

Apologetics Training in the Local Church Prophetic, Priestly, and Kingly Preparation

Tim Keller says, “[T]he world is polarizing over religion. It is getting more religious and less religious at the same time.”¹ On the one hand, strong belief in God is present. Educational and technological advances have not delivered the death-blow to belief; and neither has globalization, a troubled economy, radical Islam, post-modern thought, or the influence of the media. In many places, believers are demonstrating amazing faith in spite of these “obstacles.”

At the same time, a vocal disbelief is on the rise as well. The presence of the “new atheists” displays a heightened level of opposition to belief in God. Some in this camp disdain not only belief in God, but also a *respect* for belief in God.

But our day is not entirely new. The church has always been called to “contend for the faith” in an ever-changing culture. My question is, “How can church leaders train their people to share the Gospel in today’s culture?” As a pastor, I long to see God’s people live out 1 Peter 3:15, “to make a defense to anyone who asks” in coffee shops, on Facebook, through blogs, in classrooms, on mission trips, on sports teams, at neighborhood barbeques, or in thousands of other settings. I believe if we consider the pastor as *prophet* (word ministry), *priest* (heart ministry), and *king* (administrative ministry) we can identify a number of helpful practices.

PASTOR AS PROPHET PREPARE GOD’S PEOPLE FROM THE PULPIT

The pastor is the chief theologian and apologist in the local church. The average person in the pew is looking to the pastor for answers. Therefore, the pastor must be a

¹ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008), x.

diligent student. His study and subsequent teaching should produce a culture of study and careful reflection in the church. Serious Christian thought is necessary for leading an evangelistic church.

When a culture of shallow thinking is present in the life of the church, the results are embarrassing and destructive. Think about many college students. Some are raised in a church but are never challenged to think about the major questions of life, questions of skeptics, or their own questions about the Bible and Christianity. Consequently, when they leave for college they are often shocked to hear their friends or professors pull out the bricks of their Christian wall. Some will then leave the faith. Others doubt their faith. Still others will hide their faith, or live in intimidation. Why? Is it because their friends and professor's arguments are so persuasive? Or is it simply because they were not prepared?

These students make me think of the Rocky movies. Do you remember how the little Italian is steamrolling the competition in Rocky I and II until he met real challenger, Clubber Lang ("Mr. T") in Rocky III? Rocky had been on a roll, conquering everyone, including "Thunderlips." But Clubber Lang was the real test. Only one guy really believed in Rocky—his manager and coach, Apollo Creed. Apollo devoted himself to preparing and training Rocky in order that he might win the fight of his life. Going off to college is like Rocky III. Moving from the country to an urban area outside of the Bible belt is like Rocky III. Moving to another country where Christianity is not accepted is like Rocky III. There will be times in which believers will face their own Clubber Lang in a variety of contexts. They must be prepared to contend for the faith like a champ.

The pulpit is one of the primary means of training people to give a defense for the faith. Would you consider eight challenges for weekly proclamation, which will address skeptics and also equip believers at the same time?

1. *Preach the Scriptures.*

There is no substitute for providing the people with the Word of God on a weekly basis. If a preacher spends Sundays leading his body through the truths of books like Ephesians, Romans and Galatians, and John then his congregation will begin to understand sound doctrine. Believers will not defend what they do not own. Pastors must teach God's people historical, biblical truths indefatigably.

2. *Preach the Scriptures Christocentrically.*

Pastors should seek to exalt Christ in their biblical preaching by showing the ongoing flow of redemptive history that culminates in Christ. In other words, make sure Jesus—his person and work—is at the heart of every sermon.

Christ-centered exposition will keep your preaching true to the text and it will address a major issue in apologetics: Who is Jesus Christ? Numerous heresies and false teachings are rooted in a misguided understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ. If your people have a proper view of Christ, they will be greatly equipped for the work of defending the faith.

3. *Preach the Scriptures with an apologetic flavor.*

As we prepare to preach the Word, we should do so with an expectation that skeptics will be present. If they are not present at first, do not panic. They will be. They will come out of curiosity or a sincere spiritual hunger, or their Christian friends will begin

bringing them. Think about your weekly conversations with unbelievers as you prepare your exposition and look for ways to add an apologetic flavor. Tim Keller says, “Only if you are talking constantly to non-Christians will your preaching address them, and only if you address them will people bring them, and only if they are brought will you meet them. And so on!”²

As you apply the text, work at deconstructing the contemporary objections regarding the particular point you are making and then reconstruct a biblical worldview with sound arguments.

Illustrations can have an apologetic taste also. Consider using stories from your own life about doubts, beliefs, or conversations with unbelievers. Tell of conversations that you have had with people from different backgrounds. Consider inserting quotes and passages from the early church, influential apologists, and other brilliant thinkers.

