

GIVING REASON FOR THE HOPE

For: Prof Dr. Markus Piennisch

Introduction to Apologetics
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Canada	5
Sri Lanka.....	11
Evaluation	15
The Apologetic Task	16
Conclusion	18
Bibliography	20

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“Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” (1 Pet 3:15 RSV)

Introduction

There is a saying attributed to Ancient China which goes: "May you live in interesting times." It is as much a curse as anything, because it implies danger and turbulence, often times of crisis. But there are two sides to crisis, as the Chinese character for it indicates. It is made up of two characters – danger and opportunity. Sometimes the most difficult times are the most rewarding. They challenge us, test us, and occasionally even bring out the best in us. So the saying is as much a blessing as a curse. In the Church today, with the issues of Gay marriage and Gay clergy splitting the church, dissension over the ordination of women, lawsuits for sexual and emotional abuse, violent clashes between Christians and Hindus, Christians and Muslims, Christians and Buddhists and anti-conversion legislation intended to restrict or prevent Christian evangelism in parts of Asia, we are indeed living in interesting times.

European and North American churches are in the midst of an encounter with pluralism in the context of a postmodern age. Immigration has brought not only people of different ethnicity into the cultural mix, but also people of different faith backgrounds. As a result Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist temples, Muslim mosques and non-traditional Christian Churches – Greek and Russian Orthodox, Christian Reform and Mar Thoma, to name a few - co-exist in many urban centers along with the traditional Roman Catholic and 'mainline' Protestant Churches. In fact, the traditional churches have been in decline. Moreover, in North America at least, as the society became more multicultural and tolerant of difference, a host of "New Age" spiritualities have emerged. The mix has become so pluralistic that in a recent U.S. census, some 200 denominations and faith groups were identified.¹

¹ Robert Wuthnow, Christianity in the 21st Century, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 24

In the Two-Thirds World, however, the church is struggling with the implications of nascent nationalism, and a resurgence of traditional faiths – Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam – striving to assert their dominance within their societies. Two hundred years of mission work have borne comparatively little fruit in the Hindu and Islamic worlds². It hasn't fared much better among Buddhists. Indeed, in India and Sri Lanka, anti-conversion legislation has either been passed, or is proposed, to restrict the Christian church. Yet, it is in the Two Thirds World, principally among the more primitive cultures, that the Christian Church is growing by leaps and bounds – In 1978 one third of Africans were Christian. By the year 2000 it was expected to be 50%. In Latin America, the rate of population growth is 3%, but is 10% among evangelical Christians, There are over 70 million Christians in Asia. There were over 50,000 baptisms in Indonesia during one five-year period. Furthermore, more than 200 missionary societies have been founded in the Third World, with tens of thousands of indigenous missionaries sent out³ - a trend that has continued to grow through the work of organizations like Gospel for Asia, Christian Aid Mission and Bible Centred Ministries International.

The Church is experiencing considerable turbulence in both the West and the East. In places it is under attack and in crisis. In previous times of difficulty, the Church has turned to apologetics as a defense of the faith. The purpose of this paper is to examine the possibility and necessity of the apologetic task as a ministry within the church and her mission today, based on the theme of 1 Peter 3:15. Since the writer is an Anglican who works for part of the year in Canada, and part in Sri Lanka, the latter being in a mission field, each context is of interest and would appear to present a different opportunity for apologetics to serve the church. Let us consider each in turn.

² Vinay Samuel & Chris Sugden, Dialogue with other Religions – an Evangelical View in Vinay Samuel & Chris Sugden eds., Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 134

³ David Watson, I Believe in the Church, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1978), 21

Canada

Michael Ingham noted, In “Rites for a New Age”, that for 400 years Anglicans have been a people of the Prayer Book. It not only defined us as the Latin Mass defined Roman Catholics, it was a badge of our identity, and a symbol of the unity of our world-wide communion.⁴

All of that changed in Canada in 1980 when General Synod authorized publication of a book of contemporary, alternative rites. This process resulted in liturgical change every bit as far-reaching and dramatic as that which occurred at the other two watershed moments in church history:

- a. After the conversion of Constantine, in the 4th century CE, when the liturgy grew from a style appropriate for small informal gatherings to that of grand public ceremonial in large and splendid buildings as the official religion of the Roman Empire
- b. In the 16th century when new structures and liturgies along denominational lines emerged from the upheaval of the Reformation.⁵

