

The Apostle Paul As Apologist

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The Lutheran Cyclopaedia defines Christian Apologetics as “the scientific vindication of the truth and absoluteness of the Christian religion against unbelief.” In the minds of many Christians, the term apologetics is viewed negatively. It is not surprising that Lutherans, who understand the ministerial use of reason in respect to Scripture, especially consider this discipline suspect. Charges are occasionally brought against one who attempts to “argue” Christianity: he downplays the means of grace; he lacks faith in the power of the Holy Spirit to change hearts; he sets logic above Scripture.

It must be admitted that some apologists have been guilty of these abuses. In our age which elevates human reason and denigrates religious faith, those who attempt to take the gospel of Christ to the world will be tempted to do it on the world’s rationalistic terms. This we must not do. Yet if we wish to effectively proclaim the gospel to a world blinded to God’s truth by sinful ignorance, we cannot expect that world to meet us within the realm of faith. To show that Christianity is not unreasonable but rather beyond reason, we may well use reason itself as a point of contact without denying that the Spirit working through the means of grace is alone effective in producing faith and proving the truth of the gospel.

Apologetics is not, in itself, an inappropriate use of reason. Before passing judgment on apologetics as a whole, we would do well to consider the example of the Apostle Paul. Paul was well aware of his duty to defend the gospel. To the Philippians, he wrote: “I am put here for the defense [Greek, *apologia*] of the gospel” (Philippians 1:16). To some, it might seem ironic that the same apostle who insisted that “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17), did not hesitate to appeal to such non-biblical sources as history, nature, or the cultural experiences of his hearers in his attempts to establish points of contact with his audiences. It might seem a contradiction that the same man who wrote that Christ sent him to preach the gospel “not with words of human reason” (I Corinthians 1:17), often made his case using logic as solid and brilliant as that of any theologian or scientist or philosopher before or since his time.

If these supposed contradictions serve to spark an interest in the apologetics of Paul, there are more compelling reasons for anyone involved in the defense of the faith to study Paul’s preaching. First, Paul was above all else a missionary. He spent much of his life preaching to people most of whom had never heard the gospel before. An analysis of his approach may yield insights for us as we consider our own defense of the gospel before those to whom it might seem foreign and offensive. It certainly should set the tone. Also, while Paul had the gift of logic, he also recognized its limitations. His example is therefore invaluable to us as we try to define the place of apologetics in our witness.

Paul’s apologetics may be seen both in his preaching recorded by Luke in the book of Acts and in his own epistles. This paper will limit itself to the former, studying Paul’s apologetic method in two of his sermons and commenting on its significance for us today. We examine first Paul’s sermon before the Jews and proselytes at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch as it is recorded in Acts 13.

History Points To Christ

In keeping with Christ’s command to preach first to the Jews, Paul generally began his initial work in any given city at the local synagogue. It would not be out of place to assume that the speech in Antioch was typical of his sermons on such occasions. Here, Paul begins what might be called a three part sermon in verse 16 with an overview of Old Testament salvation history:

Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, with mighty power he

led them out of that country, he endured their conduct for about forty years in the desert, he overthrew seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance. All this took about 450 years.

After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. Then the people asked for a king, and he gave them Saul, son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled forty years. After removing Saul, he made David their king. He testified concerning him: "I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do."

(16-22)

Paul's retelling of history runs from the time of the Patriarchs to the reign of King David. Considering the racial pride and bible literacy characteristic of the Jews, this was an excellent point of contact for Paul. His appeal to the past sets his hearers on familiar ground. It is common ground, which creates naturally a bond of union and ensures that he starts with the agreement and approval of his hearers. He shows from the outset that his purpose is not to undermine Jewish culture or even religion, but rather to set the stage for the good news that was the culmination of this history. He is about to show that the gospel of Christ is not opposed to Jewish culture; it is rather the very reason for it:

From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised. Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. As John was completing his work, he said: "Who do you think I am? I am not that one. No, but he is coming after me, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. The people of Jerusalem and their leaders did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every sabbath. Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had travelled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.

(23-31)

Here Paul presents simple historical facts. Jesus' death and resurrection are not myths manufactured by someone attempting to create a new religion. This divine life and divine death and divine resurrection really happened on this earth. As historical facts, they are verifiable by many witnesses.

But even as Paul recounts these things, his scope of history is not limited to the thirty-some years of Jesus' time on this earth. It is set within the framework of salvation history. Paul shows that the Jesus of history is also the Christ of promise. All the events of his life were in fulfillment of a larger plan that had been revealed by the prophets. Paul reinforces this message of Christ as the fulfillment of God's promises in the next section of his sermon by calling as witnesses the prophecies of the Old Testament:

We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: "You are my Son; today I have become your Father."

The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words: "I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David."

So it is stated elsewhere: "You will not let your Holy One see decay."

For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay. (32-37)

All that Paul had said up to this point, all his arguments from history and the fulfillment of prophecy, were leading up to one point: Jesus died for your sins. Believe it. He concludes his sermon with a clear statement of objective and subjective justification, and a warning against rejecting this gospel:

Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: “Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe even if someone told you.” (38-41)

A progression of thought is evident in this sermon. Paul starts with common knowledge and moves toward a specific point that was not common knowledge. A similar progression is also evident in his Areopagitica in Athens, but his argument is different. Paul knew his audience. What was effective as a point of contact in a synagogue in Antioch would not be effective on the Areopagus in Athens. Fortunately, as a member of the Jewish diaspora, Paul had great facility in working with Jews and Gentiles. If references to David and the prophets would not work, he find another point of contact.

