APOLOGETICS AND EVANGELIZATION

Kenneth Hamilton

Dr. Hamilton, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, is a Professor at the University of Winnipeg.

Apologetics and evangelization is my theme. At first sight the two might seem to be very far apart and to have little to do with each other. For apologetics is a branch of theology. It is an activity of the study and of the academic world, an activity concerned with bringing doctrine into relation to philosophy and justifying the truth of the Gospel on the level of theory. Evangelization, on the other hand, is a decidedly practical activity. It is concerned with the proclamation of the Gospel so that lives may be touched and transformed by the power of God's Spirit. Its place is wherever men and women gather together — in the church, the home, the market place, the public hall. Its aim is not abstract justification but concrete conviction. It commends the Gospel, not to the dispassionate intellect, but to the engaged and anxious heart.

Nevertheless, the two are more intimately connected than a superficial view might suppose. Conversion means the turning of *the whole man* to Christ in body, mind, and spirit. It cannot be a wholly emotional matter, just as it cannot be a wholly intellectual matter. An individual does not have to consider himself "an intellectual" in order to be genuinely moved to be able to explain his faith in meaningful, rational terms. Indeed, no one is likely to continue for long confessing a faith which does not seem reasonable to him and which he cannot explain in words that make sense to other people.

Apologetics and evangelism, therefore, are not two wholly separate activities, although they are not one and the same thing. Apologetics may be developed as a distinct branch of Christian theology, one having a special interest for intellectuals and for those wishing to provide a theoretical undergirding to the Gospel. But all evangelism involves some apologetical element — some attempt to explain the Gospel in such a way that it makes sense to the minds of those who hear it proclaimed.

Thus there is a real need for all who are engaged in the task of evangelization to consider what place apologetics may have in the preaching of the Evangel in our day and age. Only after facing the issues involved in relating the two activities can we be sure that we neither overestimate nor underestimate the value of the apologetical emphasis.

With these introductory thoughts I now turn to consider what apologetics can mean to Christians as they proclaim the faith to which they are committed. I shall start by looking at what it has meant in the past for the Christian Church.

1. *Apologetics in the Early Church*

In New Testament times an *apologia* was a technical term for a speech made in defense of an accused person in a court of law. The speech could be made either by the accused himself or by another on his behalf. An *apologia,* then, suggested two things: first, that there was an element of attack — an accusation had been made which raised the necessity for a defense; and second, that a defense was forthcoming — a plea of "not guilty" had been entered, together with the assurance that an adequate demonstration of innocence would be supplied. It followed, very naturally, that the word *apologia* came to be used whenever these two conditions were present, whether or not the setting was an actual court of law.

In the New Testament itself, the technical use of the word was still the main one. Apologetics, in the modern sense, has sometimes been justified by an appeal to I Pet. 3:15, which in the King James' Version reads, "Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you for a reason of the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear." But the context of the verse is given in the previous verse, "And if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, . . ." The young churches soon discovered that the prophecy of Jesus was literally true for them, "Ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake" (Matt. 10:18). The fact that the verse refers to a formal trial where Christians were accused because of their faith is seen in Peter's command that they are to answer "in meekness and fear" — not making their defense defiantly or insolently, but with deference to the authority of law, even though they were accused unjustly. (The New English Bible has this context in mind when it translates the verse, "Be always ready with your defense whenever you are called to account for the hope that is in you, but make that defense with modesty and respect.")

Apologetics in the wider sense really entered the scene in the second century of the Christian era, with a group of men who came to be called the Apologists. These were Christians who realized that the Gospel needed to be defended in the world of that time, not only by the strength of Christian faith and the witness of Christian conduct, but also by the skillful presentation of Christian truth. The Apologists had two contemporary audiences in mind when they prepared their defense of the faith. The first consisted of Jews whose rejection of Christianity was made on serious theological grounds. Confession of faith in Jesus as the Son of God seemed to them to imperil the sole Lordship of the One True God, the God of Israel. Here, starting from the common ground of the authority of the Old Testament Scriptures, the Apologists attempted to show that a faithful reading of Scripture pointed to the Messiahship of Jesus and justified his claim that he was one with the Father. The second audience — by this time far the greater — was made up of pagans who were ignorant of the Scriptures and unimpressed by arguments based on scriptural evidence. Yet very many of these pagans were searching for a true philosophy and for a rule of life. The Apologists used their knowledge of Greek philosophy to introduce the teachings of Christ as a viable guide to the good life, and the Scriptures as an inspired revelation of the truths that led to wisdom.

