

A Confessional Lutheran Understanding of Christian Apologetics and Its Practice

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Paul replied, “I am not insane, most excellent Festus, but I am clearly speaking words that are true and sensible. Certainly the king to whom I am freely speaking knows about these things. Indeed, I cannot believe that any of these things has escaped his notice, because this has not been done in a corner. . .” Then Agrippa said to Paul, “In such a short time are you going to persuade me to become a Christian?” (from a dialogue in Caesarea that included Governor Festus, St. Paul, and King Agrippa; Acts 26:25-28, EHV)

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (St. Paul to Christians in Rome; Rom. 10:17, ESV)

You are all partners with me in grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. (Paul writing to Christians in Philippi while imprisoned in Rome; Phil. 1:7b, CSB).

APOLOGETICS ON RECORD YET DIFFERENCES REMAIN

Confessional Lutherans have discussed, debated, encouraged, utilized, or in some way or another dealt with apologetics for a long time. Our Evangelical Lutheran Synod has given it attention, perhaps more than most. There have been Reformation Lectures, articles in the *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* and *Sentinel*, courses at both the seminary and college, and numerous synod resolutions (e.g., 1985, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2018, and 2019). And there are statements, including the “Doctrine Committee Apologetics Study Document” (approved in 2012) that has been helpful and settling.¹

Yet in spite of statements and resolutions, confusion continues among us regarding what it is, its purpose, its importance, its usefulness, or how to go about it.

My aim is twofold. First, to establish a biblical and confessional Lutheran explanation of Christian apologetics by tackling head on two faulty or deficient understandings of apologetics (“two ditches” as I call them), including the one with which we confessional Lutherans (understandably) wrestle. Second, to encourage confidence in the proper use of apologetics, among both pastors and laity.

I will be working with a simple definition that complements the 2012 “Study Document” explanation:

Christian apologetics is in the business of making the case for – giving evidence for – the truth of Christianity, and in particular, the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, the only Redeemer from sin, death, and the devil.

¹ The document reads in part:

The term “apologetics” refers to the defense of the Christian faith. 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. . . .

The heart of Christian confession and defense is the gospel itself—the revelation of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God made flesh and his sacrificial atonement by which God justifies the sinner. As we can see from the apostles’ activity in the book of Acts, when Christians are called upon to defend the Christian faith or the gospel itself, they will always confess the person of Jesus Christ and his work and give witness to the gospel (Acts 2, 4, 19, 22, 26 etc.). . . .

Human reason is a gift of God (First Article in 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. Reason is used magisterially—as a master—when it stands in judgment over Scripture and its teachings, or when it reinterprets or dismisses clear teachings of Scripture to agree with human reason and experience. We reject the magisterial or critical use of reason applied to the teachings of Holy Scripture. . . .

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 Cor 4:6; Eph 2:8,9; 2 Tim 3:15; 1 Pet 1:23). . . .

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. . . . (<https://els.org/our-work-together/dc-2/apologeticsdoc/>).

REASONS FOR STRUGGLES AND DISAGREEMENTS: THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL AND EFFICIENT CAUSES

Most of the confusion and disagreement regarding apologetics centers on the teachings found in Article II of *The Formula of Concord*. In the *Epitome* we read,

[W]hat kind of powers do human beings have after the fall of our first parents, before rebirth, on their own, in spiritual matters? Are they able, with their own powers, before they receive new birth through God's Spirit, to dispose themselves favorably toward God's grace and prepare themselves to accept the grace offered by the Holy Spirit in the Word and the holy sacraments, or not? . . .

1. On this article it is our teaching, faith, and confession that human reason and understanding are blind in spiritual matters and understand nothing on the basis of their own powers, as it is written, "Those who are natural do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them and they are unable to understand them [1 Cor. 2:14] when they are asked about spiritual matters.

2. Likewise, we believe, teach, and confess that the unregenerated human will is not only turned away from God but has also become God's enemy, that it has only the desire and will to do evil and whatever is opposed to God, as it is written, "The inclination of the human heart is evil from youth [Gen. 8:21]." Likewise, "The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed, it cannot [Rom. 8:7]. As little as a corpse can make itself alive for bodily, earthly life, so little can people who through sin are spiritually dead raise themselves up to spiritual life, as it is written, "When we were dead through our trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ" [Eph. 2:5]. . . .

3. However, God the Holy Spirit does not effect conversion without means, but he uses the preaching and hearing of God's Word to accomplish it, as it is written (Rom. 1[:16]), the gospel is a "power of God" to save. Likewise, faith comes from hearing God's Word (Rom. 10[:17]) . . . In this Word the Holy Spirit is present and opens hearts that they may, like Lydia in Acts 16[:14], listen to it and thus be converted, solely through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, who alone accomplishes the conversion of the human being. For apart from his grace our "willing and exerting," our planting, sowing, and watering, amount to nothing "if he does not give the growth" [Rom. 9:16; 1 Cor. 3:7]. As Christ says, "Apart from me, you can do nothing" [John 15:5]. With these brief words he denies the free will its power and ascribes everything to God's grace, so that no one has grounds for boasting before God (1 Cor. [9:16]). . . .

Therefore, we reject and condemn all the following errors as contrary to the guiding principle of God's Word: . . .

2. We also reject the error of the Pelagians, who taught that human beings could convert themselves to God, believe the gospel . . . out of their own powers apart from the grace of the Holy Spirit.

3. We also reject the error of the Semi-Pelagians, who teach that human beings can initiate their conversions by means of their own powers, but cannot complete it without the grace of the Holy Spirit.

4. Likewise, the teaching that, although human beings are too weak to initiate conversion with their own free will before rebirth, and thus convert themselves to God on the basis of their own natural powers . . . , nonetheless, once the Holy Spirit has made a beginning through the preaching of the Word and in it has offered his grace, the human will is able out of its own natural powers to a certain degree, even though small and feeble, to do something, to help and cooperate, to dispose and prepare itself for grace, to grasp this grace, to accept it, and to believe the gospel. . . .

Therefore, before the conversion of the human being there are only two efficient causes,² the Holy Spirit and God's Word as the instrument of the Holy Spirit, through which he effects conversion; the human creature must hear this Word, but cannot believe or accept it on the basis of its own powers but only through the grace and action of God the Holy Spirit.³

THE TWO DITCHES TO AVOID WHEN CONSIDERING APOLOGETICS IN VIEW OF *THE CONFESSIONS*

² "causa efficiens = the efficient cause: a philosophical term used in theology indicating the prime or absolute cause or reason for an action or condition; the instigating cause" (David P. Scaer, *A Latin Ecclesiastical Glossary for Francis Pieper's Christian Dogmatics*. Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary, 1978.

³ *The Book of Concord*, Kolb/Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) 491ff.

One ditch into which many fall when it comes to apologetics is simply to ignore the bondage of the will, fall into some form of Pelagianism, semi-Pelagianism, or synergism, and believe, teach, or act as if man *can* “by his own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ . . .” (*Small Catechism*). This is done by our evangelical neighbors, and done frequently. When one approaches the subjects of evangelism and conversion handicapped – where the bondage of the will is denied or not fully grasped and where the means of grace are therefore ignored – something else can easily be viewed as the efficient cause. Reason rises to the surface. In his book *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*,⁴ Nabeel Qureshi describes how he wrestled with the evidence for Christianity over against evidence for Islam. It is a fascinating and important read as he is brought from a deep and committed Islamic faith to a confession of truth of the person of Christ. It includes good and necessary apologetic material. However, an implicit and unfortunate teaching of the book is that one can “by his own reason” believe in Jesus Christ. I could not find any reference to the gospel as “the power of God for salvation” or that “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 1:16; 10:17). Word and sacraments as the means of grace are not mentioned. One is left only with reason. Perhaps this is why little attention is given to sin and forgiveness in the book.⁵ The age-old battle of Lutherans and their forefathers against Pelagianism, semi-Pelagianism, and synergism is not over and never will be.

Another ditch, one that receives attention among us, is expressed in statements such as, “Apologetics is *merely* preaching the law. It is an application of truth and fact that impacts the conscience and drives one to repentance. It can reveal wrong thinking on behalf of those who contradict God's Word. Apologetics does not change the heart, only the gospel can do that.” Or, “While it can have a preparatory function of clearing away obstacles which keep unbelievers from giving serious consideration to the claims of Scripture, apologetics does not in any way effect conversion. That is accomplished only by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Word of the Gospel. Apologetics *falls in the realm of the law*. . .”⁶ The implication is if one does not accept the understanding of apologetics found or suggested in these statements, he has fallen or is about to fall into some Pelagian/synergistic ditch. This would be true, *but only if* the premise (“apologetics is *merely* law preaching”) is correct.

However, such statements, while seeking to be faithful to the biblical and Lutheran teachings on the bondage of the will, the limitations of reason, the means of grace, the word alone, etc., do not apply these teachings to apologetics as thoughtfully as they should, and therefore sometimes misapply them. There can be a forced application of *the proper distinction between the law and gospel* paradigm that is unnecessary and inappropriate. But most importantly, such statements fail to deal with the teachings and examples of apologetics found in Scripture.⁷ Apologetics and the treasured doctrines mentioned in Article II of the Formula of Concord, though paradoxical, are not contradictory.

For the record: There are two *efficient causes*, and two alone: “the Holy Spirit and God’s Word as the instrument of the Holy Spirit” (Article II, *Epitome*; see above). Second, reason never can be an efficient cause; it is limited, and, within natural man, is in a firmly established state of rebellion toward

⁴ Qureshi, Nabeel. *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014, 2016, 2018). The latest edition, due to the premature death of Nabeel in 2017, was copyrighted in his wife’s name, Kathryn Michelle Qureshi.

⁵ There is only a portion of one chapter where the author writes about the great comfort of forgiveness he is finding in Christianity (ibid., pp. 200-202).

⁶ The first quotation is a combination of statements (somewhat paraphrased) made by good Lutheran pastors. The second quotation is from “A Statement on Apologetics” (Mankato: *Evangelical Lutheran Synod Report 1985*, p.70; emphasis added). This statement was drawn up by our seminary faculty, acknowledged by the Doctrine Committee as a “clear and concise summar[y] of how confessional Lutherans view [this matter],” and adopted by the 1985 convention. I met with the Doctrine Committee regarding this statement and made the point that whereas the statement was not wrong, it missed an important aspect of apologetics and therefore was open to misunderstanding. There was no disagreement at the meeting. “The Doctrine Committee Apologetics Study Document” (quoted above and also approved by the synod, 2012) clears up some of the deficiency.

⁷ Besides these shortcomings among us Lutherans, I have also observed a too simple, unrealistic, and misapplied understanding of reason, leading to an unnecessary precaution against the use of apologetics.

God. Finally, distinguishing between law and gospel is the bread and butter of any pastor worth his salt; this distinction always guides the called minister in preaching, teaching, mission work, evangelism, worship, confession of sin, and making the case for the truth of Christ (apologetics).

“MY REASON AND ALL MY SENSES” – WE CANNOT *NOT* USE THEM

Our senses and reason obviously work together: Information or evidence comes to our senses – we hear something (a train whistle, a classroom lecture, a directive from a police officer), we see something (a speed limit sign, daylight coming through a window, the Grand Teton, an article from a newspaper describing a court trial), we touch something (a hot forehead, a pulse on a wrist), we smell something, we taste something, *and then* reason generally kicks in. Specifically, it makes a judgment of some sort. It may not make a right or the best judgment, but it makes a judgment nonetheless: “a train is coming”, “my professor is wise,” “I better slow down,” “it’s morning,” “that’s beautiful,” “the man is guilty,” “she has a fever,” “he’s still alive,” etc. We conclude something is true or false, right or wrong, beautiful or ugly, a good idea or bad idea, better or worse, smart or stupid, opinion or fact, myth or real history, important or unimportant, binding or not . . . or something in between these extremes. That’s the connection between our senses and our reason. That’s the way we are created. Some have keener senses than others. Some are better at reasoning than others. Children are developing the use of their senses and reason. The elderly begin to lose some of each. But typically, there is always this process. It’s built into us by nature; it’s unavoidable.

