

Viewpoint: JAV331

THE NEED FOR APOLOGETICS IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

by Perseus Poku and Rodney Scott

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Apologetics is biblical. That's why it should play a foundational role in the ministry of the local church. However, here are five additional reasons apologetics should be a staple in the life of the church.

First, it helps believers master the fundamentals of Christian doctrine so that they can effectively evangelize the lost (Titus 2:7–8).

Second, it provides answers to objections leveled against truth (1 Pet. 3:15).

Third, it inspires believers as well as nonbelievers to inquire more about the Christian faith (Acts 17:32–34; 26:28).

Fourth, it teaches Christians to think critically through the philosophies of opposing worldviews (1 Tim. 1:3, 6–7).

Finally, it can help the Christian who is experiencing a crisis of faith.¹

In short, apologetics is an essential component to help us grow in our faith and is therefore vital to the church in the twenty-first century. It is not vital to the church's existence per se, but rather her quality of existence, that is, her effectiveness in engaging the culture for Christ (Matt. 5:13). Consider the words of Nancy Pearcey and Charles Thaxton as they describe the infiltration of the church into the world: "We learn that until comparatively recent times, Christians have actively worked out the implications of their faith in all areas of life and scholarship—from philosophy to mathematics to physics to biology. Christian faith has not been a purely private matter. Nor has it been shut off in a separate part of life, as though it were relevant to worship but not to work."²

It is time we take our rightful stand in the world. The local church has been given an identity. She is the Lord's mouthpiece and the world's conscience. She is salt and God can use apologetics to shake her and the world up.

Every church dedicated to the Lord's mandate (Matt. 28:19–20) should be interested in evangelism. If evangelism deals with the spreading of the good news, then those who share it must be ready to articulate and defend the faith (1 Pet. 3:15).

Birth of an Apologetics Ministry. The ability to give a defense for the apostolic doctrine is at the core of the Christian faith (Acts 2:42). Any believer who constantly shares the good news will eventually meet someone who has a question about the Christian faith. This was my (Perseus's) plight when we began witnessing in 1991. I just accepted Christ a year before and I had a zeal for witnessing. This burning desire to share Christ was also fueled by my close friends. They also loved the Lord and were willing to spread the gospel each Saturday. We met at the church at 11:00 a.m. for prayer and consecration. We would then walk the streets around the church sharing the gospel door to door.

It was through this method of evangelism that our apologetics ministry was born. During one of our street witnessing ventures, we encountered two gentlemen. They were dressed in white shirts, black ties, and dark pants. They were very friendly and well informed. These two men professed to be believers

in Jesus, the Bible, and the church. As our discussion progressed, however, we soon discovered their doctrinal belief was inconsistent with our biblical worldview. As a result, all the members of our witnessing group agreed to begin studying more about other faiths. We wanted to be able to articulate the Christian faith while effectively being able to give a defense for God's word. This encounter compelled us to do more studying on the cults.

In order to better understand the doctrines of the major cults, we made appointments to visit them. We were able to visit the Kingdom Hall of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Nation of Islam mosque, and an orthodox Islam mosque. These experiences further buttressed the need for Christian apologetics. Our hearts were saddened from the experiences with the cults. We soon realized that if we were going to make an impact in our community, it would have to start with the church. As a result, we decided to approach our pastor about starting an apologetics ministry. Fortunately, we have a pastor who understands the word of God and he gave us permission to start the ministry.

The St. Paul apologetics ministry started in 1992 at St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church, located in the Oak Park neighborhood of Sacramento, California. Under the leadership of Pastor Ephraim Williams, the church blossomed to a membership of about five thousand. According to a local survey, Oak Park had within its limits approximately one hundred churches. We were not aware that any of these churches had an apologetics ministry and so there were no models for us to follow, but Pastor Williams publicly gave us his vote of confidence from the pulpit and informed the congregation about the new apologetics ministry and its function.

We met as a group once a month and engaged in systematic theology. Initially we averaged approximately eight people per meeting. We now have more than seventy members in this ministry.

