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# “You Are Bringing Strange Things to Our Ears:” Christian Apologetics for a Postmodern Age, Part 2

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Wednesday, July 12, 2006

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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.

This is where the task of Christian apologetics begins. 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.

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.

***First, 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 him with grief, and that grief turned to Gospel proclamation.

Luke records that Paul experienced *paroxynos*, 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, and 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 smorgasbord 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.” Anderson notes that America has become the “belief basket of the world.”

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 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?

***Second, a Christian apologetic is focused on Gospel proclamation.*** [Acts 17:17] Moved by the 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 fact 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.

***Third, 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*. 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. “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 even 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 countercultural, 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?” he was asked [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.

