

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

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Pastor/Teacher
Gary L.W. Johnson

EVANGELISTIC APOLOGETICS

Most of you have probably seen T-shirts or baseball caps with the words NO FEAR printed boldly on the front or back. One of my friends had one that reads KNOW FEAR in bold letters over the text of Prov. 1:7 "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." The concept of fearing God, however, is not in vogue today in our churches. This stems from a great many things, but chief among them is the loss of the biblical understanding of God's holiness and transcendence. A *Newsweek* article describes today's churches: "They have developed a 'pick and choose' Christianity in which individuals take what they want...and pass over what does not fit their spiritual goals. What many have left behind is a pervasive sense of sin."¹ In the place of the sin-and-grace emphasis of Scripture, a variety of self-help cures attempt to make Christianity into a spirituality that will appeal to seekers. Many who call themselves *Evangelical* have taken their cue, not from the Scriptures, but from a form of mysticism that has plagued the church for centuries. The noted English mystic Julian of Norwich (1342-1413) who often referred to God as "Mother" denied that God was ever the least bit wrathful. She wrote, "I saw truly that our Lord was never wroth (angry), nor ever shall be. ...For I saw no manner of wrath in God, neither for short time nor for long"² Why fear a God like that? Perhaps the most common fear we find ourselves facing centers around what I call *Evangelistic phobia* – the fear of doing evangelism! We are *afraid*. Afraid that people might think we are religious crack-pots, and more than anything else, we are afraid that we will offend people and appear self-righteous. So, if we do venture to *share* our faith, we do so in ways that will come across non-threatening, i.e., "Jesus is very meaningful to me and I think you would find Him meaningful in your life." The fear of man, the Bible declares, brings a snare (Prov. 29:25) and this fear drives us to compromise the gospel lest we incur our fellowman's displeasure. The Bible has a lot to say about the subject of *Fear*—particularly as it relates to the fear that is due to God. References to the fear of God or Christ occur no fewer than thirty-five times. During Christ's earthly ministry, men or women often stood in awe of what He did or said: when He healed the paralytic (Mt. 9:8), when He stilled the storm (Mk. 4:41; Lk. 8:25), when He walked on the water (Jn. 6:19), when He cured the demoniac (Mk. 5:15; Lk. 8:35), when he was transfigured (Mt. 17:6; Lk 9:34), when He spoke of His death and moved towards it (Mk. 9:32; 10:32; Lk. 9:45), when they heard His claim to be Son of God (Jn. 19:8), when the truth of that claim struck them (Mt. 27:54), when finally He rose from the dead (Mk. 16:8). He Himself bade men fear God; that is the meaning of Mt. 10:28 and the thrice repeated word in Lk. 12:5. (contrary to what some have taught this does not refer to the devil). Paul continues the exhortation in Rom. 11:20, though he does not actually mention God's name. 1 Pet. 2:17 puts 'Fear God' as one of the four basic commandments. Rev. 14:7 repeats the same terse command, and in three other places Revelation speaks of fearing God and His name (11:18; 15:4; 19:5). In Acts the Gentiles who have become attached to Judaism are five times almost technically described as God-fearers (10:2; 10:22, 35; 13:16,26). The term is not so technical in Lk. 1:50 ('His mercy is on them that fear Him'), or in 23:40 ('Do you not even fear God?'), but it describes the same religious attitude. Even the unjust judge accepts the negative description of himself as one who does not fear God (Lk. 18:2,4). The phrase is carried right over into the Christian sphere in Col. 3:22, where 'in singleness of heart fearing *the Lord*' almost certainly refers to Christ rather than to God. And even the shepherds who heard the great announcement of the Incarnation

