

Here I Stand: **Lutherans Finding their Voice in Christian Apologetics**

Christian apologetics: who is it for?

I'd like to tell you about a young woman. Her name is Abby. She is a quiet, compassionate, and brilliant soul. An epidemiologist. Think of her sobbing in the shower, "Lord, don't let me go! Don't let me go!" So ended her first day in college. Her first day! I may need to tell you her story in more detail as a father who thought he knew what she would be up against at the secular university. In truth, I had no idea. I will offer some research on how young Christians are especially exposed at most colleges, such as those who have no Christian mentor to run to when the questions get hard. I will tell you precisely how she survived.

Intellectual questions can sit in a believer's mind indefinitely without doing much harm. A Christian can puzzle for years, let's say, over the confidence of scientists in their evolutionary theories. However, once you introduce pain, like the heart-breaking, gut-wrenching pain and the bleak darkness Abby experienced for months on end in 2023, then those same dormant questions stir to ugly life. What then?

I do Christian apologetics for her.

I'd like you to meet Keenan whom my daughter Abby brought home. He has four lesbian mothers. It's a long story. Whatever tentative faith he had a child was knocked out of him when he once dared to question it. He may be the friendliest person I've ever met. He is a gifted therapist. The dilemma he presented to our family was whether embracing this young man the way he was prepared to embrace us, this man who just happened to love our daughter, would be sending the wrong message. My instinct was that we would gain nothing by holding him at arm's length.

Yes, he has questions, for example, how God can condemn people who never hear the gospel. What thinking person has not wondered about this? What would you say? In addition to his need for an answer, he also requires the "soft apologetic" that is our hospitality and the goings on at our supper table, where he can begin to imagine not only the Truth, but how a person could live inside of it. There is the "soft apologetics" of community, of beauty, of music, of art. This is the soft apologetic of love, as "unanswerable as a sunrise." More about these matters and about him to come. For now, imagine a sensitive young man unable to get himself out of the car after hearing a sermon that utterly dehumanized homosexuals, one of whom he especially cares for. I thought, "He'll never get over this."

I do Christian apologetics for him.

Richard is at my favorite coffee shop in my college town literally every morning. Our friendship has blossomed around our love of reading. He reads a lot about science and philosophy, while I read a lot about Jesus (among other things). We have exchanged book reports over lunch many times. Witnessing to him is effortless, but I don't always know if I'm making any progress. On the other hand, the first time we had lunch, he said as we parted, "I'm glad you exist." The next time, "I think you're my best friend." Most recently, "I love you, my friend." Perhaps we are making a certain kind of progress after all.

He is 85-years old and is diminishing before my eyes. At our last lunch he let me in for the first time on his home life: a wife who doesn't know how to attach to him or anyone, a step-daughter who has lived with them for three years and has never once greeted him. Somehow, strangely, sharing the deep truths of his life triggered something he had heard. It was a quote attributed to Philip Melancthon, "I am a dunghill covered with snow." As he rolls that around in his head, he looks both puzzled and disturbed. And something *else*.

I do Christian apologetics for him.

I believe and hope that I am in his life for a reason, as he is in mine. There is some important research revealing that some 80% of unbelievers say that would be happy to hear about Christianity *from someone who believes it*. That feels true.

At the same time, the beating heart of my passion for Christian apologetics has as much to do with the vulnerable souls among us, young Christians whom this world will eat alive if they do not stay close the Word of God and stay connected to their community. I do not imagine that doing a few Bible studies with young people on Christian apologetics means they will be out there in the world winning arguments with brilliant unbelievers left and right. Instead, I want them to know what it will feel like when they sit in that space with a hard question, when they live through a time when no answers come. I want to know that there is yet a serene confidence that is theirs as they stand on the Word of God.

Speaking of them, one more bit of research I find instructive is that young people who ask questions about their faith are more likely to retain it. That's a game changer. It helps us not to panic when the challenges are spoken out loud.

Christian apologetics is for them. All of them. To understand why, we should be clear about what we mean by that term, one that is used in several different ways even among us.

What do we mean by Christian apologetics?

I understand Christian apologetics to be “defending Christian truth at sites of struggle,” that is, wherever and however we find it being undermined or outright contested and denied. This is the broadest understanding, and perhaps no one would disagree.

Where we might be using the term differently from one another is if you have mainly in mind apologetics as an academic discipline. This is perfectly legitimate. There are those in our fellowship who have taken up the serious academic study of how the Christian worldview sits among other worldviews in the scholarly arena. They are curious about what a Christian thinker who is a historiographer, let's say, can contribute to a robust understanding of Christian truth, or a philosopher for that matter, or a psychologist, or a scientist. My own work lets me add “communication scholar” to that list, so that I could talk about the persuasive power of the biblical narrative under this understanding of Christian apologetics, for example, or the simple power of being transparently Christian in the way of Jesus' apostles.

A Lutheran Apologetic Grounded in the Hiddenness of God

There is in this realm a powerful Lutheran distinctive that goes right to the matter of “Lutherans finding their voice.” I have in mind that fact that we have historically been rather quiet out of a certain rightful hesitation when it comes to using reason and evidence to support matters of faith.

To help Lutherans like us make our unique contribution to the field, we note, in Martin Luther's vivid expression, that God hides behind “masks” where only faith can find him. This creates a useful distinction between what can be investigated empirically on the basis of evidence and what we have no business trying to prove or verify with human reason.

We can bring people into contact with the “mask,” for example, that is the wonder of the created universe in its grandeur and design. We do not prove with reason or evidence that *behind* that mask is the God who has reconciled the world to himself in Christ. Our apologetic turns to

testimony. And for this we have only the Spirit of God to reveal this truth to people's hearts as we, for our part, resort to the Word and the grace of God.

In the same way, we can comfortably investigate and argue for his phenomenal Word, the historical record, the Christian's experience, and so on – all these I may safely investigate with all the powers of reason I possess – while never daring to suggest that reason is the path to ultimate Truth – that is the Person and Work of Jesus to which I testify, the Saving God of the Scriptures and his finished salvation.

This understanding of the hiddenness of God can give Lutheran believers a wider space within Christian apologetics to which to commit themselves. The above is, by the way, the very way the apostles talk, as we shall see. If we simply check ourselves to determine whether we are speaking the way they did, we can be confident that we are “doing it right,” so to speak.

Speaking of which, what any understanding of Christian apologetics must have room for is the astonishing Ground Zero that is the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

“Speaking like the apostles” means not hesitating to say that God has accomplished *this Grand Miracle*, this Big Fact, right here in this very world - we will impress on people that this is the true nature of the claim we are making. Christianity is unique for making itself falsifiable – “If Christ be not raised...”

But he has indeed been raised from the dead. The event left scorch marks behind. It was witnessed to be hundreds, and their testimony can be rigorously interrogated. There are, in fact, countless facts and events whose historicity is taken for granted although they do not have evidence that even approaches that of Jesus' resurrection.

This fact, being a fact, is far superior to any clever argument against him can ever be.

A Second Understanding of Lutheran Apologetics

Lutherans have not been completely silent in the area of Christian apologetics. There has long been a sweet spot in which we have not been shy. We might capture this second definition of Christian apologetics (after the academic disciplines described above) with the term, “negative apologetics.” This, too, is entirely legitimate.

Rather than buttress Christian truth with rational arguments, we have in the past tended to confine our use of reason to the dismantling of *other* worldviews or the particular sorts of challenges skeptics have always tossed our way.

