



Weaving Apologetics into Everyday Ministry

Breakout Presentation by Rev. Caleb Bassett
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Breakout Summary

In recent years, apologetics—the art of explaining and defending the Christian faith—has become a hot topic in churches and schools. Across society, skepticism toward Christianity is growing, and believers are feeling that pressure in classrooms, workplaces, and even among friends and neighbors. At the same time, many people who have little interest in “church shopping” remain open to meaningful conversations about life and purpose. The challenge is clear: Are our members equipped to respond when those conversations arise?

Apologetics is not about winning arguments. It is about pointing people to Christ with confidence, clarity, and compassion. It is not a niche subject reserved for a Bible class or an academic setting but a vital part of discipleship that can and should be woven into multiple areas of congregational ministry: sermons, catechism, youth ministry, Christian education, and everyday relationships. This breakout will explore why apologetics matters now more than ever and how congregations can prepare their members both to stand firm under challenge and to speak with gentleness and respect. Together we’ll consider practical ways to help Christians of every age be “prepared to give an answer.”

ABOUT THE PRESENTER

Rev. Caleb Bassett serves as pastor at Our Redeemer, Madison, Wis. Previously he served in San Diego County, Calif. He was a member of the executive committee of the WELS Hymnal Project and chairman of the project’s technology subcommittee. He has been a guest panelist on *The White Horse Inn*, a program and podcast on theology and culture, and has earned a fellowship with the International Academy of Apologetics, Evangelism, and Human Rights in Strasbourg, France. He currently serves as director of the WELS Institute for Lutheran Apologetics.

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Why Apologetics Matters

Contemporary society is marked by three dominant characteristics that make Christian evangelism a challenging task.

- ① **Global** — We frequently encounter people from all kinds of backgrounds—many of whom come from dramatically different places and experiences than ours.
- ② **Secular** — The classical values of Western society are no longer dominant, especially the dominance of the Christian paradigm in shaping the way people think.
- ③ **Pluralistic** — A diversity of viewpoints is unavoidable. We live in an age where people do not believe even approximately the same thing as those who share their towns and workplaces.

The church has, in general terms, tended to respond in two equally opposite ways—with liberalism or fundamentalism.

- ← **Liberalism** is the chameleon that sits on the culture and changes its color to match. You no longer see Christianity; it is transformed into the secular position, whatever that position may be.

“If you can’t beat them, join them.”

- **Fundamentalism** tends toward the view that there is a sociological requirement to enter the Kingdom of God; therefore Christianity is transformed into a kind of cause in the culture war—which often obscures Christ.

“If you can’t beat them, separate from them.”

- ☰ Lutherans have found themselves in an uncomfortable paradox. They have been taught to avoid the corruption of unbelieving friends. They have also been instructed to evangelize their unbelieving friends. But absent meaningful friendships with unbelievers or a mindset that considers the long view of evangelism it seems that the only viable option is to use attention for evangelism instead of conversation. Thus the goal is who can get the most attention—and there are many ways to get attention.

Under such circumstances it seems a renewed mindset toward the task of evangelism is warranted.

Intellectual Virtues in Play

In contemporary culture it is inevitable that Christians will encounter people whose convictions differ dramatically from our own. How Christians respond to such encounters will matter for evangelism. The proper intellectual equipment is needed.

- ① **Intellectual Courage** — Those who are intellectually courageous earnestly want to know the truth, and so they take risks in the pursuit and promotion of truth. They are willing to reconsider their own beliefs, even if this scares them. But once they have done so, and come to a belief about what is true, they are willing to stick to their guns, even if the majority mocks or threatens them.
- ② **Intellectual Fair-Mindedness** — Those who are fair-minded earnestly want to know the truth and thus are willing to listen in an even-handed way to differing opinions, even if they already have strong views on the subject. In addition, they attempt to view the issue from the perspective of their opponents, believing that they do not always have the most complete or accurate vantage point.
- ③ **Intellectual Humility** — Those who are intellectually humble admit the limits of their knowledge. Such humility produces a teachable spirit and the habit of humble inquiry, both of which are at the heart of the pursuit of truth. Intellectual humility opens a person to understanding the world in a way that the arrogant are incapable of doing. This virtue is elusive, but its effects can be life-changing.

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- ☰ Our ambient culture values emotionally-pitched reactions to viewpoints that differ from our own. But no one looks at two talking heads arguing on TV and thinks that either are searching for the truth. By cultivating intellectual virtues, especially courage, fair-mindedness, and humility, Christians become more interested in truth discovered and shared than in trophies won in battle.

A person equipped with intellectual virtues will have courage, confidence, and humility in their interaction with their friends, neighbors, and cultural climate. Over time they will notice the patterns of thought that the gospel of Jesus Christ addresses.

The Matthew 5 Model

Evangelism and apologetics can be seen as the art of noticing ways of thinking or feeling and applying the appropriate argument or image. A model worth considering is patterned after the rhetorical style Jesus used numerous times in the Sermon on the Mount, “You have heard it said, but I say to you.”

1. Cultivate Awareness

Develop the capacity to notice the intellectual and emotional climate. Practice analyzing what you see and hear. Do not neglect the examination of assumptions that develop within the church that need correction and reform. Through this you gain situational awareness.

