DEVELOPING AN APOLOGETICS TEACHING SERIES AT HINSDALE FILIPINO-AMERICAN SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH, TO EDUCATE CHURCH MEMBERS AND ATTENDEES IN POST-CHRISTIAN EVANGELISM

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DEVELOPING AN APOLOGETICS TEACHING SERIES AT HINSDALE FILIPINO-AMERICAN SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH, TO EDUCATE CHURCH MEMBERS AND ATTENDEES IN POST-CHRISTIAN EVANGELISM

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PREFACE

This project was fueled by my desire to grow in the knowledge of the gospel and modern missions. There were times when my fuel ran low, and if it were not for the love and support of family, colleagues, and friends, this project would not have been completed. First, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Andrew Walker, for his help and support with my project. His godly example, words of wisdom, and encouragement were invaluable.

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I am thankful for the daily reminders that life is about love, intimacy, and connectedness, a true picture of my relationship with Jesus. I love my girls dearly.

Above all people, I would like to thank my dear wife, Katherine, for her unconditional love and tireless support. I have lost count of the myriad ways she has sacrificed time, energy, and resources to support me and cheer me on to the finish line. I could not have finished this doctoral marathon without her, and for this I will always be grateful. I see Jesus's love, patience, and kindness in her and I love her more than she knows.

Finally, I thank God for God. Without him, I would not exist. And without his gifts of grace, time, and a considerably curious mind, I would never have been able to even fathom such a project. May he receive every last once of praise, honor, and glory for this work.

Nestor Soriano

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December 2023

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Hinsdale Filipino-American Church (HFAC) is a part of the Seventh-day Adventist Christian denomination. The official mission statement of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church is unquestionably missional: "Make disciples of Jesus Christ who live as His loving witnesses and proclaim to all people the everlasting gospel of the Three Angels' Messages in preparation for His soon return."[1] HFAC joins in the worldwide mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ.

One of the greatest missional challenges for the church is the increasing secularization of America. According to the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan think tank that conducts public opinion polling and demographic research, the number of people who identify as Christian in America could drop from about 64 percent in 2020 to below 50 percent in 2070. In the same period, religious "nones" (RNs)—those who identify as atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular"—could rise from about 30 percent in 2020 to as high as 50 percent of the US population.[2] This data suggests that secularization, which advances a naturalistic worldview and diminishes the influence of religious institutions, is expanding religious disaffiliation at an alarming rate for the church. Secularization, coupled with pluralization and relativization, compels the American church to adapt its mission or face extinction. HFAC must embrace Christian apologetics in its missional strategy in order to survive and thrive in its increasingly secular setting.

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[1] Seventh-day Adventist, "Mission Statement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church," Official Statements, October 15, 2018, https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/mission-statement-of-the-seventh-day-adventist-church/.

[2] Pew Research Center, "Modeling the Future of Religion in America," September 13, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/.

Context

Hinsdale Filipino-American Church is located in Hinsdale, a western suburb of Chicago. In the mid-1970s, a team of several SDA Christian immigrants who had emigrated from the Philippines to the United States formed a Filipino congregation. On July 4, 1982, the HFAC held a ground-breaking ceremony. On March 19, 1983, the budding congregation enjoyed their new building at their inaugural Sabbath worship service. Since its inception, HFAC has had a mission to disciple people in the gospel. The church is so passionate about discipling their children that HFAC has always had a close relationship with Hinsdale Adventist Academy (HAA), a pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade SDA Christian school less than three miles from the church. Many of HFAC's members have sent their children to the school over the past four decades to shape their children in a Christian worldview.

HFAC shares in the SDA denomination's mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ by the ministry of gospel proclamation. The mission of HFAC is "to worship God by enjoying Him forever," which resultingly leads the church to realize its vision of becoming a "missional church" that proclaims and teaches the gospel.[3] In the last four decades of its existence, HFAC has proclaimed the gospel and discipled dozens of people through personal friendship, weekly worship services, Bible study classes, evangelistic seminars, and youth programming. Preaching the gospel in weekly worship service is one HFAC's greatest strengths, but it is also one of its greatest challenges. Each Sabbath (fifty-two Saturdays), the senior pastor[4] aims to proclaim the gospel to edify believers (worship) and reach nonbelievers (evangelize). While the senior pastor has this vision to edify believers and evangelize nonbelievers simultaneously every week, the majority of the church's attendance—which is about 210 people per week—identify as Christian.

[3] Per HFAC's 2018 Strategic Plan document.

[4] I am the senior pastor and I preach about forty times per year in the weekly Sabbath worship services.

HFAC lacks an intentional vision to reach nonbelievers in its social circles and community.

There are several issues with HFAC's missional vision. First, HFAC is unclear about its missional target audience. Since its inception, the church was formed to "establish a home base for evangelism among the Filipinos in the Chicagoland."[5] It is logical for an ethnic church to disciple and reach people within its cultural context, but HFAC has had an influx of different races in the last two decades, most of whom identify as Latino and Hispanic.[6] The church is confused about whether it should target Filipino or non-Filipino people. Another challenge is the cultural gap between the immigrant contingent and their children who were born in the US. The second-generation Asian Americans[7] who were raised in the West do not fully identify with the traditions, culture, and worldview of their parents. In fact, many of the current young adults and professionals who were raised in HFAC do not attend the weekly worship services and no longer identify with church and Christianity.[8] Not only does HFAC face the challenge of reaching its younger members, but it also faces the challenge of reaching its religiously disaffiliated area in the western suburbs. As mentioned, the US population is becoming increasingly secular. About 62 percent of the population in the Hinsdale area identify as Christian, and about 30 percent

[5] This quote is taken from HFAC's 35th Anniversary newsletter on March 31, 2018.

[6] There are at least two reasons for the racial influx. First, some children of the Boomer population (people born between 1946-1964) have married outside of the Filipino race. Second, many of the Latino/Hispanic attendees and members find common socio-cultural ties with immigrant Filipino culture, some of which include Spanish traditions (the Philippines was colonized by Spain from the 16th-19th centuries), family and communal warmth, and recent emigration to the US in the last four to five decades.

[7] Second-generation Asian Americans are defined as those born in the US with at least one foreign-born parent. Both the current senior and youth pastors are second-generation Asian Americans.

[8] This departure reflects a larger problem in the US. According to the Survey Center on American Life, "In terms of identity, Generation Z is the least religious generation yet. More than one-third (34 percent) of Generation Z are religiously unaffiliated, a significantly larger proportion than among millennials (29 percent) and Generation X (25 percent)." Daniel A. Cox, "Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America," Survey Center on American Life, March 24, 2022, https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/generation-z-future-of-faith/.

identify as RNs.[9] If it is true, according to Pew Research Center's report,[10] then the percentage of RNs could grow from 30 percent to about 50 percent in fifty years. It is vital for the church to take seriously its mission to this burgeoning demographic.

The second missional problem for HFAC is that the members and attendees do not reflect the demographic profile of Hinsdale. The suburb of Hinsdale is about 76 percent White and only about 15 percent Asian and 5 percent Latino/Hispanic,[11] while the racial makeup of HFAC is predominantly Asian (Filipino) with some Latino/Hispanic people. Hinsdale is also a very expensive and affluent suburb; it is the most expensive city in Illinois.[12] The median sale price of a home in Hinsdale is $795,000[13] and the median household income is $224,000.[14] The HFAC members do not reflect the racial and economic[15] makeup of the suburb. Due to the exorbitant prices, many members and attendees live at least seven or more miles from Hinsdale, which makes HFAC more of a commuter church than a community one. One disadvantage of being a commuter church is that the members are not involved in the local community. It is imperative for HFAC leaders and members to define the church's vision and missional identity.

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[9] This Hinsdale-specific data reflects the larger US data by Pew Research of 64 percent Christian and 30 percent Nones.

[10] Pew Research Center, "Modeling the Future of Religion in America."

[11] United States Census Bureau, "Quick Facts: Hinsdale Village, Illinois," accessed April 14, 2023, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/hinsdalevillageillinois/PST045221.

[12] NBC Chicago, "New Ranking Names Most Expensive Cities in Illinois and These Chicago Suburbs Top the List," March 3, 2023, https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/most-expensive-cities-in-illinois-chicago-suburbs/3086362/.

[13] Redfin, "Hinsdale Housing Market," accessed April 14, 2023, https://www.redfin.com/city/29486/IL/Hinsdale/housing-market.

[14] United States Census Bureau, "Quick Facts: Hinsdale Village, Illinois."

[15] The majority of members work in the medical field, several of whom are physicians and surgeons. But the median household income of HFAC members is well below the median household income of Hinsdale.

Rationale

Hinsdale Filipino-American Church has a strong commitment to proclaim and teach the gospel, most notably in its weekly Sabbath worship service. Unfortunately, the church has not been effective in contextualizing the gospel in its worship service to reach nonchurched people.[16] To provide a solution to this problem, the HFAC pastoral staff desire to create an apologetics teaching series to engage nonchurched people in the Hinsdale area. This project will address the major defeater beliefs that nonchurched people have about God, Christianity, and church.

There are several reasons why HFAC desires to create an apologetics teaching series for the nonchurched. The first and primary reason is because reaching nonbelievers and nonchurched people is the chief calling for the church and the reason for its existence. Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19).[17] The church has a divine command to spend its time, energy, and resources for one primary goal—to engage with non-Christians and nonchurched people and respectfully persuade them to become followers of Jesus. Most of HFAC's resources are spent on discipling believers who already practice Christianity. This project will remind and revive the church of its primary purpose of making disciples.

The second reason for this project is to learn what nonbelievers and nonchurchgoers really believe about faith. Stephen Covey, author of the bestselling book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, teaches an important interpersonal principle: seek first to understand, then to be understood.[18] In his missionary work among non-Christians in pagan Athens, the apostle Paul applied this principle by first observing and studying the target culture's worldview. Luke says when he arrived in Athens that Paul's "spirit

[16] For the definition of *nonchurched*, see "Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations" section.

[17] All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

[18] FranklinCovey, "Habit 5: Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood," accessed April 17, 2023, https://www.franklincovey.com/habit-5/.

was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So, he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there" (Acts 17:16-17). It is striking that before he gave a speech to the confused leaders and philosophers (Acts 17:22-31), he sought first to understand his context by observing their idols and engaging in conversation daily with the Athenian people.[19] For HFAC to become a church that winsomely disciples nonbelievers and nonchurched people, it is vital that the leaders and members of HFAC become familiar with nonbelievers' ideas, objections, and questions.

The third reason for this project, as the church wrestles with nonchurched people's questions and objections, is to teach members how to communicate the truth of Christianity with nonbelievers and nonchurched people. Unfortunately, many HFAC church members are not only oblivious to their nonbelieving friends' defeater beliefs; but they are unaware of how to effectively engage with a nonchurched person's questions and objections to Christianity and church.[20] After the apostle Paul spent considerable time engaging his audience in Athens, he then contextualized Christianity; that is, he effectively communicated the gospel by building ideological connections between Christian teaching and the nonbelievers' culture.[21] This project exposed HFAC not only to the real questions and objections of nonchurched people, but the members also learned how to respectfully and reasonably respond to their barriers to belief.

[19] This idea will be described in chap. 2 of this project.

[20] An even more pressing problem is that many Christians today do not even consider sharing their faith an integral part of their faith. When asked if "every Christian has a responsibility to share their faith," only 64 percent of polled Christians in 2018 agreed as compared to 89 percent in 1993. Barna, "Sharing Faith Is Increasingly Optional to Christians," May 15, 2018, https://www.barna.com/research/sharing-faith-increasingly-optional-christians/.

[21] This idea will be described in chap. 2 of this project.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to develop an apologetics teaching series at Hinsdale Filipino-American Church to educate church members and attendees in post-Christian evangelism.

Goals

The following four goals utilized Christian apologetics and guided this ministry project to develop a teaching series to educate church members and attendees in post-Christian evangelism.

1. The first goal was to discover the defeater beliefs about Christianity and church.
2. The second goal was to develop a seven-session apologetics teaching series to address the defeater beliefs about Christianity and church.
3. The third goal was to increase the knowledge of church members and attendees by conducting a seven-session apologetics teaching series.
4. The fourth goal was to develop a ministry plan to engage nonchurched people in a learning community at HFAC.

A specific research methodology was created that measured the successful completion of the four goals. This methodology is described in the following section.

Research Methodology

Four goals determined the success of this project. The first goal was to discover the defeater beliefs about Christianity and church. These beliefs were discovered from public opinion research[22] and five nonchurched people in the Hinsdale area. The goal was measured by conducting a focus group interview using a Religious Belief Interview (RBI) with five nonchurched people.[23] The public opinion research and RBI

[22] Pew Research Center, "About Pew Researh Center," accessed August 11, 2023, http://www.pewresearch.org/about; Barna Group, "Our Story," accessed August 11, 2023, http://www.barna.com/about.

[23] See appendix 1. Survey participants remained anonymous. All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

results helped HFAC leaders understand the apologetic context of the community and helped shape the development of the teaching series. This goal was considered successfully met when five nonchurched people complete the RBI and the results have been analyzed alongside public opinion research, which yielded a clearer picture of the community's defeater beliefs.

The second goal was to develop a seven-session apologetics teaching series to address defeater beliefs about Christianity and church. The defeater beliefs were discovered based on the analysis of public opinion research and the results from the five interviewees.[24] This goal was measured by a panel who utilized The Apologetics Teaching Series Rubric (ATSER), which evaluated the biblical faithfulness, logical coherence, cultural relevance, and clarity of application of the content of the teaching series.[25] The panel consisted of five Christian leaders from HFAC. This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criterion met or exceeded the sufficient evaluation level. If the evaluation feedback was less than 90 percent, then the content of the teaching session was revised until it met the 90 percent benchmark.

The third goal was to increase the knowledge of church members and attendees by conducting a seven-session apologetics teaching series. Each session included a teaching presentation and ample time for dialogue through live question-and-answer time and a reception afterward for further discussion. This dialogue time provided an opportunity for church members and attendees to digest the content. This goal was measured by an open-ended post-series survey (PSS) which assessed the impact of the apologetics teaching session. This goal was considered successfully met when fifteen series attendees, who attended at least five of the seven sessions, complete the PSS.

[24] Some defeater beliefs may include topics concerning the existence of God and evil, scientism, the reliability of Scripture, and Christian injustice.

[25] See appendix 2.

The fourth goal was to develop a ministry plan to involve nonchurched people in a learning community at HFAC. This ministry plan aimed to determine the next steps in HFAC's ministry to the nonchurched people and nonbelievers in our community. The purpose of the learning community was to provide an opportunity for nonchurched people and nonbelievers to study the Bible and continue to explore Christianity. This goal was measured by a panel of five leaders at HFAC. The panel utilized the Ministry Plan Evaluation Rubric (MPER) to evaluate the ministry plan's vision, functionality, and the action steps.[26] This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criterion met or exceeded the sufficient evaluation level. If the evaluation feedback was less than 90 percent, then the content of the teaching session was revised until it met the 90 percent benchmark.

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

The following definitions of key terms will be used in the ministry project:

Defeater beliefs. Defeater beliefs (i.e., defeaters), according to Timothy Keller, are "beliefs of the culture that lead listeners to find some Christian doctrines implausible or overtly offensive."[27] Keller continues to explain that defeaters are commonly accepted "ideas, that, if accepted, make one think, *If this is true, then Christianity can't be true.*"[28]

Cultural apologetics. Cultural apologetics, according to the Christian philosopher Paul Gould, is a branch of Christian apologetics that aims to establish "the Christian voice, conscience, and imagination within a culture so that Christianity is seen

[26] See appendix 3.

[27] Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 123.

[28] Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 11.

as true and satisfying."[29] Unlike traditional apologetics, which is primarily concerned with logical argumentation, cultural apologetics aims to engage the whole person: mind, emotions, and will. The modern apologist must not only defend the truth of Christianity, but he must reveal how the Christian worldview is desirable. The second section of chapter 3 of this project tackles the problem of identity and argues that the Christian view of identity is more logical and desirable than the secular view.

Culture. Culture may be broadly understood as a set of norms and values of a particular social group. James D. Hunter provides a helpful working definition:

> Culture is . . . a normative order by which we comprehend ourselves, others, and the larger world and through which we order our experience. At the heart of culture is a system of norms and values… but these norms and values are better understood as commanding truths so deeply embedded in our consciousness and in the habits of our lives that to question them is to question reality itself.[30]

Nonchurched. For the purposes of this project, a nonchurched person refers to someone who identifies as a non-Christian, or identifies as a Christian, but does not attend church regularly (at least three times a month).

Theodicy. Theodicy is a word that attempts to answer the question: "How can a good and all-powerful God allow so much evil and suffering in the world?" L. Russ Bush provides historical background for this term:

> From the Greek *dike* meaning order or right and *theos,* thus a defense of the rightness of God. Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646-1716) chose *Theodicee* as the title for his attempt to defend the justice of God in light of the pervasive existence of evil in the world. The term has been widely used since that time as a technical term for theistic justifications of God's actions in the world. The particular reference is usually to the intellectual problems raised by evil and suffering.[31]

There were three limitations to this project. First, while utilizing public opinion research would be helpful to assess the culture and community's defeater beliefs, the

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[29] Paul M. Gould, *Cultural Apologetics: Renewing the Christian Voice, Conscience, and Imagination in a Disenchanted World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 21.

[30] James Davison Hunter, *Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America's Culture War* (New York: Free, 1994), 200.

[31] L. Russ Bush, *A Handbook for Christian Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 314.

sample size of five nonchurched people may be small. Second, the effectiveness of the post-series survey (PSS) was dependent upon the consistent attendance of the church members and attendees at each of the seven sessions. Third, the last goal of developing a ministry plan to engage nonbelievers in a learning community was only a plan and would not be implemented until after this project was completed.

Conclusion

The practice of apologetics is essential for effective evangelism in modern-day, post-Christian culture. The following chapters examine how apologetics is interweaved with evangelism and culture. Chapter 2 will focus on a scriptural model for evangelistic apologetics. Chapter 3 will focus on addressing the problem of evil, a traditional apologetic approach, and addressing the problem of identity, a cultural apologetic approach. Chapter 4 will describe the implemented project of traditional and cultural apologetics to a local church setting at Hinsdale Filipino-American Seventh-day Adventist Church. Chapter 5 will evaluate the project, offering the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the apologetics project from chapter 4.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR USING APOLOGETICS IN POST-CHRISTIAN EVANGELISM

The apologetics landscape has changed. In the early part of the twentieth century, Christian terms and symbols were understood in Western culture, but since the middle of the twentieth century, familiarity with Christian concepts has rapidly eroded.[1] D. A. Carson, Emeritus Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, acknowledges and illustrates this reality:

> When I was a child . . . evangelism presupposed that most unbelievers, whether they were atheists or agnostics or deists or theists, nevertheless knew that the Bible begins with God, that this God is both personal and transcendent, that he made the universe and made it good, and that the Fall introduced sin and attracted the curse. Virtually everyone knew that the Bible has two Testaments. History moves in a straight line. There is a difference between good and evil, right and wrong, truth and

[1] Several circumstances precipitated the erosion of Christian terms and values. Church attendance in Great Britain and the United States fell sharply. The sexual revolution of the 1960s in America uprooted all traditional and moral values and social mores. Religious attendance dropped significantly. Robert Putnam and David Campbell observe,

> Weekly church attendance plummeted from 49 percent in 1958 to 42 percent in 1969, by far the largest decline on this measure ever recorded in such a brief period. . . . Among the twenty-somethings, the rate of decline in church attendance was more than twice the national average. Indeed, among those over fifty . . . there was virtually no decline at all, while among those aged eighteen to twenty-nine, weekly religious attendance was cut nearly in half, from 51 percent in April 1957 to 28 percent in December 1971. (Robert D. Putnam, David E. Campbell, and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012], 97-98)

Timothy Keller, founder and former pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, notes that before the sexual and moral revolution of the sixties,

> Americans were largely "Christianized" in their thinking. They usually believed in a personal God, in the existence of heaven and hell, and in the concept of moral authority and judgment, and they generally had a basic grasp of Christian ethics. A gospel presentation could assume and build on all these things in seeking to convict them of sin and the need for the redemption of Christ. Now, for more and more Americans, all these ideas were weakening or absent. The gospel message was not simply being rejected; it was becoming incomprehensible and increasingly hated. The world that Christians in the West had known—where the culture tilted in the direction of traditional Christianity—no longer existed. (Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012], 182)

> error, fact and fiction. They knew that Christians believe there is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be feared. Christmas is bound up with Jesus' birth; Good Friday and Easter, with Jesus' death and resurrection. Those were the givens.[2]

Carson recognizes a shift almost a quarter of a century ago: biblical illiteracy and a growing unfamiliarity with Christian themes were becoming more prevalent in areas like the New England states, parts of the Pacific Northwest, and in virtually any university in the United States. He continues,

> One of my students commented a week ago that he was walking in Chicago with his girlfriend, who had a wooden cross hanging from a chain around her neck. A lad stopped her on the sidewalk and asked why she had a plus sign for a necklace. The people whom we evangelize on university campuses usually do not know that the Bible has two Testaments. As Phillip Jensen says, you have to explain to them the purpose of the big numbers and little numbers. They have never heard of Abraham, David, Solomon, Paul—let alone Haggai or Zechariah. They may have heard of Moses, but only so as to confuse him with Charlton Heston.[3]

Today's world, especially the West, is becoming increasingly secular. Believers can no longer assume that Western culture understands Christian concepts. How can believers share the gospel with a biblically illiterate culture? The apostle Paul offers an effective model to reach nonbelievers who know little about the Bible. In Acts 17:16-34, Luke records Paul's missionary activity in Athens, comprised of two parts: (1) Paul's interaction with Greek culture (Acts 17:16-21), and (2) his speech at the Areopagus to the pagan Athenians (Acts 17:22-34). Paul's evangelistic efforts in Athens provide Christian apologists the best post-resurrection model to reach biblically illiterate people with the gospel.[4] Paul's model is comprised of four steps: analyze culture, adapt to culture, challenge culture, and appeal to culture.

