

Apologetics in Preaching *Not without Testimony*

By Michael Berg

We are not left without testimony (Ac 14:17). This is true in every aspect of life. Imagine waking up to a world without any knowledge passed down to you. No set language to imitate. No wisdom to ponder. No technologies invented. I am thankful that I didn't have to learn, discover, or invent all the agricultural, mechanical, or technological advancements I take for granted every day. We are not left without testimony.

Nor are we left without theological testimony. Not even the Gentiles Paul encountered, whether in cosmopolitan Rome (Rm 1:20) or backwater Galatia (Ac 14:17), were left without testimony. Natural law is common to all. Every human has enough information to conclude that there is a something out there beyond this world. Paul therefore states that Gentiles are "without excuse" (Rm 1:20).

Paul based his conclusion on evidence that we might categorize as the classical arguments for the existence of God.¹ Consider a form of the cosmological argument: All things are contingent; nothing pops into existence by itself but rather depends on something or someone else for its existence (e.g. the carpenter made the table from wood). Since the universe is the sum total of all contingent things, then the universe is contingent. This requires a necessary being outside the universe which caused the universe. The universe could not pop into existence by itself.²

The cosmological argument not only points to the existence of a noncontingent being, it also points to certain attributes of this being. This being would have to be a free agent and outside of time and space. If this being created the universe, it would also be powerful and intelligent. This being would also be a person (philosophically) which means it has consciousness and rationality.

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The classical arguments, although debated, are powerful. Yet they don't bring the skeptic to Christ. They may point to the existence of a divine being but not the Christian God. Notice also that love is conspicuously absent in the classical arguments. The gospel is nowhere to be found. If we are left with only natural law, we are left with only law. We can only conclude that the "god" of nature seems angry and doesn't discriminate between the good and the evil of humanity.

Thankfully, we are also not left without testimony about Christ. Testimony about the existence of God is evident with a use of reason, but gospel testimony is only revealed. And revelation means words. Whether spoken, written, signed, or pictured, these words are always preached.³ The truth of the gospel must be preached, that is, revealed. And to be revealed it must be hidden, that is, clothed in word.

So words matter. Therefore, we are concerned not only with words but also with attacks on words. Today we encounter two attacks on words. The first is an attack on words themselves. The second is an attack on the texts of Scripture. Both are ultimately an attack on *the Word*. Jacques Derrida's attack on logo-centrism⁴ is an attack on Christo-centricism (since Christ is the Logos). Yet we should not ignore the main point of his critique: Do words help us know truth, or do they get in the way of knowing truth? Practically speaking the answer is "yes" to both. Words are our best tool in discovering and transmitting truth. Yet who of us has not struggled to communicate a thought because words have failed us? Here we realize that

the problem is not with words but with misuse of words and our failure to articulate truth with imperfect language.

Postmodern language games [bring] two apologetic opportunities.

While the Lutheran preacher is worried by these postmodern language games, he should also see two apologetic opportunities. The first is the recognition that we, as sinful language speakers, are limited in our ability to know truth and are weary of people who speak truth not to power but for power. The second is the urge to know is still engrained in all humans, even in those who claim "we cannot know."

Do not Lutherans understand the bound will better than anybody? Are we not dismayed at the misuse of words by politicians and advertisers? We should be the least surprised people on the planet when sin is exposed. With a certain calmness (as opposed to the hysteria we experience in the contemporary world), we can slow down the anger and build a solid epistemology. Sparing ourselves (and our people) from technical language, we can simply argue that we humans are capable of knowledge. I suppose someone could always protest "Couldn't this all be a dream?" But we don't live our lives like that. We have basic beliefs upon which we build a view of the world.

Secondly we have a desire to know. More than that, we have a desire for joy, drama, importance, and wonder. We were made for something great and we know it. Nobody would describe as admirable the person who shrugs his shoulders and mutters "Who cares?" Lutherans are able to balance this very somber attitude of "We can't know fully and it's our fault" with the revelation of the Logos who fulfills our natural desire to know. True, we sinners cannot fully know anything, let alone God, but God provides everything we need in Christ. He is the Logos.



Heraclitus' famous river analogy about a person unable to step into the same river twice⁵ seems to imply that change is so constant that meaning is illusive. But Heraclitus also said, "Listening not to me but to the Logos, it is wise to agree that all things are one."⁶ Heraclitus understood that there was something outside which regulates all things. Heraclitus said "Listen to the Logos," and John said "Here is the Logos dwelling among us." Jesus is the Logos. He is what we are looking for but cannot see because of the blindness of sin. The urge to know is there in all. The way to know is in Christ. So we preach Christ.

