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

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

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

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In a very real sense, the defense of the faith has fallen on hard times. Liberal churches and denominations have so accommodated themselves to modernity that there is virtually nothing left to defend, except perhaps the Golden Rule. Postmodernism has been a great gift to the liberal churches, for it has given them new ways to sound like they are saying something important without running the risk of offending anyone.

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

Centuries ago, apologetic giants walked the earth. Apologists and theologians such as Athanasius and Augustine, Irenaeus and Cyprian, Ambrose of Milan and Anselm of Canterbury, Tertullian and Chrysostom, gave themselves to defending the Christian faith. We remember also the medieval Catholics such as Thomas Aquinas, and of course the Reformers—Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and Knox. In the United States, we think of Jonathan Edwards, J. Gresham Machen, Carl F. H. Henry, and Francis Schaeffer. These men and other like them were unapologetic apologists, known for their defense and proclamation of the truth.

They had substantial opponents as well. The famous skeptic philosopher David Hume was once observed on his way to hear George Whitefield preach one of his five o'clock morning messages on Christ. The observer chided Hume: “I

didn't think you believed in God." Hume replied, and referred to Whitefield: "I don't. But I am convinced this man does."

The times have certainly changed from those days. England's King Henry VIII was granted the title "Defender of the Faith" in 1521 by Pope Leo X, who was grateful for Henry's attack on Martin Luther. Though Henry was to make his own break with the papacy in later years, successive British monarchs have retained the title, down to Elizabeth II.

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

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

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

Oddly enough, all this is enough to make the Christian apologist almost nostalgic for Enlightenment rationalism. We can take head-on an honest, straightforward, and bold denial of Christianity. At least a true atheist knows what he denies. Postmodernity's smug "whatever" pales against Friedrich Nietzsche's bold claim that God is dead, and that we have killed him. The vacuous and unthinking relativism of the postmodern mind, however, is numbing.

This has complicated the work of theological liberals as well. Rudolf Bultmann's program of supernatural denial by *demythologization* has been replaced in our culture with what I call *hyper-mythologization*. We are witnessing the re-paganization of western civilization. The old pagan cults are back, and new cults are plentiful.

Consider the Jesus Seminar, whose purpose is to deny biblical Christology while presenting Jesus as a Palestinian political agitator ready for a tenure-track appointment at the nearest liberal divinity school. In America, we are treated to Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong and his quest to take Christianity beyond monotheism. In the Church of England, the Bishop of Edinburgh—the Primate of Scotland—denies that the Bible is of any use in morality. Having denied the virgin birth, miracles, heaven and hell, biblical inspiration, the incarnation, the resurrection, the Lord's return, scriptural morality, and virtually every other doctrine of the Christian faith, the liberals are left in a quandary—there is nothing left to deny.

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

This means that apologetics cannot be reduced to a course taken at the seminary or a book securely placed on the shelves. Great Commission proclamation in our generation must be accompanied by apologetic ministry. Gospel witness must be undergirded by the defense of truth. Personal evangelism will require cultural dexterity. The task of world missions reminds us that we are in a war of worldviews.

