



eMonograph

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Why Apologize?
Engaging challenges to the
faith for educators in
Lutheran ministries

by

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Foreword

Excuses. You'll probably have many not to read this *LEA Monograph*. After all, you are getting ready for the new academic year. And in December, Christmas programs and plans will overwhelm you. After the holidays, you're just plain tired plus it's the time of year to get down to pressing curricular realities. Of course, spring has the Easter rush, testing, Confirmation.... Besides, who needs this theological stuff and fluff?

This monograph is not a glob of theological flab. It's all muscle.

God has blessed many Lutheran educational ministries with new clientele. We no longer serve mostly young Lutherans. We have built Lutheran education over many decades, and now students of diverse denominational and even religious backgrounds have come. The mission field is at our door, but among them are skeptics, hostiles, and those who have no idea how much the one true God loves them. They need evangelism, solidly scriptural doctrine, and confident witness.

God has blessed many Lutheran educational ministries with teachers unimagined by Lutheran schools of the past. More and more graduate from public universities. And those that graduate from "within the system" may not feel the urgency nor possess ability to address challenges to the faith on which Lutherans base their educational ministries. And a few teachers may ignore the potential or fail to see the need for theological education. They—we—all need help with apologetics.

This monograph is ministry muscle, flexed and applied in firm but gentle defense and integration of faith. All who teach in Lutheran education agencies need to read this. For themselves. For those they serve.

You'll notice two features in the left margin to help you consider and reflect upon this monograph's content:

1. If you're reluctant to read all the pages, be sure to see the pull quotes. They are *italic* and **shaded**. Warning: They just might pull you into the text.
2. The other feature is a series of questions that may help you connect content to your everyday educational ministry. They appear next to clouds—you know, those puffy wonders that float by looking like all kinds of things even though they're only clouds.

Set aside a generous portion of time gouged out from your already busy schedule. Don't feel guilty about it either. Why apologize?

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Why apologize?
Unbelievers are
enemies—whom
we must love!
Will you be required

to defend your faith against its
enemies?

To whom might you defend
and support your faith in the
coming months?

*The word apologia... means
"to respond with a word."*

*As people are bombarded
endlessly by falsehood and
nonsense, it is our honor and
responsibility to respond with
truth. An apology may mean
"I'm sorry, I am wrong" but it
can also mean "I'm sorry, you
are wrong."*



What may discour-
age you from
reading this
monograph?

Get over it! This is good stuff—
heavy but good!

Part 1

Introduction: Know This Endeavor

Why this little monograph on apologetics? What does the word mean? What is the need or use of the endeavor? Consider this: if Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, then the devil is no way, all lies, and death. In the most basic of all terms, Jesus is the Word of God; the devil contradicts that Word.

Ever since the devil first contradicted God's Word and will in the Garden of Eden, he has pursued a relentless attempt to bury the Truth in a flood of lies. In our age of mass media and communication, not only diabolical lies but more subtle ones and even those which appear harmless serve to drown out the voice of truth, wisdom, and genuine reason. This situation is exactly what makes apologetics a necessity rather than an option or elective.

The word *apologia* is Greek and means "to respond with a word." As people are bombarded endlessly by falsehood and nonsense, it is our honor and responsibility to respond with truth. An apology may mean "I'm sorry, I am wrong" but it can also mean "I'm sorry, you are wrong." In both cases the foundation is our commitment to truth and the well being of others—that's why we are sorry either way and devoted to advancing God's remedy.

This monograph seeks to equip the Christian to make the best possible case for God's truth and mercy in any conceivable context. The basis of this approach is God's own disposition toward His creation, revealed in creation itself and in His revealed Word. It is intended to equip the reader with both fundamental and practical means of advancing the truth.

1. The first section describes the fundamental truths and context that supports our apologetic efforts.
2. The second section deals with the human element: who we are, how we think, and how we come to know things.
3. The third section considers God, His nature, His acts of redemption and restoration, and the special advantages these provide as we seek to advocate for the very people who would oppose us most.
4. The fourth section begins to implement what has been considered to that point with practical applications and examples.
5. The fifth section is a catalog of Bible passages that are particularly focused on apologetics.
6. The sixth section provides resources for further consideration.



Who do you know in the hit and run category?

How do you normally react to him or her?



Who do you know in the heat without light category?

How do you normally react to him or her?



Who do you know in the light without heat category?

How do you normally react to him or her?



Who do you know in the light and warmth is here to stay category?

How do you normally react to him or her?

A Tale of Four Encounters

The need for ability in apologetics becomes evident in a variety of situations. Here I provide four examples of encounters that I found myself in and unprepared for. I suspect there are many other types of encounters, but these examples will verify the need to “always be prepared to give a defense for the hope that is within you” as Peter so prudently urged (1 Peter 3:15).

The Hit and Run. For whatever reason, a person recognizes you as a Christian. They introduce themselves, tell you that all religions are basically the same, condemn anyone that thinks otherwise, then leave. You may feel confused. You certainly feel frustrated because what you believe was attacked without opportunity for a response. You would like to be ready next time, and there will probably be a next time.

Heat without Light. You had assumed that you were among Christians who shared the same faith. Then a particular subject came up, like baptism. Someone said that baptism is where we make our commitment to God. Another person agrees, arguing that baptism should only be for adults. Still others respond with shock that faith is not our decision nor is baptism our work. Very quickly the tone and volume of voices register anger and frustration. No one is listening or even letting the others finish their thoughts. Everyone is talking, even shouting, at once. Sooner or later everyone abandons the subject as a lost cause.

