Clearing a Path for the Gospel

A Lutheran Approach to Apologetics

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Arthur Eggert has been teaching Bible and doctrine classes in WELS churches in the Madison area for 30 years. He has served on the Self-Study Committee for WELS Ministerial Training Schools, the Western Wisconsin District Commission on Adult Discipleship and the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Governing Board. He is the author of numerous articles that have appeared in *Forward in Christ*, *What About Jesus* and the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* and has presented three pastoral conference papers. Northwestern Publishing House is publishing his book *Simply Lutheran*, which was written to assist in congregational evangelism and retention efforts and as a resource to refresh the doctrinal fluency of long-time congregational members.

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Introduction

In the early 1990’s, a former pastor from the Evangelical Free Church attended a confessional Lutheran Seminary. He had studied Lutheran doctrine and had concluded that it gave the correct presentation of the biblical message. As a result, he went through the formal process of joining the synod as a pastor, which included spending some time at the seminary doing more in-depth study. Two students were very curious about his background, and they struck up a conversation.

One of them asked, “How is our seminary different from the one you went to?”

He thought for a moment and then said, “Well, you don’t have an apologetics department.”

**Apologetics.** That is what this book is about. At this moment in our history, there seems to be a rising tide of interest in this topic in confessional Lutheranism. That is notable all by itself, as for at least a couple of generations, the confessional Lutheran synods have not done much work in this area. In truth, Lutheranism in America has been noticeably absent from the world of Christian apologetics for a very long time. This wasn’t always the case. In the 16th and 17th centuries, European Lutherans published a great deal about apologetics, but somehow in the New World, the topic dropped off our radar screens. Certainly, it would be an overstatement to say that no famous Christian apologist is a Lutheran. John Warwick Montgomery and his associates are probably the most acknowledged Lutheran apologists of our day.

Nevertheless, the apologetics discussion in America today has been dominated by Reformed voices, not least of all because much of the discussion has revolved around evolution and the response that many of these
voices have given to that attack on God’s Word. Unfortunately, their thinking has had a dramatic impact on the way theologically conservative Lutherans, both laypeople and called workers, have addressed these challenges to Christian teachings. We are not convinced that their approach has been consistent with Scripture or the Lutheran Confessions. The regrettable result of this reality: when our people are thirsty for apologetic resources, they often go to a different well—a well that doesn’t always preserve Lutheran and scriptural truth. Consequently, in recent years more and more Lutherans have begun to make contributions to this area. This book is intended to add to this effort. It has not been written to change the world, but it has been written to contribute to, and hopefully advance, Lutheran apologetics.

We want to begin at the most basic level for several reasons. First, we believe that this is what most Christians need. They need and want help explaining their faith to people who dismiss it or attack it. Secondly, we believe that we Lutherans need to get back to the basics because our reliance on non-Lutheran work will cause problems in the long run. We are concerned that some of these problems are already rearing their ugly heads. Many of our members feel that their faith is under attack daily. Many Christian parents worry that their children will lose their faith while attending college or even in high school, and they want to prepare themselves to answer the tough questions and to guide their children in the way of God’s truth. Many confessional Lutherans—including pastors and teachers—are desperate for materials that will help them defend what they believe. If they cannot find something that is solid and confessional, then they will use whatever they must. They don’t want to go to a poisoned well. But they don’t want to die of thirst in the desert either. We hope that this work will be a part of a broader effort to provide solidly scriptural, confessional Lutheran apologetic resources.

What is Apologetics?

Almost any introduction to apologetics will explain that the word comes from the Greek word *apologia*, which means “a defense”. We Lutherans have a confession called the Apology to the Augsburg Confession. It is not a document that says, “We’re sorry we wrote the Augsburg Confession.” It is a document that defends what that earlier confession says. Apologetics, therefore, is about defending what we believe. For support, we turn to a com-
monly cited Scriptural passage on the topic, “But in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense (Greek: *apologia*) to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.”

What then do we mean by a defense? What did Peter mean? Peter was using language that came from a Greek courtroom. He was talking about a situation in which people listen to an argument to find out what the truth is. But in the biblical context, Peter was not talking about winning an argument. He was talking about speaking in a way that persuades people of the truth. In the end, we Christians must always remember that the “reason” for our “hope” is the gospel. All true apologetics is really about finding a way to clear a path for the gospel.