In following their chosen path the Apologists, perforce, emphasized the intellectual aspects of the Christian faith. Yet they did not expound a Gospel that was theoretical merely, or divorced from a call to total commitment to Christ. The name bestowed upon the best-known of the Apologists gives the lie to such an impression. Justin was his name, but we know him as Justin *Martyr*. This converted philosopher defended the Gospel, arguing with both Jews and Gentiles, and finally he sealed his work with his life's blood.

The Apologists never imagined themselves to be introducing anything new when they took upon themselves to give a reasoned defense of the faith. Had not Stephen given to the Jews a Christian exposition of the purposes of God in the history of Israel? Had not Paul stood on Mars Hill and proclaimed Christ in terms adapted to the understanding of Athenian Stoics and Epicureans? Not only that, but Christ in his lifetime had disputed with the Pharisees and Sadducees, and with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well.

Thus both the motive and the method followed by the Apologists were based on precedents to be found in the New Testament. What was new was the notion that defense of the faith could be a distinct vocation for Christians to take up who were peculiarly suited to undertake this calling. The *apologia* or speech for the defense was now taken out of the narrower context of the court of law and the tribunal and was seen to be an essential part of the ongoing mission of the Christian church. Added to the teachers and preachers who interpreted and expounded the Scriptures for the building up of the Body of Christ, there was now felt to be a need also for specialists in communicating the Gospel to those who found its message so strange and unfamiliar that they were unwilling to listen to it. The Apologist must be someone who, familiar with the outlook of the unbelieving world, was able to build a bridge between that world and the community of believers. So it was that apologetics came to be accepted as essential to the strategy of mission and evangelization.

2. *Apologetics down the centuries*

The acceptance of apologetics within the framework of the church's missionary strategy coincided with the spread of the church through the pagan world. In New Testament times the missionary work of the church was still carried out through centers where there were Jewish communities. Even Paul, "The apostle to the Gentiles," made use of these, and he could assume that the churches felt a particular obligation to help the Christians at Jerusalem (I Cor. 16:1). The situation became entirely different, though, after the fall of Jerusalem and the entire separation between church and synagogue. The Christian mission now had to be carried out wholly in an environment shaped by pagan culture, and converts made of those who knew nothing of Scripture or of the God proclaimed in Scripture. No common *religious* foundation for communication existed at all. If Christian apologists were to build a bridge between the pagan culture surrounding them and the community of faith, it had to be out of elements present in pagan culture.

Here we come to an important aspect of apologetics that I have not yet spelled out, namely, that *it seeks a common ground on which to begin its defense* of the faith. I have already mentioned that an *apologia* assumes two conditions. One condition is that the Gospel is under attack. The other condition is that the attack can be met by an adequate defense. But there is a third condition also. This is that the defense can be understood by those to whom it is addressed — hence the need for a common ground. Unless the apologist can start his defense by stating something to which the prosecution can agree, his defense will fall on deaf ears.

This goal of establishing a common ground is both the strength of apologetics and its weakness. It is its strength, because, once the opponent of the faith has begun to listen to a defense of the faith, he may be persuaded to change his mind. It is its weakness, because the apologist may be so anxious to gain a hearing that he waters down the faith in order to make it acceptable. Now, it is the clear teaching of Scripture that the Gospel is never entirely acceptable to the unbeliever. "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (I Cor. 2:14). "But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness" (I Cor. 1:23). The apologist, therefore, is impelled through faithfulness to the Gospel "to be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers" (Tit. 1:9). But he must also be careful not to remove the "offence" of the Gospel through trusting in "wisdom of words, lest the Cross of Christ should be made of none effect" (I Cor. 1:17).