The introduction is also one of the best places to insert an apologetic element to sermon. I recently listened to a sermon from Mark Dever who addressed the skeptic in his exposition of Mark 4, by explaining the historical reliability of that particular text. After a brief explanation of why this passage struck him (a historian) as reliable, he went on to expound the text.

Let the unbelievers know that you are aware of their presence and their questions. When you do this, you are not only welcoming and inviting non-believers to engage intellectually as they hear the Bible taught, but you are also providing an example to your church body in how to address the claims made by skeptics and non-believers with grace.

4. *Preach the Scriptures with an awareness of today's false Gospels.*

² Tim Keller, *Church Planter Manual* (New York: Redeemer City to City, 2002), 125.

Pastors face theological challenges not only from the outside unbelieving world, but also from inside the local church. Paul's letter to the Galatians is a picture of this reality. A Gospel of "justification + something else" crept into the Galatian church and Paul addressed it powerfully. His head was not in the sand. He was aware of the twisted, distorted, reversed Gospel that people were accepting.

In our day, false Gospels include what Christian Smith calls "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."³ Another major distortion is the Prosperity Gospel.⁴

By drawing attention to these false Gospels, you will teach not only from the positive, but also from the negative. People need to hear the positive truth: what the Gospel is. But they also need to hear the negative truth: what the Gospel is *not*. This means that you will have to, at times, call out these false Gospels with truth and grace – not to make enemies, but to illuminate the biblical truth.

5. Preach the Scriptures to your old self.

As we prepare to preach, we should also remember what it was like to not to believe. This means, we should avoid the temptation to prepare the sermon for other pastors and leaders. Prepare sermons for your old self; that is, the person you were before you were a Christian. I do not mean that you should avoid depth. I mean that you should be clear. Anticipate objections. Assume biblical cluelessness. Be winsome, interesting, and understandable.

³ This phrase and description is noted and described well in Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

⁴ I recommend David W. Jones and Russell S. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth, & Happiness* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011) on this subject.

We should not aim to make unbelievers comfortable in their unbelief, but we should aim to make the worship service intelligible to them. Avoid Christian sub-culture jargon. Our sermons will become more and more “ghetto-ized” if we do not remember to relate to “outsiders.” Ask questions like, “What premises would I have denied?” “What words would I have not understood?” “What assumptions would I have not made?” (Of course, if you have been a believer for a very long time, or became a believer at a young age, this will require preparing even harder for connecting to unbelievers).

When you need to use theological terms (and you should), explain the terms. Have a few “asides” during the sermon for the skeptic. Speak to the questions of their hearts as you expound the text. Say things like, “For those of you who are here and don’t believe, or you aren’t sure what to believe...” Such apologetic sensitivity is rare today, but it is present in some of the preaching of today’s finest expository evangelists.

6. *Preach the Scriptures with special apologetic emphases on various occasions.*

Certain times of the year provide good times to address fundamental apologetic concerns. This too will address the skeptics and prepare believers to address skeptics. On Christmas, why not look to the historicity of the birth of Christ and incorporate apologetic arguments for the birth of Christ? On Easter give an apologetic appeal for the resurrection. Other appropriate times may be when there is a cultural movement that has created a buzz, such as the recent *Da Vinci Code* book/film that led to a variety of questions.

7. *Preach the Scriptures with ethos, pathos, and logos.*

These three Aristotelian categories are still wonderfully helpful and extremely important for the task of preparation and defending. *Ethos* has to do with the credibility

and life of the speaker. *Pathos* has to do with the passion of the speaker. We must believe what we are saying and people need to believe that we believe in what we are saying. *Logos* has to do with the content of the message and the arrangement of the material. Our content should be well researched, biblical, and Christ-centered, and then presented clearly and compellingly.

Paul demonstrated three qualities. He mentioned all three dimensions in this particular text:

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in *word* [logos], but also in *power* and in the Holy Spirit and with *full conviction* [pathos]. You know *what kind of men we proved to be among you* for your sake [ethos].

1 Thessalonians 1:4-5, emphasis added

Of course, Jesus, the greatest preacher-teacher of all time is the best example of these qualities. No one possessed greater ethos than Jesus. His life was without sin. His life was humble, gracious, loving, bold, and all together glorious. No one has ever had the passion of Jesus either. No one believed in the subject of a sermon more than Jesus because no one has ever known what is in man like Jesus, nor known the consequences for belief or rejection more than Jesus. And with regards to *logos*, He spoke as “as one who had authority, and not as the scribes” (Mark 1:22). Of course, we cannot speak direct revelation like Jesus, or possess all of these characteristics as perfectly as Jesus, but we must remember his example, his compassion and boldness, his humility and authority, his truth and clarity.

**PASTOR AS KING
PREPARE GOD'S PEOPLE WITH GOOD RESOURCES**

In addition to the prophetic task of preaching and teaching, there is also the kingly (administrative) task of leading people to good practical resources.