'were sore afraid' (Lk. 2:9). They could not but be in awe of the glory of God accompanying that announcement, thought its message was one of deliverance from fear. Many times we are told to *fear not*. Twenty-nine times the word occurs with a negative, either as a direct command from God or Christ, or indicating a fearlessness that is due to trust in God. The Gospels fourteen times record the words on the lips of Jesus. When Peter is overcome by the miraculous draught of fishes and his own unworthiness, the Lord bids him 'Fear not'. There are great tasks awaiting him (Lk. 5:10). When the disciples are troubled at the sight of Jesus walking on the water, His immediate response is 'Fear not' (Mt. 14:27; Mk. 6:50; Jn. 6:20). The same kind of fear at the Transfiguration evokes the same encouraging reply (Mt. 17:7). And Jairus, when he comes full of anxiety for his little daughter, is bidden 'Fear not, only believe' (Mk. 5:36; Lk. 8:50). The command particularly underlines the right Christian attitude to persecution: 'Fear them not' (Mt. 10:26); 'Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul' (Mt. 10:28; Lk. 12:4); 'The very hairs of your head are numbered. Fear not therefore' (Mt. 10:31; Lk. 12:7). Christ's continued word to His Church is 'Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom' (Lk. 12:32). The message extends on to the Triumphal Entry. Because the King comes, Jerusalem can get rid of her fear (Jn. 12:15). And after the awesome event of the Resurrection, first the angel, and then the Lord Himself, say to the women, 'Fear not' (Mt. 28:5, 10). The Church did not forget the message. Paul, perhaps hesitating to go on preaching in Corinth, saw the Lord in a vision saying 'Fear not' (Acts 18:9), and when he was in imminent danger of shipwreck, the same calming word came to him (27:24). In each case a commission accompanied the command: 'I have much people in this city'; 'Thou must stand before Caesar'. The promise was not just for Paul's own safety. Hebrews twice reminds its readers of earlier fearlessness: Moses' parents were not afraid of Pharaoh (11:23), nor was Moses himself (11:27). And the writer can go on to say with the Psalmist, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear' (13:6). Peter, writing to persecuted people, twice bids them not to be afraid (1 Pet. 3:6, 14). So does St. John the Divine (Rev. 2:10). He himself had had Christ's hand laid upon him, saying 'Fear not' (Rev. 1:17). Our last four instances are in connection with the Incarnation. 'Fear not, Zacharias', says the angel when he announces the birth of Christ's forerunner (Lk. 1:13). 'Fear not', says Gabriel again to Mary, when he announces Christ's birth (1:30). 'Fear not to take Mary thy wife', says the angel to Joseph (Mt. 1:20), and 'Fear not, there is born to you this day a Saviour', says the angel to the shepherds at Bethlehem (Lk. 2:10). From the very beginning, right up to the end, Christ is the victor over all fear.³

CONTEXT: ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS

1 Peter is, as William Edgar has pointed out, a letter of encouragement⁴ --but not the kind of encouragement that you might expect (i.e. things will get better so cheer up). Rather Peter is a witness to the grace of God in the midst of suffering—even in response to suffering, so much so that he could write "I have written to you briefly, *encouraging* you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. *Stand fast* in it." (1 Peter 5:12). A close examination of the context of 1 Peter 3:15 reveals that we are not only instructed to give an apology but there are also valuable directives for how to make a defense. Peter deals with the attitude and action of apologetics by *first* focusing on the need for a biblical method saying, "Sanctify Christ as Lord" (3:15). *Second*, he refers to the attitudes of "gentleness and reverence" (3:15) when approaching the non-Christian. *Third*, he deals with the importance of "a good conscience" and "good behavior in Christ" (3:16). Following these basic categories, though reversing the order, we find that the Scriptures have a great deal to say about the relation of apologetics to our lives, our approach, and our methods.⁵

I. A CONSISTENT LIFE: GOOD BEHAVIOR IN CHRIST

A similar exhortation is found in Eph. 4:20-32 where the Apostle Paul likewise stresses a proper attitude (4:23). Whether it be at home, at work, at church, or anywhere the consistency of our life is on display. Therefore the need for a consistent Christian walk cannot be over-emphasized as an essential part of doing Christian apologetics.

II. A CAREFUL APPROACH: GENTLENESS AND REVERENCE

Three other passages underscore this as well. "Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person" (Col. 4:5-

6). "Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be uncontentious, gentle, showing every consideration for all men." (Titus 3:1-2). "But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing they produce quarrels. And the Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil" (II Tim. 2:23-26). This exhortation does not mean that we are to be non-confrontational, it certainly does not mean that we are to be silent in the face of unbelief.

A. Gentle Boldness

Regarding Paul's remarks in II Tim. 2:23-26, J.R.W. Stott observes, "The fundamental characteristic of the Lord's servant is to be "gentleness" (24, 25a). We have already seen that he is called to a teaching ministry. He therefore needs to be 'an apt teacher' (*didaktikos*), endowed with a gift or aptitude for teaching. His instruction will sometimes have to be negative as well as positive. That is to say, he is called not only to teach the truth to the people committed to his care, but also to correct error. He must not shrink from 'correcting his opponents', the 'people who dispute what he says'. But in all his ministry, instructing and correcting alike, he will exhibit the same distinctive quality. He 'must not be quarrelsome'. Instead, he will be 'kindly to everyone...forbearing' and characterized by 'gentleness'. The first word (*epios*) means 'mild' and is used by Paul to describe the attitude of 'a nurse taking care of her children' (I Thes. 2:7). The second word (*anexikakos*) means literally 'bearing evil without resentment' and so forbearing of people's unkindness, patient towards their foolishness and tolerant of their foibles. The last word of the three (*prautes*) adds to the gentleness portrayed by the other two the notes of 'humility, courtesy, considerateness and meekness'. Its opposite is to be brash, haughty and rude."⁶

B. Respectful Challenging

In addition to being *gentle*, Peter instructs us to do apologetics with *reverence*. The Greek word is PHOBOS which means *fear*—but this has reference to God and not to those to whom we are speaking. "Peter's point," writes Michaels, "that a Christian should not fear human adversaries is unmistakable (cf. also 3:6). It is virtually certain, therefore, that PHOBOS in v. 16 means fear of God (cf. 1:7; 2:17)."⁷ This attitude of a deep reverence for God means we treat people, even those who oppose the Gospel with gentleness and consideration. Paul's words to Titus apply well at this point, "Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men" (Titus 3:1,2).