Reason is not pure evil. The eyes can look on a woman lustfully, but they can also admire the beauty of sunrise or see that it’s time to get up by looking at a clock. The mouth can curse God, but it can also request a glass of water because of thirst. Reason, as a gift from God, has legitimate and necessary functions that cannot be classified as sinful. Reason can add, assess, conclude, solve a riddle, comprehend calculus, and find a person guilty or not guilty based on the evidence. Reason does not reject everything Scripture teaches or puts forth as true or factual. Reason weighs evidence, including the evidence given for the truth of Christianity and Christ, and it can come to a conclusion. What reason cannot do and will not do, what it will always reject and rebel against, is the truth of the bondage of the will and the doctrine of God’s grace. Reason can accept some truths of Scripture, but it will reject all Scriptural teachings if it sees these teachings somehow supporting the real implications of the law and the gospel. The true understanding of the Old Adam and the true understanding of grace alone, Scripture alone, faith alone, and Christ alone – these sinful reason will not tolerate.

But this same reason can still weigh evidence, even biblical or extra-biblical evidence in behalf of the truth of Christianity and Christ – evidence that comes to the senses and upon which reason can make a judgment.

This is the way evidential apologetics works.⁸ There is evidence that comes to the senses. Then a judgment will or can be made. The healing of the blind man in John 9 is a classic example where evidence comes to the senses and reason attempts or struggles to make judgments or come to conclusions:⁹

- *The neighbors*: “The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, ‘Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?’ Some said, ‘It is he.’ Others said, ‘No, but he is like him.’” (vv. 8-9).
- *The Pharisees*: “‘This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?’ And there was a division among them.” “The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight.” “Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner.” “And they reviled him, saying, ‘You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.’” (vv. 16, 18, 24, 28).
- *The parents*: “We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. But how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” (vv. 20-21).

⁸ That is, evidential apologetics. Presuppositional apologetics is a different animal.

⁹ Verses quoted in this paper are from the ESV unless otherwise noted. *Emphasis* is mine.

- *The man himself*: “So they said again to the blind man, ‘What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?’ He said, ‘He is a prophet.’” “Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” “Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” (vv. 17, 25, 30-33).

Reason can choose to deny what the evidence clearly states because reason will be ruled by one’s will which is typically invested in one’s false belief system, religion, or worldview, not to mention what the fall has done to reason. Therefore, a judgment may be right, or it may be wrong. “Yet many of the people believed in him. They said, ‘When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?’” (John 7:31). “There was again a division among the Jews because of these words [of Jesus claiming to be the good shepherd who would lay down his life and take it up again for the sheep]. Many of them said, ‘He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?’ Others said, ‘These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’” (John 10:19-21). Reason can even make a right judgment intellectually, but there may be no ascent of the will to what is clearly true. Nicodemus: “Rabbi, *we know* that you are a teacher who has come from God, *for no one could perform these signs you do unless God were with him.*” Christ: “Truly I tell you . . . *you do not accept our testimony.*” (John 3:2, 11).¹⁰

In the cases cited above (and below), I am mostly dealing with a unique kind of information that comes to the senses: miracles. But whether the information is supernatural or natural (such as Jesus using simple logic or quoting from the Old Testament in defending the truth, as do Paul and others in the book of Acts and elsewhere), the process is still the same: the senses receive information – there is evidence – and reason generally makes some sort of judgment.

THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

The question is not whether there is evidence that comes to the senses. It clearly does and that is the nature of apologetics. Neither is the question whether reason is able to make a judgment. It certainly does, even if it is wrong. But when considering the different apologetic texts in Scripture, there is one question in particular I would call out-of-order: “Is this *evidence* for the truth of Christianity law preaching?” Asking that question of apologetics is like asking, “Is *artwork* depicting the crucifixion of Christ law preaching?” To make the point clearer, take the ultimate apology, the clearest evidence and defense for the truth of Christ, and try applying the same question there: “Are the appearances of the resurrected Christ law preaching?” This is not the right question. The question should be: “Are his resurrection appearances *used in the service of*¹¹ the law?” But we can’t stop there as we consider various Scriptural examples: “Are the appearances of the resurrected Christ ever somehow *used in the service of* the gospel?” And we go one more: “Are there cases where the visible-to-the-eyes resurrected Christ are *used in the service of* both?” We then need to apply these same questions to other apologies as well – all those pieces of evidence that come to the senses and upon which reason can make a judgment. But then follows this question, the answer to which is very important: “If apologetics is used in the service of the gospel, how so?” And this question leads to another that is begged by the statements on apologetics mentioned above: “Is it ever accurate to say that apologetics, somehow, is a *cause* of conversion?”¹²

There is a tightrope to walk here. But that walk must be guided by Scripture alone.

¹⁰ We can argue about whether certain “believings” were real saving faith. But even if some were not, the point still stands that senses saw or heard, and reason made some sort of judgment regarding the person or work of Christ.

¹¹ By “in the service of” I am including both intent (or purpose) and result. An apology presented may be *intended* to convict a person of sin and that also may be the *result*. An apology may be *intended* to lead a person to faith and that may somehow be the *result*. However, the intent does not always guarantee the result.

¹² The careful wording “efficient causes” by the confessors seems to raise the possibility of “non-efficient” causes. My conclusion and summary of this is found toward the end of this essay under the heading “Are There, Then, Non-Efficient Causes?”

APOLOGETICS IN THE FOUR GOSPELS

The following sections from the gospels deal with apologetics – evidence that comes to the senses and where judgments are or can be made. Is this evidence used in the service of the law, the gospel, or both? If it is used in the service of the gospel, how can this be without violating and throwing overboard the clear teachings on the bondage of the will and the two efficient causes? And can apologetics ever be classified as a cause *in some sense* so it is distinguished from an efficient cause?

What follows is a sampling of verses¹³ (*emphasis mine*) along with comments:

- Matt. 9: ⁴But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? ⁵For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? ⁶*But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins*”—he then said to the paralytic— “Rise, pick up your bed and go home.”

Comments: This is one of the clearest passages in which proof is offered by Jesus for something he has just done, as if Jesus is saying: “Yes, I, the Son of Man, have the authority to forgive sins, and here is the evidence.” Is this evidence that is visible to those present used in the service of the law or the gospel or possibly both? We let the words of Scripture speak for themselves: it is used in some sense in the service of the gospel (“forgiveness of sins”). This does not, however, mean that forgiveness can or will be received by anyone simply because he can reason. Nor does this exclude this proof being used in the service of the law. The efficacy of the law or the gospel is not the question here. The proof for at least one of them – the gospel – is.

- Matt. 11: ²Now when John *heard* in prison *about the deeds of the Christ*, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” ⁴And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John *what you hear and see*: ⁵*the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.*”

Comments: Jesus is telling John (and his disciples) to connect the dots – to reason and make a judgment: “I am performing these miracles predicted of the Messiah in the Scriptures and I am preaching the gospel to poor sinners, therefore, what is the reasonable conclusion? You asked me a question; I am pointing you to evidence; so figure it out.” Is this being used in the service of the law or the gospel? If one brings with him to the table a grasp of, for example, Isaiah 53 (which John undoubtedly did), then this is used in the service of the gospel. If there is no understanding of personal sin and the vicarious Suffering Servant, then the miracles referenced by Jesus could just as well be used in the service of the law.

- Matt. 11: ²⁰Then he began to *denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.* ²¹“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For *if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago* in sackcloth and ashes. ²²But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

Comments: Here we have an instance where the miracles of Christ, according to his own words, should have brought about repentance. That is, they were used in the service of the law (intent). And the miracles of Christ would continue to be used in the service of the law for these unbelievers, now and in the future, as a reminder of their rejection of the Christ. This does not mean, however, that miracles can only be used in the service of the law. One should not say, “Aha! A clear example of proof being used to convict people of sin. Therefore, this must be the case in all other places where proof is put forth.”

¹³ In my research I found over 200 sections (individual verses or multiple verses) in the Gospels, Acts, and epistles that touched upon apologetics in some way or another. I narrowed this list down to 136 that I consider to be more clear or pertinent to this discussion. For this list see Appendix A. Applying the questions mentioned above (“Is this used in the service of the law, the gospel?” etc.) to these verses is appropriate in most cases. I have attempted to be fair in my choice of passages, listing those that appear to speak for themselves, the conclusions being fairly obvious.

- Matt. 12: ²⁴But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.” ²⁵Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, “*Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand.* ²⁶*And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?* ²⁷*And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out?* Therefore they will be your judges.²⁸ *But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.*

Comments: This section is interesting for several reasons. First, based on what the Pharisees observed, they judged Jesus to be in league with the prince of demons. They saw and dealt with the evidence, but came to a faulty conclusion *because* they could not free themselves from and needed to maintain their false religion. Second, Jesus uses simple logic to point out their irrationality, essentially saying, “You Pharisees have checked your brain at the door.” Jesus uses both reason and his miracles in the service of the law. The intent was to convict, even though that was not the result (as far as we know). But it must not go unnoticed that he also says, “if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, *then the kingdom of God has come.*” Which kingdom was he talking about? The kingdom of grace. Whether they believed it or not, whether they understood it or not, his exorcisms also pointed to grace, and in that way they are used in the service of the gospel.

- Matt. 26: ⁷⁴Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know the man.” And immediately the rooster crowed.⁷⁵ And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.

Comments: Peter had heard the prediction by Christ earlier. Then when Peter denied him, heard the rooster, and remembered the words of Christ – seeing the prophecy fulfilled – he wept bitterly. Fulfillment of prophecy used in the service of the law.

- Mark 16: ²⁰And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and *confirmed the message* [τὸν λόγον] *by accompanying signs.*

Comments: What message or what word was confirmed? “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (16:16). Both the word of gospel and the law are confirmed (βεβαιουῶντος; “established”, “secured”) by the evidence of the miraculous and observable signs of the apostles.

- Luke 2: ¹⁰And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David *a Savior*, who is Christ the Lord. ¹²And *this will be a sign for you:* you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

Comments: Whereas the appearance of the angel of the Lord had just filled the shepherds with great fear (an observance that was used in the service of the law), the baby in a manger was a sign of a Savior who came to save people from sin (used in the service of the gospel).

- Luke 5: ⁶And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. ⁷They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸But *when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees*, saying, “*Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.*” ⁹For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, ¹⁰. . . And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.”

Comments: Information comes to Peter’s senses – proof that this Jesus is no ordinary man – and Peter rightly judges that he, a sinful man, dare not be the presence of this holy Whatever-He-Is sent from God. Observable and miraculous information is used in the service of the law, followed by the word of the gospel, “Do not be afraid.”