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[2] Donald A. Carson, "Athens Revisited," in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. Donald A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 368-69.

[3] Carson, "Athens Revisited," 369-70.

[4] There are several examples of pagan missionary activity, including Peter's interactions with Cornelius in Caesarea and Paul's interactions with Felix (Acts 24), Agrippa (Acts 25:13-26:32), and nonbelievers in Lystra (Acts 14:8-18). However, Paul's efforts in Athens provide the best model for several reasons. First, unlike Paul's speech in Lystra, which is only comprised of three verses (Acts 14:15-17), his speech at the Areopagus is considerably longer (ten verses; Acts 17:22-31) and provides the most content for research. Second, Acts 17:16-34 provides the best NT model of a missionary's interaction with nonbiblical ideas and themes. Thus, there is much to learn from Paul's efforts with the Athenians. Ellen White says this

Analyze Culture

The contemporary apologist should analyze culture.[5] The apologist aims to understand the setting and context of the culture in which he is trying to reach. John Stott likens preaching and gospel communication to a bridge between the biblical world and the contemporary world.[6] Not only does the astute apologist have to exegete and exposit the biblical text; he needs to apprehend the culture's beliefs and values to bridge the biblical world to the contemporary world. Timothy Keller comments on this balance of bridging both worlds:

> Some sermons are like "a bridge to nowhere." They are grounded in solid study of the biblical text but never come down to earth on the other side. That is, they fail to connect the biblical truth to people's hearts and the issues of their lives. . . . Proper contextualization is the act of bringing sound biblical doctrine all the way over the bridge by reexpressing it in terms coherent to a particular culture.[7]

If the apologist fails to examine the beliefs and issues of people's lives, then he will be ineffective in communicating and reaching his audience. The astute apologist invests significant time and energy to analyze his cultural context.

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about the apostle's model: "Paul's words contain a treasure of knowledge for the church. . . . Had his oration been a direct attack upon their gods and the great men of the city, he would have been in danger of meeting the fate of Socrates. But with a tact born of divine love, he carefully drew their minds away from heathen deities, by revealing to them the true God, who was to them unknown." Ellen Gould Harmon White, *The Acts of the Apostles: In the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Nampa, ID: Pacific, 2005), 241.

[5] Lesslie Newbigin, a British theologian and missiologist, offers a helpful definition of culture:

> By the word culture we have to understand the sum total of ways of living developed by a group of human beings and handed on from generation to generation. Central to culture is language. The language of a people provides the means by which they express their way of perceiving things and of coping with them. Around that center one would have to group their visual and musical arts, their technologies, their law, and their social and political organization. And one must also include in culture, and as fundamental to any culture, a set of beliefs, experiences, and practices that seek to grasp and express the ultimate nature of things, that which gives shape and meaning to life, that which claims final loyalty. (Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* [Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1986], 3)

An effective apologist analyzes the beliefs, norms, values, and priorities of his target culture.

[6] John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2017).

[7] Keller, *Center Church,* 101.

Interact with People in the Culture

The first step to analyze culture is to spend time in regular interaction with people. Paul's example is given in Acts 17:16-17: "Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there."

There are two significant principles in this passage. First, Paul is deliberate to discuss and argue the case for Jesus with every person he meets, Abrahamic believers (Jews and devout persons) or nonbeliever (Gentiles, Athenians). He is not interested in casual conversation; he is intentional about contending for Christianity. The word *reasoned* (διαλέγομαι) in Acts 17:17 means to engage in speech interchange, converse, discuss, and argue.[8] This word διαλέγομαι is used only thirteen times in the New Testament, ten of which are in the book of Acts. In two instances (in Thessalonica in Acts 17:1-2[9] and Corinth in Acts 18:4[10]), Paul tenaciously deliberates about arguing the case for Jesus. Like Paul, the contemporary apologist is driven by an insatiable hunger to persuade people of the gospel.

Second, Paul meets people where they are and interacts with them regularly. Every day he is seen in the synagogue interacting with Jews and devout people[11] and in

[8] Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 232.

[9] Acts 17:1-2 reads, "And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned [διαλέγομαι] with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead."

[10] Acts 18:4 says, "And he reasoned [διαλέγομαι] in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks." Paul endeavored to persuade and convince Jews and Gentiles of the claims of the gospel."

[11] It was Paul's custom to use the synagogue as an opportunity for evangelism, as in Thessalonica and Berea. Charles K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles: In Two Volumes*, International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: Clark, 2002), 2:828.

the marketplace with an array of Greek residents. Jack Finegan writes about the bustling marketplace:

> The Athenian Agora [marketplace] was the center of the public and business life of the city, and people met there every day to learn the latest news and to discuss all manner of subjects. . . . Temples and government buildings, shops and offices, and altars and statuary filled the Agora, and stoas and colonnades gave protection against the summer sun and the winter rain and cold.[12]

Paul goes into the heart of the city daily, especially the areas where people were open to discuss ideas.[13] He understood that the best way to analyze culture is by regularly conversing with the Athenians. Today's apologist realizes that books are no substitute for human interaction. The greatest source of learning about a culture is in regular conversations and interactions with people in the community.[14]

Grasp the Culture's Worldview

The second step to analyze culture is to study and familiarize oneself with the culture's worldview.[15] As the apologist interacts with people he observes their beliefs, hopes, values, and aspirations. One should notice Paul's deliberate study of the Athenian

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[12] Jack Finegan, *Discovering Israel: An Archeological Guide to the Holy Land* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 128.

[13] John Stott notes that the equivalent today would be "a park, city square or street corner, a shopping mall or marketplace, a 'pub,' neighborhood bar, cafe, discotheque or student cafeteria, wherever people meet when they are at leisure." John R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 281.

[14] Keller, former founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan which he led for 28 years, shares his experience of growing his weekly attendance to over 5,000:

> In the earliest days of my ministry in New York City, I preached at both morning and evening services. New Yorkers are gregarious, and after each sermon many people came up to give frank opinions about what they had heard. I made appointments to see them to discuss things at greater length, and I would often talk to fifteen or twenty people a week who bombarded me with feedback about my preaching. Christians were bringing a lot of non-Christian friends, and I was able to hear reactions to my preaching from people across the spectrum, from mature Christians to skeptics. (Keller, *Center Church*, 121).

It was in his regular appointments and conversations with New Yorkers that he grasped the beliefs and values of the city.

[15] A worldview can be described in different ways: how one interprets reality (Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Reference Library [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999], s.v. "worldview"); a frame of reference (Carson, "Athens Revisited," 371); the questions, hopes, and beliefs of a culture (Keller, *Center Church*, 121).

culture: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed ἀναθεωρέω, examine something carefully[16]] the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god’” (Acts 17:23). Paul’s careful observation, coupled with his daily interaction with the people, helps him grasp the Athenians’ beliefs, values, and worldview.[17]

Ancient Athenian culture. In the first and fourth centuries BC, Athens was at the pinnacle of its political, intellectual, and artistic prowess. The sculpture, literature, and oratory of Athens was unrivaled. When Paul visits Athens around AD 50, he witnesses a diminished city with a population of no more than ten thousand. According to William Larkin, the city had been “reduced to poverty and submission by its war with Rome (146 BC),” but “it was granted the status of a free city in view of its illustrious past.”[18] Although Athens was a shadow of its former self, its political glory was not entirely dimmed.[19]

Athens was the intellectual center of the ancient world and was a notable university city.[20] It was home to philosophical greats such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno and still retained its philosophical prestige.[21] Athens was religiously pluralistic and was replete with an array of gods that were affixed to houses, shrines,

[16] Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 63.

[17] Paul’s upbringing aided his missionary endeavors to the Gentiles. Although he was a Jew and was brought up in Jerusalem, he was a citizen of Tarsus (Acts 21:39). Tarsus was a university city, and the intellectual “high culture” of this city molded Paul’s intellectual development. See Paul Trebilco, “Asia,” and David W. J. Gill, “Achaia,” in *Graeco-Roman Setting,* vol. 2 of *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*, ed. David W. J. Gill and Conrad Gempf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

[18] William J. Larkin, *Acts*, IVP New Testament Commentary, vol. 5 (Downers, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 251.

[19] F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 329.

[20] J. Daryl Charles, “Engaging the (Neo)Pagan Mind: Paul’s Encounter with Athenian Culture as a Model for Cultural Apologetics (Acts 17:16–34),” *Trinity Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 47.

[21] Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 329.

roads, and gateways. When Paul visits Athens, he meets a forest of idols.[22] His "spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16).

Paul encounters three primary religious groups as he interacts with the city's residents. First, he visits the synagogue and encounters the "Jews and devout persons" (Acts 17:17). It was Paul's custom, as in Thessalonica and Berea, to visit the synagogue as an opportunity for evangelism.[23] He longs to connect and share the gospel with his fellow monotheists of Abrahamic heritage. He also interacts with "devout persons"—Gentiles who were pious and generally regarded as God-fearers (Acts 13:43, 50; 16:14; 17:4; 18:7, 13; 19:27).

The second group Paul encounters are Epicurean philosophers (Acts 17:18). The Epicurean school was founded by Epicurus (341-270 BC). Frederick Bruce comments that the Epicureans held an ethical theory that presented "pleasure as the chief end of life, the pleasure most worth enjoying being a life of tranquility, free from pain, disturbing passions, and superstitious fears (including in particular the fear of death) . . . [and] did not deny the existence of gods, but maintained that they took no interest in the life of men."[24] Epicureans were like contemporary agnostic secularists[25]; they did not rule out the possibility of God's existence, but they did not see God's involvement in the life of men.

Paul encounters a third group known as the Stoics (Acts 17:18). These Stoic philosophers, who claimed Cypriote Zeno as their founder (340-265 BC), were more prevalent than the Epicureans. According to Darrell Bock, Stoics were pantheistic in their

[22] Larkin, Briscoe, and Robinson, *Acts*, 251.

[23] Barrett, *Acts of the Apostles*, 2:828.

[24] Bruce, *Book of the Acts*, 331.

[25] Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 561.

theology and "argued for the unity of humanity and kinship with the divine."[26] Bruce comments that their system emphasized the "rational faculty of man, and on individual self-sufficiency."[27] Stoics were like a blend of a contemporary pantheist and a secularist who prizes rationality. These three groups, the Jews and devout persons, Epicureans, and Stoics are the primary groups Paul encounters in his daily interaction with people in Athens.

Contemporary American culture. Like Paul, the contemporary American apologist is aware of the religious and cultural trends in his culture. The Pew Forum, a "nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes, and trends shaping the world,"[28] conducted a Religious Landscape Study in 2014 by interviewing more than 35,000 Americans from all 50 states.[29] According to the Religious Landscape Study, about 71 percent of the population identify as Christian, while the second largest demographic are the unaffiliated (religious "nones"), who make up about 23 percent of the population.[30] As of 2019, the number of religious nones (RNs) is swelling rapidly and now stands at 26 percent.[31] This statistic means that more than a quarter of the population claim to be atheists, agnostics, or hold no religion in particular, and the number is growing

[26] Bock, *Acts*, 561

[27] Bruce, *Book of the Acts*, 330.

[28] Pew Research Center, "About Pew Research Center," accessed July 18, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/about/.

[29] Pew Research Center, "About the Religious Landscape Study," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, accessed July 18, 2020, https://www.pewforum.org/about-the-religious-landscape-study/.

[30] Pew Research Center, "Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, accessed July 18, 2020, https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/

[31] Pew Research Center, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, October 17, 2019, https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/.

by the year. This rapid growth of RNs presents a major challenge for the church. No longer can the church assume that people have a religious and biblical framework.[32] By regular interaction and observation, the contemporary apologist must analyze the beliefs and values of RNs to contextualize the gospel in this increasingly secular world.

RNs are a diverse group with an array of beliefs and practices. While RNs are not uniformly nonreligious,[33] the Pew Research Center's two Religious Landscape Studies (conducted in 2007 and 2014) reveal that RNs are becoming less religious and more secular.[34] Secularism's pervading influence is spreading in contemporary American culture. According to Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, secularism is defined in several ways. First, secularism applies to social and political structures: public spaces "have been allegedly emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality."[35] Government and church are separate. Second, "secular" can also define individuals. Taylor explains that people doubt God's existence, and secularity can be described as a "falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church."[36] Taylor suggests (and prefers) a third definition: "The change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others."[37] Secularism is uprooting the vestiges of religious belief in all

[32] See more on the biblical framework in section 3.

[33] As of 2014, 61 percent of RNs believe in God, while only 27 percent say they are absolutely certain of God's existence. Pew Research Forum, "Religious 'Nones' Becoming More Secular," Pew Research Center, November 11, 2015, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/11/religious-nones-are-not-only-growing-theyre-becoming-more-secular/.

[34] Pew Research Forum, "Religious 'Nones' Becoming More Secular."

[35] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 2.

[36] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2.

[37] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

aspects of society and, according to Keller, "All the emphasis is on the saeculum, on the here-and-now, without any concept of the eternal. Meaning in life, guidance, and happiness are understood and sought in present-time economic prosperity, material comfort, and emotional fulfillment."[38] This secular age is the water in which the contemporary apologist must navigate.

Adapt to Culture

Not only does today's apologist need to analyze culture, but he must be able to adapt gospel truths to his hearers. This process of adaptation is also known as contextualization, which, as Keller asserts, is the skill of "giving people the Bible's answers, which they may not at all want to hear, to questions about life that people in their particular time and place are asking, in language and forms they can comprehend, and through appeals and arguments with force they can feel, even if they reject them."[39] Proper contextualization adapts the gospel without compromising the truths and essence of the gospel. Paul offers two principles of adaptation: establish the universality of worship and utilize respected authorities within the culture.

Establish the Universality of Worship

The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers are surprised and baffled by Paul's teaching. They bring him to the Areopagus to address an Athenian crowd. The Areopagus was the court of justice located on a rocky hill west of the Acropolis in Athens and may

[38] Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016), 2-3.

[39] Keller, *Center Church,* 89. In scholarly discussions, a variety of words have been used to describe the process of contextualization, such as *adaptation, indigenization, translation,* and *praxis.* A. Scott Moreau, "Evangelical Models of Contextualization," in *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization*, ed. Matthew Cook et al. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2010), 165-93. The words *adaptation* and *translation* are the most helpful terms to describe the process of contextualization in this thesis.

have been Athens's chief court.[40] Bruce writes that Paul does not stand before the crowd "in a forensic sense, nor yet to be examined with a view to being licensed as a public lecturer, but simply to have an opportunity of expounding his teaching before experts."[41] Paul begins his address: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:22-23). Paul spotlights the Athenians' idolatry, which becomes the springboard for his address.

Athenian idolatry. Idolatry was not an important theme in Christian and Jewish disputes,[42] but it was prominent amid Gentile missionary endeavors. Christian missionaries frequently encountered and confronted idolatry in pagan cultures.[43] Paul is aware of the Athenians' idolatry and tactfully confronts their veneration by affirming religious devotion. The Greek term Paul uses when he notes that they are "very religious" in Acts 17:22 is *deisidaimōn*, which is only used once in the New Testament and means

[40] David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 492.

[41] Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 331-32.

[42] Christian and Jewish communities both rejected and repudiated temple idolatry.

[43] In Acts 15:1-25, The Jerusalem Council met to decide the directives by which Gentile converts were accepted into the Church. The first practice was that Gentiles abstain from food that had been sacrificed to idols (Acts 15:29). Lints comments on this confrontation with idols, "When we turn to the rest of the New Testament, the central discussions of idolatry occur in the context of the mission to the Gentiles. The reason is apparent—engagement with the Gentile world meant confrontation with the pervasive and persistent temple cults of the Graeco-Roman world that openly flaunted their loyalty to idols." Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and Its Inversion*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 36 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 107. Lints writes that idols were revered among the Gentiles:

> In contrast to Judaism and Christianity the Gentile nations thought of idolatry in positive terms. Idols were physical representations of the gods worshipped locally. In each location where temple worship took place the idols reflected the sacred presence of the people's peculiar deities. As the cult of the emperor grew in the first century, temples were constructed to the Graeco-Roman pantheon, with the emperor now included. These "national" gods and their idols were to be revered across the breadth of the empire. (Lints, *Identity and Idolatry*, 105)

very devout and religious.[44] Paul also uses the rare Greek term *eusebeō* (from "what therefore you worship," Acts 17:23) to describe their worship, which means to show profound reverence, respect, and exceptional devotion."[45] Paul's method is clear: he is using the Athenians' uncommon religious devotion as a springboard to elucidate the gospel. Joseph Fitzmeyer acknowledges Paul's method: "His starting point is Athenian religious piety, and he tries to raise them from such personal experience to a sound theology."[46] Paul longs to establish that all people, including the idol-worshipping Gentiles, grope for God.[47]

Biblical idolatry. There are two ways the Bible defines idolatry. First, idolatry in the Bible involved ritual worship of created objects in place of God (Exod 20:4-5; Deut 4:23). However, idolatry was not only ritualistic, it also included a relational and covenantal dimension.[48] The Bible is replete with examples and admonitions to shun the ritualistic worship of idols.[49] However, there is a second biblical definition of idolatry:

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[44] Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 216.

[45] Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 413.

[46] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Anchor Bible, vol. 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 607.

[47] Bock states, "Even in their use of idols, Paul recognizes an attempt to grope for God." Bock, *Acts*, 564.

[48] One can read the first and second commandments in the Decalogue (Deut 5:7-9) and assume that God is a demagogue who arbitrarily demands our worship. But his command to avoid other gods and idols must be understood relationally, namely, that he longs for his people to love him with all their heart, soul, and might (Deut 6:5). The reason he demands love is because he is the one who gives love: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Deut 5:6). Thus, there is relational and covenantal quality to idolatry and worship. Lints comments on the relational quality of worship (this is in context of mankind being made in the image of God, *imago Dei*):

> It is a relational dynamic that connects image (person) to original (God) but it is also a relationship of worship or honour that depicts this connection. From the beginning to the end of redemptive history the image is constituted by its (dis)honouring of God. The image (humankind) finds its telos (purpose) in the honouring relationship to the original (God the Creator). This is true at both the beginning and the end of the canon. (Lints, *Identity and Idolatry*, 29-30)

[49] Exod 34:14; Lev 26:1; Deut 4:23-24; Ps 97:7; Isa 44:8-11; 1 Cor 6:9-10.

worship and idolatry is an attitude of the heart. God condemned the idolatry of Israel's leadership through the prophet Ezekiel: "Son of man, these men have taken their idols into their hearts, and set the stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces" (Ezek 14:3). God exposed the reason for their idolatry: their hearts were infatuated with their idols.[50] Idolatry in the Bible can thus be understood as loving anything or anyone else more than God.[51]

Contemporary idolatry. Paul used idolatry as a foundational theme and method to adapt the gospel to his pagan audience. His method provides a relevant model to reach the modern and biblically illiterate nonbeliever. Paul's model is effective because it "levels the playing field" for nonbelievers. If the contemporary apologist defines sin as primarily disobeying God's law,[52] then the nonbeliever can simply dismiss this moral imperative and remark that obeying God's injunctions is only for believers. It is far more effective for a believer to define sin as idolatry because everyone—believer and nonbeliever—is devoted (i.e., worships) to something. Worship is an anthropologic reality; it is a universal human trait. Postmodern novelist David Foster Wallace speaks of the existential reality of worship in his 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College:

> In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship. . . . Worship power—you will end feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect,

[50] Self-sufficiency/dependence is another example of the relationship between idolatry and the heart. King Saul was supposed to follow God's instruction to punish the city of Amalek and "devote to destruction all that they have" (1 Sam 15:3). Saul punished and killed all the people of the land, but took Agag king of the Amalekites, spared his life, and kept some of the animals that "he deemed best" (1 Sam 15:8-9). He wanted to receive honor (by preserving the life of the king) and gain wealth (by keeping the animals), instead of following God's command. God called Saul's arrogant self-sufficient disobedience "idolatry" (1 Sam 15:23).

[51] One writer defines biblical idolatry this way: "Anything that men love and trust in instead of loving the Lord and trusting wholly in Him becomes an idol." Ellen Gould Harmon White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Boise, ID: Pacific, 1948), 5:250.

[52] "Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4).

> being seen as smart—you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. And so on. Look, the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful; it is that they are unconscious. They are default settings.[53]

In his book *Counterfeit Gods,* Tim Keller defines and applies the reality of idolatry to contemporary culture. His definition of idolatry is immensely pertinent:

> A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living. An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought. It can be family and children, or career and making money, or achievement and critical acclaim, or saving "face" and social standing. It can be a romantic relationship, peer approval, competence and skill, secure and comfortable circumstances, your beauty or your brains, a great political or social cause, your morality and virtue, or even success in the Christian ministry.[54]

Idolatry cuts across all cultures and is a useful foundational theme to reach nonbelievers.

Utilize Respected Authorities within the Culture

The casual reader may be surprised that Paul does not quote Scripture in his address at the Areopagus. Bock explains why: "Paul is working with ideas in the Greek world that are familiar to the Athenians and only alludes to Scripture in his speech instead of quoting it directly."[55] Paul does not quote Scripture directly because it would have been ineffective for him to use a source that the Athenians did not deem as authoritative.

Paul also does not condemn the Athenians' idolatry; rather, he reveals the logical inconsistency of idol worship. His argument is as follows: God created the world and is the source and sustainer of life.[56] Since God is the creator, he cannot be made with

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[53] David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009), 93-113.

