

Can Witnessing a Miracle Lead to Faith?

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This article examines what Scripture teaches about apologetics—about defending the faith. Specifically, we will make a case from Scripture for using extra-biblical arguments—arguments from history, science, logic, etc.—as part of that defense of the faith. We will start with a study of what God reveals in Scripture about the role miracles can and cannot play in an unbeliever’s path to faith. Then we will move to what Scripture says about the role other things play in bringing a person to faith. That will eventually lead us to a more general discussion of using extra-biblical arguments in our apologetic.

Can witnessing a miracle lead to faith? Let’s consider two passages that appear to give conflicting answers.

No —Luke 16:27-31

“He said, ‘Then I beg you, father, send him to my father’s home, because I have five brothers—to warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ “Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets. Let them listen to them.’ ““No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ “Abraham replied to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’” Luke 16:27-31 (EHV)

This passage from Luke relates Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus. It appears to say that witnessing a miracle does *NOT* lead to faith.

Yes —Matthew 11:20-24

Then Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles were performed, because they did not repent. “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles which were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. You, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to heaven? No, you will go down to hell. For if the miracles performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for the land of Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”

Matthew 11:20-24 (EHV); parallel in Luke 10:10-15.

This passage from the Gospel of Matthew clearly states that witnessing a miracle *CAN* lead to faith. Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum were towns in Galilee. During his earthly ministry, Capernaum served as Jesus’ hometown. Jesus performed many miracles in these towns.¹ Jesus performed “most of his miracles” in Chorazin and Bethsaida, yet many people living there rejected Jesus as their Savior (“they did not repent”). These people witnessed Jesus perform spectacular miracles, yet remained in their unbelief. For them, witnessing miracles did NOT lead to faith. In Matthew 11, Jesus reveals something amazing. He demonstrates that his complete knowledge of everything past, present, and future even includes knowledge of what could have been. If the miracles Jesus performed in Chorazin and Bethsaida had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, those people would have come to faith!

Consistent and Truthful

Can witnessing a miracle lead to faith? One passage seems to answer “No,” while another answers “Yes.” How can this be? We know that “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35, EHV) and that Scripture

¹ Matthew 8: 5-16; Mark 1:21-33, 2:1-12, 3:1-6, 6:45, 8:22-25; Luke 9:10-17.

is truth (John 17:17). All sixty-six books of Scripture present a consistent and truthful message. The central message of Scripture is about Jesus our Redeemer, and Scripture is consistent and truthful about that, yet Scripture is consistent and truthful in *everything* it addresses. How can we understand our Luke 16 and Matthew 11 passages in a way which is consistent with the rest of God's Word? What is God telling us in these passages? To help understand these two passages, it will help us to recall what God reveals about the means of grace.

Means of Grace

Scripture clearly teaches that God works only through the gospel in Word (the Bible) and sacrament (Baptism and Holy Communion) to create and strengthen faith². We call the Word and sacraments the "means of grace." This information can be used to explain both our Luke 16 and Matthew 11 passages.

Pagan Cities

Miracles are not a means of grace, but they can have a role in bringing people to faith. Let's consider how seeing miracles could have resulted in bringing the people of Tyre and Sidon to faith. The Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon were located on the Mediterranean coast roughly 35 and 50 miles northwest of the Sea of Galilee. Both were Roman free cities. Most people living there were pagans. They believed in many gods. [Yet some believers did live there, such as the woman whom Jesus commends as having "great faith." See Matthew 15:21–28].

Try to imagine how these pagans might have reacted to Jesus. If these pagans could witness Jesus performing many spectacular miracles, they would note that their gods did not do such undeniable miracles. This Jesus must be, or at least represent, a god above their gods. They might then listen to what Jesus said, hear the gospel, and come to faith in the true God through that gospel message. Witnessing miracles can lead to faith in this way. The Holy Spirit does not create faith through the miracles, but the witnessing of miracles can lead to hearing the gospel. The Holy Spirit can then work faith through the gospel.

² Romans 10:17, 1 Corinthians 1:21, 1 Peter 3:21, Matthew 26:26-28.