Light without Heat. This experience is often set in motion by a smart Alec. There is no heated exchange of words because the smart Alec has no interest in the life, soul, or well being of others. Alec considers himself too intelligent and sophisticated for primitive concerns like God, the soul, or eternal life. Alec likes to play the devil’s advocate, though everyone knows that the devil needs no advocacy. He listens thoughtfully to your explanations, then twists your words and asks hypothetical questions in order to confuse and debilitate you. Alec doesn’t care about truth because he doesn’t believe there is truth. He only cares about proving that his intelligence is superior to yours. You don’t feel anger, you feel lost.

Light and Warmth is Here to Stay. With deep roots in the Word of the Lord, consistent observation and appreciation of God’s revelation in nature, some experience, and love for others, you consider what another person has just said. In order to be sure you understand and to demonstrate your concern for the other person you ask questions of clarification. You listen thoughtfully, deliberate, then ask



Which comes first in your introduction to a school year?

- A. Tell what you believe
- B. Tell what you expect

What difference might it make?

a follow up question. Your questions are genuine. Concern for your own life and well-being along with your concern for the life and well-being of others are evident in the modesty and humility with which you seek the insight of the other person. The questions you ask eventually expose a difficulty in the other person's conviction or a problem left unresolved. Having no answer to give and being at ease with your disposition, she asks you if there is a solution. You carefully and kindly articulate the gospel. The simplicity, clarity, and profound nature of the gospel produces faith, hope, and unity. A lifelong Christian friendship is set in motion.

A Brief Overview of the Context of Christian Apologetics

In my experience, people who claim a Christian faith make poor apologists. All too often there is a quick conclusion followed by condemnation: "Oh, you belong to that church (or group or ideology)? I hope you know that you are going to hell when you die!" Perhaps such ready condemnation is, at least in part, the product of the law taking an un-natural place in the life of an average Christian.

We tend to begin memorization with the Ten Commandments. Luther began his catechisms here, and with good reason; the law is our tutor to bring us to Christ. But where does the Bible begin? Genesis begins with creation. God provides two whole chapters of unparalleled grace and beauty as He creates life. Then comes the fall. Even after the fall, God establishes His promise of a savior before declaring the consequences of man's rebellion (Genesis 3:15).

The New Testament, similarly, begins with creation or re-creation in the birth of Jesus. Matthew provides more than four chapters on the life of Christ before recording Jesus' clarification of the law in the Sermon on the Mount. When Paul was asked to speak to the people of Athens he began by recognizing something positive about them: their devotion to religion. What would the world think of Christianity if we started with the Creed instead of the Commandments?

Universal Atonement

The universal atonement refers to Christ's redemption of all the world in His life, death, and resurrection. Not only has God declared plainly that He desires all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4), but He has also demonstrated this in history—particularly in the history of His Son.

The starting place for Christian apologetics is not that "people are damned because..." On the contrary, the starting place is that all people are created and redeemed by

Our starting point is not to impress on people the severity of their condemnation under the law, but their liberation under Christ.



Do you know which students claim no church home or faith?

What will be your attitude toward them? Your action?



How will these paragraphs → help your *apology* to parents or students who claim that God is no longer involved in life?

God. The reality of our situation is that we ARE God's creation and that we ARE redeemed, reconciled to Him by our substitute, Jesus Christ (Romans 5, 2 Corinthians 5). The question is not, "Can we be saved?" The question is, "Will we realize the benefit of our redemption?" This changes our disposition and starting place in response to the world around us. Our starting point is not to impress on people the severity of their condemnation under the law, but their liberation under Christ.

In the past three years I have had opportunity to discuss religion at length with two different atheists. By asking lots of questions, I discovered, in both cases, that these people were opposed to a God that does not exist and to a form of religion that the Bible repudiates. Each time they expressed objection to or disdain for what Christianity teaches, I was able to join them in their disposition, then explain to them what the Bible teaches in stark contrast. In both cases, our extended discussions climaxed in an explanation of the vicarious atonement that God has provided through His Son. The change of disposition and affect of the gospel was awesome.

God's Gracious Disposition

The unique and most compelling characteristic of the one, true, living God is His love. This disposition of God is evident in both general and special revelation. General revelation refers to everything we can know and experience in the world around us: "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament tells His handiwork ... There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard" (Psalm 19). The regenerative property of nature, the restoration of life in spring, procreation, beauty, the regularity of natural law, the process of healing, and involuntary muscles all convey God's will that we should live and not die.

Special revelation refers to the Bible. While nature can give us some indication of God's will for us, it cannot reveal everything that the Bible does, nor can it do so as quickly. The Bible points to God's handiwork in nature and reveals His intervention and divine restoration of creation in the life of His Son.

God's gracious disposition is evident in both means of revelation by the consistent and comprehensive nature of the gospel. Creation consistently and profoundly argues the truth of God because it is His handiwork. What is the matter with any particular part of the world is the matter with all the world because from one man, Adam, it has been passed to all people and through all people.

The solution for that matter is equally universal and impartial. God makes His sun shine and rain fall on the wicked



Why can't you force students to believe? What are the implications for your teaching?

The world's concept of Christianity is one of unthinking drones or sinister monsters who force the will of an angry, capricious God upon what would otherwise be a happy society of people. Nothing could be further from the truth, but that will be accepted as truth unless exposed as false.