What makes this change a “watershed moment”, according to Ingham, is that in the 20th century the secularization of Western culture pushed Christianity aside from the central position it had occupied since Constantine, and created a new situation of marginalism for the church.⁶

There were a number of societal factors motivating such significant change in Canada. The 1985 ruling by the Supreme Court of Canada striking down the Lord’s Day Act indicates the extent of the shift that had occurred in the religious makeup of the country, and the resulting demise of Christian privilege that was the eventual end-product of the new constitutional guarantees of religious freedom to men and women of all faiths.⁷ By the 1980’s it was clear to the Anglican hierarchy that the decline of Christendom meant finding a new role for the Church and its leaders. In Ingham’s words, “We are called to be a spiritual community in a society which promotes individualism, to affirm the dignity and

⁴ Michael Ingham, *Rites for a New Age: Understanding the Book of Alternative Services*, (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1986), 13

⁵ *ibid*, 27

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *Ibid*, 35

worth of human beings in an economy which reduces persons to units of production, to develop supportive and nurturing relationships in the midst of competitive and consumer values.”⁸

In Canada, twentieth century Christians felt they were confronted by a situation similar to the pre-Constantinian one of the early Church. Working from a position of comparative weakness, church leaders believed they had to approach centers of power from the outside. With increasing secularization, the state has taken over most of social services that constituted the church’s domestic mission. Indeed, secularization of the culture and the decline in religious commitment, placed the church in a situation of having to contemplate domestic evangelism on a large scale – from a minority position – for the first time.⁹ Moreover, this “Post-Christendom” church has started to view its mission from the perspective of those on the periphery of society. The church has come to understand that servanthood means more than caring for the less fortunate; rather, it’s also about seeking justice for victims and peace among the powerful. Furthermore, prophesy has come to mean more than denouncing sin in individuals but also exposing corporate, social, and systemic injustice.¹⁰

It was into this world that the Book of Alternative Services (BAS) was “born” - a set of rites for a more fragmented and less homogeneous society, a society in which Christians are a minority in an indifferent and somewhat hostile environment.. Its contemporary liturgies were designed to equip a post-Christendom church to strengthen its own sense of being a community, and to help bring new members into the church in ways that help them experience a new identity in Christ.¹¹ By emphasizing the resurrection of Christ and the gifting of the church by the Spirit, the BAS has undertaken a deliberate shift of spiritual emphasis to equip Christians for a time in which they are once again a minority. As Ingham notes, the resurrection, not the crucifixion, must be the central

⁸ Ingham, 76

⁹ *ibid*, 165

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ *ibid*, 57

paradigm for a marginalized church in an alienated society.¹² Moreover, Holy Week rites in the BAS are theologically grounded in the Gospel of John - the celebration of Easter- rather than the Matthean Passion¹³ In a significant departure, the season of Trinity has disappeared from the liturgical calendar. Instead, Pentecost now extends until Advent, a sign of the recovery of a focus on the spirit, appropriate for the new apostolic age of a post-Christendom church.¹⁴

It is significant, however, that liturgical reform did not arrest the decline. Through the period from 1980 to 2001, the Anglican Church in Canada continued to lose membership. The sociologist Reginald Bibby, even raised serious concerns about the medium-to-long term viability of the Church as an organization – a position that, this writer is happy to note, he has reversed in his most recent, post 9/11, survey, reported in his book “Restless Gods”. Nevertheless, while the decline has been halted, there is not yet any sign of a return to the attendance rates of the pre-BAS church.

The Church, during those years of decline, hunkered into a defensive posture inside its buildings, concentrating on making those who remained feel better about themselves; but not engaging the larger culture in any meaningful way. Of course, this posture was not limited to Anglicans. The United Church of Canada, The Presbyterians and the Roman Catholic Church – the mainline denominations – were also losing members and influence. Gay rights became an issue in the United Church a decade before the Anglican fabric was rent by the same-sex blessing issue in the Diocese of New Westminster. In the United Church the issue was the ordination of Gay clergy. Whole congregations split and many people left the Church. All four denominations currently find themselves involved in lawsuits over issues of sexual, physical and emotional abuse that occurred in residential schools they ran for aboriginal Canadians on behalf of the Federal Government. Originally, it was the government alone who was being sued. The Government “third-partied” the churches into the lawsuit, and did so in such a way that the churches’ liabilities – and assets – would be

¹² *ibid*, 121

¹³ *ibid*, 123 -124

¹⁴ *ibid*, 125

assessed first. The issue forced the closure of one Canadian Anglican Diocese, and threatened the National Church with bankruptcy. The Canadian public just stood by and watched with mild interest.