For one example, would you deny God because of the existence of evil? How much sense does this make? This argument appeals to some universal standard of what is objectively evil or good in order to deny the One upon which that very standard entirely depends. The philosophers are agreed. The argument falls apart, although this may not be especially helpful for the suffering soul. It might be better to point out that to deny God because of suffering only manages to make suffering far worse. You have just made it both meaningless and hopeless. But suffering is neither meaningless nor hopeless in the light of Christ crucified, raised, and coming back for us one day. As it stands, negative apologetics is a vital area and we will have more to say about it.

A Third Understanding of Christian Apologetics

My personal bent in dealing with Christian apologetics, in addition to framing it as a communicative practice, is to fully take my cues from the apostles and their use of the Greek word, *apologia*. I don't see a reason not to let our understanding of Christian apologetics be

entirely shaped by their use of this word. For the apostle Paul, the word attaches to the way he defended the truth *from Scripture*. For the apostle Peter, the word describes his simple testimony to the things he had seen and heard, testimony offered in the face of fierce opposition. As we talk this weekend, it will become even more clear that I am not making a hard distinction between apologetics and Christian witness, and I am most certainly *not* excluding the Word of God so as to leave us to argue on some other ground.

Incidentally, when our risen Lord said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed,” he does not mean that we believe without evidence. It is simply that we have not seen and heard what the apostle did. We were not present. Rather, our evidence is their inspired, apostolic testimony, the words of men who did not lie or fabricate, but offered up their lives as the proof of their sincerity.

Limiting our Scope

Christian apologetics is a sprawling field, especially what I’ve referred to as the academic discipline that goes by that title. It is good that a few in our midst are turning themselves into experts across the full breadth of it. The rest of us need not attempt to bring all of it into our congregations or schools or families.

Instead, we will discuss the two core issues in Christian apologetics that make for a realistic agenda for inoculating young people against whatever might threaten them: 1) That Jesus is really raised from the dead, and 2) that the New Testament is a phenomenally reliable book. You can say, dear skeptic, “It’s been proven that Jesus never existed,” or “No one takes that book seriously anymore.” Just don’t utter that sort of nonsense around historians or scholars of the antiquities who know what they’re talking about. I speak of all such people regardless of their position toward Christianity. We cannot let the Bible to be so easily knocked out of our children’s hands by the baseless assertions of some popular professor.

In my own handling, when I think broadly of Christian apologetics as defending Christian truth at sites of struggle, I do not step around the Word of God. I do not strive to avoid the full scandal of the cross. I must not avoid being a fool in the eyes of the world. I will never assume that people have the faintest notion of what the gospel is. I will do my best to get to Jesus. Every. Single. Time.

What our father, J.P. Koehler said about polemics (arguing for sound doctrine among believers who differ) is just as well said about Christian apologetics. It is “another form of bringing Good News.”

Things we Lutherans are NOT interested in

This essay means to lay a foundation for some very practical conversations at this retreat. That foundation should perhaps include mention of a few things we Lutheran Christian apologetics are simply *not* interested (in addition to things hinted at elsewhere this essay). I have two issues in mind here: fideism and theodicy.

Fideism. To put it simply, if you ask me, “How do I know that everything you are saying about Jesus is true,” and I answer, “Well, you just have to believe,” that’s fideism. Think of what a devastating thought that could be if you were to plant that in the mind of young believer on her way to the secular university. You are telling her, “Darling, whatever you do, don’t you dare examine your Christian belief. It won’t hold up to scrutiny. No, what you need to do is squeeze

your eyes shut. Stop up your ears. Why? Because you just gotta believe!”

This is decidedly not the way the apostles talked. Listen to Paul.

“I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.” (Acts 26)

It was not done in a corner. This is the nature of the Christian claim, namely, that a real event happened in this very world. The king could have stopped someone on any street corner in Jerusalem in this day and had the “where were you when” conversation about the astonishing things that had happened there. “Go interrogate the witnesses to your heart’s content,” Paul is saying, even as we may explore to heart’s content the eye-witness testimonies in the New Testament. Drag yourself and your doubts to those stunning moments in the epistles when the inspired writers blurt out, “I am not lying.” The whole affair is either a monstrous conspiracy successfully carried out by thousands, or Peter can be trusted when he tell us that his memories are not “cleverly invented stories.” Incidentally, a man named Chuck Colson, who was part of the Watergate conspiracy that took down the Nixon presidency found the idea of a successfully concealed conspiracy surrounding a fake resurrection to be, in a word, absurd.

“We are witness,” Peter says, “as does John with nothing to gain for lying and everything to lose. “What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked and our hands have touched, this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.”

“You just gotta believe?” We can do better than that.

Theodicy. If you want to make Martin Luther spin in his grave, just take up the task we call theodicy which is “defending the way of God to men.” Theodicy asks, “Can God be defended for the things he has done or allowed to happen?”

To that notion, Luther cried, “Blasphemy!”

Who am I to come to God’s defense with my “wonderful powers of reason!” C.S. Lewis has a collection of essays with the title, *God in the Dock*. The title is ironic. You may know that “the dock” is where, in England (perhaps other places, too) the defendant stands during a trial. The point is that God is *not* in the dock. The point? God is absolutely not on trial. We do not get to pass sentence on him. It is his verdict that matters. Thank God that, in Christ, it is what it is.

I’ve compared theodicy to having someone come to me who wants to talk about whether or not my bride is faithful to me. To even take up that conversation would mean slipping into a different relationship with her than the one I enjoy consisting of love and trust. I will be glad to talk to anyone about the hard teachings of the Bible, but not like that. I trust him!

This brings to mind the uniqueness of the Lutheran apologetic. To the question, “What about those who never hear the gospel,” the Lutheran answers that it is quite true that God can *seem* to unfair. He may even *appear* to be an enemy. This is biblical. A vital Lutheran distinctive as that we Lutherans “call things as they are.” I answer is that, in that hard moment, I only have the gospel. When God seems to human sight to be this or that, I run to the place where the hidden God is revealed down to his essence, down to his core: God on a cross. For me. There, and only there, is where I can come to know his true heart.”

“Flee the hidden God!” By this I refer to the God of unthinkable power and mystery who exists in places where I cannot apprehend him. “Flee the hidden God and run to Christ!”

“Who wants to know God must listen to Mary’s Son.”

Things we Lutherans DO Care About

An Apologetic of the Word. The goal of the Christian apologist is to create the circumstance in which the Word of God and of Christ is running through people's minds, being weighed and considered. If we can do something about the predictable patterns of psychological resistance, even better. (More on that below). But this is the clarity I mean, namely, that only the Word and Spirit can ever do the thing we long to see happen in the people we meet. Period.

Incidentally, I have three stories from the last few years that involved the conversion of an energetic doubter of Jesus as happened simply and only because someone convinced them to read this or that portion of the New Testament.

Many years ago, I was listening to an interview by a then famous radio and TV personality named Larry King. He was interviewing a Christian man, pressing him on the hard questions related to suffering. How can we reconcile the goodness of God with the sort of gut-punching pain we see in this world? The Christian said something like this, "It's a crucial question you're asking. I wonder if you are familiar with Psalm 22?"

I was floored. In the space of less than 20 seconds, the believer had moved the ground of their conversation into the sacred Scriptures. I'll have more to say about the Church's fundamental intellectual task being the careful interpretation of our sacred texts. Consider that in a secular age when people are able to imagine the non-existence of God (I personally can no longer do so), and where Christians feel pressure to ground the truth of Jesus in human reason to the satisfaction of the world or else surrender it or keep it to themselves, we need just this sort of "Apologetic of the Word." Please join me in further developing what that can mean.

What that Christian did as he was being pressed hard in that interview, well, that's one way the "apologetic of the Word can look and sound." In our final session together, I will show you another in the form of answering skeptical challenges with Bible stories. Surely there are ways we have not yet thought of.

