

You Are Bringing Strange Things to Our Ears: Christian Apologetics for a Postmodern Age

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Introduction

We are called to serve the cause of Christ at one of the crucial turning points in human history. The generations now living have witnessed an explosion of knowledge, the collapse of distance, and the rising and falling of empires. Cultures and societies have been radically transformed. Expansive wealth has brought great material comfort, but the most basic structures of society are undermined. Families are fractured, lawlessness abounds, violence invades, and the media bring a constant stream of chaos into our lives.

Most souls are homeless, and the reality of truth is itself denied. Postmodern Americans accept meaning as a replacement for truth and exchange worldviews as quickly as they try on new clothes.

This is a very strange time to proclaim and defend the Christian faith. Evangelism is difficult in an age when most persons think that their most basic problems are rooted in a lack of self-esteem and when personal choice is the all-determining reality of the marketplace. The task of apologetics is complicated by the postmodern condition. How do you defend the faith to persons unwilling to make any judgment concerning truth?

In a very real sense, the defense of the faith has fallen on hard times. The liberal churches and denominations have so

accommodated themselves to modernity that there is virtually nothing left to defend, except perhaps the Golden Rule. Postmodernism has been a great gift to the liberal churches, for it has given them new ways to sound like they are saying something, without running the risk of offending anyone.

Evangelicals seem perplexed by the postmodern condition. Some see postmodernism as a new opportunity—the death of Enlightenment rationality. Others, myself included, see postmodernism as modernity dressed up for a new millennium. In any case, the apologetic task is stranger than it used to be.

We can think back to the glory days when apologetic giants walked the earth. The early church had Apologists and theologians such as Athanasius and Augustine, Irenaeus and Cyprian, Ambrose of Milan and Anselm of Canterbury, Tertullian and Chrysostom. We remember the medieval Catholics such as Thomas Aquinas, and surely the Reformers; Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and Knox. In our own nation, we think of Jonathan Edwards, Gresham Machen, Carl F. H. Henry, and Francis Schaeffer. These men and their kind were unapologetic apologists, known for their defense and proclamation of the truth.

They had substantial opponents as

well. The famous skeptic philosopher David Hume was once observed headed to hear George Whitefield preach one of his five o'clock morning messages on Christ. The observer chided Hume: "I didn't think you believe in God." Hume replied, and referred to Whitefield: "I don't. But I am convinced this man does."

The times have certainly changed. England's King Henry VIII was granted the title "Defender of the Faith" in 1521 by Pope Leo X, who was grateful for Henry's attack on Martin Luther. Though Henry was to make his own break with the papacy in later years, successive British monarchs have retained the title, down to Elizabeth II. Queen Elizabeth, we might note, has been a singularly ineffectual "Defender of the Faith." Her apologetic maxim seems to be reducible to the doctrinal principle, "We are not amused."

Nevertheless, Elizabeth is to be the last of the British monarchs to be crowned with this title. Charles, the current Prince of Wales, is likely to be England's first New Age king, complete with belief in reincarnation, panentheistic worldview, and postmodern morals. In a recent interview, Charles declared himself unwilling to take on the title, "Defender of the Faith." Better, he said, to be known as "Defender of *Faith*" since, "People have fought each other to the death over these things, which seems to me a peculiar waste of people's energies."¹ He added that he would be the "defender of the Divine in existence, the pattern of the Divine which is, I think, in all of us but which, because we are human beings, can be expressed in so many different ways."² So, the future King Charles will defend *faith*, but no particular faith, including Christianity, and especially the Church of England, of which he will be head. In this

manner, Charles will be the perfect king for a church whose bishops routinely deny the most basic doctrines of the Christian faith.

The shift from modernity to postmodernity has not been pretty. In the end, relativism is a more deadly enemy than denial, for it rejects the very possibility of truth, even as it allows for infinite forms of meaning. This has not made the apologetic task any easier.

In the premodern age, the great issue was *which* supernatural claims are justified and true. In the modern age the assumption was that *no* supernatural claims are justified or true. In the ethereal vapors of postmodernity, *any* supernatural claim is assumed to be true, whether justified or not. But no claim to truth can be absolute, universal, or exclusive.

Oddly enough, it can make the Christian apologist almost sentimental about Enlightenment rationalism. We can take the honest, straightforward, bold denial of Christianity head-on. At least a true atheist knows what he denies. Postmodernity's smug, "whatever," pales against Friedrich Nietzsche's bold claim that God is dead, and that we have killed him.

