



The Need for Apologetic Communities

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The fact that almost all aspects of human activity today are dominated by naturalistic assumptions means that for many the Christian worldview lacks any sort of intellectual credibility. So these intellectual difficulties need to be addressed honestly and effectively - as Paul did. The intellectual challenge has to be faced head on. However, alongside the erosion of belief in a supernatural universe has come the *erosion of experience* as a result of modernity. People are more cynical, less inclined to listen to authority, more sceptical about big answers. Hence the church has to give tangible expression to human community since this lies at the heart of the Christian view of reality.

The apologetic task within a post-modern world requires more than simply knowledge. Non-believers need to see the Christian view of reality fleshed out within human relationships, even though imperfectly. They need to be reassured that Christianity is not just another 'virtual reality' which can be manipulated at will. How is this best done in the context of the local church, for example? And are there contemporary parallels for the apostle Paul's specifically apologetic approach described in Acts when he held 'daily discussions in the hall of Tyrannus' ?

Introduction

An important question is this : Why should we be thinking in terms of apologetic communities separate from the local churches ? Are the local churches not the proper context for all the tasks which Christ has set his people ?

In a certain sense this is true – the local church is indeed the only type of community commissioned directly by Christ and alone guaranteed a continuing existence up to the end of the age.

But other organisations have a part to play in the Lord's work. They can be extremely valuable in fact. However, they need to be conscious of their 'occupational hazards' and always insist, wherever possible, that members belong also to a local church. This helps to keep them from becoming inward looking or inbred.

In the area of apologetics, however, the failure of the western church, generally speaking, has been almost total. When Harry Blamires wrote his classic on *The Christian Mind* in the mid 1950's he began the book saying - 'There is no longer a Christian Mind'. Then he went on ...'unfortunately the Christian mind has succumbed to the secular drift with a degree of weakness and nervelessness unmatched in human history...'

Sadly the intervening years, while they have brought improvement in many areas, have not seen significant difference in the area of the development of a Christian mind, at least not within the practice of local churches. Scholarly books have been written and many have benefited from them. The churches have focussed, quite rightly, on the exposition of Scripture. Evangelism has remained a priority. But the ministry of local churches has tended to neglect intellectual concerns, especially in Europe.

This being the case it is almost unavoidable that a start has to be made to train future apologists elsewhere than in the local churches. This is far from ideal and one of the aims of a proper initiative in this area should be the reinvigorating of the churches so that they also become 'apologetic communities'.

The task is also daunting in terms of its dimensions and difficulties.

But why communities?

§ The task of turning the churches around in relation to their apologetic responsibility is too great for any one or two individuals. Therefore as a first step *models* have to be created which churches can see and examine and even

participate in. They then become catalysts for change within the larger community of the church.

§ In relation to the post-Christian societies within which we all live the task is too daunting without considerable *support*. So communities for apologetics provide an understanding and sympathetic support for those trying to learn a better way. They can be mutually encouraged, comforted, instructed and corrected.

§ Most importantly of all, society in the West has experienced something like '*community melt-down*'. One contemporary writer, not a Christian, puts it like this:

'One could argue that corporate consumer culture is tantamount to a kind of nuclear attack on the mind...' (Berman: *The Twilight of American Culture* 2000)

This being the case, particularly as it occurs in the context of a repudiation of traditional moral values, of like-minded apologists is then able to make an appeal to those who come to look and listen which far exceeds the cogency of their arguments. Not that arguments and discussion are without value, but they need more than simply to be stated, especially when there is an excess of statement without substance anyway.

In this context it is striking to find numbers of writers drawing parallels between the situation in the West today and the disintegration of the Roman Empire in the 5th century. And not a few, including the famous British historian John Roberts, see the small monastic communities surrounding Benedict in the 6th century as a possible model for the present.

For these reasons at least the development of apologetic communities is both understandable and strategically necessary. Their object is 3-fold :

§ To raise a **new generation** within the church at large which is confident about the objective truth of God's Word – and for that reason devoted to the service of their Master.

§ To **provide teaching** – the communication of ideas – the learning of propositions – the honing or arguments – the experience of discussion – the understanding of alternative worldviews and why they aren't true.

§ To teach within the context of the testing of faith in which the **experience of service** and changed attitudes is considered as important as anything

learned intellectually about apologetics, or anything else for that matter.

The major block to this sort of approach is not merely the absence of examples and practice but *the spirit of 'technique'* which dominates western thinking in almost all areas of life.