What are some concrete ways in which you're tempted to *major in the minors* with students? With their families?

and the righteous. But His intent is that both, wicked and righteous, realize the truth in that revelation and honor Him accordingly.

The gospel revealed in the Bible is also consistent with itself. We cannot force a person to realize the life that God freely provides and would restore because it is a gift, not an obligation. The very nature of the gift of redemption precludes the forcing of it upon a person. While we can make the strongest of arguments for the truth by appealing to God's Word and creation, we reject any idea of "strong arming," since it is self-defeating.

The world has 2,000 years of bad experience at the hands of those who claimed a Christian confession but whose will and ways were clearly anti-Christian. The world's concept of Christianity is one of unthinking drones or sinister monsters who force the will of an angry, capricious God upon what would otherwise be a happy society of people. Nothing could be further from the truth, but that will be accepted as truth unless exposed as false. God is love and all His ways are loving. His creation and His Word bear that out. It is our privilege to convey this inspiring, regenerative truth to the world.

Fundamental Doctrine

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to the Christian witness after missing the context and content of the gospel is that of "majoring in minors." This refers to the practice of exhausting yourself and your listener with too much insistence over symptoms rather than problems. Underlying this problem is the difficulty of realizing what the root of disagreement really is. The two examples that follow have been greatly simplified to briefly illustrate my point. Nevertheless, I have never had an experience where moving the discussion from subsequent to fundamental matters has not succeeded.

Example one: Lutherans and Baptists traditionally disagree over infant baptism. Yet the real disagreement is not over baptism but over how we are saved. If we agree on the means by which God saves us, then the matters of baptism are resolved.

Example two: Issues with the real presence in the Lord's Supper are really issues with the incarnation of Christ. If true God can become truly man, then joining Himself to bread and wine is no problem at all. Recognizing the fundamental Christian doctrine allows us to be as productive and positive as possible in dialog with people who assume they disagree with us. The fundamental doctrines, from which all other issues flow, are as follows:

...the fallen human ego is the most formidable opponent to both truth and its own salvation.

1. Revelation – This really has to do with epistemology—how we know what we know. We cannot have a productive conversation until we agree upon a way of knowing truth. If a person holds the Bible to be the Word of God in Truth, then we can start from there. If not, then we must resort to common human experience in natural revelation.
2. Anthropology – The nature and condition of humanity is the next most critical doctrine, because the fallen human ego is the most formidable opponent to both truth and its own salvation. However, as long as people think they are better than they actually are and know more than they actually do, they will contradict and oppose the truth. For example, if a person accepts either general or special revelation AND accepts his complete disability before God, there is little remaining to hinder the realization of God's grace.
3. Theology – With revelation and a humble spirit we can learn what God intends to teach us about Himself through nature and through His particular acts and revelation in history. We can know things about God that we cannot understand but that work together for our salvation. The Trinity is incomprehensible but not necessarily inconceivable. For example, Augustine referred to the heat, light, and substance of red hot metal to explain how God could be three distinct persons yet one God.
4. Incarnation – Since God is Trinitarian and man is His creation there is no necessary obstacle to accepting that His Son became true man in order to redeem us.
5. Vicarious Atonement – God redeemed the whole world—all people of all times and places—in the life of His Son. This is the righteousness of God that is the powerful force working faith in those who hear it (Romans 1:16-17).
6. Resurrection – This is critical because it is the evidence of redemption accomplished (Romans 1:4; 1 Corinthians 15:17). None of what we have come to know so far will save us if Jesus has not risen from the dead. The risen Jesus, witnessed and attested to by many people in many circumstances over 40 days, demonstrates that He is the only savior and the only one to have proven Himself worthy of faith.
7. Means of Grace – All of the above would still not benefit us without a delivery system. The Word of God in Holy Scripture and the sacraments that flow from it provide an objective means to know that we are saved and are realizing that salvation.

If everyone lived exactly as God has commanded and life was miserable, then we would have a reason to complain.



How can you teach that God gave His Law as a blessing rather than a way to restrict fun and freedom?



What do you think or how do you feel about non-believers or skeptics in your class or in their families?

Cause and Effect

Another fundamental part of apologetics has to do with “what’s the matter” and “who’s responsible.” In conversations I have had with people who claim atheism, they always are surprised when I assert that neither death nor the regrettable condition of the world are God’s will. If everyone lived exactly as God has commanded and life was miserable, then we would have a reason to complain. But if human beings insist on contradicting His design, how is God at fault for our self-destruction? Consistency in our thinking about cause and effect removes many unnecessary obstacles in our apologetic effort, generally and specifically.

Everything that is wrong generally is a consequence of humanity getting everything wrong generally. Since Adam rejected God’s design, the world has been steadily disintegrating. We see a general disintegration in our own lives from the condition of the material things we purchase to our own aging process. Thus I cannot with any certainty or helpful purpose say that my cold or the flu is a direct result of a particular mistake that I made (unless I socialized with the sick and refused to wash my hands). Women miscarry, children die from cancer, young men and women engaged to be married die in car accidents, families perish in house fires. These are the kinds of things that happen in a world that is not, generally, as God intended it. The good news is that there is more to life than the material world that is so fragile and vulnerable.

