REASONS OF THE HEART

Recovering Christian Persuasion

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To Pierre and Hélène Courthial

Whose radiant faith is the best apologetic.

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INTRODUCTION

THE CREDIBILITY GAP

> Modern culture is not altogether opposed to the gospel. But it is out of all connection with it. It not only prevents the acceptance of Christianity. It prevents Christianity even from getting a hearing.
> —J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Christianity?*, 1951

The Hour of Apologetics

I'LL NEVER FORGET A CONVERSATION I had with a relative of mine shortly after I became a Christian. Being excited about my newfound faith (to say the least) and wanting to share with my family what I had discovered, I challenged him with the Bible's claims, the reality of Christ's presence, and the hope of heaven. Not too far into the conversation, he asked me what real difference becoming a Christian would make in his life. His question brought me up short. I wanted to tell him he would be a better person, but he was one of the best people I knew, without apparent needs. I wanted to say that he would have new meaning in his life, but that seemed trivial to a man who had a good job, a loving family, and no particular anguish about the larger issues of life. Everything I thought of sounded inconsequential. I couldn't connect.

Persuading our generation about deep issues is becoming more and more difficult as our culture moves away from certain shared assumptions and values. And today it is not only Christians who feel impotent sharing their deepest convictions. What-

ever issue espoused, often the day is carried not by those who attempt the kind of persuasion that depends on careful reasoning and integrity, but by a power play such as rage or the more subtle tyranny of the expert. In this atmosphere, many Christians whose convictions are strong and whose faith is foundational are understandably frustrated. Different barriers are raised. Air-tight arguments fall on deaf ears.

In short, the Christian message seems *irrelevant*—followers of Christ have wonderful answers to questions people seem not to be asking. We feel like someone selling the latest, most efficient equipment for doing alchemy. The sales pitch may be as good as the wares, but no one is interested because no one practices alchemy.

This is the climate into which the hour of apologetics has arrived. Although commending the faith may be difficult, it is crucial for the survival of the church and the spread of the truth. We long to make an impact and a difference in our society, but are faced with a credibility gap between the gospel of Christ and our culture. Every age experiences this tension, yet at the dawn of the twenty-first century the distance seems greater between the message and the audience than previously. Why is this so?

It is partly, no doubt, because Christians have grown so used to their own language, terms, and culture that they have become isolated from those who surround them. A great British preacher used to tell his congregation that the interests dearest to the hearts of believers are peripheral to unbelievers, and that the things most important to unbelievers are insignificant to followers of Christ. He was describing what he considered normal and good. But how healthy is it for Christians and non-Christians to live in such different worlds?

This credibility gap between believers and skeptics is often highlighted for me in church. Occasionally in the Sunday service I try to imagine a particular friend beside me in the pew. What impact would the sermon have on Michael, my Jewish neighbor? Or on the beer-drinking sports fan I met at a baseball game

with his sports outlook, "Life is short, play hard"? Or on Mr. Mukerji, a visiting Hindu friend who delighted the children with stories of his travels and who considers his religion an accident of birth? What would church mean to these people, with its "language of Zion"? What would they make of the issues that are so real to me, a Christian, but are undoubtedly foreign to their world?

These questions lead to deeper questions: Why should Christians persuade others about what they believe? Is it not better to live and let live, to be quiet and unobtrusive? Is it ethical to disturb someone else's views with a challenge from religion? Is there not something indecent about apologetics, the defense of the faith?

Indeed these are serious issues. Along this line, one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century, Karl Barth (1886–1968), believed that Christian apologetics was an illegitimate pursuit. He taught that God should spread his truth directly, without recourse to the complexities of human arguments. Apologetics, in his view, reduced the gospel to the level of human religion, thus spoiling the wonder of God's grace.

Barth's ideas prevailed in the seminaries and pulpits in many parts of the Christian world. Even today, years after his death, apologetics is a neglected discipline in these circles. Did he have a point? Certainly. One tradition in apologetics does reduce the gospel to a cold, human construction. Endless debates about science and faith, proofs for the existence of God, and speculations about the Trinity have often been a distraction, rather than a commendation, for the faith.

Such a radical dismissal, however, falters on two grounds. First, apologetics is commanded in Scripture. Christians are told to be ready to give answers to those who ask why they believe (1 Peter 3:15). For reasons we do not entirely understand, God has entrusted to us the task of heralding his truth. Second, apologetics—the defense of the faith—is impossible to avoid. Ironically, it takes apologetics to discredit apologetics. Barth himself wrote reams and reams of polemical theology.