C. Directed Answers

Another problem that often arises when approaching the non-Christian is the tendency to ignore his questions and push the conversation toward a goal of your own or to follow whatever line of thought which he may wish to pursue. On the one hand, there is the perspective that we should "make a defense to every one" as our text tells us, and that this means no matter what the direction of the conversation it should be followed by the Christian. The desire to be genuine in our concern for the non-Christian's questions is well intended. Yet, there is no biblical support for assuming that we must answer *every* question without exception. Answering every person, as Peter says, is different from answering *every* question. In fact, Paul told Timothy to "refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels" (II Tim. 2:23). We are told in Prov. 26:4, *not* to answer a fool according to his folly (a passage we will examine later on in this series). We must be prepared and willing to answer the questions of unbelievers but careful to avoid the sort of questions that lead to nothing but useless argument. Instead, we are to direct our conversations with the unbelieving world so that "God may grant them repentance" (II Tim. 2:25). We must have a definite purpose, leading the lost to

Christ. We are not to be interested in showing our own abilities to quarrel and argue. We should choose to answer those questions and follow up those lines of thought which lead the conversation to the issue at hand: belief in Christ and submission to Him as the Lord. There is a place for defending Christianity from attack (as in public debate or in print) but Peter's point has to do with answering individuals.

D. Concerned Preparation

Note the emphasis Peter places on being *prepared* (HETOIMOI AEI, lit. "being ready always") to give an answer—the work of apologetics is verbal. The saying (attributed to St. Francis of Assisi) "Preach the gospel, if necessary, use words" though popular, is certainly not biblical. As important as the testimony of lives is, the Gospel is *not* about our lives—and Peter expects us to give a *verbal* defense to those who *ask* for the *reason* why we are Christians—and this requires that we be diligent to be biblically grounded in our faith.

III. A CORRECT PROCEDURE: SET APART CHRIST AS LORD

How we do apologetics is critically important. "Apologetics," writes Edgar, "is about argument, which means developing a persuasive sequence of words to answer the challenges from an unbelieving culture. There is thus an affinity, but not direct similarity, between apologetics and evangelism. Evangelism is a missionary endeavor, proclaiming the gospel in every circumstance. Apologetics is a part of this missionary thrust, specializing in argument as it focus on issues and methods that "demolish argument and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God" (2 Corinthians 10:5). So apologetics is a kind of science, a discipline that develops sound ways of presenting the gospel."⁸

- A. Biblical apologetics constructs a method based on the teaching of Scripture.
- B. Biblical apologetics requires that the believer present his case for Christianity with the complete assurance that his faith is true and entirely defensible.
- C. Biblical apologetics must maintain the Creator-creature distinction.
- D. Biblical apologetics gives regard to the effects of sin and regeneration on man's ability to know truly and to make correct moral decisions.
- E. Biblical apologetics seeks to communicate effectively and convince the non-Christian on the basis that he is God's image and is aware of his creatureliness.

CONCLUSION: "Evangelicals today," complains Os Guinness, "display a troubling ignorance and unease about apologetics." We need to realize that this widespread attitude is sinful. If we really *fear the Lord* then we will seek to honor Christ by being prepared to do evangelistic apologetics. "It is this *holy fear* or respectful awe focused on Christ, that drives out other fears, and makes possible an honest and effective response to interrogation."⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ *Newsweek*, Sept., 1994, p. 26.

² As cited in *A Dazzling Darkness: An Anthology of Western Mysticism* ed. Patrick Grand (Eerdmans, 1985), p. 119.

³ For complete listing of these terms cf. H.K. Moulton, *The Challenge of the Concordance: Some New Testament Words Studied in Depth* (Bagster, 1977), pp. 213-215.

⁴ W. Edgar, *Reasons of the Heart* (Baker, 1996), p. 34.

⁵ R.L. Pratt Jr. *Every Thought Captive* (P&R, 1979), p. 62. I am indebted to this helpful book for the substance of my outline.

⁶ J.R.W. Stott, *Guard the Gospel: The Message of 2 Timothy* (IVP, 1973), p. 77.

⁷ J.R. Michaels, *I Peter: Word Biblical Commentary* (Word, 1988), p. 189.

⁸ Edgar, *op. cit.* p. 41.

⁹ Michaels, *op. cit.*