On the other hand, specific experiences can be traced to specific activity or inactivity. If I never studied for an exam and fail, why would that be a surprise? If I hit my thumb with a hammer, pain is what I expect and my poor aim is the cause of it. Specific consequences for specific actions, like the case in general, should also NOT be thought of as God imposing punishment so much as the regularity and reliability of God’s universe being demonstrated. God’s reliability and dependability will always expose our failures. Yet we depend on the continuity of God’s universe to conduct our lives. How could we live a single day, know what to do, or learn to do and make the things we have if the nature of our world was unstable and constantly changing?

Part 2 Principles: Know Thyself

An Apologetic Character

What is your disposition toward others and what they think? The terms in which you are thinking make all the difference when you meet another person. Do you tend to think in military terms or in medicinal? Are you planning to “blow

...our weapons are spiritual and they are for the defeat, not of another person, but of our common enemy—the devil and his deceit.

A charitable and inquisitive spirit makes the Christian apologist committed to really knowing what another person is thinking, especially at the most fundamental level.

the other person out of the water” then “bury him” with your sophisticated arguments? Or, are you hoping to relieve a person who is suffering under a misfortunate and unnecessary burden? Are you thirsty for conquest or devoted to liberation?

While Paul speaks of the “weapons of our warfare,” he is clearly contrasting the Christian mission with military (2 Corinthians 10:4). The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, nor are they for taking the lives of others. On the contrary, our weapons are spiritual and they are for the defeat, not of another person, but of our common enemy—the devil and his deceit. Jesus described Himself as a physician (Matthew 9:12) and it is His mind and image we seek.

A few comparisons will help us grasp and retain the biblical model of apologetics. Consider, for example, the difference between a talk show host and an anthropologist. Talk shows are often frustrating to watch because the host is more interested in advancing his/her own opinions than helping the audience benefit from the guest whose expertise and life’s work is concerned with the matter in question. An anthropologist is more serious and inquisitive, not interested in the short term or sensational, but in learning the truth and the significance of it. Magistrates differ from detectives. Magistrates are concerned with coming to a judgment, while detectives must suspend judgment in order to determine the facts.

James said, “Let every man be slow to speak, slow to anger, and quick to listen, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God” (James 1:19-20). A charitable and inquisitive spirit makes the Christian apologist committed to really knowing what another person is thinking, especially at the most fundamental level. First we want to know *what* another person is thinking or believing, then we want to know *what makes them believe* this way or that. You may note that I said *what makes them believe* and not *why* they believe. In my experience the word “why” tends to be heard as challenging and combative, while the question, “What makes you...?” is perceived as a function of genuine interest in learning – which is the case.

Two examples mentioned earlier provide good illustrations. Here again the examples have been simplified in terms of time required and difficulty encountered. In real conversations much more time will be required to establish rapport, to listen sympathetically, to understand and discover the way of inquiry that will best lead the other person back to fundamentals. In real conversations it may be extremely difficult to keep our emotions in check when the subject,



How do you handle this *baptism disagreement* with students in your classroom? →

How might you handle it differently with a different age group?

The real issue has to do with how we are saved.

though not the root, is woven into the very fabric of our lives.

Many confessing Christians pursue very heated arguments over infant baptism. Some argue that infants must be baptized in order to be saved. Others argue that baptizing infants is useless and contrary to the faith. But if we ask, "What makes infant baptism so important to the one and problematic to the other?" we might discover the common ground. Both have a deep desire for eternal life and a reasonable fear of God and everlasting condemnation. On the other hand, if we keep asking "what is the matter" with baptism, we will eventually discover that baptism isn't the issue at all. The real issue has to do with how we are saved. If God saves us in spite of ourselves, then infants are the ideal example. If God has provided only the potential for us to be saved, then it seems obvious that our abilities must develop before we can seize that opportunity. Either way, clarifying the fundamental issue allows us to have a conversation that is productive because it addresses what is really at issue.

Many confessing Christians have very different views about what the Lord's Supper really is and what it offers. Careful inquiry will reveal that the problem here is not so much about the Lord's real presence under the forms of bread and wine. The real trouble begins with human nature thinking too much of itself and thinking too little.

We think too much of ourselves. Who are we to sit in judgment on what God can and cannot do? The Bible is a record of God's way of resolving what seemed impossible. Nature is also a witness to the remarkable activity of God in doing what no man could have conceived.

We think too little. Doesn't God give Himself to us in a multitude of ways? Doesn't He provide His life for ours in the material universe as well as the spiritual realm? He makes the sun shine, the rain fall, and the earth give its produce. What is the human nature of Jesus except a medium by which God gives and restores life to us? What is bread and wine except physical means by which God extends life? The Lord's Supper is awesome and yet common because God joins the eternal life of His Son with the common, daily elements that support our physical life.

This last example suggests that real inquiry and a charitable spirit not only provide a better avenue to truth, but allow for the welcomed relief that humor often brings. Consider the story of two young boys who were the best of friends. They did everything together, except on Sunday morning. One boy was Lutheran the other was Roman Catholic. Since

they didn't really know why they went to different churches, they decided to visit each other's on successive Sundays. On the first Sunday they went to Roman Catholic Mass. The Lutheran boy asked about the design of the church. The other boy explained that it is in the shape of a cross. The Lutheran boy asked about the man with a metal object on a chain with smoke coming out. That is incense. The Lutheran boy asked about the bell that rang during communion. The other boy explained, "That means Jesus is now physically present."