It follows that apologetics can never become the sole means of evangelism for the Christian Church. The proclamation of the Gospel is first and foremost a setting forth of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. It is a preaching of Christ crucified which may seem foolish in the eyes of men but which becomes the means of salvation through the power of God (I Cor. 1:18). It is also an invitation to search the Scriptures, since these make us "wise unto salvation through faith which is in Jesus Christ" (II Tim. 3:15). Worldly wisdom can never be a substitute for the wisdom given us through God's Spirit. And the Spirit is received by the hearing of faith (Gal. 3:2). Arguments, in themselves, do not convert any one or bring about a living faith.

Nevertheless the Christian, who is commanded to keep that which is committed to his trust and to oppose false teachings (I Tim. 6:20) cannot forego argument when the truth of the Gospel is attacked. Although the wisdom of the world is foolishness in God's sight, to despise all wisdom as "worldly" is in direct contradiction to Christ and to Paul. Christ called his followers to be wise as serpents (Matt. 10:16); while Paul warned Christian disciples not to be children in understanding (I Cor. 14:20). Apologetics, one might say, cannot blaze a trail for the Gospel. Instead, it endeavors to keep open those paths that have been cleared and to see that these do not become blocked by the enemies of the Gospel.

Down the centuries, writers of apologetics can be seen engaged in the task of trying to keep open the paths to Christian truth. Sometimes they have tried the way of dialogue, starting from the viewpoint of the non-believer, the apologist seeks to show that the objections raised against the Gospel by the other are really mistaken ones which can easily be answered by a more careful examination of the issues. This was the way

taken, for example, by Justin Martyr in the second century when he wrote his *Dialogue with the Jew Trypho.* And it was the way taken at the turn of the nineteenth century by Schleiermacher in his *Speeches on Religion to Its Cultured Despisers.* Sometimes apologists have sharpened dialogue into a frontal attack upon the unbelieving viewpoint, exposing its errors in order to follow with a demonstration of the rational and convincing nature of the Christian's commitment to faith. This was the way taken, for example, by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Against the Gentiles,* by Calvin in Book I of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* and by Joseph Butler in his *Analogy of Religion.*

When apologists take the way of attacking errors, the "common ground" does not seem to have a place in their arguments. Yet, in fact, it has. For the defense of the faith that they make concentrates upon refuting just those arguments which are in the forefront of the minds of those whom they oppose, and so are live issues for them also. Thus, Thomas Aquinas answered the objections to faith that were current in the thirteenth century; Calvin raised the main points of conflict over doctrine that engaged men of Reformation times; and Butler's arguments all were directed to the Deists of the eighteenth century. One result of the fact that apologists always have in mind this "common ground" is that the most purely *apologetic* parts of their writings have a way of becoming outdated. Live issues turn into dead ones, and other issues take their place. Today, there are few Deists around, so many of Butler's arguments hardly interest us, although the positive claims that he makes for Christian faith are still very worthwhile reading. On the other hand, Calvin's main purpose in writing the *Institutes* was to expound the eternal truths of the Gospel. His attacks upon mistaken beliefs are largely incidental to his main argument. The *Institutes,* therefore, has a "timeless quality" although it is also a work reflecting vividly the times it was written in.

The matter of growing out of date is one that affects the writings of apologists very greatly. Some apologetic works that were extremely popular in their day now seem to us in our day to be of slight value, if any. William Paley's *View of the Evidences of Christianity* seemed thoroughly convincing when it was written at the end of the eighteenth century, and continued to be influential for many years. Who reads it now? Augustine's *City of God* was written in the first place to refute those pagans who argued that the coming of Christianity had brought about the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. Augustine's work is still powerful today, but not because we are particularly interested in the original question but because in it Augustine gave us a vision of God's purposes working continually throughout history, in our own day as well as in Augustine's day.