The vacuous and unthinking relativism of the postmodern mind is numbing. You will forgive me for thinking that the shift from Bertrand Russell and Karl Marx to Bill Moyers and Phil Donahue is not social or intellectual progress.

This has complicated the work of theological liberals as well. We have gone from Rudolf Bultmann's program of supernatural denial by *demythologization* to our culture's current program of what I call *hypermythologization*. We are witnessing the repaganization of western civilization. The old pagan cults are back, and new

cults are plentiful.

Clearly, not all modernists have turned to pondering crystals and hugging sacred trees. Modernity's end stage is not a pretty sight. Consider the Jesus Seminar, whose purpose is to deny biblical Christology while presenting Jesus as a Palestinian smart aleck and political agitator ready for a tenure-track appointment at the nearest liberal divinity school. In America we are treated to Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong and his quest to take Christianity beyond monotheism. In the Church of England, the Bishop of Edinburgh, the Primate of Scotland, denies that the Bible is of any use in morality.

Having denied the virgin birth, miracles, heaven and hell, biblical inspiration, the incarnation, the resurrection, the Lord's return, scriptural morality, and virtually every other doctrine of the Christian faith, the liberals are left in a quandary—there is nothing left to deny.

In a sense, it is downright difficult to be a creative liberal these days. Just about the time you develop a new heresy, you find out that someone else has already written the book, collected the royalties, and appeared on CNN.

Some suggest that the age of apologetics is over. I intend to argue that the apologetic task has never been more pressing, more urgent, or more important. Indeed, I believe that at this critical time of cultural and intellectual transition, the Christian ministry, taken as a whole, must be understood as an apologetic calling. Apologetics—the task of setting forth the truth claims of Christianity and arguing for the unique truthfulness of the Christian faith—must be the major mode of ministry in a postmodern age.

This means that apologetics cannot be reduced to a course taken at the seminary

or a book securely placed on the shelves. Great Commission proclamation in our generation must be accompanied by apologetic ministry. Gospel witness must be undergirded by the defense of truth. Personal evangelism will require cultural dexterity. The task of world missions reminds us that we are in a war of world-views.

I believe there are several distinct apologetic challenges facing the church in the postmodern age. Internally, the church must defend the faith against ignorance, against compromise, against doctrinal apathy, and against denial. The church now suffers from a breathtaking deficit of doctrinal instruction and biblical truth. In some cases, the great truths of the Christian faith are unknown. In other cases, these truths are left dormant and untaught. Beyond this, the very real dangers of doctrinal corrosion and heresy threaten.

Externally, the Gospel must be defended against secular atheism, postmodern relativism, naturalistic scientism, materialism, and current syncretisms. The Gospel must be proclaimed in the face of rival systems of belief and alternative worldviews, new and old.

Paul's Model for Christian Apologetics

This is where the task of Christian apologetics began. In the Apostle Paul we find a model of Great Commission proclamation matched to an apologetic argument—an argument in defense of Christian truth. In Acts 17:16-34 we find Paul standing at Ground Zero of apologetic ministry in the first century.

Athens was the most intellectually sophisticated culture in the ancient world, and even in Paul's day it basked in its

retreating glory. Though Rome held political and military preeminence, Athens stood supreme in terms of cultural and intellectual influence. The centerpiece of Paul's visit to Athens is his message to the court of philosophers at the Areopagus, also known as Mars Hill.³

Some critics have claimed that Paul's experience on Mars Hill was a dismal failure. Luke presents it otherwise, however, and in this account we can learn a great deal about the proper defense of the faith. Several principles of a proper Christian apologetic become evident as we consider this great biblical text.

A Christian Apologetic Begins in a Provoked Spirit (Acts 17:16)

Paul observed the spiritual confusion of the Athenians and was overcome with concern. The sight of a city full of idols seized Paul with grief, and that grief turned him to proclaim the Gospel.

Luke records that Paul experienced *parōxynō*, a paroxysm, at the sight of such spiritual confusion. Athens was intellectually sophisticated—the arena where the ancient world's most famous philosophers had debated. This was the city of Pericles, Plato, and Socrates. But Paul was not impressed with the faded glory. He saw men and women in need of a Savior.