The next Sunday they went to the Lutheran church. The Roman Catholic boy asked about the men standing at the back with handfuls of paper. Those are ushers and they pass out orders of service. The Roman Catholic boy asked about the way the service begins. Beginning with confession and absolution means that we recall how and why God accepts us and accepts our worship. When it was time for the sermon, the Roman Catholic boy asked what it meant when the pastor took off his watch and laid it on the pulpit. The other boy answered, "It doesn't mean a thing." While the story is made up, the point is real—honesty and charity go a long way toward discovering truth and the communion truth creates (1 John 1:7).



What is your first reaction when students or others challenge your faith?

faith?

You may have already experienced how quickly our calm intent to witness to another person can turn into a heated exchange of unpleasant words. The only solution to this is to reflect on what matters and how best to stay oriented to that, no matter what!

The truth does not have to be argued as much as it simply needs a hearing.

Personal Identity—How do We See Ourselves?

Can you be an anthropologist or philosopher? Can you take a detached and dispassionate view toward something so critical to our lives now and forever? The first and most essential part of developing the disposition of a philosopher and anthropologist is to become conscious of your own philosophy, nature, and ideals. Commitments that are held unconsciously will reveal themselves in subtle or obvious ways. Fear, sarcasm, cynicism, and condescension can be very evident in body language or tone of voice. They may also resurface in combative language, interrupting, raised voices, or frustrated condemnations. You may have already experienced how quickly our calm intent to witness to another person can turn into a heated exchange of unpleasant words. The only solution to this is to reflect on what matters and how best to stay oriented to that, no matter what!

Consciousness of our commitments comes from reflecting upon them, especially in the face of challenges. Commitments that endure challenges argue their own merits and defend themselves. That gives us the freedom to be patient with others as we seek an opportunity to show them what we have seen and come to know. The truth does not have to be argued as much as it simply needs a hearing. If we are constantly thinking through challenges to the truth and how the truth endures, then it is not a surprise or unwelcome assault if someone else needs our help in working

Epistemology is the study of how we know things and how we know that we know.



Do you believe that Jesus is your Savior?

What makes you think that is the case?

Why would it be good to discuss what students would answer to both questions?

through the same challenges. Knowing my own struggles and deficiencies in matters of truth makes me more interested in what I can learn from others and more patient with their struggles.

Any concern with truth requires us to add epistemology to our interest in philosophy and anthropology. Epistemology is the study of how we know things and how we know that we know. What makes a person think they know anything at all? More than that, what could make a person so certain of what they know that they would be determined to die or make others die because of it? No matter what aspect of life we are dealing with, we all come to know things through our senses. We experience things or we read about the experiences of others. If those experiences are consistent enough (or sometimes desirable enough) we will claim to know them. A person may claim knowledge apart from experience. Such a person claims that he "just knows." But even a claim like this is subject to the support or contradiction of everyday experience.

How would we go about discovering what we and other people may or may not know? I suspect the best way is by honest inquiry in a determined succession. Consider something you think you know or the assertion of another person. Now ask, "What makes you think that is the case?" No matter what the answer is, you may still be able to follow with the question, "And how do you know that?" This approach offers at least five benefits.

1. First, such determined questions seek to reveal the origins and interrelationships of experiences. Recognizing causes and effects makes positive change possible.
2. Second, asking questions helps us realize our own or any other person's way of understanding things, which may or may not be accurate.
3. Third, finding accuracy in a system of thinking suggests reliability. Finding inaccuracies in a system of thinking highlights a problem area and reveals the issues that need our attention.
4. Fourth, by asking questions, we eliminate the possibility of argument, anger, and frustration. We really are working in our own minds and with the minds of others to understand reality and recognize truth.
5. Fifth, by asking helpful questions, we allow the other person to realize deficiencies in their own thinking for themselves. This is much more beneficial and lasting than arguing with a person on the defensive or with pronouncements like, "You are just wrong."

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to say, do, or think the wrong thing?

Now we return to the matter of becoming anthropologists and philosophers. Good apologetics begins with the very defensible assertion that all people are more alike than they are different. We have a common creator and nature. We have a common fall in Adam, and accordingly, common problems from within ourselves and from people in the world all around us. Have you ever noticed how easy it is to say, do, or think the wrong thing? It just seems to come "naturally." Consciousness of what is common to us all generates a disposition that is genuine, charitable, and winning. We can be sympathetic, both deeply and really. We can be detached, knowing that God is patient with us, wants us to be patient with others, and has already provided an everlasting remedy for what ails us all (more on this in the next section).

What kind of philosophy should we adopt in view of the above? First of all, it seems prudent to begin with modesty. Since we cannot know anything with absolute certainty (since we are not absolute creatures, like God), why not be honest about it? If we would like something to be true because we desire it, why not just say, "I wish this were the case"? If we are wondering let's say, "I wonder if..." If we suspect that we are onto absolute truth we can truthfully say, "I suspect that this is true."

Second, given our epistemological condition, there would seem to be no substitute for an inquisitive and challenging nature. Being inquisitive makes sense because there is so much to know and our minds, perception, and personal experiences are so limited. A challenging nature makes sense for at least two reasons: God says we should ("Keep on testing the Spirits to see if they are of God," 1 John 4:1, "Keep on testing yourself to see if you are in the faith," 2 Corinthians 13:5), and our epistemology urges us to continually reexamine our experiences to see if consistency indicates reliability, and therefore what is potentially true.