Thus, maybe it is easier to say what apologetics isn’t than what it is. It is not an attempt to prove that what the Bible says is true. In the end, we cannot do that. In fact, in the Lutheran Confessions we pledge ourselves to judge all teachers and teachings solely by the Scriptures. Even more than 1 Peter 3:15, the key passage for all apologetic work is Hebrews 11:1: “Now faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen.” Notice that faith focuses on what we cannot see. It focuses on what we hope for, and as St. Paul tells us, hope that is seen really is “not hope at all”. If we could prove the things that we trust in, that we hope for, we wouldn’t need faith to believe in them.

This is a key point for all our attempts to explain the reason for the hope that we have. We cannot convince anyone with a clever argument that Jesus paid for all the sins of the whole world. We cannot logically explain the doctrine of the Trinity and make it intellectually acceptable. We cannot prove creation by science or experiments. Faith is trusting in what we cannot prove. Faith is clinging to what God promises even when all the evidence we can see seems to contradict him and all the people we most love tell us that we are wasting our time. We know the truth because God has worked through the gospel and made us believers. No amount of posturing on our part can change the fact that only a believer will see these teachings as a perfectly rational position to hold.

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1 1 Peter 3:15.
3 Romans 8:24.
4 The ministerial use of reason is discussed in Chapter 1.
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Therefore, apologetics is not about winning arguments. It is not about convincing people that the Bible is true. It is about getting a hearing for the gospel. People don’t want to listen to the truth. If they did, missionaries would have a much easier time. People don’t want to believe that they are sinners who need a Savior so that they will not go to hell. They don’t want to consider hard questions such as how a loving and all-powerful God can allow pain and suffering to happen. They don’t want to wrestle with the love and the power of God. Instead, they bring up all kinds of objections that are really designed to avoid the law and the gospel. Apologetics is about dispensing with those objections so that we can get down to the real conversation, “What has Jesus done for you?”

Apologetics in a Postmodern World

It is certainly easier to say what needs to be done than it is to do it. There are reasons for this. One reason is a tremendous cultural shift that has taken place since the 1950’s. Sociologists say that we have entered a postmodern age. One of the things they mean by this statement is that people’s standards for judging what is true have changed. In the middle of the twentieth century, science and logic were considered the path to truth. The postmodern world has concluded that these approaches have failed. They did not give us unimpeachable truth, and they have not shown the path to a society that is just and free and prosperous. So many people today believe that truth is relative. “What’s true for you might not be true for me.” When it comes to faith, we sometimes encounter the most frustrating of all apologetic situations, the person who dismisses what we have to say as something that works for us but just isn’t for them. They may even say that they respect our position and admire our sincerity, but they disagree with us and insist that this is their right.

So, where do they look for truth? Often to their feelings. Most Americans today would echo Obi-wan Kenobi and say one needs to stretch out with one’s feelings. The only thing a person can count on as true is what is found in his or her heart. So, what do such people consider to be the purpose of a church? It is a community, a place of belonging. It speaks its own language and perpetuates its own traditions and maintains its own truth. If one chooses to belong to that community, one does so to fulfill some basic human need and in the process, one accepts the community’s view of truth, at least to some
extent. This view fails to recognize that the church’s commission is to spread the message of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Thankfully, postmodernism does not mean that all people have completely turned off their brains. In fact, there may even be a rising reaction against the cynicism of the postmodern attitude. It is important to speak to people where they are. This book focuses on providing a solid, Scriptural response that can be employed in the world in which we live today to deal with apologetic questions.

The Importance of Not Knowing

When we’re debating something that is really important, it is extremely frustrating when we don’t know the answer to a question or to a challenge that the other person puts forth. Of course, that is why it is important for us to study God’s Word in general and to be serious students of the culture in which we live. But part of the genius of the Lutheran Reformation was the realization that there is some information that God just didn’t give us. This is hard, because we all like to have all the answers. Yet, humility often means trusting that God knows the answers and that when he chose not to tell us those answers, he was doing what is best for us. For example, we might think of a parent telling a young child that he or she is going to have a new baby brother or sister in a few months. That is certainly exciting news! Naturally, that young child has all kinds of questions. However, when it comes to the intimate relations between the father and mother that God used to bring that baby into existence, that little child doesn’t need to know too many details. In fact, it could be confusing or possibly even unhealthy for that child to have too much information. In spiritual things, we are often like that little child.