Sign Miracles

We call many of the miracles performed by Jesus, the Apostles, and the prophets “*sign miracles*.” These miracles were a sign pointing to the true God. These signs confirmed the message being spoken as being from God [Exodus 4:5,8; Mark 16:20]. Regarding Jesus miraculously turning 120 or more gallons of water into wine at a wedding feast, the Apostle John reports, “This, the beginning of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee. He revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him” (John 2:11, EHV).

God reveals how other people came to faith through sign miracles. Here are some examples:

Elijah and the Prophets of Baal: When Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, a spectacular miracle pointed to the true God. The result: “When all the people saw this, they fell on their knees and said, ‘The LORD, he is God! The LORD, he is God!’” (1 Kings 18:39, EHV). Witnessing a miracle led these people to faith.

Doubting Thomas: Thomas refused to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead (John 20:24-29, EHV). Thomas said, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe.” Later Jesus appeared to Thomas, who said to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus replied, “Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Seeing the risen Lord led Thomas to faith. *None* of the disciples believed Jesus had risen until they saw their risen Lord (Mark 16:9-14). Thomas was simply the last of the disciples to whom the risen Christ appeared. The great majority of people in all of history, even in Biblical times, never witnessed a sign miracle. Jesus calls them, and calls us today, “blessed” for believing without seeing.

Crossing the Red Sea: The Israelites were led to faith by witnessing God drown the entire Egyptian army in the Red Sea. “Israel saw the mighty hand which the Lord put into action against the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in Moses, his servant.” (Exodus 14:31, EHV)

Miracles can remove barriers to the gospel and even point to the true God. Seeing the resurrected Jesus certainly pointed to the true God. Seeing Jesus alive dispelled any reasoning that Jesus would be unable to raise himself, even though he raised others. That temptation and others were eliminated by seeing a miracle, allowing God to work faith through the means he chose—the gospel.

Rich Man and Lazarus

The forgoing also explains the words from the parable of the rich man and Lazarus: “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31, EHV). If these brothers continued to reject the gospel, then they will never have faith. Witnessing a miracle, like someone rising from the dead, does not create faith. The best a miracle can do is break down barriers to the gospel, and in some cases, point to the true God. Witnessing a miracle often did NOT lead to faith. Look at the people of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. They witnessed miracles yet did not come to faith.

Can Witnessing Good Works Lead to Faith?

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its flavor, how will it become salty again? Then it is no good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled on by people. You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill cannot be hidden. People do not light a lamp and put it under a basket. No, they put it on a stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. In the same way let your light shine in people’s presence, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” Matthew 5:13-16 (EHV)

Witnessing the good works of a Christian can lead an unbeliever to faith. That unbeliever may ask himself, “What makes this Christian do these good things? What does he have that I don’t have that makes him so kind to others?” Witnessing good works could lead the unbeliever to listen to the gospel message, through which God can bring that person to faith. God can use the good works of a Christian to break down barriers to the gospel.

Daniel Deutschlander put it this way as he comments on this passage in several of his books,

Jesus connects our lives to our doctrine when he tells us, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). The life that is seen by others as flowing from the Word of God may well draw others to hear that Word.³

Jesus reminds us that a life of good works, which by definition is a life that conforms to the law, is even a tool by which he would draw others to hear the gospel. He tells us, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).⁴

How many have come to hear the gospel because of the peace and the order, the decency and the usefulness to others that they saw in the life of a humble and pious Christian? Such a life certainly brought praise to the Father on those occasions—however rare they may be—when someone was first drawn to hear the gospel by the light of Christ radiating from the life of a Christian!⁵

Lyle Lange comments on this and other passages,

Christians will want their lives to give testimony to others of God’s grace, so others will desire to know what God has done for us.⁶

Armin Panning wrote a 16-page article on this passage. In the following quote he makes the point that “Good deeds are an outreach tool,”

³ Daniel M. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds—The Splendor of Christian Doctrine* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2015), 211.

⁴ Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds*, 241.

