Article: **DA820**

WHEN APOLOGETICS WAS EVANGELISM

This article first appeared in the Effective Evangelism column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 26, number 1 (2003). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: http://www.equip.org

The next time you have an opportunity to share the good news of Jesus Christ, think about this: There is no example in the New Testament of a "personal testimony" being used in an evangelistic setting. Does that seem surprising? The personal testimony has become such an integral part of evangelistic training that it is assumed to be explicitly described, even mandated, in the Bible; but it isn't.

What about Paul's testimony to the Philippians about his former life as a Pharisee who persecuted Christians, of which he said, "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung" (Phil. 3:8)?[1] This is indeed a personal testimony about how Jesus changed Paul's life, but it is found in a letter to *fellow Christians*, in which Paul compared himself to the "evil workers" (Phil. 3:2) who were opposing him. Paul was not witnessing to his faith as an evangelist but was illustrating for vulnerable believers the contrast between himself and those who were preaching false doctrine.

What we call "apologetics" was, in fact, what the apostolic church would have called "evangelism." Early missionary preaching testified to the historical realities upon which the Christian faith was grounded and called for repentance on those grounds. Consider Peter's speech to the crowd in Jerusalem at Pentecost (Acts 2:22–25):

> Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it. For David speaketh concerning him, I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved.

Peter did not testify how Jesus had changed his life or about how he "felt clean" now that his sins were washed away; rather, he appealed to three matters of historical record: the *miracles* done by Jesus (as well as the sign of speaking in other tongues, witnessed by the crowd), the *resurrection of Jesus* and His empty tomb, and the *fulfillment by Jesus of Old Testament prophecy*. It is on the basis of these three facts that Peter called on his hearers to repent. Their repentance was an expected reaction in light of the historical reality of God's vindication of Jesus.

Throughout Acts we see the same appeals made in evangelistic settings (3:12–26; 4:10–12; 10:34–43), but not a single instance of a modern "personal testimony."[2] Why? The answer is found in an unlikely place: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil" (Jer. 13:23). Jeremiah expressed an ancient, proverbial belief that *people never change their ways*. A radical change in behavior was extremely unusual and was viewed with suspicion. This is why, even after Paul became a Christian, the disciples "were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple" (Acts 9:26). They were suspect of such a radical change. In the ancient world, therefore, a personal testimony would have been an ineffective witnessing tool.

Does this mean that we should abandon personal testimonies as a form of witnessing? Of course not. Personal testimony is itself a form of evidence, and a changed life can make a deep impression on others, especially those who want their own lives to change. The apostles' example, however, shows that evangelism and apologetics are not mutually exclusive. We need to be familiar with the factual basis for

our faith in order to "be ready always to give an answer" to any person who asks (1 Pet. 3:15). A basic familiarity with fundamental apologetics is essential to following the apostles' example.

The spirit of our age admittedly makes our task more difficult. Personal testimonies appeal to our individualism and our feelings, and can be much more interesting than arguments based on ancient history. Appealing to the miracles of Jesus as evidence will not be as straightforward today as it was to those who themselves had seen, or heard eyewitness testimony to, the miracles. Modern arrogance dismisses ancient history (especially religious history and accounts of miracles) as the fabrication of primitive minds. Skeptics may assume that miracles are impossible. Our witness to them may therefore have to begin by addressing the philosophical premises of naturalism (i.e., that there is no supernatural God who can perform miracles). Those who believe miracles are possible may still reject the New Testament miracles as nothing more than copies of pagan miracles. They may say that Jesus was no more special than other holy men who performed miraculous feats. The wide circulation of information about other religions today has made an evidential appeal to the miracles of Jesus a much more complex task than the apostles could have ever imagined.

