

## **A Pastoral Look at Apologetics, With a Plea**

**Dean Bruce, Th.D.**

**Pastor, Church of God, Mendon, Ohio**

I spent a few years in Europe in the early eighties, during which time I rode the trains and public transportation a bit. I was always very cautious to ensure that I had the proper ticket. But I knew of folks who used to try to ride for free and I saw some get caught from time to time. In Germany there were always printed warnings listing the cost of this law breaking. So I enjoyed hearing about two groups of college students traveling to and from a conference by train. Perhaps these were some of your students! It seems the law students had used the allotted funds to purchase a ticket for each of their members, but the engineering students were seeking to pocket some of their allotment and had only purchased one ticket for the entire group. The law students were watching eagerly to see these lawbreakers punished--perhaps much like us when we see the police stop someone who has sped by us like we were standing still. Oh, some of you are the guy speeding past the rest of us?! When the engineering lookout gave the signal that the conductor was coming through, the engineering students all crowded into one lavatory. The conductor knocked on the door and said, "Ticket please." The ticket was slid out under the door, punched, and handed back with a "Thank you."

On the way home from the conference the law students decided that they too would purchase only one ticket and join the engineering students in profiting a bit from the trip. Unbeknownst to the law students, however, the engineering students had not purchased a ticket at all, but were all looking strangely smug. The engineering lookout gave the signal and the law students crowded into one lavatory while the engineering students went into another. A few moments later an engineering student knocked on the door of the little room where the law

students were crowded and said, “Ticket please!” This was for those of you who think that preachers *have* to start out with a joke.

A. J. Hoover, in Elwell’s Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, informs us that the English word apologetics “comes from a Greek root meaning ‘to defend, to make reply to, to give an answer, to legally defend oneself’” (p. 68). He further notes that “Broadly defined, apologetics has always been a part of evangelism” (p. 69). In the common parlance of Christian seminarians apologetics is “the defense of the faith.”

My first instinct, as a descendant of the warriors of “Auld Scotland,” is to picture a proper defense as one which, in a no-holds-barred way, quickly and efficiently eliminates one’s enemy or target, or at least all resistance. That is to say, the *only* good defense is an overwhelming and devastating offense!

When I was a youngster with a BB gun, no one had told me that BB guns were not supposed to be super accurate. Not knowing this, but having watched a few westerns on television from time to time, I practiced hip shooting at either the vertical or horizontal wires on thin gauge wire fence until I was fairly proficient at hitting them where they intersected. Some years later when my cousin loaned me a scope for my trusty bolt-action Marlin .22 rifle, I knew that you were supposed to be able to shoot *better* with a scope than with open iron sights, but no one had told me that you shouldn’t expect to get less than a half inch group in three shots at fifty yards with such a gun as mine, if that. Not knowing this I sighted the scope in until I could shoot the blue tip off of the head of a kitchen match. It seems that in the years since then that BB guns are made mostly of junk plastic and not only break easily, but are not at all consistent in their shooting, not at all good enough to hip-shoot fence wire from twenty feet. It seems also that ammunition manufacturers have conspired to make such inferior rounds with which I can hardly

hit even the match box any longer!

I have learned in more recent years that the object of apologetics is not to eliminate nor to devastate, but to reach one's target. And I use the word target because most often in apologetics our target is not our enemy. And I of course use the term "reach" rather than "hit" for the target. Depending on which nuance of the word apologetics we are using, our target might be our friend, our fellow worshipper of Christ, or one whom we are trying to win to such. *Reaching* our apologetics target has similarities and great differences to reaching the targets at which one shoots. Both take plenty of preparation--practice on the one hand. But the methods used, and the results obtained, are vastly different, on the other hand.

Understanding that the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 is to be our guide in the church, I often felt as I was growing up that there was a lot of emphasis placed on *winning* souls to Christ, but that they were then forgotten in the rush to win more souls. "Jesus came to them and spoke to them saying, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore, Go and disciple all the peoples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to carefully observe [*t h r e w* - obey, etc.] all that I commanded you; and behold! I am with you always, even until the completion of eternity!'" I used an exclamation point here for two reasons. 1) This is a command and that is usually how we show a command in English, and 2) I think that this is exciting! Obeying Jesus pleases Him, and pleasing him should excite us to service!

I have since learned that even though *any* of us can be used of God to win a soul to Christ, that *my* gifts lie more in the area of equipping. That is to say that my role is much more that of "teaching them all things that I have taught you," than that of baptizing them--if one sees the teaching of all things as discipleship and the baptizing as that result of effective evangelism

wherein individuals give their life to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It seems to me still that often efforts and ink are expended much more in this latter effort to win souls than in teaching those already won to the Lord how it is that they should live and grow in Him--and in doing so to repeat *both* the baptizing and the teaching portions. Thus carefully observing all of Christ's Great Commission to us.