Churches have been closed or sold to developers by all four denominations, who – because of declining membership and financial capacity – were forced to rationalize their operations. Perhaps the most dramatic evidence of decline was among the Roman Catholics. In Quebec City, in the Roman Catholic heartland of French Canada, cathedral-like catholic churches by the score have been closed and put up for sale. The Quebec society had, over a forty-year period, thrown off the shackles of obedience to the church and become secularized. Without immigration, the hollowing-out of the Catholic church would also have been much more obvious in places like Toronto.

While the Churches were embroiled in their own problems, they missed, for the most part, the changes that were occurring in the society around them that accelerated the very difficulties they were experiencing.

The pluralists were saying the same thing the liberal Hindu has been saying all along – all religions are of equal value and lead to the same God.¹⁵ This point of view has resulted in the so-called “Copernican Revolution”, which involves a shift of view from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre, to the thought that God is, and all religions, including our own, serve and revolve around him. In essence, it implies that we must abandon our commitment to Jesus Christ as God’s final revelation, and accept all religious claims on equal terms.¹⁶

In Toronto, where the writer lives, the application of this principal has resulted in the marginalisation of the Christian faith within the society at large, and the school system in particular. Teachers in the public school board are told it is not appropriate to talk about Christmas or Easter. What used to be Christmas and Easter holidays are now Winter Break and April Break. Christmas Carols are often forbidden in the schools. Assemblies are now entertained with Holiday

¹⁵ Ken Gnanakan, The Pluralistic Predicament, (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1992), 3

¹⁶ *ibid*, 11

Songs - Jingle Bells and Frosty the Snowman. A kindergarten teacher was called on the carpet by the principal for allowing her children to colour eggs at Easter, and questioned as to the validity of that activity in a multi-ethnic public school, which – incidentally – had affirmed Eid, Ramadan, Divali, and Kwanza. In the secular world, businesses find it is inappropriate to send Christmas cards to their clients and friends. Displays of Christian symbols – such as the Creche – are not permitted on public property, like the Toronto City Hall or the grounds of the Provincial Legislature; where, incidentally, displays of religious symbols from other faiths are welcome at their holiday season. The Anglican Cathedral of St. James, which had installed a full peal of change-ringing bells, was charged with noise pollution. Essentially, Christ has been removed from the public realm in the name of political correctness.

The other major factor contributing to the decline of the church in the west has been “postmodernity”. As the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman says: “The main feature ascribed to “postmodernity” is the permanent and irreducible *pluralism* of cultures, communal traditions, ideologies, “forms of life” or “language games”. . . . or awareness and recognition of such pluralism.”¹⁷ Things which are plural in the postmodern world cannot be classified as “right” or “wrong” solutions to common problems. In fact, truth is considered to be socially constructed, contingent, inseparable from the peculiar needs and preferences of certain people in a certain time and place. This notion leaves no value, custom, belief or eternal verity untouched.”¹⁸ Furthermore, it leads to what Douglas Groothuis calls “Truth Decay” - a cultural condition in which the very idea of absolute, objective and universal truth is considered implausible, held in open contempt or not even seriously considered.”¹⁹ Truth decay, he maintains, is occurring everywhere in postmodern culture; dominating most television programs, the cinema, best selling books, popular songs and insinuating itself into churches, seminaries and

¹⁷ Daniel J. Adams, Toward a Theological Understanding of Postmodernism, in *Metanoia*, Summer 1997, (Prague:)

¹⁸ Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 20

¹⁹ *ibid*, 22

Christian colleges.²⁰ Indeed, Phillip Kenneson, a professor at a Christian college has been quoted as saying, "...there is no such thing as objective truth, and it's a good thing too."²¹ Things have even gone so far that in a recent study over half of evangelicals agreed with the statement: "The purpose of life is enjoyment and personal fulfillment."²²

