

Apologia: Christianity in an Age of Tolerance

By Rev. Dr. Daniel Paavola

In his 2005 work, *Soul Searching: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, researcher Christian Smith concludes, “It seems that when the engagement and education of youth by their religious communities is weak, then the faith of teenagers in those traditions tends to degenerate into Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” Smith reports that this deism, a generalized concept that God merely exists and wants people to “be good,” may be “the new mainstream American religious faith for our culturally post-Christian, individualistic, mass-consumer capitalist society.”

The implications of Smith’s findings are important to Lutheran parents, youth workers, and pastors. The Gospel is God’s special revelation, His great gift and promise, His unveiling of Himself in the person of Christ. As such, the Gospel is not something that can be stumbled upon by chance. It must be taught and modeled by the Church, and as members of the Church, we Christians are given the responsibility of passing the truth of God’s love down to our children, and passing it down verbatim.

With *Apologia*, a new resource from thESource for Youth Ministry, parents and youth workers are given the language they need to communicate God’s truth to youth. *Apologia* provides evaluation of a relevant doctrinal issue with Scriptural and doctrinal connects, all in bite-sized, easy to understand segments.

Introduction: Christianity in the Age of Tolerance: On What Do We Stand?

Perhaps it would have been easier to be Luther in his day. Luther saw a clear challenge to the Gospel and responded with courage. The stakes were life and death, but the lines were clearly drawn.

Today many of our challenges lack that clarity. Our early-millennium American culture expects us to accept any belief as long as it’s sincerely held. Christians respond with the unique claims of the Gospel and look for a lively debate. However, eager for a spiritual tug-of-war, oftentimes Christians find that they alone are pulling on the rope. Many non-Christians assume that all religions are essentially alike in belief and that any differences are minor. Other religions are often seen as simply another way for people to reach God based on their sincerity.

How should a Christian respond to this spiritual view? The Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions give clear directions for those wishing to profess the Gospel in an age of tolerance.

Scripture Connect

Colossians 4:5-6: “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”

Notice the positive approach of these verses. Approach speaking with others as an opportunity to display the qualities of faith. These verses are realistic in that they don’t expect a conversion at every turn. However, they direct us to five qualities of speech that serve in any time: Your speech can be wise, timely, gracious, preserving and enticing. Let speech and life with those outside the faith be wise as you consider the consequence of each meeting and the reception which your words might have. Your wisdom comes from God’s Word rather than an overpowering logic or a skillful debate. Study His Word regularly. Also make your speech timely. A farmer realizes that the times for planting and harvesting are short and that each day must be used to its fullest advantage. So it goes for us; make the most of these rare days. Be gracious with your speech, inviting others to see the riches of grace in Christ. Finally, Paul speaks of your speech being seasoned with salt. Salt preserves the food and entices us to eat more. Your speech can be filled with words that bring enduring life and which invite the hearer to desire a relationship Christ.

Other scriptural passages similar to Colossians 4 that are useful include:

Ephesians 4:29: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

Ephesians 5:15-16: “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.”

A clear call to decision in an age which was vacillating between various beliefs comes with Joshua:

Joshua 24: “But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

Doctrinal Quotation

“Thus, we have come to fundamental, clear agreement that we must steadfastly maintain the distinction between unnecessary, useless quarrels and disputes that are necessary. The former should not be permitted to confuse the church since they tear down rather than edify. The latter, when they occur, concern the articles of faith or the chief parts of Christian teaching; to preserve the truth, false teaching, which is contrary to these articles, must be repudiated.”

Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Introduction, 15.

The introduction to the *Formula of Concord* gives a healthy balance for Christians speaking against error. While the Formula largely addresses the errors within the Church, and our topic concerns the Christian speaking to society, the general principles are still helpful. The purpose of speaking is to retain the truth of the faith. A love for contention alone is never reason for disagreement. However, to preserve the Gospel, it is necessary to distinguish which arguments are important and which are best left alone.

On this preserving of the Gospel, Luther in his commentary on Galatians speaks vividly: “What is all creation in comparison with the doctrine of justification? Therefore if you see this threatened or endangered, do not be afraid to stand up against Peter or an angel from heaven. For this cannot be praised highly enough.” (*Luther's Works*, vol. 26, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963, p. 106) The Gospel is both a treasure to be protected and also a prize to be shared. In an age of tolerance, the distinctive gift of God's Son, his incarnation as God and man, his perfect life, his substitutionary death, and his bodily resurrection and ascension are points upon which the Christian cannot compromise. We cannot diminish the grace of God which sent his Son and which accounts the actions of the Son in the place of sinners.

However, besides being riches preserved, these truths are treasures offered. While explaining his or her view of the Gospel, the Christian is opening the same promises of grace to those listening. In making this offer in an age of tolerance, Christians can expect some bridge of understanding between themselves and non-Christians. Luther explained the extent of this common understanding: “The heathen were not wrong in believing that God is Someone who helps. This truth still inheres in human nature... Human nature knows that it is God who helps; but who this God is it does not know.” (*What Luther Says*, vol. 2, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959, p. 616.) Like Paul in Athens, Acts 17: 22-23, where Paul acknowledged the Athenians' pursuit of God as one they did not yet know, so Christians can offer the knowledge of God in Christ to those who have a yearning and expectation of God but cannot find Him.

Application

What should Christians then do in a tolerant time? Several opportunities exist for gracious, timely speech which offers the Gospel. Our tolerant age allows for many paths towards God. Affirm that the person with whom you are speaking is earnestly looking for God. Share some of the likely qualities that you both expect of God: creator, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, loving, and just, for example. Talk of why you have this expectation of God, whether it's through observing creation or simply because it seems reasonable.

After making this bridge of expectation for God, show the distinctive nature of the Gospel in Jesus Christ. Point out that while many expect God as creator to be the one who made every hill and every tree, only Christians believe that God came as God and man to be judged a criminal, dying on a hill, crucified on a tree. Only Christians believe that this one perfect life of Christ, His innocent death, and powerful resurrection make Him the new Adam and the firstborn for all who follow Him in faith. Only Christians believe that when we had killed God's Son, God was then at peace with us rather than angered. Only Christians believe that God views the world through the action of His Son. Therefore everyone is forgiven apart from their own actions because God has chosen to see the world in light of the perfection and sacrifice of His Son. The distinctive nature of the Gospel changes the conversation. You might begin by affirming your mutual expectation of God. You move on to offer the unique perspective that only Christians have in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

When this matchless Gospel has been held up, then affirm your personal experience with Christ. Go from "Christians believe..." to "I believe..." Make the promises of God in Christ still the focus. Say, "I believe that He has done this also for me." Invite your listener to have this same faith by hearing the Gospel. Your gracious speech may well be the way God preserves another soul. This age of tolerance can be the opening of the one door to eternal life for those who are intrigued by the Gospel through you. Our age may often lack the drama of Luther's conflicts, but it still gives opportunity for the Gospel to be heard.

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