When I dropped my daughter, Abby, off at the University of Minnesota Morris, I handed her a book by Gene Veith, *Loving God With All Our Mind*. It's a book about engaging winsomely, not obnoxiously, with secular ideas in the academy. It begins with the wisdom that informs the conduct of Shadrack, Meshach, and Abednego in Babylon. It teaches how to respond to secular ideas not with arms-crossed, "Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!" Instead, a Christian can hear something in what is being discussed that we have known about for thousands of years.

An example would be the oppression of marginalized groups and the maintaining of power through unjust systems that you see in the book of Amos. So we can say, "There's something here that Christian theology deals with quite seriously, but here's the bigger picture you're leaving out." That "bigger picture" can be the thing wrong with every society and every person. That "bigger picture" can be a portrait of Christ emptying himself of all power, for us and for the world.

Anyway, months later when I had to borrow my daughter's old car, I found photocopies of that book in the back seat of her car with scribbles and underlines. I call that "a good day for a dad." You'll read about another of those later.

Why mention all this? The preface of the book makes the thrilling claim by Vieth that having the Word of God did far more than merely help him survive the university with his faith intact. The writer makes the much larger claim that Christian truth as unveiled on the pages of Scripture gave him *every intellectual* advantage in the arena of ideas. The Bible made him a robust and flexible thinker. Later, deep in his book, he has this to say.

"The *paradoxical* play of mind, which Christianity encourages, is open to truth wherever it may be found, but it refuses to take one limited perception as an absolute. It accepts

reason without making limited human reason the judge of all truth. It accepts scientific methodology without reducing the universe to what can be crammed into a test tube. Because it teaches that human beings can know the world but are very, very limited, Christianity can accept the discoveries of reason and science (even those that seem to contradict each other) without seeing them as final answers.”

An apologetic of the Word.

Allow me to continue this essay with further grounding in key teachings to hold firm in our heads and hearts. All this you already know, but let's help each other to hold onto clarity about the nature and causes of unbelief and of faith, a balanced view of human reason, and so on.

Why don't people believe?

“The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's will, nor can it do so” (Rom. 8:7). Paul's inspired comment on the *sarx* [flesh] is the necessary starting point for apologetics that deserves the name of Lutheran. This truth is echoed famously in Luther's *Bondage of the Will*, and it is encapsulated in the familiar, wonderfully clarifying line: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him...”

The unbeliever has reasons for not wanting God to be true. The unconverted *will* wants what it wants. It has its dismal idolatries, and sets its unconverted *emotions* on some other version of human thriving rather than rest itself in God and find its only satisfaction in him. The unconverted *mind* is blasphemous, arrogant, motivated, and self-justifying. Reason is unable to humble itself before the foolishness of the cross. That scandal always meets us in a collision with how we naturally think and live.

We are by nature dead, blind and hostile to God. Left to ourselves, we are best imagined as a blindfolded skeleton with a bony fist in the air.

What are the causes of faith?

Grace is the eternal attitude in the heart of God that chose you to be his own. He knew you – this was no closing of the eyes or throwing darts at a board. He knew you and chose you *in Christ* before the creation of the world. There is no other way to explain it. It is this grace that planned and carried out our salvation in time: Christ promised, Christ incarnate, Christ our righteousness, Christ crucified, Christ raised, Christ glorified, Christ returning.

In each preaching of the cross, Christ intervenes again to pour out upon us all that he is and has won. The witness takes what is his and freely disperse it to all without condition. Through the Gospel in Word and sacraments – the inspired Scriptures and the “visible Word” – the Holy Spirit makes alive the one who was dead. He shines into the darkened heart the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. He continues to sustain by his Word the faith through which God has reconciled his natural born enemies, turning them into sons. They are kept by him through the perpetual working of law and gospel – the killing and making alive – that is the life of repentance. These are the causes of faith, the reasons we recognize it as a gift from first to last.

“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourself, it is the gift of God – so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

What is the nature of faith?

Faith has three necessary components, captured in the Latin terminology of *scientia*, *assentia*, and *fiducia*. That is, faith requires the necessary knowledge [*scientia*] of Christ and salvation, the content of God's scandalous revelation. In addition, faith consists of the necessary assent [*assentia*] to this revelation from God as the soul says, "Yes, this is true." Finally, faith is complete in the necessary trust [*fiducia*] that my God, in Christ, has indeed done this *for me*. It is not merely true. It is true *for me*.

This is the faith that only receives. By a power not its own, it takes hold of a salvation that is already complete, and which is objectively true whether one believes it or not. Faith is the *organum leptikon* [receiving organ] that is neither a work of ours nor does it have any merit. When it is genuine, real and alive, the faith that saves issues in good works. It becomes the source of a new kind of life – "Christ in me" – that will engage in a bitter struggle with the flesh until the day we are freed and transformed in glory. That will happen in the moment we first lay eyes on Jesus. Until then, the whole core and substance of Christianity is not that we live for God, but that he lives for us in Jesus our Lord.

Why some not others?

A stirring treatment of this question, one that avoids all the theological mischief that has been done in this regard, is found in the closing pages of Luther's *Bondage of the Will*. In a crescendo to this remarkable book, he expounds the "Three Lights." The "First Light" is the light of human reason. Reason is a gift, albeit one that is tragically flawed as we have seen – it has had a gaping red wound in its side ever since the Fall. This first light, human reason, lights up many worthwhile things in this world. However, much that is vital and real lie beyond our discovering or comprehending by this light alone.

The "Second Light" is the light of the gospel. Only this light reveals the true glory of God in the face of Jesus. Yet not *every* corner of knowledge is made plain to us in this light. There are questions that remain. Just read the book of Ecclesiastes. This profound Scripture rips the comfortable mask off the universe, where things will still happen of which we can make no sense. This is the book that makes Christ utterly necessary. It chases us to him.) "Why some and not others" is just such a mystery that remains. And yet a "Third Light" is coming. We will be face-to-face. God will be vindicated and celebrated as we shout, "You have done all things well." All our questions will dissolve into praise and joy.

But for right here and right now, God has left room for faith. He shows us his true nature and his heart of staggering love toward us as Jesus alone has revealed it. For this, we only have the Word. The church's fundamental intellectual task, as I was saying earlier, is not epistemology – "how we know what we know." We will never satisfy the world in how we ground truth. The church's fundamental intellectual task is hermeneutics, the proper interpretation of our holy texts. We are thrown onto Christ – we make our resort to grace – in our need to get it right by the Spirit's own light.

The gospel reaches into time out of God's eternal counsel with himself, and takes hold of the chosen elect. Saving faith, then, is a flat-out miracle. The goal of Lutheran apologetics is not, then, to prove that the gospel is quite reasonable after all. It is to *witness* to the fact that the *unreasonable* happened. Faith is not the end of reason, but the birth of a new and higher reasoning that soars to and is captivated by Christ. We are, indeed, "kept by the power of God"

Psychological Resistance

Our Lutheran fathers were clear about the fact that people receive or respond to the Word of God *psychologically* apart from and simultaneous with the working of the Holy Spirit. This is why we don't tend to stand on street corners and recite John 3:16 over a bullhorn. We don't get a pass when it comes to our obligation to do all we can so that the Word of God be truly heard by people, to penetrate their minds and imaginations. We will do all in our power so that the Word would not be that "seed that fell on rocky ground" (Mat. 13:20) to be instantly snatched away by the birds. It is worthy of the most energetic exercise of human reason that we contemplate how the Word of God may actually be heard in a world in which the psychological patterns of resistance to it are automatic and decisive.

