

APOLOGETICS

DEFINING APOLOGETICS

“The trouble with most theologians,” said one writer, “is that they go down deeper, stay down longer and come up murkier than anyone else I know.” Maybe, as you come to read this chapter, that sentiment expresses your own feelings about apologetics. However, apologetics is not about injecting a dose of confusion into the Christian Gospel to try and make it sound more profound. It is about communicating the profundity of the Gospel so that it removes the confusion surrounding it.

Apologetics is really about evangelism. The word apologetics comes from the Greek word “apologia,” which literally means a reasoned defence. The apostle Paul uses the word to describe his own ministry, when in Philippians he states that he is appointed for the defence and confirmation of the Gospel. We also find the word apologia used in 1 Peter, when a command is given that we should always be prepared to give an answer (apologia) for the reason for the hope that we have. Clearly, both Peter and Paul are thinking of evangelism in these contexts.

Unfortunately however, apologetics has come to be defined in such a way that to most people it means little more than engaging in abstract philosophical arguments, divorced from the reality of life. Yet apologetics is not about dry intellectualisation of the Gospel. For others, the word seems to imply apologising, as if Christians should say sorry for believing in Christ. Yet apologetics is not about that either. So what do we mean when we talk about apologetics?

A Letter to the persecuted Church

“But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you for the reason for the hope that you have, but do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience...”
1 Pet 3:15 & 16

The letter of 1 Peter is addressed to the wider church, which is suffering under persecution. The letter is a passionate one. Its readers are exhorted to lead holy and obedient lives, an endeavour made possible because of the new birth that has occurred in their lives through the living word of God. (1 Pet 1:17-24). Every chapter contains practical instruction as to how we should live and what attitude we should adopt. In the midst of all of this instruction, comes a very clear command- be prepared to give an apologetic for the hope that you have. What then can we learn from this brief text about apologetics?

1. Firstly, the lordship of Christ needs to be a settled factor in our lives. The term “heart” does not just refer to the seat of our feelings, but also of our thoughts. Every part of us needs to be under the authority of, and obedient to, Christ.

In the book of James, it talks of the double-minded man. This turn of phrase does not mean to be two faced, it means trying to look in two different directions, to be caught

between two opinions and not have made a commitment either way. Such a person is simply swept along by the tide, tossed backwards and forwards by the ever-changing winds of public opinion. In contrast, the man who asks in faith is stable, and his prayers for wisdom are effective. The connotation this time is of someone who has been persuaded, and has put his trust into that which is truthful.

The starting point for giving an apologetic therefore is not possessing a top-notch education or holding a proliferation of theological qualifications. It is accepting Christ's Lordship in all areas of our lives including our thinking. If we are still caught in two minds, if we are not convinced of the veracity of the Gospel, we will never be able to develop an effective apologetic for the hope that we have, because Christ is not Lord of all of our life.

2. Secondly, the context of the command is one of holiness. Our attitude, our actions and how we treat other people are vitally important. (1 Pet 3:8 onwards). Even when faced with persecution, evil is not to be repaid with evil. The reason for the persecution is not because Christians are *not* obeying God's commands- it is because they *are* obeying his commands. Similarly, the assumption in 1 Pet 3:15 is that because our lives and attitudes are different due to living in obedience to God's commands, people will ask questions as to why. We are told that some non-Christians will ask questions, and that we should therefore be prepared. In other words, there should actually be a demand for an apologetic because of the quality of our lives. How we live should be generating intrigue in the Gospel. How are we doing on this front?

3. We must also remember that the letter of 1 Peter is addressed to the church. The command to give an apologetic is not one that is addressed to a handful of carefully selected specialists. The command to give an apologetic is one that is directed to every single member of the body of Christ. No one who is a Christian can excuse themselves.

It may be helpful here to draw a distinction between the process of evangelism and the gift of the evangelist. An evangelist is someone who has the gift of precipitating a decision in someone's life concerning their standing before Christ. Not everyone has this gift. However, the process of evangelism is something that everyone is engaged in. Every time we talk to someone about Christ, every time we invite someone to an event or to church, every time we give someone something to read, we are involved in that process. It is precisely in that process that apologetics plays a role. As soon as you begin to answer someone's question, or tell someone why you are a Christian, you are giving an apologetic. It is not a question of whether we engage in apologetics or not, but what kind of apologetic are we giving when the opportunity comes by.