At least four major themes can be discerned in postmodernism. The first is a rejection of classical metaphysical thought. Metaphysical objectivity is replaced by sociological subjectivity, evidenced by a shift from deductive theology to inductive theology that lies at the foundation of liberation theology and the many socio-political theologies now in vogue.²³ The second major theme is a rejection of human autonomy. The person is always part of a larger sociological matrix; which includes history, culture, economics, religion, politics, and philosophical worldview. Together these two themes have led to a movement known as nonfoundationalism, which seeks to disassociate theology from objective foundations such as Scripture, creeds, confessions, and ecclesiastical tradition.²⁴ A third theme is praxis, a serious concern for the practical ethical aspects of human life. Postmodern thinkers have been harsh critics of the "underside" of modernism – the oppression and exploitation of people of non-Western cultures; leading the contextual theologies from the non-Western world, feminist, womanist, African-American, Hispanic, and other theologies from marginalized groups, to place so much emphasis upon praxis.²⁵ The fourth major theme is a strong anti-enlightenment stance, with some postmodernists even calling the West intellectual terrorists. The result of these themes, according to Adams, is a pluralism of theologies with no one perspective assuming a dominant position in the church.²⁶

The logical extension of postmodernism is nihilism, the effects of which have been poignantly described by Dorothy L. Sayers :

²⁰ *ibid*, 21

²¹ Groothuis, 22

²² *ibid*

²³ Adams

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ *ibid*

“ In the world it calls itself Tolerance; but in hell it is called Despair. It is the accomplice of other sins and their worst punishment. It is the sin which believes nothing; cares for nothing; seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for.”²⁷

The postmodernist maintains that none of the religious worldviews is objectively true. Since religious relativism is obviously incompatible with the objective truth of Christianity, religious diversity implies that normative Christian truth claims can be neither made nor defended.²⁸ As William Craig says, “Thus we are led to the paradoxical result that in the name of religious diversity traditional Christianity is delegitimized and marginalized.”²⁹ That would certainly seem to describe what has happened in Toronto and Canada.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is a predominantly Buddhist country – approximately 70 percent of the population are Buddhist (of Sinhala ethnicity), about 15 percent are Hindu (mainly Tamil), Muslims and Christians account for about 7.5 percent each. The Christians include both Sinhala and Tamil converts. Despite the substantial difference in size – there are about ten times as many Buddhists – both the government and a party formed of Buddhist monks, the JHU, have proposed bills to prevent ‘unethical’ conversion; which are aimed directly at the Christian community.

The bills crystallize anti-Christian sentiment that has resulted in violence directed against Christians and their places of worship during the past two to three years. Since Christmas 2003 over one hundred churches have been attacked – mainly Pentacostal and Assemblies of God, but also Roman Catholic and Anglican. Services have been disrupted, congregations have been beaten, pastors and church workers have been assaulted. There is considerable tension.

²⁷ Groothuis, 170

²⁸ William L Craig, Politically Incorrect Salvation, in Timothy R. Phillips & Dennis L. Okholm, eds., Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 76

²⁹ *ibid*

The violence is new. The anti-Christian sentiment previously found a focus in the schools. In the fifties, the denominational schools were accused of converting Buddhist children to Christianity. Subsequently, in the sixties, all denominational schools were taken over by the government. Paradoxically, religion is now being overtly introduced into the schools again – worship, not just academic study. That worship is Buddhist. Buddha images are being erected where Christian symbols had previously been forbidden. Children of other faiths who attend “public” schools are expected to participate in Temple activities, including performing “puja”, and Buddhist cultural events.

The Christian community has previously tried to be tolerant and work around these situations. The connotation of the anti-conversion bills, however, are such that they have now been forced to respond – in the courts, in the legislature and by holding marches and demonstrations. If one or both of the bills are passed, Christian organizations would continue charitable works – seniors homes, children’s homes, clinics, the provision of food and clothing to the poor – at their peril. Any or all of it could be regarded as unethical inducement to convert to Christianity, and charges – criminal charges punishable by fines, imprisonment and, in the case of foreigners, deportation – could be brought.

The Sri Lankan government, and the Buddhist clergy, clearly feel threatened by the pluralism and post-modernism that has coursed throughout the West, and are determined to protect their society against the dilution of their culture, values and ethic. Let us examine Buddhism to see where the seeds of this conflict are to be found.

