

23T06 Church we have a Problem

Hello my friends. Thanks for joining me today for an @ the PUNLA coffee table.

Today, I want to share my thoughts on what I titled “the questions of the faithful”.

Let’s pray. Heavenly Father please guide our discussion today. Help me to stay out of the way, so you can use me. If I say anything wrong, please don’t let them remember my errand words but remember what you want them to hear regardless of my words. We trust you and we know you have promised the wisdom we need to understand your word in the Bible. Help us to let the Holy Spirit lead us and guide us. Bless our time together and I pray all these things in your name Lord Jesus. Amen.

First before we get started, this discussion is based on a paper I wrote in a seminary class. The paper was actually titled Apologetics and the Local Church – Answering the Questions of the Faithful. For those of you that are not familiar with the term Apologetics, it just means to defend your faith. It’s a seminary term, I don’t like the term personally, I would rather it was just called defending our faith but oh well.

What is the role of Apologetics in your local church? The answer to this question will define the direction and zeal of any local church congregation. In the book Pagan Christianity , the authors stress the need to apply Christian Apologetic techniques and teaching to all areas. The defense of our beliefs or Apologetics has many uses and objectives, but for the purposes of this paper, I want to concentrate on the role of Apologetics in supporting the individual attenders of the local church.

Every churchgoer has something they question or don’t understand. Everyone, including myself, has things we don’t understand or find confusing. Typically, we toss these issues and ideas into what I figuratively refer to as the “*junk drawer*” of the “*I don’t know*” of our faith. All sorts of Christian doctrines and traditions, interpretations of scriptures and defenses of our core beliefs get tossed into this figurative “*junk drawer.*” The average churchgoer has many of these. However, the common problem is the “junk drawer” gets fuller and fuller until it starts spilling out, and affecting our confidence and security in our faith. Most churchgoers simply defer to the local pastor, assuming whatever the local pastor teaches is in fact the biblical truth. This apparent unquestioning approach often gives rise to fermenting doubts. If we make no attempt to address these concerns and questions, then the eventual outcomes are either rejection or apathy. You can ignore it until it is beyond solution or address it and let the community of knowledge shape plausible solutions for our questions.

I propose that we cultivate open communication that can demonstrate that the Christian worldview, which as author Nancey Pearsey states it, “*provides an overarching system that reveals truth in every part of our lives.*” The church community should be supporting each other in resolving any churchgoer’s question from a Christian worldview using objective truths, reason and logic.

Why Focus on Members, not the Unchurched World? To paraphrase the words of Apollo 13 mission astronaut Jim Lovell *“Houston, we have a problem.”* These are not his exact words but most of us probably know that they had a problem, an explosion which wrecked part of their spacecraft enroute to the Moon. Let me say it this way, Church, we have a problem. As the culture war or social revolution has raged on around us, there has been an ever widening divide between church and culture as well as pastor and churchgoer. Authors Jaques Barzan and Nancy Pearcey speak about the various forms of dualist thought which are rampant in our world today. Pearcey describes how this divided thought undermines the objective truth, goodness and beauty that our Christian worldview provides. Instead, the culture has relegated our Christian thought to realm of wishful thinking and convenient delusion.

Gerald Hiestand writes about the *“pastor-flock divide”* and explains how the typical churchgoer sees Theology as having no impact on their lives. Hiestand continues *“It is too far removed from the real needs”* of people making the issues of Theology *“utterly irrelevant to life, worship and mission of the church.”* Hiestand has just summarized what a vast majority of churchgoers believe that the church is not relevant to issues outside the church. This is an uphill battle my friends. For far too long we have conceded ground to the culture, such that now in most cultural circles the church is unimportant, irrelevant, and unwanted.

I know many will rebuff me for not focusing on the unchurched masses in the world today. Without a doubt, evangelism is needed in our world today and there is a need for excellent apologetics solutions to address the many questions and perspectives that are causing so much confusion in the world today. But this is unfortunately just as true inside the church walls as outside. In his book *the Unsaved Christian*, Dean Inserra says the largest evangelistic opportunity is in the pews of our churches. Inserra goes on to assert that our churches are full of what he calls *“cultural Christians.”* They have zeal to attend church but lack reasons or convictions for their faith.

In the article titled, *Why Go To Church?*, Dale Meyer says, *“Today it's a carnival of narratives and the church is one stand amidst all the rides, games and sideshows. Some are hucksters; others not.”* Churchgoers have to face an onslaught of conflicting views every day. The Church community should be the place where we come together and discuss these many confusing concepts, so we know how to answer, respond and support each other. I believe the church community should be a voice of reason and logical thought, based on objective truths to counter the relativistic and dualistic nonsense of our times.