Flannery O'Connor has written about our Western society as a "Christ haunted" culture. There is, for many people, some dim but faulty recollection of what it means to be a Christian. This is not helping us. People today have the illusion that they already know fully what it is, this strange thing called Christianity. It is something like being inoculated by a dead virus of Christianity which keeps them immune to the real thing, though that is more powerful by far. In other words, Christianity will tend to meet people in this culture as the thing they already know all about and which has been effectively debunked (they think) long ago. In other words, witnessing to Christ in this culture is not the same as witnessing to him in India or China where it may still be possible to achieve a primitive response to the gospel. That is, the gospel can still meet people in many places in the world as something astonishing, new and never before considered. Not here.

What Nathaniel said to Philip, "Nazareth!? What good could come from there!?" is echoed in the typical modern response to the Christian church. "What good could possibly come from there!?" This eerily sums up those "patterns of resistance," the walls that so often spring up when you identify yourself as a follower of Jesus to people in this time and place. All this is validated in recent research that has measured the population for how many non-Christians have a positive view of the Christian church. The numbers have fallen off the cliff in the last two decades, the percentages now sitting down somewhere in the low teens. *Der Christ is an optimist* [the Christian is an optimist]. Thank goodness. Because what would otherwise be most disturbing are the results of surveys that ask people on the street what the word "evangelical means." Intolerant. Bigoted. Arrogant. Hypocritical. I suppose this isn't anything new. They hate us? Well, they hated Jesus first.

Factor into this mix the intellectual climate at the secular university in which the resurrection of Jesus, for example, strikes the educated mind as pure fairy tale. That is, such a person can scarcely consider the possibility at all. Jesus is to them this odd, intellectual artifact, this local cultural myth, that somehow survives the endless progress of human advancement. It's just weird. Under these circumstances, just as in preaching within the sanctuary, witnessing outside the sanctuary involves the challenging of how to gain a fresh hearing of the gospel.

Why does resistance matter?

All this is why, for example, we want to be able to discuss the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus as our first core element of Christian apologetics. (See Appendix B) That evidence is quite astonishing. Now to be sure, even if we could *prove* that the event happened, it would not be the same as proving Jesus is the Son of God and that God has reconciled the world

to himself in him. Prominent Jewish thinkers in history have concluded that Jesus rose from the dead while not calling him their Savior. Here is exemplified the difference between the “mask” – the effects in known history of the salvation event – and that which only the gospel can reveal by the Spirit – the reality of God’s undeserved grace for a world of wretched sinners. Only the Spirit can reveal that!

In pointing to these evidences, we have not proved the gospel. We are simply saying, “If you think this is a fairy tale, honestly, you need to think again.” We are saying, “You have an opinion about being vaccinated against the COVID virus or wearing a mask. You ought to have an opinion about the resurrection of Jesus!”

The same goes for the authenticity of the New Testament, primary historical sources of the very highest conceivable credibility (as we shall see later on). It is either intellectual dishonesty or plain ignorance that imagines that these documents can be safely ignored. That is all we are really saying. Or think of this as an example of “negative apologetics” – how much sense does it make to ignore what’s there in the historical record, one that passes every standard of reliability. (See Appendices A and E.) The Lutheran way of doing apologetics is always to pivot toward simple, transparent testimony.

Jesus was just a man? The Bible is just a book? These are the ultimate “defeaters.” (For a fuller list, see Appendix C.) By that I refer to the things in people’s minds that feel self-evidently true, things largely unexamined, and things which, if they are true then Christianity is not. “Jesus isn’t even a real historical figure? No one takes the Bible seriously anymore.” Christian love compels us. We cannot let these lies stand uncontested or let the reality become buried in ugly misinformation. These are the “strongholds” we seek to “demolish” on our way to “taking every thought captive to Christ.” (See 2 Corinthians 10.)

Our objective is simple enough to articulate. We want the Word of Christ to gain entrance past those “watchful dragons” that are the well-practiced evasions of the closed mind. (For a list of positive apologetic arguments, see Appendix D.) We want it to be penetrate and be thought about, heard, weighed, and considered, not dismissed out of hand, so that the Spirit of God might do what only he can.

Why they THINK they don’t believe

The foundation we’ve laid above for a biblical understanding of faith versus unbelief, is critical for grounding all our thinking about Christian apologetics. The human will has set itself against God as he has revealed himself in Christ. “They do not come into the light because their deeds are evil.” This is Jesus’ clear diagnosis of the sinful heart that does not want to be seen or to have to see itself for what it is. It clings to the *opinion legis* [opinion of the law] and the self-justification, self-salvation project. In this it is, of course, doomed to fail.

However, as people experience their own unbelief, and as they explain to you and to themselves why they find Jesus irrelevant, implausible or even absurd, they will tend to speak about three things. Christian love cares enough about people to want to hear them well as some, for example, narrate their exodus from the church. These stories fall into three categories and understanding them will certainly shape, not so much *what* we say, but *how* we say it.

Reason #1. For some people – Habermas estimates their number also at 10% – the story, at least the way they tell it is, is mostly *intellectual*. Their “defeaters” have a logical cast to them. They are prepared to tell you precisely why the Christian worldview doesn’t make any

sense to them. It is especially true of this group that we need to learn how to undermine *their* worldview. Their stories are often about what happened to them when they asked their questions in church. And we have to acknowledge about this group, as the rest, that their most appalling stories may in fact be true. For the vulnerable believer, intellectual reasons don't tend to be faith-crushing. They simply nag at the mind as unresolved questions, that is, until real suffering intrudes on their personal world. Read on.

Reason #2. For most people – Gary Habermas reports the number at 80% – the reason for unbelief is mostly *personal*. For them, it is mostly about pain. A skeptic may have suffered at the hands of Christians who were or were perceived to be blatantly hypocritical. Or they may have thought themselves abused by a church. This, too, may or may not be true. What is most common of all: they have suffered in life, a little or a lot, and this is their self-evident “defeater,” the reason God is not real. To throw too much rational argumentation at these people – words on top of words – is to risk falsifying the situation and mocking their woundedness. Something else is needed. As for the vulnerable believer, this is where it becomes critical that they have kept ties with their Christian community.

Reason #3. For about 10% of people the story is either *social* or a problem of the *will*, that is, it has to do with how they want to live their lives. Their rejection of Christianity has to do with what they perceive to be its inhibitions on life as they choose to live it. What often goes with that is the fact that there are certain sets of people to whom they are attracted and by whom they are accepted (or want to be). The hip and cool. The smart. The tolerant. The socially aware. Conversely, their unbelief is not a carefully reasoned thing, so much as it is an aversion or indifference to whatever Christian set they were once a part of or any that is currently available to them. “Why think about inconvenient truth at all? I know the kind of people I want to hang with, the kind of people I want to be just like.” Once more to the vulnerable young believer, without the Christian “twos or threes” to run to, they will tend to find community elsewhere where the supposed unreasonableness of Christian faith is the air in the room.

Why do people's reasons for not believing matter to us?

We want to understand these *presenting* reasons because there is a limitation to “Christian worldview thinking.” This concept can imply that human creatures are “heads on sticks,” that is, little more than “things that think.” To be sure, worldview remains a powerfully important concept. Every worldview answers the same question: where do we come from, what's wrong with everything, what counts as redemption, and what counts as hope. The Marxist has his answers. We have ours.

However, it is a mistaken notion that deals with the matter of faith as an intellectual one to the exclusion of the personal, the emotional, and the social. The reality is that a person can articulate a Christian view and can even think in some Christianly ways, but it is still this world that they love and desire with a need that feels like survival. This world with its countless versions of human thriving is more real to them than the Savior they do not know. It is this world's countless alternatives for living the “good life” that capture the imagination. In this or that seemingly viable option (what a person can want most out of life) and identity (the need to be somebody) upon which they have pinned their whole heart. A Lutheran apologetic does not see in another person a mere information problem or a contest of reason. It sees souls locked in

the delusions of idolatry, taken in by the lies of Satan himself. They got on the wrong bus without knowing where it is going. There is no gradual rational path into faith. Their dependence on rebirth by the Spirit working through the means of grace, like ours, is absolute.