4. Fourthly, there is the need to be prepared. "There is no problem so big or so complicated," wrote one graffiti artist "that it can't be run away from." This is, of course, perfectly true. The increasing complexity and diversity of the choices we face in life, coupled with a rapidly changing post-modern society, mean that the easiest course of action when faced with an apparently great problem is to run away. However, the Christian is called to an engagement with, not a retreat from, the world.

5. Engagement however is going to take effort. It is much harder to fight a battle than it is to excuse yourself from one. The word translated “prepared” in the NIV has its root in the idea of being fit. Getting prepared is going to involve us exercising the effort necessary to make sure that we are ready. Opportunities to share our faith should not be lost because we haven’t taken the time to think through what we would say. The trouble is, we often don’t know how we can say what we think we should.

That is why many Christians have already put their thoughts onto paper to help us in this task. In that sense, authors of books about apologetics should be regarded as personal trainers, to help us develop a spiritual fitness for the questions that will inevitably come our way. These people write books not to put weight on our bookshelves, but to lend weight to our thoughts and hence our conversations. Truly, we need to “stop thinking like children,” being like infants in regard to evil while being like adults in our thinking (1 Cor 14:20).

The difficulty in getting fit of course is that it takes time. Many of us who want to get physically fit end up disillusioned, because after one week, there is little visible difference. The same is true of apologetics- we need to make a beginning, recognising that we all have a long way to go. And once some degree of fitness is achieved, it must be maintained through regular exercise.

6. Fifthly, the apostle talks of giving an answer for the **reason** for the hope that we have. People believe in all kinds of strange things. One of my colleagues in India loves to tell of the time he worked for the government over there. One of the privileges he enjoyed was having a chauffeur driven car to take him around on official business. In India, as over here, if a black cat crosses your path, it is considered to be bad luck. What was of interest was how each driver dealt with the problem when it occurred. One of his drivers would stop the car, reverse over the spot where the incident had taken place, and then drive off again- trying to undo what had happened. Another would open the window and spit out of it, trying to curse the curse if you like and somehow turn it into a blessing. The third was the most interesting. He would slow down, letting another car over-take him, and with it presumably taking away any bad luck that he had received as a result. You wonder if he was afraid to overtake anyone himself.

We would call these beliefs superstitions. There is no logic or reason behind them. The Apostle Peter however is quite clear. Believing that Christ died so that we might be saved is not a superstition. It is not like saying that black cats bring bad luck. Instead there is a reason for the hope that we have- there is a logic if you like behind the Gospel- there are reasons that can be communicated and explained concerning the atonement. We must be ready to give an explanation, a defence, of why the Gospel is true.

7. Given that the lordship of Christ in our own lives is the starting point for giving an apologetic, the Cross is where we are heading. The reason for the hope that we have is the Cross and resurrection. There is no other reason why the Christian has hope, and there is no other reason for our confidence. Any apologia, any answer aimed at giving the reason for the hope that we have must therefore lead to or flow from the Cross. We must never lose sight of this fact.

However, at the same time we must recognise that people may have other legitimate questions that need to be dealt with before they are prepared to give us a hearing. If someone believes that Christ was not an historical figure for example, then we need to establish for them that he was. Such a task is not difficult. It may be that they are convinced that there is no such thing as truth- that it doesn't matter what you believe. Again, we need to help such a person understand why this point of view can't be sustained. Having done this though, we must recognise that we haven't discharged the Great Commission. We have made a small step- an important and vital step- but still only a small step, in the right direction.

At various points in this chapter, we will be dealing with a variety of important issues that have arisen in our post-modern society, that create problems in the minds of some when it comes to communicating the Gospel. Important as these are, we must remember that the reason we need to deal with these issues is so that we can clear away false ideas so that Christ can be seen for who he is.

8. Finally, our attitude is vital. The Christian does not share the Gospel out of a sense of moral superiority. Nor do we treat other people and their convictions with contempt. Instead, what we share is to be shared with gentleness and respect. Arrogance has never been an attractive or admirable quality, and it is all the more offensive when the message that is brought claims to be one of grace and peace. This is not to imply that the Gospel is to be compromised in any way. But that its mode and method of communication must be consistent with content that we are presenting.

