

Apologetics Bible Study, Lesson # 2

Acts chapter 2: Using Apolgetics in Mission Outreach

Peter's Pentecost sermon reveals that the missionary outreach of the apostles was persuasive in nature, not expository. Peter's speech focuses on the following four arguments.

1. Jesus' many miracles demonstrated that He is the Messiah.
2. We know that Jesus is the Messiah because He fulfilled the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament.
3. We know the apostles were accurate in what they said because they were eyewitnesses of Jesus' life, teaching, death and resurrection.
4. Jesus' resurrection from the dead proves that he is the long-awaited Messiah of God.

As we observed in our first Bible study, the Apostle Peter admonished us to "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (I Peter 3:15). Today we will consider an example of how Peter, himself, proclaimed the reason for the hope that he had.

It was Peter who addressed the crowd on the day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts chapter 2. We will read this chapter, along with some explanation, and observe how Peter himself used apologetics (arguments and evidence) in his mission outreach. Acts 2 begins as follows:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place (1:1).

Who is meant by *they* in this verse? Peter had explained the meaning of *they* in Acts 1:21-26 when he said:

Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."

So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs." Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.

So Matthias was chosen to replace Judas who had committed suicide. As a result the apostles were now back to being a complete group of twelve. Notice that Peter insisted on there being one primary criteria for someone to be eligible to become one of the inner circle of twelve. The criteria was that the person had to have been with them "the whole time" beginning with the baptism of John to the ascension of Jesus into heaven.

And why did the new disciple have to meet this standard? The reason, said Peter, was so that this person could be “a witness with us of his resurrection.” Today we usually use the word “witness” to mean one who engages in evangelism. That is not what Peter was saying. Peter meant that this new apostle had to be an eyewitness, a witness in the sense of being a witness as in a court of law—someone who could testify to what he had personally seen and heard, someone who could testify to what was true. In the New Testament, the word *witness* always means to supply evidence, usually in the sense of being an eyewitness.

Why is this important? It clarifies that the apostles were committed to giving their listeners the most credible and reliable testimony possible—the testimony of eyewitnesses. Second-hand reports or hearsay were not allowed. For this reason all of the twelve apostles had to be eyewitnesses of everything that had taken place from the time of John’s baptism of Jesus to His ascension into heaven.¹ And Jesus had told them, “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). By those words Jesus was saying that his apostles would provide evidence to their listeners that what they said was true.

When it came to the writing of our New Testament documents, the same criteria was used. The written records that became our New Testament were accepted as reliable and authoritative because they contained the personal testimony of the eyewitnesses. In this way the Apostles and other church leaders gave us the assurance that everything included in the New Testament is true.²

Acts chapter 2 continues as follows:

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the

¹ The Scriptures also speak of a broader group of apostles, much larger than the inner circle of twelve. To be considered an apostle in this broader sense, one had to be an eyewitness of the risen Lord. The apostle Paul, accordingly, said, “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” (I Cor. 9:1) Paul was speaking of seeing Jesus after the resurrection.

² Historians commonly speak of two “e’s” regarding the quality of historical documents. They are being *early* and being the testimony of *eyewitnesses*. Documents that are written by persons who were contemporaries of the events being described and who were also eyewitnesses provide historians with the best possible information for historical accuracy.

wonders of God in our own tongues!” Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

Peter Addresses the Crowd

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning (2:2-15).

We observe here that Peter began his presentation by answering the objection of the skeptics. His answer was similar to that of Jesus’ answering objections as recorded in John 20:30-31. That is, he answered the objection by showing that it was irrational because it was contrary to the experience and knowledge of his audience. If Jews drank wine or beer in any amounts, they did so with and after their evening meal. It’s not that they never got drunk, but they only did so late in the day--and never in the morning. So the accusation that the apostles were drunk was contrary to the common knowledge of the audience.