2. Connect the Dots

With a solid awareness of ambient attitudes it becomes possible to connect what you have observed with relevant theological arguments or biblical narratives. Notice where the biblical story provides a better story than the culture or where solid reasoning undergirds the gospel.

3. Apply Appropriate Arguments and Images

Having listened and thought carefully it becomes possible to share an appropriate apologetic argument with a tough-minded skeptic or an engaging image with the tender-hearted wander. “You have heard it said... But I say to you...”

- ☒ In this approach the cultural awareness is what “you have heard it said” and the apologetic content is what “I say to you.” By working to connect these two things you will increasingly see opportunities for courageous evangelism.

Weaving Apologetics into Everyday Ministry

The idea of “weaving” works well—apologetics becomes a thread that works its way into a variety of ministry opportunities.

- ① **Preaching** — For pastors this will be a premier opportunity. Look for natural opportunities in texts, esp. figures like Thomas, the Magi, Mary. Acknowledge the difficulties in texts and point to answers. Note times when secular caricatures are dispelled. Model intellectual virtues frequently.
- ② **Education** — For churches with elementary schools, consider a unit on a standard apologetic approach, esp. evidential apologetics. This is best done in grades 6–8. In catechism class, allow an open question time in every class. Model curiosity and humility and courage.
- ③ **Groups** — For churches with small group ministries, consider facilitating study and discussion groups on key apologetic resources, esp. books that focus on the practical.

It is also possible to weave intellectual virtues into the way a church treats its communication and general culture.

- Reiterate that apologetics is a species of evangelism—it is not a branch of systematic theology. The goal is to get people to the cross of Christ. You don’t have to refute every potential error.
 - Renegotiate the emphasis on creation apologetics—consider focusing on resurrection apologetics instead. The death and resurrection of Jesus is central to salvation. Bring people there first.
 - Reflect on Christianity as a way of knowing—more than just something that is known. Yes there is content to the Christian message, but there is also practice, mystery, and growth involved.
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- ☰ Pastors, teachers, group facilitators, and church leaders can work to weave apologetic material as well as emotional and intellectual equipping into the regular patterns of ministry in the typical church and school. While some specific classes or workshops are often beneficial, the opportunity to develop an emotional and intellectual culture through core ministry efforts should not be overlooked.

Example from a Membership Class

Below are three elements that I include at the start of our path to church membership. I highlight each of these elements to lay an intellectual and apologetic foundation to the candidate's future path of Christian formation.

CHRISTIANITY AS KNOWING

Exercise: Imagine you want to know about driving a fast sports car. So you search online for as much detail as you can. You find all sorts of detailed diagrams about how the the car works. You memorize as many facts as you can about the design of the car. You watch videos of other people driving the car. Based on the experience described above, would you agree that you “know about driving a fast sports car?” Why or why not?

This exercise helps people take steps away from the idea that to be a Christian is to know all sorts of facts or information about God—to be a God expert of some kind. It opens learners to the reality that they will have to actually “get in the car” in order to know Christianity.

GOD AS PERSON

Exercise: Imagine a young man has fallen in love with a young woman. He wants to introduce his girlfriend to his parents. He is nervous about how this will go. He asks for your advice. Make a plan for a good introduction that helps these people get to know each other. Be ready to share some features of your plan with the rest of the class.

Discussion: Think of a person you know well; do you know everything there is to know about them? Does your answer affect what you think of them?

The exercise usually reveals that learners make plans for the parents to actually meet the girlfriend. I usually ask why they didn't propose sharing the girlfriends medical record or college transcripts, for example. Learners intuitively sense that there is more to a person than data. This leads to a meaningful insight: you can love a person even if you don't know everything there is to know about them. Thus it is possible to love God even if you have open questions.

GOSPEL AS NEWS

Exercise: Imagine you are lost in the wilderness and have run out of water. As you search for something to drink you discover two signs. The first says: Water (H₂O) is a molecule made of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom. The second says: Water is available in the stream 500 meters to the west.

This exercise helps people realize that there are certain claims that you can't evaluate before you take action. You have to take action first—at the point of hearing. This is the closest I come to an altar call. I say, "I have told you good news that is of great joy—that God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ. This is news that matters. You will need to check this out to ascertain if it is true. I can help with that."

Resources

To get an excellent overview of evidential apologetics and see why apologetics matters, listen to *Sensible Christianity* by John Warwick Montgomery, available for purchase from 1517.

<https://shop.1517.org/products/9781962654302-sensible-christianity>

To learn about the intellectual virtues and how they relate to Christian conviction that can withstand the challenges of our times, read *Virtuous Minds: Intellectual Character Development* by Philip E. Dow, available for purchase at various booksellers.

https://www.google.com/books/edition/Virtuous_Minds/aLAmDAAAQBAJ

For a great resource with practical approaches on how to apply apologetics to your everyday conversations, read *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions* by Gregory Koukl.

<https://www.google.com/books/edition/Tactics/zNFAMejLgmYC>

For small group study or book reading and discussion groups consider the *Prepared to Answer* series by Mark Faustian, available from Northwestern Publishing House, or *Religion on Trial* by Craig Parton.

https://www.google.com/books/edition/Religion_on_Trial/ytPYDwAAQBAJ