⁵ Daniel M. Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle—Following the Scriptural Road* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2011), 144.

⁶ Lyle W. Lange, *God So Loved the World—A Study of Christian Doctrine* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2005), 382.

He allows us to be his agents in bringing others to praise his name. It is that encouragement especially which is in evidence when Christ urges us, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” Recall that Christ called his disciples “the light of the world.” Outsiders and worldlings are to see them, like a city set on a hill, and are to be drawn and attracted to what they have to offer. This is true godliness for a godless age. There is a mission consideration involved in letting our light shine. We perhaps don’t often think of it in that way, but Jesus is virtually saying, “Good deeds are an outreach tool.” They are to be instrumental in building the church.⁷

The reflected light of the Savior is a powerful force. Paul realized that, and to spread its mighty beams he enlisted the help of others. For example, he urges the Philippians to live their faith to the full so that “you may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke in the minds of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Php 2:14). Their work, and that of many others, was not without effect. Throughout the ages dedicated light bearers have reflected their Savior and thereby have led countless thousands to praise our gracious Father in heaven. From generation to generation there has been true godliness for each godless age.⁸

Here is another passage showing that witnessing the good works of a Christian can lead to faith,

Live an honorable life among the Gentiles so that even though they slander you as evildoers, when they observe your noble deeds, they may glorify God on the day he visits us. 1 Peter 2:12 (EHV)

⁷ Armin J. Panning, “‘LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE BEFORE MEN’ Godliness for a Godless Age,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, vol. 83 no. 4 (fall 1986), 287.
⁸ Panning, 288.

Daniel Deutschlander comments on this passage,

A Christian neighbor or coworker acts as a priest when he seeks and finds opportunities to share the gospel with those around him. That sharing may come when someone asks him something like this, “What makes you tick anyway? You seem different.”⁹

David Kuske comments on this passage,

Peter urges them (and us) to cling to a noble, praiseworthy way of life—a way of life that is honorable also to those living a life of sin. The purpose/goal of living such a life is to turn the tables on those who run Christians down as evildoers. When and if such people take the time to observe what Christians are doing, they may begin to be drawn to the God whom Peter’s readers (and we) are thanking by living this kind of life. And they end up praising God when the Holy Spirit turns them from unbelief to faith.¹⁰

Peter continues in his epistle by applying this point to wives with unbelieving husbands. Peter says unbelieving husbands,

...might be won over without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your respectful and holy behavior. 1 Peter 3:1b-2 (EHV)

David Kuske comments on this 1 Peter passage,

Peter continues to encourage his readers to live a praiseworthy life in order to win others for Christ (2:12). He writes to Christian wives who have unbelieving husbands and tells them that they can win their spouses without saying a word.¹¹ ...Peter, while referring particularly to the yielding of Christian wives to their husbands, is also thinking of other conduct

⁹ Deutschlander, *Lutheran Middle*, 184.

¹⁰ David P. Kuske, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Peter, Jude* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2015), 109.

¹¹ Kuske, 156.

their husbands might observe. Things such as not being unfaithful to their husbands, not being selfish, not using guile to get what they want, etc.¹²

Mark Jeske puts it this way,

God's way is for the believing wife to treat her husband well—in this way the silent testimony of her love and submission will make Jesus Christ look good, and the husband may later come to faith because of the wonderful way in which she treats him.¹³

There are more Scripture passages where God connects faith to things other than the gospel, such as 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, John 2:11, and John 14:11. As with the passages we already examined, WELS authors comment on each of these passages with remarks about removing obstacles to the gospel.

Apologetics

We have discussed how God can use miracles and good works to break down barriers to the gospel. An unbeliever who witnesses a miracle, or sees the good works of a Christian, may be more likely to listen to the gospel, and through that gospel, God can work faith. Apologetics has something in common with miracles and good works. Apologetics can also remove barriers to the gospel, and like miracles, apologetics may even point to the true God. Scripture shows a place for apologetics (extra-biblical arguments from history, science, logic, etc.) in our ministry to believers and in our ministry to unbelievers.