This latter plan seems to make much more sense to me. It also reminds me of the young boy who went to his local hardware store owner and told him that he would like to work for him for just thirty days to learn a little bit about business and to help complete a class project. But since the boy did not have any business experience he didn't expect the owner to pay him, instead he would work for a penny for the first day with his wages to double each succeeding day of the thirty-day period. The owner thought that this was pretty cute and did not balk at all when the boy suggested that just to protect each of them that they draw up and sign a contract. Those of you who have done the math know the outcome, the boy owned the hardware store before the month was past. The pay for the thirtieth day, if I did the longhand math right is \$5,368,709.12, which then makes the total for all thirty days \$10,737,418.23! My point here is that if we each teach only two others how to win two others and disciple them, that very soon we would win most of the world to Christ. Of course, *why* would anyone stop at just two? And why not get disciplers and evangelists working together to win *and* teach?!

I see primarily three facets of apologetics and although I define them separately I believe that they are and should be understood as overlapping, or interrelated. The first facet is that which defends the faith against attack, whether that attack comes from within the church as heresy, or from without. This was the arena of the Apostles and of the early church councils. I think for the most part today it is probably that of those writing systematic theologies, among

perhaps other writings as well. But there seems to be no unified thought or agreement to it. If we as the Church are an Army, we are much less organized, less efficient, and less supporting of one another than our Nation's Army--and I speak as a proud veteran of that same Army.

The second facet of apologetics is in the area of winning souls to Christ, whether the approach is evidentialist or presuppositionalist, or better yet to my way of thinking, a good combination of the two.

And as you may already have guessed, the third facet is that of discipling believers in Christ. It should be apparent how these three areas overlap and complement one another and yet may each be treated separately as well. I think that all too often the church keeps them separate, almost as if they are embarrassing relatives--or in-laws!

During the summer of 2002, right after his junior year, my elder son Dwayne spent the last four weeks of his summer at Trails End Ranch, a church camp near Ekalaka in south eastern Montana as a CIT, a Camper in Training. Shortly after he came home he said, "Dad, what is apologetics?" Now if that doesn't make a theologian's heart beat faster there is something wrong! I explained to him briefly that it is the defense of the Faith and then asked *why* he had asked me his question. He went on to tell me that his counselor for the summer, also a pastor's son, had told him that he thought that my son Dwayne should study apologetics, that he had a knack for it. And then Dwayne proceeded to *ask* me to develop a course in apologetics for him to take the following school year. He spent all eight weeks the following summer on staff at Trails End, plus two weeks of staff training prior to that, and then hurried home so that after an early birthday and late graduation party we could see him off to Basic Training in the Army at Ft. Benning, Georgia. It should be no surprise to any of us that in his two and a half years thus far in the Army, one of which was spent in combat in Iraq and during which he was nearly killed

while “qualifying” for a Purple Heart, that he probably has had more opportunity to practice apologetics than any two of us in academia or the pastorate.

I ask you, how many *thousands* of other “laymen” are there like him who *have* much opportunity to *apologize* for the faith, but who perhaps are not trained to do it, or do not have the “tools” which they need to properly do apologetics? (I do *not* seek to imply here that because I helped to train him that he is perfectly or even properly trained. He is what and who he is by the grace of God. Although I would like to take *some* credit!). How many of us who supposedly are “equipped” for apologetics are actually able to put it to use with any frequency?

Apologetics is a very important endeavor. It is the difference between eternal life and eternal damnation in *so* many lives.

I have been a member of the Evangelical Theological Society for nearly a dozen and a half years and of the Evangelical Philosophical Society for seven or eight years. I do not get to as many of the ETS and EPS meetings as I would like, but I do greatly enjoy those which I do get to attend. They stretch me, make me think, and interact. BUT, although often what I pick up there is useful to me and has been very beneficial and has helped me to grow and learn, I am not usually able to put it into practice or otherwise *use* it in my ministry, or at least not *immediately*, or without “translating” it into layman’s terms.

We as Christians probably all too often earn the just condemnation that we are always and only telling everyone what is wrong, we are always and only condemning *everyone* and *everything*. Perhaps we should resolve that we will only tell others what is wrong when we also have a solution to offer for the situation. In other words, if we are going to ruffle feathers, and I think that we should, we should also show how to properly brush them into place!

I pastor a small church in a small west-central Ohio town of about 700. I also serve as a

Fireman and Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) in the greater community. I say this in part to let you know that I am involved in and known by my community. I don't spend my all my time hiding in my office hoping for opportunities to minister. I am out amongst the sheep--and the wolves.

Here then is my plea: No matter which facets of apologetics you might be concentrating on, researching, and writing about, I BEG that you do so in such a manner that I and others like me can immediately and without a lot of reworking *use* your works for the building of the Kingdom. Use them not for only leading some to Christ, but teaching each one *all* that He has taught us. Many of these have a far greater chance of reaching far more than any of us do. None of *us* is likely to be one of the world's next great evangelists, or preachers or teachers for that matter, but *each* of us might be training one or more of them! As a popular television icon from north of the border says, "We're all in this together."