

Clearing a Path for the Gospel –A Lutheran Approach to Apologetics

by Arthur A. Eggert and Geoffrey A. Kieta. *Sun Prairie WI: In Terra Pax Lutheran Publishing, 2019. 353 pages, softcover, \$25.00.*

Apologetics is defending the Christian faith. The book’s title is its overall theme: The purpose of apologetics is to “clear a path for the gospel.” Sections of the book expound on the nature of truth, God’s attributes, the reliability of Scripture, and the nature of science. Many common apologetic topics are hardly mentioned, such as the problem of evil, the person and the resurrection of Christ, and hell, so in that regard, this book is not an introduction to the major categories of apologetics. What this book does is live up to its title. It presents “a Lutheran approach to apologetics.”

There is a distinction between Lutheran apologetics and that of other Christians regarding the place of human reason. The authors present the Lutheran (scriptural) position regarding the use of reason,¹ in a scope and breadth found few other places, and apply it to various aspects of apologetics. Even though our Christian faith is created and strengthened solely through the gospel in Word and sacrament, the authors show how our apologetic can use extra-biblical arguments to “clear a path for the gospel.”²

So much in this book is excellent. The theme of chapter 6 on miracles is great. The authors explain that God continuously uses His power in His “regular way” to keep the entire universe working. When God chooses to use a method other than His regular way, “we call it a *miracle*” [p. 139].

1 The “ministerial use” versus the “magisterial use” of human reason is covered [p. 10, 11]. The Bible is described as “self-authenticating” [p. 63]. They also write, “We readily acknowledge that we cannot prove that the Bible is the Word of God based on external sources. If we could, then the external sources would be our real standard of belief and not the Bible itself” [p. 64].

2 For example, “The goal of apologetics is to speak and write in defense of the truth using logic as well as Scripture. ...Apologetics is a necessary discipline” [p. 6-7]. “The apologist must determine whether the goal should be to impart information, argue the reasonableness of the Christian belief about the Bible or confront the straying with the indefensibility of their position” [p. 63].

Important truths are taught: “If someone wants to be a skilled apologist, that person needs to be in the Word. He or she needs to personally read it regularly” [p. 308]. Practical helps are taught such as using written notes to remember the details of any long-term apologetic conversations [p. 241]. The apologist should avoid mixing weaker arguments with stronger ones, as that leads to your strong arguments being ignored and your weak arguments being attacked. The book puts it this way, “A weak argument is usually worse than no argument at all” [page 228]. The authors write, “The apologist needs to stake the claim for the exclusivity of Christianity [p. 190].

Many people today believe in subjective morality. They reject objective right and wrong. The book recommends that the apologist ask such people if it was right for Americans to enslave Africans. This may lead to an admission that there is an objective standard of right and wrong, and then to the source of that standard (God). “This opens the door to a discussion about Jesus” [p. 179].

Two chapters are especially outstanding. They provide many examples of how the apologist can respond to specific questions of skeptics. The chapter on miracles lists thirteen biblical miracles and how to discuss each one. The chapter on salvation lists many ways skeptics attack the law and gospel and how we may respond.

The chapter on archaeology and secular history has some very good information and suggestions. The “historical claims” of Christianity “are an essential part of the message of the gospel” [p. 193]. “As apologists, we need to ask the skeptic to articulate why these things cannot be true” [p. 205]. “To simply dismiss the biblical account in favor of non-biblical sources because they are non-biblical is not in keeping with principles of academic history” [p. 206].

Appendix I explains 78 logical fallacies “to help the apologist avoid such fallacies in his or her arguments and to detect them in the arguments of others” [p. 313]. This and Chapter 1, “The Nature of Truth,” can help train the apologist in logical thinking and in logical listening.