[54] Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Riverhead, 2011), xx.

[55] Bock, *Acts*, 568.

[56] This will be explained in detail in the next section, under "Biblical Framework."

human hands (Acts 17:24-25). God cannot be made by human hands (graven images) since he is the creator. Therefore, it is impossible for human beings (God's offspring) to fathom that God is formed in the image of man (Acts 17:29).[57] Paul's cultural adaptation and sensitivity to reach his pagan audience is worth noting: He (1) only alludes to Scripture and (2) does not denounce the Athenians' idols; instead, he only confronts the inner logic of their idolatry. Paul also uses Athenian authorities to accommodate the gospel.

Poets. Paul illustrates God's sovereignty and immanence by quoting two Greek poets. First, Paul quotes[58] from a poem that was attributed to Epimenides the Cretan (600 BC) and comes from the fourth line of his quatraim: "They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one—The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies!—But thou art not dead; thou livest and abidest for ever, *For in thee we live and move and have our being*."[59] Paul is arguing that even the revered poet Epimenides alludes to the creating and sustaining of God. Bock comments that this citation suggests "a widespread belief that people exist by God's creation and sustenance, so that God is not far off."[60] Paul also quotes Epimenides to illustrate the immanent and relational aspect of the true God, an idea that Stoics would have understood.[61]

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[57] Lints comments, "The critical hinge in Paul's argument turns on whether it makes sense to suppose that the Creator of the world can be fashioned out of gold or silver. God created humankind; not the reverse. He is not an image that can be formed from the imagination or creativity of human artists. Paul appeals to the inner logic of idolatry rather than denouncing the practice of idolatry." Lints, *Identity and Idolatry*, 118.

[58] "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

[59] Bruce, *Book of the Acts*, 339, emphasis added.

[60] Bock, *Acts*, 568.

[61] Charles comments, "The statement 'in him we live, move, and have our being' expresses the Stoic belief in closeness and to/kinship with God. No pagan philosopher could reject this assertion, since any Stoic worth his salt readily conceded that God 'fills' the universe, that a union exists." Charles, "Engaging the (Neo)Pagan Mind," 58.

Paul quotes the fifth line of the Phainomena, a poem ascribed to Aratus (born 310 BC): "Let us begin with Zeus. Never, O men, let us leave him unmentioned. All the ways are full of Zeus, and all the market-places of human beings. The sea is full of him; so are the harbors. In every way we have all to do with Zeus, *for we are truly his offspring*."[62] In both quotations, Zeus is not considered as the chief god of Greek mythology but as the supreme being of Greek.[63] Paul is arguing that God is the supreme implied by their poets. He also cleverly contextualizes the excerpts to argue that God is the creator and mankind is his progeny. Bock comments that Paul "takes a Greek idea of the 'spark of the divine being' in us as tied to Zeus and speaks of being made of God's children by the Creator, alluding to our being made in God's image."[64]

Contemporary application. Paul's employment of the two poets provides an exceptional example of how the contemporary apologist can effectively adapt the gospel to a culture that does not accept the Bible's authority. Paul reinforces his biblical points by using sources that the Athenians trust. In the same way, the contemporary apologist can teach biblical truth by utilizing supporting material that the listeners respect.[65] Keller provides an apt example:

> If you are teaching on virtually any passage on human sin and rebellion—but especially texts, like Romans 8:7, that speak of our heart's natural hostility to God—you would do well to quote a remarkable passage by the atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel, who candidly confessed, "It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God: I don't want the universe to be like that. . . . This cosmic authority problem is not a rare condition."[66]

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[62] Bruce, *Book of the Acts*, 339, emphasis added.

[63] Bruce, *Book of the Acts*, 339.

[64] Bock, *Acts*, 568.

[65] Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 106-7.

[66] Keller, *Preaching*, 108. Keller quotes Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University, 1997), 130.

Here is another example of how a contemporary apologist can employ respected authorities to buttress biblical arguments. If he is teaching on moral absolutes and how the Word of God supersedes human judgment, the apologist can quote Martin Luther King Jr.'s insightful observation in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail": "How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law."[67] King argues that human laws are fair and just when rooted in the eternal law of God.

Like Paul, the contemporary Christian has the great task and opportunity to adapt the gospel to nonbelievers in a secular culture. He contextualizes biblical truth by establishing the universality of worship and by employing respected authorities within the culture.

Challenge Culture

The contemporary apologist has the great task of not only analyzing and adapting to culture, but of challenging culture with gospel truth. The gospel juxtaposes two contrasting realities. The message of the cross is the most *inclusive* message to mankind. God extends his matchless love to all people (vociferous nonbelievers included) through the sacrifice of Jesus (John 3:16; Rom 5:81; 1 John 4:18). However, the message of the cross is at the same time the most *exclusive* worldview. The only way to be with God is through believing and receiving Jesus (John 3:16; 14:6;). This exclusive nature of the gospel is an offense to many people. The gospel was a stumbling block (*skandalon,* offense) to the Jews, and was folly (*moria,* foolishness) to the Gentiles (1 Cor 1:23).

[67] Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter From a Birmingham Jail [King, Jr.]," UPenn African Studies Center, accessed July 30, 2020, https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

Paul is inclusive in his speech to the Athenians. He affirms their religiosity and finds common ground with their beliefs, but Paul is also exclusive in his address. His goal is to accommodate biblical truth so that he can challenge the Athenians with the glorious gospel. Paul challenges the Greeks by confronting them with respect and reason and building a biblical framework.

Confront Culture Respectfully and Coherently

The modern apologist would be wise to follow Paul's example in his careful confrontation of pagan culture.

Cultural respect and affirmation. Paul affirms the Athenians before he confronts their worldview in his address at the Areopagus. Paul was agitated with the Greeks pagan worship as he mingled with the Greeks daily (Acts 17:16-17), but he restrains his irritation, speaks with composure, and affirms their religious fidelity: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious" (Acts 17:22). Paul's laudatory remarks may not have been complimentary,[68] but the context suggests that he addresses the Athenians in a winsome way to earn the respect of his listeners.[69] It is vital for believers to affirm the culture's beliefs (where possible) before confronting them. Affirming and finding common beliefs becomes the basis to challenge the false ideas of a nonbiblical worldview. Keller perceptively writes, "Our criticism of the culture will have no power to persuade unless it is based on something that we can affirm in the beliefs and

[68] Bruce writes, "This characterization of the Athenians by Paul was not necessarily meant to be complimentary: we are told that it was forbidden to use complimentary exordia in addressing the Areopagus court, with the hope of securing its goodwill." Bruce, *Book of Acts,* 335. Barrett notes that Paul may have "noted with disapproval, one might also say with arrogance, that the city was full of idols." Barrett, *Acts of the Apostles*, 2:835.

[69] The term *deisidaimonesteros* (the Greek word for "very religious"), according to Simon Kistemaker, "can be understood either in a derogatory sense ('superstitious') or as a complimentary statement of fact. In the context of the speech, Paul uses the term affirmatively, because he is interested in gaining the attention of the Athenian crowd. To complete his commendation, he even adds the words *in every respect*." Simon J. Kistemaker, *Acts*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 631.

values of that culture. We can challenge some of the wrong things they believe from the foundation of those right things they believe."[70]

Coherent confrontation. Paul turns his attention to confronting the Athenians' worldview. He does not, however, assault their beliefs; instead, he confronts the logical assumptions of their beliefs. Keller writes, "Paul does not simply dismiss a culture's aspirations; rather, he both affirms and confronts, revealing the inner contradictions in people's understanding."[71]

Paul's "confrontation method"[72] is as follows: Paul affirms a *common belief* (held by both believers and nonbelievers), and then he challenges the common belief with a *confronting belief.* In Acts 17:28, Paul quotes two pagan poets to demonstrate that God is the source and sustainer of all life. Then in verse 29, Paul says, "Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man." Without quoting Scripture or naming God, Paul establishes a common belief between believers and pagans: there is a Supreme Being who created mankind. Paul then confronts the Athenians on the basis of the common belief. Paul's argument is as follows: "If we were created by this supreme being (i.e. God), what makes us think we can fashion and shape him as an image worthy of our worship?" He reveals the inconsistency of their logic.[73] Paul implies, "If you can believe in a supreme being that created this world, then you can worship him directly; it's impossible for you to fashion him in your own image."

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[70] Keller, *Center Church*, 124.

[71] Keller, *Center Church*, 124.

[72] For this insight I am indebted to Keller, *Center Church*, chap. 10.

[73] Keller writes, "Paul is showing them that their beliefs fail on the basis of their own premises. He challenges idolatry by showing that it is inconsistent with the pagans' own (and better) impulses about God." Keller, *Center Church*, 125.

British writer and Christian apologist C. S. Lewis provides an exemplary example of this "confrontation method" to convince his British audience that God is a holy God: "If God is Love, he is, by definition, something more than mere kindness. . . . He has paid us the intolerable compliment of loving us, in the deepest, most tragic, most inexorable sense."[74] Lewis continues,

> When we fall in love with a woman, do we cease to care whether she is clean or dirty, fair or foul? Do we not rather, then, first begin to care? . . . In awful and surprising ways, we are the objects of His love. You asked for a loving God you have one . . . not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, not the cold philanthropy of a conscientious magistrate . . . but the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist's love for his work . . . provident and venerable as a father's love for a child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes. How this should be, I do not know: it passes reason to explain why any creatures, not to say creatures such as we, should have a value so prodigious in their Creator's eyes. It is certainly a burden of glory not only beyond our deserts but also, except in rare moments of grace, beyond our desiring.[75]

Lewis acknowledges the possibility of a God whose character is one of love (common belief), but he challenges his Western audience that if they can accept a God of love, then he has to be a God that is holy and just and loathes sin (confronting belief).

Build a Biblical Framework

Paul judiciously affirms and confronts the Greeks' belief system. He accommodates biblical truth to his biblically illiterate audience. He does not use Scripture; rather, he uses their own respected authorities. Paul constructs a biblical framework (i.e., worldview) before he expounds the gospel. The contemporary apologist acknowledges that to reach Western culture, which is becoming increasingly secular and biblically illiterate,[76] he must build a biblical framework before expounding the truths of Jesus. Just as a youth must know basic arithmetic before algebra, the nonbeliever must

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[74] C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 33.

[75] Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 38-40.

[76] See religious nones' statistics in the "Contemporary American culture" section.

have a basic biblical framework to understand the gospel. Carson elaborates on the importance of teaching foundational biblical categories:

> You cannot make heads or tails of the real Jesus unless you have categories for the personal/transcendent God of the Bible; the nature of human beings made in the image of God; the sheer odium of rebellion against him; the curse that our rebellion has attracted; the spiritual, personal, familial, and social effects of our transgression; the nature of salvation; the holiness and wrath and love of God. One cannot make sense of the Bible's plot line without such basic ingredients; one cannot make sense of the Bible's portrayal of Jesus without such blocks in place.[77]

Paul tactfully confronts the Greeks' worldview as he builds a biblical framework. His framework is comprised of two major components: God and man.

God. Paul articulates three truths about God. God is (1) the Creator, (2) sovereign, and (3) immanent. First, Paul states, "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man" (Acts 17:24). Paul purports that there is a God who created the world. He is transcendent and cannot be contained in man-made temples. Like the Jews, the Greeks understood this concept of God as maker of the world.[78] However, Paul teaches that this maker is monotheistic and transcendent; this conception of God would rule out pantheism.[79]

In his second doctrine of God, Paul says that this creator God is not "served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:25). Paul establishes the universality of God's reign; namely, that he is sovereign and self-sufficient. He provides everything needed for life. Barrett states, "He made everything; how can he need anything? He not only created all

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[77] Carson, "Athens Revisited," 370. In his book *Theology and Practice of Mission*, Bruce Ashford highlights the importance of understanding the Bible's foundational "plot line" in "four major plot movements—creation, fall, redemption, and restoration." Bruce Riley Ashford, ed., *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, the Church, and the Nations* (Nashville: B & H, 2011), 6.

[78] Barrett, *Acts of the Apostles*, 2:840.

[79] Carson writes about Paul: "How much he enlarged on this point we cannot be certain, but we know from his other writings how his mind ran. The creation establishes that God is other than the created order; pantheism is ruled out." Carson, "Athens Revisited," 376.

things in the beginning but continues to give (διδοὺς, present participle) to all life, breath, and all things, that is, all the things men need for their human existence."[80]

Third, Paul teaches that this transcendent God is also immanent: "Yet he is actually not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27). Unlike pantheistic teaching would suggest, this creator God is not removed from mankind and he cares for his people's well-being. God is close and intimacy is possible. Kistemaker comments, "Paul diverges . . . from Stoic philosophy with its teaching that God, in an impersonal manner, is present everywhere. By contrast, Paul's teaching is that we are able to have a personal relationship with God, because God is near to his people (see Pss. 139:5-12; 145:18; Jer. 23:23)."[81]

Man. Paul teaches three facts about man. Mankind (1) stems from one man, (2) is created for relationship, and (3) has an idolatrous heart. First, Paul comments on mankind's anthropological roots: "And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26). Paul teaches, according to Fitzmyer, that the creator God has "divine design and intention that lie behind all human existence."[82] Paul builds a theology of anthropology because he desires to frame his soteriology.[83] Carson writes, "If sin and death were introduced into the one human race by one man such that the decisive act of another man is required to reverse them, then it is important for Paul to get the anthropology right so that the soteriology is right. We cannot agree on the solution if we cannot agree on the problem."[84]

In his second teaching about anthropology, Paul created mankind to "seek God, and perhaps feel [ψηλαφάω, to look for something in uncertain fashion, to feel

[80] Barrett, *Acts of the Apostles*, 2:841.

[81] Kistemaker, *Acts*, 636.

[82] Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles,* 609.

[83] "Soteriology" is a theological term for the doctrine of salvation.

[84] Carson, "Athens Revisited," 377.

around for, grope for[85]] their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for "in him we live and move and have our being; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring'" (Acts 17:27-28). Mankind is in search of God because he is created to be in fellowship and relationship with his creator. This relational aspect of the supreme God was not in the Athenian worldview. Peterson says, "There was plenty of reaching out for God in the form of popular religion and philosophical reflection, but the result was a proliferation of idolatry and self-confessed ignorance of the true God (vv. 16, 22-23). Nevertheless, God's purpose for humanity remains, despite the blinding and corrupting effects of sin."[86] Paul assures the Athenians that in their search for God, it is possible to find him.

Third, Paul reveals the human problem: "Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man" (Acts 17:29). Paul affirms the Greeks' religious devotion, but he now confronts their spiritual malady: idolatry. It is at this point that Paul clarifies sin. Paul argues that mankind is God's offspring in that man is created in God's image. Thus, he deserves our recognition and adulation. But we have instead paid homage to the creature through idolatry.[87] Idolatry is at the heart of man's rebellion.

Contemporary application. A contemporary Christian may ask, "When I'm witnessing to a nonbeliever, do I need to teach every single component of Paul's framework in one sitting and teach it in his exact sequence?" No, a believer does not have to use Paul's exact order. Every nonbeliever has missing pieces in their conception of God. The key for the modern apologist is to discern the beliefs of his target audience so

[85] Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1098.

[86] Peterson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 498.

[87] Bruce writes, "But Paul is dealing here with the responsibility of all human beings as creatures of God to give him the honor which is his due. And this honor is certainly not given if they envisage the divine nature in the form of plastic images." Bruce, *The Book of Acts,* 340.

that he knows which components of the biblical framework are missing in their understanding of God. Once he ascertains the missing pieces, he can then piece together a picture of God that fits within the storyline of Scripture: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.

Appeal to Culture

The contemporary apologist analyzes culture, adapts to culture, and challenges culture, but he does not stop there. He must appeal to the hearts of his audience so that God would change not only their minds, but their hearts.

Appeal for Transformation

Paul teaches two truths in his appeal to the Greeks. First, he states that God has been forbearing: "The times of ignorance God overlooked" (Acts 17:30). Paul alludes to God's forbearance in his letter to the Romans: "This [redemption through the sacrifice of Jesus] was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins" (Rom 3:25). Paul is saying to the Athenians that, in God's forbearance, he passed over the sins committed before the appearance of Jesus, including the sins of man's ignorance. Paul is arguing that there no longer is an excuse (Rom 1:20) for the Greeks' ignorance. It is here, near the end of his speech, that Paul transitions from philosophical categories to issues of the heart. There is now a moral imperative to seek God.

The second truth Paul teaches in his appeal is an existential one: "But now he commands all people everywhere to repent [*metanoeo,* to feel remorse, be converted[88]]" (Acts 17:30). Repentance is a key theme in Luke and Paul's writings.[89] The word *metanoeo* signifies a complete turnaround in the mind and heart's affections. Paul asserts

[88] Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 640.

[89] Luke 3:7-9; 3:19-21; Acts 20:18-20; 1 Thess 1:9-10.

that divine ignorance is not just an intellectual problem; it is a heart issue.[90] He argues that since man has not only ignored God, but turned away from him, it is now time for him to turn around and seek God. The contemporary apologist must "land the plane." Not only must he adapt and defend the gospel, but he must also appeal to the heart. Contemporary apologetics not only calls for an exercise of reason, but it calls for existential repentance. Apologetics is learning of God and turning to God.[91]

Present Jesus

After Paul establishes the necessity of repentance, he reveals the reality of a judgment: "He has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17:31). Paul asserts that mankind is responsible for turning to God[92] and time is linear and has a finality to it. Time was not linear in Greek theology; time was cyclical. Carson explains, "Paul establishes a linear framework: creation at a fixed point; a long period that is past with respect to Paul's present in which God acted in a certain way ('In the past God overlooked such ignorance'); a now that is pregnant with massive changes; and a future (v. 31) that is the final termination of this world order, a time of final judgment."[93] Paul covers the whole span of human history. He starts with creation in the beginning of his speech and concludes with the reality of a final judgment (which will be a prelude to the new creation).

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[90] Barrett comments, "Here it is clear that repentance will mean in the first instance turning from the false gods with which Athens abounds. It is also true however that since the call is for repentance the defect of Greek religion is not simply intellectual but existential. Man is guilty of having withdrawn from fellowship with the Creator." Barrett, *Acts of the Apostles*, 2:851.

[91] After Peter presents the reasons for the death and resurrection of Jesus, he then exhorts his audience, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Notice that his logic ends with one goal: a call to repentance.

[92] Discussed in the previous section.

[93] Carson, "Athens Revisited," 378.

Now that Paul has built a biblical framework and revealed the transformative reality of knowing God, he introduces "a man whom he [God] has appointed" (Acts 17:31). This man is the one whom God has given all authority to execute justice and judgment in the world. He is the one mentioned in the Gospel of John: "And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man" (5:27). The Son of Man is none other than Jesus Christ. Paul unequivocally identifies the identity of Jesus by pinpointing his resurrection: "He has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31). Christ's identity (and his responsibility of judgement) is established by his resurrection. Speaking about Paul, Bruce writes, "He assures his audience, God has furnished firm proof that this is the man through whom he is going to judge the world, because this is the man whom he has raised from the dead."[94]

Like the modern age, there was general skepticism of miraculous events like the resurrection during Paul's day, but if the resurrection of Jesus Christ took place, Peterson asserts that "it challenges human skepticism about the possibility of encountering God and being judged by him. It is the best proof we have of a general resurrection and makes Jesus the key figure in God's plan for humanity."[95] The resurrection of Jesus Christ provides strong evidence for the person of Jesus.

Gospel scope. One may ask, "Did not Paul fail to present the gospel to the Athenians? Not once did he quote Scripture or make reference to the cross of Jesus." Paul did not explain the details of the gospel, but one must understand his context. His goal was not to expound the theology of the gospel to pagan people, but to build a biblical framework so that he could introduce the Greeks to the person of Jesus. While he did not "win" any converts, Luke says that "some men joined him and believed, among whom

[94] Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 341.

[95] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 503.

also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them" (Acts 17:34). Paul constructed a biblical framework that intrigued several Athenians and caused them to inquire more of Christianity.

Conclusion

Paul's missionary efforts with the Athenians in Acts 17 provides the modern apologist a model for worldview evangelism in secular America. Paul's model is comprised of four steps. First, the apologist must analyze culture by interacting with people in the culture and analyzing their worldview. Second, he must adapt to culture by establishing the universality of worship and employing respected authorities within the culture. The third step is to challenge culture—the contemporary apologist must confront culture respectfully and reasonably and must build a biblical framework to frame the gospel. Last, the apologist must appeal to culture by inviting people to experience heart transformation and by introducing people to Jesus.

The next chapter will address concepts in two fields of Christian apologetics: traditional and cultural apologetics. The first part will explore one of the most common defeater beliefs in traditional apologetics: the problem of evil and suffering. The second section will analyze a pressing apologetic theme in modern culture: the problem of identity.

CHAPTER 3

PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR TRADITIONAL AND CULTURAL APOLOGETICS

The task of Christian apologetics is to provide evidence to make a case for Christianity. Traditional apologetics has historically defended the Christian faith by wrestling with truth claims within the realms of philosophy, history, and science. Traditional apologetics has been largely thought of as "an intellectual discipline" that aims to refute objections to Christianity and offer "positive reasons for the Christian faith."[1] However, in recent years, some Christian apologists in the West have questioned the traditional approach to apologetics that primarily engages the mind and reason. Paul Gould, author of *Cultural Apologetics: Renewing the Christian Voice, Conscience, and Imagination in a Disenchanted World*, is a recent voice who argues for a new apologetic approach to supplement traditional apologetics in a post-Christian era. He coins the new approach "cultural apologetics," which he defines as "the work of establishing the Christian voice, conscience, and imagination within a culture so that Christianity is seen as true and satisfying."[2] Cultural apologetics engages the mind, but it also demonstrates "the truth of Christianity" with the "whole being: intellect, will and emotions."[3]

[1] Steven Cowan, introduction in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 8.