Author John Vitek reports research that shows young people today growing up in the church have not been equipped with logical or reason based perspectives on which to base their beliefs. Therefore, in the absence of a plausible answer, they formulate their own answer from the world around them which most often results in disaffiliation or rejection of their principles of faith. Interestingly, Chris Norton proposes that the resurgence of apologetics in youth ministries is because teens are asking more questions about why people believe the way they do. Norton said, *“Those who thought*

that kids in a postmodern world don't want an ideology were wrong." Norton goes on in his article to quote many statistics that support the concept that people, especially young people, have questions, and they are looking for answers. They aren't rejecting their faith because they don't know the church and its doctrines, they just don't see how those beliefs apply to them. They can't see how faith is meeting their emotional needs. The result is most young people are unsure of their religious beliefs and why.

C.S. Lewis captured this perfectly in his book *Screwtape Letters*. In the story the senior demon, Screwtape, advises on how to dissuade people from taking seriously the Christian faith. *"For in so doing, skeptics and other lukewarm believers will be less convinced of Christianity."* In another section he states, *"He doesn't think of doctrines as primarily true or false, but as academic or practical, outworn or contemporary."*

C.S. Lewis knew this to be true, people have questions. As long as they don't ask them or get answers, then their faith is at risk. They might even reject their faith completely and they definitely won't be in a position to defend their faith to the unchurched. Let me say it again. Church, we have a problem.

So, What Can We Do? I understand that the problems seem to be many. The divide between pastors and their flock (churchgoers) grows wider with each passing year. But these problems are really opportunities for a follower of Jesus.

One of my favorite New Testament textual critics, Dr. Daniel Wallace often addresses the problems about textual criticism this same way. Dr. Daniel Wallace is Executive Director of the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts (CSNTM) and senior research professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary. His lectures typically include all the many variations and discrepancies in the more than five thousand ancient Greek New Testament manuscripts. Dr. Wallace once said about this, *"Now that all the Christians want to go kill themselves, take heart there is good news."* There is always good news when you are following the king of the universe. There are tough questions about the authenticity and accuracy of the Bible, but Dr. Wallace encourages those questions. Why, you might ask? The questions are good because they force us to search, research, study and resolve the issues, instead of ignoring or burying them in our *"junk drawer."* The research and linguistics knowledge of Dr. Wallace and scholars like him, give us great evidence for our confidence in the bible. So, yes asking the question is good. It is good because now we can answer the critics. This helps our confidence, resilience, and strengthens our walk with Jesus.

The church, as a whole, but more specifically the leaders in the local church, need to learn what Darrel Bock and Mike Del Rosario refer to as *"understanding the triphonics in dialogue."* Triphonics refers to something playing on three sound channels at once. Dialogue Triphonics include three primary levels: 1) the topic at hand, 2) a combination of emotions, perceptions, and judgements, and 3) how our identity and self-understanding impact what we are discussing. This sounds very difficult, but this is just a practical application of James 1:19 (NIV) *"My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."*

Listening is a lost art in our culture. Typically, in the world, the loudest, most persistent voice is heard. This tramples those with sincere questions. Both pastors and church leaders need to learn to listen better. If we can become better listeners, then I believe we will begin to hear and see the questions which are eroding the confidence of the average churchgoer. The first thing we must do is foster an environment where questions are encouraged. Church, we can do this.

Questions are Good. I would like to share a couple experiences from my life that show the power of a question. I hope to demonstrate how the listeners response affects the outcome.

In the early 2000's my wife and I attended a large church near Houston Texas. I would not categorize it as a megachurch, but it held many services on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday to accommodate the many thousands that attended. I actually knew the lead pastor well and our family served diligently in many ministries of the church. The pastor had always said from the pulpit that if anyone had questions, just ask one of the pastors. One weekend the pastor was teaching from Acts 8:26-40, the story of the Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Then he said something odd. Acts 8:37 is the easiest verse to memorize in the Bible, because it's not there. I was very puzzled by this because my bible had a verse 37. So, I sent an email to the associate pastor I was working with at the time and asked a question that changed my path as a follower of Jesus forever. What did the lead pastor mean, verse 37 isn't there and why does he think this. I was hoping to get some insight from a seminary class or knowledge the pastor had I was unaware of. What happened next still shocks me, when I think about it. The associate pastor responded by telling me that I should not be asking a question like this. By asking questions, I was challenging the pastor. Over the course of several emails, I eventually quoted 1 John 4:1 as the reason I was willing to challenge the pastor's viewpoint. 1 John 4:1 (NIV) *"Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."* This resulted in the associate pastor erupting and accusing me of calling the lead pastor a heretic. I believed this scripture was telling us to own our faith, not just trust what others say is true. My wife had been raised in a Christian cult and had been taught to accept what pastors told her without question. As she read and studied the bible, the cults beliefs became exposed as what they were. Because of the letters 1/2/3 John, and the concept of testing every spirit, she had gotten free from the cult.