Buddhists do not regard Buddhism as a revealed religion, but as a teaching. Scripture is also regarded as a teaching, not a revelation from God.³⁰ Buddhism teaches the idea of an impersonal god in the sense of an ultimate reality unknown to finite man. However, it is atheistic in the sense that it rejects the idea of an omniscient, omnipotent, personal creator God.³¹

³⁰ Pracha Thaiwatcharamas, God and Christ in the Context of Buddhism in Vinay Samuel & Chris Sugden eds., Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 205

³¹ *ibid*, 207

There are two main branches of Buddhist thought: Theravada, the kind practiced in Sri Lanka, emphasizes austerity, and a more literal interpretation of Buddha's teaching. Mahayana Buddhism is more expansive and prefers a liberal interpretation.³² Theravada, also known as Hinayana or 'lesser vehicle' views truth as beyond the common life of man, so that the ethical distinctions of a man's life are lost. Essentially, Theravedists believe:

1. to know and discern good and evil is to suffer;
2. higher wisdom (enlightenment) is attained as the ultimate in the highest degree of concentrated reflection
3. when one is released, one is absorbed into Nirvana, the ultimate emptiness
4. the ideal is to become the perfected one;
 - a. solitary
 - b. self-contained, and
 - c. self-dependent³³

The heart of the faith is the four 'noble truths'

1. Life is suffering; The very nature of existence is to suffer. Existence is marked by impermanence, non-substance, and suffering.
2. Suffering has a cause, the desire for life.
3. There is a release from suffering – the Buddhist version of the 'good news'; however rare and blessed are those who escape the wheel of rebirth (samsara), and the law of karma (universal causality – each act brings own inevitable return).
4. the way of release (or escape) follows the eightfold path or middle way:
 - a. right understanding
 - b. right mindedness
 - c. right speech
 - d. right actions

³² David Lim, *Biblical Christianity in the Context of Buddhism* in Vinay Samuel & Chris Sugden eds., *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 177

³³ Lim, 177

- e. right livelihood
- f. right efforts
- g. right mindfulness
- h. right concentration³⁴

Right speech, actions and livelihood are ethical disciplines intended to avoid harming others and oneself. The last three are mental disciplines allowing one to 'realize' the Truth and achieve Nirvana (a transcendant state free from craving with its attendant sorrow and suffering)

Buddhist concern focuses on pain and suffering. Knowledge or wisdom is supremely important. Misery comes from ignorance. The Buddhist ideal is detachment – to escape from all forms of existence. Buddhists believe only the Absolute is ultimately real, and changeless, and permanent.³⁵

While Christianity demands the suppression of selfishness, Buddhism demands the suppression of self. While Buddha expressed the goal for man in "emptiness", Christians use the opposite term "fullness".³⁶

To the Theravada Buddhists, Jesus can be represented as either the supreme "arahant" who has been through the samsaric cycle and rules over the karma, or the true dharma to Nirvana.³⁷

Some Christians have found the common grace of God's general revelation in several aspects of Buddhist beliefs; for instance, the ethical quality of the Buddhist way (dharma) and goal (Nirvana), and the possibility of man to attain selfhood by participating in dharma (selfless ethical living). Others consider the Christian Triune God to be reflected in the three Buddhist signata³⁸; and find contact points in:

- The Buddhist concern for holy living
- The desire for intense devotion (bhakti)
- The desire for release from bondage
- The search for worthy teachers

³⁴ ibid, 176-177

³⁵ Lim, 183

³⁶ ibid, 184

³⁷ ibid, 193

³⁸ ibid, 195

- The authority of personal experience
- The search for the unselfish state of mind, and
- Buddhist meditative techniques which they feel are compatible with Christian mysticism.³⁹

But, essentially, there is little compatability between their respective faiths. Essentially, they represent two opposite worldviews. Buddhism is Monistic (ie: The doctrine that mind and matter are formed, or reducible to, the same ultimate substance or principle of being). Buddhist beliefs are totally opposite to Christian ones; i.e.:

1. Nirvana (non-existence) also implies the non-existence of God.
2. Existence is seen as illusion, and desire as cardinal sin.
3. Buddhists believe in reincarnation
4. They regard the will to live as the root of evil⁴⁰

Moreover, Jesus Christ is the stumbling block for any faith that denies the reality of the transcendent . They cannot accept the possibility of it becoming immanent In fact, they fail to discern the happening of this in human history; and therefore reject the biblical witness to Jesus .⁴¹

Perhaps it is this lack of significant compatability that is at the root of Buddhist – Christian antipathy. They may just rub each other the wrong way.

Evaluation

In the two situations discussed above the Christian community failed to articulate its position clearly and firmly, with devastating results. In both cases the Church now finds itself being persecuted. Possibly the persecution would have happened in any event, but the Church did little to mitigate its effect.