We will have more to say in person about what I'll call the "apologetic conversation." In a nutshell, we speak transparently of the beauty and reality of Christ using the Word of God just as we have always done. We speak the gospel so that the person knows what it is and what is at stake. The skeptic isn't convinced but can understand why you could want it to be so – what the singing is all about. You can almost expect to hear at this moment their "defeater," the thing that feels self-evidently true to them with the result that Jesus cannot be, say, "A loving God could never send people to hell." We learn to gently deconstruct whatever that is, but not to win an argument. How much sense does it really make to dismiss Jesus on the basis of his flawed church, just for one example? The simple objective is to "to put a stone in the shoe" in the hope that we can open the Word of God to a mind that is no longer quite so sure about its favorite, well-practiced reasons for dismissing it out of hand.

Here is a similar approach. Call it: "Yes...but No...but YES." Often there is a cultural narrative that we can affirm in some way. For example, the culture of our day is struggling for the time when no one is condemned for anything. We can actually say "Yes" to that cultural ambition. We're saying "Yes" to the hope of living a life without condemnation. Of course! But "No." The way this world thinks it can achieve that sort of freedom and joy, well, it's just another defeater we'll need to learn how to gently dismantle or at least "put a stone in the show." And we do so in order to get to that truer and better YES that is ours in Jesus. "I do not condemn you," he said to an adulterous woman and to us. Imagine.

This idea is validated in Apostle Paul's words: "Jews look for miraculous signs and Greeks for wisdom" (1Co1:22). He saw two different cultural narratives and two different cultural ambitions. He learned to response to each in strikingly different ways. And yet, to both he says, "Yes...No...YES." And that "YES" is Christ, both the power and the wisdom of God.

The paradox of human reason

"I believe in Jesus, *like I believe in the sun*, not only because I see it, but because I see everything else by it" (CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity*). I like that. A lot. But I actually like GK Chesterton (one of Lewis' favorite influences from a previous generation) even little better. Chesterton says instead (I'm paraphrasing), "*Allow one sun in your sky*, that is, allow *one mystery that is too bright to look into*, and in that light is everything else revealed" (*Orthodoxy*).

That expression adds a key element, namely, the *mystery* of the gospel. This is in keeping with the *ministerial* use of reason. This refers to reason when it does not dare to handle the deep things of God or try to make them less scandalous than they are. Reason used properly strives to correctly take God's meaning from the inspired, inerrant Word. For Luther, reason is in its proper role when it does not stand above the Word of God arbitrating what can be believed versus what is simply too much. To fail to bow its knees before the light of divine revelation would be the *magisterial* use of reason, the one a Lutheran apologetic must perpetually exclude. Jesus is not true because we have reasoned it out to the satisfaction of everyone (so that we can now confidently declare that we are not fools). The willingness to be a fool is in fact the first prerequisite of Lutheran apologetics. So said our fathers.

Reason is the handmaid in the house of faith. She sweeps the floors and dusts the shelves, and much else that is absolutely useful. But there is one room in which she is not allowed. There

is one item she is not permitted to pick up. It is the essential gospel of our Lord Jesus. “Shhhhhhh! God is speaking!” says faith when mere reason dares to handle the message of the cross. All of this is apiece with a “Three Article Approach” to a Lutheran apologetic, a concept I hope to develop further.

First Article. “I believe in Jesus like I believe in the sun.” I don’t prove Jesus in the normal sense of the word. It is “faith seeking understanding.” This is when we argue *from* the truth of God as our starting point rather than *to* it. *I know Christ is true* on grounds other than reason and evidence. By Word and Spirit, he is my heart’s true presupposition. And from this true ground of faith, the Word and Spirit of God, I can see clearly so as to sift what evidence there is, and to celebrate everything that is just as it must be since Jesus is true.

Second Article. It is all about Jesus. The reason to do apologetics in the first place is to “demolish strongholds,” that is, to tear down every humanly inspired thing that would set itself up in opposition to Christ and which, if left unchallenged, will keep people from ever seeing his face. This is a key distinctive to Lutheran apologetics and one it has in common with polemics between Christians. Simply put, Christian apologetics is for us simply “another form of bringing Good News.” And this is why our talk does not suddenly turn lawyerly, but will continue to model the “warmth and force” that characterizes the pastoral heart and pastoral communication. The *What* – the love of God in Christ – must be in harmony with the *How* – our self-evident love for the person with whom we speak. Anything else is a “performative contradiction.”

Third Article. This signals the utter clarity the Lutheran apologist must bring to the table on the following issue. “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength [thinking or choosing] believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel...” This understanding is precious. It is the reason my daughter survived her years at the U of M Morris with her faith only more fully her own. The “WELS bubble” burst for her in the first five minutes of class, and it can never exist for her again. She can no longer believe in Jesus in the taken-for-grantedness of “Well, what else would I believe!?” or in the conditions of not being able to imagine the alternative. No, she is instantly surrounded by dozens of seemingly viable alternatives. Naïve faith is no longer possible, even as in the first week she was stripped of what were supposed to be undefeatable arguments against evolution, saying to herself, “None of my Christian teachers have ever been where I sit right now.”

She survived, simply put, by staying connected to the Word of God and the family of believers. She started a campus ministry that met in the quintessential church basement of a 70’s WELS church build in a gray-haired church with an old school pastor. “Inoculation theory” suggests that when people simply stay exposed to their original worldview and the “plausibility structures” or “what counts as reasonable” in their own community, their beliefs do not tend to shift or erode. If this a valid observation from communication research, how much more true it is when the Holy Spirit is present not giving her up without a fight.

This Third Article approach makes a crucial commentary on the three core issues we have identified for our equipping of vulnerable Christians within our sphere of influence. 1) It is not meaningful to be able to argue the evidence for the *fact of Christ’s resurrection* if we ourselves are not vitally connected to Jesus in our personal devotional life. 2) It is not meaningful to be able to argue the *phenomenal authenticity of the New Testament* if we do not know it intimately and speak it often. 3) It is not meaningful to win arguments about the

necessity of God (a distant third “core issue”) if we are not drawing people to join us in the life of worship and the mystery of the sanctuary. It is there that his reality – and the possibility of living within it – becomes, as I say, imaginable (in the fullest theological sense of that word). There’s not a lot of arguing going on in the sanctuary. Instead, we experience that desire that is a longing, and for which no satisfaction exists in this world, the evidence that we were made for another.

Reason-based apologetics is, according to Kierkegaard, a “Second Judas’ Kiss.” What we can end up arguing for is not Christ but the enlightenment view of reason that takes it to be the source of ultimate truth. This view of reason excludes the very possibility of divine revelation, which can only come to us from the outside. We do not to raise up an army of “apologetic geniuses,” champions in our midst on whom the rest of rely because they can win debates with arguments we ourselves cannot wield. No, we do not ground the truth in ourselves or our own wonderful powers of argument. Instead, like the apostles, we emphasize their own weakness to be any such ground so that the power of Christ may rest on the weakness of the man and the apparent weakness of the message.

Everyday Christians will often lack answers and will lose arguments to people more gifted in debate. They can still rest in serene confidence even then. Against any evidence for evolution that may have confused him for a while, our world-class WELS scientist, Martin Sponholz would simply say in the midst of that dilemma, “I only have Moses.” Meaning, I still have the Word of God.