- Luke 16: ²⁷“He said, ‘Then I beg you, father, send [Lazarus] to my father’s home,²⁸ because I have five brothers—to warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ ²⁹“Abraham said, ‘*They have Moses and the Prophets. Let them listen to them.*’ ³⁰“No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘*but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.*’ ³¹“Abraham replied to him, ‘*If they do*

not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

Comments: This has become a *sedes doctrinae* for many when it comes to apologetics. And it is important for apologetics. It has great application. But it does not cover all the bases; it is not intended to answer any and all questions regarding the role of proof in evangelism and conversion. For starters, it should be kept in mind that the rich man would not have been thinking of repentance for his brothers in a Christian sense. The rich man, or any unbeliever, whether he be on earth or in hell, has no true understanding of the cross. It is foolishness or a stumbling block to him. The gospel would never enter into the salvation equation for him. The other difficulty of using this as the final and only word on apologetics is that it would then be in conflict with other clear examples and teachings where such observable evidence of a resurrection somehow accomplished what it would not accomplish with the rich man’s brothers. See comments below on Luke 24 and John 20:19-29 where seeing and touching the resurrected Christ were used not merely in the service of the law.

So, what *do* we take away from this account? First, Jesus was not saying that evidence of a resurrection is unnecessary and would always do nothing. He *was* saying that no amount of evidence would convince those who refused to believe, something confirmed in Acts as the apostles presented resurrection evidence. People have no ability to accept Christ on their own, but they are very capable of rejecting him, in spite of the evidence. The other thing to learn is this: apologetics divorced from “Moses and the Prophets” (that is, divorced from *the Christ-focused and gospel-centered message of the Old Testament Scriptures* – Luke 24:27) is totally useless. “Moses and the Prophets” is ultimately and primarily about Christ. If all one hears is evidence for the existence of God, for Jesus of Nazareth as a real historical figure, for the superiority of a young earth over against any form of evolution, or even testimony of a man resurrected (all of which *are* important), I might just as well spend my time convincing him of the rules of arithmetic, and leave it at that. Math won’t save him, and neither will believing that a man named Jesus walked this earth, if that’s all he has. “Moses and the Prophets” teaches me that I am desperately wicked, that God is a God of justice, but, *above all*, the good news that this Messiah alone is my righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. What this text does *not* teach, however, is that apologetics is unimportant or useless; it does not state that evidence cannot be used in the service of the gospel.

— Luke 24: ³⁶As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, “Peace to you!” ³⁷But they were *startled and frightened* and thought they saw a spirit. ³⁸And he said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹*See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see.* For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” ⁴⁰And when he had said this, *he showed them his hands and his feet.* ⁴¹And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, “*Have you anything here to eat?*” ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and *he took it and ate before them.*

Comments: According to one understanding of apologetics (an incomplete one), these appearances – and the lengths to which Jesus went *to convince them* of his resurrection – were unnecessary. Afterall, if the disciples, just like us, could not by their own reason or strength believe in Jesus, all God really needed to do was send a prophet simply to *say*: “Jesus who was crucified for you has risen.” No appearances needed. Yet Jesus appeals to their senses and reason. He is directing the apostles and others present to use their senses and reason; he is asking them to look at and touch the specific marks that identified him as the one who really, truly was dead by crucifixion so they might believe and say, “It really is you, alive, risen!” and thereby alleviate their fears and doubts. When doubts continued regarding his identity (“maybe we’re seeing a ghost!”), he provided more evidence to confirm an obvious reality: “Watch me eat some of your food right in front of you.” It was important and essential that Jesus confirm the reality of his resurrection. What he did here and over the next 40 days was give them “many convincing [i.e., observable] proofs” (Acts 1:3, CSB) that begged for and demanded the only reasonable judgment. But it is important to note that such appearances and proofs could be and were used in the service of the law as well, even though being used in the gospel predominates.

- John 2: ¹¹This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.
- John 2: ²³Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many *believed* in his name *when they saw the signs* that he was doing.
- John 11: ⁴⁴The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.” ⁴⁵Many of the Jews *therefore*, who had come with Mary *and had seen what he did*, *believed* in him.

Comments: A common feature in the Gospel of John is a miracle followed by believing: Evidence (for his person or work) followed by faith. It is possible that some time before believing, these miracles were used in the service of the law, to work contrition. But the context gives no evidence for this.¹⁴ One is not allowed to import something into the text unless it is confirmed by parallel accounts or it is a clear teaching from elsewhere in Scripture that demands such an interpretation. What we simply have in the passages above is evidence (a sign, a miracle) followed by faith. In other words, these accounts are saying evidence is being used in the service of the gospel. Again, this does not exclude miracles being used in the service of the law, but that is not found here.

- John 6: ¹⁴*When the people saw the sign* that he had done, they said, “*This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!*” ¹⁵Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself. . . . ²⁶Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, *you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.*” ²⁷Do not work for the *food that perishes*, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. . . .” ²⁸Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” ²⁹Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” ³⁰So they said to him, “Then *what sign do you do*, that we may see and believe you?. . .” ³⁶“But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. . . .” ⁴⁰For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” ⁴¹So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” ⁴²They said, “*Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’*” ⁴³Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. ⁴⁴*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. . . .*” ⁵¹I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” ⁵²The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “*How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*” ⁵³So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, *unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. . . .*” ⁶⁰When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “*This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?*” . . . ⁶⁶After this *many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.* ⁶⁷So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, *to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,*” ⁶⁹and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”

Comments: It is important to see how this account fits with previous and following sections of John. The discourse follows the feeding of the five thousand. A miracle was performed that confirmed a number of things, including Jesus as the bread of life sent from heaven. The crowd saw and partook of the miraculous food and was then determined to make him king by force, for they judged him to be the Prophet. How they understood “the Prophet” becomes clear in the latter verses. When they catch up to him the next day, they are still determined to make him king. However, they do not believe in Jesus as the true bread of life. One might conclude that the miracle, therefore, was not used in the service of the gospel because it did not produce within them such a faith. But the distinction needs to be made between purpose and result. I may intend one thing, but that may not be the result. The unfulfilled result does not negate the purpose or intent. God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. But that result does not happen. So, it can still be said that this miracle was used in the service of the gospel

¹⁴ This is not to suggest the law had not done its work prior to believing. Obviously it would have, necessarily.

(“I am the bread of life”) even though no one there believed it. Like the Pharisees above, these unbelievers were so invested in their false worldview (a materialistic, heaven-on-earth, prosperity gospel) that they were blind to the intent of the miracle, interpreted it according to their false theology (“you can and will give us everything we need for the here and now”), and ended up just as firmly entrenched in their rejection of Christ as any Pharisee or Sadducee. But there is something else to note here. Support for the bondage of the will and the efficient causes is here: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

- John 10: ²⁴ So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.”²⁵ Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe. *The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me,*²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep.
- John 10: ³⁷ If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; ³⁸ *but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.*”
- John 12: ⁹ When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well,¹¹ *because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.*
- John 14: ⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, *or else believe on account of the works themselves.*
- John 20: ³⁰ Now *Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples,* which are not written in this book; ³¹ *but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

Comments: See also the comments under John 2 and 11 above. One of the takeaways from these verses is that the observable evidence of miracles is a reason to believe in Jesus. Again, evidence is being used in the service of the gospel. I have always been confused by a broader interpretation of John 20:30-31, as if “these” (v. 31) is talking about something other than “signs” (v. 30).¹⁵ Whereas the broader teaching is true, viz., “*this gospel of John* is written that you might believe...,” it is quite difficult to conclude on the basis of the Greek that this is the primary meaning of these verses.¹⁶ I don’t mind this teaching at all, but we sell John short if we see it as the essential meaning here. The connection between ταῦτα and σημεῖα is right there, it’s contextual, both within these two verses and in the broader context. We therefore partially miss John’s apologetic thrust when we assume ταῦτα is something other than signs. The meaning is clear: “These signs, performed by Jesus in the presence of his disciples, are written down by an eyewitness so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

- John 12: ³⁷ Though he had done *so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him,*³⁸ so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”

Comments: Though believing often follows the observable evidence of signs and miracles, that is not always the case. The intent of the signs is clear (believing in Jesus, thus serving the gospel), even

¹⁵ For example, the headings for these two verses in the ESV, EHV, and CSB say, “The Purpose of *This Gospel*” (emphasis added) or something similar. It is more accurate to say, “The Purpose of These Signs”.

¹⁶ σημεῖα whenever it is used in John is always a reference to his miracles, miracles that confirm and point to – are a sign of – the reality of his divinity and his work. Luther (see Appendix B, #7) and J. Ylvisaker (*The Gospels, A Synoptic Harmony*, p. 790) agree that “these” is referring to “signs”. See also “The Purpose of the Gospel of John According to John 20:30-31”, Michael K. Smith, *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* (December 2016), 296-304.

when there is no such result. What such verses show us is that many will remain firmly entrenched in unbelief in spite of the evidence; no amount of proof will change a thing.

- John 19: ³³But when they came to Jesus and saw that *he was already dead*, they did not break his legs. ³⁴But *one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.* ³⁵*He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe.* ³⁶For *these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken.”* ³⁷And again another Scripture says, “They will look on him whom they have pierced.”

Comments: John is telling his readers they ought to believe Jesus died on the cross because he clearly observed it, verified by the piercing and the flow of blood and water. One is to believe that Jesus (earlier shown to be the Son of God by his words and deeds) was truly dead *on the basis of what John saw with his eyes*. It’s a matter of historical record. To put it another way: the death of the crucified Christ is to be believed not merely because the apostle says so, but because of his reliable eyewitness testimony.

- John 20: ¹⁹On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰When he had said this, *he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.* ²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” ²²And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” ²⁴Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.” ²⁶Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “*Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.*” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “*My Lord and my God!*”

Comments: Here are two points to add (or reemphasize) to what was said above regarding Luke 24: First, we see a close connection between the senses and reason working together on the one hand (“we saw and touched, therefore it is him!”) and the proclaiming of the gospel on the other (“If you forgive...they are forgiven”). That connection is real. The Office of the Keys would not be a reality without a resurrected Christ, a resurrection confirmed by his appearances which in turn confirms the Office of the Keys.¹⁷

I also see here an instance where apologetics – viz., the appearance of the resurrected Jesus – is used in the service of both the law and gospel. “Thomas, put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side and know that your pride, your stubbornness, your unbelief are all so clearly wrong.” “Thomas, put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side and know that I, who died for you – for your pride, your stubbornness, your unbelief, your sin – I am alive.” This explains Thomas’ confession of faith: “My Lord and my God.” Right then and there, the law and the gospel were effective. The appearance (evidence) served both.

APOLOGETICS IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

The use of apologetics is just as extensive and clear in Acts.

First, Acts contains observable evidence upon which a judgment could or should be made:

¹⁷ This is similar to Rom. 1:1-4: “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the *gospel* of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was *declared to be the Son of God* in power according to the Spirit of holiness *by his resurrection from the dead*, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

- “After he had suffered, he also presented himself alive to them by *many convincing proofs*, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.” (1:3, CSB).
- “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, *a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know*” (2:22).
- Acts 2: ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and *many wonders and signs* were being done through the apostles.
- Acts 4: ⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, *by what means this man has been healed*, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well.
- Acts 9: ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly *a light from heaven shone around him*. ⁴ And falling to the ground, *he heard a voice* saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”
- Acts 9: ³⁴ And Peter said to him, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed.” And *immediately he rose*. ³⁵ And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.
- Acts 9: ⁴⁰ But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, “*Tabitha, arise*.” And *she opened her eyes*, and when she saw Peter she sat up. ⁴¹ And he gave her his hand and *raised her up*. Then, calling the saints and widows, he *presented her alive*.
- Acts 10: ³⁶ As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), ³⁷ *you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea*, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. *He went about doing good and healing* all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ And *we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem*. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but *God raised him on the third day and made him to appear*, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as *witnesses*, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.
- Acts 13: ¹¹ “And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and *you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time*.” Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. ¹² Then the proconsul believed, when *he saw* what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.
- Acts 16: ²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, ²⁶ and *suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened*.
- Acts 14: ¹⁰ Paul said in a loud voice, “*Stand upright on your feet*.” And *he sprang up and began walking*. ¹¹ And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, “*The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!*”¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. ¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, ¹⁵ “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. ¹⁶ In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. ¹⁷ Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.” ¹⁸ Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.

