

Apologetics: The missing link in our Evangelism today?

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It has been my contention for many years that there is something missing in some of the ways that we do evangelism, especially in the last fifteen years. Methods of evangelism which seem to have been effective twenty to thirty years ago don't seem to be quite as effective today for reaching the lost. I believe that there are many reasons why our evangelism has lost its punch in reaching the lost, especially here in America. But I would like to point out one fundamental truth that the Bible teaches as being an important ingredient in evangelism, and yet is missing in much of our evangelism today. I believe that some of our ineffectiveness in reaching the lost of our generation can be traced to this missing ingredient.

I am referring to the important role that Christian evidence (Apologetics) should play in doing evangelism. When it comes to evangelism, although the Bible does clearly make a distinction between apologetics and evangelism, it does not draw a complete separation between them! In fact as one studies the New Testament, it becomes clear that evangelism and apologetics were used hand in hand in connection with reaching others for Christ!

The use of evidence was a common practice that accompanied the proclamation of the Gospel in the N.T. (see Matt. 4:23; John 5:36; 10:37-38; 20:30-31; Acts 9:22; 14:1; 17:2-3; 26:28-29; 28:23). For example, Jesus continually showed evidence of his supernatural power in order to encourage others to believe in Him. The miracles that He performed demonstrated to the Jews in a tangible way that God did send Jesus!

The Apostle John pointed out that there were other miracles that Jesus performed that weren't even mentioned in his book, but that "these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31).

Also, the Apostle Paul did not just proclaim the Gospel to the Jewish people. His custom was to "reason with them from the scriptures" (Acts 17:2-3). The Apostle Peter declared that we are to give reasons to others for why we believe what we do as Christians (I Pet. 3:15). Overall, in the New Testament, some kind of Christian evidence normally accompanied the proclamation of the Gospel.

I believe that the problem for those of us who are witnessing to our friends and acquaintances at the threshold of a new millennium is that we have not been adequately taught to couple apologetics with evangelism. And even if we have been taught that, we should use Christian evidence in conjunction with the presentation of the Gospel, in practice many of us have difficulty

actually putting the two together in evangelistic situations. Unfortunately, using Christian evidence is often a last-ditch effort to reach our non-Christian friends and acquaintances rather than part of a systematic effort to capture their attention. In turn, they may be more likely to give us a hearing and consider the truth claims of Christ.

Now we might have been able to get by with mostly proclamation evangelism twenty to thirty years ago since our culture for the most part had still somewhat embraced the seeds of Theism and Christianity. As a result, doing apologetics in conjunction with our evangelism probably didn't seem as urgent of a need. Certainly we can see that in the New Testament, Jesus and the Apostles mostly used historical apologetics since most of the people that they witnessed to (Jews and God-fearing gentiles) had already embraced Theism as a worldview. Also, the Jews already had a belief that God would send a Messiah to rescue them. Granted, their view of the Messiah was very different than what Jesus and the Apostles had proclaimed since the Jews saw Him coming more as an earthly king rather than as a suffering servant. Still, the Apostle's aim was to merely show that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures concerning the Messiah (Acts 28:23). This might parallel the situation in America twenty to thirty years ago when most people at worst were just considered backslidden Church-goers or at least held to a Theistic worldview.

However, the question that we need to address in the New Millennium is this: Do the people we are attempting to reach today share the same Theistic worldview as those that Jesus and his disciples mainly ministered to? I would answer that, frequently, this is not the case. As a result, it seems to me that the kind of Apologetics we need to do more of today resembles what the Apostle Paul did in Acts 17 when he was witnessing to the pantheists and polytheists. With these groups of people he did not assume that they all accepted a Theistic worldview. His basic approach in witnessing to them was to first show the rational inconsistencies in their own worldview, and then point the way towards Theism and Christianity (Acts 17:23-32). Theistic Apologetics involves showing that Theism is the correct worldview before talking about the evidence for Jesus being the Messiah. This may be helpful for some who have difficulty accepting the idea of Jesus being the Son of God, especially when they don't believe that God exists to begin with!

In the past we might have been able to evangelize without using apologetics, or even using very limited historical apologetics. However, I believe that it is much more difficult to evangelize without employing apologetics today. My contention is that we cannot afford to only use "proclamation evangelism" any more if we are going to effectively reach the modern skeptics of our day, especially here in America!

So what will be the repercussions of doing evangelism detached from a consistent apologetic approach?

I believe that doing evangelism in the next millennium without a consistent apologetic approach will greatly limit our effectiveness in witnessing to those around us. This is especially true of those who have rejected a belief in absolute truth. As a result, not only might our non-believing friends have a difficult time distinguishing between our beliefs as Christians as opposed to what a particular pseudo-Christian cult may believe, they may have even given up on the idea that any real, objective truth can be found anywhere. They might be happy that Christianity works for you and me, but may insist that it's just our truth, not their truth. We need to remember that this is a very different situation than Jesus and the Apostles were confronted with in their generation. At least the people of their generation believed that truth could be known and did correspond to reality (what is). This cannot always be said of those in our generation and those who will be born in the new millennium.

As a result, these different kinds of intellectual perspectives will need to be adequately addressed and answered (2 Cor. 10:5) if you and I are going to effectively reach this new generation for Christ! New methods of evangelism which incorporate apologetic elements must be developed and consistently applied in witnessing if we are going to play an effective role in helping to turn the irreligious and skeptics towards God, especially here in America.

However, these new methods and strategies, even if adequately implemented, will still not be enough to significantly impact other people's lives for Christ. To paraphrase the Apostle Paul in this setting, he would point out that "Even if I have all knowledge and have great methods for reaching the lost, but do not demonstrate genuine love towards others, it is useless!" (I Cor.13:2-3)

Christians must also demonstrate genuine love and compassion towards others in order to significantly impact other people's lives. **I am convinced that an appropriate methodology along with a holy lifestyle and a loving compassion for others in cooperation with the important work of the Holy Spirit, can be a powerful combination that can have a great impact on the lives of our non-Christian friends and acquaintances (Acts 14:1; Phil. 1:12-14).** This combined approach can play an important part in reaching the children of the new millennium. My prayer is that all of us will become more like the men of Issachar, who "understood the times in which they lived" (I Chron. 12:32) and that we will ask God for the courage, strength, and compassion to do what must be done in order to reach the skeptics of the new millennium!