Even though much in this book is praiseworthy, readers may find things with which they disagree. For instance, chapter two is devoted to the claim “all arguments that endeavor to prove the existence of God are a waste of effort” (p. 46). The authors explain nine traditional arguments for the existence of God and common rebuttals. The authors believe these nine traditional arguments are not “logically sound” and “leave us no closer to proclaiming the message of Christ” so “they are of no value to us” (p. 52). Just because there is a rebuttal for an argument does not mean that argument is “of no value,” since there are rebuttals for ALL apologetic arguments. Also, the weakness of an argument is often in the eye of the beholder. Even weak arguments can convince many. Personally, I rarely if ever use arguments for God’s existence, since I tend to see other arguments as more useful. That said, countless Christians have successfully used such arguments to “clear a path for the gospel.” That is our apologetic goal. Learning these common arguments for the existence of God, and learning their rebuttals, is of great value for all apologists, even those of us who disagree with some of the authors’ claims.

The authors set high standards for their book,

We have tried to use the highest standards of scholarship. ...We avoided using *ad hominem* arguments, creating *strawmen* to avoid our opponents’ real positions or engaging in lines of argumentation which they might reasonably recognize as containing fallacies. [p. 7, italics in original]

Unfortunately, the book sometimes fails at achieving these goals, as the following paragraphs show.

“Noah’s ark, however, was not built to rest on land as a tourist attraction, but to float on an ocean under adverse conditions” [p. 143]. This unprofessional jab at the 500-foot ark in Kentucky is unnecessary. The creation apologetic organization “Answers in Genesis” (AIG) employs many Ph.D. scientists. The authors commit the “No True Scotsman” fallacy³ when they imply these AIG scientists are not “real scientists” [p. 312].

³ *Using a biased definition to make a false claim seem to be true.*

Regarding Christians who “argue that we should soften doctrinal positions in light of social changes,” the authors say, “such people wish to be called Christians” [p. 65]. This is another form of the “No True Scotsman” fallacy. More seriously, it is doctrinally false to imply all such people are not Christians. While false doctrine is very dangerous to one’s faith, God can and does preserve in the elect many who adhere to false doctrine.

The book at times condemns others for doing something while at the same time doing that very thing. For example, the book advances the apologetic view that God placed fossils of imaginary animals (trilobites, dinosaurs, etc. never existed as living creatures) and of imaginary plants on every continent. Other possible explanations for fossils, such as the Flood, are rejected with the words, “We cannot constrain the Lord to act in the way we would like him to act, nor can we explain how he acts when he does not tell us” [p. 122]. It seems to me that this line of reasoning can be turned around and used against the authors’ claim that God created fossils. God does not tell us anything about fossils, so in the authors’ own words, we cannot “explain how he acts when he does not tell us.” The authors advance created fossils as the only possible explanation for fossils, based solely on their human reasoning. Here the authors “constrain the Lord to act in the way we would like him to act,” something the authors say we “cannot” do.

In a similar way, the book advances the apologetic claim that light from distant stars may simply be light streams that God created for us to view and that there may be no physical stars on the other side of those light beams. Some Christians prefer other explanations for distant star light,⁴ and some of them do so because they think a God-made video of stars that do not actually exist seems to be deceptive. The authors respond in the same paragraph rather forcefully, “It is blasphemy to charge the Lord with deceiving us if he didn’t set up the universe or even the earth in the way that our investigational logic tells us it should be” [p. 116]. The authors here use their own “investigational logic” to claim that distant star light is a movie, yet their explanation, just like the alternative explanations they reject, may not be the way that God “set up the universe.”

⁴ Several other creationist explanations are listed on pages 22-23 in the spring 2016 LSI Journal. www.Lutheranscience.org/2016spring (accessed 1-3-20)

The authors use their own logic to imagine how God carried out the Flood, and then condemn others who do the same thing. They write, “By faith Noah built the ark and got on it, and we need to accept the biblical account by faith, not in terms of how we think that it could have been pulled off” [p. 145]. On the two pages preceding this statement, the authors speculate that Noah’s ark was “much larger” than pre-flood ships, that God gave Noah additional details not in Scripture on how to build, that it took a miracle for the animals leaving the ark to diversify into today’s many species, and that it required a miracle to care for the animals on the ark.