Some apologetic works that tend to date quickly are those which take up a concern much on people's minds at a particular time, and then try to show that Christianity throws light upon this concern. Henry Drummond's *Natural Law in the Spiritual World,* for example, took its theme because men in the late nineteenth century were much impressed by the scientific view of those days that believed everything

to be controlled by the impersonal laws of nature. Drummond argued that spiritual laws are just as real and that the two sets of laws can be compared. Again, what is most lasting in Drummond's book is his positive faith, not the success or failure of his argument. Today the writings of Teilhard de Chardin have a wide appeal to many both inside and outside the churches, because Teilhard argues that the present findings of science are completely compatible with Christian faith, and indeed support rather than undermine faith. Perhaps in a few years' time the arguments used by Chardin may seem completely out of date and quite unconvincing.

If many books of apologetics quickly lose their appeal, and seem to us now of historical interest merely — or even to be merely historical curiosities — that may not matter too much. In their day they showed that Christians believed that they must defend the faith, however well or badly they actually managed their defense. These apologists did their best to keep the paths open so that their contemporaries would not be prevented from walking on them and finding a way to their salvation. If they sometimes trusted in arguments that depended overmuch on worldly wisdom rather than on the truth that is from above, at least they turned those arguments against the world and its ways and sought to point men to Christ. To be faithful in a little is all that the apologist can claim — and not to let the children of the devil do all the talking and all the persuading.

3. *Informal apologetics in evangelism*

Apologetics supposes there to be a common ground between the Christian and the non-Christian. That common ground is to be found in the culture and thought of the society in which both Christian and non-Christian live. The apologist, for this reason, has to be someone who really knows that common ground well. It follows that apologetics is an area for specialists in thought and culture, for those well-versed in philosophy and ideas and familiar with the thinkers and writers of the day and of other days. Just as a defendant in a law suit will be careful in choosing a lawyer to defend him — requiring a specialist in criminal law, or in company law, and so on, as his case demands — so the defense of the faith requires trained specialists, theologians or informed laymen who will not fail for lack of the proper knowledge required.

So it has been true down the centuries that apologetics has been a field largely given over to experts: particularly to theologians with a professional training in philosophy. There is, indeed, an area in apologetics which requires, more than philosophical knowledge, an ability to communicate. This is the area of defenses of the faith directed to ordinary Christians (or to the uncommitted) who wish to know how to answer some of the common objections made to the credibility of the Gospel message, or who are troubled over the plausibility of modern alternatives to Christianity that are being put forward today, or who simply are perplexed about how to explain their faith to unbelievers. Men such as the late C. S. Lewis or, more recently, Francis A. Schaeffer have met a widespread need in giving such apologetical

material in non-technical words. Their popularity reflects the felt need for a popular and readily available apologetic for the ordinary Christian to use. Yet apologists of this kind have to be themselves specialists, though not narrowly academic ones. They have to explain the writings of philosophers, and sociologists, and psychologists, and artists, and a host of other leaders in shaping the ideas abroad in the culture of our times. They simply try to mediate between the specialists and the non-specialists, giving the results of their studies to those who do not have the time or the training to do this for themselves.

There is, however, a further area of apologetics which is quite removed from the control of the expert. This might be called the area of non-specialized or informal apologetics. It is the type of apologetics which every Christian man or woman may be called upon to enter, without preparation, in the ordinary course of his or her Christian witness. Someone asks, "Why should I believe in Christ, in particular?" "I know some worshippers of Krishna and they are obviously sincere." Or someone says, "Last night I was able to talk to my husband through a medium at a seance. Isn't that a better proof of life after death than resurrection of Christ, which happened so long ago and can't be proved?" Or someone else says, "Christians have hang-ups on sex. They talk about eternal life, but they really are afraid of *life,* and they want to take the joy out of living."

The Christian who is told these things and others like them may simply testify to the faith that is in him. But he knows that he is expected to do more than that, and he will probably try to give an opinion, as well as he is able, saying why he believes the alternatives to the Gospel that have been suggested are not the right answers. In other words, he will embark on some informal apologetics.

