

Some Words About...

by Terence Y. Mullins

This article appeared in [Lutheran Partners](#), January / February 2006 • Volume 22 • Number 1

Apologia (explanation)

The Greek word *apologia* meant an explanation. Josephus quotes Antipater (who was accused of attempting to poison his father, King Herod) as saying, “Father, lend an unprejudiced ear to my explanation” (Wars 1:621) and, later, “You, father, have given my explanation yourself” (1:630). His explanation was very moving, but the poison was brought forth and tried on a prisoner who immediately fell down dead (1:630). Explain that away!

New Testament

Paul, facing an angry mob, says, “Listen to my explanation to you now” (Acts 22:1). And because he spoke to them in Hebrew, they listened — up to a point.

Festus points out that Romans give an accused person opportunity to face his accusers and “give an explanation about the accusation” (Acts 25:16). That suited Paul just fine.

In response to some questions about his apostleship, Paul wrote to the Corinthians “This is my explanation to those who question me” (1 Corinthians 9:3). His explanation was in terms of things that were beyond dispute, things that were well known, and things that they had observed when he was among them. (In the chapters that follow, it becomes clear that those who would deny that he was an apostle were looking for extraordinary actions or events in connection with his ministry — things mystical, perhaps bizarre — as signs that he was an apostle. On the contrary, Paul’s explanation of his status as an apostle is not in terms of speaking in strange languages or of anything bizarre but in terms of preaching the gospel clearly and serving his fellow Christians and his God in love.) And he compared his apostolicity to others.

In 2 Corinthians 7:11 Paul, apparently based on information from someone, had written a letter that hurt the feelings of the Corinthians. Titus brought Paul a letter that cleared things up. Now Paul says he is actually glad he wrote the letter, because their hurt feelings had “aroused them and led to an explanation, then indignation, then anxiety, then resentment, then zeal and then to punishment” (of the troublemaker).

In his letter to the Philippians Paul writes that they “share my grace both in the explanation and affirmation of the gospel” (1:7). Later he says that some preach Christ to spite him but others out of love, “knowing that I stand for the explanation of the gospel” (1:16). It seems that those who Paul says preach Christ in a different way from his, and do so to spite him, must have resisted any attempt to explain how the gospel affects daily living but nevertheless still preached Christ, and Paul said that at least pleased him.

Apparently, there had been a clash between Paul and some others, perhaps on doctrinal matters, and he initially came out second best. So Paul warns Timothy about Alexander the coppersmith who is antagonistic toward their message and “on my first explanation no one was on my side but all rejected me” (2 Timothy 4:16).

Peter tells his fellow Christians, “Be ready to give an explanation to all who inquire about the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15).

Today

Explanations are necessary if we are to communicate Christian truth coherently. In his Small Catechism Luther constantly stated the church’s historic treasure and asked “What does this mean?” followed by an explanation. For each commandment in turn he put the question and gave a simple, clear, and unequivocal explanation of the commandment. He did the same for the articles of the Creed and the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer.

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Such explanations of central elements of the Christian faith transferred them from mystical forms into vital forces within the individual's life. Keeping the commandments, for example, ceased to be a matter of trying to conform to the dictates pronounced on a holy mountain centuries ago and became a matter of so reverencing, loving, and trusting God that we live as God wants us to live. The explanation gives immediacy to the commandment and makes it part of a relationship with God rather than an impersonal mandate.

Today's preachers can learn from Luther's approach. Sermons need to be explanations of truth, not entertaining monologues.

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