The book also contains factual errors and misleading comments. For example: Readers are misled to think that 5 million *species* of land animals descended from the *kinds* on Noah’s ark [p. 144]. This number is grossly exaggerated by including kinds that were most likely *not* on the ark. It is more reasonable to count only amphibians, birds, mammals, and reptiles. There are an estimated 40,700^{5,6} species of those alive today.

Fossils are incorrectly defined on page 120, “...only those [living things] which have a structure that can somehow be preserved are candidates for fossilization.” This is incorrect since anything that lived in the past can produce a fossil, even bacteria and jellyfish. The authors’ overly narrow understanding of what constitutes a fossil led them to make another error in their very next paragraph, “In reality, the fossil record does not reach back to the time life supposedly began because those early creatures were too flimsy to be fossilized.” This statement is incorrect. Fossils of microorganisms which evolutionists claim as those earliest life forms were discovered many decades ago.⁷

⁵ *This number increases constantly as new species are discovered and the definition of species narrows. The number of bird species recently doubled.*

Mark Owuor Otieno, “How Many Species of Birds Are There?” WorldAtlas, Nov. 2, 2017. (accessed 1-3-20)

<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/how-many-species-of-birds-are-there.html>

⁶ Sophy Owuor Otieno, “How Many Species of Reptiles Are There?” WorldAtlas, Jan. 14, 2019. (accessed 1-3-20)

<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/how-many-species-of-reptiles-are-there.html>

⁷ “Fossils of primitive microorganisms show that life had emerged on earth by about 3.8 billion years ago.”

National Academy of Sciences, *Teaching About Evolution and The Nature of Sci-*

Verbal Inspiration

This book starts down a dangerous path. It starts innocently with the words,

This forces the apologist to face the general issue of when is the Bible stating an eternal truth and when is it only giving an explanation of some principle in terms that were understandable to the people who first read and heard it.
[page 124]

The book follows these words by listing some questions about nature which God asked to Job. Job did not know any of the answers, but today, we know some of the answers. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he does not know where the wind comes from or where it goes, but the authors claim that modern meteorologists know.

Two paragraphs later we read, “As described above, man is now manipulating life which God created in ways that were unimaginable to men whom God used to write the Scriptures” [page 125]. This line of reasoning is the buildup to the authors’ claim that God’s Genesis 1 commands limiting reproduction to within kind may no longer be enforced today by God. When used as a reason to claim that God may have altered some of His commands, I think this starts down a dangerous path—a path of reasoning which, if followed, can lead us to question much of what God reveals in Scripture.

First, the most troubling words are, “...unimaginable to men whom God used to write the Scriptures.” It is clear from Scripture that the prophets sometimes did not know the meaning of what they wrote (1 Peter 1:10-12). If they had to know the meaning, then the doctrine of verbal inspiration falls apart. Second, the limited scientific understanding of Job and Nicodemus is not reason for us to conclude that God changed His Genesis 1 commands that limit reproduction to be within kind. If the lack of understanding of people in biblical times was reason for us to claim that God may have reversed some of His Genesis 1 commands, then that same

ence, (Washington DC, National Academy Press, 1998), 11.

line of reasoning could be used to claim God reversed many of His other commands. This would also wreak havoc with doctrine.

New Kinds

The authors write,

Genesis 1 tells us that a specific kind of life can only come from that specific kind of life. ...In Genesis 1:24, God stated that the animals he created would reproduce according to their kind. ...*The Bible does not say the universe and life could not have evolved through natural processes; it merely says they didn't.* It is blasphemous to say that the almighty God could not have established the laws of nature so that macroscopic evolution was possible. Perhaps he didn't, but perhaps he did, yet chose not to use that mechanism for reasons known only to him.” [p. 123, 125, and 129, italics in original.]

The authors develop this claim on pages 122 through 132. Here is my summary: God may still be enforcing His Genesis 1 commands limiting reproduction to within kind, or God may have sometime after creation modified His Genesis 1 commands to permit animals and plants to reproduce outside of their kind (to develop new kinds).