[2] Paul M. Gould, *Cultural Apologetics: Renewing the Christian Voice, Conscience, and Imagination in a Disenchanted World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 21.

[3] Kevin Vanhoozer proposes a theodramatic approach to apologetics, which views and explains Christianity within the context of a drama or story, not just a theoretical system. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness, and Wisdom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 233.

An effective apologetic strategy in the post-Christian world should utilize a holistic approach that engages both the mind and heart of a person. The modern apologist should advance reasons for Christianity that intersect with a nonbeliever's belief system as well as offer "plausible answers to universal human longings."[4] The first section of this chapter addresses the problem of evil, which is the most prevalent issue in traditional apologetics.[5] The second section addresses the problem of identity by tracing a short history of the understanding of the self, critiquing modern notions of identity, and promoting the advantages of adopting a Christian view of identity.

The Problem of Evil

Many people reject God because they cannot make sense of the reality of evil and suffering. In January of 2018, the Barna Group wrote an article entitled, "Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z." Generation Z, those born between 1999 and 2015, are considered the first truly "post-Christian" generation. The Barna Group surveyed teens between the ages of 13 and 18 and learned that the percentage of teens who identify as atheist "is double that of the general population (13 percent vs. 6 percent of all adults)."[6] Their top barrier to faith was, "I have a hard time believing that a good God would allow so much evil or suffering in the world."[7]

This defeater of the problem of evil is the reason why Bart Ehrman, author of more than twenty books and the James A. Gray Distinguished Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, abandoned his childhood faith. He shares the reason for

[4] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 24.

[5] Kelly James Clark writes, "The problem of evil is the most formidable and apparently intractable obstacle to belief in God, and it is easy to see why. It is difficult to imagine that God could exist given the various kinds and amounts of evils that exist in the world today." Kelly James Clark, "Reformed Epistemology Apologetics," in Cowan, *Five Views on Apologetics*, 281.

[6] Barna Group, "Atheism Doubles among Generation Z," January 24, 2018, https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/.

[7] Barna Group, "Atheism Doubles among Generation Z."

his crisis: "I could no longer explain how there can be a good and all-powerful God actively involved with this world, given the state of things. For many people who inhabit this planet, life is a cesspool of misery and suffering. I came to a point where I simply could not believe that there is a good and kindly disposed Ruler who is in charge of it."[8]

Ehrman became an agnostic—one who does not know if there is a God—and asserted, "If there is one, he certainly isn't the one proclaimed by the Judeo-Christian tradition, the one who is actively and powerfully involved in this world. And so I stopped going to church."[9] Ehrman's objection to faith is nothing new. His argument was proposed three centuries ago by renowned philosopher David Hume (1711-1776), who wrote, "Why is there any misery in the world? Not by chance, surely. From some cause, then. Is it from the intention of the deity? But he is perfectly benevolent. Is it contrary to his intention? But he is almighty. Nothing can shake the solidity of this reasoning, so short, so clear, so decisive."[10] Hume argues that if there is a God who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly benevolent and loving, then he would not allow all the evil and suffering in this world.

A Possible Solution

Some philosophers point to the horrible evil in the world and conclude that a good and all-powerful God would not only prevent evil, but he would not even have a good reason for doing so. William Rowe (1931-2015), a philosopher of religion who abandoned Christianity for atheism, argues that a good and all-powerful being cannot exist since there is no good that we know of that would justify an omnipotent,

[8] Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 3.

[9] Ehrman, *God's Problem*, 3-4.

[10] David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion: The Posthumous Essays, Of the Immortality of the Soul, and Of Suicide, from An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding of Miracles*, ed. Richard H. Popkin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 66.

omniscient, and perfectly good being that allows horrendous evil.[11] There is a problem with Rowe's assertion. He has unquestionable faith in the capacity of the human mind to comprehend all the good reasons for evil and suffering. An illustration would be helpful.[12] A girl looks inside a large horse barn and does not see a horse. She concludes that there is no horse in the barn. The next day, she looks inside the same horse barn for a flea. She does not conclude that there is no flea because it is possible for the flea to be so small that she cannot see it. This illustration reveals the fallacy of Rowe's statement: just because a person cannot fathom a good reason for evil, does not mean there cannot be one. This reasoning, according to Timothy Keller, "is fallacious" and "blind faith of a high order."[13]

Famed atheistic philosopher J. L. Mackie (1917-1981) also believes that there would be no good reason for God to allow evil. Mackie purports, "A good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can," and "there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do."[14] In other words, since God is omnibenevolent and omnipotent, he is bound by his perfect nature to perpetually prevent and eliminate all evil and suffering. The problem with Mackie's assertion is that he assumes human beings can comprehend the depths of the purposes of God. It is quite possible for a good being to allow evil for a greater good. In his chapter "God, Evil, and Suffering," Daniel Howard-Snyder argues that a good being may have good and justifying reasons to allow evil in this world:

> Would a perfectly good being always prevent evil as far as he can? Suppose he had a reason to permit evil, a reason that was compatible with his never doing wrong and his being perfect in love, what I'll call a justifying reason. For example, suppose

[11] William Rowe's argument is summarized and critiqued by Alvin Plantinga in Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University, 1999), 465-66.

[12] This illustration is based on Plantinga's "noseeum" example in Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 466.

[13] Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 23.

[14] J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64, no. 254 (April 1955): 201, emphasis added.

> that if he prevented evil completely, then we would miss out on a greater good, a good whose goodness was so great that it far surpassed the badness of evil. In that case, he might not prevent evil as far as he can, for he would have a justifying reason to permit it.[15]

Love and Free Will

The skeptic asserts that a loving and omnipotent God would never allow evil and suffering in the world. One way to respond to this objection is to understand what is meant by the statement, "God is loving." The Christian worldview teaches that love is the essence of God's character (Exod 34; 6, 7; Deut 4:37; John 3:16; 1 John 4:8). Therefore, his highest value is love, and his greatest goal is for love to flourish.[16] For love to flourish, God grants human beings free will. Stephen Davis, a professor of philosophy and religious studies, claims that God's goal was to "create a world in which created rational agents (e.g., human beings) would decide freely to love and obey God."[17] Renowned Christian philosopher, Alvin Plantinga, has constructed the Free Will Defense, which, according to various philosophers and scholars, has solved the logical problem of evil.[18] Rowe asserts,

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[15] Daniel Howard-Snyder, "God, Evil, and Suffering," in *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. Michael J. Murray (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 84.

[16] The idea that God's greatest goal is for love to flourish stems from a biblical worldview. If a nonbeliever charges the omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent Judeo-Christian God of being unjust, then an appropriate response must come not only from the domain of philosophy, but from Scripture, which is the primary source for understanding the Judeo-Christian God. Significant work has been done to address the problem of evil from a philosophical perspective. See Michael L. Peterson, ed., *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings*. 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2017). However, this section attempts to provide a perspective based on the canon of Scripture that is philosophically informed. A nonbeliever should, in theory, grant the Christian the opportunity to answer from a biblical perspective.

[17] Stephen T. Davis, "Free Will and Evil," in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, new ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 74.

[18] While Plantinga's argument is a potent solution to the problem of evil, this section argues that love is the greatest value, and free will, as John Peckham claims, "is a functional good, a means to the greater end of love." John Peckham, *Theodicy of Love: Cosmic Conflict and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 11.

"The logical problem of evil has been severely diminished, if not entirely resolved," as a "result of Plantinga's work."[19]

The heart of Plantinga's Free Will Defense is summarized in *God, Freedom, and Evil*: "It is possible that God could not have created a universe containing moral good (or as much moral good as this world contains) without creating one that also contained moral evil. And if so, then it is possible that God has a good reason for creating a world containing evil."[20] God created the world with the possibility of evil because he prizes free will. Since God's goal is for love to flourish, he grants free will to his rational creatures so that they can freely choose to love him. Love cannot be forced; it must be voluntarily chosen. British writer C. S. Lewis writes,

> Free will is what made evil possible. Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata—of creatures that worked like machines—would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other. . . . And for that they must be free.[21]

So God's goal is for love to flourish, and he grants free will so his creatures would freely choose to have a relationship with him. This is the only way to secure love since love cannot be forced.

God's commitment to free will comes at the risk of allowing evil in this world. The biblical data suggests that evil was not created and perpetrated by God. Rather, evil was introduced to this world by the devil (the enemy of God; Gen 3). The devil, in the form of a serpent, tempted Adam and Eve, the first human beings, to eat of a forbidden tree. To their demise, Adam and Eve chose to eat of the tree. This event severed their relationship with God and marked the beginning of the fall and sin of mankind. Adam

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[19] William L. Rowe, "God and the Problem of Evil," in *God and the Problem of Evil*, ed. William L. Rowe (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 76.

[20] Alvin C. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 31.

[21] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 48.

and Eve had the choice to avoid the forbidden tree: the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:16-17). While they made the wrong decision, this narrative demonstrates that God's commitment to love and free will is so resolute that he allows the possibility of evil. In *Theodicy of Love: Cosmic Conflict and the Problem of Evil*, John Peckham argues, "If love requires freedom and if the rejection of God's love is itself evil, then love requires the possibility of evil."[22]

The Evil Instigator

The skeptic charges God with evil since God, who is omnibenevolent and omnipotent, does nothing to prevent the horrendous evil and suffering in the world. However, the skeptic is unaware of the nature of evil as portrayed within the Christian worldview. The nature of evil not only consists of natural evil (caused by the natural world, such as floods, earthquakes, and forest fires) and moral evil (caused by a human agent), but also evil that is incited by supernatural evil forces (Eph 6:12). The Western, modern world is ambivalent about supernatural phenomena.[23] Though in classical times, prior to the Enlightenment, Western societies assumed a world with cosmic realities. Thus, the skepticism of supernatural phenomena is a recent view.

According to the Bible, the primary evil instigator is the devil or Satan (Job 1-2; Matt 4:1-11). Scripture portrays the devil as a malevolent antigod force who incites moral and natural evil in this world (Gen 3; 1 Chron 21:1; Job 1:6; Matt 4:3; Eph 2:2; 1 Pet 5:8; Rev 12:9) and accuses God of evil and slanders his name and character (Rev 12:10; 13:6; Job 1-2; Zech 3:1-2; Jude 9). Thus, the devil is the primary character who is responsible and culpable for evil in this world. Some people object to the idea of a devil and argue

[22] Peckham, *Theodicy of Love*, 11.

[23] Since the Enlightenment (1715-1789), supernatural agencies, such as the devil and demons, have been ignored or dismissed in the modern world (the reality of the supernatural is more prevalent in other parts of the world). Rudolf Bultmann writes, "Now that the forces and the laws of nature have been discovered, we can no longer believe in spirits whether good or evil." Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 4.

that God should not have created this antigod being in the first place.[24] However, if God values free will and grants it to human creatures, then it is possible that God granted free will to cosmic creatures, such as the devil. Furthermore, if the devil exercised free will and chose to reject God, this would be considered the very first act of evil in the universe, which would deem the devil the originator of evil.[25]

While the idea that the devil bears responsibility for evil does not entirely solve the problem of why he was created in the first place, it at least introduces a perspective that demonstrates God's character of love. Unlike the devil, whose aim is to destroy all creation, God's intentions are never to harm his creation; rather, his desires are to care for and protect his creation so love can flourish.

Evil Defeated

Since God is a God of love, his goal is to remove any obstacles that would hinder the flourishing of his love in the world. The greatest demonstration of God's commitment to annihilate evil is the crucifixion of Christ. At the cross, Jesus defeated all evil powers. The apostle John states, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). The devil's judgment comes in two phases. First, the devil and his minions were legally judged for their evil actions when Jesus died on the cross (John 12:31; Rev 12:10-11). Second, the devil and demons will be annihilated at the end of the history of this world, right before God's people inherit the new earth (Rev 18;

[24] Jeffrey Russell asserts, "The idea of the Devil ultimately does little to solve the problem of why there is evil in the cosmos. At the center of the problem is the question of why God should freely choose to create a cosmos in which the Devil and other evil beings produce such immeasurable suffering." Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1992), 303.

[25] The view that evil originated with the devil when he freely chose to reject God is supported by the Bible (see Isa 14:12; Ezek 28:16; Rev 12:7-9).

19:20-21; 20:10-15). According to Peckham, God's suffering on the cross "teaches us that we can trust that God has done and will do everything he can for us."[26]

The suffering of God on the cross not only reveals his commitment to uproot evil from the world, but his crucifixion also provides a conclusive demonstration of God's character of unselfish love. God voluntarily chose to give himself to save humanity (Rom 3:25-26; 5:8). He sacrificed himself to reveal his matchless love. Keller writes,

> If we again ask the question: "Why does God allow evil and suffering to continue?" and we look at the cross of Jesus, we still do not know what the answer is. However, we now know what the answer isn't. It can't be that he doesn't love us. It can't be that he is indifferent or detached from our condition. God takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he was willing to take it on himself.[27]

The problem of evil assumes God's character is evil since he allows horrendous evil and suffering in the world. The crucifixion of Jesus is the most compelling solution to the problem of evil because it reveals the loving and merciful nature of God. By contrast, the death of God also reveals the evil and destructive nature of the devil.[28] The existence of evil feels unjust in the human scales of justice, yet it was exponentially more unjust for an infinite God to become human and die for the sake of mankind. The extravagant love of God fueled the apostle Paul's engine and prompted him to say, "Christ's love compels us" (2 Cor 5:14). The problem of evil is concerned with the discovering the nature of God. The next section will wrestle with the cultural and visceral problem of identity that concerns the nature of man.

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[26] Peckham, *Theodicy of Love*, 127.

[27] Keller, *Reason for God*, 30-31.

[28] Jesus said about the antigod enemy, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:10-11).

The Problem of Identity

In 1998, actor Jackie Chan starred in an action-comedy film entitled *Who Am I?*[29] After he was left for dead, the solo commando (Chan) struggled to regain his memory and at one point in the film screamed, "Who am I?" This question of identity is prevalent in modern Western culture and shapes society's values and politics. Carl Trueman, a Christian theologian and historian, wrote *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* to discover why the following statement is coherent in modern culture: "I am a woman trapped in a man's body."[30]This section explores the history of modern conceptions of identity and provides a cultural apologetic for a Christian view of the "self."

Identifying Identity

It is necessary to define the term *identity*. Trueman asserts that a sense of self involves understanding personal purpose, "what constitutes the good life, and how I understand myself in relation to others."[31] Keller identifies two qualities of identity. First, each person has a sense of self that is *durable* and permanent in every sphere of life. A woman is a mother at home, a manager at her job, a daughter, and a sister all at the same time. To have a durable identity means that in whatever context she is in, she has a core sense of who she is—a permanent sense of self that remains constant in different contexts. Second, each person has a perceived sense of *worth*, an "assessment of your

[29] Chen Musheng, dir., *Who Am I?* (Golden Harvest, 1998), 58:09.

[30] Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 19.

[31] Trueman and Dreher, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 21.

own value."[32] Tony Schwartz acknowledges the human need for value: "Once our basic needs are met, we human beings arguably crave value above all else."[33]

Two Approaches to Identity

Prolific Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor offers two ways to look at identity from a historical perspective.[34] He contrasts two views of identity: (1) the ancient view, which he labels the *porous* self, and (2) the modern view, which he names the *buffered* self. The pre-modern, ancient self was "porous" in the sense that the self was permeable to some outside power.[35] A person's identity was tied to the cosmos, community, and tradition, namely, an external and permanent source outside the self. The ancient self was vulnerable to cosmic forces. One sign of the porous ethos is that people used to look back at "that time" (previous "golden" eras) with nostalgia.[36]

The modern, "buffered" self is rooted in expressive individualism. Unlike the ancient self that derived its identity in the cosmos or community, modern identity is invulnerable to external forces and rooted in intuition; it is not an identity to be found, but one to be realized. Taylor asserts that, in the modern self, "the possibility exists . . . to

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[32] Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016), 118.

[33] Here is the insightful quote in its entirety:

> Why does Michael Phelps keep returning to a brutal training regimen in the pool, long after he's achieved every imaginable accolade as a swimmer? Why do men who have earned hundreds of millions of dollars, even billions, work relentlessly to earn even more, long after it could possibly make any material difference in their lives? Why does a substantial group of politicians with no remote chance of being elected president feel compelled to traverse the country campaigning 18 hours a day for more than two years? As little as these varied people have in common, their shared core hunger is for value. Once our basic needs are met, we human beings arguably crave value above all else. (Tony Schwartz, "The Enduring Hunt for Personal Value," *New York Times*, May 1, 2015, sec. Business)

[34] See chap. 1, "The Bulwarks of Belief," in Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 25-61.

[35] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 35-38.

[36] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.

disengage from everything outside the mind,"[37] and the buffered self "is essentially the self which is aware of the possibility of disengagement."[38] Instead of connecting with an outside source, such as family, people, God "or the some other cosmic Good. . . . Now the source we have to connect with is [not outside us but] deep within us. . . . We come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths."[39] The umbilical cord has been cut from the cosmos, and now humans are to find and form themselves from within.[40]

Truth Shift

The shift from the ancient view of identity to the modern one has had a seismic impact on the understanding of the nature of truth. According to American Christian philosopher Norman Geisler, truth has two qualities: truth (1) is *absolute* in the sense that it is for everyone, everywhere, and at all times, and truth (2) "corresponds to the way things really are."[41] He offers a cogent example: "The statement 'God exists' means that there really is a God outside the universe, an extracosmic Being."[42] When someone makes a claim, that claim must correspond to the "actual state of affairs being described."[43] For example, if someone says, "Nelson Mandela was South African," he must believe that his statement: (1) is absolutely true, which means all other options are false (Nelson Mandela was from South Africa, and not from Germany or Kazakhstan),

[37] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.

[38] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 42.

[39] Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, CBC Massey Lecture Series (Concord, ON: Anansi, 1991), 26.

[40] Robert Bellah et al. describe this expressive individualism as "radical private validation," "the unencumbered self," and "radical individualism." Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 2008), 79-81.

[41] Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 741.

[42] Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 741.

[43] Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 743.

and that it (2) actually corresponds to the reality being described (Nelson Mandela really is South African).

In the example of Nelson Mandela, the object being described (South Africa) is assumed to be an external, objective reality. The statement, "South Africa is a country of Africa," is assumed to reflect a true reality, even if someone believes otherwise. Someone might disagree and say that South Africa is not a country, but most people would doubt this interpretation. Thus, truth is objective: the truthfulness of a claim lies in the reality (object) itself, not in the interpreter's (subject) imagination or interpretation.[44]

In the past several centuries, seismic shifts have taken place in the West's understanding of truth.[45] The locus of truth has shifted inward, where the individual is now the sole arbiter of truth. Trueman observes this inward shift and discerns a "prioritization of the individual's inner psychology—we might even say 'feelings' or 'intuitions'—for our sense of who we are and what the purpose of our lives is."[46] Modern man now turns inward to discern truth and discover his meaning in life.

How Truth Shifted

Three philosophers, Charles Taylor, Philip Reiff, and Alasdair MacIntyre, have identified and described the inward shift of truth.[47] Taylor employs several useful terms

[44] American philosopher Peter van Inwagen offers a cogent example of objective truth:

> When people use the adjective objective in connection with truth, they use it as a reminder that the truth or falsity of what we say and believe does not in most cases depend on our desires or our hopes or our fears or any of our psychological states. If my doctor has told me that there is a cancer growing in my gut, what she has told me may be true or it may be false, but its truth or falsity depends on what's going on in my gut and on nothing else. If I experience a very sincere desire for her statement to be false, that fact is entirely irrelevant to whether it is false. This desire of mine may have consequences for what I believe about the state of things in my gut (such is human epistemological frailty), but it has no consequences for the truth or falsity of those beliefs. (Peter van Inwagen, "Philosophy, Politics, and Objective Truth," *Euresis Journal* 5 [Summer 2013], 192)

[45] This epistemological shift will be explained in the next section.

[46] Trueman and Dreher, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 23.

[47] The following section is a summarized synthesis of Trueman's historical engagement of Taylor, Reiff, and MacIntyre's ideas in chap. 1,"Reimagining the Self," and chap. 2, "Reimagining Our Culture," in Trueman and Dreher, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 35-102.

to explain the West's identity-metamorphosis. He coins the phrase *social imaginary* to describe how most people in a culture refer to their shared beliefs, practices, norms, and assumptions.[48] It is not merely a set of shared ideas, but a set of collective practices.[49] In *A Secular Age* and *Sources of the Self*, Taylor contrasts two terms to describe social realities: *mimesis* and *poeisis*. A mimetic view denotes the world has order, and humans must discover this meaning and conform themselves to it. By contrast, *poeisis* conveys the idea that the world is made of raw material, and it is up to humans to shape and create meaning. Self-creation is routine.

Philip Reiff, an American sociologist and cultural critic, applies psychology to describe patterns of cultural change. He argues that the modern man is psychological and inward and no longer needs therapy from his community. In traditional culture, the therapist was the expert who helped patients understand the values and practices of the community to which he belonged. Commitment to the community was prior to the individual.[50] Reiff asserts that modern man no longer needs *therapy* from community, since institutions are deemed socially and psychologically oppressive.[51] Objective and external truths are only constructs designed to subjugate the weak.[52] In Reiff's view, the community's role is not to administer but to protect followers from the institution's coercive therapy.[53] Modern man must now create his own destiny and manifest his identity

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[48] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171-72.

[49] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2004), 2.

[50] Trueman and Dreher, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 47.

[51] Trueman and Dreher briefly traces the history from communal positivism to oppression by citing key figures: Jean-Jacques Rousseau regarded the present community as a hindrance to self-actualization; Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche argued that the present community must be uprooted for individuals to flourish; Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse believed that the present community subjugated sexual self-expression and must be uprooted. Trueman and Dreher, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 48.