BALANCING MIND AND HEART

There are at least two other key reasons for Christian apologetics. One is that it provides food for starving people. If what Christians believe is true, then human beings are not innocently going about their business but are in desperate need of answers. To use a time-honored image, Christians are like beggars who have found food and are eager to share it with others. As such, apologetics has a deeply human side that is concerned with the whole person; it is not just a series of dry techniques or rational proofs.

The other reason is that it brings honor to God. The concept of honor is eclipsed in Western society; today the word makes us think of knights in armor and the courtly love of bygone days. But honor is a precious Christian principle that means esteem, homage, and reverence where it is due—supremely, to the Lord.

If what we mean by Christian apologetics is anything less than this, then Karl Barth is right. But there is a better way. Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), the French mathematician, scientist, and theologian, provides the antidote to cold, rationalist apologetics in his *Pensées*. In this anthology of apologetic reflections, he pleads for a proper balance between mind and heart: "We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart," he declared to a complacent audience. This is because, to quote his best-known saying, "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing."[1]

It is crucial not to be misled here, for Pascal is not saying that faith is irrational. Rather he is drawing a distinction between the contrived reasonings of the excessively rational apologetics of seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes and the affections of the heart for another person, particularly God.

In the context of Pascal's writings, his balance is impressive. Reason is good and necessary as long as it knows how to submit to the truth. To do that, it needs the heart's right disposition. The heart, as Pascal puts it, does have its *reasons*. But a system of dry rationalism alone will never lead to God.

DON'T APOLOGIZE

Apologetics, it must be said, is not exactly a household word today. People confuse it with apologizing or being sorry about something, which is actually the opposite of what it means. Arguments could be made to eliminate the word and substitute something else, but few good candidates exist. "Defense of the faith" is an accurate summary of parts of the apologetic enterprise, for the gospel often needs to be set off from hostile criticism. And yet defense is not the only task; a more positive sense is also involved. Perhaps "commending the faith" is better, sounding more congenial. But that term is somewhat genteel and even timid. "Vindicating the faith" is another option. Still, that may sound somewhat belligerent.

With no great issue at stake, it is best to stay with *apologetics* and offer an explanation. The word actually has a noble pedigree. The root meaning of the Greek term is judicial and might accurately be translated, "getting oneself off a charge." Apologetics breaks down into *apo*, which is a preposition meaning (in this case) "unto," and *logos*. *Logos* in Greek has a rich meaning, primary referring to the "word," the word by which the inward thought is expressed. But it also signifies the thought process itself, or "reason."

Reasoning is a varied function that may involve conversation, discourse, reports, or a story. The central kind of reasoning done in apologetics is argument, which means to marshal evidence in support of a person or position. The methods of persuasion used in an argument may be diverse, as long as they all help to present convincing reasons in defense of a point of view. Apologetics, whether Christian or not, then, means to argue a case in favor of a person or a position. It carries the primary connotation of defense.

One of the most famous ancient examples of such a defense is Plato's *Apology*. In this philosophical masterpiece Plato reports on the defense Socrates gives when charged and tried with three crimes: introducing new divinities to Athens, denying the official

gods of the state, and corrupting young men. Socrates appeals in his moving speech from his conscience to the truth, attempting in vain to be released from the accusations. He employs what has come to be known as the Socratic method, an approach in which one asks a series of questions, leading the adversary down a certain path. After the questioning has evoked just the desired answers, the opponent becomes disarmed.

The Socratic method is called a dialectical approach because it engages in dialogue with a generous use of irony and paradox to penetrate deeply into the issues. Socrates often used storytelling as well. Today this method is still used in law schools for good reason; the ancient dialectical approach has much in common with a legal mind.

Many examples of this kind of defense can be found in secular literature. One of the best known writings from the late Renaissance is Michel De Montaigne's *Apologie de Raymond Sebond.* Penned shortly after the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of the Huguenots (1572), it stresses not the sufficiency but the utter vanity of human reason. Our knowledge is always tentative, constantly changing, prone to pride. Montaigne's biting irony, coupled with his great knowledge of the classics, is so inspiring that we still profit from his reasoning today.

In the Christian context apologetics has a special meaning. For two thousand years the defense of the faith has been the mission of the church. It has, of course, taken many different shapes and stemmed from many different versions of how apologetics works. But down through the centuries this discipline has been considered a necessary and urgent task for believers who are faced with unbelief.