There is more to faith than intellectual understanding. God doesn’t always give us the information or the evidence we would like to have. Because we desire such information, we are tempted to look to archaeology, history or science to supply the evidence needed to prove our faith. Certainly, there are times when these disciplines might help us to demonstrate that something the Bible says is true. But often, they only befuddle our apologetics. If we become obsessed with trying to find answers in these disciplines, we put our own faith at risk. How can this be? The most obvious way is that we begin to doubt God’s Word because we cannot prove it. In addition, there is also a more subtle danger: we may begin to engage in intellectual dishonesty to uphold
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our position. We select facts from secular disciplines that seem to support what we believe and ignore those that don’t. Eventually, we saddle ourselves with an ever-growing house of cards that needs constant reinforcement. One of the authors’ driving concerns in writing this book is our desire to help Christians avoid the fallacy of relying on the brilliance of man to demonstrate the truth of God’s Word.

Attempting to shore up the biblical witness with human planks also damages our credibility when people see through our efforts. It makes us look like the person who sticks his fingers into his ears and shouts, “I can’t hear you!” any time some inconvenient piece of data comes their way. We further discuss the importance of truth in apologetics in Chapter 1.

Sometimes Christians have to say, “I don’t know.” God chooses what to tell us, and he lets us wrestle with things here. He calls us to trust that he knows what is best to share with us. Who is the one who decides what we can and cannot know? The Father who sent his Son to die for us. The Son who humbled himself even to death on a cross for us. The Holy Spirit who lives in our hearts and strengthens us through the gospel. That God of love is working for our good even when he hides things from us that we think we need to know. That God of love has built his power into the Scriptures. In the end, even when it comes to apologetics, he will work to accomplish his purpose through that Word.

What Are We Trying to Do?

The goal of apologetics is to speak and write in defense of the truth using logic⁵ as well as Scripture. The mission of this book is to give apologists the tools they need to remove manmade obstacles which prevent people from hearing the message of Christ, thereby leaving the stumbling block of the cross itself as the only intellectual obstacle to faith. These tools will aid the apologist in disarming bad arguments against God and his Word, in undermining bad presuppositions and worldviews that are at odds with the biblical message and in stripping away all the peripheral attacks reason makes on the gospel, so that hearts may be confronted by the central claims of the gospel, both historical and theological, on its own terms.

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⁵ Logic, of course, must be used in its proper place, not as a judge or equal of Scripture, but as a tool that God gives us to understand His Word and the world which He has given us. This is explained in Chapter 1.
In creating this book, the authors have bound themselves to write nothing which conflicts with the Old and New Testaments of the Holy Scriptures or the Confessions of the Lutheran church. We have tried to use the highest standards of scholarship. We submitted our ideas to those with the expertise to judge the accuracy and quality of our work. We tried to always state our assumptions and those of our opponents clearly and accurately to prevent false agreement or false conflict. We avoided using ad hominem arguments, creating strawmen to avoid our opponents’ real positions or engaging in lines of argumentation which they might reasonably recognize as containing fallacies.

Why did we do this? First of all, to be fair. Christ expects this of us. Second of all, because we believe that the truth can stand by itself: God doesn’t need us to reshape his Word to make it more palatable to people in the 21st century (although we do need to speak to those people and to their concerns accurately and directly). Finally, it is not helpful to Christians who are trying to defend their faith if we present them with false targets. If we were able to edit what our opponents are saying—the way that a TV show often does when it is addressing an issue that is “timely” or “edgy”—it would be very easy for us to make unbelievers look foolish and all Christians look brilliant. That would be false security. When we came into actual contact with an unbeliever, we would not be prepared to address the questions and attitudes that were keeping him or her out of the kingdom of God.

As we have said, apologetics is a necessary discipline. It is all about getting a hearing for the truth. It is about engaging skeptics and doubters in a thoughtful way so that we can disarm their objections long enough for the Holy Spirit to perform a true miracle through the gospel. It requires calmness and a cool head. It requires an ever-growing knowledge of what God actually says in his Word. It requires serious study of the world around us and a real world understanding of the times we live in. It also requires an unflinching willingness to examine what we do say and to abandon favorite approaches that don’t really help us in our efforts.

Above all else, it requires confidence in Jesus’ promises. He promises that when we speak, he speaks. He promises that he rules all things for the good

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6 [Jesus said,] “Whoever listens to you listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me. And whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.” (Luke 10:16).
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of his church. He promises that when the unbelieving world attacks us, the Holy Spirit will give us wisdom that evildoers cannot contradict.

7 “And he subjected everything under his feet and appointed him as head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.” (Ephesians 1:22-23).

8 [Jesus said,] “I will give you such words and a wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.” (Luke 21:15).