This text reminds us that a proper Christian apologetic begins in spiritual concern, not in intellectual snobbery or scorn. We preach Christ, not because Christianity is merely a superior philosophy or worldview, nor because we have been smart enough to embrace the Gospel, but because we have met the Savior, we have been claimed by the Gospel, we have been transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Our apologetic impulse is not a matter

of intellectual pride, but of spiritual concern. A dying world languishes in spiritual confusion. I wonder how many of us are grieved as Paul was grieved in his observation of Athens. Looking at the spiritual confusion of American culture, do we experience the paroxysm with which Paul was seized?

We live in a nation filled with idols of self-realization, material comfort, psychological salvation, sexual ecstasy, ambition, power, and success. Millions of Americans embrace New Age spiritualities in a quest for personal fulfillment and self-transcendence. The ancient paganisms of nature worship have emerged once again, along with esoteric and occultic practices.

As journalist Walter Truett Anderson observes, "Never before has any civilization made available to its populace such a smorgasboard of realities. Never before has a communications system like the contemporary mass media made information about religion—all religions—available to so many people. Never has a society allowed its people to become consumers of belief, and allowed belief—all beliefs—to become merchandise."⁴ Anderson notes that America has become the "belief basket of the world."⁵

I fear that we have become too acculturated, too blind, or too unimpressed with the paganisms and idolatries all around us. We betray a comfort level that Paul would certainly see as scandalous. Where is the outrage? Where is the gripping realization that millions of men and women are slaves to the idols of our age? Where is the courage to confront the idols on their own ground?

A Christian Apologetic is Focused on Gospel Proclamation (Acts 17:17)

Moved by a city full of idols, Paul went

to the synagogue and to the marketplace each day, presenting the claims of Christ and reasoning with both Jews and Gentiles.

The goal of a proper apologetic is not to win an argument, but to win souls. Apologetics separated from evangelism is unknown in the New Testament, and it is clearly foreign to the model offered by the Apostle Paul. The great missionary was about the business of preaching the Gospel, presenting the claims of Christ, and calling for men and women to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and be saved.

For too many evangelicals, the study of apologetics is reduced to philosophical structures and rational arguments. This is not Paul's method. He is not merely concerned with the justification of truth claims, but, more profoundly, he is concerned for the justification of sinners.

This is another reminder of the truth that every true theologian is an evangelist and every true evangelist is a theologian. Christianity is not a truth to be affirmed, but a Gospel to be received. Nevertheless, that Gospel possesses content and presents truth claims that demand our keenest arguments and boldest proclamation. Moved by the sight of idols, Paul preached Christ, and called for belief.

A Christian Apologetic Assumes a Context of Spiritual Confusion (Acts 17:18-21)

Paul's Gospel proclamation brought confusion to the Athenian intellectuals. The Epicureans, the forerunners of modern secularists, and the Stoics, committed to pantheistic rationalism, accused Paul of teaching nonsense.

Confusion marks the spiritual understanding of most Americans. Pollsters

report amazingly large numbers of Americans who profess belief in God, but live like atheists. The vast majority of Americans profess to be Christians, but have no concept of Christian belief or discipleship.

A quick look around the local trade bookshop will reveal something of the contours of America's spiritual confusion. Books on religion and spirituality abound, but most are empty of content. You know you are in a confused age when a popular book is entitled, *That's Funny, You Don't Look Buddhist: On Being a Faithful Jew and a Passionate Buddhist*.⁶ Sadly, this confusion has invaded our churches as well. An amazing number of Christians allow for belief in reincarnation, channeling, or other spiritualist manifestations.

The current popularity of angels is another symptom of our spiritual confusion. Americans now love to decorate their homes with angel figurines, artwork, calendars, and inspirational messages. These citizens may or may not believe in God, but they do believe in divine messengers, and they are always cute and friendly—the theological counterparts to the Smurfs.

To the Athenians—and to modern secular Americans—the preaching of the authentic Gospel sounds strange. "You are bringing some strange things to our ears," the Athenians responded to Paul. The Christian evangelist hears this same response today. In postmodern America, the Christian Gospel is strange in its whole and in its parts. Most Americans assume themselves to be good and decent persons. They are amused at the notion that they are sinners against God. We assume our need of therapy. The Gospel insists on our need of salvation. We want to work it out ourselves. The Gospel argues that this leads to death. We want to look within. The Gospel points us to Christ. We want

to do our part. The Gospel insists that Jesus paid it all. We demand to get what we deserve. The Gospel warns that this is exactly what we will receive, unless we turn to Christ in faith.