Third, honesty about our nature and limitations should produce humility. Humility produces a sympathetic disposition and this disposition is both winning and non-confrontational. For example, rather than simply contend that someone's assertion is wrong, in humility I can ask what affect their assertion has on me, especially if it is true. It is wonderful to suspect that we can, by the power of our own wills and minds, cure ourselves of illnesses. But my will and mind are weak, so where does that assertion leave me? I like the thought that being a good person means a happy afterlife, but how do I know I'm good enough, especially in view of my own disintegration and death? How can I have confidence in Mohammed or Buddha as prophets since they were either unwilling or unable to keep themselves among

the living, and since I have no way of knowing where they are now?

Part 3

Foundations: Know Thy God, His Creation, and His Redemption

The central witness of the Bible declares that God has reconciled the world to Himself in the life, death, and resurrection of His Son.

God is love, according to the Apostle John. Many people look at what is wrong in the world and claim that He is not loving or that He simply is not at all. I would like to consider the depth and breadth of witnesses that say He is love and lovingly pursues making right what is wrong. The central witness of the Bible declares that God has reconciled the world to Himself in the life, death, and resurrection of His Son. Many witnesses make the same declaration. The rising of the sun, the reproduction of plant and animal life, the regenerative nature of healing, and the seasons are all indications of the fundamental activity of God for the sake of our lives.

How does this foundation guide us as we navigate opportunities to witness and challenges against our witness? First of all, this foundation makes us absolutely and unchangeably positive. Second, this foundation provides a sense of safety from within which we may try to realize, together with others, the significance of God's gracious disposition and providence toward us. *The Mission* is a film about Jesuit activity among the natives in South America in the nineteenth century. The beginning of the film conveys my point. The Jesuits had no success in evangelizing the natives because they all began their witness with the crucifixion of Jesus. However, the natives responded quite differently when the church finally sent a missionary who began where the gospels do, with the nativity of Christ. The witness of nature, the Bible, and God's own pattern is to establish a context of love, grace, providence, and reconciliation. Within that context, the Lord responds to the trouble that would contradict His desire. This, I am arguing, is the proper pattern for Christian apologetics.

Apologetics have always and will always be necessary as long as the devil is a liar and murderer. The truth is singular and life giving. Opposition to the truth is deadly, relentless, and comes in innumerable variations. Truth is permanent and immovable; therefore it is the position from which we may safely call and reach out to those who are storm-tossed and perishing.

Several truths are fundamental for apologetics. The universal, vicarious atonement of Christ orients the positive nature of our approach to others. We are not trying to get people to be or do something they are not or do not want to

Christian apologetics is about realizing the benefits of what has already happened.



How can you do this with ...
... preschoolers?
... third graders?
... confirmands?
... adults?

The Christian apologist works to keep people from experiencing condemnation unnecessarily.

We are a soul that possesses a body and is itself animated by spirit, either divine or demonic.



..."a soul that possesses a body..."
How might this phrase affect the way one views students?

be. Nor are we trying to take something away from them. The universal, vicarious atonement of Christ means that what is wrong has already been taken away and we already are reconciled to God. Christian apologetics is about realizing the benefits of what has already happened. This truth is unparalleled in the history of humanity and among religious and philosophical systems. This truth means we can be at ease and positive. Furthermore, this truth means that negative and contrary voices have no sustainable complaint. If it is unfair that all mankind fell in Adam's fall, it is more profoundly and wonderfully unfair that God has restored all mankind through the life of His Son (Romans 5). The issue then is not one of fairness, but that fallen mankind wants to pursue its fallen ways AND do so without consequences or guilt. It is not God who is unjust, but fallen man who seeks his own destruction (Malachi 2:17, Ezekiel 18:32). The simple truth is that God desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, and that His mercy is upon those who fear Him (1 Timothy 2:4, Luke 1:50).

Second, knowing the truth makes a person more patient, loving, thoughtful, and considerate. All these characteristics endear us to others and provide the context for fruitful dialog. The very nature of the truth conveyed in the Bible makes the apologist unwilling to impose conformity, to be inconsiderate or condemnatory. Jesus said, "Judge not that you may not be judged" (Matthew 7:1). He also said, "If your brother sins, go tell him his fault..." (Matthew 18:15ff). The semantic domain of the term "judgment" resolves this apparent contradiction. In Matthew 7, Jesus is forbidding us from issuing conclusions that we have neither authority nor ability to make. I cannot possibly know who will or won't know everlasting life. I am not in the place of God to condemn. Rather, I am among His servants who live to help people realize that their condemnation has already been removed in Christ. The Christian apologist works to keep people from experiencing condemnation unnecessarily.

Third, we recognize the fact that human beings are not one dimensional. We renounce any superficial or trivial denouncement of any certain person or peoples. We know that human beings are essentially spiritual. We are a soul that possesses a body and is itself animated by spirit, either divine or demonic. This means that we are all descendants of the same man and all suffer from his condition of fallenness. This also means that we are all the beneficiaries of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. God has already declared us redeemed, and His inspired Word is present to regenerate our souls in the image of His Son. My human nature makes me sympathetic; my regenerate soul makes me positive, patient, and loving. This disposition is evident in Philip's simple but persistent witness to Jesus. Philip was

The real challenge for the apologist is not to prove the truth, but simply to get the truth a hearing.



How does this comfort you?

...it is not necessary (nor helpful) to hit people over the head with the Bible by issuing judgments: "The Bible says what you are doing is wicked." What is both necessary and helpful is to show people that contradicting God's design destroys multitudes of lives in a multitude of ways. It is possible to recognize that first, and then realize that the Bible both predicts and forbids things for just that reason.

excited and eager to help others realize the benefit of God among them. When met with suspicion he responded most effectively by saying, "Come and see!" (John 1:46).