- Acts 26: ²⁵But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and *rational* words. ²⁶*For the king knows about these things*, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that *none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner*.

Second, this evidence is used in the service of the law:

- Acts 2: ³⁷Now *when they heard this they were cut to the heart*, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”
- Acts 9: ³Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*” ⁵And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*”
- Acts 5: ²⁷And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, ²⁸saying, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and *you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.*” ²⁹But Peter and the apostles answered, “*We must obey God rather than men.*” ³⁰*The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree.*”

Third, this observable evidence is also used in the service of the gospel:

- Acts 4: ³³The apostles continued to *testify about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ* with great power, and abundant grace was on all of them. (EHV)
- Acts 9: ³⁴And Peter said to him, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed.” And immediately he rose. ³⁵And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon *saw him, and they turned to the Lord*.
- Acts 9: ⁴⁰But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, “Tabitha, arise.” And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. ⁴¹And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then, calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. ⁴²*And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.*
- Acts 10: ³⁶As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), ³⁷you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: ³⁸how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹And *we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem*. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰but *God raised him on the third day and made him to appear*, ⁴¹not to all the people but *to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead*. ⁴²And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³To him all the prophets *bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*” ⁴⁴*While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.*
- Acts 13: ¹¹“And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time.” Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. ¹²*Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred*, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.
- Acts 17: ²As usual, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days *reasoned with them from the Scriptures*, ³explaining and *proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and rise from the dead*: “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah.” ⁴*Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, including a large number of God-fearing Greeks, as well as a number of the leading women.*
- Acts 28: ²³When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, *testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus* both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. ²⁴And *some were convinced* by what he said, but others disbelieved.

THE VERDICT: MANY TEXTS ARE USED IN THE SERVICE OF THE GOSPEL.

Whereas most of the passages above are descriptions of what took place, they also confirm that observable evidence is being used *not only* in the service of the law *but also*, many times, in the service of the gospel. Consider these passages, some of which have already been quoted:

- Mark 16: ²⁰ And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and *confirmed the message by accompanying signs*.
- John 20: ³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ *but these [signs] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*.
- Acts 14: ³ So they stayed there a long time and spoke boldly for the Lord, *who testified to the message of his grace by enabling them to do signs and wonders*. (CSB)
- 2 Cor. 12: ¹² The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.
- 1 John 1: That which was from the beginning, *which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life*—² the life was made manifest, and *we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life*, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—³ that which *we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us*; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.
- 2 Pet. 1: ¹⁶ For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but *we were eyewitnesses of his majesty*. ¹⁷ For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” ¹⁸ *we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain*. ¹⁹ *And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts*.
- 1 Cor. 15: ¹ Now I would remind you, brothers, of *the gospel I preached to you*, which you received, in which you stand,² and by which you are being *saved*, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. ³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ *died for our sins* in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he *was raised* on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and *that he appeared* to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ *Then he appeared* to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ *Then he appeared* to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, *he appeared also to me*.
- Heb. 2: ³ *This salvation* had its beginning when it was spoken of by the Lord, and it was *confirmed* to us *by those who heard him*. ⁴ At the same time, God also *testified by signs and wonders, various miracles . . .*

These and other sections:

- 1) All refer to evidence upon which a judgment can be made, and,
- 2) All claim that this evidence is somehow used in the service of the gospel. Specifically,
 - Observable evidences (“signs”) “*confirmed the message*” of the apostles (Mark 16).
 - Observable evidences (“signs”) are recorded “*so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name*” (John 20).
 - Observable evidences (“signs and wonders”) “*testified to the message of his grace*” (Acts 14).
 - Observable evidences (“signs and wonders and miracles”) are “signs of a true apostle” (2 Cor. 12).
 - Observable evidence (the risen Christ) was “heard . . . seen with our eyes . . . looked upon and . . . touched with our hands,” . . . *so that you too may have fellowship with us and . . . with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ*” (1 John 1).

- Observable evidence (the transfigured Christ) means “we have *the prophetic word more fully confirmed*” (2 Pet. 1).¹⁸
- Observable evidences (numerous appearances of the resurrected Christ to different individuals and groups over 40 days) were part and parcel of what was “*delivered to you as of first importance*,” and linked with the gospel that saves and with the Christ who “died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15)
- Observable evidences (“signs and wonders, various miracles”) “*testified*” to “*this salvation*” (Heb. 2).

ANSWERING THE PARADOX: OFFERING EVIDENCE WHILE PRESERVING THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL AND GRACE ALONE

So here’s the all-important question: How can apologetics (making the case for the truth that Jesus is the Christ by presenting evidence in which reason plays a role) be used in the service of the gospel without denying the bondage of the will and the efficient causes of the word and Holy Spirit?

We cannot unmake what we are. We have senses and our reason. And whether right or wrong reason can make a judgment. Reason, corrupted by the fall, cannot convince the will out of its hatred for God. It cannot grasp Christ and his forgiveness. It cannot be an instigating cause of faith. Nevertheless, we still have this reason that inevitably and naturally judges. We cannot avoid being creatures who will sense, reason, and make judgments, even if we wanted to.

So here is the way the paradox can be answered. It is a narrow path. But I believe it steers us correctly.

Apologetics is used in the service of the gospel *insofar* as it points to, implies, or confirms the truth of the gospel.

This is what is seen over and over again in numerous examples of Scripture, all the while upholding and acknowledging the precious means of grace. Reason can reason. But it cannot effect conversion. It can hear what is to be believed, but it cannot enable one to believe. It can see or hear the evidence in favor of the truth of the gospel, but it is not the power of God for salvation that creates faith. The gospel alone does that. But the evidence – that which reason cannot or should not ignore – can imply, point to, or confirm the word of the saving gospel which the Holy Spirit then uses to change the heart of stone within the rebellious sinner into a believing heart now reconciled to God because of the work of Christ.

This allows Scripture to stand and speak as it does when it comes to the purpose and/or result of apologetics (evidence used in the service of the law or the gospel or both) *and at the same time* the doctrine of sin and the doctrine of grace remain firm and true.

Appendix B includes quotations from Dr. Martin Luther where he recognizes that the Gospels contain proof, evidence, and eyewitness testimony used in the service of the gospel as explained above. For example: “For since He shows Himself to be alive and, moreover, offers them His hands and side for inspection, their eyes and reason are convinced that He is certainly risen from the dead. And so the Word and the work agree with each other.” He even goes so far as to say these observable evidences and proofs bring certainty.¹⁹

Luther sees these proofs – that are observed by the senses and upon which reason can make a judgment – as working hand-in-glove with the Word, all the while teaching the bondage of the will and the total inability of reason to be an efficient cause.

But why would God do this? Why use reason in such a way? For several reasons. First, we are created by him with specific gifts and abilities he expects us to use, including reason. He does not ignore who we are; rather he uses this attribute unique to human beings to lead to faith or, in the case of believers, to strengthen faith. Second, reason is the only means given to us by which we can judge

¹⁸ I am assuming one of two interpretations and understandings of these verses.

¹⁹ Appendix B, #s 5, 6, 8, 9.

something to be true or false, right or wrong, keeping in mind its appropriate and ministerial role. Apologetics is used so one can say, “this is certainly true” (Luke 1:1-3²⁰), or to say with Thomas, “My Lord and my God.” Third, it sets Christianity and Christ apart from all other religions, their false messiahs, and their utopias. False religions do not and cannot provide such evidence; not even close. Christianity is in a class by itself. Fourth, it is time. In a culture where the Bible is readily dismissed as God’s word, a common ground that remains is reason.

BUT WHERE’S THE OBSERVABLE EVIDENCE FOR US? THE IMPORTANCE OF EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY

The miracles, fulfillment of prophecy, and the resurrection of Christ – proof for the truth of Christ – were events that took place within the time and space of 1st century A.D. Palestine. That evidence has come and gone. “Therefore,” someone might think, “believing for us is a matter of just hearing the word since there is no such evidence for our eyes to see or our hands to touch.”

It is true we cannot reproduce *that* evidence.²¹ But there are two things to keep in mind. First, the apostles and others who observed the evidence back then did not come to faith because the miracles and resurrection of Christ were the efficient causes. They also, like us, could not “by their own reason . . . believe in Jesus Christ or come to him.” What’s good for the goose is good for the gander. If evidence plays no *such* role in our believing according to Scripture, then it played no such role in their believing either. Yet, as was shown above, evidence was used in the service of the gospel. And this remains as true for us today as it did for them back then.

That brings me to the second and very important point. The apostles were to bring the message of Christ “to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:8). And how were they to do that? *Merely* by telling or writing to people that Jesus lived, died, rose, and ascended, and then proclaim forgiveness of sins, followed by an exhortation to repent and believe? Get rid of the “merely” and the statement is better, but still incomplete. So what did the apostles do beyond the *merely*? “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and *you will be my witnesses* in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, *and* to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:8). “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. *You are witnesses* of these things.” (Luke 24:46-48; see also John 15:27). The noun “witness” (μάρτυς) is used 35 times in the New Testament. In all of these, with two exceptions *possibly* (Rev. 2:13; 17:6), this noun always refers to one who saw, who heard, or who touched: “We were there.”²²

And what they saw, heard, and touched was put forth as evidence, as in a courtroom where jurors hear or see (and sometimes read) the evidence provided by witnesses. *Eyewitnesses* are always best. And if these witnesses all agree, that’s even better. And just like a courtroom where jurors are to hear the evidence, deliberate, and come with a verdict, so also the apostles were appealing to juror-like abilities of their hearers or readers to weigh their testimony and come to a conclusion. They were seeking to

²⁰ Luke 1:1-3: “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have *certainty* concerning the things you have been taught.” (emphasis added).

²¹ People often fail to distinguish between *scientific proof* (dependent upon observation of repeatable events) and *historical proof* (normally associated with eyewitness accounts or careful investigation and research into past events in order to verify the events). Both are valid ways to prove something. But many, for some reason, think truth can only be established or confirmed by the scientific method, even though they don’t live like this; in fact, no one does.

²² It is unfortunate that we often refer to Christians in general as “witnesses” who are to “witness” to their neighbor. We are not witnesses; not even close, at least in the NT sense. To call ourselves such actually waters down the import of this New Testament term, making it something other than what it is, and detracting from its great apologetic value. (See also “Matthew 28:19 and the Mission of the WELS”, p. 44ff.; report to the WELS Conference of Presidents, April 23, 2007).

persuade and convince them. This cannot be denied. Their role as apostle *and as witness* to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ could not be separated from one another. If he was an apostle, he was necessarily a witness (Acts 1:21-22; 1 John 1:1-3; John 15:27). This witness role was not used incidentally, or even occasionally. It was part and parcel to the apostles' message. It was not something the apostles appealed to just once in a while. In the evangelism sermons in Acts, the apostles almost always establish the factuality of the resurrection of Christ by referring to their eyewitness status (2:32; 3:15; 4:13; 5:32; 10:39, 41; 13:31). Paul also was obligated to let others know that he witnessed the risen Christ: "But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and *witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you*" (Acts 26:16; see also 22:15). There is no doubt that Paul in 1 Cor. 15:3-8 records six post-resurrection appearances to eyewitnesses, himself included, as evidence for the truth of the gospel of forgiveness.

Eyewitness testimony *is* evidence. Two will do. Three is even better. But 500+, at different times, in different groups, sometimes individually, all saying the same thing?