Our confidence does not arise from the fact that we believe that our minds are infallible, or that we know everything. Several years ago, while at a seaside resort, I saw a tea-towel that read "Those of you who think that you know everything, are beginning to annoy those of us who do." The funny thing is, of course, that the only person who could make such a statement is God! The Christian is not claiming exhaustive knowledge on an infinite subject. Our confidence rests in the reality of the relationship we enjoy with Christ, the change he has brought into our lives and the truthfulness of his claims. Our confidence is not in a system of thought. It is in the person of Christ. That is why the Apostle Paul says, "I know **whom** I have believed," and not **what** I have believed.

I am convinced that this is why we are also told that we should keep a clear conscience as we talk to others. We are not called on to pretend we know something when we don't. Nor are we boasting of how great our own minds are, as if we had figured out everything by ourselves. With humility, fear of God and honesty, we testify to the truth and reality of the Gospel message, that Christ is still alive.

The Gospel promises to change lives. It is no surprise therefore that people expect to see lives changed. If our attitude indicates that Christ makes no difference to how we live or how we treat others, we immediately undermine its credibility. Ultimately, our goal is not to win arguments, but to see people come to know Christ.

DOING APOLOGETICS

Having laid a Biblical understanding concerning the command to give an apologetic, it then becomes important to consider how we then go about fulfilling it. The temptation with apologetics is to offer set answers to set questions. Undoubtedly, it can be useful to have a structure in mind when dealing with certain issues. However, far more useful is to have an understanding of how we can effectively engage with people at a conversational level.

Jesus the conversationalist

If you read through any of the Gospels, we see that Jesus spent a lot of time talking with people. In chapter one of John's Gospel, we find a record of Jesus' conversations with the first disciples. In chapter two, water is turned into wine at a wedding, and we read about Jesus' conversations with Mary. Chapter three contains Jesus' well-known conversation with Nicodemus, followed by his conversation with the women at the well in chapter four. In chapter six, we have a series of conversations recorded between Jesus and his disciples, and in Chapter seven Jesus goes to the Feast of the Tabernacles. Again, he is interacting with the groups of people he meets there. It is easy to go on. Clearly Jesus did a lot of other things apart from talking to people. But whether he is talking to individuals, small groups or large crowds, there is an immediacy and intimacy in what he does.

A while ago I was speaking at a conference on evangelism. An African Bishop was also there. Following his address, the question was raised as to why he thought so many people were becoming Christians in his part of the world, and so few in the West. He didn't even stop to think about his answer. "When you walk around my neighbourhood," he replied, "you hear people talking to other people about Jesus- in restaurants, in shops even in bus queues. While I have been here however, very few people seem to be doing this."

Hesitating to join in

Maybe one of the reasons we are uncertain about engaging with some people is that we feel we don't have all the answers. If you ever meet someone who does have all the answers, please let me know. I have some questions for him myself. The truth is that none of us know exactly what to say all the time. However, a good apologist does not only think about answers to be given to other people's questions. It also involves thinking about the questions that need to be raised to other people's answers, or even questions that need to be put to the questions themselves.

Reading through the four Gospels reveals that Jesus asked well over one hundred questions of his critics and his questioners. Asking a question achieves many different things, but let me outline five things that are important here.

Getting people to think

Firstly, asking a question forces people to think. Thinking is not the enemy of the Christian faith. We consistently see that Jesus asked questions to make people think about what they were saying.

In Luke 18, Jesus is asked the question, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The question is a good one. On the face of it, this is a perfect question

for Jesus to jump straight in and tell him what he should believe. Instead, Jesus decides to ask a question of his own. “Why do you call me good?” he replies. I don’t know if you have stopped to consider what went through the man’s mind when this reply came back. Certainly, it was not a reply that he was expecting. But one thing I can guarantee you, by now he is certainly thinking. “No-one is good but God alone,” Jesus continues. However, if no one is good but God alone, and Jesus is good, then it must also follow that Jesus is God. Immediately, Jesus has taken this man to the logical conclusion that must follow from his own admission. It is done quickly and incisively, and there can be no doubt as to the implications that Jesus has spelt out.