Write a "Pastor's Blog." Pass along information to your people as you come across it during the week. Consider posting videos from great apologists, and other helpful items for defending the faith.

Create a "Book Corner." Put some books out in the foyer, lobby, or another area that you recommend. You do not need to have a massive bookstore with tons of options. Simply order a select number of good books, and sell them at cost. The smallest of churches can do this. Create a reading culture in your church.

Recommend books. Take books to the pulpit and hold up the book as you use a quote for an illustration from your sermon. Also, do not hesitate to recommend books in your blog, in the church bulletin, or in a church newsletter.

Provide a setting for detailed learning, discussing, and teaching. Start mentoring young pastors, teachers, and leaders. Also, do not hesitate to offer seminary level teaching for your people to grow in church history, systematic theology, survey of the Old and New Testaments, and other subjects. Consider making other nights that you are already using for teaching a time for in-depth theology and apologetics.

Host an Apologetics Conference. Avoid always bringing in the latest popular preacher and teacher to every event. Invite apologists who have expertise in a particular area and invite them to equip the body in regards to a particular subject. Or, if you can't host a conference or an event, take some people to a conference.

Offer an “Ask Anything” time for the congregation. You might have church members submit questions to you, and then do a series on those questions. You might also consider asking people on the street, what troubles them about a belief in Christianity, and do a series on those questions. You might have a day with an expert in which he preaches a sermon in the morning and then gives a talk in the evening followed by a Q & A time.

Use your church website as a means of equipping. Recommend books and articles on the website. Allow the people to submit questions that the pastor(s) might answer in three or four minute videos. Endless possibilities exist for the web.

Start a “Pastor’s Reading Club.” Select a book of interest, let the people know what it is, and then plan some times to discuss it. You will be surprised at what will happen in these experiences. Faith will be strengthened, relationships built, and questions answered.

Write your own books. You know the needs of your flock better than anyone else. Just as Paul wrote letters to the churches, you may write pamphlets or books to your church that speak to current events and issues in worldview and theology (but we can’t add yours to the canon!). You do not have to have a publisher for everything. Publish the book yourself or upload it to your church website. Why? When you put stuff in print, you are sending a message to your church that something is really important. We talk about a lot of things as pastors, but when you take time to write, it sends a signal that this particular subject is really vital. Besides this, you will reach a different audience with print than you do with preaching, and you will be able to use your written content in a variety of ways.

**PASTOR AS PRIEST
PREPARE GOD’S PEOPLE BY SHEPHERDING HEARTS**

When Peter describes the process of “being prepared to give a defense for the hope that is within us,” he first says, “but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy” (1 Pet. 3:15). Here we see the priestly work of pastoring: a concern for the hearts of God’s people.

Why is it that many in the church do not engage the culture with the Gospel? Surely, part of it is a lack of knowledge and resources, but another reason is more basic. People will not engage the culture the way they should until their hearts have surrendered to the holy Lordship of Jesus Christ. We live out of the overflow of the heart.

If you are a pastor, can I ask you how well are you shepherding the hearts of your congregation? The priestly pastor is sensitive to the flock. He sympathizes with them and is aware of their growth or lack of growth. He is concerned with the member’s spiritual disciplines, their prayer life, and their relational health. As a pastor, we must stay in tune with the spiritual vitality of our people, and see to it that we are monitoring the presence of personal holiness, first in our lives, and then in the lives of our people.

Priestly ministry also involves caring for the hearts of our people *by leading them to love our neighbors and one another*. Work at creating a church known for selfless love for one another and the world. Francis Schaeffer referred to Christ-like, observable love as the “final apologetic,” which Christians rarely use.⁵

One of the greatest apologetics is mercy ministry—caring for “the least of these.” Ministry to the orphan, the poor, the hungry, the sick, the oppressed, and the dying are not separate from apologetics. For many skeptics, our deeds of mercy are more persuasive than

⁵ Quoted in Timothy George and John Woodbridge, *The Mark of Jesus: Loving in a Way the World Can See* (Chicago: Moody, 2005), 19.

our plausible arguments. The church's deeds of mercy should be put on display before the unbelieving world for the glory of God and their eternal good (1 Peter. 2:12). To lead a church that influences the unbelieving world, we must remember the words of Jesus, "By this is all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). They will "know" not by sound arguments (though we should make them) and not by our winsome presentations (though we should give them) but by our Christ-like love. Our deeds need to illustrate our words, and our words need to explain our deeds.

Conclusion

We need to think carefully about how we are doing apologetic ministry in this generation. As a "prophet," I need to give careful thought to my preaching. Am I equipping the saints in the Christ-centered Scriptures, and addressing the skeptic's questions? As a "king" I need to think creatively and strategically about how I'm providing resources. Am I using every possible means to get helpful material to the flock? As a "priest," I need to consider the hearts and lives of the people of God. Am I shepherding their spiritual lives, and leading them to love the world through deeds of mercy?