Grace is an alien concept in American culture. Sin is almost outlawed as a category. A substitutionary atonement sounds unfair. God in human flesh is too much to take. But that is what we preach.

“You are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean” (v. 20). The Athenians were confused by Paul’s preaching of Jesus and the resurrection. More explanation was needed. “He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,” accused others, charging Paul with the same offense that led to the execution of Socrates.

The Athenians and their tourists loved to spend their time telling or hearing something new—but not this new. Americans are consumers of meaning in like manner as they buy cars and clothing. They will test drive new spiritualities and try on a whole series of lifestyles. To many, the Gospel is just too strange, too counter-cultural, too propositional, too exclusive.

Paul was brought up on charges and gained a hearing at the Areopagus. “May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming?” (v. 19). The one offense certain to bring charges against the evangelist in our generation is the claim to objective, absolute, eternal, universal, exclusive truth. Polytheists, syncretists, and secularists are untroubled by the promotion of one more deity or spirituality in the cultural cafeteria. But preach Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life and the Gospel as the only message of salvation, and you will find yourself hauled off to the court of public scorn and

derision.

To contend for biblical morality in this culture is to run the risk of being cited for “hate speech.” We must assume a context of spiritual confusion, and this is often now a hostile confusion. The Gospel sounds not only strange, but threatening to the local deities.

A Christian Apologetic is Directed to a Spiritual Hunger (Acts 17:22-23)

Paul’s observation convinced him that the Athenians were a religious people. A deficit of religiosity was not the problem. The Athenians seemed to be fearful lest they miss any new philosophy, or neglect any unknown deity.

American culture is increasingly secularistic. The past century has seen the agenda of secularism accomplished in the courts, in the schools, in the marketplace, and in the media. And yet, Americans are among the most religious people in the world. The emptiness of the secular wasteland haunts most postmodern persons. They long for something more.

Many people declare themselves to live by scientific rationality, and yet they read the astrology charts, believe in alien abductions, line up to see bleeding statues, and talk about past lives. In America, even some atheists say they believe in miracles. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow suggests that “Americans are particularly fascinated with miraculous manifestations of the sacred because they are uncertain whether the sacred has really gone away.”⁷

Paul had taken account of the plentiful idols and houses of worship found in Athens. He noted that they were hedging their bets, lest they offend an unknown deity. Paul seized the opportunity. Brought before the court at the Areopagus, Paul

brought up the altar to an unknown god. “It just so happens that I know that God,” Paul asserted. “Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.”

This is surely a pattern for Christian apologetics in a postmodern age. We must seek constantly to turn spiritual hunger toward the true food of the Gospel of Christ. God has placed that hunger within lost persons so that they might desire Christ. We bear the stewardship of proclaiming the Gospel. We must muster the courage to confront confused post-moderns with the reality of their spiritual ignorance. Paul never allowed that this ignorance is an excuse, but it is a reality.

In their ignorance, Americans are feeding on a false diet of superstition and myths. The hunger is a place to start. Our challenge is to preach Christ as the only answer to that hunger.

A Christian Apologetic Begins with the Fundamental Issue of God’s Nature, Character, Power, and Authority (Acts 17:24-28)

Interestingly, Paul does not begin with Christ and the cross, but with the knowledge of God in creation. The God who created the world is not looking for Corinthian columns and the Parthenon, Paul argued. He does not dwell in temples made with human hands.

He is the author of life itself, preached Paul; and He needs nothing from us. Furthermore, He has made humanity and is Lord over all the nations. He sovereignly determines their times and boundaries.

You were partly right, said Paul, even as he quoted their poets. We are God’s children, but not in the sense you believe. In proclaiming God as the Creator, Ruler, and Sustainer of all things and all peoples, Paul was making a claim that far sur-

passed the claims of the Hellenistic deities.

Paul’s concern was to establish his preaching of Christ upon the larger foundation of the knowledge of the God of the Bible, Maker of Heaven and Earth. John Calvin organized his systematic theology around what he called the *duplex cognitio Domini*, the two-fold knowledge of God. We must start with the knowledge of God as Creator, but this is not sufficient to save. “Nevertheless, it is one thing to feel that God our Maker supports us by his power, governs us by his providence, nourishes us by his goodness, and attends us with all sorts of blessings—and another thing to embrace the reconciliation offered us in Christ.”⁸ It is a place to start.