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The second attack on words is an attack on the texts of Scripture. There is a general cynicism to the accuracy of the Gospel accounts. Once again, the apologist does not want to engage in circular logic (the Bible is accurate because it says so). Nor does the apologist want to cede the field to the skeptic. Instead the apologist wants to level the playing field so that the same criteria used to examine other ancient texts are used on the New Testament manuscripts.

A basic outline of such criteria can be found in countless books on apologetics. A quick summary will suffice here. Three tests determine the accuracy of ancient documents. First, the biographical test examines the autograph and manuscript evidence. How close to the events were the autographs written? How many manuscripts are there, and how early are those manuscripts? Second, the internal test concerns itself with the coherence of the text, the ability of the writers to be accurate (means, motive, and opportunity), and the text's claims about itself. Finally, the external test asks if there is extratextual evidence to back up the claims of the texts.

The New Testament texts pass all three tests. We have good reason to believe in an early dating of the Gospels. The amount of manuscript evidence and the gap between the autographs and the manuscripts are by far the best of any document of the era (biographical test). The New Testament writers had the opportunity and means to record this data. They also had pure motives (they gained nothing for their testimony but martyrdom). The New Testament claims inerrancy and lays out a coherent message (internal test). We also have what amounts to a chain of custody of the evidence. We have insight into the vetting process of the books of the canon (e.g. John taught Polycarp who taught Irenaeus who taught Hippolytus). Add to this extra-biblical accounts of Christ (e.g. Tacitus and Pliny the Younger) along with archaeological evidence, and the texts pass the external test.

The Sixth Sunday after Easter (May 26, 2019) has much to do with testimony. The First Reading (Acts 14:8-18) is the story of

Barnabas and Paul in Lystra and Derbe. The two missionaries are mistakenly identified as gods. In response Paul states that they work for the true God who had not left the Galatians “without testimony” of a supreme being who sends “rain from heaven and crops in their seasons” (Ac 14:17). Psalm 65 is an example of praise for such providence.

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The Second Reading (Rv 21:10-14, 22, 23) highlights the foundation of the apostles’ testimony. In Jesus Christ’s revelation to John, the church is pictured as the New Jerusalem. Written on the city’s foundations are the “names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (Rv 21:14). The apostles are equated to foundations because the church’s ministry is built on their testimony.

Finally, the Gospel (Jn 14:23-29) is Jesus’ own words about his relationship to the Father and his sending of the Spirit to the apostles. “These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me. All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (Jn 14:24b-26).

Here is an example of how a preacher might include apologetic concerns about words, texts, and reliability into a sermon.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.” What a lie. It doesn’t take us too long in life to realize that wounds inflicted by words heal slower than broken bones. Words matter. Words are powerful.

This makes perfect sense because we are people of words. Better yet, we are people of the Word. The world was created by words. God wants to deal with us with words. We deal with each other with words. He wants us to take him at his word. The whole story of the Bible is about people not taking God at his word and then God coming with his Word to save them. Finally Jesus is the Word. Now, you might say “But Pastor, I dream in color!” Or “I think in pictures.” Good for you, but how will you explain it to me? With words. For lack of a better way to say it, we are people of words.

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So we are very sensitive when people attack *the Word*. Maybe you have heard it said that the New Testament is unreliable history. “We don’t really know what Jesus said or did.” This is



simply not true. We have more reliable historical data for Jesus than for any other person of that era, and it’s not even close. I won’t bore you with all the details, but just consider this one fact: We have more copies of the New Testament which verify the events of Jesus’ life than any document describing the most important people of ancient Greece or Rome. We have around 5,600 manuscript fragments of the New Testament. Most famous writings of the time have less than a dozen. A dozen! By far the largest manuscript collection of one book is Homer’s *Illiad* which boasts 643. It’s not even close to the evidence of the New Testament. All I am saying is don’t fall apart when you hear that the New Testament is fraudulent. It’s simply not true.

