APOLOGETICS IN EVANGELISM

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A STUDENT said to me the other day, 'I wish preachers would not take it for granted that everybody knows what is meant by Evangelism. In the light of this, perhaps I may be forgiven for stating what I understand by 'Evangelism' and 'Apologetics'.

To 'evangelize' is to pass on the *good news* of what God has done in Christ for sinners, whether rich or poor, educated or neglected, gifted or insignificant in the eyes of their fellow-men. Evangelism is 'presenting Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit so that men come to trust Him as their Saviour and serve Him as their Lord in the fellowship of His Church'. I have not seen any improvement on this definition of the Edinburgh Conference, 1910.

Apologetics, usually used in the plural, are never to be confused with apologizing, although both words derive from the same Greek root. 'He made considerable use of apologetics' need not indicate that he was in the least apologetic! The Greek verb *apologeomai* means 'I speak in defence'; apologetics are defined in the Concise Oxford Dictionary as 'argumentative defence, especially of Christianity'.

The motive underlying the use of Christian apologetics, as I understand it, is not to make the Christian faith philosophically respectable. Nor is it to make the faith scientifically credible or intellectually tenable, although faith has been confirmed in this way for some. The Christian faith is *revealed*, 'once for all delivered' (Jude 3), not *discovered* by scientific method or brought into being by philosophic reflection. The *raison d'être* of Christian apologetics is to clear up misunderstandings and misconceptions, to make the faith more intelligible, and to vindicate and underline the truth revealed by God. Logic and reason, historical fact and archaeological finding, and the discipline of comparing scripture with scripture, are all to be enlisted in the task of defending the faith. At the same time, we must be careful to recognize that these are only handmaidens to the revelation God has given in the Bible, not independent authorities, and that the main factor in a right understanding of this revelation is not a grasp of all the evidential arguments but the illumination of the Holy Spirit. There are, sad to say, 'fundamentalists' who do not give evidence of being born again. Their evidential arguments do not carry much weight. The best apologetic for the Christian faith is a transformed life, lived in glad submission to the will of God revealed in His Word.

There are various contexts in which apologetics have been used with an evangelistic purpose; books and booklets, articles contributed to newspapers and journals; church services and meetings organized by Christians; meetings organized by opponents of the faith, with opportunity for Christians to reply to the speaker; debates organized by university debating societies; and personal conversations.

SOME EXAMPLES OF APOLOGETIC WRITING

Excellent examples of publications which are invaluable allies in the defence of the faith are found in books such as *The Plight of Man and the Power of God*, an exposition of Romans i-iii in the light of the 20th-century (or any

century!) situation, and *Truth Unchanged, Unchanging*, both by Dr. Lloyd-Jones; *Why Believe?* by the late Professor Rendle Short, the contents of which have helped thousands of students towards the Christian faith, and *Basic Christianity* by the Rev. John Stott. More recently the I.V.F. has put us more in its debt by publishing Professor F. F. Bruce's book *The Apostolic Defence of the Gospel.* For its size and scope this small book may well come to occupy a unique place in the realm of Christian apologetics. No-one concerned with a right use of apologetics can afford to be without this. And no-one can read it without understanding more clearly the New Testament as a whole. It is of the utmost importance to us to know what use our Lord Himself made of apologetics, how far He entered into debate with His opponents, and to what extent the apostles considered it legitimate to make use of apologetics in their preaching and teaching. The answer is set forth so clearly by Professor Bruce that I can do no better than urge you to read it there. I feel it would be presumption on my part to go over the same ground.

The motive of each of these writers is abundantly clear. Not one of them thinks he can by reasoning argue rebellious fallen man into the kingdom of God. Dr. Lloyd-Jones' primary purpose in *The Plight of Man and the Power of God* is to expound Scripture so as to declare God's truth, and at the same time demolish structures of error. In *Truth Unchanged, Unchanging,* he analyses and answers 'some of the commoner assumptions on which so many today base their rejection of the Christian Faith'. The Rev. John Stott and Professor Rendle Short have sought to answer the arguments of those who are prejudiced against listening to Scripture, seeking to remove some of the difficulties that hinder such people from coming to faith, and going on to declare the basis of genuine Christian faith. But you can deal with a man's intellectual difficulties until he says he has no more problems to set before you, and leave him (almost) as far from the faith as he was before. It is not by being persuaded that your arguments are better than his, that your philosophy of life is superior to his, that a man becomes a Christian. Until a man is convinced that he is a rebellious sinner, guilty at the bar of a holy God, needing the cleansing blood of Christ, not just a new intellectual slant on things, he will fall short of that great experience of reconciliation which the New Testament puts on the very threshold of vital Christianity.

ARGUMENT IN PERSONAL WITNESS

What holds good for writing holds good for preaching and personal work. If you are trying to argue a man into God's kingdom you are mistakenly trying to do the work of the Holy Spirit for Him. Some go so far as to say that they will not discuss any 'intellectual difficulty' with an unconverted person, in any situation. They are right in viewing the primary purpose of apologetics as to ground the believer in the soundness of his faith, its contemporary relevance, and the solidity of the ground underneath it. They would not discuss the reliability of Scripture with the unconverted. The 'evidences for the resurrection' they reserve 'for believers only'. They reason that to discuss these things with a man is only to pander to his intellectual pride, and make it all the harder for him to come as a broken sinner to the foot of the cross.

Speaking personally, I would take this position with any man who was merely out for an argument. But I would not take the same line with a man who seemed to be genuinely searching for the truth. I would seek to make clear to him that he cannot get all his difficulties sorted out before he becomes a Christian, and that many of his objections to faith will only be resolved as and when he commits himself as a sinner to the Saviour.