The Apostle Paul, when speaking to King Agrippa, similarly argued that the objection raised by Festus was irrational because it was contrary to the information that Agrippa had at his disposal (Acts 26:26). We can see, therefore, that there are times when we not only do well to answer the objections people raise to the gospel message, we can additionally see that there are times when we should do so by pointing out major fallacies contained in the objections. We do not necessarily have to quote Scripture to refute objections.

Peter continued by saying:

No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

“In the last days, God says,
 I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
 Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
 your young men will see visions,
 your old men will dream dreams.
 Even on my servants, both men and women,
 I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
 and they will prophesy.
 I will show wonders in the heavens above
 and signs on the earth below,
 blood and fire and billows of smoke.
 The sun will be turned to darkness
 and the moon to blood
 before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.
 And everyone who calls
 on the name of the Lord will be saved’ (2:16-21).

Peter here gave additional information in answering the objection. He explained that the real explanation for what the audience was observing consisted of the fulfillment of the Joel Prophecy—that a major outpouring of the Holy Spirit would occur when the Messiah came. Then notice how Peter proceeded from answering the objection to the gospel message—as did Jesus did in Matthew 12, and as Paul did in Acts 26.³ Peter used the answering of the objection as groundwork for proclaiming the gospel message of Jesus the Christ. That is the singular purpose for answering objections.

By means of the Joel prophecy, Peter also clarified a second major argument for the truthfulness of the gospel message—that of fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies. This is a second reason we should be ready to provide to substantiate the hope that we have. (The first was eyewitness testimony.)

Peter then gave us a third reason for the hope that have. He said:

“Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know” (2:22).

The many miracles of Jesus provide a third reason for recognizing the truthfulness of the gospel message. Peter’s Jewish audience would have known that the ability to perform miracles was one of the tests for true prophets (Deuteronomy 34:10-12).) As we noted in lesson one, the Apostle John specifically told us that he recorded a number of these miracles in order that we “might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing we may have life in his name” (John 20:31). The ultimate purpose for the miracles was that they provided evidence for substantiating the truth of the gospel and thereby were instrumental in leading lost sinners to Christ.

We also notice that Peter did not quote Scripture to prove that Jesus performed these sensational miracles. He, instead, said, “which God did among you through Him as you yourself know.” That is, Peter appealed to the various reports that his Jewish audience would have received of Jesus’ many miracles. (Even Jesus’ enemies acknowledged that he performed miracles, but they said he did so by Satan’s power.)

So the sources Peter here appealed to included those that were non-Biblical and even non-Christian. The Apostle Paul, similarly, utilized secular sources in his missionary sermons to verify the truth of the gospel message.⁴ There is no reason why we shouldn’t do the same.

Peter proceeded with his sermon by saying:

³ Matthew 12:22-29, and Acts 26:26

⁴ See Acts 22:16-22 and Acts Ch. 26.

“This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross” (2:23).

As we can observe, Peter now preached the law. Peter is terribly explicit in this law preaching, He said, “you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.” Every sermon recorded in Acts contains both law and gospel. There are no exceptions. We do well to follow this example.

Peter then said:

“But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. David said about him:

‘I saw the Lord always before me.
Because he is at my right hand,
I will not be shaken.
Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest in hope,
because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,
you will not let your holy one see decay.
You have made known to me the paths of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence.’

Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it” (2:24-32).

Peter here emphasized the primary proof showing that Jesus is the promised Messiah—His resurrection from the dead. As evidence for the resurrection, he stated: “we are all witnesses of it.” *All* included Matthias who had just been added to their number. Once again Peter was saying that the account of Jesus’ resurrection was not based on hearsay, idle rumors or some kind of speculation, or oral traditions. The Apostles knew it was true because they had all personally seen and heard the risen Jesus. They were witnesses in the same way that witnesses would appear in a court of law. They could attest to the fact that Jesus had appeared to them after his crucifixion in real space/time history, and that they had not only seen and heard him, they had touched Him with their own hands and seen him eat and drink like any other living person.

The Apostle Paul made the same argument in I Corinthians 15. Said Paul:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen

asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born (15:3-8).