A Christian Apologetic Confronts Error (Acts 17:29)

In this sense the apologetic task and the polemical task are related. Error must be confronted, heresy must be opposed, and false teachings must be corrected. Paul was bold to correct the Athenians with a firm injunction: “we ought not to think” false thoughts about God.

False theologies abound in the post-modern marketplace of ideas. Americans have revived old heresies and invented new ones. The Mormons believe that God is a celestial being with a sex partner. The ecological mystics believe that the world is God, the so-called Gaia Hypothesis. New Age devotees believe that God is infinite empowerment. Shirley MacLaine believes that God is . . . Shirley MacLaine.

The Athenians made idols out of marble and precious metals. Paul rebuked this practice, and proclaimed that the Divine Nature is not like gold or silver or stone. Furthermore, God is not “an image formed by the art and thought of man.”

Our culture is filled with images of gods formed by art and the thought of man. Our confrontation must be bold and biblical. We have no right to make God in our image.

A Christian Apologetic Affirms the Totality of God's Saving Purpose (Acts 17:30-31)

Paul brought his presentation of the Gospel to a climactic conclusion by calling for repentance and warning of the judgment that is to come. He proclaimed Christ as the appointed Savior who will judge the world, and whose identity has been clearly revealed by the fact that God has raised Him from the dead.

It is not enough to preach Christ without calling for belief and repentance. It is not enough to promise the blessings of heaven without warning of the threat of hell. It is not enough to preach salvation without pointing to judgment. We have not preached Christ until we have proclaimed His resurrection from the dead.

An authentic apologetic defends and declares the whole Gospel. The center of our proclamation is Jesus Christ the Savior, who was crucified for sinners, was raised by the power of God, is coming again in glory and in judgment, and is even now sitting and ruling at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. We must defend the truths of Christ's deity, the virgin birth, the historicity of the miracles, the truth of the incarnation, the reality of His substitutionary death, and the assurance of His bodily resurrection.

Yet we dare not stop at these affirmations, for we must place the person and work of Christ within the context of God's eternal purpose to save a people to His own glory and to exalt himself among the nations. The task of Christian apologetics

is comprehensive, even as it is driven by the desire to see sinners turn to Christ in faith.

Conclusion

Paul's apologetic method did not make him popular in Athens. He was not hired on as a philosopher on Mars Hill. Some began to sneer. Others professed interest in hearing more—but later. But some men joined him and believed, "among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them."

"You are bringing some strange things to our ears." As our Lord exhorted the crowds, "He who has ears, let him hear" (Matthew 13:9). Proclaim and defend the Christian faith today and some will sneer. Others will listen with the ear, but not with the heart. Some, however, will believe, and will join the church of believing saints.

The world has no need of half-evangelists preaching a half-gospel to the half-converted, leading to a half-hearted church. I pray that God will raise up and call out a generation of bold and courageous evangelist-apologists for the twenty-first century. These would be men and women who will be witnesses to the power of the Gospel to the whole world, and who would proclaim the whole counsel of God. We need a generation of men who will lead bold churches in preaching and teaching the Holy Scriptures, equipping the saints for every good work, including the work of defending the faith.

O God, who dost ever hallow and protect thy Church; Raise up therein, through thy Spirit, good and faithful stewards of the mysteries of Christ, that by their ministry and example thy people may abide in thy favor and be guided in the way of truth,

*through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth
and reigneth with thee in the unity of the
same Spirit ever, one God, world
without end.*⁹

ENDNOTES

¹Jonathan Dimbleby, *The Prince of Wales: A Biography* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1994) 528. Charles introduced the words quoted above with this declaration: "I personally would rather see it as Defender of Faith, not *the* Faith, because it [Defender of the Faith] means just one particular interpretation of the Faith, which I think is sometimes something that causes a deal of a problem. It has done so for hundreds of years." (Ibid.)

²Ibid.

³So named because it was claimed that at this spot Mars had defended himself against the charge of murdering Hallirhothius, son of Neptune. See A. N. Wilson, *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle* (New York: Norton, 1997) p. 156 n. 42.

⁴Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn't What it Used to Be* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990) 188.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Sylvia Boorstein, *That's Funny, You Don't Look Buddhist: On Being a Faithful Jew and a Passionate Buddhist* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997).

⁷Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 139.

⁸John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) I:40.

⁹*The Book of Common Prayer* (1928), p. 562.