Ministry to Believers: Apologetics can help *believers* by blunting temptations, helping them see logical inconsistencies in unbelief, and helping them better understand spiritual truths. In places like 1 Corinthians chapters 9 and 15, Paul uses many logical arguments when addressing believers.

¹² Kuske, 144.

¹³ Mark A. Jeske, *James, Peter, John, Jude—The People's Bible*, 2nd ed. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2002) 102.

Ministry to Unbelievers: While witnessing to *unbelievers*, apologetics can sometimes be of value if it leads to an opportunity to share the gospel message. Jesus repeatedly used logical arguments to silence unbelievers.¹⁴ Peter and Paul sometimes preceded their gospel message with arguments from reason.¹⁵ Reason may also be useful in silencing certain objections to the validity of Scripture, but reason and non-biblical evidence at best provide a short introduction or a point of contact. Presentation of law and gospel should not be delayed.

In both these cases, ministry to believers and ministry to unbelievers, the role of apologetics is to remove barriers to the gospel. Apologetics may be commonplace in ministry to *believers*. In ministry to *unbelievers*, apologetics has a more limited role—that of leading the unbeliever to listen to the gospel message.

Siegbert Becker comments that Luther supported using arguments from reason (extra-biblical claims) in our apologetic, “All of these examples make it abundantly clear that Luther is not averse to the use of reason in the area of apologetics.”¹⁶

David Valleskey writes about using apologetics in ministry to unbelievers,

Apologetics can properly serve a helping role in evangelism. It can assist in clearing away misconceptions that may have resulted in a person being unwilling to listen seriously to what the Scriptures say. ...It won't make a Christian of a person, but it may well result in his willingness to keep listening. If apologetics has accomplished that, it has done its job.¹⁷

Angus Menuge mentions an important reason for using apologetics,

Likewise, in a world beset by religious pluralism, we need to give people a reason to think that Christianity alone, and not

¹⁴ *Matthew 12:9-14, 12:24-29, 21:23-27, 22:15-22; Luke 13:15-16.*

¹⁵ *Acts 2:14-15; 14:15-17; 17:22,23,28.*

¹⁶ Siegbert W. Becker, *The Foolishness of God—The Place of Reason in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1982) 182.

¹⁷ David J. Valleskey, *We Believe—Therefore We Speak, The Theology and Practice of Evangelism* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1995), 111-113.

its many competitors, is faith worthy, so that they start to look at its claims. Only then, as they encounter the Word, can we relinquish responsibility and leave it to the Holy Spirit to draw them to personal faith. In the collaborative, community project that Christian apologetics should be, scientists can contribute their insights into how Christian conviction supports science as well as hard evidence that supports a Christian worldview.¹⁸

This article will close with a great quote from Lyle Lange, who at the time was a professor at Martin Luther College. He asks Confessional Lutherans to use “more apologetics” and also discusses using apologetics in ministry to Christians [**bold italics in original**],

Apologetics is a natural outgrowth of our faith in Christ. Christians do apologetics. Apologetics has often been called “pre-evangelism.” I would rather put it this way: Apologetics may involve “pre-evangelism” (removing obstacles which prevent us from sharing the gospel). However, Lutheran (biblical) apologetics *is* evangelism. ...I believe there is a need for more apologetics. Our students are looking for answers to the questions they have and the questions others have posed to them. These questions may come from parents, siblings, relatives, friends, dates, fiancés, spouses, or people with whom they work. Our students sincerely desire to be able to give people a reason for the hope they have. Are we meeting their needs, or, are we sending them out into a hostile world poorly equipped to deal with the barrage of questions they will face?¹⁹

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¹⁸ Angus Menuge, “The Vocation of Scientist,” in *Here We Stand—A Confessional Christian Study of Worldviews*, editor Curtis A. Jahn (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2010), 253.

¹⁹ Lyle W. Lange, “Lutheran Apologetics: From Our Classrooms and into the World,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (Dec 2011): 335, 369. <http://www.blts.edu/wp-content/uploads/lsq/51-4.pdf> (accessed 1-3-20)