[52] Trueman and Dreher, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 49.

[53] Trueman and Dreher, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 48.

before the world. The community must not muzzle this individualistic expression but must support it.[54]

Alasdair MacIntyre, a moral and political philosopher, wrote an instrumental book, *After Virtue*,[55] that laid the ground for virtue ethics, an ethical theory that purports that actions are judged by their ends.[56] MacIntyre argues that the purpose (i.e., end) of human action needs to be understood within a social environment. Individuals make choices within a social fabric, not in isolation. Thus, ethics is grounded in the tradition of a community. He suggests that modern society cannot agree where to ground morality. Modern ethical discourse is confused because there is no consensus of the telos of human existence.[57] MacIntyre claims that the major social assumption of society is what he calls *emotivism*, which is "the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character."[58] In other words, society has given feeling and personal preference objective authority.

The Modern Self Is Feeble

Modern man stands confidently on the foundation of his intuitions, but he does not realize how feeble his base is. There are several problems with modern identity: it is rooted in itself, denies social realities, and is quite fragile.

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[54] Yuval Levin opines, "We have moved, roughly speaking, from thinking of institutions as molds that shape people's character and habits toward seeing them as platforms that allow people to be themselves and to display themselves before a wider world." Yuval Levin, *A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus: How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream* (New York: Basic, 2020), 33-34.

[55] Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2007).

[56] This section is based on Trueman's summary of Alasdaire MacIntyre in Trueman and Dreher, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 82-88.

[57] Trueman and Dreher, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 82.

[58] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 11-12.

Modern identity is rooted in itself. Modern man is rooted in the shifting sands of feeling and preference. Modern culture has turned inward and given "the self" the power and authority to choose its own values.[59] As noted in the section on MacIntyre, personal feeling and intuition (man's inward psychological convictions and experiences) have been granted final authority in decisions of value, identity, and truth. One problem with being steered by feeling and preference is that they constantly change. Keller writes, "If your identity is just your desires, they are going to be changing all the time. If in every situation you seek your own self-interest, responding in ways that get the approval and control you want at the moment, then identity essentially disappears."[60] In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, sociologist and social psychologist Erving Goffman claims that what appears to be a self is a series of social masks that constantly change, which suggests that there is no self at all.[61] If a person's identity is built upon the shifting sand of feelings and intuitions, then there is no sense of permanence.

Another problem is that if values are ultimately preference, then there is no real way to define what is good. Modern man's interests are constantly shifting; thus, there is no firm way to say some values are better than others.[62] One day, a man believes people must be honest at all times and in all circumstances. Two years later, his value for honesty shifts when offered a position in his company that requires him to lie. What sits at the heart of his shifting values is that he is, as Robert Bellah et al. would argue, his "own moral universe, and there is finally no way to reconcile conflicting claims about what is good in itself."[63]

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[59] Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 75.

[60] Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 124.

[61] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

[62] Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 7.

[63] Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 76.

Modern identity denies social realities. In her contemporary novel *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, Helen Fielding creates a fictional character by the name of Bridget who boasts about her confidence in her diary one evening: "7:08 p.m. Am assured, receptive, responsive woman of substance." However, she sees a problem. "My sense of self comes not from other people but from . . . myself? That can't be right."[64] She is right. It is impossible for the modern person to form her identity on herself alone because she seeks validation and value from others.

Bellah et al. argue that human traditions are embedded in society's social fabric. They argue that traditions are socially constructed. They define a tradition as "a pattern of evaluations and understandings that a community has worked out over time," and that tradition "is an inherent dimension of all human action."[65] A modern person may declare that she is entitled to concoct her own self-approved values, but the reality is that it will not take long to find a community of people who hold the same belief. Values and traditions are not created in a vacuum; they are formed and shaped in community. Bellah et al. argue that it is "cultural fiction" for modern people to believe they can create their values in isolation, because "just where we think we are most free, we are most coerced by the dominant beliefs of our own culture."[66]

Mankind's sense of self is created and evaluated in community. Taylor argues, "One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it."[67] Thus, to deny the reality that community shapes identity is to deny what it means to be human. Human identity is interwoven in the web of community,

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[64] Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 121.

[65] Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 335-36.

[66] Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 65.

[67] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1989), 35.

and humanity derives worth and value in relationships. Keller writes, "Only if we are approved and loved by someone whom we esteem can we achieve any self-esteem."[68]

Modern identity is fragile. The modern self is a self-made self. No longer does modern man look to the cosmos or community for meaning and purpose; his life now idolizes his performance and achievement. Keller states that while modern man claims to be free of social norms, he no longer looks to his family but to his "chosen arenas of achievement," where he needs "the acceptance and applause of others who are already within those circles."[69] The irony is that in modern man's attempt to liberate himself from outside voices, he still links himself to the opinions of others. The modern man attaches himself to the very thing he rejects. This leaves him vulnerable and fragile, for when he fails to achieve his lofty dreams, he fails himself and the expectations of others.

Modern identity is fragile because it is rooted in at least two idols. The first idol is the idol of success. Mary Bell, founder of the Center for Recovering Families, remarks about the existential angst of chasing success:

> Achievement is the alcohol of our time. . . . These days, the best people don't abuse alcohol. They abuse their lives. . . . You're successful, so good things happen. You complete a project, and you feel dynamite. That feeling doesn't last forever, and you slide back to normal. . . . But you love the feeling of euphoria, so you've got to have it again. The problem is, you can't stay on that high. . . . Eventually, in this cycle, you drop to the pain level more and more often.[70]

The euphoria of success is fleeting. When a person has achieved "success," he is satisfied for a moment but realizes he does not have enough of "it," so he strives for more of "it." Modern man's attempts to build his identity on success is tenuous.

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[68] Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 125.

[69] Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 129.

[70] Harriet Rubin, "Success and Excess," Fast Company, September 30, 1998, https://www.fastcompany.com/35583/success-and-excess.

A second idol is romance. Modern man's inward turn has unleashed his passions for love, and he has turned to romance to fulfill his deepest longings. A lover has become the primary object of his affections and she has become the crowning act of all his achievements. Ernest Becker writes, "The self-glorification we now need to achieve in our innermost being, we now look for in our love partner. . . . Modern man fulfills his urge to self-expansion in the love object just as it was once fulfilled in God."[71] The problem with making a love partner one's "all" is that "any shortcoming in him becomes a major threat to you."[72] When success, a love partner, or any other object becomes an idol, "should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living."[73]

Christian Identity Is Durable

Modern man realizes his identity is not as stable as he has hoped. Christianity offers a more stable and durable foundation for identity.

Christian identity is given, not gained. American singer and songwriter Madonna laments the visceral emptiness of success:

> I have an iron will, and all of my will has always been to conquer some horrible feeling of inadequacy. . . . I push past one spell of it and discover myself as a special human being and then I get to another stage and think I'm mediocre and uninteresting. . . . Again and again. My drive in life is from this horrible fear of being mediocre. And that's always pushing me, pushing me. Because even though I've become Somebody, I still have to prove that I'm Somebody. My struggle has never ended and it probably never will.[74]

Madonna's fear of ordinariness is the fuel that drives her engine to achieve. Her identity is rooted in being a successful "somebody," which she admittedly never becomes. When

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[71] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), 160.

[72] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 167.

[73] Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Riverhead, 2011), xx.

[74] Lynn Hirshberg, "The Misfit," *Vanity Fair*, April 1991, https://archive.vanityfair.com/article/share/bd86a835-b84c-47a7-bbec-60b9af6ea282.

an achiever's self-worth is tied to success, she is left emotionally bankrupt because she never entirely achieves her goal.

Christianity, on the other hand, offers a more liberating identity. The apostle Paul writes in his first letter to the believers in Corinth about his freedom: "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me" (1 Cor 4:3-4). Paul is saying that the judgment and opinions of people mean little to him. His identity is not attached to what other people think about him. Strikingly, Paul says he is not even anxious about his own opinions about himself. Rather, he is more concerned about what God thinks of him.

In the beginning of his Corinthian letter, Paul writes, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor 1:4). The grace of God, namely the gospel,[75] is a central theme in Paul's writings. The gospel claims that the basis of someone's acceptance with God (i.e., salvation) has nothing to do with achievement, but has everything to do with Christ's achievement.[76] The incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus demonstrate God's matchless love and grace for humanity and stand as the crowning acts of achievement. Christianity teaches that human identity is not rooted in a life of fastidious performance. Instead, human identity is grounded in faith that delights in the wonder of Christ's accomplishments. A person's identity, therefore, is not *gained* by work, but *given* as a gift.[77] Madonna can become a

[75] Paul calls the gospel "the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24). The gospel is the good news that people can have a restored relationship with God because of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection.

[76] Paul writes in Eph 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." Paul is saying that a person's acceptance with God is solely rooted in the gift of Jesus's death and sacrifice. Therefore, people cannot boast of any of their accomplishments.

[77] Keller describes the "gained vs. given" dynamic in another way: "Unlike either traditional or secular culture, a Christian's identity is not achieved but received. When we ask God the Father to accept us, adopt us, unite with us, not on the basis of our performance and moral efforts but because of Christ's, we receive a relationship with God that is a gift." Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 136.

"somebody" not by her own efforts, but by believing and receiving the true "somebody," Jesus Christ.

Christian identity is satisfyingly enduring. All humans desire to be happy. French philosopher and writer Blaise Pascal states, "All men seek happiness. There are no exceptions. . . . This is the motive of every act of every man, including those who go and hang themselves."[78] Modern man's insatiable drive for success offers glimpses of happiness, but he is still empty.

Alex Honnold, an American rock climber who climbs massive rock walls without ropes, was the first person to free solo El Capitan in Yosemite National Park. In *Free Solo,* the biographical documentary about his daring climb of El Capitan, Honnold comments about the momentary pleasure of achievement: "If you're seeking perfection, free soloing is as close as you can get. And it does feel good to feel perfect, for a brief moment."[79] Success is not permanently delightful; it is temporary and fleeting. King Solomon attests to the temporary delight of success. After he amassed enormous wealth, built elaborate houses and vineyards, and became famous, he said, "Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun" (Eccl 2:11). Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt analyzes Solomon's emptiness: "The author of Ecclesiastes wasn't just battling the fear of meaninglessness; he was battling the disappointment of success. The pleasure of getting what you want is often fleeting."[80]

If the euphoria of success is fleeting, then people need a more satisfying source for their happiness. David Brooks, cultural commentator for *The New York Times*,

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[78] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 1995), 45.

[79] Alex Honnold, in Elizabeth Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin, dirs., *Free Solo* (National Geographic Society, 2019), 41:01.

[80] Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (New York: Basic, 2006), 82.

identifies a more fulfilling source of joy: "Relationships are the key to happiness. People who live in the densest social networks tend to flourish, while people who live with few social bonds are much more prone to depression and suicide."[81] Relational connectedness is more lasting than the transience of success. Haidt concurs that relationships are the best source for happiness: "If you want to predict how happy someone is, or how long she will live . . . you should find out about her social relationships."[82] Christianity offers relational intimacy that is rooted in the ontology of the Trinity.

Christianity teaches that God is triune in nature. There is one God who exists in three co-eternal beings: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Since the Trinity has existed together for eternity, they are fundamentally relational.[83] Unlike other monotheistic religions, such as Judaism and Islam, the Christian view of God paints a unique and dynamic portrait of love, intimacy, and unity between each person of the Trinity. John, one of Jesus's disciples, declares that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). For there to be love, C. S. Lewis argues that God has to "contain at least two Persons" because "love is something that one person has for another person."[84] Each person of the Trinity has two other persons to share this love. The Trinity invites human beings to enter their relational and eternal pattern, or "dance," as Lewis puts it, because "there is no other way to the happiness for which we were made."[85] If the Christian God exists, and he is eternal and essentially relational, then human beings have a more satisfying and permanent foundation to build their identity. The Christian God invites human beings to enter the delight of Trinitarian

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[81] David Brooks, "Harmony and the Dream," *New York Times*, August 11, 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/12/opinion/12brooks.html.

[82] Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, 133.

[83] The Gospel writer John describes the relational intimacy of the Trinity. The Father and Son are in close relationship (1:18), the Spirit and Son are one in purpose, the Spirit glorifies the Son (16:13-14), and the Son glorifies the Father (17:4-5).

[84] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 174.

[85] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 176.

intimacy and is so zealous about this union that he gave Jesus to secure eternal joy (see John 3:16).

Conclusion

The problems of evil and identity are prevalent themes that the modern apologist must engage with in order to frame Christianity as a reasonable and potentially satisfying worldview. The problem of evil is the most prevalent intellectual barrier for skeptics because they cannot reconcile atrocious evil with a benevolent God. However, there are several convincing solutions to the problem of evil. The Free Will Defense, as proposed by philosopher Alvin Plantinga, and the crucifixion of Jesus provide compelling answers to the problem of evil. The problem of identity is a great challenge in modern society because modern man grounds his ontology in himself. Modern man has turned inward and rejected outside voices; he primarily listens to himself. This inward turn has made modern man feebler than he realizes. Christian identity, on the other hand, is grounded in a more durable foundation since mankind's identity is rooted in an enduring faith relationship with the historical Jesus. The next chapter will apply traditional and cultural apologetics in a local church setting.

CHAPTER 4

THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE APOLOGETICS TEACHING SERIES PROJECT

The purpose of this project was to develop an apologetics teaching series at Hinsdale Filipino-American Seventh-day Adventist Church (HFAC) to educate church members and attendees in post-Christian evangelism. The first goal of this project was to discover the defeater beliefs about Christianity and church. The second goal was to develop a seven-session apologetics teaching series to address the defeater beliefs about Christianity and church. The third goal was to increase the knowledge of church members and attendees by conducting a seven-session apologetics teaching series. The fourth goal was to develop a ministry plan to engage nonchurched people in a learning community at HFAC. All four goals were successfully implemented in the local church, and in this chapter I will describe the process and details of each goal.

Goal 1: Discovering Defeater Beliefs

The first goal was to discover the barriers to belief about Christianity and church, based on public opinion research and from personal interviews with five nonchurched people in the Hinsdale area. I utilized research from two polling organizations for my public opinion research: Barna Group, an evangelical Christian polling firm; and Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about societal issues and trends. After several hours of research in three primary articles,[1] I determined that

[1] Barna Group, "Atheism Doubles among Generation Z," January 24, 2018, https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/; Barna Group, "Doubt & Faith: Top Reasons People Question Christianity," March 1, 2023, https://www.barna.com/research/doubt-faith/; Pew Research Center, "Why America's 'Nones' Don't Identify with a Religion," August 8, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/08/08/why-americas-nones-dont-identify-with-a-religion/.

most barriers to Christianity could be grouped into five main objections: (1) past experiences with a religious institution; (2) the hypocrisy of religious people; (3) the existence of evil and human suffering; (4) science refutes the Bible; and (5) one religion cannot have all the answers.

After my research from the Barna Group and Pew Research Forum articles, I setup interviews with five nonchurched people.[2] Two interviewees identified as Christian, and three identified as non-Christian. My first interview was with a married couple, whom I will identify as interviewees 1 and 2 (I-1 and I-2, respectively). I-1, the husband, identified as a Jew and was raised as a child in the Jewish faith; I-2, the wife, was raised at HFAC and in the Adventist school system (Hinsdale Adventist Academy). She identified herself as Christian, but did not regularly attend church at the time of my interview. My second interview was with a couple, interviewees 3 and 4 (I-3 and I-4, respectively). I-3 attended HFAC as a child and identified as a Christian, but did not regularly attend church at the time of my interview. His girlfriend, I-4, identified as a Buddhist and was genuinely curious about Christian teaching. My last interview was with interviewee 5 (I-5), a man engaged to someone who attended HFAC as a youth. I-5 identified as a Hindu and shared compelling insights about his faith of origin. The interviews were insightful and fascinating and helped shape the creation of the teaching series in goal 2.

Goal 2: Developing the Teaching Series

The second goal of the project was to develop a seven-session apologetics teaching series to address the defeater beliefs about Christianity and church from my public opinion research in the articles from Barna Group and Pew Research Forum, and from the five nonchurched interviewees. This second goal was accomplished in four steps. First, I collated the data from my public opinion research and interviews and selected seven topics for my series. After much deliberation, I selected seven messages:

[2] I will identify each person by numbers and the order by which I interviewed them.

(1) Oppression: Isn't the church responsible for so much pain?; (2) Suffering: How can a good God allow evil and suffering?; (3) Exclusivity: There cannot only be one true religion, right?; (4) Identity (Part 1): Who am I and how do I know?; (5) Identity (Part 2): How can I have an identity that is not crushing?; (6) The Person: Who is Jesus and why does it matter?; (7) Restrictive: Doesn't Christianity limit my freedom? The interviews played a crucial role in selecting my messages. I decided to leave out the science defeater ("science refutes too much of the Bible"), since this barrier was not relevant to my interviewees, and I added the "restrictive" topic (message 7) since two of the interviewees expressed how Christianity appears guilt-ridden and narrowminded, especially to the LGBTQ+ community. I included the identity of Jesus message (message 6) to persuade my three non-Christian interviewees (if they came to the teaching series) of Jesus's divinity and personhood as Lord. I added the identity topics (messages 4 and 5) to speak to today's modern culture's identity issues in the areas of politics, race, sexuality, and gender, and to demonstrate for interviewees how Christian identity is desirable and appealing.

The second step to accomplish the second goal was to prepare the seven messages. This step took the most effort and was the most time-consuming. I finished and refined the messages over a period of about four to five weeks. For each message, I went through a process of reviewing all my resources and collating the most pertinent ideas and illustrations, determining the main idea and response to the defeater, and crafting a detailed outline. After I finished the message outlines, the third step was to send the messages for review from a panel of five people comprised of committed leaders and members at HFAC. Two panelists were paid staff (one full-time pastor and one part-time worship leader) and three panelists were people who had experience working in secular environments (health care and startup businesses). Their responses were especially helpful as I completed the fourth and final step, which was to edit my messages from their feedback.

Goal 3: Conducting the Teaching Series

The third goal of the project was to increase the knowledge of church members and attendees of evangelism in a post-Christian culture by conducting the seven-session apologetics teaching series at HFAC. The series was entitled, "Questioning Christianity: A Series to Explore Tough Questions about Christian Faith." I accomplished this third goal in three steps. First, I generated interest and raised awareness for the series (and the necessity of evangelism to nonbelievers) in several social circles in the congregation. The first group was a small group leadership team which was comprised of paid staff, ministry leaders, and their families. The small group leadership team was called the Grow Group Leadership Team (GGLT). The GGLT started meeting weekly in October 2022 (about nine months before the series) for over two months to research and explore the necessity of evangelistic small groups to reach nonbelievers, and to plan for an experimental weekly Grow Group (a missional small group designed to engage with nonbelievers) that would be launched in January 2023. The GGLT held a Thanksgiving event and invited non-Christian coworkers and friends to the gathering. On January 14, 2023, the GGLT launched its weekly Grow Group and met until March 4, 2023. This Grow Group experience impressed upon the GGLT the importance of connecting with and engaging nonbelievers and nonchurched people.

The second social circle was the members and attendees of HFAC. I preached a sermon series on April 29 and May 6, 2023 (about eleven weeks before the apologetics teaching series) entitled, "Adapt or Expire: Embracing Change to Fulfill Your Mission." The series was based on my research from chapter 2 of this project of Paul's missional adaptation in Acts 17. The sermons provided theological resources and justification for the church's need to adapt its mission to a post-Christian context in the US and the Hinsdale area. I also co-preached with the church's youth pastor a five-part sermon series from June 3 to July 1, 2023, entitled, "The Word: Experiencing His Transformative Power." We shared the theological necessity of questioning and examining the Word and the importance of questioning beliefs. I generated interest for the apologetics teaching

series during this sermon series, and with direct invitations (with fliers) in the Saturday worship services three weeks before the series. The third and last group with whom I generated interest was my interviewees (nonchurched contacts). I shared with the interviewees that I would be conducting a series to answer tough questions about Christianity. I also invited nonchurched contacts, both non-church members and irregularly attending church members, to the series.

The second step in this third goal of implementing the project was to conduct the series. The series was held on July 18-22, 2023. I presented seven messages in five consecutive days.[3] I originally planned to implement the project in seven sessions over seven consecutive weeks, but for several reasons instead I chose to conduct the series in the span of one week. First, the HFAC culture is accustomed to holding events in intense bursts. For example, since I had been senior pastor of HFAC for two years by the time I conducted the apologetics teaching series, the church held two one-week (Monday through Saturday) Vacation Bible School (VBS) events in the summers of 2022 and 2023.[4] The church also held several events that were held in short bursts: a prayer event held every night for one week, a second 24-hour prayer event held over two days, and another special evangelistic event held over two days. Second, the Seventh-day Adventist denomination's evangelism culture is accustomed to conducting evangelistic events in intense bursts. Since 2005, I have conducted a handful of evangelistic events (including countries outside of the US) that were held over a variety of periods of one to three-week timeframes. In my previous pastorate in Colorado, between 2015 and 2021, I held two successful two-and-a-half-week evangelistic meetings (we met three to five times a

[3] Message 1 was held on Tuesday, July 18 at 7:00 p.m. Message 2 was held on Wednesday, July 19 at 7:00 p.m. Message 3 was held on Thursday, July 20 at 7:00 p.m. Messages 4 and 5 (parts 1 and 2 on the topic of identity) were held consecutively, with a small break in between, on Friday, July 21 at 7:00 p.m. Messages 6 and 7 were held on Saturday, July 22 at 11:15 a.m. during the worship service and 2:00 p.m., after potluck, as a closing afternoon session.