This is the first time I have encountered a young earth creationist claiming that it may be possible for new kinds of plants or animals to develop naturally. The book correctly asserts that people may eventually be able to produce new kinds of plants and animals through modern genetic manipulation. Such activity by man does not violate God's directive that the “earth produce” plants and animals “according to their kind.” The book correctly asserts that the Bible does not say stars and planets cannot form naturally. Yet God is clear when he reveals that he has limited plant and animal reproduction to be “according to their kind” (Genesis 1:11,12,20,21,24,25).

The common (possibly unanimous until now) position in the WELS is to understand that these Genesis 1 passages limit natural reproduction to stay within kind, that no new kinds ever develop naturally, and that limitation is still being enforced by God today. In preparing this review, I found thirteen quotes by WELS authors supporting created kinds (in books, WLQ articles, and one website). Not one even implied that new kinds may be able to naturally develop. These authors include Daniel Deutschlander⁸, Lyle Lange⁹, and John Jeske¹⁰.

One reason explicitly laid out in the book for its claim that God may have changed some of His Genesis 1 commands, is the lack of scientific knowledge of people in Bible times. An underlying reason for this claim seems to be the theme expressed in multiple chapters: Evolutionists have strong evidence for “their model of how the world works” [p. 121].

I assume that God’s Genesis 1 commands to reproduce within kind are carried out by God through genetics, but I may be wrong. The book declares that “We must recognize that biblical statements about ‘kind’ ... are not statements about genetics” [page 125]. Why must we disconnect God’s command from genetics? The book implies that our apologetic should do everything possible to avoid questioning the scientific conclusions of evolution, because those evolutionary models are so strongly supported by evidence. Evolutionary science concludes that genetics do not limit reproduction to biblical kinds, so the book requires our Christian apologetic disconnect God’s Genesis 1 commands about kinds from genetics.

⁸ *Deutschlander wrote in his doctrine book, “Could there be development within a kind? Yes. But one kind cannot successfully interbreed with or become another kind. A bird cannot eventually evolve into a dog or a fungus into a man.”*

Daniel M. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds—The Splendor of Christian Doctrine*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2015), 128.

⁹ Lyle W. Lange, *God So Loved the World—A Study of Christian Doctrine*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2005), 152-153.

¹⁰ *Jeske wrote in The Peoples Bible commentary on Genesis, “The creator endowed each of these new forms of life with the capability of passing on life to the next generation—again, only of its own kind. This divine restriction does not allow for new kinds, as the theory of evolution proposes.”*

John C. Jeske, *Genesis—The Peoples Bible*, 2nd ed. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2004), 21.

Our default position should be that God has not modified His commands, unless God reveals that information to us in Scripture. God warns us to not change His Word (Prov 30:5-6; Matt 5:18; Deut 4:2; Rev 22:19). We ought not change what God declares about reproduction within kind, just because our sin-darkened human reason thinks that may be the case. The authors warn against setting “our minds over the Word of God” by using our human reason in a magisterial way [p. 11], yet the authors here do the very thing they warn against, when they claim God may have changed His Genesis 1 commands.

Science and Truth

The authors admit [p. 135]:

- 1) Scientific conclusions are only “provisionally true.”
- 2) That even if a scientific model explains all observations, it still may be false.
- 3) That all science, including evolution, is based on the unprovable presupposition that there is no God, and that conclusions (scientific models, theories, laws) based on a false assumption are “uncertain.”

With these reasons alone, why would the Christian apologist have to accept created fossils as the only explanation for fossils? Why should we speculate that God may have rescinded His Genesis 1 commands on reproduction within kind?

Recommendation

I recommend this book for those who wish to study apologetics. Most chapters have plenty of solid content. Unfortunately, some chapters also have content with which readers may disagree, especially Chapter 5 titled “Creation and Science,” with its seemingly loose view of verbal inspiration, its claim that new kinds of plants and animals may naturally develop, and its claim that God created fossils of imaginary animals (like dinosaurs and trilobites). May God use this book to spur brotherly discussion of apologetics in our circles.

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