It could not be otherwise, for the Christian faith claims to be true. Whatever else may be said, a distinction between truth and error has always been fundamental to the church. Different apologies, or statements of the truth, were developed to vindicate the Christian position and defend the faith against various attacks. Opposition to belief may be openly hostile or more subtle, but is a fact that requires the practice of apologetics.

AN APPEAL TO THE HEART'S REASONS

This book is an "apology for apologetics" of the Pascalian sort. Part one lays the foundations for apologetics. Chapters one and two describe both some obstacles and opportunities for recovering Christian persuasion today. Although our age is no different from any other in terms of the basic issues, we face specific challenges, such as the claims of the postmodern condition. In chapters three and four we will move to the biblical basis for the task of apologetics, showing the various ways in which the Scriptures not only authorize but mandate responsible persuasion. The fifth chapter, drawing on the first four, focuses on method as it sets forth the principles behind actual arguments in favor of the Christian position.

In the second part we will more specifically treat various questions that arise in apologetic discussions, giving suggestions for responding. Chapter six deals with barriers to belief, probing the question: "Why do people resist considering the most basic questions about life?"

Then we will explore three major issues that often surface in discussions about faith. The first, in chapter seven, is whether religion is an illusion. Chapter eight looks at the second, the matter of the uniqueness of the Christian faith. And chapter nine is concerned with the third, the problem of evil.

Finally, chapter ten treats the subject of assurance, its necessity and limits. Although none of this is exhaustive, the book is designed to encourage the reader to engage in Christian persuasion, appealing to the heart's reasons.

Part One

FOUNDATIONS

1

TODAY'S UNUSUAL OPPORTUNITY

> To know and to serve God, of course, is why we're here, a clear truth that, like the nose on your face, is near at hand and easily discernible but can make you dizzy if you try to focus on it hard. But a little faith will see you through. What else will do *except* faith in such a cynical, corrupt time? When the country goes temporarily to the dogs, cats must learn to be circumspect, walk on fences, sleep in trees, and have faith that all this woofing is not the last word.
>
> —Garrison Keillor, Lake Wobegon Radio Show

No Golden Age

Commending the Christian faith has always been challenging. Every age has its own particular obstacles and unique opportunities, and today is no different. At the outset we should be realistic about both the obstacles and the opportunities, for to do the work of apologetics with integrity we need to be clear about which hindrances are real and which may be imaginary.

One reason we are less than effective in doing apologetics today is rooted in the belief that our age is absolutely unique and that barriers to believing the gospel are far greater than ever before. According to this view, the Christian faith was more the consensus in earlier epochs. Compared to those days, we are in decline and secularization has gagged the message.

Different candidates for a golden age are put forth by different people. Some place it in the early church, when the gospel spread with astounding rapidity. Others look to the high Middle Ages, the era of the Gothic cathedral, when all of life and culture pointed to God. Protestants like to recall the Reformation or perhaps the Puritan days as times when the gospel had a great impact. A popular American version sees the colonial times as basically Christian. But we must ask honestly: Was the task of persuasion easier in the past than today? Were there times when the general cultural climate was more conducive to the gospel?

To be sure, extraordinary spiritual advances were made during certain periods of history, often despite great odds. Yet in order to avoid a wrong-minded nostalgia, we need a dose of historical honesty. Looking carefully beneath the surface of what is apparently an age of faith often reveals not only strengths but weaknesses.

In the early church, for example, there was indeed an extraordinary fervor as Christians faced not only philosophical opponents but also persecutors. At the same time, however, the church was full of dissension, skepticism, and corrupt practices. For example, Christians were slow to question the surrounding culture's views on privilege and thus it took a long time for the liberating message of the gospel to affect women and family life. Asceticism was often considered the most spiritual demeanor for true Christians. In the fourth century a confusion of power between the church and the state developed that is still being untangled today. Furthermore, Christian apologetics did not always clearly define the gospel over against Greek philosophy. Concepts were borrowed from philosophy that instead of making it understandable actually contradicted the gospel message.[1]

The same basic evaluation could be made of other candidates for a golden age. Medieval Europe represented a mixed civilization that knew great blessings. The influence of the gospel was behind advances in technology, hospice care, and the arts, but there were serious obstacles to faith as well. Because Christianity was the only official religion, it was difficult to distin-

guish between real faith and nominal practice. Many believed that grace was dispensed because one simply went to church or steered a child into the priesthood.

The same judgment holds true for colonial America, when the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay sought to bring all of life under the rule of God. The limited Christian consensus of Massachusetts, however, did not last very long. By the time of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, deism and other Enlightenment views were as influential as the Christian faith. At best there was a synthesis, a kind of "Christian humanism." And tragic flaws contradicted even the good face of humanism, such as the scandals of slavery and the treatment of Native Americans, which were not addressed seriously until much later—and then not altogether satisfactorily.