Though the apostles spoke as if these events and the accompanying message of forgiveness were true, they did not *merely* say, "Jesus suffered, died, and rose for the forgiveness of your sins, therefore repent and believe." Nor did they *merely* say, "Believe this because of my apostolic authority." Instead, their preaching was often accompanied by the "signs of an apostle . . . , including signs and wonders and miracles" (2 Cor. 12:12). And, almost always, attached to the message of the gospel was the evidence of their eyes and ears, what they saw and heard: "we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. . . . [we] ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead" (Acts 10:39, 41).

This has tremendous practical application for us today. I often ask a sceptic or unbeliever if he accepts certain historical events or persons to be factual, like the existence of Julius Caesar or specific ancient empires. If yes, why? I am opening a door to the reliability of eyewitness testimony or to the reliability of those who after careful research and investigation recorded the factual events and the words actually spoken. When we place the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles before the sceptic, the atheist, the agnostic, the Muslim, or the person who has not given his worldview or religion much critical thought, we are not simply having them read or listen to "the Word of God" (though it is that), we are also having them weigh eyewitness testimony; we are having them read or listen to reliable historical records. And we can and ought to emphasize that. In most cases it would do no good to say, "Read this, it is the Word of God." They cannot relate to that; they do not share the same epistemology. They will not believe the Bible is the word of God simply because I say so; that understanding usually comes after conversion. Besides, this is not the approach of the apostles. Though they spoke authoritatively (at times) and corroborated their apostolic authority with miracles, the evidence they most often placed before others was, "We were there," or, "Here is testimony of witnesses," and therefore "These are reliable and true records," something for which they were willing to die.²³

Luther recognized this understanding and use of the eyewitness testimony in the gospels:

Christ's resurrection is certified, first of all, by the testimony of His adversaries; then, by the testimony of His friends; third, by the testimony of the Lord Himself, by revealing Himself to be alive and by showing Himself; and fourth, by the testimony of the prophets and Holy Scripture. The guards, the governor Pilate, as well as the chief priests and the Jews confess that Christ is not in the tomb. Next, not only do Peter and John run to the tomb but also [Mary] Magdalene and all the other women and disciples, and they find things just as the angels had said. Then, the Lord Himself comes to them as well. He eats and drinks with them after His resurrection; talks with them; allows them to touch, feel, and clasp Him; and says: "See my hands and my feet, that it is I Myself. Touch Me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" [Luke 24:39]. In short, during the forty days before His

²³ Again, it is hard to underestimate the prooftext of 1 John 1:1-3: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." See also 1 Cor. 15:30-32.

ascension into heaven, He so convinces them that none of them can deny, but all must confess, that the Lord has truly risen from the dead. Finally, Holy Scripture is also in agreement, and the testimony of the dear prophets. In this way, both friend and foe bear witness to the resurrection, and in addition to such testimony there is the event itself as well in Scripture.

Upon such testimonies every Christian should joyfully and confidently rely and should believe certainly and without any doubt that Christ rose from the dead on the third day. . . . We should rely on these with certainty and not require any further special revelation. For myself, I am entirely satisfied by these witnesses, so that I would not even wish to have some kind of special revelation and see Christ in person. For even such a personal vision would not be as helpful as these testimonies. For because I have often read that the devil often disguises himself in the form of Christ, I would be unable to believe such revelations. But when Pilate and those who crucified Christ themselves confess that He rose from the dead; then, that His disciples bear witness to the same thing; and Christ Himself bears witness; and the writings of the prophets bear witness – that is more certain and convincing for me than any special revelations.²⁴

One of the best ways to evangelize apologetically is simply to put in the hands of an unbeliever one or more of these accurate historical accounts that were written by eyewitnesses or by those who had access to the eyewitnesses and did the research. And the great thing about this apologetic approach – placing in their hands the reliable words and accurate observations of witnesses – is the power of God for salvation is embedded throughout.²⁵

RETHINKING DEBATING AND PERSUADING

Whether we are talking about biblical or extra-biblical apologetics, eyewitness accounts, or natural law approaches, it is often said we cannot argue people into the kingdom of God for nothing good will come of it. This is based, to some degree, on the assumption that trying to argue people into the kingdom of God is relying on reason. Arguments and debates, the thinking goes, are merely attempts to persuade and convince someone’s mind with rational arguments, therefore, the means of grace are pushed out of the picture.²⁶

But what is overlooked is Paul and even Christ himself. They took on their opponents. And in doing so their intent and result is evident. Consider Paul:

- Acts 17: ²And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he *reasoned* with them from the Scriptures, ³explaining and *proving* that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.”⁴ And some of them were *persuaded* . . .
- Acts 18:⁴ And he *reasoned* in the synagogue every Sabbath, and *tried to persuade* Jews and Greeks.
- Acts 19:⁸ Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly over a period of three months, arguing and persuading them about the kingdom of God. (CSB)
- Acts 19:²⁶ And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul *has persuaded* and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods.

²⁴ Luther, M., *Luther’s works, vol. 69: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*, Christopher Boyd Brown, Ed. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009) 288-289. For a longer quotation of this, see Appendix B, #8.

²⁵ One of my frustrations has been to find a small paperback edition of the Gospel of John that does not have some editor’s introduction or conclusion that pushes decision theology or some version of the “Sinner’s Prayer.” Several years ago, we ended up cutting out about four pages of one version before we handed them out. Then I did find one that was “decision-free,” but when we ordered more later, the decision theology had been put in. I have now found one that is better, though not perfect. It can be bought in bulk so the price is only \$1.35/John. It’s ESV and does not list chapters and verses (which I like for evangelism purposes). Go to: biblesbythecase.com and type in “ESV Gospel of John, LARGE PRINT Reader’s Edition (Paperback - Case of 50)”. The CSB will be coming out with the Gospel of John next summer, with no commentary.

²⁶ Luke 16:31 is used in support of this where Jesus says, “If they don’t listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be *persuaded* if someone rises from the dead.” But, as stated earlier, this verse is not to be applied across the board as if it is the only one that has anything to say about the use of evidence.

- Acts 26: ²⁸ And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you *persuade* me to be a Christian?” ²⁹ And Paul said, “Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am. . .”
- Acts 28: ²³ When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and *trying to convince* them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. ²⁴ And some were *convinced* by what he said, but others disbelieved.

Some would point out that these attempts of Paul to prove and persuade were “from the Scriptures,” and therefore he was relying on the power of the Word and not on evidence or reason. No doubt Paul did argue from the Scripture, especially with the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles who accepted the Old Testament as inspired – they had a common epistemology. But we also know that Paul’s (and Peter’s) argumentation for the truth of Christ consisted of performing miracles (2 Cor. 12:12) and eyewitness testimony. And even if Paul’s attempts to persuade and convince were only “scriptural” (which they were not), the fact remains he was obviously appealing to the reasoning ability of the mind of *the unbeliever* in order to persuade and convince him that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

The best way to explain this arguing or debating, this persuading and convincing, is found in what was said before regarding apologetics in general: Arguments are and can (and even should) be used in the service of the law, in the service of the gospel, and in the service of both; they can be used to lead people to faith in Christ insofar as they point to, imply, or confirm the truth of Christ and his gospel. The gospel is often embedded in the apology.²⁷

But there is one way in which we are not to argue: We want to win the argument with an unbeliever, but for his sake, not for the sake of me winning. Arguing *while disregarding* the admonitions of Paul (“Let your speech *always be gracious*, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” Col. 4:6), and the admonitions of Peter (“yet do it with *gentleness and respect*”, 1 Pet. 3:16), will only make enemies of the cross enemies who now have an even better reason to justify their unbelief. This is why St. Paul ruled out “quarreling” for God’s public servants (2 Tim. 2:24). His example, however, allows for and encourages reasonable and even intense debate.

We can and even ought to argue, debate, attempt to persuade and convince our unbelieving neighbor, all the while loving him unconditionally, just as we were first loved and still need to be loved every day by God.²⁸

EXTRA-BIBLICAL APOLOGETICS

The focus so far has been mainly on biblical apologetics – those utilized by Jesus, the apostles, and others within the pages of Scripture. But what about apologies that come from outside of Scripture? Are they somehow different? Yes and no. What both have in common is the same process: information or evidence that comes to our attention, followed by the use of our reasoning faculties that can make a

²⁷ Martin Luther was “argued” into the kingdom of God. Though his conversion was instantaneous, there was in some sense a process taking place, and it was very argumentative both with God and himself. The *95 Theses* do not reveal a sinner saved by grace through faith alone. Some say that the concept of grace is not even found in *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518. Dr. Cameron MacKenzie cites Luther’s 1545 account of the “Tower Experience” which Luther writes about in his preface to the Latin edition of his works. There Luther, according to MacKenzie, seems to be saying that this experience did not occur until as late as 1519. In other words, this was one long argument. (“The History and Theology of Martin Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation,” September 6, 2019 radio interview of Dr. MacKenzie on *Issues, Etc.*).

²⁸ There are many who have been “argued” into the kingdom of God. I remember having miniature debates, if you will, with fellow students at Bethany, my girlfriend, and a professor. None of them were heated, but there wouldn’t have been anything wrong with that necessarily. I would say three other things were found in this “process.” One was compassion and patience shown by these Christians I spoke with (or argued with). Another was the increasing pressure of the law. Finally, there was Christ on the cross, for me. Other examples of being argued into the kingdom would include C.S. Lewis, John Warwick Montgomery, Craig Parton, Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, Nabeel Qureshi, Lee Strobel, and many others.

judgment. If we object to the use of extra-biblical apologetics on the grounds that there is an appeal to reason, we will also have to object to *biblical* apologetics as well. But this objection falls flat since Jesus and the apostles put forth evidence that is directed toward man's reasoning ability. The presence and utilization of human reasoning therefore is not justification for dismissing extra-biblical apologetics.

Within Scripture and the Confessions, extra-biblical evidence is at times used in support of Christian truths. The Lutheran Confessions put forth secular evidence a number of times to support biblical doctrine (e.g., "Concerning Monastic Vows" in both the Augsburg Confession and the Apology). Peter appeals to his hearers' memory of current events ("just as you yourselves know") during his sermon in Acts 2 in making the case for Jesus as the Christ. Paul refers to the growing seasons, the abundance of food, and the satisfied hearts of his pagan listeners as a witness to the truth that there is one true providential God. He uses a pagan altar's inscription, "to an unknown god," and a Greek poet to point to the biblical teaching that there is one God who created and still governs all things (Acts 17:22ff.). He appeals to King Agrippa's personal recollection of events, which were a matter of common knowledge ("for this has not been done in a corner," Acts 26:26). The confessors and apostles do not *establish* doctrine on the basis of extra-biblical sources, but neither do they refrain from using such sources to support or point to scriptural truth. This is a proper application of the ministerial use of reason.

This is not to suggest that all apologies are equal (see below). But even the "less equal" apologies – as long as they are based on or point to truth – can be beneficial and testify, albeit indirectly, to the truth of Christianity and Christ.

APOLOGETICAL APPROACHES

Here are several ways to approach or understand Christian apologetics.

1. Biblical and Extra-Biblical Apologetics

Biblical apologetics: evidence or arguments found and utilized in the Bible.

Extra-biblical apologetics: evidence or arguments not specifically found in the Bible (nor are they contrary to it) but can be used to support some truth found in the Bible and/or can be used to refute or disprove some religion, worldview, theory, or teaching contrary to the truth or truths of biblical Christianity.

2. Offensive and Defensive Apologetics

Offensive apologetics: reasons or evidence for believing the Bible, the Christian worldview, and the truth of Christ himself.