Once someone has started to think, then it is easy to get them to open up within their own assumptions. Asking questions is frequently a better way to do this than jumping into some kind of detailed rebuttal. The difference between a conversation and an argument is that in a conversation people are listening to and thinking about what the other person is saying. In an argument, people end up in an automatic response mode, which is why when they have gone too far, the common refrain is, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to say that, I wasn’t thinking.”

Exposing contradictions

Asking questions is also a gentler way of exposing contradictions, and this is certainly the case when dealing with relativism. When I was an undergraduate, I was involved in a student support service. We were not allowed to give advice, only to listen and ask people questions. One evening, two young girls arrived at the centre, one of whom had slashed her wrists with a razor blade in an attempt to take her own life. As they sat opposite me, the girl whose wrists were beginning to heal over looked at me and said, “There is no such thing as truth. If there was, then I would have a reason to live.”

My immediate reaction was to offer my resignation from the service there and then, so that I could proceed to tell her why I thought that this position was philosophically untenable. Instead, I asked her a simple question that I had been asked myself a few years earlier: “You say that there is no such thing as truth- tell me, is that statement true?” It was as if someone turned the lights on in her life. It is correct to conclude that life must be meaningless if there is no such thing as truth. However, the conclusion depends on the assumption made, and in this case, it is what is assumed that must be challenged. Failure to do this will always result in disaster- which is why one thinker defined logic as going wrong with confidence. A faulty starting point will throw everything else out of kilter.

The faulty assumption made is the belief that the claim “everything is relative” can be meaningfully stated. To state that everything is relative is to make an absolute claim. If it is absolute, then it follows that not everything is relative. Literally, nothing has been said. You run into a similar problem if you try to deny that there is such a thing as truth. The statement “There is no such thing as truth” assumes that there is such a thing. What you are in effect saying is “The truth is, there is no such thing as truth.” However, if the statement is true, then there is such a thing as truth. If there is no such thing as truth, then the statement is not true. If it is not true, why believe it? The statement is literally nonsensical, and “nonsense remains nonsense,” said C. S. Lewis, “even if you talk it about God!”

Defining the issue

Frequently as Christians, we want to jump in with answers to questions without really thinking about the assumptions in people's minds concerning the issue at hand. In Matthew 22, Jesus is asked whether it is right to pay taxes to Caesar or not. If someone asked you today whether you thought Christians should pay their taxes or not, the answer you would give I'm sure, would be "yes". Why is it, then, that in Matthew 22, instead of giving a one-word answer, Jesus again asks a series of questions of his own? The reason is that the issue of paying taxes had become clouded in the minds of the people there. As a matter of fact, Jesus knows that the question is a trap.

Israel was under occupation by the Romans, who were regarded by the Jews as the evil oppressors. To pay taxes, and certainly to collect them, was seen to be strengthening the hand of the enemy. Was not Israel God's chosen people? Was this not their land? Surely to help the Romans was to go against God himself? In the minds of the listeners, if Jesus is going to be on God's side, he is expected to say no. If he says no, it will get back to the authorities, and he will be arrested- which is what the questioners want. If he says yes then he will lose the respect of the people. As far as the questioners are concerned, it is a win/win situation.

Jesus however asks for a coin. "Whose portrait is this?" He asks. "Whose inscription?" "Caesar's" they reply. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's," Jesus answers.

Do you see what has happened? Jesus has re-defined the issue at hand. Yes pay your taxes he says, but he answers in such a way so as to make sure that no-one misunderstands what he is saying. He has not only answered the question, but also the sentiment and prejudice that lay behind the question. Frequently, as Christians, we think we have discharged our obligation to communicate the Gospel by answering questions put to us, without attempting to disarm what lies behind the question.

Let's take a contemporary example with a lot of feeling behind it, the question of abortion. The temptation again is to rush in with answers, when really we should first of all be thinking about questions to help the situation along. The way that the issue is normally phrased is in terms of choice- does a woman have the right to choose what happens to her own body? The question, when phrased this way, seems to allow only one answer- yes she does have the right to choose.