In the Canadian case, the Church's intent in producing the new liturgy – to provide support for a marginalized Church – was, in hindsight, a self-fulfilling prophecy. The necessary evangelism the Church intended was spoken of, but never really acted upon. In an effort to be inclusive and politically correct, the

³⁹ Lim, 196

⁴⁰ ibid, 194

⁴¹ ibid, 194

Church stopped speaking its truth in the broader community for fear of being offensive, and concentrated its efforts on ministering to the declining numbers of the faithful. In doing so, for the most part, they stopped carrying the good news to the needy within their own communities - the marginalized, the urban underclass, the unemployed, the homeless. They turned away from dealing with issues of violent crime and police brutality, and the moral and spiritual disintegration of our communities typified by drugs, AIDS, and unwed juvenile parenthood. In the process, the Church came to be seen by many as irrelevant and impotent.

Douglas Webster, in an article entitled "Evangelizing the Church" summarized the situation succinctly with his comment that both poles of the Protestant continuum (liberal Protestantism and popular evangelicalism) are being evangelized by the world rather than evangelizing the world.⁴²

In Sri Lanka the story was different in that the Church did not fall from a majority position within the society. It was always in a minority. However, the processes of indigenization and contextualization were not done effectively after independence. The Church, particularly the Anglican Church, retained much the same appearance within the community as it had before, and was still seen as a relic of a colonial past. Participation in the process of "nation-building" principally fell to the Buddhists. Christians kept their heads down through the turmoil of the Bandaranaike years, the country's abortive experiments with socialism, the JVP rebellion, and most recently the protracted civil war with the Tamil Tigers. They tried not to give offense, and in doing so lost their schools to the government in the 1960's. They continued to keep their heads down until their churches came under attack physically, and legally with the introduction of the anti-conversion legislation.

The Apologetic Task

The Biblical references are quite clear on the responsibility of all Christians to defend the faith:

⁴² Douglas Webster, Evangelizing the Church in Timothy R. Phillips & Dennis L. Okholm, eds., Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 196

- “Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” (1 Pet 3:15 RSV)
- “...they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and for three weeks he argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying. “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.”
(Acts 17: 1b-3 RSV)
- “Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who chanced to be there.”
(Acts 17:16-17 RSV)
- “And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, arguing and pleading about the kingdom of God: 9 but when some were stubborn and disbelieved, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the hall of Tyrannus. 10 This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.” (Acts 19:8-10 RSV)
- “We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.” (2 Cor 10:5 RSV)
- “Beloved, being very eager to write to you of our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. “(Jude 3, RSV)
- “But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. And convince some, who doubt; save some, by snatching them out of the fire; on some have

mercy with fear, hating even the garment spotted by the flesh". (Jude 20-23 RSV)

- On qualifications for elders: "he must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it." (Titus 1:9)

The quotation at 1 Peter 3:15 is particularly apt in the context of both Canada and Sri Lanka since it was written in a time when persecution threatened. They are in the midst of various trials (1:6). They are likely to be falsely accused (3:16). A fiery ordeal will try them (4:12) They may have to suffer for righteousness sake. (3:14) They are sharing in the afflictions in the afflictions that Christians around the world are asked to endure. (5:9)⁴³

Conclusion

We Christians are simply asked to have an answer for what we believe; to share it with others who ask about our beliefs; and to do so with gentleness and reverence. As the Book of Proverbs says, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise makes knowledge acceptable, but the mouth of fools spouts folly." (Prov 15: 1-2) We are required to speak our truth clearly, firmly, without disparaging or attacking others or their beliefs...simply letting the Christian message, and our explanation of it, do the work. We simply have to overcome our shyness, concerns about giving offense, performance anxiety and do it.

There is one other crucial piece. We need to demonstrate the hope. It must be seen by others if we are to have the opportunity to make an explanation for it. This means we must first believe ourselves. We must also live our faith by putting God first, and dedicating all we do in the name of Jesus Christ.

As Norman Geisler said, "...it is incumbent upon Christians to give a reason for their hope. This is part of the great command to love God with all our mind as well as our heart and soul (Matt. 22: 36-37)." If the Christian Church is to thrive again in the West, and where it confronts other strongly articulated faiths,

⁴³ William Barclay, The Letters of James and Peter, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, rev ed. 1976), 146

we must learn to do apologetics well. We must stand firm and speak our truth - with consideration of other points of view, yes, but we must speak our truth, and stand by it. It is an essential ministry if we are not to go the way of the Church in North Africa after St. Augustine; losing our place, and that of our faith, to others of a more determined nature.

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