Defensive apologetics: reasons or evidence given to reject what is false and therefore contrary to the Christian worldview, biblical teachings and events, and the truth of Christ. This often takes the form of answering objections.

3. Classical Arguments (Classical Apologetics)

This is a systematic way of describing apologetics, typically utilized in academia and taught in certain college, university, and even high school courses. Classical arguments include:²⁹

- *Evidential and Historical arguments*: evidence for the resurrection of Christ and other miracles, prophetic evidence, evidence for the reliability of the New Testament texts, legal arguments, archeological evidence.
- *Cosmological arguments*: Contingency argument, Motion argument, Efficient Causality argument, Change argument, Time and Contingency argument.
- *Anthropological arguments*: Aesthetic arguments (beauty, the arts, love, emotions), Ethical argument, Truth argument, Conscience argument, Desire argument, Common Consent argument, Blessedness argument, Perception argument, Existential argument, Pascal's Wager argument.
- *Scientific and Teleological arguments*: Consciousness argument, the World as Interacting Whole argument, Design and Fine-Tuning argument.

²⁹ This list of arguments describing Classical Apologetics is from Dr. Michael Berg's course, "Philosophy 202: Apologetics" (2018 Spring Semester) at Wisconsin Lutheran College.

- *Ontological arguments*: Degrees of Perfection argument, Origin of the Idea of God argument, Finitude of Man argument.

It is not common to find an unbeliever or sceptic familiar with the different categories of Classical Apologetics. More often, the unbeliever (and often the believer) has bought into a reason or reasons not to believe in the truth of Christianity and Christ and likely assumes there are good reasons to believe in something else. Plus, the unbeliever (and frequently the believer) has not thought much about the evidence for the truth of Christ. Therefore, practically speaking, the best and easiest way to use apologetics is the Offensive and Defensive approach. We see a good example of this in 1 Cor. 15 where Paul engages believers at the congregation who somehow had concluded there is no resurrection of the dead. He uses both offensive arguments (six separate eyewitness accounts of the risen Christ) and defensive arguments (“If Christ is not risen, then your Christianity is dead in the water”). He points to the defensive approach when he says, “We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God” (2 Cor. 10:5). Jesus spent a lot of time making the case for the truth of his person and work (offensive) and similar amount of time demolishing the false beliefs and worldviews of those opposed to him (defensive).

However, in today’s climate not many think about or inquire about Christian apologetics or other important questions. It’s not on their radar screen. They may never seriously consider questions such as, “Might there be something wrong with my worldview?” “Is it true that Christianity and other religions are social constructs?” “Does the scientific evidence really support evolution?” “Are the Gospels reliable documents that accurately record the events and teachings of Jesus?” “Might there be something fundamentally wrong with gender identity?” “Is it reasonable to believe that all religions are essentially the same?” “Is it true that all people are basically good or can become good?” “Can we be confident that there is nothing beyond the natural?” “Aren’t religions, including Christianity, based on nothing more than blind faith?” “Is it reasonable to assume that miracles do not and cannot happen?” “Why would we want to restrict marriage to a man and a woman?” “Can (supposed) contradictions in the Bible be shown not to be contradictions?” “If God is all powerful and all loving, how can there be so much evil in the world?” “Is atheism more reasonable than theism?” Most do not ask these questions, though they should.

And when these sorts of questions are asked, good answers are rarely provided. In fact, the false answers are zealously taught, especially to the younger generations. And they are taught before learners are even able to formulate questions.³⁰ Add to this that even though people yearn for truth, more and more are convinced there is no such thing. It’s not easy.

The answers to the above questions all are connected to the truth of Christianity and Christ, in some way or another. And the false answers provided are frequently the leaven that Jesus and Paul warn against (Matt. 16:ff.; 1 Cor. 5:6; Gal. 5:9). What can help is to understand that the false answers to these questions typically have their source in one of several worldviews: modernism (naturalism, materialism, evolution), postmodernism (diversity, tolerance, constructionism, Gnosticism, same-sex marriage, gender identity, etc.), and spiritualism (some sort of pantheism or paganism).³¹ It is the second of these – postmodern constructionism and tribalism – which now holds much of culture captive, including trends in government, education, corporate businesses, media, and much of what goes by the name of Christianity.

I have proposed a project where we not only provide answers, but also the questions, such as those above (plus many more).³² By clarifying the questions and offering sound answers, we encourage

³⁰ I am convinced that so many of our young people have bought into deceptive cultural trends partly because answers are introduced to them before their critical apparatus has kicked in or because critical thinking used to discern between right from wrong – used to ascertain truth – has been discouraged and stifled. Group think is easier and more fun (you get to socialize!), but is also very dangerous and will prove to be seeds for persecution – the “mob mentality”.

³¹ See *What In the World Is Going On: Identifying Hollow and Deceptive Worldviews*, David Thompson (Milwaukee: NPH, 2010).

³² This has been done, of course, by many, including conservative Lutherans. But it would be helpful to have a simplified and centralized resource, with answers limited to two pages at an 8th grade reading level. This could be accessible online or in print and used as a supplement for catechesis (for both young and old), Sunday School,

the use of critical thinking – reasoning – in the service of the truth. Not all answers to questions asked would point to, imply, or confirm the truth of Christ directly. But they can open a door for the gospel. They can be used in the service of the law or the service of the gospel. In doing so we better educate ourselves, our members, and our children, in order to be “ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15).

NOT ALL APOLOGIES AND APOLOGETIC APPROACHES ARE EQUAL

The goal of Christian apologetics is always the same: to present evidence that can eventually lead to the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, the only Redeemer. If apologetics is not utilized with this goal in mind, it is not *Christian* apologetics, or at least not *good* Christian apologetics. If I want to do nothing more than direct a social constructionist away from his worldview rather than lead him to Christ and the Christian worldview, it would be better to have him watch a video of Jordan Peterson who is more likely to convince him of the insanity of postmodernism. For us, it’s all about Christ. And to do this we engage their mind, their reason – that unique, though corrupted, attribute common to all human beings – that they may believe that Jesus is the Christ. We can relate to them and speak to them as if they have this human ability, for they do.³³

But not all apologies are equal. Some defenses for the truth of Christianity *directly* point to the gospel, whereas others can be used *indirectly*. Some apologies can be utilized in the service of the law and sin rather *pointedly*. Others *indirectly* imply a divine moral law. A sound answer to the problem of evil does not point directly to Christ, but in the end the ultimate answer *is* found in the cross of Christ. Another person may justify his unbelief on the basis of Darwinian evolution, which calls for a dismantling (2 Cor. 10:5) by means of sound creation science that indirectly points to the truth of Christianity by the process of elimination (“Okay, so what are the alternatives?” or “What theory, then, best explains the evidence?”). Another may say, “All religions are basically the same” or “We all worship the same God,” which begs for a simple lesson in logic, thereby revealing his nonsensical and false belief, which can also lead to his next question, “But how do you know your Christianity is true?” To simply say to this and all such questions, “Because the Bible says so,” is to devalue him by ignoring his “reason and all his senses” given to him by his Creator and to deprive him of the evidence that God would want him to consider.

That being said, the case needs to be made for the *higher* apologies found and used in the Bible. There are some who act as if apologetics is mainly about putting forth evidence for a special creation or a young earth. There are others who focus on the philosophical arguments for the existence of God or natural law/knowledge apologetics. I am not criticizing the great value of these apologies. They are important and even necessary. But what I have observed is that the apologetics used by Jesus and the apostles can often get short shrift or ignored all together, even by good Lutherans. The historical and evidential arguments used in the Gospels, the book of Acts, and the epistles end up becoming simply one among many rather than the best apologies.

There is a twofold reason these should be preeminent. First, both Jesus and the apostles used them. Second, they point to, imply, or confirm the truth of Christ more clearly than any other apologetic.

parochial schools, home schools, studies at church and home, individual use, etc. I have begun the process by gathering a list of over 300 questions that are asked or should be asked and answered. They are arranged by topic (Evidence for God; Science, Creation, Evolution; Religions and Worldviews; Moral, Social; Cosmic, Philosophical; the Bible; Jesus; The Uniqueness of the Confessional and Biblical Lutheran Church; Personal). Anyone interested in helping with this project is invited to contact me. There is also the possibility of developing a confessional Lutheran apologetics study Bible with these questions and answers included.

³³ This would fall under Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor. 9: “I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some” (v. 22). Even though Paul approaches different audiences differently (compare, e.g., how he approaches the Jews in Antioch, Acts 13, to how he speaks to the pagans at Lystra in Acts 14 and the Athenian philosophizers in Acts 17) he always approaches them as if they can think and reason, all the while knowing it is the gospel that “is the power of God for salvation” and “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” (Rom 1:16; 10:17).

Paul in 1 Cor. 15 directly connects his gospel of forgiveness to observed bodily resurrection appearances. There are no less than nine appearances of Christ over 40 days recorded in the historical records we call the New Testament. Most who witnessed these appearances (perhaps all!) had been of the mindset that Jesus would remain dead. And as Paul explains, these appearances confirm not only that Christ was resurrected, but the heart and center of the gospel as well: the forgiveness of sins, the message that can and does create and strengthen faith. The same is done with the miracles of Christ and the apostles³⁴ and fulfillment of prophecy.³⁵ And in all these cases, the eyewitness verification if not stated implicitly is indicated explicitly by the context and the manner in which these records are written.

The eyewitness testimony of the Apostles, the miracles of Christ, the fulfillment of prophecy, and, above all the resurrection find no equal among all the apologies. Arguments against evolution are essential in our day, but they do not *necessarily* point to Christ or the truth of the gospel. Biblical apologies are both necessary and invaluable. The Christian should seek to be proficient in explaining these evidences to his neighbor.³⁶ And if the Christian is not yet there or unable, he can always hand him the Gospel of John (see footnote 25). We should encourage each other to go to these apologies when we can and even as soon as we can (when appropriate). When we are asked to give a defense for the hope that we have, the resurrection is the Ultimate Defense for the truth of the Gospel.³⁷

ARE THERE, THEN, NON-EFFICIENT CAUSES?

I go back to the question I raised earlier: Does the recognition of “efficient causes” in Article II of the Formula of Concord³⁸ imply there are non-efficient causes when it comes to conversion? Understanding how people answer certain questions will help. “Why are you a Christian?” or “What caused you to become a Christian?” or “What led you to faith in Christ?” When people hear such questions, their minds don’t necessarily or even usually think, “Oh, he’s asking me about an efficient cause.” They will typically assume something prior to or less than an efficient cause, including, evidence or circumstances or people or events or experiences or burdens that might have pointed to, led to, or confirmed the truth that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God and resulted in faith. Some of these – people, events, evidence, etc. – could have been used in the service of the law, and some could have been used in the service of the gospel. But what we should not say is that these things are “law” or these things are “gospel.” That would be silly. The law is the law and the gospel is the gospel. But there is the platter on which one or the other or both can be served.

³⁴ “But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—he then said to the paralytic—‘Rise, pick up your bed and go home.’” (Matt. 9:6). “These [signs] are written that you maybe believe...” (John 20:31). “They... spoke boldly for the Lord, who testified to the message of his grace by enabling them to do signs and wonders.” (Acts 14:3).

³⁵ “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.” (Matt. 11:3-5).

³⁶ What is also necessary these days is a familiarity of the reliability of the New Testament texts and manuscript evidence. It is often assumed that the Gospels are nothing more than legends or myths, developed over several centuries by well-meaning writers who lived in the 2nd century or later; the New Testament, sceptics presume, could not have been written by eyewitnesses or those who walked and talked with the eyewitnesses. But the manuscript evidence says otherwise (see Appendix C: “Basic/General” and “Biblical Reliability”).

