

AN APOLOGETIC CHURCH

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The Christian church has been blessed with many gifted apologists, both popular and scholarly. People such as C.S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, Paul Little, Josh McDowell, Norman Geisler, Ravi Zacharias, Lee Strobel and William Lane Craig have had a great impact on Christians of the past few generations. There are para-church organizations and seminaries that have mobilized to meet the challenges of the increasingly skeptical culture. All of this is good and very important for equipping Christians to defend their faith. However, it is only part of the story. I would like to suggest that the local church needs to take some leadership in proclaiming a believable Christian faith. It is time for the church to take the role of an apologetic church. There are some very practical ways for the church to take on this mantle.

Biblical Preaching

Many preachers bemoan the fact that contemporary congregations are biblically illiterate. There are two possible responses: 1) give up on biblical teaching and speak only to felt needs, or 2) take the time and effort to teach the Bible to the people. There is a tremendous amount of pressure on preachers to entertain the people.² While it is important to keep the interest of the congregation, this can be done by an honest expression of the preacher's confidence in the relevance and power of the biblical text.³ The importance of biblical

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² This is not a recent innovation. See 2 Timothy 4:3.

³ A good example is that of Billy Graham. From a strictly homiletical perspective, Billy Graham was not an exceptional preacher. However, his confidence in the power of the Gospel came across clearly and it impacted audiences for generations.

preaching cannot be overstated. Before a Christian should attempt to interact with other religions or philosophies, they must have a solid comprehension of the Christian Gospel. While this can happen in private study, one of the most important roles of the pastor is to equip the congregation in this area from the pulpit.

Promote Questions

As important as it is to have biblical preaching, it is also important to have small groups in which discussion can take place. Small groups can easily become simply opportunities to socialize. Relationships are important, but this should be used to provide a safe place in which to discuss the Gospel and what it means to be a follower of Jesus in this world. While listening to sermons is passive learning, small groups should be active learning. It is important to promote questions. Why do Christians not believe in reincarnation? What is the difference between believing in the Trinity and believing in three gods? Do not shut down the hard questions just because they make some uncomfortable. If Christians cannot discuss these things in the safety of Christian fellowship, how can they discuss the difficult issues with their friends and co-workers? Wrestling with these questions can be some of the best preparation for effective apologetic conversations with non-Christians.

Be Vulgar

One of the most important events in the early church was the translation of the Bible into the Latin Vulgate or the common tongue. This has been a continuing tradition throughout Christian history, including Martin Luther's German translation. The need to translate the Gospel remains just as important. The church can no longer rely on a basic Christian understanding for the people we speak to. While we cannot stop speaking of justification, sanctification or glorification, we can translate these concepts into terms that are more easily understood. This is not about "dumbing down" the Gospel,

but translating it into the common tongue. The process of translating these theological concepts will actually help us to gain a deeper understanding of them for ourselves. The church desperately needs a new Vulgate.

Practical Apologetics

One of the things the things that we can learn from the emerging church movement is the importance of practical apologetics. While many evangelicals will be uncomfortable with the lack of interest in propositional truth among some emerging leaders, there is truth in the need to express the truth of the Gospel in action.⁴ If the Gospel is essentially the appearance of the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15), then there should be some outward expression of the Gospel. This is not a form of the well known "Preach the Gospel always, and if necessary, use words."⁵ Neither apologetics nor evangelism is about just being nice and hoping someone will ask us about our underlying theology. However, this generation is looking for more than a good philosophical argument for the truth, they are looking for truth that works in real life. This is not a compromise to a liberal social justice ideology but a return to a biblical model that contained truth in both propositional and practical forms.

Conclusion

If judgment begins with the church (1 Peter 4:17), so too should apologetics. It is not enough to leave apologetics to professional apologists, professors or para-church organizations. The church needs to be an apologetic church. Even if the average Christian cannot define the word 'apologetics,' pastors and other leaders should be equipping the church to defend the Christian faith in word and deed. The

⁴ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), p. 124.

⁵ Falsely attributed to St. Francis of Assisi.

purpose of this journal is to be one part of the process of making that happen.