



Demonstrating the Truth

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Jesus and the Ethos of Demonstration

The Apostle Peter probably told the story on many occasions as he preached his way to Rome in the decades that followed the earthly ministry of Jesus. Mark, a close companion of Peter during his journeys, recorded Peter's account of this event in the New Testament Gospel that bears Mark's name. The event to which I refer is the miraculous healing of a man who could not walk, probably paralyzed for many years, if not from birth, recorded in Mark, chapter two. There are many healing miracles recorded in the Scriptures, but this one has a special twist in that this miracle illustrates, in a dramatic fashion and early in the ministry of Jesus, a key method our Lord himself utilized in communicating and confirming the center points of his message.

As Mark relates the story, Jesus had already garnered a large following that made it difficult for him to move around in populated areas. In Capernaum, Jesus began to teach in a local home, and a huge crowd quickly gathered so that there was no room left even outside the door. Reports of Jesus' healing activities certainly added to the interest, and it is likely that many in attendance were anxious for a touch from this extraordinary rabbi. Four men in particular sought healing from Jesus, not for themselves, but for their companion who was unable to walk. They could not get through the crowd to Jesus inside, so they climbed up on top of the structure, burrowed through the roof, and lowered the "paralytic" down on his mat to Jesus in the room below.

Now comes the twist. When Jesus saw the paralytic and the faith of the men who had brought



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him, Jesus said, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Even the parallel passages recorded in Matthew and Luke do not tell us the reaction of the man on the mat, or those who brought him, to this unexpected statement by Jesus. All three synoptic Gospels, however, record the reaction of some "teachers of the law" who were likely following Jesus around in order to scrutinize his teaching and activities. Indeed, the text implies that the looks on their faces may have told the whole story, because they clearly thought Jesus had crossed a very serious line with his utterance to the paralytic. In their view, Jesus had blasphemed. After all, who could forgive sins but God alone?

Jesus' response to the "teachers of the law" is the climax of this passage. Peter, who was likely an eyewitness and the source of Mark's account, probably knew enough about the religious law of his day to sense that a conflict was looming. Ironically, and certainly the reason that this incident stayed so prominently in Peter's mind, Jesus did not dispute the thinking of the teachers of the law on the point that God alone could forgive sins—simply because the point was a valid one. Instead, Jesus replied, "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, get up, take your mat and go home." The man got up in full view of the throng that had gathered and walked out, leaving everyone amazed.

I suppose any religious teacher could have wandered into Capernaum and made spiritual statements such as "your sins are forgiven" and convinced at least a few people to believe that a real activity in the unseen, spiritual world had taken place. But Jesus' goal on this occasion and on many that followed (e.g., Matthew 11:2-5, Luke 7:18-23, John 3:2, 5:31-36, 10:38, and 15:24-25) was to help those in attendance have good reason to "know" that he had authority from God and, by implication in the case of the paralytic, that he was

the divine Son of God. Jesus provided reasons to believe through many different means, the most dramatic of which were miracles done in public as authentication of his message, identity, and authority. Of course, Jesus' prediction of his own death and resurrection (Matthew 12:39-40, Luke 11:29-30, John 2:18-22, etc.), which he overtly labeled "*the sign*" to a wicked generation, took this to the highest level. New Testament scholar R.V.G. Tasker called the sign of the resurrection spoken of by Jesus "the supreme sign, which would be the Father's unmistakable vindication of his Son."

It is very important to understand that in justifying the task of Christian apologetics throughout the history of the Church, it was Jesus himself who set the stage. He did this not by writing apologetic tracts and treatises, but by creating what I shall call here an "ethos of demonstration" among his followers. Jesus demonstrated the truth of his message and his identity over and over again using nearly every method at his disposal, including miracle, prophecy, godly style of life, authoritative teaching, *and* reasoned argumentation. And although Jesus clearly authorized the apologetic ethos for his followers by living it out himself, it is also important to note that he did not create this approach *ex nihilo* during his three years of ministry. Indeed, Jesus himself was really just reaffirming an age-old ethos of demonstration that had been well established in the Old Testament tradition. From the miracles of Moses in Pharaoh's court (Exodus 7), to Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18), to God himself calling for his opponents to "present your case... set forth your arguments" (Isaiah 41:21), a divine pattern was already fixed by the time Jesus came on the scene.

The Apostles and the Early Church

Perhaps there is no stronger argument that Jesus himself was an extraordinary source for the apologetic impulse in Christianity than the fact that his closest followers, those who so deeply desired to emulate their Master, were such ardent proponents of Jesus' ethos of demonstration. Indeed, Paul, John, and Peter seemed almost obsessed with offering evidence, testimony, and argument at every turn in order to establish the truth of the Gospel message. The case for the Apostolic support for the full range of apologetic activity is very well known and has been affirmed by scores of

preeminent evangelical scholars in the last fifty years. Anyone wishing to downplay the significance of the defense of the faith to the Apostles and the early Church is truly swimming upstream against an overwhelming current. Since it has been so well covered, I shall choose only a few of the most compelling examples to highlight.