At such times, the Christian who replies, "Well, I don't know the answer to that, but I still believe in Christ," is giving his witness. But the point is that he can hardly leave it at that. An objection to the faith has been made that requires a defense, an *apologia.* So he is called upon to be an apologist, whether or not he has any special competence to make an adequate defense in relation to this particular issue. Christians engaged in evangelization come to expect questions along a number of lines, because of issues that are topical and are being widely discussed in the newspapers and magazines and books and films — in the secular world. A few years ago, many questions would have concerned religion and science, and the Christian attitude to war and peace. Today, the questions are more likely to be about what Christians believe in connection with ecology, and abortion, and women's liberation, and world hunger and revolution. The Christian who is asked about these things can, of course, refer the questioner to experts. He can suggest that there is Christian literature on these topics, or he can quote what Christian leaders have said about them. But, since the most convincing witness is always a personal one, he will probably speak to more effect if he can speak for himself, even if he stresses that he is giving his own views and not committing all Christians to sharing his viewpoint.

What this adds up to is that the Christian who is engaged in the task of evangelization can never wholly avoid the area of apologetics.

As well as knowing his faith and being concerned to communicate the Gospel effectively, he must know something about the secular world also. He must have a real involvement in contemporary culture, so as to be able to move onto that common ground between believer and non-believer which is the place where apologetics makes its witness.

This common ground is not the chief place where the task of the evangelist is done. That is the Scriptures, on the ground of which all true witness must be made. But the other ground — the ground on which the secular world is familiar — cannot be shunned just because the Christian knows that it is not the ground where his true home is. For the sake of others — and in a real sense for his own sake also — he cannot be ignorant of the world where men move every day without thought of God or of their salvation, the world of secular culture, secular values, secular ideas. When Christ came among us, he worked in the carpenter's shop and talked to all kinds of people where they were. We cannot retire from the common arena.

In this connection, a word from one of the great evangelists of history, John Wesley, is very pertinent. Wesley said to his preachers, "Read the most useful books, and that regularly and constantly. . . . 'but I read only the Bible.' Then you ought to teach others to read only the Bible, and by parity to reason, to hear, only the Bible; but if so, you need preach no more. Just so said George Bell. And what is the fruit? Why, now he neither reads the Bible nor anything else. This is rank enthusiasm. If you need no book but the Bible, you are got above St. Paul. He wanted others too. 'Bring me the books,' says he, but especially the parchments,' those wrote on parchment. 'But I have no taste for reading.' Contract a taste for it by use, or return to your trade."

Wesley was concentrating in this statement upon reading, and he probably had in mind the reading of books that would be of direct edification of preachers. But the principle that he evoked holds true in a much wider field. Unless we keep entirely to the words of Scripture in evangelization — adding no comments whatsoever to those words — we are entering upon the common ground of culture, not simply preaching the faith but also entering upon some type of apologetics by claiming to *explain* the faith. In these days of many modern translations of the Bible, also, we are perhaps more conscious before that every translated word we use, even when it is a word of Scripture, bears some imprint of the culture of the time — is to some small degree an interpretation. So, if we are to be wise stewards of the Gospel in our generation, we will read books and use the other means available to us that link us with the cultural world in which the work of evangelization has to be carried out.

Paul reminds us that we have the treasure of the Gospel only in earthen vessels (II Cor. 4:7). This is true not only of the earthen vessel of the preacher's own personality, which has to serve as the vehicle by means of which the Gospel is communicated, but also of the earthen vessel of the culturally-conditioned words in which the preacher's message is given. We often forget (or do not recognize sufficiently)

how greatly we are dependent upon the forms of thought and of speech that rise out of our culture — that common ground which Christians share with non-Christians. How readily, for instance, we appeal to people today to take Christ "as their personal Savior." Yet these words would have had no meaning to men and women in New Testament times and for many centuries after. The concept of "the personal" is a very recent one. It is founded, indeed, upon the value which the New Testament place upon the *person* of Jesus Christ and of relating ourselves through faith to him. In these days of TV "personalities" and the like, the concept has been cheapened. Yet it still remains a valuable one by means of which we can convey to our contemporaries that through committing ourselves to the Son of God we may ourselves become sons of God, or *true persons.* But it was through apologetic witness, through entering upon the common ground of secular culture, that the concept became understandable. You can speak of a "personal Savior" and be understood only when you belong to a culture that also speaks about a "person to person" telephone call!

