither verify nor authenticate Scripture as God’s revelation.
7. Human reason is a gift of God (First article 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.
8. 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 Corinthians 4:6, Ephesians 2:8,9, 2 Timothy 3:15, 1 Peter 1:23).
9. 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.
10. Since the apologetic task is engaged not only in confessing the faith, but in using the law to reveal the presumptuousness of unbelief, care will be taken not to confuse the law and the gospel or to make the law a part of the gospel presentation, instead of a necessary adjunct to it. Christian Confession and Defense will always keep in mind C.F.W. Walther’s exposition *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, especially

the final thesis: “The Word of God is not rightly divided when the person teaching it does not allow the Gospel to have a general predominance in his teaching.”

Basic approaches to apologetics

Presuppositional apologetics

Presumes Christian faith is the only basis for rational thought. It presupposes that the Bible is divine revelation and exposes flaws in other worldviews. Apart from these presuppositions, one cannot make sense of any human experience, and there can be no set of neutral assumptions from which to reason with a non-Christian.

Presuppositionalism is the predominant apologetic of contemporary conservative Calvinist and Reformed churches.

The common ground between the believer and the non-believer is that they both know that God exists, although the non-believer tries to suppress the truth.

Cf. Romans 1:18–22.

Critics of presuppositional apologetics claim that it is logically invalid because it begs the question of the “truth” of Christianity and the “non-truth” of other world views.

Fideism (presuppositionalism to an extreme)

The exclusive or basic reliance upon faith alone in the pursuit of religious truth, accompanied by a consequent disparagement of reason. What the fideist objects to is not so much “reason” *per se* but evidentialism, which supposedly holds that no belief should be held unless it is supported by evidence.

Critics: If faith is the only way to know the truth of God, how are we to know which God to have faith in? All religious thinking becomes equal. God has endowed us with sense, reason and intellect. Does he intend us to forgo their use?

Evidential apologetics

Emphasizes the use of evidence to demonstrate that God exists. The evidence is assumed to be evidence both the believer and nonbeliever share. You need not presuppose God's existence.

The rules of evidence, as used by historians and legal scholars, frame the discussion. Even scientific evidence and methodology can be used.

The New Testament documents are reliable in recording the historicity of the resurrection of Christ.

Even miracles are reasonable and plausible wherever an all-powerful Creator is postulated and not excluded *a priori*.

Prophecies are the strongest evidence for Christianity. Jesus not only foretold, but was foretold, unlike in other religions, and these prophecies came from a succession of people over a span of several thousand years.

Critics: Does not prove anything with absolute certainty. As in a courtroom, the best you can do is establish a matter “more likely than not” or, at best, “beyond a reasonable doubt”.

Counterargument: We live our lives all the time with this kind of “highly probable but not 100% certain” approach to truth and reality.

Reminder: The evidentiary approach can reasonably establish certain facts, the knowledge and assent part of “faith”, but the critical trust component is only worked by the Holy Spirit. Many, but not all, evidentiary apologists approach this from a decision-theology background and believe that the evidence will lead to a “decision for Christ”.

Cf. Peter and John in their writings. “What we have seen, heard, touched, this is our testimony.” “Jesus did many other things These are written ...”, i.e., “This is our written testimony, our sworn affidavit.”

Example: John Warwick Montgomery uses this approach to demonstrate the following:

The New Testament documents are reliable as historically accurate documents.

These documents record the testimony of the apostles, who are credible witnesses of what they heard and saw concerning Jesus.

These documents testify that Jesus claimed he would rise from the dead after being professionally executed.

Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is as demonstrably true, if not more so, than any “fact” of ancient history or legal finding in a courtroom.

One should not lightly dismiss the teachings and claims of Jesus, but should give them the greatest consideration.

Goals

Defense of faith for the believer

Can use presuppositional approach (catechism, sermons, etc.).

Defense against unbeliever

Christian is dealing with the “father of lies”.

Can use evidential approach.

First - undermine the shaky foundation of the unbeliever; respond to unbelievers about the inconsistency and untenability of their foundations.

Second - provide evidence that Christianity is not unreasonable.

Third - present law and gospel from Scripture.

Result: finally, faith is the work of the Holy Spirit

People can, and will, choose to not believe, even in the face of good evidence.