Peter, who along with James and John was a member of the inner circle of Christ's Apostles, was greatly influenced by the apologetic thrust of Jesus' ministry and offers a direct command for all believers likewise to follow this model. In what remains today as a touchstone verse for those with a calling to defend the faith, Peter wrote, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15). Jude, who was likely the brother of Jesus, also gives a very straightforward command to his brothers and sisters in the Way to defend the faith against false teachers. "I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). The Apostle Paul makes it clear that anyone who is to be considered for eldership in the church should be proficient in arguing against those who hold false doctrine. Paul wrote that an elder "must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9).

Even if Christ's closest followers had not given direct commands to engage in apologetic activities, they modeled these activities so frequently and unmistakably in Scripture that their actions amount to a clear exhortation for all Christians to go and do likewise. The Gospel writers themselves were carefully attuned to this. Luke, for instance, had explicit apologetic purposes in the construction of his Gospel—a special focus that he lays out in the prologue to his book. Here he highlights the importance of eyewitness testimony, careful investigation, and accurate reporting, all with an eye toward helping his reader, Theophilus, to know "the certainty" of the things he had been taught (Luke 1:1-4). Luke's Book of Acts begins by mentioning the "many convincing proofs" Jesus had given his followers to confirm the truth of the resurrection (Acts 1:3). Jesus was therefore portrayed as the first among many in Acts who would offer reasons for belief at every

opportunity. Later in Acts, Luke focuses on the Apostle Paul and describes a key *modus operandi* of Paul for his missionary activity in his travels throughout the Mediterranean world as reasoning, proving, and persuading on behalf of the truth of the Gospel. Luke describes Paul's regular method in Acts 17:2-4, as well as the result. "As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. 'This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,' he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did large numbers of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women."

In addition to confirming that it was his "custom," Luke gives direct accounts of Paul reasoning and persuading in Thessalonica (Acts 17:2), Athens (17:17), Corinth (18:4), and Ephesus (19:8). Indeed, in Ephesus Paul not only "had discussions" daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, but was also a vehicle for God's "extraordinary miracles" among the people (19:11). For the Apostles, as for Jesus, there was no ultimate line of demarcation between miracles and reasoning in that both were powerful tools in the hands of the Holy Spirit to persuade and lead humanity to salvation in Christ. Jesus' ethos of demonstration was thriving among the New Testament figures and set in place a tradition of defending the faith that would be carried on by the Church Fathers in the centuries immediately following the founding of Christianity.

Objections to Apologetic Engagement and Responses

Because of the steady encroachment of secular culture onto the Church's turf and the tremendous increase in the felt need by evangelicals for responses to the intellectual issues that challenge the Gospel and the Christian view of the world, objections by Christians to apologetic activity seem to be raised far less frequently. There are still objections, but it is my experience that even these seem to be formulated somewhat differently than those in the recent past. I shall offer responses to four objections to apologetic engagement that I have heard most often in recent years. I will present the objections I have heard in the same language with which I normally encounter them at public events.

I've never seen anybody come to faith in Christ through apologetics. Of course one would immediately wonder why the Apostle Paul was so enamored of reasoning, proving, and persuading if these methods were desperately ineffective, or why Peter and Jude would command the practice of giving reasons for faith. Indeed, in the passage from Acts 17:2-4 quoted above, Paul's explaining, proving, and persuading is directly associated with "large numbers" of converts and undoubtedly played a role. People always come to Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit, but there are many tools the Holy Spirit uses to do his work. One of those tools is apologetic reasoning. There are many who give serious personal testimonies to the value of apologetics in assisting their movement toward salvation—Augustine of Hippo and C.S. Lewis, to name two easily recognizable and influential figures. Occasionally apologetics is the primary tool that brings people to the foot of the cross. This would be true of my own conversion and of many I've shared the Gospel with over the years. Other times apologetics plays a secondary or tertiary role, helping to make the Gospel message more plausible in a world that has serious doubts about its veracity. However, given the explicit commands and clear examples in Scripture to offer reasons for faith, I would guess that those who offer this objection have either rarely tried robust but gentle apologetic engagement or perhaps are not "prepared" in the way that the Apostle Peter exhorted us to be (1 Peter 3:15).