Someone has called it “the last idol of fall,” namely, “the idol of explanation.” I will only trust in God my Savior when he has explained everything in life to my satisfaction? God forbid! Job cried out, “Though he slay me, I will trust him.” Because faith is a gift that sometimes exists over against everything we see or feel in this world, we can never ultimately justify it to anyone else. We can only say, “Here I stand. What else can I do?” as we open to Isaiah or David, John or Paul. Why? Because God cannot lie. Because this is the truth that has made me what I am. It is the only coherent explanation to the world as it is or to me as I am. “”Here I stand” we say with Luther. “See a man captivated by the cross.” This is Lutheran apologetics as it must be. Like preaching itself, it is an extension of who we are by the grace of God.

The rest of their stories

My daughter Abby finally received her diagnosis of “Long COVID.” After months of grueling pain, months during which we huddled around her as a family, a soggy mess, praying, and speaking the promises of God to one another, we have her back. She smiles again. She laughs a new full-throated laugh. She thrives in her career. She cares for her family. Although she says she’s at something like 90% recovered and this may be as good as it gets, she is determined to live her life.

So it was that we had a beautiful, fragile, 2 a.m. soul encounter, just her and I, by a campfire last summer. That was when she told me about that first day of college and her anguished tears in the shower – “Jesus, don’t let me go! Please don’t let me go!” She had suddenly found herself all alone in a spiritually dangerous place. She told me that all her questions have not been answered, but she has peace about them just the same. It was yet another “good day for a dad.” Then my wise daughter actually quoted 1 Corinthians to me.

“Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God in his wisdom made foolish the wisdom of the world...for the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s

strength.”

On the following Thanksgiving, as each member of my family wrote things they were thankful for on a card to hang on our little “Thanksgiving Tree,” my son-in-law Keenan (he of the four lesbian mothers) wrote the following about those months of panic attacks and hopeless sobbing. “I’m thankful that I know I have the resilience to walk through fire with Jesus and with my bride and my real family.” Poor Joe, our other son-in-law was seen busily crossing out what he had written – something about a new phone. We love him, too.

When I asked Richard what the snow stood for in the saying, “I am a dunghill covered with snow,” he paused a long pause and said, “I think it must be the beauty of Christ covering us.” He used the word, “us.” Did he mean to? I know the man has questions still. So many questions.

I don’t mean for these happy or at least hopeful outcomes to discourage all those who are still waiting for theirs. These are days of heartache across the best and strongest of Christian families and Christian communities. I have harder stories to tell as well. No one is untouched by the unbelief of someone they care about. The point is, I do apologetics for them.

I hang on in hope to something Soren Kierkegaard said about the people that may happen to burden us most, “Speak a Word of Christ to them, then leave the two of them alone. Let them work it out.” Likewise, my adviser in my PhD program would quote Dietrich Bonhoeffer often and with tears. I always knew that he was thinking about his youngest son. Bonhoeffer said, “Speak to Christ about the man even more than you speak to the man about Christ.”

It a matter of Word and prayer. This is what I know. Also this. God is good. He is unspeakable good and he can be trusted in everything, in every way.

I close with a surprising quote from C.S. Lewis that we mean to take to heart. He commented once that no bit of Christian theology seemed less certain to him than the one he had just successfully defended in a public debate. This is because in that moment the truth seemed to depend on what he called “this weak pillar” (referring to himself). Then he said, “For the Christian apologist *to be saved*, he must continually fall back from the arguments and evidence *into the thing itself*.” Whatever he may have meant by that, what we mean by “the thing itself” is Jesus and his Word. It is the life of worship, our perpetual gathering around the Word and water, the bread and wine. We draw our apologetic from the deepest of wells. The prerequisite for witness is, to put it simply, a full heart.

A related note comes from Soren Kierkegaard who helps us not to think of Christian apologetics as an intellectual puzzle or some sort of performance.

“What good would it do me to construct a world in which I did not live, but only held up to the view of others? What good would it do me to be able to explain the whole meaning of Christianity if it made no great different in my life. No, to know the truth for which I may live and die, this is the greatest thing.”

As we gather this weekend, we will refresh each other in that beautiful “world” of Christian truth and biblical theology. We can help each other truly to live in that world and to inhabit it fully on our way to being transparently Christian. What else could we hope to be?

And with that, may God be with you until we meet again.

Appendices

- A) Bulleted information on the phenomenal reliability of the New Testament
- B) Bulleted information on the fact of Jesus' resurrection from the dead
- C) A Top 20 List of "Defeaters"
- D) Positive Apologetic Arguments
- E) A Sample Apologetics-Informed Devotion on Luke as World-Class Historian

Appendix A – New Testament Apologetics

On the Phenomenal Reliability of the New Testament

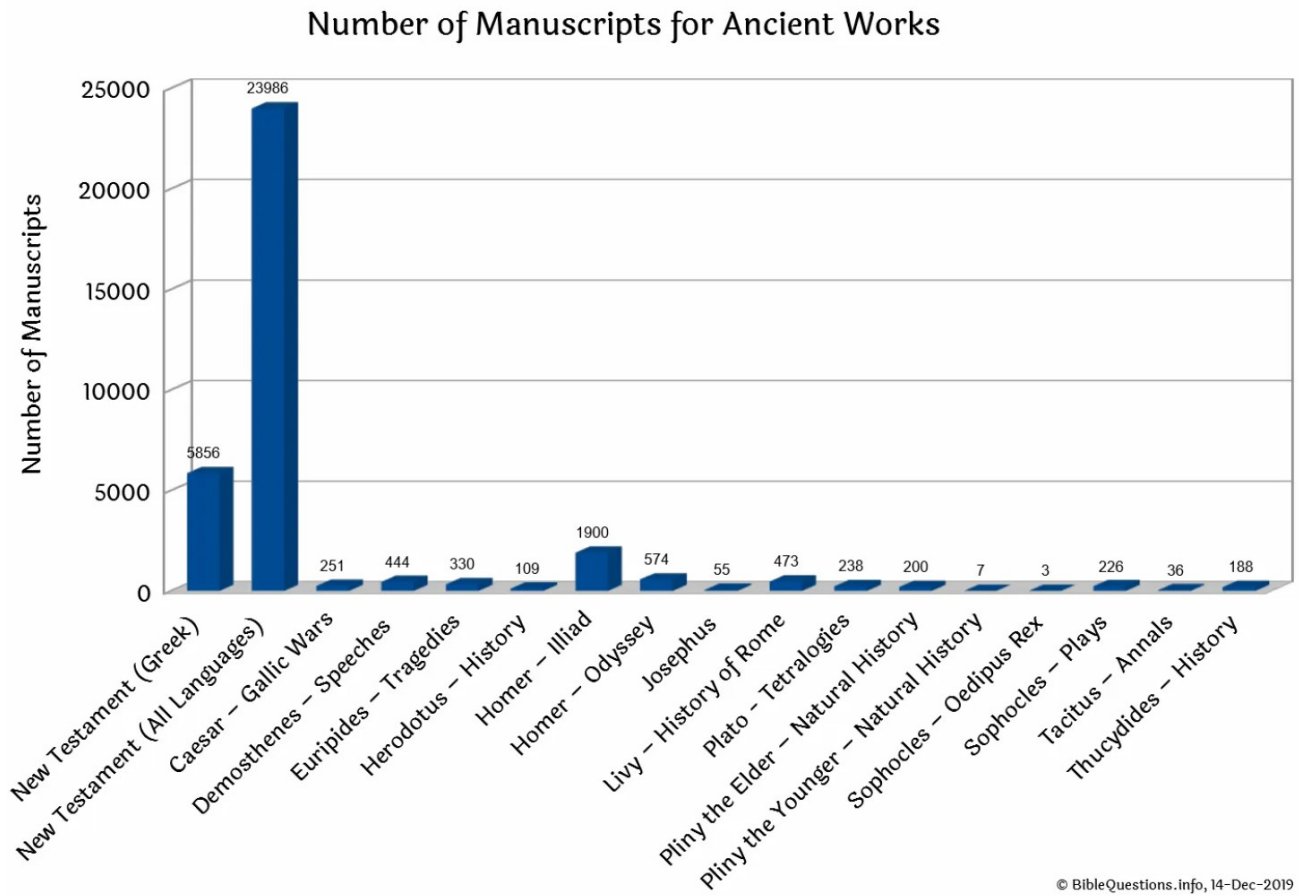
"Why would the apostles lie?...If they lied, what was their motive, what did they get out of it? What they got out of it was misunderstanding, rejection, persecution, torture, and martyrdom. Hardly a list of perks!" – Peter Kreeft.