Finally, the advantage of standing upon and advocating for the truth is that the truth is evident everywhere and is self-authenticating. Real science and real religion are devoted to the same interest: finding the truth and the benefits derived from it. The real challenge for the apologist is not to prove the truth, but simply to get the truth a hearing. This comes best by invitation, once the other person's arsenal of resistance and masking cacophony have been exhausted.

As truth is self-authenticating, lies are self-defeating. People who are living a lie know it (Romans 1:32, John 3:2). If we ask them real questions in real concern they will eventually recognize that denying the truth is self-defeating. Contradicting God's will and design for us is self-destructive. Psalm 19 and Romans 1-3 assure us that God provides an enduring witness to the truth in nature. We have everything to gain from the arguments of science and nature because the material universe argues the truth. For example, everything forbidden in the moral law is forbidden because it is harmful to us. Trusting in anything other than God can only bring deception, disappointment, and vulnerability to abuse. Dishonoring parents leaves children exposed to predators and short-sightedness (as the story of Pinocchio exhibits so well). Sexual promiscuity, besides all the physical ailments it produces, robs people of the very experience they seek most – the complete union of two people in truth and love. Thus, it is not necessary (nor helpful) to hit people over the head with the Bible by issuing judgments: "The Bible says what you are doing is wicked."

What is both necessary and helpful is to show people that contradicting God's design destroys multitudes of lives in a multitude of ways. It is possible to recognize that first, and then realize that the Bible both predicts and forbids things for just that reason. Adultery is not just a mistake for the adulterer, the mistress, the wife, the children, the extended family, the future of the family and the community as a whole. All suffer for that fleeting indulgence of a body that is passing away.

So, what advantages does the truth provide for the Christian apologist? There are at least four advantages for the Christian apology: invulnerability, vulnerability, pace, and honesty.

The Christian apology is *invulnerable* because the truth is permanent and insurmountable. God's will is evident in His Word, nature, design, and history. God's intent that we

God has permanently solved the temporary problems of a fallen world and even makes those problems work for us...

should live and the sense that death, destruction, and waste are contrary to that will are made clear all day long, every day, all around us. The vicarious atonement adds the essential dimension to this witness. God has permanently solved the temporary problems of a fallen world and even makes those problems work for us (Romans 8:28, 2 Corinthians 4:17). God united all people into one in His Son and reconciled us to Himself. This fact cannot be undone – and why would anyone want to undo it? The invulnerability of the truth is evident in the very history and present circumstance that make so many lament. The truth and Christian witness have always been under assault and persecution. This suggests at least two things. One, the durability of the truth argues for its assertion—it is the truth. Two, the history of relentless assault argues that this truth is of the greatest significance.

Christians become better apologists by removing the log from their own eyes before trying to remove the speck from their brother's...

The second advantage we possess is *vulnerability*. This is not a contradiction of our first advantage, but flows from it. God's gracious disposition toward us and the vicarious atonement means that we have nothing to fear from being honest with ourselves and others. On the contrary, we have everything to gain from honesty. Genuine Christians test themselves first, learning, refining, reflecting, challenging and accepting challenges, embodying, and finally "owning" what it is we say we believe. Christians become better apologists by removing the log from their own eyes before trying to remove the speck from their brother's (Luke 6:42). More than any science or scientist, the Christian tests not only the material world, but also the immaterial. After His resurrection Jesus said to His disciples, "Handle me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Luke 24:39-41). Similarly, God said through the prophet, "Test me now..." (Malachi 3:10). The more we recognize the composition of our human nature, the more we appreciate the magnificence of God's grace and wisdom in redeeming us. The more we recognize these, the more affinity we feel toward others as they struggle with their own limitations and suffer in the absence of realizing God's providence for them. Paul used this common ground in his address to the Athenians on Mars Hill (Acts 17). Paul wanted to and could really be all things to all people because we are essentially the same in all essential ways (1 Corinthians 9:22).

James said we should be slow to speak and quick to listen.

The third advantage is *pace*. James said we should be slow to speak and quick to listen. Jesus was found in the temple at age 12 "both listening and asking questions" (Luke 2:46). If we consider people apart from the universal atonement, our approach will be primarily negative (they are damned), anxious (we need to change their condition before it is too late), self-centered (I need to fix this now),

and impatient (...now...). Often this is more about relieving ourselves of concern for others than it is about the eternal well-being of others. However, given the context of grace and atonement provided by Christ, we are at liberty to take the long course. We can get to know others, ask questions so that we thoroughly understand their thinking, and demonstrate that their life—real life—and truth are what matters to us. With the long course we have time to reflect on the thinking of others, test our own thoughts with theirs, find the positive features of their belief system, and formulate good questions that will allow them to test and expose the inadequacies of their commitments for themselves. If and when the pace needs to quicken, they will let us know.

This was the case of a husband of a member in my parish who had no time to speak with me until he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Suddenly he had nothing but time and wanted desperately to use it to find the enduring life that had to this point eluded him. Solomon was also an advocate of the long course. As he put it, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1); "The righteous studies how to answer..." (Proverbs 15:28a); and "The plans of the heart belong to man but the answer of the mouth belongs to the Lord" (Proverbs 16:1).

