

Apologetics in Preaching *Prophecies Fulfilled in Real History*

By Michael Berg

To some apologetics is a dirty word. The obvious objection to apologetics is “What about faith?” This concern is not unique to *sola fide* Lutherans by the way. This objection is found in all denominations. Of course, we Lutherans have a specific objection to the misuse of reason because of Paul’s clear teaching on the bound will. We also are well aware of theologians who rely on reason and give unsatisfactory answers to the logical problem of the bound will, human responsibility, and undeserved grace. Is reason a whore or God’s greatest gift? Nimble theologians answer “Yes” to both without comprising grace or falling into determinism. Reason should be used in a ministerial manner but not in a magisterial manner. This we know.

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Apologetics does not have to be a dirty word nor something to be avoided. It is helpful to think of the three aspects of faith *notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia*.¹ The apologist can point to the verifiable facts of the Christian faith (*notitia*). By the use of reason he can defend these verifiable events of the New Testament and counter the false claims on reality made by other religions and the secular world. He points to Christ (the true *notitia* of faith). The apologist can even convince people of this truth, an assent to the facts (*assensus*). But this is where the apologist’s work ends. He cannot produce *fiducia*, that is, trust. This is left to the Spirit. After all, even the demons believe that there is one God and shudder (Jm 2:19). Certainly Satan knows Christ (*notitia*) and agrees (*assensus*) that he is the Savior of the world (otherwise he wouldn’t work

so hard to stop the church) but he does not trust Christ (*fiducia*). When apologetics stays in the correct realm, it is not only permissible but is beneficial.

Perhaps two more preliminary notes are in order before we move on. First, we are all apologists. In a similar way we are all philosophers. Everybody has a philosophy of life even if that philosophy is “Philosophy is stupid.” We all have a view of the world. We cannot escape it. Nor can we escape reason. Declaring “Reason is always antithetical to faith and therefore bad” is a logically reasonable thing to assert! The proposition simply lacks a true premise. We cannot escape apologetics either. It is only a matter of how we carry out our apologetic task, with thoughtfulness or sloppiness. We are constantly making the case for our claims on truth using reason, anecdotes, and empirical evidence. It is how we operate.

The truth of the matter is that Lutheran preachers frequently carry out the apologetic task. When we point out that Luke did not begin his historical narrative on the nativity of Christ with “Once upon a time” but rather “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree,” we are carrying out apologetics. When we insist that New Testament scholars treat the Gospel manuscripts with the same objectivity they do with any other document of the era, we are doing apologetics. When we state that Islam and Christianity are not the same, if for no other reason than one claims Jesus is God and the other does not and both cannot be right, we are speaking apologetically.

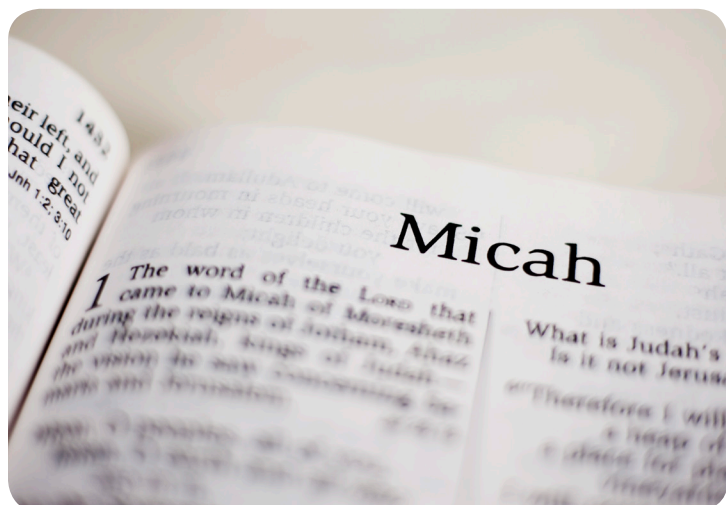
We are also in good company. Not only do we have Peter’s command to carry out apologetics (1 Pt 3:15-16), we also have plenty of apologetic examples in Scripture. Luke’s history. Paul in Athens. Prophecies fulfilled. Miracles performed. All these are examples of biblical apologetics. We can have the same confidence as did Paul when he said to Agrippa “What I am saying is true

and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner" (Ac 26:25-26). The events of the New Testament are verifiable facts of history. This is real. In fact, as Paul wrote to the Corinthian congregation, "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God" (1 Co 15:13-15a). It is as if Paul said, "Show me the dead body and I'll stop being a Christian!" This Christian faith is not a blind faith or a faith in faith; it is a faith based on facts.