In short, doing effective apologetics was no easier in former times than today. There has never been a golden age when commending the faith was free from considerable obstacles.

NO GOLDEN PRESENT

Ironically, a number of people believe quite the opposite about the present—they hold that there has never been a better time to do effective apologetics than now. This conviction has many forms; we will briefly mention two.

The first form of optimism sees our era as a golden age of communication. The means whereby we communicate today are so powerful that people claim we have the best chance to spread the good news globally since the Reformation, which used the printing press to such advantage. Indeed, on the surface it appears that through television, popular books, radio, the Internet, and other media, the gospel could be made available to large populations with relative ease.

But the primary difficulty with this view is that it confuses means with ends. It does little good to have extensive communications networks if real persuasion is not occurring. The promise of communication is often ironically contradicted by

the means of communication. For example, seeing a war battle on the televised news gives the viewer the sense of being there, of being on top of the situation. Watching the news on the television, however, actually makes us feel powerless to do anything about the war.

Christians can deceive themselves into thinking that modern methods will guarantee successful evangelism. One example is the multiplication of large conferences with thousands of Christians attending. There are meetings on evangelism, conferences on world missions, charismatic assemblies, and gatherings featuring a certain ministry or keynote speaker. From the sheer magnitude of these megaevents one has the impression that Christianity is a force to be reckoned with.

When examined closely, however, another side appears. Many in the audience travel from event to event, listening to inspiring speakers but rarely taking the message to the marketplace or the laboratory. The message itself is often familiar devotional language that does not touch the real world. For a brief moment, a mass of people experience a spiritual high that then vanishes.

This reinforces the tribalism that besets so many Christians today. No doubt it is involuntary tribalism—we long to have an influence on our world but do not know how. We fear the world because it is not responsive, and so we retreat to the safer haven of Christian fellowship.

Now we should be careful not to disparage the blessings of modern life. After all, who is not thankful for advances in medicine and for the relative prosperity and security of life in many parts of the West? Perhaps today all we have is a few "rainbows for the fallen world"[2]—but they are bright rainbows. Doing Christian apologetics is perhaps no easier today than in times past, but it is not necessarily harder.

POSTMODERN HOPE

The second form of optimism about the present says that our age is open as never before to the gospel because we are "post-

modern." According to this view, one of the major obstacles to belief in the Christian faith is "modernity." This sweeping concept refers to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment movement that places all its trust in human reason and the inevitability of progress. Since that time, and up until World War II, there has been an embargo on the possibility of God.[3] But after the devastations of the war and the revolutions of the ensuing decades, the modern mentality has broken down. We can no longer believe in reason alone.

There is much that is appealing in the vision of the postmodern present as a great opportunity for the gospel.[4] Human reason as a rigid, universal standard is not finally compatible with a sovereign, creator God. But the end of the "Age of Reason" is not necessarily the beginning of the age of faith. For one thing, at the heart of the postmodern mentality is a culture of extreme skepticism. The postmodern *condition*, as French theorist François Lyotard calls it, is one in which what he calls the *grand narrative* (the "metanarrative") is ruled out.[5] There is no more truth; there is no more great key to the meaning of life. According to many postmodernists, knowledge is no longer objective—nor even useful—and ethics is not universal. All we have is data and language games. This is hardly a world compatible with the gospel.

Besides the problem that the Christian faith and the postmodern condition are not really compatible, there is a further difficulty with optimism about a golden present. The world after the World War II is not really so different from Enlightenment times as the postmodernists claim. It is not even certain that we have left modernity at all.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens has argued that when we understand its deepest structures, modernity is not so easily surpassed. Such basic features as trust in critical reason and faith in progress are still very much with us. Even disillusionment with reason, which is characteristic of trends after World War II, was there long before. Perhaps the most we could claim is

that the criticism against the dominant traits of modernity is especially sharp today.[6]

In sum, there never was a golden age when evangelism was easier; today is no better, though no worse, than other times. To be sure, every era has different characteristics, needs, and challenges, and thus Christian apologetics must be alert to the peculiarities of an epoch. But the reason that today or any day represents a special opportunity—the reason that apologetics is *relevant*—is not primarily because we have a good understanding of the cultural context. Rather it is because of the message, the *good news* of the gospel. By definition it is fresh and even surprising. If "nothing is new under the sun" in human history, the message itself, coming from another world not ruled by the sun, is fresh in every way today.