See how dangerous poor listening is? Not only was the question I asked innocent, but I was looking for information. Instead, the question was misconstrued, challenged, and then quite angrily responded to. Now looking back at it, the result of this could have been either rejection or apathy. By God's grace our response was to search harder and longer for an answer. Many faced with this type of challenge would fear to ever ask another question. If they wanted to remain in the church, they would devolve into the apathy mode. Shove the question into their faith junk drawer and stop asking questions. And the junk drawer would just keep getting fuller. Alternatively, another likely response would be anger. If angered, however, many would work themselves into

the mode of rejection. This rejection would result in shoving this question with the many others into their faith junk drawer. This anger could easily result in emptying the drawer entirely into the trash bin, and leaving the church or possibly rejecting their faith all together. In our case we did eventually leave the church for a church closer to where we live. We could never get past the way we had been treated. A couple years later that associate pastor was let go by the church. By God's grace, in this instance we fought for our faith and continued to look for answers.

Acts 8:36-38 (NKJV) *³⁶Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" ³⁷Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." ³⁸So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him."*

I have researched and now know the answer to my question. Acts 8:37 is not in many modern translations because some of the older manuscript fragments that have been found do not have this verse. To me the story is missing the motivation for the baptism without verse 37. I am personally glad my bible still has Acts 8:37.

Another such event took place a few years ago. Our family had a question about eschatology. In an effort to be brief, I won't go in the details of this specific question I asked our pastor. His response was, "thanks for the perspective, let me research it a little, then we can talk about it." Can you see the difference? The receptiveness to the asking of the question. The entire tone of the conversation is now different. Now we have an atmosphere of discovery. No authority, no arrogance, just let's see. This is the concept of fostering questions. Now I will tell you we do not always agree with our pastor, but that's actually okay. We share and study different perspectives, cross reference the scriptures and study original language transcripts, all in the spirit of discovery. This is what we need to be fostering in our local churches to prepare people to face the craziness of our world. Whenever anyone is confronted by something that troubles them, we as the local church should be able to come alongside them. We should ask those questions with them. Together we should search for resolutions based on the word of God instead of blind obedience to religious traditions and dogma.

Foundations for Addressing Questions are critical. In order to foster an environment for questions we also need to build a structure for addressing those questions. The first and most critical of these is that the Bible is God's Word, and as such the Bible has no contradictions in message. This will require leaders in the local church to become informed about textual criticism. Like I mentioned earlier, there are many excellent scholars who have done the research to provide us with very compelling support of the Bible, its content and its divine inspiration.

Secondly, we need to develop methods which help us to recognize our bias. I call this the *"Bible Bias Test"*. In quick summary, any viewpoint, doctrine or tradition is only as strong as the bible verses that disagree with it. It's not about what supports you, it's

really about the arguments against your viewpoint. This is part of studying the bible contextually, historically, and culturally based on when it was written, not when and where we live.

These two build a structure for our foundation that will allow us to review and test viewpoints. It will allow us to explore multiple plausible explanations and reject those that are not supported by all scripture.

Now I know what you may be saying, not all questions are about the bible. This is true and false. Many questions may not be related directly to a bible text but I believe the wisdom of the bible can be applied to all questions with no exceptions.

The next part of the foundation we need to build is the objective nature of what God says is objective: truth, goodness and beauty. In short if God says it, it is. God is always right. But this may be an uphill battle with some churchgoers. In his article, Siniscalchi reminds us that most postmodernists do not see truth as an objective description of reality. As a result of this paradigmatic shift, the Church's central claims are no longer seen as binding. We must focus on building a foundation that counters this thought through examples, logic and reason. Siniscalchi goes on to stress how important it is for apologetics to stress the arguments for both beauty and goodness, along with objective truth as we build our structure for answering questions.

Now that we have a foundation for our question fostering environment, we need to resist some of the pitfalls that can derail this environment. Apologists must resist what Gaillardetz refers to as "*museum curators or debaters*", but instead promote the concept that we are all pilgrims eager for company on our journey. Gaillardetz frames this with five practical points: 1) be passionate and positive, 2) encourage dialogue, 3) be ecumenical, 4) historically responsible sense of church tradition, and 5) remain culturally engaged. This framework helps us to keep the "*all*" questions are good foundation while providing us with guide rails to keep our discussions focused back on what God says, instead of what people say.

