

A Reaction to Dr. Michael Berg’s “An Introduction to and Defense of Apologetics”

Thank you, Symposium Committee, for choosing this timely and important topic and thank you, Dr. Berg, for your informative and thought-provoking essay.

As Dr. Berg demonstrates, apologetics has a long history in the Christian Church. Nevertheless, confessional Lutherans often seem to view it with suspicion. We are troubled by those who seem to approach the apologetic task with the idea that they can bring people to faith by presenting the right arguments. Those who understand the work of the Holy Spirit and the importance of the means of grace are understandably concerned about such an approach. Francis Pieper in his *Christian Dogmatics* frequently cautions about an improper reliance on reason and apologetics. And yet Pieper writes,

The arguments which call forth only a human faith (*fidem humanum*) would be underestimated if we declared them to be utterly worthless. Also Christ and His Apostles used them on occasion. Such rational arguments serve to show how frivolous are the judgments of unbelief against the divinity of Scripture. These arguments may be used to good advantage also in the case of Christians who are afflicted with doubts as to the divine character of Scripture. These doubts arise from the unbelieving flesh of the Christians, and through these rational arguments the flesh of the Christians is outwardly checked and subdued. Arguments of reason, historical arguments, etc., can also be of service in the conversion of a person by inducing those outside the Church to read or hear the Word of God itself and so come to faith in the Word by the operation of the Holy Ghost through the Word.—But we must not imagine that the presentation of such arguments of reason is a necessary prerequisite for the proclamation of the Word of God.¹

Like Pieper, Dr. Berg acknowledges both the limitations (see pp. 7-9) and the value of apologetics. His essay, quite naturally, is promoting a greater use of apologetics in our circles. He writes that apologetics “need not be a dirty word” (p 1). “The abuse of reason does not negate its use. Nor does the abuse of apologetics negate its use” (5). He notes four reasons for engaging in that task: there is a biblical mandate—1Peter 3:15; there are biblical examples—Paul in Athens and before Agrippa and Festus; there are examples from church history—Justin Martyr and Luther; and finally, as rational human beings we cannot avoid the task.

Even a cursory reading of Luther demonstrates that as much as he decried sinful reason, he was a master of using reason and argumentation against his opponents. His classic work, the *Bondage of the Will*, written in response to Erasmus’ *Freedom of the Will*, comes to mind as well as his words against the enthusiasts in the Smalcald Articles. He skillfully turns their claims of the immediate or direct working of the Holy Spirit against them.

Just as also our enthusiasts at the present day condemn the outward Word, and nevertheless they themselves are not silent, but they fill the world with their pratings and writings, as though, indeed, the Spirit could not come through the writings and spoken word of the

¹ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950. vol I, 311.

apostles, but first through their writings and words he must come. Why then do not they also omit their own sermons and writings, until the Spirit himself come to men, without their writings and before them, as they boast that he has come into them without the preaching of the Scriptures? But of these matters there is not time now to dispute at greater length; we have elsewhere sufficiently urged this subject.²

Dr. Berg emphasizes the proper motivation for apologetics and the spirit in which we are to carry it out. “These are not arguments to be won but arguments to be used in love. Apologetics is a ministry of caring” (6). He calls the task “Seelsorge Apologetics” intended to help not only unbelievers with the goal of presenting the gospel but also to help believers whose Old Adam presents them with doubts. It calls for careful listening and gentle questioning (11-12).

He offers three tactics (12-13). The first is leveling the playing field. In other words, “hold the skeptic’s use of reason to the same standard the skeptic himself uses to criticize the Christian claim.” Unbelievers are often guilty of using the same violations of logic that they accuse Christians of using. Christians, by the way, can benefit from a knowledge of the basic rules of logic. Secondly, Berg says to challenge their demand for certainty—you don’t live like that. In other words, we conduct our lives and make every-day decisions on the basis of probability. With the use of reason we cannot bring someone to absolute certainty about Christian claims, but we can demonstrate that these claims are possible and perhaps, even probable. Finally, put a rock in their shoe. Give them something that creates doubt about their worldview. We are not trying to top someone in an argument or to fight a liberal agenda. We are trying to gain a hearing for the gospel.

The essayist offers examples of different kinds of apologetic arguments in the body of the essay and in the addenda. Time will not allow an examination of each. We should note, however, that what appears to be a compelling argument to some people will be quickly dismissed by others. Every rational argument can be opposed by another rational argument. In the divine creation versus evolution debate I find the arguments based on intelligent design and the laws of probability to be compelling. I would be a fool, however, to think that such arguments would be compelling to a convinced evolutionist. Yet if I have at least demonstrated that my position is not irrational or have created even a little doubt in the claims of evolution by challenging assumptions I have accomplished something and perhaps gained a hearing for the gospel. My conversations with skeptics must be carried out with humility and must show love and respect for those I am engaging.

A couple of the apologetic arguments contained in the essay and addenda do not appear to be compelling to me and, in fact, at some points seem to be begging the question or assuming some things as true which really need to be proved (e.g., the Kalam Cosmological Argument). A person needs to be comfortable with the argument he is presenting and understand its weaknesses.

² *Smalcald Articles*, Part III, Article VIII, 6.

We live in interesting times. Rationalism and trust that the scientific method can produce the only certain truth are no longer dominating the way our society thinks.³ So-called postmodern thinking seems to be holding sway. Postmoderns seem to hold that “we can’t get to truth and that truth may or may not exist and it would be better not to be so dogmatic about it” (29). Because of their love of stories and metanarratives many may be interested in giving the Christian story a hearing. We live in an era of competing ideas. Berg reminds us that there is nothing new under the sun. There have been similar eras in the past. He tells us that the current times of enlightenment-postmodern dichotomy remind one scholar of the Sophist-Socrates conflict in ancient Greece (29). I see similarities to the Mediterranean world in the first century AD with various competing ideas, philosophies, and religions. A Roman governor asked our Savior a seemingly postmodern question—what is truth? This competition did not seem to hinder the advance of Christianity.

Berg sees unique possibilities in our contemporary times. He wisely tells to get rid of the martyr complex. Each age has challenges. This age is no different. He expresses some cautious optimism and encourages us not to be anti-apologetics and urges us never to hesitate to preach the full counsel of God. He encourages us to read widely to be able to engage our culture. He offers a number of apologetic resources in his bibliography. His addenda provide much helpful information. He suggests that Lutheranism is in a good position to engage the current culture. He says that this may be a Lutheran moment.

Is such a suggestion a theology of glory? Christians have every reason to be optimistic about the future but will at the same time always temper that optimism with realism. We can be optimistic because we know the promises and power of our God. We will always also be realistic because we know the horrible corruption of original sin, the power of Satan, and the opposition of the world. We know that God’s ways are higher than our ways. He is a hidden God. He views success differently from the way we do. Even a casual study of history shows that when things seem the worst for God’s people, our God has often inaugurated an unexpected and marvelous expansion of his kingdom.

Dr. Berg has given us an excellent introduction into the discipline known as apologetics. His encouragements to engage in the apologetic task are compelling. The essay made me think. I hope that it will produce fruitful discussion.

John M. Brenner
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³ We should not think that modernism has disappeared. With the current emphasis in education on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) modernism will continue to exist.