Solvitur ambulando! But I would not hesitate to set before him certain facts designed to annul the effect of some of the lies the devil has planted firmly in his mind. For example I would discuss Genesis i-iii very briefly with an earnest enquirer who asked me about it, but I would move on as quickly as possible to the Person of Christ. The crux of the faith is at Calvary, not in Eden. I would set out some of the evidences of the resurrection for someone really troubled to know whether it actually took place historically as described in the Gospel records, but would point out the limitations of this approach to truth. I would not hesitate to answer some of the questions put to me about the trustworthiness of Scripture, while only too aware that my answers cannot make the man a Christian. But the Spirit of God may not only use the truth I utter, but also the manner in which I give my reply, to help a man to turn to God's Word without the fatal prejudice that leaves it an obsolete, closed book. Sometimes a seeker is relieved to find that we are *aware* of the difficulties. Some seem fully persuaded that we only believe because we are ignorant of the difficulties, and once we ran into the difficulties we would abandon our faith!

A CHANGING PERSONAL APPROACH

As I look back over nearly fifty university missions, I can trace an interesting pattern, with three distinct phases. Before the war I took a series of isolated subjects designed to lead up to the cross, and committal to Christ on the part of those whom God had been preparing. Immediately after the war I was conscious of taking a more apologetic approach; while presenting Christian doctrine in a systematic way, at the same time I sought to answer the questions which seemed to be on the lips of most of the ex-servicemen who were flooding the universities. In the university missions I shared in overseas there was a similar pattern, *viz.* 'These are the things that are worrying people. Present the gospel in the context of these things'. This was by no means a difficult task, and I never felt I was shuffling the gospel around to fit the circumstances.

A number of years of ministry in one place inevitably exercises a strong influence over one's approach to any other ministry. And when I have occasion to take part in university evangelism now I am conscious that the 'post-war *lecturer*' has given place to the 'middle-aged *preacher*'!

There are certain fundamental doctrines that must be presented: God and Christ, Man and Sin, Redemption, Regeneration, and Discipleship. And though I may still use some of the old titles (incidentally, is there any justification for spending the Lord's money on advertisement which is more likely to repel than attract? Not that I advocate the other extreme of boosting a charming personality!), my message is basically a *declaration of the facts* as found in God's Word, rather than a *defence of the faith.* I seek to keep the apologetic and polemic content (which Professor Bruce points out is found so clearly in our Lord's teaching in John's Gospel) subservient to the declaratory and expository approach. You cannot build up a church on a diet of apologetics. There is no substitute for consecutive systematic exposition of the Word of God. But happy is the church where redeemed believers are helped to grow strong and stand firm in the faith, against all onslaughts. In this respect apologetics has its place. And this is its primary place, as the Epistles make so clear by inference, *i.e.* by the very fact that most of them are written to defend and preserve the faith in the faithful under various pressures.

I have never liked a debate in the formal sense (*i.e.* organized by a debating society) on Christian things. The danger is that you give 'the house' the impression that these are open subjects, 'debatable', a matter of opinion. In that way we may pander unwittingly to intellectual pride.

I have not heard of anybody being converted through listening to such a debate. But I believe we should have great patience with a man whose motive is genuinely that of 'search for the truth', whose pride in his intellect has been broken, who is conscious he is a sinner and really seeking help, but hindered from believing by certain difficulties. I don't believe we should try to steam-roller anybody into faith, or dismiss their difficulties with an airy 'Either you believe, or you don't believe. Take it or leave it.' On the other hand, I do seek to make clear to a man with difficulties that the real issues are moral issues and that we do not have to understand *too* much in order to become Christians — just enough to know that I am a guilty rebel in the sight of a holy God and that His Son came into this world to save sinners like me, and that He can save me now.

I hope the reader will forgive me for the personal note, and allow me to close with an illustration from recent experience. A few days ago a Christian mother, nearly two years old in the faith, introduced me to her agnostic neighbour. 'Don't talk to me about nature,' she said, before I could open my mouth, 'as the Jehovah's Witnesses have told me *that* ought to be enough to make me believe in God — and it doesn't convince me one scrap.'

I assured her that the Bible indicated that she would not *appreciate* nature's witness to God until she found herself at the feet of Christ. As we thought together of the Saviour and His life and words and, above all, His death, the miraculous process was taking place. The Spirit was bearing witness to the truth. Faith was coming by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (Rom. x. 17). Teaching rather than apologetics was the key to her situation.

The apostle Paul both *declared* the truth God had revealed (Acts xiii. 38, 39, 43, 44, xiv. 3, 21, xvii. 23, xviii. 11) and *reasoned*, not from philosophical premises but from the Scriptures (Acts xvii. 2, 3 and 17-31, xviii. 4, xix. 8-10, xxiv. 24, 25). There is a time for everything. Apologetics are to be the handmaid of teaching in evangelism, chiefly for the convert beset with difficulties and the earnest enquirer hindered by difficulties. But they should never be viewed as a substitute for plain straightforward presentation of the gospel. The preaching of the cross is still the power of God unto salvation. Flawless logic or brilliance in intellectual argument cannot achieve spiritual results. Our faith must not stand on a basis of human philosophy or unassailable proofs, but in the power of God. Our speech and our preaching are not to be in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power (1 Cor. ii. 2-5). We have enough facts, and adequate authority.

To engage in effective evangelism we don't need 'all the answers' or 'every explanation you can think of'. So let us get on with preaching the gospel! Men are dying in moral and spiritual darkness, without Christ, without hope. It is later than we think.

I.V.F. Pocket Books

Basic Christianity. J. R. W. Stott. 3s. 6d.

Why Believe? Prof. A. Rendle Short. 3s.

The Apostolic Defence of the Gospel. Prof. F. F. Bruce. 3s. 6d.

Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God. J. I. Packer. 3s. 6d.