Dale Meyer writes that, "*we should tell the Christian story and our personal Christian stories in order to witness to our faith amidst today's plurality of stories.*" Our experiences with similar problems and questions are powerful tools to pull the world outside of the walls of the church into our discussions. Personal stories backed up by bible wisdom is a very useful method to breaking the ice for dialogue about most issues.

We also need to remember we won't always agree. It is important to address this as we build our foundations. If we don't, questions will persist. Yannich Imbert discusses this by saying, "*diversity of opinions can make people dubious if any can be true.*" This is a common argument that the new-Atheists use. The argument is if several options exist, then all of them are false. But that same reasoning does not work for scientific explanations or medicine, where there are often multiple plausible explanations or theories. The existence of multiple options does not automatically result in the

conclusion all must be false. We must foster an environment where thoughts can be shared then tested against biblical wisdom, reason, and logic.

Let's read 2 Cor 10:3-5 (NKJV) . *³For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. ⁴For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, ⁵casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."*

Fostering an environment that encourages questions provides us a forum to pull down the strongholds of false worldview. By developing a structure with tools for addressing these questions, it allows the church to destroy false arguments and build strong foundations for our church community to unite around. These foundations build our confidence and develop the core objective principles of truth, goodness and beauty.

We need to actively tear down the arguments for any dualist thought, or as author Nancy Pearcey states it *"liberating Christianity for the its cultural captivity."*

Church, we have work to do.

Let's Pray

Father God, thank you for giving us the resources and sources to answer these tough questions. We know you know all things. When we see how things fit perfectly in your plan. Wow. Only with God is this possible Thank you for giving us the Holy Spirit to guide us and help us. Help us to open the Bible and look into history to answer our questions. I pray these things in your name Lord Jesus, Amen

Okay. We as the body of Christ, the church community need to foster an environment where people feel like they can ask any question. In fact, if you have a question send it to me. I'm going to be doing some research on what those questions are. Send your question to me at questions@punla.org.

So why is this important. We need to help each other answer these questions. So we can have confidence in our faith and help others to find that confidence.

Thank you for joining me @ the PUNLA Coffee Table today. If you liked the message, please share the link with a friend. Send me comments, my email should be on the screen.

Until next time @ the PUNLA Coffee Table. God bless.

Bibliography

1. Lewis, C.S. *"The Screwtape Letters."* New York: Macmillan, 1944.
2. The Holy Bible, New King James Version. Thomas Nelson, 1982.
3. Barzun, Jaques. *"From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life, 1500 to the Present."* New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
4. Gaillardetz, Richard R. "Do We Need a New(er) Apologetics?." *America*, 190 no 3 (February 02 2004): 26-33.
5. Hiestand, Gerald. "Pastor-Scholar to Professor-Scholar: Exploring the Theological Disconnect Between the Academy and the Local Church," *The Westminster Theological Journal*, 70 no 2 (Fall 2008): 355-369.
6. Pearcey, Nancy. *"Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity."* Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 2008.
7. Meyer, Dale A. "Why Go To Church?." *Concordia Journal*, 36 no 2 (September 2010): 89-96.
8. Holy Bible, New International Version. Biblica, Inc, 2011.
9. Siniscalchi, Glenn B. "Postmodernism and the Need for Rational Apologetics in a Post-Conciliar Church." *Heythrop Journal*, 52 no 5 (September 2011): 751-771.
10. Norton, Chris. "The Return of Reasons: Apologetics Makes a Comeback in Youth Ministry." *Christianity Today*, 55 no 9 (September 2011): 15.
11. Viola, Frank and Barna, George. *"Pagan Christianity? -Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices."* Carol Stream IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2012.
12. Imbert, Yannick. "The End of Reason: New Atheists and the Bible." *European Journal of Theology*, 22 no 1 (2013): 50-64.
13. Vitek, John M. "Better Understanding, Not Apologetics, Will Best Serve 'Nones'." *National Catholic Reporter*, 54 no 23 (August - September 2018): 8.
14. Wallace, Daniel. lecture ref. Veritas Forum, "How Badly Was the New Testament Corrupted?," at South Dakota State University (<https://youtu.be/zZ5cgQUJnrl>) (11/7/2018).
15. Inserra, Dean. *The Unserved Christian: Reaching Cultural Christianity with the Gospel.* Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2019.
16. Bock, Darrell L; Del Rosario, Mikel. "The Table Briefing: Dialogical Apologetics and Difficult Spiritual Conversations." *Bibliotheca sacra*, 177 no 706 (April - June 2020): 234-240.
17. Ken Wehrman, "the Bible Bias Test," PUNLA Christian Ministries (10/25/2021) (<https://punlacoffeetable.org/the-bible-bias-test>).