An Appeal To Natural Knowledge

The most complete example we have of Paul’s actual preaching to the Gentiles is Paul’s address to the meeting of the Areopagus, recorded in Acts 17:22-31. Athens was the hometown of Socrates and Plato, and the adopted home of Aristotle, Epicures, and Zeno. The heirs of these men constituted Paul’s audience. Intellectually, this was as sophisticated a group of people as could be found anywhere, and they knew it. So did Paul. The subtleties of Jewish faith are entirely absent from this address—not only would references to Old Testament scripture have been unknown to his hearers, they also would have immediately confirmed these philosophers’ suspicions that Paul’s message was nothing more than the ranting of a second-rate Jewish travelling preacher. Instead, Paul argues on the basis of natural knowledge:

Men of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything...(22-25a)

Paul’s point of contact is an Athenian altar inscription, one which pointed out the natural religiosity of these people. The Athenians were seekers after deeper knowledge. Since they openly admitted their ignorance of the divine nature of God, Paul would tell them about him. As humans possessing a knowledge of God from creation, their inquiry would necessarily include their own origin and the origin of all things. It was natural, then, for Paul to speak first about God the Creator.

It is important to note that after Paul makes his initial point of contact, he does not ingratiate his audience by attempting to make his case according to their philosophic principles. Though he does not quote passages, the God of which he speaks is definitely the God of the scriptures. He is a personal creator, certainly not the impersonal force of the pantheistic Stoics.

The address continues with a description of the providential nature of God:

...because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. “For in him we live and move and have our being.” As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring.” (25b-28)

Again, Paul does not compromise truth for a favorable hearing. The Epicureans present, holding as they did to the philosophy that all things were determined solely by chance, would have contested Paul’s assertion of God’s providential order of the earth. But the mention of providence served a point: to show that God is a loving God who wants to draw all people to himself. Paul is not purposely contentious. He continues to make points of contact, even emphasizing his point with an appeal to Greek culture, quoting two Greek poets who recognized a divine creator and sustainer albeit in Zeus.

Paul continues his appeal to the natural knowledge of God by addressing the consciences of his hearers:

Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man’s design or skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.

Paul attaches responsibility to the fact that all are God’s offspring. God’s creatures should not consider him to be something other than what he is, but they do. They should acknowledge him to be the God that Paul sets forth here, but they do not. The pagan philosophers may not have bowed to idols as the common people did, but their promotion of false ideas concerning divinity amounted to the same thing. Paul had earlier appealed to the natural knowledge of God in creation; here he appeals to the testimony of the conscience to the existence of God. His point is a sobering one: the God of creation is also the God of judgment.

As evidence of this assertion, he refers to the historical fact of Christ’s resurrection. To the Greeks, whose thought system had no room for a final judgment, Paul gives concrete evidence that such a day certainly would come—that the agent of judgment had already been appointed. With this Paul ends his defense of his message.

For Our Learning

The modern apologist may learn much from Paul’s preaching. After watching the great missionary in action, we cannot say that there is no scriptural basis for apologetics in evangelism or preaching. It is simply too apparent in both these addresses. Yet it is equally important to note that the apostle’s logical argument never takes the place of or obscures his straightforward presentation of divine truth, as unpalatable as that truth might have seemed to his hearers. In speaking to the Jews in Antioch, for example, he never tried to explain away the fact that their own countrymen had rejected and murdered their God. He stated this openly. In his address to the meeting of the Greek philosophers, Paul clearly announced essential doctrines that were completely foreign and seemingly foolish to his hearers, such as the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment. He did this without dressing them in the philosophical garb to which this sophisticated audience was accustomed.

If we follow Paul’s example, our apologetics will never be “apologizing” in the sense of making excuses for hard teachings. Fact is fact. Finally, the gospel of the cross itself is the ultimate hard teaching: “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” Yet it alone does the real work of winning souls for Christ. Let us never forget this. This limit of apologetics is certainly the most important lesson we can learn from Paul. He proclaimed the gospel without compromise. So must we.

Such a bold and direct statement of belief is sometimes misunderstood as intellectual arrogance. Paul could not be accused of this. His approach was always sympathetic. While he would not compromise his message, he never neglected to seek points of contact, common ground from which he might bring his hearers to see divinely revealed truth. Frederic Howe defines describes “common ground” as “the common range of understanding that a Christian and a non-Christian have about truth and life” (*Challenge and Response: A Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, 65). With Jews, Paul found this common ground in heritage and history, and prophecy and promises. With Gentiles it was natural knowledge and its manifestations in their own culture. Paul was flexible, adaptable, always searching for another way to make the facts of the gospel accessible to people from widely different backgrounds. His approach was to be all things to all people.

The world in which we witness is far different from that of Paul’s day, but it is just as varied, if not more so. Globalization brings us into contact with more cultures than Paul dreamed of. As the philosophy of cultural relativism takes root here in our own country, it becomes increasingly important for us to be sympathetic and respectful in our proclamation of God’s absolute truth. This does not mean compromising or adapting the Gospel—we must never cease to be doctrinally correct in an attempt to be “politically correct.” It may mean adapting our approach to the audience—constantly seeking those points of contact, that common ground which will vary with the audience.

Apologetics manuals afford us all kinds of information that might be useful in establishing points of contact, but all that will be useless unless we know something about the people to whom we are speaking. To approach the flexibility of Paul in his apologetic method, we must constantly strive to learn as much as we can about the other cultures that surround us. If we fail to do this, we may be guilty of an arrogance not seen in Paul, who became “all things to all men” for the sake of the gospel. Rather, we would do well to imitate Paul—his sympathy with and respect for his hearers as intelligent human beings possessing living souls; his courage in proclaiming difficult doctrines coupled with his confidence that the clear gospel message will overcome difficulties. Such an approach is the basis not only of appropriate apologetics, but, more importantly, effective evangelism.