

LECTURE 6: BIBLICAL APOLOGETICS— PAUL IN HIS EPISTLES

In addition to his preaching and teaching recorded in Acts, Paul's letters provide insights into his methods of apologetics. In addition, they provide arguments Paul used to convince people of the truth of the Christian faith. They provide us with rich resources for developing our own apologetic approach and methods.

Paul's Earliest Epistles – the Eschatological Epistles

1 Thessalonians 1:4-5, 9; 2:13

“For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. . . for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.”

“And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.”

Observations on 1 Thess 1-2

- Christianity evidenced by effectiveness of their conversion
- Holy Spirit provides certainty of the truth of the Word of God

“We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the holy scripture, and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole, (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the word of God; yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.” (WCF 1:5)

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12

“Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.”

Observations on 1 Thess 4

- Christianity evidenced by godly lives
- (These evidences for Christianity, noted in 1 Thessalonians, are frequently repeated in Paul's epistles)

Paul's Major Group of Epistles – the Soteriological Epistles

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.” (Isa 29:14)

“Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

“Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”

“When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.”

Observations on 1 Cor 1

- Appeal to the unexpectedness of God's plan
 - Not appeal to human wisdom
 - Not appeal to human strength
 - Appeal to crucifixion of Christ (1:23; 2:2)
 - Appeal to weakness of Christ's followers (1:26-29; 2:1, 3-4)

- Appeal to the perfection of Jesus Christ (vv. 30-31)

1 Corinthians 2:6-16

“We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written:

“‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’ (Isa 64:4)—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

“The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man’s judgment:

“‘For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?’ (Isa 40:13)

“But we have the mind of Christ.”

Observations on 1 Cor 2

- Rulers ignorant, thus crucified Jesus (v. 8)
- Appeal to divine regeneration of the elect
 - Impossible to be a believer without new birth

1 Corinthians 14:22-25

“Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers. So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’”

Observation on 1 Cor 14

- Appeal to spiritual gifts, especially prophecy

- Cf. the excellent treatment by Phil Roberts, *The Gift of Tongues: An Evaluation* (1991)

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”

Observation on 1 Cor 15

- Appeal to the death, burial, resurrection of Christ, as attested by many witnesses

2 Corinthians 2:14-17

“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.”

Observation on 2 Cor 2

- Appeal to his own preaching and ministry
 - Accomplishes God’s purpose whether believed or not

Galatians 1:8-9

“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!”

Observation on Gal 1

- Appeal to authority of apostolic preaching
 - No empirical, testimonial, or other evidence to contradict what has been revealed through Paul (now, in Scripture)

Romans 1:18-23

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

“For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.”

Observations on Rom 1:18-23

- Classic “natural theology” passage
- The creation demonstrates the eternal power and divine nature of God (cf. Ps 19 and Rom 10:18)
- This revelation is clearly understood by all who observe nature
- Because of our sinful nature, natural man suppresses this knowledge
- The suppression of this knowledge results in the judicial darkening of the mind by God
- As a result, man forms his own gods and worships the creation instead of the Creator
- Other sins result from this error (rest of Rom 1)
- [for a good summary of interpretations of this important passage, see Richard Alan Young, “The Knowledge of God in Romans 1:18-23: Exegetical and Theological Reflections,” *JETS* 43:4 (Dec 2000) 695-707]

Romans 1:32

“Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.”

Observations on Rom 1:32

- An excellent demonstration of “natural law”; not controversial in interpretation (as is Rom 2:14-15, which may apply particularly to believers)
- The unregenerate engage in a wide variety of terrible sins (listed in previous verses)
- Yet they know that these activities are indeed sinful and deserving of death

Romans 2:12-16

“All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even

though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.”

Observations on Rom 2 and conscience

- Deals with Gentiles and the evidence of conscience

Many (as evidenced in the NIV translation) consider this passage as discussing unbelieving Gentiles, who nonetheless have God's law implanted in their consciences as an evidence that shall be used against them. Thus the existence of the conscience, and the presence of some kind of moral law among people untaught in Christianity, is an evidence pointing to the existence and moral character of God.

However, it appears better to understand this passage as speaking of believing Gentiles. The first sentence could be translated as follows:

“Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law by nature, do the things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, . . . ”

In this case, Paul is speaking of the new covenant, which promises to write the law of God on the hearts of believers. The phrase “by nature” would refer not to their doing the law, but to their not having the law (by birth and culture). With this understanding, we do not need to supply the parentheses necessary in the prior translation. Paul teaches elsewhere that the unbeliever does not have God's law in his heart (e.g., Rom 8:7-8). (For further defense of this view, see Cranfield, *ICC*, *ad loc.*).

If this understanding of the passage is correct, the evidence for God's existence and moral law would be found not in the conduct of unbelieving Gentiles, but rather in that of believing Gentiles.

As far as the conscience of the unbeliever goes, Paul does teach elsewhere that the unbeliever has an innate, if imperfect, knowledge of God's law (Rom 1:32)

Romans 13:1-7

“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

“This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.”

This passage should be compared with Titus 3:1-2, “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.”

Observations on Rom 13

- While not explicitly apologetic, these passages set the tone for the Christian’s relation to a potentially hostile state. Paul teaches proper submission and respect for the civil authority, while at the same time the responsibility of the civil magistrate as a minister of God. Future apologists encouraged this submission and this consideration by the government.