But without faith it is impossible to please God. This objection derives from a common misinterpretation of Hebrews 11:6: "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." The misunderstanding of this verse is based on a weak notion of the word "faith." The only way this verse can be a problem for the task of apologetics is if one equates saving faith with "blind faith"—something that is illegitimate but done far too often by Christians today. Christian faith is not "blind faith"; that is, it is not opposed to reason, evidence, logic, or knowledge. In fact, the Apostle Paul allows no room for blind faith in a very provocative passage in First Corinthians. Paul wrote that if Christ did not rise from the dead, our faith is useless and futile (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). Here he locks together the resurrection of Christ, a knowable historical

event—the truth of which can be determined through evidence and reason—with saving faith. He had a marvelous opportunity in this passage to decouple reason and faith. He could have encouraged us to have faith no matter what the evidence showed. But he did exactly the opposite. Paul confirmed that if we have no valid resurrection, then we have no valid faith. Christian faith is not blind in the least; rather, it is dependent upon a historical event that can be thoroughly investigated with eyes wide open. A good synonym for genuine faith in the Christian tradition is simply “trust,” and we can certainly trust that which we can know to be true—indeed, it is the wise thing to do. Our trust or faith is stronger when we have excellent reason to believe in whom we are trusting.

Just preach the Word because it will not return void. The Bible verse from which this objection is derived (Isaiah 55:11) does not contain the word “just.” But it is the word “just” that creates the problem, because it implies that nothing else is ever needed in order to have the Word of God begin its regenerative work in the unbeliever. But Jesus and his Apostles demonstrated to us that other elements could act as a catalyst for the Gospel. As I showed earlier, miracle, prophecy, godly style of life, *and* reasoned argumentation were all employed to authenticate their message with great effect. And once again the commands of Peter and Jude to defend the faith do not make sense if the only tool permissible is Gospel preaching.

Let me look at this from another angle for a moment, because this objection actually made a lot more sense in previous generations. In years past it was not unusual that a believer could quote the Bible or “preach the Word” and have a good chance of engendering respect and perhaps deep reflection on the part of the unbeliever. This was possible because the Bible still carried significant cultural authority. An unbeliever would be likely to consider its words because there was a widespread recognition that the Bible was at the foundation of western civilization and brought wise counsel on many issues—even if the whole text was not considered true or without error by the skeptical recipient. Those days, however, are gone. There is a better than even chance today that a person will actually consider you immoral for quoting the Bible, because the Bible is often viewed, inappropriately of course, as misogynist, racist, violent, religiously exclusive, and the basis

for much of the conflict in our world. Clearly, the Scriptures are still “living and active” and “sharper than any double-edged sword” (Hebrews 6:12) and able to make us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15). However, the armor that the opposition is wearing may need to be lowered for the sword to penetrate. A robust defense of Scripture as the Word of God—a pillar of modern apologetic work—can be used by the Holy Spirit to do this and is needed now more than ever.

What really matters is that you love Jesus and are willing to be used. It is difficult to argue with this sentiment, because there is so much truth in it. After all, if we do not put loving Jesus first and are not willing to be used, we are way out of touch with Christianity ourselves and are in serious need of discipleship. However, on close inspection this objection, like the one just before it, is problematic in that it is in principle excluding as unimportant a whole area of God-ordained activity. Putting this objection in a slightly different way, loving Jesus is where our focus should be and not on ivory-tower dialogue. Of course, once again we run into the problem of the commands and examples of Jesus and his followers. If they valued reasoned argumentation on behalf of the Gospel, then so should we. Moreover, since loving Jesus entails obedience to him and to the commands of his inspired Apostles, then engaging in apologetic activity would certainly be a mark of obedience and therefore consistent with loving Jesus.

When I hear this objection to apologetic activity I can’t help but think there is something lying beneath it—something that is not being stated clearly or completely forthrightly. I shall conclude with a brief word about this underlying issue. As one can quickly tell, the popular objections that I have addressed here are not particularly precise or persuasive. Very often when Christians dispute the validity of defending the faith, they may not be reacting to the legitimacy of the apologetic task itself, but rather to their negative experiences with some who take up the apologetic task. This has been at times a serious problem with the effectiveness of our overall Christian witness. Apologists are sometimes out to win arguments and not souls, impatient with illogic from their counterparts, and arrogant in their demeanor. I am convinced that this can strip even the brightest apologists of their effectiveness for the Lord. Indeed, the “ethos of

demonstration” that I identified in the daily ministry of Christ and his Apostles included living out the second greatest commandment, to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). The most effective apologist is not the one who has the greatest academic prowess alone, but the one who has excellent intellectual preparation *and* reflects Christ’s love in every way. When Peter penned his great apologetics command (1 Peter 3:15), he was compelled to attach a qualifier that captures this notion: “But do this with gentleness and respect.” Paul likewise confirmed this when he explained to Timothy that “the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 2:24-25).

Christians who are able to bring it all together—a bright mind, comprehensive intellectual

preparation for the proclamation and defense of the faith, the deepest devotion to and emulation of our Lord, and an unflinching commitment to the Great Commission—are instruments of great power in the hands of the Holy Spirit for furthering the Kingdom. It should be our goal to raise up apologists such as these. I am convinced that even in small numbers they will foment a spiritual revolution in a world that is thirsty for knowledge of the truth.

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