Appealing to Jesus' fulfillment of Messianic prophecy can also be difficult to use in evangelism. Enlightenment-era, literalist critics like Thomas Paine argued that the New Testament writers misused Old Testament prophecy and applied it to Jesus illicitly. Modern skeptics continue to use Paine's arguments. Critics charge, for example, that Matthew misuses Hosea 11:1 — "When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt" — by saying this was fulfilled by Jesus when his family returned from Egypt (Matt. 2:15). Research into ancient Jewish methods of exegesis, however, shows that the New Testament writers did not use the Old Testament any differently than their contemporaries.[3] Matthew's exegesis of Hosea is an example of *midrash*, a Jewish technique of interpretation in which phrases in the Old Testament were isolated from their context and applied to a new situation. Jesus was understood as fulfilling Hosea 11:1 because He reenacted the theme of a return from Egypt.

The appeal to the empty tomb of Jesus is the apostolic argument most commonly used today. Christian apologists and scholars have convincingly shown that the Resurrection is the only alternative consistent with the data. Theories that the apostles stole Jesus' body, or that the apostles went to the wrong tomb, collapse under the weight of inconsistencies and impossibilities. Other explanations for Jesus' empty tomb take on a hue of desperation. Some would prefer to believe Jesus was an alien from outer space who was restored by advanced technology rather than accept that He was the Lord of life who was resurrected by the power of Almighty God. The explanation that Jesus survived the crucifixion and went to live in India or Japan resurfaces periodically — an alternative that indirectly testifies to the fact that the tomb was empty.

Rampant cynicism, ignorance, and skepticism has made our task more difficult, but that does not mean it has become *impossible*. Believers who can communicate the basis for their faith can be far more convincing and make a far greater impression with their personal testimony. If we are unable to answer unbelievers' questions about Christianity, however, we leave ourselves open to the charge of being uncritical and not caring to examine our faith. Paul, in fact, advised the Thessalonians to "prove all things" (1 Thess. 5:21). The Bible does not encourage a blind faith.

No believer, not even a scholarly believer, can hope to master every conceivable apologetic issue; nor is it necessary. A few basic areas, however, are all that Christians need to study in depth to be more effective witnesses. Materials on life in Bible times can be especially helpful and will often bring more light to passages that seem obscure.[4] Authors who examine and compare social values in the biblical world to those in the modern world can bring an exciting new perspective and understanding to the text.[5] A book on the literary genres and interpretation of the biblical text is also essential.[6] Once the basics are mastered, one may choose to study specialty fields such as archaeology, literature, textual criticism, or eschatology. A network of informed Christians can trade information as needs arise in their own efforts. With the ready access of electronic mail and informational resources both in print and online, the answers to even the most difficult questions can literally be at our fingertips.

If we profess to love God, it is only consistent with our profession that we should desire to learn more about Him and His Word. Apologetics should not be regarded as alien to our personal testimony but should become an integral part of it. A man who said he loved his wife but could tell an inquirer almost nothing about her would be rightly regarded with suspicion. We owe no less loyalty to our Lord than to show our love for Him (1 Pet. 3:15) by learning all we can about Him and His message — the "faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 1:3).

-- James Patrick Holding

NOTES

1. All Bible quotations are from the King James Version.
2. Resemblance to a modern personal testimony in Paul's speech before Agrippa (Acts 26) is incidental. Paul is offering a defense against charges that he violated Jewish laws and was a "mover of sedition among all the Jews" (Acts 24:5–6). He first recounts his former life to show that he was previously a zealous believer in Judaism. He then trumps the charges by arguing that his Christian faith is consistent with Jewish beliefs in the resurrection of the dead (26:6–7; cf. 23:6), so that not only was he a sincere Jew in his former life; he remained one, even as a Christian! Paul's purpose was to show that he could not have been a "mover of sedition," disloyal to Jewish sensibilities, for he himself was still a loyal Jew, "believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets" (24:14) and finding what was written there fulfilled in Christ. He does not follow the pattern of a modern personal testimony, for he does not appeal to the changes in his life as a reason for Agrippa to become a Christian.
3. See Richard Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
4. E.g., Victor Matthews, *The Social World of Ancient Israel, 1250–587 B.C.E.* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993); James Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).
5. E.g., Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Ancient Personality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993); David deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kingship and Purity* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).
6. E.g., D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, *Cracking Bible Codes: A Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Literary Forms* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995); Robert H. Stein, *Playing by the Rules: A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).