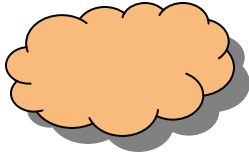
The fourth advantage is *honesty* and honest inquiry. Honesty and honest inquiry are the only means we have of approaching the truth. The most beautiful truth of all is that we have been redeemed by the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world. The beauty of honest inquiry is that it makes argument and negative responses impossible. Consider how often God begins with a question, "Adam, where are you?" or "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" The Christian apologist does not ask rhetorical questions nor does he prepare a sequence of rapid fire questions as a prosecutor does in cross examination. What we really want to know, above all, is what another person believes and what it is that makes them believe that. In the second place, we want to know what they may or may not know about how things really are. In the third place we want to know what the best avenue of connection is between the truth, the other person, and ourselves so that we may develop a caring relationship. In the fourth place, honest inquiry invites another person to ask us good questions when their thinking or system is exhausted and fails them.

...we want to know what the best avenue of connection is between the truth, the other person, and ourselves so that we may develop a caring relationship.

Part 4

Practice: Know Thy Neighbor

The time has come to use what we know. As Jesus said, "...the truth shall set you free" (John 8:31). In view of what



Role Play—or at least imagine—the following situations after reading Part 4.

A second grader wants to know why God took away her daddy.

A parent questions you about why children who attend church often do not act better than those who don't go to church?

You're on a home visit with a parent who has fallen away from the church because his observations of life have convinced him that God is either unloving or that He just doesn't exist.

You are looking for a new "script" for starting the school year. What will you say and discuss with your students?

A student asks why you believe in God.

A parent confronts you about teaching there is only one true God. She says, "It doesn't matter who you believe in, just as long as you believe in something."

A father insists that you stop wasting time talking about God in science, social studies, and all the other subjects.

A student leaves your school—one who you have worked so very hard in witnessing your faith and telling her about Jesus. You have seen no evidence of her faith, and you feel like a failure. What do you do?



we know about God, His creation, His Word, and ourselves, how would we approach another person in the most beneficial way? We begin with questions. First, questions that anyone would ask to get acquainted: "Hello, my name is ... what's yours?" "I'm from ... where are you from?" "I work at / I go to school at ... where do you work or go to school?"

Second, we want to use what we have learned to ask the next series of questions that would reveal a person's fundamental beliefs, especially in respect to revelation/epistemology and anthropology – what do they think they know, why do they think they know it, and what do they think about themselves? These are questions like, "What made you choose the kind of life you have?" or "What aspect of your life or work is most important to you?" We can follow such questions with an inquiry as to why they answered as they did; only we do well to refrain from using the word *why*. It sounds less challenging or offensive to ask, "What makes that so important to you?" or "How do you know that's the right thing to do with your life?" Notice how the last question actually asks the person about their epistemology. Other questions we might ask would have to do with what they think about themselves—hopes, dreams, fears, desires, frustrations.

Third, the final series of questions follows what we have learned with an interest in evaluating the durability, providence, and reliability of what the person thinks. Are their thoughts consistent with reality? Do they really have a way of knowing what will happen to them after death? Do they have a sense of what makes life worth living now?

Here we want to be especially careful to maintain our honest inquiry and not become condescending or manipulative. We can do this by thinking through their system of belief for ourselves and articulating problems we suspect and our fear of them. Fear is a real, common, and generally justifiable emotion. We can be happy to appreciate what a person's thinking may offer, but fearful of what will happen if that is not the case. For example, I really love the idea of reincarnation if it gives us unlimited chances to reach eternal paradise. But what happens if that is not the case and my physical death is only the beginning of my troubles, permanently? I love the assertion that we have prophets among us today, but how do I know what they say is true? Having a divine authority with us today, as Roman Catholicism sees the Pope, would be invaluable. But how do I know that authority is real? All questions will inevitably lead us back to the answer to all questions: our Creator and Redeemer. He provides proven, reliable, and inspiring answers in His creation and in His Word.

Part 5

Passages: Know Thy Texts

- a. Genesis 3: "Adam, where are you?" Good question.
- b. Isaiah 55: "Why do you spend money for what does not satisfy?" Now, how do you say that today? "Who are you, what do you do, what do you have, are you happy?"
- c. Proverbs 15:1: "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."
- d. Proverbs 15:28: "The heart of the righteous studies how to answer."
- e. Proverbs 16:1: The preparations of the heart versus the answer of the lips
- f. Proverbs 17:27: "He who has knowledge spares his words and a man of understanding is of a calm spirit."
- g. Matthew 7:1: "Judge NOT."
- h. Matthew 10:17–20: "They will bring you before councils... don't worry about what to say." (See 1 Peter 3:15 then Proverbs 16:1)
- i. Luke 1:50: "God's mercy is on those who fear Him ..."
- j. Luke 2—Jesus in the temple asking questions
- k. John 1—Philip's response is "Come and see."
- l. Acts 17—Three things about the Bereans, Paul in Athens
- m. 1 Corinthians 10:4: "The weapons of our warfare..."
- n. James 1:19–20: "Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger..."
- o. 1 Peter 3:15: "Always be ready to give a defense, with fear and humility"

Part 6

Resources: Know Those Published

- a. Budziszewski, J. *The Revenge of the Conscience: Politics and the Fall of Man*. Dallas: Spence, 1999.
- b. Chesterton, G.K. *The Everlasting Man*
- c. Gagnon, Robert. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2001.
- d. Salvo
- e. Strobel, Lee. *The Case for the Real Jesus*
- f. Verny, Thomas, M.D. *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child*. New York: Delta, 1981