But there is another more subtle attack on words. It’s an attack on the ability of words to even transmit meaning. It goes like this: every word is spoken by an author who then loses control of the word. The word is just floating out there detached from what the original author meant by that word. Even the original author is using words that come with their own baggage. For example, when a poor kid on the tough streets of Philadelphia hears the word “run” he thinks of something different than what the long-distance runner thinks when she hears the word “run.” Fair enough. There are shades of meaning. But does that really mean that we cannot communicate with each other or even know anything for sure? The fact that we are using words right now disproves that theory. We are able to match reality with words.

Yet we all have experienced a time when words didn’t do the trick. “I’m at a loss of words,” we might say about an extraordinary event. It’s not that words have necessarily failed us but rather that we sinful users of words have failed. We’re the problem. And God knows this. He knows that we are so deeply flawed that we cannot wrap our heads around divine

things and in fact, fight against them. Every single day I grow in appreciation of this passage from 1 Corinthians: “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cr 13:12). God knows our flaws. He knows us better than we know us. And one day I will know. One day.

So God is very concerned with words. It is through *the* Word transmitted through preached words that you and I know salvation. Think about what we heard today. Jesus revealed to St. John the Golden Jerusalem, heaven. It’s pictured with twelve foundations with the names of the apostles on those foundations. Why such respect for the Twelve? Because of their bravery, wisdom, and integrity? Hardly. The Twelve are most important because of their testimony. They were the first to see and hear Jesus. Their greatest honor was to pass down this testimony.

In fact, this is what Jesus was talking about in today’s Gospel. These words of the Father were given to the Son and the Spirit. It is the Spirit who then comes to these eyewitnessing apostles. The Spirit inspired them to write, record, speak, and preach this message to others. Why? Why are all three persons of the Trinity involved in words? Why do they acknowledge this on the foundations of the Golden Jerusalem? Why is this the highest honor? Because of you, that’s why. Because of you.

Words matter. *God’s* words matter. They matter because this is how God deals with us. This is how he is revealed to us. This is how the Spirit comes to us. This is how you have faith. And these words have power, the power to save. They have power to cut through all the confusion of our modern world. We hear all sorts of stories, all sorts of words, all sorts of reports. We don’t know which words to believe anymore. But the gospel cuts through all of that and declares forgiveness for you. This is truth, for this Word is Christ and Christ is the truth.

We need this specific word. It is true that every person has been given testimony from God. Nature tells us that there is a designer of some sorts. Our consciences tell us that the designer is a moral being. There is a right and wrong. “He has not left himself without testimony,” as we heard Paul say today. But none of this tells me what I really need to know. A tree can tell me that there is a God. But it can’t tell me that Christ died on its distant relative for my salvation. I need to know Christ and him crucified for me. Only the Word tells me that.

God has gone to great lengths for your salvation. He sent his Son who lived, died, rose, and ascended for you. He has also gone to great lengths to give you words, and in fact *the* Word.

The Twelve preached it and even died for it. The New Testament writers recorded it. The church copied it. Your ancestors confessed it. Your parents, biological or spiritual, taught it to you. And now it is preached to you. So that you would know. So that you would have peace. Words matter, don’t they? So here is the preached Word to you today, “You are forgiven!”

- ¹ The four classical arguments for the existence of God are the cosmological, teleological, ontological, and anthropological arguments.
- ² One important question in cosmology is the finitude of the universe. If the universe is infinite then no creative being is needed to explain the universe. The Kalam Cosmological Argument makes the case that time cannot be infinite. If the universe (and therefore time) is infinite then the time between when you started reading this sentence and the time you stopped would include an infinite amount of moments. But how could you traverse an infinite amount of moments? The fact that you have reached this present moment proves that the universe is not infinite.
- ³ See Luther’s distinction in *The Bondage of the Will* between the preached God and the unpreached God. We are to seek God where he intends to be sought, hidden but paradoxically revealed in word. Seeking an unpreached God, that is without word, ends with law not gospel.
- ⁴ Derrida attacks the idea that language is a fundamental expression of reality.
- ⁵ *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments*, G.S. Kirk, 1954 Cambridge University Press, 366 -367.
- ⁶ *The History of Philosophy* Vol. 1, W.K.C. Guthrie, 1967 Cambridge University Press, 424-425.



Books for Further Study

Can Science Explain Everything? by John Lennox

Can We Trust the Gospels? by Peter Williams

Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospel by J. Warner Wallace

Handbook of Christian Apologetics by Peter Kreeft & Ronald K. Tacelli

History, Law and Christianity by John Warwick Montgomery

The End of Reason: A Response to the New Atheists by Ravi Zacharias