[4] This has been the culture of VBS at HFAC for the past decade.

week). Third, I held the apologetics teaching series in a one-week timeframe to connect and build interest with my nonchurched contacts. I thought a nonchurched person may be more willing to attend a session on a weeknight instead of attending seven consecutive Saturday/Sabbath morning worship services.[5]

With the help of my message-evaluation panel, I polished and practiced each message and then presented the topics each night. After each presentation (except Saturday morning during the worship service), a Q&A session was held to answer questions from the live and online audience. The rest of this section describes the content of each message.[6]

Session 1: Oppression

The first session was entitled "Oppression: Isn't the Church Responsible for So Much Pain?" I began with setting the stage for the entire Questioning Christianity series by arguing that having right beliefs is important. I then appealed to the audience to come to each session with an open mind and heart. I cited Barna Group who said that some of the top reasons non-religious people reject Christianity are (1) past experiences with a religious institution and (2) the hypocrisy of religious people.[7] The oppressive posture and attitude of some religious and Christian organizations keep non-religious people away. I then shared stories of oppression done in the name of Christianity, such as the

[5] I also considered holding the apologetics teaching series on seven consecutive Thursday evenings (or another weekday), but thought that a small group format would have been more effective for nonchurched people. As our church begins to shift toward a gospel-centered and missional culture to reach nonbelievers in the community in the next few years, we will build relationships with nonchurched people, which will prompt us to hold larger events. For example, if our church leaders are trained and intentional about reaching nonbelievers in missional small groups (an initiative that will be processed and communicated through the Visioning Team), then I could hold a future apologetics series, on seven consecutive Thursday evenings, where about 40-50 percent of the audience are non-Christian or non-churched people.

[6] See appendix 5 for a simple outline of each message of the seven sessions.

[7] Barna "Doubt & Faith: Top Reasons People Question Christianity," March 1, 2023, www.barna.com/research/doubt-faith/.

violence of the Crusades around AD 1100-1300, the complicity of many Christians with slavery in the US, and the fear-mongering attitude of many Christian leaders today.[8]

My response to the session's defeater belief ("Isn't the church responsible for so much pain?") was given in three points. First, I argued that Christians are more flawed than people assume. Christians, like non-Christians, are a work in progress, which means they will make mistakes. Second, Jesus critiques religion by sharing that the problem with many religious people, like the Pharisees who were implicitly rebuked by Jesus's story of the older brother in the prodigal son's parable (Luke 15:11-32), is that their faith is not deep enough. Third, the solution to oppression is not to abandon Christianity, but to adapt a deeper Christianity and have a deeper faith. The solvent to oppression is found in God's love, who gave his life (like the father of the prodigal son) for his children.

Session 2: Suffering

The second session of the apologetics teaching series was entitled, "Suffering: How Can a Good God Allow Evil and Suffering?" I shared that, according to the Barna Group, this was the top barrier to belief of Generation Z (those born between 1999 and 2015).[9] Prominent professor Bart Ehrman shared that the problem of evil (POE) was the tipping point in his abandonment of Christian identity.[10] The POE is not a new argument, but one that dates as far back as 300 BC with the Greek philosopher Epicurus.

I responded to this prominent and ancient defeater with three points. First, it is possible that a good God has good reasons to allow evil. The idea that "an omniscient God would *never* have any good reasons to allow evil" is an arrogant statement because it assumes the questioner knows everything an all-knowing God would do. Thus, since

[8] The fear-mongering and guilt-tripping attitude of HFAC Christian leaders is the primary reason one of my interviewees no longer attends church.

[9] Barna Group, "Atheism Doubles among Generation Z," January 24, 2018, www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/.

[10] Ehrman, *God's Problem*.

mankind's knowledge is limited, it is possible that a God with unlimited knowledge has a good reason to allow evil that human beings are not aware of. An illustration of God having a good reason to allow evil is the biblical story of Joseph. Joseph was sold as a slave by his brothers to the Egyptians and was later elevated to second in command in Egypt. Under his leadership, the Egyptians stored up food for a great famine and became a food source for the surrounding nations. Joseph's brothers and his family were reunited and saved from the famine. Joseph asserted to his brothers that God allowed the evil of slavery for the greater good of saving the nations.

Second, if it is possible that a good God may have good reasons to allow evil and suffering in this world, then a good reason a loving God would allow evil is because he grants his creatures free will. The assertion that God prizes free will is articulated by renowned philosopher Alvin Plantinga (whom many scholars believe solved the logical POE) as proposed in *God, Freedom, and Evil*.[11] Third, the origin of evil did not begin with God, but rather Satan (Gen 3; Rev 12). Also, while the POE is existentially painful, what is infinitely more painful (and simultaneously comforting) was the suffering of God on the cross. The crucifixion of Jesus does not answer why human beings unjustly suffer, but it does promise that Jesus loves humanity and is present with people in their suffering.

Session 3: Exclusivity

The third session was entitled, "Exclusivity: There Can't only Be One True Religion, Right?" The assumption behind this question is that all religions are not right or wrong; they all have partial truth and are all equally valid. This assumption is best illustrated by the familiar elephant story from a Hindu text that describes a handful of blind men who try to describe an elephant by touching different parts of the elephant. The moral of the story is twofold: (1) just as the men only handled a piece of the elephant, one's

[11] Plantinga argues that a good God could not have created a universe with moral good without creating one that contained moral evil. Alvin C. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 31.

knowledge of God is partial, and (2) just as the different parts were all part of the same elephant, all religions and beliefs are essentially the same.

My response to this barrier was comprised of three main points. First, to say that all religions are equal is logically faulty. The statement, "Each religion sees part of the truth, but none can see the whole truth," is another way of saying that all truth is not absolute; truth is relative. But to relativize all religions and say, "No one can see the whole truth," is itself an absolute statement. Also, to say that all religions are equally valid is to assume that doctrines do not matter. While all the major religions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and Buddhism) share some beliefs and practices, they are all fundamentally different. For example, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism teach of God who is distant, while Christianity's God is one who is close and personal.

Second, Christianity provides ample resources for peace.[12] The *imago Dei* principle (Gen 1:26) assumes that since mankind is made in God's image, human beings have innate and inestimable worth. Thus, if it is true that all people, both believers and nonbelievers, are made in God's image, then it is possible that nonbelievers can possess more wisdom and goodness than believers assume. And, if the Christian story is true, that all people are flawed due to the selfishness (sin) of mankind's first parents (Adam and Eve), then it is very possible that believers can have less wisdom and goodness than they assume they have. Thus, Christianity provides resources for people who hold divergent beliefs to have respectful dialogue. Third, exclusivity enhances relationships. What makes a marriage special is the intimate exclusivity a husband and a wife have for each other. As the story of the Samaritan woman illustrates, Jesus offers religious exclusivity for the purpose of relational exclusivity.

[12] I received this insight from Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), chap. 1.

Session 4: Identity (Part 1)

The fourth session of the apologetics series was entitled, "Identity (Part 1): Who am I and How Do I Know?" This presentation was the first of two sessions shared on the same evening. The question of identity is palpably present in modern US culture, particularly in politics, race, and gender and sexuality issues. My response to the question, "Who am I and how do I now," came in the form of three points. First, there are two approaches to identity: the ancient view and the modern view, or the porous and the buffered self, respectively, per Charles Taylor.[13] The pre-modern, ancient self (before the time of the Enlightenment in the 1700s) was "porous" in the sense that the self was permeable to some outside power. The modern, "buffered" self is rooted in "expressive individualism." Unlike the ancient self that was porous, modern identity is invulnerable to external forces.

Second, the shift from the ancient to the modern view of the self has been seismic. Carl Trueman, author of "The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self," observes this inward shift and discerns a "prioritization of the individual's inner psychology—we might even say . . . 'feelings' or 'intuitions'—for our sense of who we are and what the purpose of our lives is."[14] Modern man has turned inward and, according to American sociologist Philip Reiff,[15] modern man believes that communities and organizations should never challenge, but support his identity convictions. My third point was that we know ourselves not from ourselves, but sources outside ourselves. Taylor asserts, "One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those

[13] See chap. 1, "The Bulwarks of Belief," in Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 25-61.

[14] Carl R. Trueman and Rod Dreher, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 23.

[15] Trueman and Dreher, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 48.

who surround it."[16] In other words, people validate their identity from outside sources. I shared how external sources shaped my identity: my parents gave me my name; I am a second-generation Asian-American because my parents are ethnically Filipino, and I was born in the US; and I am a Christian because I believe Jesus was God and he was raised from the dead, realities that have been corroborated by historical and external sources.

Session 5: Identity (Part 2)

The fourth session was entitled, "How Can I Have an Identity That Isn't Crushing?" After a short break, I presented this second message on identity. The goal of this fifth teaching was to critique the modern view of identity and offer several reasons why the Christian view of identity is appealing. My response was summarized in three points. First, the modern view of identity is feeble. Modern man is rooted in the shifting sands of feeling and preference. According to Robert Bellah et al., in *Habits of the Heart*, modern culture has turned inward and given "the self" the power authority to choose its own values.[17] One problem with being steered by feeling and preference is that they constantly change. I shared that I met a man on airplane who was flying to South America. We talked about religion and morality. I shared my perspective of commitment and fidelity in marriage and he said, "That sounds too restrictive to be with one woman forever. I should be able to follow my feelings and be with someone who makes me happy." The problem with following feelings is that feelings change. Another problem with trusting feelings is that if one's values are determined by preferences, then there is no real way to define what is good. The modern man's interests are constantly shifting; thus there is no firm way to say some values are better than others.

[16] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1989), 35.

[17] Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 2008), 79-81.

Second, the Christian view of identity is durable. I shared two reasons. First, the Christian identity is given, not gained. Like Madonna (whom I quoted in the presentation), people aim to root their identity in their success and achievements, but when an achiever's self-worth is tied to performance success, she is disappointed because she never fully achieves her goal. On the other hand, Christianity offers a more appealing identity. The apostle Paul writes, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor 1:4). The grace of God, namely the gospel, is a central theme in Paul's writings. The gospel claims that the basis of someone's acceptance with God (i.e., salvation), has nothing to do with achievement, but has everything to do with Christ's achievement. Thus, in the Christian worldview, a person's identity is not *gained* by work, but *given* as a gift.

The second reason the Christian view of identity is durable is that it is satisfyingly enduring. Success satisfies, but only for a moment. King Solomon testified of this disappointing reality when he said, "I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun" (Eccl 2:11). What is more satisfying than success is relationship. According to David Brooks in the *New York Times*, "Relationships are the key to happiness."[18] The Christian view of identity is truly satisfying because the essence of Christianity is not achievement, but relationship. Christianity teaches that God is triune in nature (Father, Son, and Spirit). Since the Trinity has existed together for eternity, they are fundamentally relational. If the Christian God exists, and he is eternal and essentially relational, then human beings have a more satisfying permanent foundation to build their identity. Human relationships inevitably come to end, but a relationship with the triune God never ends.

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[18] David Brooks, "Harmony and the Dream," *New York Times*, August 11, 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/12/opinion/12brooks.html.

Session 6: The Person

The sixth session of the project was, "The Person: Who Is Jesus and Why Does It Matter?" This message was presented on Saturday morning during the weekly worship service. The historical person of Jesus has had a profound impact on the world. Jesus made a radical declaration by claiming that he was God (John 8:48-59). The goal of the presentation was to examine four options of Jesus's identity based on his statement that he was God: Jesus was either a liar, a lunatic, a legend, or the Lord.[19] My response to the session's question explored each of these four options.

The first option of Jesus's identity was that he was a liar. Jesus was questioned before the high priest right before his death. Mark, the author of the Gospel of Mark, wrote about this fervent exchange:

> Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed? And Jesus said, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." And the high priest tore his garments and said, "What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?" And they all condemned him as deserving death. (14:62-64)

Jesus knew he was going to die if he told the truth about his identity. He told the truth, and he was crucified for blasphemy. When someone's life is on the line, his true identity is revealed. Therefore, Jesus cannot be lying; he was telling the truth. Jesus was not a liar.

The second option was that Jesus was a lunatic. C. S. Lewis writes,

> The historical difficulty of giving for the life, saying and influence of Jesus any explanation that is not harder than the Christian explanation is very great. The discrepancy between the depth and sanity of His moral teaching and the rampant megalomania which must lie behind His theological teaching unless He is indeed

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[19] This is the source for C. S. Lewis's popular "Trilemma" about Jesus's identity:

> That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* [New York: HarperCollins, 2001], 52)

Lewis is arguing that there are only three options: either Jesus was a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord. He does not address the fourth option, that Jesus was a legend, which has been popularized after his death. The fourth option is addressed below.

> God has never been satisfactorily explained. Hence the non-Christian hypotheses succeed one another with the restless fertility of bewilderment.[20]

It is harder to believe that Jesus was a lunatic than it is to believe he really was God. Also, twelve of Jesus's apostles were persecuted, and eleven of them were martyred. It is highly unlikely that the apostles would risk their lives for a lunatic. However, some wonder, "What about false messiahs and prophets, like David Koresh and Jim Jones? They were lunatics, and many of their followers believed their lies and died." Jesus was different from these false messiahs in at least three ways. First, the message of Jesus was radically different from the false messiahs. Unlike the fanciful messages of false prophets, Jesus's message was rooted in love. Second, unlike the teachings of the phony messiahs, the impact of Jesus's teachings has endured for more than two thousand years. Third, unlike many false messiahs, the followers of Jesus have risked their lives long after Jesus died.

The third option was that Jesus was only a legend. In Jesus before the Gospels, Bart Ehrman states that during the forty to sixty-five year time gap between Jesus's death and earliest accounts of his life, the memories of Jesus were distorted through oral transmission (like the game telephone).[21] Thus, the written records of Jesus, especially the Gospels, are not reliable. I had two responses to Ehrman's claim that the memories of Jesus were distorted through oral transmission. First, there are several theories surrounding the oral tradition during the time of the Gospels. In his article, "Informal Controlled Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels," Kenneth Bailey offers a perspective from his years of teaching in the Middle East. He claims that the Middle Eastern culture had an "informal controlled oral tradition."[22] Stories were shared at informal gatherings

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[20] C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 113.

[21] Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus before the Gospels: How the Earliest Christians Remembered, Changed, and Invented Their Stories of the Savior* (New York: HarperOne, 2016).

[22] Kenneth Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels," *Themelios* 20, no. 2 (January 1995), www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/informal-controlled-oral-tradition-and-the-synoptic-gospels/.

(there was no specified teacher or students) but were still controlled by the community and the veracity of an oral message was preserved.[23] Thus, the oral accounts of Jesus were safely passed down for about four to six decades. Second, the common view among New Testament scholars (especially among liberal ones) is that it is impossible to know the Christianity that Jesus taught because eyewitness testimony was altered during oral transmission. In *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Richard Bauckham challenges this view and purports that "the traditions were originated and formulated by named eyewitnesses, in whose name they were transmitted and who remained the living and active guarantors of the traditions."[24] In other words, it was not an anonymous group, but respected church leaders who possessed eyewitness testimony and passed on the Jesus tradition in their lifetimes. Thus, it is unlikely Jesus was a legend.

The fourth option was that Jesus was Lord. The death of Jesus had cosmic significance. He died to rescue the world from sin and restore humanity's relationship with God. Jesus's resurrection from the grave provides strong evidence that he was not just a man, but that he was the Lord. Michael Licona in *The Resurrection of Jesus* purports that, according to Gary Habermas, an expert on the resurrection of Jesus, there has been nearly universal consensus amongst scholars since 1975 concerning three facts:

> 1. Jesus died by crucifixion
>
> 2. Very shortly after Jesus' death, the disciples had experiences that led them to believe and proclaim that Jesus had been resurrected and had appeared to them
>
> 3. Within a few years after Jesus' death, Paul converted after experiencing what he interpreted as a postresurrection appearance of Jesus to him.[25]

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[23] Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels."

[24] Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2017), 290.

[25] Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010), 463-64.

There is strong evidence that Jesus was Lord. One of the strongest pieces of evidence is the change he makes in people's lives. At the end of the message, I invited two new believers to share their testimony of conversion with the audience and congregation.

Session 7: Restrictive

The seventh and last session of the project, presented in the afternoon after session 6, was entitled, "Restrictive: Doesn't Christianity Limit My Freedom?" The assumption behind this question is that Christianity stifles human freedom. I had three points for response. First, total inclusivity does not work. Some nonreligious people say that Christianity stifles culture and human expression. They say, "People should be able to live as they see fit without any social pressure. We should therefore all be completely inclusive." This idea sounds good in theory, but it does not work. For example, if a leader from a gay organization said, "I'm becoming straight," the community would frown on him. Also, if a leader from a traditional marriage organization said, "I'm beginning to believe that same-sex marriage is okay," her community would question her membership. Every community (i.e., tribe) has a set of values and a code of ethics by which members abide. Thus, to say that people should be totally inclusive (and not uphold any values) does not work.

Second, Christianity is more diverse than people think. Some people claim that Christianity is a cultural handcuff and imposes one culture (Western ideals) on other cultures. The beauty of Christianity is that while it is firm in its orthodox teachings, Christianity is flexible in its cultural expressions. Christianity is not a Western phenomenon; rather, it started in the Middle East, blossomed in the area of modern-day Europe, and spread throughout the world. In fact, the majority of the Christian population today is in the global south: Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

Third, constraints do not hinder growth; they foster growth. I remember when I was learning to play piano I felt constrained by my mom's command to practice. I obeyed, but begrudgingly. I felt constrained. I could not play basketball, hang out with friends,

and play video games all day. But the constraints of practicing the piano gave me the freedom of playing beautiful music. Thus, people should not avoid constraints. Rather, they should ask, "Which constraints can I adopt that will help me flourish?" Restraints are necessary in relationships too. What makes my marriage special with my wife is that we are exclusively for each other and no else. For love to flourish in a relationship, both parties need to lose their independence. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt 16:24-25). In any social circle, people must lose their independence for the survival and flourishing of the group. It is no different with being a Christian. To be a follower of Jesus requires a loss of independence. The beauty of the gospel is that Jesus lost of all His independence to save humans from sin and restore their relationship with God. The answer to the question, "Doesn't Christianity limit my freedom?" is yes and no. Yes, because like in any social group, people must lose their independence. No, because Christianity allows a person to experience freedom in a relationship with Jesus.

After conducting the apologetics teaching series, the third step was to have the attendees evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the series. A post-series survey was administered after the last presentation was finished.[26] A person was eligible to complete the post-series survey if they attended at least one session.

Goal 4: Developing the Ministry Plan

The last goal of the project was to develop a ministry plan to engage nonchurched people in a learning community at HFAC.[27] The ministry plan included several components. The first component was a theological vision. The ministry plan is primarily rooted in God as revealed in the Bible, not in a fine-tuned strategy. While not

[26] See appendix 3.

[27] See appendix 6 for the ministry plan.

exhaustive, the theological vision was comprised of three parts. The first part expressed the church's need to be gospel-centered; that is, the true north of Christian experience and teaching is rooted in the redemptive story of Jesus, and not in achievements. The second part expressed the need to be mission-driven; that is, to balance both word (evangelism) and deed (social action) ministry. The third part expressed the church's desire to have beauty-bias; that is, to not only argue for the truth of Christianity, but to display its beauty.

The second component of the ministry plan described the church's need for an updated mission statement. HFAC's official mission statement (as of 2018) is, "Worship God by enjoying Him forever." While the primary purpose of the church is worship, the mission statement fails to address HFAC's need to be missional. It would be helpful to church leaders to consider some version of this statement to enhance its missional clarity: "Our vision is to become a gospel-centered and missional movement, one that balances word and deed ministry, in our local communities around the Hinsdale area. We are aware that our local communities are made up of people of different racial, economic, and religious backgrounds, and we are compelled by God's love to adapt by learning to speak the language of Christianity to those who don't."

The third component was a path to missional engagement with nonchurched people and listed three areas of change for HFAC. The first area of change is the church's communication in worship services. For worship services to be evangelistic, church leaders should: (a) avoid "insider talk" and define theological and church terms if needed; and (b) not assume that everyone in the audience understands the Bible. The second area of change is to create a network of missional small groups to connect and engage with nonbelievers. Third, the church wants to develop leaders who live missionally and have missional conversations. The fourth component described three short-term goals for 2023: (1) launch one to two missional small groups by September 10; (2) create a worship philosophy document by October 15 that expresses how HFAC can make its

worship services comprehensible to nonbelievers and nonchurched people; and (3) conduct an evangelistic series on October 27 through November 4 aimed to reach a non-Christian audience with the truth and beauty of Christianity and the gospel.

After the ministry plan was completed, I sent it to a five-member panel for review and evaluation. The panel consisted of five key leaders who have missional influence at HFAC: the youth pastor, head elder, two key leaders from the evangelism council, and an elder who contributes to the missional strategy. I selected this panel because most of them serve on the newly elected Visioning Team and I wanted to ensure that we are on the same theological and missional page.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the methodology by which the apologetics project was developed and implemented at Hinsdale Filipino-American Seventh-day Adventist Church. The next chapter provides an evaluation of the project's success in accomplishing its stated purpose and goals. It will also describe perceived strengths and weaknesses of the project and offer theological and personal reflections.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT EVALUATION

The intention behind this project was to educate church members and attendees (especially potential nonchurched people) in post-Christian evangelism. This final chapter will analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the project's purpose and goals, assess the strengths and weaknesses of the project and offer a few suggestions as to what I would do differently if I were to implement this project again. To conclude the chapter, a theological and personal reflection of the project will be included.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The purpose of this project was to develop an apologetics teaching series at Hinsdale Filipino-American Church to educate church members and attendees in post-Christian evangelism. As stated in chapter 1, there are great missional challenges for HFAC, some of which include its monocultural demographic (the church is primarily made up of people with Filipino ethnicity, and the church members do not reflect the racial diversity in the community) and lack of evangelistic awareness (church leaders are not aware of the questions and doubts of nonreligious people in the area and culture).