1. Scholars of the New Testament enjoy an "embarrassment of riches" with approximately 5800 documentary witnesses to the original text in Greek, plus over 24,000 translations of New Testament texts into other languages.
2. When you hear about hundreds of thousands of textual variants, that number includes every time a variant appears in any of the nearly 30,000 texts. These numbers are astonishingly low and no doctrine of the New Testament is implicated.
3. The New Testament writers included countless embarrassing and inconvenient details about themselves.
4. The New Testament writers included many difficult sayings of Jesus; neither they nor those who produced copies of the apostolic writings ever allowed themselves permission to smooth over the difficulties. There is zero evidence of New Testament documents in any state of flux.
5. The New Testament writers carefully distinguished Jesus' words from their own rather than put anything they may have wanted into his mouth.
6. The New Testament writers included accounts that they would not have invented. That Jesus' first resurrection appearances were to women is only one of many examples (an incredibly significant one). Others include the last words of John the Baptist, "Are you the one or should we look for another?"
7. The New Testament writers include more than thirty historically confirmed people in their writings; these combine with countless locations and events that can be investigated historically; wherever their veracity can be empirically tested they pass (with minor exceptions in the form of issues not yet resolved).
8. The New Testament writers include divergent details just as is typical of real events, not fabricated stories; this is true of all events witnessed by multiple people. The NT copyists never paper over these difficulties either (which can all be solved just as they are).
9. The New Testament writers challenge their readers to check out verifiable facts.
10. New Testament writers describe miracles just as they do other historical events, with simple, unembellished accounts; this is in dramatic contrast to the false gospels that began with "The Gospel of Thomas" dated to the end of the 2nd century with their blatant mythical flair.
11. If the New Testament were a fabrication, it means that some common ancient men invented a literary genre – "realistic historical fiction" – that would not be seen again for over 1800 years. (There is much more to this than students usually think.)
12. Unlike modern day martyrs who come to believe things for which they willingly die, the apostles were in a position to know whether their claims were false. No one knowingly dies for a lie.
13. The New Testament writers abandoned their long-held sacred beliefs and cultural practices, adopted new ones, and did not deny their testimony under persecution or pain of death.

It matters when the NT was written. Portions were written in the 50s and 60s AD (this is not in dispute). We can solidly date the church's confession about Jesus to five or six years after he was raised (see 1 Corinthians 15 & Galatians 1, documents that enjoy full scholarly consensus as to their authenticity). Most of the NT was written before 70 AD – this is supported by its failure to mention the fall of Jerusalem. 25 of the 27 NT books – besides Jude and 3 John – were widely quoted all around the ancient world by the church fathers by 100 AD (this is not in dispute). *Any conspiracy a person could dream up strains the imagination.* Legendary material cannot gain traction or supplant eye-witness testimony while thousands were still alive. And remember that we are not talking about what someone had for breakfast on a Tuesday, but about life-altering, "where-were-you-when?" events. And remember that we have only scratched the surface of the spine-tingling phenomenon of OT prophecy (e.g., crucifixion details that precede its invention, and a resurrection of a man who died but avoided decay). Again, the most important person who ever lived, who divides history into a *Before* and *After*, happens to have unique prophetic credentials which a mere man could not arrange for himself.

Whatever else we have to say about this, we should always say, “Let’s read Luke, the world-class historian...then John, the one who leaned on Jesus’ chest...”

This is what we mean by “an embarrassment of riches.”



Appendix B - the Fact of Jesus’ Resurrection

Broad Historical Consensus about the Resurrection.

“Scholars must provide more than alternative theories to the Resurrection; they must provide first-century evidence for those theories.” – Gary Habermas

The following represent a historical consensus among scholars no matter their presuppositions about Christianity. A person ought to have an opinion about the resurrection of Jesus.

1. Jesus was a real historical figure who died in Jerusalem by Roman crucifixion, experts at the task.
2. He was buried in a private tomb. No one there expected him to rise. All would need convincing.
3. Afterwards the disciples were terrified, bereaved, and hopelessly despondent. This was the state of Jesus followers when something caused the church to suddenly explode into existence.
4. The conspicuous lie from hostile witnesses that “his disciples stole the body while we were sleeping” is their testimony that the tomb was empty.

5. Women provided the first crucial testimony (without value at the time) that the tomb was indeed found empty two days after his internment. Mary believed she met the risen Jesus.
6. The disciples had experiences that they believed were actual appearances of the risen Jesus.
7. The disciples could have made the convenient claim that they were met by the spirit of Jesus; instead they were explicit in making the falsifiable claim of his physical resurrection from the dead, citing the “many convincing proofs” he showed them.
8. Powerful forces in Jerusalem were highly motivated to squash the resurrection rumors; they needed only to produce the body of Jesus. No group that we know of in Jerusalem had serious motivation to steal Jesus’ body.
9. Due to their experiences, the disciples’ lives were thoroughly transformed. They were without exception willing to die for their claim. They had nothing to gain and everything to lose by lying.
10. The proclamation of the resurrection was sounded very early, in fact, from the beginning of Christian church history, not a legend that arose after centuries (see the note on 1 Corinthians 15 later in this document).
11. The disciples’ public testimony and preaching of the Resurrection took place in the city of Jerusalem among thousands who would have refuted their factual claims were that possible.
12. The gospel message centered on the preaching of the death and resurrection of Jesus.
13. The resurrection of Jesus was immediately affirmed in the primitive Church as proof of his full divinity, and this among the last people in the world disposed to create a legend that a crucified man was God himself given that Judaism gave the world the highest conceivable conception of God. (See the “legend, liar, lunatic, Lord” argument.)
14. Sunday immediately became the primary day for the gathering and worshiping of thousands of Jews in Jerusalem.
15. James, the brother of Jesus and a skeptic before this time, was converted when he believed he also saw the risen Jesus; he became the pillar of the church in Jerusalem.
16. Saul of Tarsus became a Christian believer due to an experience that he also believed was an appearance of the risen Jesus. He voluntarily surrendered all his privilege, brilliantly expounded the implications of what he saw and the about-face in his own life; he died for this conviction.

Skeptical counter-theories, in addition to flying in the face of all the evidence there is, can be dispensed with given minimal preparation: hallucination theory, the wrong tomb theory, the swoon or apparent death theory, the stolen body theory, the substitute Jesus theory, the wanting to believe theory, the copied pagan myth theory. If a given theory may fit with one or two of the “minimal facts” that all historians accept, it will run headlong into others. The Resurrection is not legend, lie, or embellishment. Crucifixion was designed to erase a human being who as not fit to live or be remembered. There’s only one reason you know the name of Jesus. He rose.