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Second, preaching with apologetics in mind has a beneficial ripple effect. First the Christian becomes firmer in the faith.² Even if she cannot articulate why, for example, the teleological argument (fine-tuning of the universe) is a problem for the atheist, she knows that someone out there has thought about this. She knows that her pastor cares enough to have thought it through. She is not left alone in her doubts. She can find an answer. This, in turn, boosts her confidence to share her faith. It also gives her confidence in her pastor to whom she is willing to send her skeptical friend. She knows that her friend will encounter a patient and caring man willing to work through skeptical doubts instead of simply thumping his bible. Apologetics is a ministry of caring.

While Lutherans desire to uphold the doctrine of the bound will, we are also careful not to fall into fideism. By fideism we mean here a reliance on faith alone as the arbiter of truth, a faith in faith. The apostles did not speak this way. Faith always has an object and is only as good as that object. If Christ is only an idea or myth, then faith in Christ is foolish as St. Paul makes very clear in 1 Corinthians 15. However, if Christ is real, then faith is grounded



in that reality. The concern of souls is paramount here. Our assertions may be true, but making a case for them might be necessary for the sake of the skeptical mind. We never describe faith as a prerequisite for forgiveness: first someone dead in sin musters up faith and then God will love him. Rather we preach the gospel and are prepared to make a case for what we believe. It is through this proclamation that the Spirit will do his work.

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One of the greatest biblical treasures God has bestowed on us in this regard is prophecy, the focus of our present issue. A fulfilled prediction is a powerful thing. Who knows how many have come to faith because of prophecies fulfilled? Yet there are natural objections. Was this prophecy manipulated? Was the prediction so vague that any event could be described as fulfilling the prophecy? Was this so-called prediction actually made after the fact? Was this just by chance? These are legitimate questions Christians might ask about, for example, the Book of Mormon's so-called prophecies. They are also legitimate questions for the skeptic to ask the Christian. We should not shy away from answering such questions under the guise of "We just believe because the Bible said so!"

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So let's ask, in a general way, questions about the many Old Testament prophecies claimed to be fulfilled in the New. Were these manipulated? I suppose, logically, some could have been. It is possible, for example, that Jesus rode a donkey because he was aware of Zechariah (Ze 9:9-10). However, how could he manipulate his birth in Bethlehem? Who chooses where he is born?

Were these predictions so vague that any event could be described as fulfilling the prophecy? I suppose Isaiah's prophecy that many in Israel would be calloused towards the mission of Christ could be counted as vague (Is 6:9-10). There will always be some who will go against any message, religious or not. But what about the thirty pieces of silver, the unbroken bones of Christ, his pierced side, his burial with the rich? Those are highly specific.

Was this so-called prediction actually made after the fact? This is the default position of many. We are well aware of the mental gymnastics higher critics perform to maintain their a priori bias against prophecy. A two-Isaiah theory comes to mind. Notice the near acquiescence to the fact that the predictions actually came true. Many do not bother disputing the fact that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, died on a cross with a pierced side after being sold for

thirty pieces of silver. This is not their primary concern. They attack the texts instead. They must have been written after the fact. Yet textual and archeological evidence counter this claim. Consider the Great Isaiah scroll which is believed to be written around 125 B.C. Of course, some would claim that Isaiah said nothing about Christ, but the prophetic chapters 52 and 53 have convinced many to reconsider the claims of Christianity.

Was this just by chance? Could it be that many of the Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in Christ are simply a result of randomness? In an age of powerful algorithms that market seemingly every known product to our personal devices with disturbing accuracy, in an age where metrics, in my opinion, are ruining the game of baseball, a mathematical argument of prophecy is a powerful one. We live by statistics. So let's take just a handful of events in the life of Christ prophesied in the Old Testament. Eliminate the ones about his divinity for argument's sake. We can also dispatch the ones that could have been (logically) manipulated or could be accused of having a Nostradamus-like vagueness. You can pick any you like: the flight to Egypt, gambling for his clothes, receiving wine vinegar at the cross, etc. Let's say that we find twenty-five prophecies. Let's place the odds of each of these happening or not happening at one in four (overly generous odds by the way). The chances of these twenty-five occurring in one person is one in a thousand trillion. Could it be by chance? "I suppose," we might say to the skeptic, "but you don't live your life taking chances like that."

By the time we get to the fourth Sunday in Advent, Lutheran preachers will be in full incarnation mode. We are eager to expound on that great mystery and the great grace of God becoming man with a special pastoral emphasis on the *for you*. He did it all for you! By the fourth Sunday in Advent we are no longer delving into obscure themes that apply both to Jesus first and second comings. As Christmas approaches we are preaching on Micah's Bethlehem prophecy (Mi 5:2-5). We are pondering with the Hebrew Christians that this incarnate body was prepared for perfect sacrifice unlike our imperfect gifts (Hb 10:5-10). We sing with Mary and are wowed like Elizabeth that the world's Redeemer resides for a time in Mary's womb (Lk 1:39-55). We agree with the psalmist that the Lord's "salvation is near" and beg of him to show us his "unfailing love" (Ps 85).³

So does apologetics have a place in Advent Four? Yes, but it needs to take a secondary seat (as always) to the proclamation of the incarnation *for us*. This is a special time. Yet we are always mindful of the skeptic and the doubter. A small portion of a sermon could easily touch on the fact that these Christmas events are fulfilled prophecies legitimizing Christ and granting confidence to the listener that God's promise to him or her will also be kept.