Unbelief is irrational and will not necessarily listen to reason or evidence.

Be aware that reason can be faulty if the premises it uses are false.

Evidence can be interpreted in different ways depending on one’s presuppositions.

Example: Was the testimony of the disciples regarding Jesus’ resurrection wishful thinking? Or was it against their hopes and expectations? What do the rules of evidence say about such testimony?

How to incorporate apologetics into our ministry

Talk to your members, confirmands, etc. to find out the issues with which they are being confronted.

READ and LEARN. Read some of the apologetic literature. How do those apologists respond to the issue? Is their approach in line with sound Lutheran theology and the apologetic principles stated above?

Get started. Pick one issue and start preparing. You will never run out of issues to deal with. But by dealing with one issue, you gain confidence and experience and show your people that there are responses and answers to be had.

Bring one or two apologetics lessons into your catechism class. Again, you can't exhaust all the apologetic issues, but you can show your class that there are answers and responses and they can come to you for help. Nothing is more frustrating to young people than to be confronted with an attack on their faith and they have never heard someone show that there are responses to those attacks. You might include a lesson for your students on the reliability of the Scriptures based on the quantity, ubiquity and proximity to the events of the manuscripts on which we base the Bible. Or, provide a critique of the weaknesses in evolutionary theory, demonstrating that belief in evolution requires a leap of faith that far surpasses the well-founded faith of the Christian. Discuss how scientists can selectively include or exclude data that doesn't fit their model (e.g., the exclusion of unfavorable climate data revealed by the emails of the British climate researchers.)

Incorporate apologetics in Bible study. Have a special evening class for several weeks dealing with the principles of apologetics or dealing with one apologetic issue. Have such a class for your members and, if you are bold, have them invite friends or open the class to the public. (But be sure you are well prepared!!)

Incorporate examples of apologetics in sermons periodically. Preach on texts that are apologetical, See Acts 17 where Paul uses presuppositional apologetics in the synagogues as well as evidential apologetics in the Areopagus in Athens.

Resources to get you started

Lange, Lyle W. "Lutheran Apologetics: From Our Classrooms and into the World."
Presented to the Lutheran College Conference, August 9, 2010.

Montgomery, John Warwick. *Christianity for the Tough Minded* (editor). Edmonton, AB, Canada: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology, and Public Policy, Inc., 2001.

_____. *Evidence for Faith*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology, and Public Policy, Inc., 2004.

_____. *Tractatus Logico-Theologicus*. Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft (Culture and Science Publ.), 2005.

Pearcey, Nancy R. *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity From Its Cultural Captivity*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004.

[Pearcey's book has an excellent discussion on the separation, in our culture, between "scientific" knowledge and "value/religious" knowledge. Scientific knowledge is public, supposedly objective, modern, part of the public consensus,

useful for public policy making. Value knowledge is private, subjective, post-modern, not entitled to be part of public policy making. Such a distinction is unfounded and intolerable. Pearcey argues that Christians must fight against this idea. There are not two kinds of truth. There is one “total truth.”]

Quist, Allen, *Many Convincing Proofs: A Biblical Approach to Christian Apologetics*. Mankato, MN: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 2008.

Thompson, David, C. *What in the World is Going On?* Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2010.

Others:

Acts & Facts. Dallas: Institute for Creation Research. Subscribe (free) at www.icr.org

“Creation Moments” e-newsletter. Subscribe (free) at www.creationmoments.com

McDowell, Josh. Various (watch for decision theology)

Strobel, Lee. *The Case for . . .* series published by Zondervan (watch for decision theology)

Zacharias, Ravi. Various (watch for decision theology)

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the creation/evolution debate so important for Christians and why should it be part of our apologetics?
2. Of what use is the Intelligent Design discussion?
3. What is the difference between the apostles as witnesses going into the world, and modern-day Christians as witnesses going into the world? How should this shape our apologetics and evangelism?
4. Why is the science of text criticism something important for our people to know about?
5. Why is the fact of the resurrection so important? How do you establish the fact? How do you establish the meaning of the resurrection? What miracle did Christ use to establish his authority to forgive sin? How does testimony and evidence come into play regarding these issues?