Paul here used the eyewitness testimony as evidence for the resurrection just as Peter had done in Acts 2. The implication of Paul's argument was obvious—if you doubt what I am saying, you can speak to any of these other people I am mentioning—they, too, are eyewitnesses, and they, too, will testify to the truth of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

It should be added that modern New Testament scholars, including those who are skeptics of the resurrection and including theological liberals, generally agree that the apostles and other followers of Jesus did, in fact, claim that they were eyewitnesses of the resurrection, and they did so because they believed that Jesus had appeared to them after the crucifixion. This is a big change from the views of the skeptics and liberals of a generation ago who claimed that the resurrection was a second century invention. The evidence that it was the apostles themselves who said Jesus had risen is simply too strong to be discounted. In addition, something remarkable had clearly taken place to transform these apostles into the kind of courageous and knowledgeable missionaries that they had become.⁵

There are some Christian people who say that they don't need any kind of evidence or proof for the resurrection. In response to that position, we can easily observe from Peter's sermon that he did, in fact, supply an abundance of evidence for the truth of the resurrection and other events he was describing. It is hard to imagine why he would have done so if he believed it was unimportant.

Peter continued by saying:

“Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,

’The Lord said to my Lord:
“Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet.’

Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah” (2:33-36).

Peter here stated another proof for the truth of Jesus' resurrection—that of His fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Peter included several Messianic prophecies, which Jesus fulfilled, along with eyewitness testimony to prove that it really happened—Jesus did rise, and did so in space/time history, just as the prophets said he would.⁶ The main reason for our hope—that of

⁵ Gary Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids MI.: Kregel Publications, 2004), 48-63.

⁶ For a description of the other major Messianic prophecies that Jesus fulfilled, see Allen Quist, *The Reason I Believe: The Basics of Christian Apologetic* (St Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2017).

the resurrection—and the other reasons for our hope are all interlocked and complement one another.

Peter concluded his sermon by proclaiming the gospel of salvation won by Christ, which reads as follows:

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day (2:37-41).

The conclusion of Peter’s sermon is the gospel message of Jesus the Christ who came to seek and to save those who are lost. Every sermon recorded in Acts concludes by urging all people to receive this gospel message in faith. Apologetics is an integral part of every missionary sermon contained in Acts, and these sermons all focus on one purpose—proclaiming the gospel of Jesus the Christ to all the world.

In closing this lesson, we should notice once again that Peter spoke much like an attorney speaks in court—he both explained the message and gave credible evidence for its truthfulness. Every missionary sermon recorded in Acts follows this approach. Once again, there are no exceptions.

We have also observed that Peter used four lines of argument, all interrelated, in his argumentation. They are:

1. Jesus’ many miracles demonstrated that He is the Messiah.
2. We know that Jesus is the Messiah because He fulfilled the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament.
3. We know the apostles were accurate in what they said because they were eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life, teaching, death and resurrection.
4. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead proves that he is the long-awaited Messiah of God.

The additional sermons in Acts make use of these same four lines of argument. This is not to say that all four are stated in every sermon, but they are the primary arguments that are used. The same is true for the entirety of the New Testament. Its apologetic content focuses on these four lines of proof.

For us, then, to give an answer, to give our reason for the hope that we have, as Peter said we should be ready to do, means that we should be familiar with these four arguments and be equipped to explain and defend them to any and all who are willing to listen.

We should also recognize that the sermons in Acts are all tailored to fit their particular audience. Peter's Pentecost sermon, for example, relied heavily on the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. For a largely Jewish audience, that would have been very effective. Paul's sermon given to the Athenians on the Areopagus, in contrast, never once referred to the Old Testament but instead quoted poets familiar to the Greek audience. Paul also made use of natural theology, natural law, and the common knowledge of the Athenians. This suggests that quoting the Bible is not always the best way to preach Christ.

And every line of reasoning used in the missionary sermons points to and concludes with the glorious message of Jesus the Christ who came to seek and to save those who are lost.