³⁷ Since the resurrection is true then every other argument and challenge to Christianity falls. However, this may not be realized right away by a Christian or applied consistently across the board, especially in the face of evidence that supposedly supports some other worldview or false belief. For that reason, other apologies against many false worldview assumptions can be very helpful and should be brought to bear. For if the false assumption remains unchallenged, it would easily come back to chip away at faith in the resurrected Christ.

³⁸ *The Book of Concord*, Kolb/Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) 494. See also footnote 2 and the quote from the *Epitome* above.

So in one sense a person can say, “I was brought to faith by my spouse,” or “Because of these circumstances in my life, I became believer,” or “I believe in Jesus as my Savior because of the evidence,” or “I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, because of his miraculous signs.”

We have to be careful of limiting the word “cause” to only one meaning. It does not always mean “efficient cause.” Would we really say to a person who told us he was a Christian because of his spouse, “No you’re not. You are a Christian because of the power of the gospel.” We should not say that because actually both are true. Neither would we say that the spouse was “law preaching” or she “falls under the category of the law.” We could however say that the spouse was used in the service of the law or used in the service of the gospel. She was “used to convince me of my false worldview” (service of the law), and/or she was “used to point me to the amazing truth and comfort of forgiveness found in Christ alone” (service of the gospel).

This is how apologetics and evidence are used in the New Testament. It is safe to say that apologetics is a non-efficient cause. As seen in the examples of Jesus, the apostles, and the writers of the New Testament, apologetics points to, implies, or confirms both the truth the law and the truth of Christ and his gospel. And just as a believer can resist and say no to a spouse or friend who is trying to lead him to Christ, so also one can say no to the evidence that is seeking to lead him to Christ. If one comes to Christ, ultimately it is because of the efficient causes to which the spouse or the apology is pointing.

Apologetics is in a class by itself compared to other evangelism methods (like programs we come up with to attract people to the gospel message or to our church) because it approaches our neighbor on a ground we all have in common and because we find it used by the apostles and Christ himself. It has been and still ought to be a serving platter on which the gospel can be placed. In a world that continues to ask, perhaps more than ever, the age-old question, “What is truth?”, we not only have the truth, we also have that which points to, implies, and confirms it.

APOLOGETICS: THE HANDMAIDEN AND FRIEND OF THE GOSPEL

Apologetics is not “merely law preaching”; neither is it simply “clearing away obstacles which keep unbelievers from giving serious consideration to the claims of Scripture” (though it can and does serve these purposes). Apologetics is also a serving platter on which the gospel can be placed. It is not as if we make the case against false belief, then make the case for the truth of Christianity, and then “step out of the way so the gospel can do its work” (as some claim). No. The gospel is or can be embedded in the apology. This, as I have shown, is what is seen time after time in the words or examples of Christ and the apostles.

Is there some sort of implicit danger within or in using apologetics? No more so than in the proper preaching of the law, or even the gospel. We know that when the law is preached, most will hear it only to justify themselves self-righteously like the Pharisee in Luke 18 (10ff.) rather than repent. When the pure gospel is preached, many will hear it in order to justify cheap grace (Rom. 6:15ff.). Just as the appropriate preaching of the law or gospel is not the problem or evil (Rom. 7:12-13; Gal. 3:21), so it can be said of sound apologetics. Though many misconstrued or ignored the evidence of miracles, that did not stop Jesus, Philip, Peter, and Paul from presenting the evidence (John 6, Acts 8 and 14).

Are there times not to use apologetics? Of course: when the senses and reason are not what they will be (as in the case of infants and children) or when they are no longer what they once were (among those afflicted with dementia or other mental challenges). It also does not have to be used where there is a common epistemology and the person asks, “What does God’s Word say?”, and all that is possibly needed is the gospel undefended (but even here it is important to remember the apostles used apologetics with believers to confirm the truth and comfort of the gospel – 1 Cor. 15:1-11; 2 Pet. 1:16-21; 1 John 1:1-3). At the same time, we *are not required* “to give a defense” if nobody asks us anything. We *are required*, however, when we *are* asked: “always being prepared to make a defense to *anyone who asks you* for a reason for the hope that is in you.” (1 Pet. 3:15). But even in non-asking settings, it is not inappropriate to “put a stone in his shoe” with the hope that maybe he will ask us why we believe what we believe. If we never engage our quiet and seemingly content neighbor, we will never know where he stands in the balance of eternity and he may never hear the gospel.

We should never not use apologetics because we think it is implicitly harmful or dangerous or because we are afraid the hearer will end up thinking he can by his “own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ.” The Holy Spirit will do his work when and where he pleases (John 3:8).

Still, we do need to guard against a misuse of apologetics in our preaching, teaching, and evangelism, for the sake of our hearts and those under our care, for the *opinio legis* is ever present. We do so by taking heed to the whole counsel of God, including the careful study and meditation of Holy Scripture and our *Confessions*. We also need to watch our practice carefully, making sure the pure gospel predominates and the sacrament is rightly and regularly administered (the more regular the better). This sends a message to and distinguishes us from the pro-apologetics but anti-sacramental churches (not to mention the great benefit of offering every-Sunday communion for us and our members).

But we also have to guard against an underuse of apologetics. Here we can plead guilty. Here we have let non-Lutheran churches take the lead (and have been scared off by them at the same time). One of the reasons C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton, Josh McDowell, Ravi Zacharias, Lee Strobel, Tim Keller and others have been read and listened to is because they have tapped into something that resonates with the nature of man: who and what God has created him to be. Man is an aesthetic, moral, rational, thoughtful, fulfillment-driven, eternity-longing creature. Though corrupted and unable to grasp how and in whom these God-given attributes will be truly satisfied, they still reside within man (Eccl. 3:11). We should not be surprised that the Creator somehow uses these unique human aptitudes to point us to his Son in whom they are and will be perfectly fulfilled.

Those who do not believe, teach, and confess the complete fall into sin and the pure means of grace will fall into and encourage the misuse of apologetics. But those who view apologetics merely as law preaching or as that which somehow only falls under the category of the law, will probably end up encouraging its non-use and fail to recognize this most valuable platter on which the gospel can be placed.

When I was moving my belongings into the dorm of Bethany Lutheran College as an agnostic freshman, one of the professors who watched me said to himself, “O boy, what do we have here!” Among the usual, I was also carrying the stuffed head of a collie (stolen from a house I had broken into) which I put on display in my room. It said something about me. I took a course from that same professor my first semester called “The Case for Christianity.” I was amazed by what was taught and my worldview was challenged. Could I be that off base? Could these strange students and professors be right who took the Bible at face value? I would discuss and even argue with students, my girlfriend, and professors. At the same time the law was pressing harder and harder upon me, for I had been enjoying and justifying a number of sins. I still remember being alone one evening when other students were at the midweek Lenten service. I was walking around what was then the football field for the Catholic high school (now Bethany’s soccer field). I was thinking about the cross of Christ. Especially the cross for one wretched sinner in particular. I was brought back to my baptismal grace I had received as an infant. The cross alone did it. And yet I cannot deny what the evidence was pointing me to all along.

Soli Deo Gloria

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Appendix A: Apologetic Passages and Sections from the New Testament

The Gospels

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Matt. 2:1 – 2 2. Matt. 2:9 – 10 3. Matt. 3:16 – 17 4. Matt. 8:32 – 34 5. Matt. 9:4 – 8 6. Matt. 9:32 – 34 7. Matt. 11:2 – 6 8. Matt. 11:20 – 24 9. Matt. 12:1 – 7 10. Matt. 12:9 – 14 11. Matt. 12:22 – 23 12. Matt. 12:24 – 29 13. Matt. 14:26 – 33 14. Matt. 15:30 – 31 15. Matt. 16:13 – 17 16. Matt. 26:74 – 75 17. Matt. 27:54 18. Matt. 28:1 – 10 19. Mark 2:6 – 12 20. Mark 3:1 – 6 21. Mark 4:39 – 40 22. Mark 5:14 – 17 23. Mark 6:1 – 3 24. Mark 7:34 – 37 25. Mark 14:15 26. Mark 16:14 27. Mark 16:20 28. Luke 1:1 – 4 29. Luke 2:9 – 17 30. Luke 4:35 – 37 31. Luke 5:6 – 10 32. Luke 5:20 – 26 33. Luke 7:11 – 17 34. Luke 7:18 – 23 35. Luke 7:37 – 48 36. Luke 8:23 – 25 37. Luke 9:1 – 9 38. Luke 9:18 – 20 39. Luke 9:38 – 45 40. Luke 16:27 – 31 41. Luke 18:41 – 43 42. Luke 24:12 43. Luke 24:19 – 27 44. Luke 24:36 – 48 45. John 1:6 – 8 46. John 1:14 47. John 1:47 – 51 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 48. John 2:11 49. John 2:23 50. John 4:17 – 19 51. John 4:39 – 42 52. John 4:48 53. John 4:50 – 53 54. John 6:14 55. John 6:26 – 44, 51 – 53, 60, 65 – 69 56. John 7:2 – 5 57. John 8:28 – 30 58. John 9:3 59. John 9:8 – 12, 15 – 20, 24 – 38 60. John 10:19 – 21 61. John 10:24 – 26 62. John 10:37 – 38 63. John 11:14 – 15 64. John 11:41 – 48 65. John 12:9 – 11 66. John 12:17 – 19 67. John 12:37 – 42 68. John 14:8 – 11 69. John 15:24 70. John 15:27 71. John 17:4, 8, 17, 20 72. John 18:6 73. John 18:38; 19:4 – 6 74. John 19:33 – 37 75. John 20:6 – 9 76. John 20:18 77. John 20:19 – 23 78. John 20:24 – 29 79. John 20:30 – 31 80. John 21:6 – 7, 11 81. John 21:20 – 23 82. John 21:24 – 25 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 91. Acts 4:1 – 4 92. Acts 4:5 – 12 93. Acts 4:13 – 22 94. Acts 4:23 – 31 95. Acts 4:33 96. Acts 5:19, 21 – 32 97. Acts 8:5 – 8 98. Acts 8:12 – 13, 18 – 2 99. Acts 9:3 – 5 100. Acts 9:20 – 22 101. Acts 9:34 – 35 102. Acts 9:40 – 42 103. Acts 10:36 – 44 104. Acts 11:22 – 23 105. Acts 13:11 – 12 106. Acts 13:26 – 32 107. Acts 14:3 108. Acts 14:10 – 18 109. Acts 15:3 110. Acts 16:14 111. Acts 16:25 – 31 112. Acts 17:2 – 4 113. Acts 17:17 114. Acts 17:22 – 34 115. Acts 18:4 116. Acts 18:19 117. Acts 18:26 – 28 118. Acts 19:8 119. Acts 19:26 120. Acts 20:22 – 24 121. Acts 26:9 – 11 122. Acts 26:16 123. Acts 26:24 – 29 124. Acts 28:23 – 24 |
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Acts

83. Acts 1:3
84. Acts 1:8
85. Acts 1:21 – 22
86. Acts 2:12 – 13
87. Acts 2:22 – 24, 29 – 32, 36 – 39
88. Acts 2:43
89. Acts 3:6 – 10
90. Acts 3:12 – 20

Epistles

125. 1 Cor. 15:1 – 11
126. 1 Cor. 15:12 – 19
127. 1 Cor. 15:29 – 32
128. 2 Cor. 10:4-5
129. 2 Cor. 12:12
130. Phil. 1:7
131. Phil. 1:16
132. Col. 2:8
133. Col. 4:5-6
134. Heb. 2:3 – 4
135. 1 Pet. 3:14-16
136. 2 Pet. 1:16-21
137. 1 John 1:1 – 3

Appendix B: Dr. Martin Luther on Proof, Evidence, Eyewitness Testimony in the Gospel of John

1. [On John 4:46ff.]