**Whatever else we have to say about this, we should always *fall back into the thing itself*.
“Let’s read the Psalms together (22 and 16)...then Luke...then Peter...then Paul...”**

The top four items (below) enjoy virtually *total* consensus among historians for this period. There is just a bit less agreement about the fifth item. Half of the letters of Paul are unquestioned, including (very significantly) the two mentioned below.

“The Minimal Facts” Approach

A man known as Jesus Christ was executed by the Romans through crucifixion

Later, the disciples believed he appeared to them physically

The Conversion of the Persecutor Saul

The Conversion of the Skeptic James

The Empty Tomb (with not quite the same consensus)

The authenticity of 1 Corinthians and Galatians is unquestioned.

Appendix C - Defeaters

Defeaters – A Top 20 List

1. How can you actually believe in miracles?
2. There are no moral absolutes.
3. Christians are hateful, bigoted, and intolerant.
4. Religion is a psychological crutch for the weak; Christianity is psychologically damaging.
5. The church of history has done terrible things.
6. There is no such thing as truth / your claims are oppressive to me.
7. With so many denominations and interpretations, who can say what it all really means?
8. Where is God when I'm hurting?
9. How can there be a good God when the world is such a bad place?
10. The Bible is full of myths and contradictions.

11. There are many paths to God / I can believe what I want as long as I'm sincere / it's arrogant to claim you alone have the truth.
12. Isn't religion discredited by science?
13. The church is all about power.
14. I don't need to believe in God to live a meaningful life.
15. Can a loving God send people to hell?
16. People are basically good. And/or, There's no such thing as sin.
17. Religion only puts barriers between people / it's the cause of all the trouble in the world.
18. I have a mind, and this doesn't make sense.
19. Bible-believing Christians are just wrong about LGBTQ issues.
20. I want freedom from all your rules.

Appendix D – Positive Apologetic Arguments

Positive Apologetic Arguments – A Top 20 List

If God Became a Man, You Could Expect...

This is a fascinating backdoor approach. Who do you know that fits this four-part profile?

1. He would tell us in advance so that we could recognize him; this is about the spine-tingling phenomenon of Messianic prophecy, the credentials that belong uniquely to the one who just happens to divide human history into a before and after.
2. He would have an unprecedented entrance into the human story, his mind-bending incarnation as Christianity's "One Grand Miracle." This will beautifully complement our emphasis in class on Jesus' resurrection.
3. He would have words and deeds that would resonate in the human soul like none other; this is the simple apologetic of helping skeptics become familiar with the one they would reject.
4. He would do something about the most serious problems that plague humanity. (This should be a comparison of Christianity's answer to evil, pain, and death *versus* those of all other religions or philosophies.)

Christianity's Historic Advantage

Accepting Christianity does not mean taking a single historical figure's word for it (as is the case, e.g., with Mormonism, Islam, and many others).

5. Christianity's falsifiability, as well its intersection with hundreds of known people, places and events (as repeatedly confirmed by archaeology and historians of all persuasions). We are not asked to ground our faith in the words of a single, merely human figure (such as Joseph Smith or Muhammed).
6. The fact of the early Christian church - its explosion into existence, shocking and against all odds - needs to be explained and accounted for.
7. Likewise, the persistence of the Church throughout history / the survival of the essential gospel until now as it found its own path to each one of us in this room.

The Phenomenal Word of God

Many have tried to slam the door on Christianity, but something keeps it ajar, something that isn't going away...

8. This is about the Bible's phenomenal unity, the essential agreement among dozens of writers, spread across centuries on countless complex and controversial subjects about which countless opinions could be imagined.
9. This is about the Bible's phenomenal preservation and survival; this is about our confidence in the Bible we now hold in our hands in the face of relentless disinformation and opposition.
10. The Bible's phenomenal authenticity – this is *not* the way a fictionalized history or cast of characters could ever have been written. (Extend to the Old Testament and/or the Epistles the approach what we've said about the four Gospels).

There is No One Like Jesus

It would take more than a Jesus to invent a Jesus.

11. Jesus cannot be dismissed as a "great moral teacher" and nothing more. He claimed to be God himself. This leaves us with three choices: he is a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord himself. (Some people include "legend" in this construct, but no historian of worth lives with this fiction.)
12. There is no life that has so changed the world – left a larger wake in history or transcended human cultures. (And/or there is no one who has been so dangerous to the skeptic who *dares* to examine him closely.)
13. There is no life that ever inspired such unadulterated devotion or, for that matter, such hatred. No person has so invaded human imagination or haunted people's dreams. (Think especially of literature, music, and art. And/or think of Christian self-sacrifice and willing martyrdom down to this very day. And/or think of the unique opposition Christianity awakens.)

Some Classic Apologetic Arguments

We can confidently assert that God is the best explanation to the existence of the universe, for its beginning, and for its staggering design. You might add to that list the religious experiences of billions of people.

14. The cosmological argument (and/or the contingency argument that is closely related).
15. The teleological argument (and/or the “fine-tuned universe” argument that is closely related).
16. The moral argument.

Why I Believe

Coming home to a recognizably Lutheran apologetic voice.

17. We can fall back to the definition of faith, its causes, and its preservation, biblically speaking, as Lutherans uniquely and strenuously affirm them.
18. “We walk by faith, not by sight” – we can articulate our serene confidence no matter what we ever see, think or experience, even when answers to the hard questions elude us. Nothing is more sure the voice of God making promises in his own name.
19. A religion with the crucifixion of God at its center is utterly unique and un-inventible – humanity cannot account for it except that it is the Truth. This means reaffirming that Christ crucified and raised is the centerpiece of Lutheran apologetics.
20. Apologetics is “another form of bringing Good News,” and as such, it is an extension of the apologist’s whole life of faith, worship, and love for people and for the gospel itself.

Appendix E – A Sample Apologetics-Informed Devotion

“The Certainty of the things you have been taught”

A Devotion on Christian Apologetics for Advent

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

We turn now to Luke, travelling companion of Paul and world-class historian. He combs the documents and interviews the witnesses. He begins where it all began.

To be a fly on the wall!

“‘A sword will pierce your soul?’ He said that? O, Mary!”

As to Jesus’ resurrection, you could have the “where were you when?” conversation on any street corner in Jerusalem.

Credentialed historians charge Luke with “habitual accuracy.” He perfectly captures the atmosphere of a Jerusalem, Ephesus, or Philippi. What he gets right about the fluid politics of Rome in particular times and places is, by all accounts, astonishing.

Although he didn’t have to, Luke constantly wagers his reputation. “Check me on this!” C.S. Lewis commented, “I’ve been reading myths all my life. This is *not* what they are like.”

Luke wagers *everything*. If his unembellished reporting is wrong in the particulars, then folks can safely dismiss him when it comes to *his true subject* – truth of another kind. From G.K. Chesterton: “Allow one sun in your sky, one mystery too bright to look into, and all else is lit up in that light.”

God came near. All the way down. All the way in.

“Nails, spear shall pierce him through. The cross he’ll bear for me, for you.

Hail! Hail! The Word made flesh. The babe, the Son of Mary.”

If Christmas is a gathering storm of sadness or anxiety, we have much we’d love to say to you over an open Gospel: the obsessive Luke, the urgent Mark, the timeless Matthew, the

“open book” we call John. This is first. Your reconciliation to “God from God” and “Light from Light” is history, actual history, yet charged with the holy just the same.

At a particular time. In a particular place. Through a particular Jewish maiden.
It happened.

Lord, what a path lay ahead for you because we happened! Humanity has an ugly history. So do I. In wonder we search the record, sift the reliable facts, and find you there, the world’s Redeemer and mine, compassionate, glorious, and oh-so-real! Amen.