This project fulfilled its purpose in several ways. First, the project opened the church leaders' and members' minds to start thinking missionally. At the time this project was implemented (in the summer of 2023), HFAC was a forty-year-old church that was started with the specific purpose of primarily discipling people of Filipino descent. Though unintentional (and coupled with the Filipino's culture of family-orientedness), this monoethnic dimension caused members and leaders to think and do ministry internally.

The project challenged the church to think outside the church's walls and cultural social circles.

The second way the project fulfilled its purpose was that it opened the church members' minds to the defeater beliefs and barriers that people have about Christianity. The church wrestled with the real questions of today's nonchurched culture (based on research from the Barna Group and Pew Research Forum) and some dechurched people who used to attend HFAC regularly (two of the five interviewees attended the church when they were youth). Rather than keep questions and issues in the shadows, the project brought doubts to light, which challenged the church to take seriously its capacity to missionally adapt to secular culture. Third, the project challenged church members to question the foundation for their beliefs. As will be stated later in this chapter, many members were trying to defend their denominational beliefs and identity, which is important to do, but the series emphasized that the primary foundation to someone's belief system is not denominational affiliation; rather, it is the gospel and the matchless love of God that is the foundation for the Christian worldview.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

The first goal was to discover the defeater beliefs about Christianity and church. Much time was spent researching articles and collating data from the Barna Group and Pew Research Forum to understand the barriers to belief of hundreds of youth and adults in America. In addition to analyzing public opinion research, five nonchurched people were interviewed to glean more information from the local area. This first goal was successfully met, as expressed in chapter 1, since all five nonchurched people completed the RBI and the results were analyzed alongside public opinion research to gain a clearer picture of the community's defeater beliefs. I learned several important lessons from the interviews that were implicitly and explicitly shared in the apologetics teaching series. First, having an open posture is critical to engage with nonreligious people. Interviewees 3 and 4 (I-3 and I-4, respectively) shared with me during the interview that they

appreciated my curiosity and open posture. When I-3 mentioned the idea to I-4 to meet with me for an interview, I-4 was hesitant because she was worried I would push religion on her. My openness to learn from them was a breath of fresh air. The second lesson I learned was that many of the barriers to Christianity are not detached from life; the barriers are personal. For example, I-3 said that the reason he does not attend church is because some HFAC leaders (some of whom were relatives) made him feel guilty for not attending church and following the church's rules. His girlfriend, I-4, said she questioned Christianity because it appears as though the religion condemns her homosexual friends.

The second goal was to develop a seven-session apologetics teaching series to address the defeater beliefs about Christianity and church. This goal was the most time consuming and challenging because it required much planning and creativity to address the defeater beliefs in a comprehensive, concise, and tactful way. For this goal I prepared messages with the nonreligious culture and five interviewees in mind. The messages were crafted to carefully and clearly answer the questions and barriers to Christianity from today's culture and local church community. The messages were measured by a five-member panel (all of whom are leaders of the church) who utilized The Apologetics Teaching Series Rubric (ATSER), which was a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, logical coherence, cultural relevance, and clarity of application of the content of each of the messages. This second goal would be considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criterion met or exceeded the sufficient evaluation level. Upon receiving and analyzing the panelists' rubrics, the third goal was considered successfully met since each of the seven criteria components met or exceeded the 90 percent minimum level.[1]

[1] The following is a list of the total evaluation percentages of each of the seven criteria components (see appendix 2 for criterion details): criteria 1: 100 percent; criteria 2: 100 percent; criteria 3: 95 percent; criteria 4: 100 percent; criteria 5: 100 percent; criteria 6: 100 percent; criteria 7: 90 percent. The lowest evaluation level I received was only for one (of the seven) of the criteria components: "Each teaching session appeals not only to the mind (reason), but to the heart (experience)." I received 90 percent for this criteria component.

The third goal was to increase church members' and attendees' knowledge of evangelism in a post-Christian culture by conducting a seven-session apologetics teaching series. On nights 1-3 (July 18-20, 2023), about forty people were in attendance in the sanctuary and about eighteen viewers online. Sessions 4 and 5 were held on the fourth night (July 21); about sixty were in attendance at the church and fifteen online. Session 6 was held on Saturday morning (July 22) during the worship service; about 210 people were in attendance at the church and about thirty-nine viewers online. The last session was held on the same day in the afternoon; about sixty people were in attendance in the church and ten online. Many of the people that attended the church were either members or regular attendees of the weekly worship services. Only one of the interviewees came to one session (session 2 on the topic of evil and suffering); I am not sure if the others watched online.

The third goal was measured by a Post-Series Survey (PSS) given to attendees at the end of the last session.[2] The PSS was administered at the end of the final presentation. Forty-three people completed the survey, all of whom were either regular members or attendees, as far as I could tell.[3] The third goal would be considered successfully met when fifteen series attendees, who attended at least five of the seven sessions, complete the PSS. The goal was successfully met since twenty-eight of the forty-three respondents indicated that they attended at least five sessions.

[2] At first, I was planning to use a pre/post-test to measure statistical differences of my subjects. However, upon much deliberation and consultation with a professor in the DMin program, I decided to use a post-series survey for several reasons. First, there was no way for me to guarantee consistent attendance (i.e., a consistent control group) from my audience (e.g., regular members, regular church attendees, and nonchurched people) to administer a pre/post-test. Second, the post-series survey would allow me to survey a larger group than a pre/post-test.

[3] At first, my desire was to design the apologetics teaching series for a nonchurched people only. But upon consultation with a professor in the DMin program, I decided to switch my primary audience to church members and attendees. The primary reason for this switch was because I had no way to guarantee that nonchurched people would come to most if not all of the seven sessions without an incentive. And if I were to offer an incentive, it could potentially skew the results.

Upon careful review of each survey, it was apparent that the surveyors were enriched, inspired, and challenged to think critically about their beliefs.[4] In addition to the fulfillment of the previously stated goal of fifteen PSS respondents, the project was successful for three other reasons.[5] First, nineteen different people (about half of the total surveyors) said that the love of God and the gospel were clearly emphasized and understood to be a Christian's true north.[6] One surveyor (around forty years of age) said, "God's love should be the most important and first thing we put forth and other things will follow." Another respondent (age seventy-three) wrote, "The Gospel came out more clear and alive. I now have confidence in the Lord I worship." The audience was reminded at every session that according to the Christian worldview, the strongest resolution for each defeater belief is the love of God in Jesus Christ and his sacrifice on the cross (which is the heart of the gospel message). Second, eleven surveyors shared that they learned it is crucial and possible to have an open posture toward people who hold different beliefs. This attitude is essential in one's witness to nonbelievers in culture. One person (age fifty) responded to the first question of the PSS, "What is the most significant thing you learned about Christianity from this teaching series?" by writing "that we should be open to listen to others with a different belief system, so we may learn from them and they from us."

The third reason the project was successful was because seven surveyors shared that the series reinforced their beliefs as a follower of Jesus. For example, one twenty-year old person said, "I struggle with answering several of the questions that were answered and expanding on the basic answers I do have and I've struggled with these issues myself so this helped a lot. I've never felt I got a good/sufficient answer to those

[4] Several respondents also shared that the series affirmed their Christian convictions.

[5] There were many responses in the survey. I carefully read and tracked common themes from all the surveyors.

[6] The following are the numbers of different respondents who cited these themes as being central to the series: (1) "love of God/Jesus": eight respondents; (2) "Jesus-centered": seven; (3) "gospel": two; (4) "cross": two.

questions until now." Another millennial (age twenty-three) said, "It's been reaffirming of the way my parents raised us to practice Christianity and now I want to live that out in my adult life." One respondent (age sixty-three) wrote that the series cleared "years of clouded principles."

The fourth goal was to develop a ministry plan to engage nonchurched people in a learning community at HFAC. A ministry plan was designed that was contextual to the current cultural (concerning racial and missional maturity) stage of the church. The ministry plan aimed to determine the next steps in HFAC's ministry to the nonchurched people and nonbelievers in our community. The goal was measured by a panel of five leaders at HFAC. The panel utilized the Ministry Plan Evaluation Rubric (MPER) to evaluate the ministry plan's vision, functionality, and the action steps. The fourth goal was successful since the ministry plan received a near perfect score.[7]

The goals of this project had defined measures of success to determine their effectiveness and success. Upon implementation and review of each goal, the project was successful at accomplishing its objectives. The purpose and goals of the project, to create a teaching series to educate members and attendees at HFAC in post-Christian evangelism, were successfully met. Members and attendees were inspired and challenged to think about their beliefs in new ways, to understand the secular context in our national and local communities, and to learn how to be open to divergent views without compromising their convictions.

Strengths of the Project

This project had several noteworthy strengths. First, the church members and attendees wrestled with questions outside the Christian community. It is not often that church members take seriously the questions and doubts of the secular culture. In fact,

[7] There were five criteria to be rated between the numerical range of 1 to 4. The ministry plan received all 4s except one 3 for only one criteria component ("The plan has clearly defined actions steps with a timeline").

many church members shrink at the opportunity to share their Christian faith out of fear of a lack of knowledge or embarrassment.[8] Chapter 2 of this project explored the courageous and careful evangelism adaptation of Paul as recorded in Acts 17:16-32. Through this project, HFAC members and attendees observed a contextualized model of evangelism in a non-Christian context.

The second strength of this project lies in the establishment of Jesus and his gospel as the Christian's true north. Nine surveyors of the PSS raised issues related to our particular denomination, the Seventh-day Adventist Church. For example, one person lamented how many people are behind "in understanding the truth and being more loyal to a particular denomination than to Jesus." While denominational loyalty (or any faith community) is not bad, the primary loyalty of a Christian is to Jesus and his gospel.[9] This gospel-centered vision was emphasized and encourage in the project. When asked, "What is the most significant thing you learned about Christianity from this teaching series," one surveyor (age seventy-three) remarked, "Christianity is Christ-focused."

A third strength of this project was exposing and challenging the church community to a new way of doing evangelism in today's post-Christian climate. The church members and attendees learned several things in this new model of evangelism. First, they learned that public prayer is not always necessary. Several members (who spoke to me and the emcee privately) were perturbed that we did not pray before and after the meetings (except for the sessions on Saturday, our day of worship). One elder sent me a text message disagreeing with our avoidance of public prayer. The emcee (the youth pastor was the emcee for the series) and I decided not to pray so that we would not

[8] One respondent of the PSS said, "I've realized I'm not prepared to 'defend' Christianity given the opportunity."

[9] I am a committed member and pastor in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, but my primary loyalty is to Jesus and his gospel. Jesus and his gospel story serve as a hub to enlighten and tie together my understanding of the Bible's doctrines, such as the weekly celebration of the Seventh-day Sabbath and the second advent of Jesus.

make any nonbeliever unnecessarily uncomfortable who was not accustomed to prayer. Second, during the Q & A sessions, several members asked questions that pertained to specific denominational teachings.[10] However, I reminded the questioners that the focus of the series was within the purview of Christian teaching, not of a particular denomination. This project's approach was new for many church members and attendees.

A fourth strength of the project was the teamwork and communal learning formed from this project. Each message was carefully crafted and refined by the panelist team (from the second goal). Several panel members gave me honest and detailed feedback about some blind spots in the messages. I took their feedback into consideration and incorporated their suggestions as I polished and practiced each message before presenting them, and the result was a more refined, clear, and concise presentation. Not only did the panelists refine each message, but they also learned (by reviewing the messages and attending the sessions) how to respond to the toughest questions about Christianity in today's culture.

Weaknesses of the Project

There were several weaknesses in this project. The first weakness was that not many nonchurched people attended the apologetics teaching series. One reason for this lack of involvement from nonchurched people is that the church at large does not have a strong missional culture. While there is no problem with discipling existing members and their families, many programs are catered for people who already regularly attend church. Only a handful of leaders are discipling non-members via personal or group Bible studies, and most of these leaders are studying with people who have a Christian background. Not many leaders or lay people are intentionally and missionally engaging with non-Christian people on a regular basis.

[10] One questioner during the Q&A session asked, "Of the thousands of Christian denominations, is there one true denomination?"

A second weakness of this project was that some messages were too complicated for people to understand. One surveyor of the PSS said, "Present the topics in simpler everyday conversation." Two people, an elder and a young adult church member, said the concepts presented in the series were probably too deep for the average listener. It is difficult to answer a skeptic's questions about Christianity without appealing to reason, logic, and philosophy, but it is incumbent upon the Christian apologist to speak and present in a way that is easy for even a child to understand.

A third weakness was the delimitation of the series to only address seven defeater beliefs. While the series sought to address the most prominent questions about Christianity, other key barriers were not addressed, such as the issues of scientism, creation versus evolution, the Bible as myth, and the historicity of Jesus and his resurrection. A fourth weakness was the lack of practical application for the believer, especially in the area of sharing Christian beliefs. One PSS surveyor commented, "Feeling more inspired to share the love of God with believers and nonbelievers. I've realized I'm not prepared to 'defend' Christianity given the opportunity." While the series was helpful to model apologetics evangelism in an event format, it would have been helpful to include a component, perhaps at the end of last session (or even another day), that spoke to the practical realities of church members who desire to share their faith in the marketplace.

What I Would Do Differently

There are several things I would do differently. First, I would emphasize and aim to establish several missional small groups (for the purpose of engaging with nonbelievers and nonchurched people) at least two years before conducting an apologetics teaching series so that there would be a larger nonchurched contingent to work with. I transitioned to HFAC in the middle of my doctoral program, so my context drastically shifted.[11] I was pastoring at HFAC for less than two years before I began implementing

[11] My original context (when I began the DMin program in 2018) was in Loveland, CO, which

the project. If I had more time, I would be intentional about creating a culture of missional small groups. In fact, this is the goal with the visioning team as expressed in the ministry plan (goal 4). While I am glad that we began the process of exploring small groups about nine months before the project, it would have been helpful to have more time to build a communal and evangelistic culture.

Second, I would like to interview more than five people; perhaps fifteen to twenty people. This would give a bigger sample size to work with. I would also interview people in the neighborhood around the church. The people I interviewed had some type of relationship connection to the church. I am curious to know what people in our community think about Christianity and our church. This data would have aided my research. Third, I would probably not do the apologetics teaching series in the summer. Due to schedule conflicts and other events, the summer was the best time to implement the series. While there was a decent turnout, perhaps the series would have been better attended in the fall or spring. Fourth, I would simplify the messages and include more stories to connect with my audience. One weakness is a lack of emotional connection with the audience. The topic of evil and suffering is both philosophical and personal, and it was apparent in my presentation on suffering (message 2) that people were emotionally resonating with the message. However, perhaps the other messages would have benefited from more emotional connections.

Theological Reflections

In the mission of making disciples of all nations (Matt 28:18-20), it is necessary for Christians to always be ready to give a reason for their Christian convictions and faith in Jesus Christ (1 Pet 3:15). The field of Christian apologetics provides the modern-day missionary tools to help clear skeptics' mental fog so they can see a clear picture of Jesus.

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only had a population of about 70,000 people. I am now in a densely populated suburb of Chicago and pastoring in a monoethnic church.

This project revealed that the primary goal of an apologist is not to win people by argument alone, but to offer reasonable evidence for the beauty of God's love in Jesus Christ. The true north of Christianity (and all reality) is the gospel; namely, the redemption story of Jesus. One prolific writer by the name of Ellen White penned these words: "There is one great central truth to be kept ever before the mind in the searching of the Scriptures—Christ and Him crucified. Every other truth is invested with influence and power corresponding to its relation to this theme."[12] The apologetics teaching series sought to honor skeptics' questions, offer alternative perspectives, provide sufficient answers, and frame the responses in the love of God in Jesus Christ. One can imagine Paul, in his missionary endeavors in a multiplicity of cultural and religious settings, wrestling with the objections of his audience to present the beauty of the gospel as quickly as possible, for it was the love of God that constrained him (2 Cor 5:14).

Christian apologetics is not only rooted in the gospel but it necessitates adaptation. Paul was a prime example of adaptation. In his letter to the Corinthian church he said,

> To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. (1 Cor 9:20-23)

As explored in chapter 2 of this project, Paul adjusted his evangelistic approach in Athens, a pagan and polytheistic culture, to winsomely and effectively persuade his erudite audience of the philosophical beauty of the gospel. While Paul is a worthy example, Jesus himself was the prime model of adaptation. He who was God and with the Father for all eternity took on human flesh to become like us in order to save us (John 1:14; 2 Cor 5:21;

[12] Ellen G. White, *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials* (Washington, DC: Ellen G. White Estate, 1987), 2:806.

Isa 53:5). This project challenged HFAC members with the stark reality and necessity of adaptation in an increasingly secular culture.

The modern-day Christian apologist not only offers rational proofs for the existence of God but aims to underline mankind's desire for the beauty of God. Truth does not only correspond to reality; it beautifies reality. Since truth is beautiful, it is incumbent upon the Christian apologist to accentuate Christ's beauty. Paul Gould writes, "The cultural apologist works to resurrect relevance by showing that Christianity offers plausible answers to universal human longings. And she works to resurrect hope, creating new cultural goods and rhythms and practices that reflect the truth, beauty, and goodness of Christianity."[13] One aim of the series was to highlight not only the reasonability of truth, but the beauty of truth. One surveyor of the PSS learned from the apologetics teaching series that "religion should bring truthfulness, be useful, and bring peace." It was the aim of the apostle Paul to present Christianity as not only true, but beautiful. Paul writes about the beautiful fullness of Jesus in his letter to the believers in the small city of Colossae: "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. . . . For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Col 1:17, 19-20). How beautiful is the truth that Jesus holds all things together, possesses the fullness of the Trinity, and redeems mankind through his loving sacrifice!

Reflection on Ethnicity and Apologetics

The field of Christian apologetics predominantly involves reason, logic, and argumentation. As argued in the introduction of chapter 3 of this project, an effective apologetic strategy in the post-Christian world should utilize a holistic approach that engages both the mind (intellect) and heart (will and emotions) of a person. One often overlooked dimension in apologetic methodology is the palpable impact of ethnicity on a

[13] Paul M. Gould, *Cultural Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 24.

person's worldview. One unique dimension of this project's context was the opportunity and challenge of practicing apologetics in an Asian-American cultural context. Hinsdale Fil-Am Church, which started as an ethnically Filipino congregation forty years ago, is still predominantly Filipino in ethnicity, but has had an influx of Latino members and attendees in the last two decades. HFAC's cultural context is an amalgamation of Western (United States) and non-Western (primarily Asian and Latino) ethnicities. This cultural conglomeration provided a unique experience to practice apologetic evangelism.

In *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures*, Jayson Georges and Mark Baker differentiate between honor-shame cultures and innocence-guilt culture. Honor-shame cultures—also known as the Majority World that includes Asians, Arabs, Africans, and much of Latin America[14]—refer "to collectivistic societies where the community tends to shame and exclude people who fail to meet group expectations, and reward loyal members with honor."[15] Innocence-guilt culture—predominantly in Western, Anglo contexts in North America and Western Europe—is more individualistic and defines morality through rules and laws. According to Georges and Baker, "Governments, corporations, schools and even families establish rules to guide our behavior; people expect those rules to apply universally to all people at all times."[16] What is unique about practicing apologetics at HFAC is the challenge of addressing Western defeater beliefs in a context that has been historically honor-shame in culture.[17]

I learned two lessons from implementing my apologetics project in the honor-shame context. First, I learned the importance of highlighting the relational and communal

[14] About 80 percent of the world's population identifies as honor-shame cultures.

[15] Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 18.

[16] Georges and Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures*, 37.

[17] HFAC has the unique challenge of preserving Asian, honor-shame heritage while evangelizing and discipling in a Western context. One great challenge for the older members who were raised in an honor-shame context is how to disciple their children and grandchildren in a Western context.

dimension of Christianity. Honor-shame cultures view reality through the web of relationships. Georges and Baker insightfully write, "The social matrix of collectivistic cultures is designed around establishing and expanding a network of relationships. Group-oriented cultures value relational harmony."[18] It is important for a Christian apologist who is working in an honor-shame context to contextualize the gospel in a way that elevates and strengthens relationships. For example, the core values of HFAC (according to the church's 2018 strategic plan document) are embedded in the acrostic "F.A.M.I.L.Y."[19] It is clear that the church views itself through an honor-shame, relational lens. It is important for the pastoral team to frame the teachings of Christianity in the context of relational harmony and enhancement. I was intentional about emphasizing the relational nature of Christianity in my teaching series by anchoring my apologetic arguments in the love of God in Jesus Christ. However, I could have been more intentional about contextualizing the messages to reveal the relational and familial benefits of embracing Christianity. For instance, in my first message ("Oppression: Isn't the Church Responsible for So Much Pain?") I argued that the reason Christianity has been responsible for pain and oppression is because the faith that many Christians were practicing was not deep enough (because true Christianity causes believers to love and respect others). Perhaps it would have been helpful for me to share that one reason for surface-level faith is because Christians have been relationally detached from God and each other, and if believers began to truly embrace Christ, they will be more intentional about relationships and building God's family on earth.

The second lesson I learned was to communicate truth patiently. "People in honor-shame cultures communicate indirectly," write Georges and Baker. "Words are for the purpose of managing relationships and social identities, not presenting information.

[18] Georges and Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures*, 46.

[19] "F" stands for Fellowship; "A" is for Adore; "M" is for Minister (inreach); "I" is Instruct (outreach/discipleship); "L" is Love; "Y" is for Yearn (The Blessed Hope/Second Coming).