So, let us understand that the task of evangelization must include, inevitably, the willingness to take up the work of apologetics. Apologetics, like all good things, may be misused and misapplied. Whenever it becomes self-sufficient and is parted from its foundation in the Christ revealed in Scripture, then it can be dangerous and even come to be the enemy of the Gospel. The Word of God cannot be established through the explanations — those limited and culturally-conditioned explanations — that we give of it in terms of "worldly wisdom." The apologist may all too easily fall under the spell of his own cleverness in justifying the ways of God to man that we forget that it is God who justifies, and God alone who can declare that is true. But, in the Providence of God, men also can speak a human word to human beings like themselves that may be used by God to touch the mind and the heart of those who otherwise would not give heed to their salvation. Apologetics, in the service of evangelization, has a humble and subordinate part in breaking the Word of life so that men may partake of it. But it has a part, and we should not neglect that part. Some may find that their calling is to be, in a formal way, apologists in the service of the Gospel. All are called, as the time fits and as the occasion offers, to undertake informal apologetics. Part of the field that is the world to be won for Christ is the common ground where the Christian apologist meets the non-Christians.

APOLOGETICS IN EVANGELISM REPORT

Secretary: V.S.C. Tyndale

Preamble

It was agreed that the most urgent task in apologetics facing evangelicals is the contention of a deeply biblical theology of apologetics. This task could not be undertaken by a discussion convening in four and one-half hours, and remains to be done. The group confesses to its shame, however, that the majority of that time was not spent in that area. The discussion, albeit so, was very profitable. By the nature of things, this report cannot be a definitive statement on apologetics, but is, in fact, a survey of the areas covered by the discussion and of some points on which there was a measure of consensus.

1. After a resumé of the paper by Dr. Kenneth Hamilton, which all who read it agreed that it had been most helpful and profitable, we were faced by a number of issues which might be tackled, and it was thought to be preferable to tackle a selective number. Nevertheless, as this report will indicate, discussion was wide-ranging.

2. The group found the biblical mandates for apologetics in the doctrine of creation. Man being made in the image of God was approachable by the Christian on the basis of mental, physical and emotional needs.

Apologetics has its source in man's creation by God as creatures who have been made in order that they might know their Creator and to see the world as under his sovereign rule. The reconciling Word that is Christ the Redeemer — restoring our sinful nature so that we may once more know God and his love — makes possible our speaking words that point men to the reconciliation of the Cross insofar as our minds can comprehend God's purpose for us.

3. Apologetics is not the same as evangelism, yet it should not be separated from the evangelistic task. It can bring men to understand their fallen nature by admitting the poverty and futility of their lives apart from God and the failure of all human hopes to make a truly human community. It can help the believer to understand more fully the promises offered in the Gospel. Yet the direct preaching of the Gospel in its power can alone open men's hearts to the believing reception of the Good News and deliver them from sin and despair. It stands as a separate discipline, not merely as a tool for evangelism, but it does not stand in isolation. It is important that the dichotomy between prophet, apologist and evangelist should be corrected. If apologetics is related to, and based on, an adequate theological basis, this tension will be resolved.

4. The discussion forced us to begin to face some questions in relation to apologetics, such as: What is the effect of the fall on the unbelieving mind? What is the place of revelation in nature and conscience? What do we mean by a point of contact or common ground?

5. The role of apologetics in the witness of the Christian community is to open the mind to the truth that is in Christ. It should not be thought of narrowly as the presentation of Christian "endeavor" to convince the