The early years were extremely difficult. Some church members did not understand the need for an apologetics ministry while other members strongly supported us. We pressed on, and eventually we became known as the ministry that answered biblical questions. We made it easily available for the congregation to obtain answers regarding their Christianity.

We created a resource cabinet in the administrative wing of the church. The cabinet contained Christian Research Institute (CRI) perspectives, which are one-page statements on various issues. We were able to provide answers immediately to many questions through the aid of the CRI perspectives. In addition, we created an information box. The box was intended for church members to drop in their questions. Someone from our ministry contacted the church members to provide answers within two to three days of receiving a question in the box. We even received questions from various Sunday school teachers. Eventually the church started to understand the role of the apologetics ministry.

Furthermore, the influence of this ministry has expanded outside the church walls. Since the inception of our apologetics forums in 1998, many other churches have expressed interest in apologetics training. We have been blessed to have individuals such as Phillip Johnson, Norman Geisler, J. P. Moreland, and Hank Hanegraaff speak at our forums. We also developed series on "Loving God with All of Your Mind," "Let the Truth Be Told," and "The Essentials of the Christian Faith." The forums are intended to expose Christians to apologetics. In addition, our hope is for attendees to take the information back to their own churches. It is always a blessing to see different people from various nationalities and denominations talking about sound doctrine. My favorite part about the forum series is the question-and-answer period, where participants are welcome to question our speakers.

The Value of Apologetics in the Local Church. As a ministry, we find it helpful to have a church that believes in the inerrancy of the Bible. As a result, the ministry has become a vital component of the church. In an attempt to promote hermeneutics, we approached our new membership department. With the approval of our pastor, we created an apologetics class for all new members. It is essential that we give our new converts the purity of the major doctrines without contamination (1 Pet. 2:2). This was the purpose for incorporating an apologetics class into the new membership curriculum. By attending the apologetics class, many new members have been able to gain confidence in their knowledge and understanding of the Christian faith.

The church has additionally utilized the apologetics ministry in terms of research. When St. Paul was working on opening a bookstore, church staff asked us to identify sound and heretical authors. The

ministry accepted this awesome task and was able to recommend authors that adhered to sound doctrines. Our ministry is currently working on a youth apologetics class. According to David Wheaton, approximately fifty-one percent of Christian college enrollees deny their faith upon graduating.³ It is in light of these alarming statistics that we decided to develop apologetics training sessions for our youth. Since they share classrooms with atheists, naturalists, skeptics, and students with many other worldviews, it is important that they receive training in sharing and defending their faith. In order to train them, we conducted a workshop entitled, "Let the Truth Be Told." It is also our hope that our youth will develop Christian clubs at their various schools. Ultimately, we hope to develop trained ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20).

I understand that each church is different. I am also cognizant that resources vary from church to church. Despite obvious challenges, it is very important for every Bible-teaching church to have an apologetics ministry or curriculum woven into its programs. Failure to do so will ultimately create an atmosphere for erroneous doctrine. Developing a culture for apologetics will help churches root out unbiblical statements, lyrics, teachings, and traditions. Having an apologetics ministry has helped our church tremendously. Many of our members are now doctrinally sensitive. They search the scriptures for edification (Acts 17:11) and are willing to confront any aberrant views. The heartbeat of every church should be to develop an apologetics ministry dedicated to maintaining the integrity of sound doctrine. —
Perseus Poku and Rodney Scott

Perseus Poku holds an A.A. in Education and a B.A. in History from California State University, Sacramento. Mr. Poku is currently working on his Masters in Christian Apologetics at Southern Evangelical Seminary, and serves as the full-time Staff Minister at St. Paul Baptist Church in Sacramento, California.

Rodney Scott holds a B.A. in Biblical Studies from Biola University and an M.A. in Philosophy from Talbot University. He serves as Director of Evangelism and Discipleship at Progressive Community Church in Stockton, California.

NOTES

- 1 When my Aunt Bennie died, my years of study on the evidence of the bodily resurrection of Jesus gave me assurance that she not only survived the death of her body, but that she would soon receive a new body at the resurrection.
- 2 Nancy R. Pearcey and Charles B. Thaxton, *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), xiii.
- 3 David Wheaton, *University of Destruction* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2005), 170.