Harmony takes priority over ideas. Truth in communication is defined relationally, not logically."[20] The field of Christian apologetics primarily engages in the mind. I learned how to adapt my apologetic teaching to my cultural context that prizes relational harmony over ideas. I did so by emphasizing the relational aspect of Christianity; namely, that God longs for a relationship with his people, and speaking in a way that honored the older attendees of the teaching series. For example, during the Q&A sessions I was intentional about exuding a posture of honor and respect when I disagreed with attendees' perspectives. The reason honor-shame cultures are indirect in their communication is because "being truthful means being loyal in your relationships, respecting others and helping preserve face," says Georges and Baker. "A person who 'cuts to the chase' or 'gets to the point' runs the risk of offending others."[21] If I was too direct, I may have lost my credibility and influence. I had to exercise patience in my posture and words to effectively communicate in my cultural setting.

As I continue to preach and disciple people at HFAC, I must remember to communicate truth honestly and patiently. On one hand, if I am indirect and acquiesce to the relational pressure of the honor-shame context, I risk hiding the truth and avoiding the confronting truth of the gospel. On the other hand, if I am too direct in my communication and disregard the relational harmony of HFAC's culture, I risk offending parishioners and attendees. The beauty of apologetic evangelism is that I have the privilege—like Paul in Athens in Acts 17—to communicate the gospel in a way that is both intellectual and relationally credible to my audience's culture. I am thankful and challenged by the opportunity to learn how to apply apologetics in my church's cultural context, which is a mix of honor-shame and Western realities.

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[20] Georges and Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures*, 53.

[21] Georges and Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures*, 53.

Personal Reflections

The research, development, and implementation of this project strengthened my commitment to Christ and evangelistic adaptation. This project has been a profound source of growth in several ways. First, the gospel has become central to my life and ministry. Before this project, the gospel was central to my worldview in theory, but on the periphery in practice. I believed that the gospel was merely the prerequisite knowledge someone had to understand before moving into more advanced teachings and doctrines. As a result of this project and wrestling with skeptics' defeater beliefs, the gospel became the center of my theological and ministerial universe. The gospel has become the lens by which all other biblical truth is seen and colored.

The second way I experienced growth was in the area of evangelistic adaptation. My exploration of Paul's missional adaptation in Athens in Acts 17 (chapter 2 of this project), engaging with traditional and cultural modes of apologetics (chapter 3 of this project), and developing and implementing my apologetics teaching series (chapter 4 of this project) stretched my capacity to adapt in a post-Christian climate. I have begun the process of preparing myself for the greatest challenge to the Christian church in the United States: how to speak the language of Christianity with a hostile culture that does not understand it.

Our local congregation of HFAC was supportive and engaged in this project. The church has also experienced growth in several ways. First, HFAC members and attendees have grown in their understanding of the centrality of the gospel. As mentioned previously in this chapter, nineteen respondents from the PSS specifically cited the love of Jesus and the gospel as central to Christian beliefs. The gospel is becoming central to the church's theological DNA. Second, HFAC has begun the process of learning what mission looks like in today's religious climate. The church was stretched by its participation in the project. Members and attendees were exposed to real questions and challenges from nonreligious people in our culture and from people who used to attend

HFAC. The church has begun the process of rethinking its approach to evangelism and discipleship.

Conclusion

The process of learning from this project has been painfully beautiful. The project was "painful" in the sense that I had to work very hard and let go of some incorrect assumptions,[22] and "beautiful" in the sense that I began to experience the apostle Paul's joy of gospel contextualization in Athens. Due to the formal evaluations and informal positive feedback from this project, I conclude that the apologetics teaching series was an effective intervention to aid HFAC in its missional endeavors.

I am thankful for the seismic impact this project has had in my life. Every stage in the project was arduous and difficult, but the fruits have been overwhelmingly positive. I have grown by leaps and bounds as an evangelist in our growingly secular age, and HFAC has been exposed to the reality that evangelistic adaptation is essential to its survival and missional effectiveness. I am thankful to God for sprouting my love for the gospel, for his infallible revelation in the Bible, for his church, and for those who have yet to taste the sweetness of Jesus (due to their conceptual barriers and/or experiential bitterness). May the Lord be glorified, and his church aided through the work of this project.

[22] Some of the incorrect assumptions that were jettisoned included: (1) the gospel is only a prerequisite in Christian theology and experience; (2) evangelistic programs should always "feel" Christian and include components of worship music and prayer; (3) unlike nonbelievers, believers understand the gospel and its centrality in Christian beliefs; (4) if believers adapt and contextualize the gospel, then they will dilute orthodox Christianity.

APPENDIX 1

RELIGIOUS BELIEF INTERVIEW

The Religious Belief Interview (RBI) was used to assess defeater beliefs about Christianity and church from five people in the Hinsdale area, all of whom were directly or indirectly connected to HFAC's social circles. The results from the RBI played a pivotal role in shaping the apologetics teaching series.

RELIGIOUS BELIEF INTERVIEW

Agreement to Participate
The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify possible barriers (i.e. objections, questions) to Christianity and church. This research is being conducted by Nestor Soriano for the purpose of obtaining information for doctoral research. In this research, you will be orally asked several questions about your personal religious beliefs and opinions. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time*.

By your completion of this religious belief interview, and checking the appropriate box below, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

[ ] I agree to participate

[ ] I do not agree to participate

Full Name: _____

Religious Identity:

1. Which one of these options do you religiously identify with? (circle one)
    a. Christianity
    b. No religion
    c. Other religion

2. If you marked "No religion," which if these options do you identify with? (circle one)
    a. Atheist
    b. Agnostic
    c. Nothing in particular

3. If you marked "Other religion," please state which religion you identify with:

Upon completion of your informed consent, we will begin our open-ended interview. We will use the list below as part of our interview.

Questioning Christianity List
According to a study by Barna Group, a visionary research company that focuses on the intersection of faith and culture, the following are some of the top reasons why people question and doubt Christian beliefs:

1. Past experiences with a religious institution
2. The hypocrisy of religious people
3. Questioning how a good God could allow evil and human suffering
4. Science refutes too much of the Bible
5. One religion can't have all the answers

Interview Questions[1]

1. What was your experience the last time you visited a Christian church?

2. What do you understand the message of Christianity to be?

3. The Questioning Christianity List provides a list of reasons why people question and doubt Christian beliefs. Do you identify with any of the reasons? If so, please explain why.

4. Is there another reason why you question Christianity? If so, please share your reason and why you believe it.

5. If you question and doubt Christianity, what would it take for you to consider Christian beliefs?

6. In what ways, if any, do you find Christianity relevant to your life?

7. What would you say prevents you from frequently attending church?

8. What could a church offer for you to consider attending church regularly?

[1] The interviewees did not see these questions. I asked most, if not all of the open-ended questions within the one-hour interview. I recorded their responses on my laptop to be efficient with my time.

APPENDIX 2

APOLOGETICS TEACHING SERIES EVALUATION RUBRIC

The curriculum evaluation rubric on the following page assessed the merit of the biblical accuracy and faithfulness, logical soundness, cultural relevance and sensitivity, and contextual application of the apologetics teaching series for Hinsdale Fil-Am Seventh-day Adventist Church.

APOLOGETICS TEACHING SERIES
EVALUATION RUBRIC

Name of Evaluator: _____ Date: _____

Participant Evaluation Tool					
1 = insufficient · 2 = requires attention · 3 = sufficient · 4 = exemplary					
Criteria	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**Comments**
Bible & Logic					
Each teaching session is sound in its interpretation of Scripture.					
Each teaching session is faithful to the theology of the Bible.					
Each teaching session is logically sound and reasonably convincing.					
Cultural Relevance					
Each teaching session demonstrates a careful understanding of the objections and questions to Christianity.					
Each teaching session sensitively and adequately addresses each barrier to Christian belief.					
Gospel & Application					
Each teaching session invites the audience to consider the person, words, works, and/or beauty of Jesus.					
Each teaching session appeals not only to the mind (reason), but to the heart (experience).					

Other Comments:

APPENDIX 3

POST-SERIES SURVEY

Agreement to Participate
The research in which you are about to participate is designed to assess the personal impact of the teaching series about Christianity that you just attended. This research is being conducted by Nestor Soriano for the purpose of obtaining information for doctoral research. In this research, you will be asked several questions about your experience of the teaching series and about your personal religious beliefs. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time*.

By your completion of this survey, and checking the appropriate box below, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

[ ] I agree to participate

[ ] I do not agree to participate

Section I. Demographic Information

How many of the seven sessions of the teaching series did you attend? _____

Age: _____

* Note: If you are 17 years of age or younger, please have your parent/guardian sign the Parent/Guardian Consent Form.

Religious Identity:

1. Which one of these options do you religiously identify with? (circle one)
    a. Christianity
    b. No religion
    c. Other religion

2. If you marked "No religion," which if these options do you identify with? (circle one)
    a. Atheist
    b. Agnostic
    c. Nothing in particular

3. If you marked "Other religion," please state what religion you identify with:

Section II. Survey

1. What is the most significant thing you learned about Christianity from this teaching series?

2. What is something that is still unclear to you about Christianity from this teaching series?

3. Which barrier (objection, question) to Christian belief do you encounter most in your social circles?

4. What is one question that you still have about Christian belief?

5. What is one step that you've taken to engage with this knowledge?

6. In what ways has the content from this teaching series impacted you?

PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM
FOR THE POST-SERIES SURVEY

Agreement to Participate
You are being requested to give permission for a minor or member of a vulnerable population under your legal supervision to participate in a study designed to assess the personal impact of the teaching series about Christianity that he or she just attended. This research is being conducted by Nestor Soriano for the purposes of obtaining information for doctoral research. In this research, a person will be asked several questions about his or her experience of the teaching series and about his or her personal religious beliefs. Any information provided will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will a person's name be reported, or a person's name identified with his or her responses. Participation in this study is totally voluntary, and the person you are giving approval to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time. By signing your name below, you are giving informed consent for the designated minor or member of a vulnerable population to participate in this research if he or she desires.

By signing your name below, you are giving informed consent for the designated minor or member of a vulnerable population to participate in this research if he or she desires.

Participant Name _____

Parent/Guardian Name _____

Parent/Guardian Signature _____

Date _____

APPENDIX 4

MINISTRY PLAN EVALUATION RUBRIC

The ministry plan evaluation rubric assessed several criteria in the ministry plan to involve nonchurched people: missional correspondence, clarity, biblical faithfulness, and clear actions.

MINISTRY PLAN EVALUATION RUBRIC

Name of Evaluator: _____ Date: _____

Ministry Plan Evaluation Rubric					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The ministry plan reflects the mission of Hinsdale Fil-am Church					
The plan is clearly defined					
The plan is biblically-based and culturally-sensitive					
The plan leads to discipleship making and evangelism					
The plan has clearly defined outcomes					
The plan has clearly defined actions steps with a timeline					

APPENDIX 5

MESSAGE OUTLINES FOR A SEVEN-SESSION APOLOGETICS TEACHING SERIES

Session 1 - Oppression: Isn't the Church responsible for so much pain?

1. Christians are more flawed than people think
2. Jesus critiques religion
    a. The goal is not to abandon Christianity, but adopt a deeper Christianity
3. A deeper Christianity solves oppression

Session 2 - Suffering: How can a good God allow evil and suffering?

1. A good god may have good reasons to allow evil
2. One reason God may allow evil and suffering is because he grants people free will
3. God suffers (through the death of Jesus) to conquer evil

Session 3 - Exclusivity: There can't only be one true religion, right?

1. To say that all religions are equal is logically faulty
2. Christianity provides ample resources for peace
3. Exclusivity enhances relationships

Session 4 - Identity (Part 1): Who am I and how do I know?

1. There are two approaches to identity:
    a. The ancient, porous self
    b. The modern, buffered self
2. The shift from the ancient to the modern view of the self has been seismic
3. I know myself not from myself, but sources outside of myself

Session 5 - Identity (Part 2): How can I have an identity that isn’t crushing?

1. The modern view of identity is feeble
    a. Modern identity is rooted in itself
2. The Christian view of identity is durable
    a. Christian identity is given, not gained
    b. Christian identity is satisfyingly enduring

Session 6 - The Person: Who is Jesus and why does it matter?

1. Jesus was not a liar
2. Jesus was not a lunatic
3. Jesus was not a legend
4. Jesus was the Lord

Session 7 - Restrictive: Doesn't Christianity limit my freedom?

1. Total inclusivity doesn't work
2. Christianity is more diverse than we think
3. Constraints do not hinder growth; they foster growth

APPENDIX 6

MINISTRY PLAN FOR MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Goal of Ministry Plan

The goal of this document is to develop a ministry plan to engage nonchurched people in a learning community at Hinsdale Fil-Am Seventh-day Adventist Church (HFAC). We define a nonchurched person as someone who either: (a) identifies as a non-Christian, or (b) identifies as a Christian, but does not attend church regularly (at least 3 times a month).

Theological Vision

What drives this ministry plan to engage nonchurched people is God. God is on mission, and we join Him in His redemptive work. Thus, this ministry plan is primarily rooted not in a fine-tuned strategy, but in God as revealed in the Bible. We call this biblical and redemptive foundation a *theological vision*. While not exhaustive, our theological vision can be expressed in a few ways:

1. Gospel-centered
The Gospel is our true north. The Gospel is the good news of God's matchless love (1 John 4:8) and His salvific action in Jesus Christ, specifically, the redemptive story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection (John 3:16; John 14:6). We do mission and engage with nonchurched people because God is on mission, in the Person and work of Jesus, to restore and reconcile His relationship with all people (2 Cor. 5:18). The way all people have a restored relationship with God is not by earning their salvation through their meticulous efforts, but only by receiving the gift of Jesus' sacrifice (i.e. grace) by faith (Eph. 2:8, 9). In other words, salvation is by sheer grace. Thus, what draws and delights nonreligious people is not moralism and human achievement ("I need to try harder to gain God's acceptance"), but the good news (i.e. Gospel) of Christ's achievements ("Jesus worked so hard for me. I want to receive His gift of salvation by faith!").

2. Mission-driven
There has been much debate in evangelicalism in the last five to six decades about how to understand the church's mission.[1] The debate centers around this question: "Is the primary mission of the church to win converts (evangelism) or show compassionate service (social action)?" John Stott argues that it is unfair to pit "word" ministry (evangelism) and "deed" ministry (social action) against each other. Rather, it is best to see the mission of the church as a partnership between word and deed ministry (evangelism and social action). When we use the term "missional" in our church's context, we mean that we balance both word and deed ministry. Most nonchurched

[1] See John Stott, "Christian Mission in the Modern World," in John R. W. Stott and Christopher J. H. Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, updated and expanded ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 15-33.

people are attracted to our beliefs (word ministry) because of our compassion (deed ministry). In other words, they become open to truth because they see the beauty of God's love in action. By God's grace, HFAC aims to balance both word and deed mission.

3. Beauty-bias
HFAC is part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a Protestant Christian denomination. We believe that our beliefs are rooted in Scripture and the Gospel, and our beliefs have relevance in our missional endeavors not only because they are true, but because they display the matchless and beautiful love of God. For example, consider the beauty of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is not primarily a day of rote observance; rather, it is a weekly and special day to commemorate our Creator's creative and redemptive work (Gen. 1-2; Ex. 20:8-11; Heb. 4:9), and a day to do good for others (Isa 57-58; Mark 3:1-5). The Sabbath is essentially a day to love God and neighbor. In our mission to nonchurched people, it is vital that our beliefs are not only "argued" to be right but shown to be beautiful.

Missional Vision

The official mission statement of the HFAC (as of 2018) is, "Worship God by enjoying Him forever." While we agree that worship is primary, we believe it is helpful to include a missional component that describes our current missional context. As HFAC is experiencing a cultural shift,[2] it would be helpful to consider some version of this statement: "Our vision is to become a Gospel-centered and missional movement, one that balances word and deed ministry, in our local communities around the Hinsdale area. We are aware that our local communities are made up of people of different racial, economic, and religious backgrounds, and we are compelled by God's love to adapt by learning to speak the language of Christianity to those who don't." We realize that this missional, multicultural vision is a massive shift for our church, but the leaders of HFAC are willing to ask these tough questions for the sake of reaching our non-Christian, multicultural communities with the Good News of God's love.

Path to Missional Engagement

To fulfill this missional vision to reach nonchurched people in our communities, we are compelled to adapt, follow a path of missional engagement, and consider the following seismic changes:

1. Evangelistic Worship
Our weekly Sabbath worship services must be comprehensible to nonbelievers. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul writes to the church in Corinth about the issue of tongues in their worship services. In verses 20-25, he contrasts the difference between speaking in tongues and prophesying (which means to proclaim the revelation of Jesus), and he elevates prophesying because proclaiming the Gospel in a comprehensible way will cause nonbelievers to believe and worship God. Thus, the leaders at HFAC must be intentional about communicating in a way this is comprehensible and sensitive to the nonbeliever. This means that: (a) we avoid "church/denomination-ese," that is, insider religious talk

[2] HFAC, which started as a Filipino church in 1983, is becoming more multicultural (we have a large Latino contingent), and the second-generation Filipino-Americans (those born in the US with at least one immigrant parent) identify with American, multicultural values instead of the Filipino values of their parents or grandparents.

(e.g. “We are justified by faith,” or “The Spirit of Prophecy says…,”) and “better-than-thou” statements (e.g. “Thank God we’re not like those lost people!”); and if we have to use theological terms, we aim to define our terms; (b) we don’t assume that everyone in our audience understands the Bible or accepts the Bible as an authoritative source.[3]

2. Evangelistic Community
Acts 2 provides a model for evangelistic community. In Acts 2:1-41, we see a large evangelistic gathering and meeting. In Acts 2:42-47, we see evangelistic community in smaller groups. The new believers and nonbelievers worshipped in the temple (evangelistic worship) and in their homes (evangelistic community). Since God is a Triune God who enjoys relational intimacy in a small group (Father, Son, Spirit), we believe that the best way *nonbelievers become* disciples and *believers mature* as disciples is in small groups. At HFAC, we desire to be intentional about missional groups.[4]

3. Evangelistic Conversations
Acts 17:16-34 provides a model for evangelistic conversations. While Paul was waiting for his friends to join him in Athens, he reasons with religious Jews in the synagogue and nonreligious Greeks in the marketplace everyday to find ways to share the Gospel. At HFAC, we desire to develop a culture of missional conversations. One way to do this is to train lay ministers who learn how to share the Gospel in conversational and “normal” ways in their social settings (e.g. at work, at school, in their neighborhood). We believe that the best way to train lay ministers is not through teaching sessions but in evangelistic small groups, where they see mission modeled.

Short-term Objectives (2023)

While our missional vision will guide our long-term objectives,[5] here are a few short-term goals (outside of regular and intercessory prayer) that will stimulate missional change in the immediate future:

1. Launch 1-2 Missional Small Groups - by September 10
The purpose of this goal is to launch 1-2 missional groups that will serve as experimental groups. Some details for this goal include: (a) duration: 10 weeks minimum, from early fall to Thanksgiving; (b) demographics: an adult group, led by Pr. Nestor, and perhaps a youth group, led by Pr. Rodney; (c) size of groups: 12-20 people; (d) target audience: nonbelievers and nonchurched people (at least about 25% of group size) ; (e) purpose: to have a safe space to question Christian faith (word ministry) and serve others (deed ministry); (f) location: in homes.

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[3] See short-term objective 2, below, for implementation.

[4] Timothy Keller writes, “Unless the number of people in midsize and small groups is at least half the number of the people who gather for worship and teaching on Sunday, your church is heading in the direction of being a consumer center rather than a community.” Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 314. HFAC averages about 230 in attendance every Sabbath. It would a challenging but worthy goal for the leaders to consider involving at least half of the attendance (115 people) in missional groups.

[5] The elected visioning team will continue to discover God’s vision, mission, and goal for the church into 2024.

2. Create Worship Philosophy Document - by October 15
We will create a worship philosophy document (in conjunction with our Visioning Team document which will be presented on October 22) that guides our weekly worship service, particularly our music and message. As mentioned earlier about evangelistic worship, our goal with this document is to express how we can make our worship services comprehensible to nonbelievers and nonchurched people. The implementation of this document will begin at our worship service on Saturday, November 4.

3. Conduct Evangelistic Series - on October 27-November 4
We will design and conduct an evangelistic series for a non-Christian audience. The series will assume a non-Christian audience and will aim to share the truth and beauty of Christianity in language non-Christians can understand. The series will be rooted in the Gospel, which means that the theological and emotional weight of each message will center upon the goodness of God in the Person and work of Jesus Christ (Rom. 2:4; John 3:16). The series topics will be decided by our evangelism council and pastoral team in the next few months.

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ABSTRACT

DEVELOPING AN APOLOGETICS TEACHING SERIES AT HINSDALE FILIPINO-AMERICAN SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH, TO EDUCATE CHURCH MEMBERS AND ATTENDEES IN POST-CHRISTIAN EVANGELISM

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2023
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The purpose of this project was to develop an apologetics teaching series to educate church members and attendees in post-Christian evangelism at Hinsdale Filipino-American Seventh-day Adventist Church. The project entails the assessment of defeater beliefs about Christianity, the creation and implementation of an apologetics teaching series to address the defeater beliefs, and the development of a ministry plan to engage nonchurched people in a learning community.

Chapter 1 introduces the context, rationale, purpose, and goals of the project. Chapter 2 provides a biblical and theological basis for the use of apologetics in post-Christian evangelism. The chapter explores Paul's adaptive methods to contextualize the gospel to a non-Christian audience in Acts 17. Chapter 3 explores the philosophical foundations for traditional and cultural apologetics. The first part addresses the problem of evil and the second part addresses the problem of identity. Chapter 4 reviews the development and implementation of the apologetics teaching series project. Chapter 5 evaluates the effectiveness of the project and suggests areas for improvement.

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