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“You Are Bringing Strange Things to Our Ears:” Christian Apologetics for a Postmodern Age, Part 3

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Fourth, 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.”

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 postmodernists with the reality of their spiritual ignorance. Paul never allowed this ignorance to become an excuse, but there can be no doubt that 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.

Fifth, 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.

The Athenians were partly right, said Paul, even as he quoted their poets. All human beings are God's children, but not in the sense the Athenians believed. In proclaiming God as the Creator, Ruler, and Sustainer of all things and all peoples, Paul was making a claim that far surpassed 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. "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," Calvin said, "and another thing to embrace the reconciliation offered us in Christ."

Sixth, 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 postmodern marketplace of ideas. Americans have revived old heresies and invented new ones. 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.

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.

Seventh, 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.

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."

The world has no need of half-evangelists preaching a half-gospel to the half-converted, and leading a half-hearted

church. What is needed is a generation of bold and courageous evangelist-apologists for the twenty-first century—men and women who will be witnesses to the whole world of the power of the Gospel, and who would proclaim the whole counsel of God.

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.

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