The nobleman comes to Christ and asks him to go with him and help his son. That was a kind of trust in the Lord Christ that he would help, but such a trust was still without the Word and rested entirely on the miracle, which the Lord had previously done in Galilee at the wedding. Undoubtedly, that's where he would have heard of Christ. From that event he gathered trust in the Lord Christ that he would also help him. Yet such is still not rightly believing, because as I said, the Word which faith listens to is not yet there. That's why Jesus comes at him somewhat harshly and says, "Unless you see signs and miracles, you do not believe." What he's saying is that faith should not rest on signs and miracles alone but rather on the Word. For signs and miracles can well be false and deceptive miracles and signs. Yet he who sticks to the Word cannot be deceived, because God's promise is certain and cannot lie. So although the Lord does signs and miracles to reveal himself and move the people to faith, his underlying intention is more that a person would look at the Word than at the signs, which only serve to bear testimony to the Word. Thus, it was not primarily his concern simply to help this or that sick person physically. His primary office was to point people to the Word and impress it on their hearts so that they would be saved by it.³⁹

2. [On John 14:11. *Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me; or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves.*]

Christ says: "If My preaching does not make you willing to believe that God dwells and is in Me and that I dwell and am in Him, then believe this because of the works you see before your eyes. These works, as no one can deny, are not human; they are divine. They prove and attest powerfully enough that He speaks and works in Me and through Me." These are the works and the miracles which He performed publicly before all the world—giving sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, healing to all manner of sick, casting out devils, and raising the dead—solely by the Word. These are not only divine works, but they are also witnesses of God the Father. Therefore he who sees and hears these sees God the Father in them; and he is not only persuaded that God is in Christ and that Christ is in God, but from them he can also be comforted with the assurance of God's fatherly love and grace toward us.⁴⁰

3. [On John 8:16]

Now Christ says: "We are two, I and the Father. I am an official Personage, as is borne out by John's testimony. The miracles and My heavenly Father also attest to this. I refer you to them, for My miracles corroborate My claim." All this tends to silence the Jews and to confirm and defend His office.⁴¹

4. [On John 1:14] *We have beheld His glory.*

What does this mean? The evangelist wants to say that Christ not only demonstrated His humanity with His actions, by dwelling among the people so that they could see Him, hear Him, speak with Him, and live near Him until His thirty-fourth year, by suffering cold, hunger, and thirst in this feeble and wretched human form and nature, but that He also displayed His glory and power in proof of His divinity. Of this He gave proof with His teaching, His preaching, His signs and wonders, convincing anyone of His Godhead who was not blinded and hardened by the devil, as the high priests and scribes were. By word and deed He proved that He was God by nature: He healed the sick and raised the dead; in short, He wrought more and greater miracles than any prophet before Him, in fact, than any other human being ever was able to do.

By way of illustration, as God brought forth heaven and earth through the Word, that is, through Him, even so He, too, performed all that He wished by uttering a word. For instance: "Little girl, I say to you, arise" (Mark 5:41); and: "Young man, I say to you, arise" (Luke 7:14); and: "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11:43); and to the paralytic: "Rise, take up your bed and go home, be delivered of your sickness" (Matt. 9:6); and to the lepers: "Be clean!" (Matt. 8:3; Luke 17:14). In a similar way He fed 5,000 men with five loaves of bread and two fish, prompting those who witnessed this miracle to say: "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world" (John 6:14). When a great storm arose on the sea and the Lord rebuked the winds and the sea, all those in His ship marveled, saying:

³⁹ Luther, Martin. (*Weimar Ausgabe*, 1915) 52:516.16-34. I originally ran across a portion of this quotation in *The Gospels* by Joh. Ylvisaker (Augsburg Publishing House, 1932), p. 158, which did not include a citation. Prof. Nicholas Proksch (Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary, Mankato, MN) was kind enough to research and locate the source, and then offer this English translation (2019).

⁴⁰ Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 24: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14-16*. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999) 73.

⁴¹ Luther, M. *Luther's works, vol. 23: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 6-8*. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds. (Vol. 23, pp. 343-344). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 343.

“What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey Him?” (Matt. 8:27). With His words He also exorcised the evil spirits. All this He could accomplish with a single word.⁴²

5. [On John 19:38]

For among such people Christ’s death and burial is no more than any other man’s death and burial. For us, however, who know and feel how much depends on our faith that our Lord Jesus Christ was died and buried, so that our faith may have certain evidence and a firm, strong foundation, these words are neither excessive nor superfluous. All these words serve to ground and confirm the Christian faith with certain evidence and witness so that we may be certain of salvation. That is why these words cannot be excessive or superfluous.

St. John records the narrative of how the event took place with all of its circumstances. First, he describes the persons who buried Christ; second, he indicates the mode, measure, and manner in which they buried Him; third, the day and the hour when it happened; finally, the place and the location where they laid Him. All these things, even though they seem plain and simple, are not to be regarded as trivial but carefully noted. For, as mentioned, they all serve as evidence and proof for our faith concerning that article. If the history is lacking and forgotten, then faith is lacking and extinguished as well.⁴³

6. [On John 19:41-42]

In sum, everything [i.e., the details regarding Christ’s death and burial] had to serve to support and confirm our faith in this article [of faith that He was dead and buried] so that we might have certain proof and testimony that He is truly risen from the dead.⁴⁴

7. [On John 20:1]

For St. John did not write his Gospel for the sake of Christ (who has no need of it), nor for his own sake (for he played a part in it), but for our sakes, so that we too might believe and through faith obtain the power and fruit of the joyous resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus he himself says at the end of this chapter: “These signs are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that in Him you may have life in His name”.⁴⁵

8. [On John 20:1]

Thus now the resurrection of our dear Lord Jesus Christ from the dead is adequately circulated and attested even among the Lord’s adversaries. . . . All this happened for our benefit, so that it might serve to make us certain of this article [of the resurrection]. . . .

Christ’s resurrection is certified, first of all, by the testimony of His adversaries; then, by the testimony of His friends; third, by the testimony of the Lord Himself, by revealing Himself to be alive and by showing Himself; and fourth, by the testimony of the prophets and Holy Scripture. The guards, the governor Pilate, as well as the chief priests and the Jews confess that Christ is not in the tomb. Next, not only do Peter and John run to the tomb but also [Mary] Magdalene and all the other women and disciples, and they find things just as the angels had said. Then, the Lord Himself comes to them as well. He eats and drinks with them after His resurrection; talks with them; allows them to touch, feel, and clasp Him; and says: “See my hands and my feet, that it is I Myself. Touch Me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” [Luke 24:39]. In short, during the forty days before His ascension into heaven, He so convinces them that none of them can deny, but all must confess, that the Lord has truly risen from the dead. Finally, Holy Scripture is also in agreement, and the testimony of the dear prophets. In this way, both friend and foe bear witness to the resurrection, and in addition to such testimony there is the event itself as well in Scripture.

Upon such testimonies every Christian should joyfully and confidently rely and should believe certainly and without any doubt that Christ rose from the dead on the third day. . . . We should rely on these with certainty and not require any further special revelation. For myself, I am entirely satisfied by these witnesses, so that I would not even wish to have some kind of special revelation and see Christ in person. For even such a personal vision would not be as helpful as these testimonies. For because I have often read that the devil often disguises himself in the form of Christ, I would be unable to believe such revelations. But when Pilate and those who crucified Christ themselves

⁴² Luther, M. (1999). *Luther’s works, vol. 22: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 1-4*. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 114.

⁴³ Luther, M., *Luther’s works, vol. 69: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*, Christopher Boyd Brown, Ed. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009) 273-274.

⁴⁴ Luther, M., *Luther’s works, vol. 69: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*, Christopher Boyd Brown, Ed. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009) 283.

⁴⁵ Luther, M., *Luther’s works, vol. 69: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*, Christopher Boyd Brown, Ed. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009) 285.

confess that He rose from the dead; then, that His disciples bear witness to the same thing; and Christ Himself bears witness; and the writings of the prophets bear witness – that is more certain and convincing for me than any special revelations.

A heart that holds this article of the resurrection of the dead as certain, however, is an especially rare bird on earth. For the world learns this article as if it were any other history or event. But that it should risk life and limb and everything it has on this – that will never result, for it is unsure of this article. About this article one should be utterly certain. For what makes a Christian is when someone holds this article to be the certain truth, so that he forsakes life and limb for it. That is why we preach this article, so that we may become certain of it and so that everyone may search his own heart and examine himself to see whether he, too, would die on account of this article. I am not going to talk about the fruit of Christ's resurrection now, for I have often preached about this on Easter: that the resurrection of the Lord Christ brings with it redemption from sin and death. At the present, however, I want to preach on the text with reference to [Christ] Himself so that we may become certain of the history and story, and each one may regard this preaching as certain and sure.

That is what St. John intends when he so carefully describes the history, for he would like to make it so certain so that we do not have any doubts about it. He precisely describes the time, the persons, and the persons' actions, as befits a good historian.⁴⁶

9. [Sermon for Easter Tuesday Morning, John 20:19-23]

Now, on the evening of that Sabbath, the Lord Himself comes to the disciples through closed doors, stands in their midst, greets them kindly, and says, "Peace be with you," as if He wanted to say, "Through Mary Magdalene, I had a proclamation brought to you that I am risen from the dead and ascend to My God and Father, yet in such a way that I am not ashamed to call you [My] brothers. And I receive you as My co-heirs in all that is Mine, so that My God is your God, and My Father is your Father, and the heaven I possess is your heaven. Now, so that you may be certain of this proclamation, I Myself have come here in My own person, and I offer you happiness and salvation as your glory and inheritance. And so that you may have no doubt about My resurrection, I am showing you My hands and My side. Here you see that I am the very one who was nailed to the cross by His hands and feet and whose side was opened by a spear."

By showing them all this, Christ wanted, first of all, to strengthen their faith in this article. For since He shows Himself to be alive and, moreover, offers them His hands and side for inspection, their eyes and reason are convinced that He is certainly risen from the dead. And so the Word and the work agree with each other. The Word of Christ goes first, being proclaimed first through the angel, [then] through Mary Magdalene, and finally through the Lord Himself. Through this Word their hearts are inwardly enlightened, comforted, and strengthened through the power of the Holy Spirit. Next comes the work that Christ, in accordance with the Word, appears alive and by His appearing moves the disciples' eyes so that, since they are to be witnesses of His resurrection in all the world, they may not only hear of it but also see and experience it themselves. This is as Christ says to Nicodemus, *Quo vidimus testamur*, "We bear witness of what we have seen" [John 3:11]. Therefore, this appearance and revelation should be numbered with His other appearances and should establish and strengthen our faith in this article through the certain evidence and testimony of the Word and work.⁴⁷

Appendix C: Resources⁴⁸

— Basic/General

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⁴⁶ Luther, M., *Luther's works, vol. 69: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*, Christopher Boyd Brown, Ed. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009) 288-289.

⁴⁷ Luther, M., *Luther's works, vol. 69: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*, Christopher Boyd Brown, Ed. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009) 351-352.

⁴⁸ At least useful but not necessarily whole-heartedly endorsed.

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— **Biblical Reliability**

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 Bruce, F.F. *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1981. Print.
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— **Study Bibles**

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— **Creation/Evolution**

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