Perhaps something like this.

So the local news reports on a lottery winner. Nothing new here. Someone has to win. A big billion dollar jackpot, that's a bit rarer. "Good for him," you might think as you turn off the light and go to sleep to dream about what you might do with all that cash. A



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year later the news reports that the same person won again. Another billion. Now that's newsworthy. "Must be nice," you think as you turn off the light and go to sleep to dream jealous dreams of this unbelievable lucky person. "Why does he keep playing the lottery after he already won a billion dollars, anyway?" A year later: same guy, same result. Now the news story is about a fraud investigation because there is no way anybody is that lucky.

We live by odds. We really do. Something's fishy about this three-time jackpot winner. It just can't be. We use the same reasoning in everyday life. When you start your car in the morning to go to work, you are not afraid that it will blow up. Otherwise you wouldn't turn the ignition. I mean what are the odds, right? What are the odds when you drive over a bridge that it will collapse? What are the odds when you walk in a field that a sink hole will open up as your left foot hits the ground? We live by probability. It *could* happen. But what are the odds? And if we really insisted on absolute certainty about everything we would never get out of bed in the morning, too afraid to venture out into a world full of bad possibilities.

Well, what are the odds that one man, in one time, in one place fulfilled hundreds of predictions prophesied hundreds of years before? And not just vague prophecies but specific ones: born in Bethlehem, born of a virgin, sold for thirty pieces of silver, buried among the rich, rose three days later, and ascended into heaven, just to mention a few? The odds are astronomical, certainly far greater than a three-time lottery winner.

I suppose someone could still remain skeptical. But honesty must conclude that fulfilled prophecies are solid evidence. So ask yourself the question, "What are the odds of that?" Better yet, ask yourself this, "If I use the same reason and logic I do in everyday life about thousands of things, why would I doubt the prophecies fulfilled in Christ?"

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Now don't get me wrong. This is not how faith works, as if it were only a statistical formula. No, faith is a pure gift of God. But if I doubt these claims by use of my reason, should not my doubts also be under the same rule of logic? So, let's ask ourselves the question, "What are the odds of that?" The words we heard today do both. They both prove the case, and they work to give and strengthen faith. They show us the actual prophecy. We then see the beginning of fulfillment as pregnant Mary visits her cousin, Elizabeth. We will, of course, celebrate its fulfillment come Christmas. Then these words of Scripture serve as the means by which the Spirit grants and strengthens faith. It is finally through the Spirit's work that we are certain.

This is all for you.

The ultimate purpose of both the fulfillment of prophecy and the giving of faith is you. This is all for you. This is not simply a newsworthy event like the three-time lottery winner. "Wow, that Christ is a unique character," we would say as we shut off the light and go to sleep. No, this was done with a purpose beyond a good story or even beyond showing off God's power and glory. This was accomplished for you. Micah promises a Savior from Bethlehem so that he can shepherd his flock and they will "live securely" (Mi 5:4). Elizabeth asks, "But why I am so favored" (Lk 1:43) for this upcoming Christmas event was for her too. The writer to the Hebrews points out that this is the body meant for sacrifice, to pay for the sins of the world, yours included (Hb 10:10). Salvation is near you, as we sang in the psalm (Ps 85:9). How near? He became one of us. And he comes to us again in Word and meal to strengthen our faith in him until he fulfills another prophecy, his return.

And why doubt his return? Why doubt any promise he has made to you? He hasn't let us down yet. He hasn't missed a prophecy yet. Of course, he will come back for you and me and take us to heaven. Would a God who has been so faithful to us and done so much work for our salvation—becoming man, suffering, dying, rising, and ascending—then, all of a sudden, *not* bring his gracious work to heavenly conclusion for us? I mean...what are the odds of that?

¹ I use these three terms in a broad sense and not necessarily in the sense that *notitia* and *assensus* are parts of saving faith. For a short but more nuanced discussion see Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, pp. 426-430.

² This is *fides quae*, not *fides qua*.

³ The readings are for Advent 4-C in *Christian Worship*.



Books for further study:

Tractatus Logico-Theologicus by John Warwick Montgomery

Evidence that Demands a Verdict by Josh & Sean McDowell

Evidence for God: 50 Arguments from the Bible, History, Philosophy, and Science ed by William Dembski & Michael Licona

Isaiah 52 Explained by Mitch Glaser

The New Testament Documents by FF Bruce

Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimonies by Richard Bauckham (2nd ed, 2017)

Christian Apologetics by Douglas Groothuis