However, it is actually the wrong starting question. The first question is not about choice, it is about how to define life. If you were to ask the question "When does someone have the right to terminate an innocent person's life?" the answer from most people will be never. The primary question therefore is not one of choice, but how do you define life? Is what is in the womb a human life or not? If it is a human life, should it be protected? If it is not a human life, what is wrong in terminating it? Many people define life pragmatically in terms of what we do, and the foetus doesn't really do much. For the Christian however, life is defined essentially, on the basis of who we are. To answer the question of choice, without first raising the issue about how to define life is to fall into a trap by failing to effectively communicate with the people listening.

Giving the right answer does not rectify the problem of asking the wrong question. The question must first be reformulated before any answer can be given.

Exposing motives

Asking questions is also a way of exposing people's motives. In Luke 20, Jesus is asked by what authority he is doing the things that he is doing. It is another loaded question, with which the authorities are hoping to trap Jesus. Jesus turns to his inquisitors and asks them whether John's baptism came from heaven or from men. At this point, the religious leaders find themselves stuck. However they answer, they will lose favour with the people. The irony is, I don't know if Jesus really wanted an answer to his own question or not. His question is designed to reveal their own motives, and the most appropriate response to Jesus' question would be some kind of apology for the way that they were treating him.

It is always important to help people understand what their motives are in asking you questions. Some people can keep on asking questions just because they like playing debating games. Other people ask questions because they are sincerely interested in the answer. It is important to distinguish between them. Those who are constantly jumping from one topic to another may well need challenging as to what they are trying to do. Again, asking a question is the easiest way to do this. "Tell me, if I were to answer this question for you, would you become a Christian?" normally focuses the mind quite quickly.

The advantage of helping someone understand their own motives in asking questions is that it gives them a chance to reflect on the importance of what is at hand. We are not involved in evangelism because we like to play games with people. The stakes are too important for that.

Conversations need questions

If someone asked you six questions about the Christian faith, and you took about ten minutes answering each one, during the course of one hour, you would speak for 59 minutes and the other person would utter six sentences. It doesn't sound like a very good conversation does it? I don't know if you have friends who can talk for hours with no need for you to join in the conversation. I can promise you that if you do, you do not look forward to your times with them.

Asking questions gives the person you are talking to the opportunity to explain where they are coming from and what they believe. This is very important. Jesus was asked about inheriting eternal life twice in the Gospel of Luke, once in chapter 10 and once in chapter 18. Although there are similarities, there are important differences between the two encounters, and each answer that Jesus gives is tailored to the individual he is speaking to.

One of the dangers in apologetics is that it becomes mechanistic. The same answer is given to similar questions over and over. However, although the truth of the Gospel remains constant, we need to avoid making the mistake of thinking that by repeating things we have said to other people in the past, we will automatically get the same response. People have different capacities to understand, and their questions are informed by different experiences. We need to ensure by listening to the people we talk to that we understand where they are coming from.

MORAL COMPLAINTS AGAINST GOD

There are various questions that can be asked whose effect is to cause the heart to sink because the answer seems so hard to deliver. What will happen to people who have never heard the Gospel? Why does God allow suffering? I have put these two questions together because they are moral complaints against God. In other words, to those who sincerely raise these questions, it seems that somehow what God is doing is wrong.

Dealing with the issue of judgement, I think it is useful to bear the following things in mind. Sometimes, when people raise this question, they ask it in relation to a specific individual- are you saying that so and so went to hell? The answer to this question is that we don't know. We are not in a position to judge who will be in heaven and who isn't, and it is a mistake to get drawn into that debate. What we do know is that there will be no miscarriages of justice on judgement day. In Rev 19:2 we read the multitude will declare that God's judgements are true and just. In other words, no one will be able to point a finger at God and accuse him of falling short somehow in his process of judgement.

Most miscarriages of justice occur when information is suppressed or distorted. In other cases it is because of some failing in the judge's ability to understand what is going on or because he is corrupt. However, if you have perfect access to all information, together with a perfect judge, there can be no failing in the administration of justice.

If I am honest, I do not think that there is much mileage in pursuing this issue in great detail with someone. What we can do is assure them that God's judgements will be true and just. But how do they stand? What about someone who is offered forgiveness and then turns it down?

This of course leaves the old chestnut of suffering. Let me immediately say that others far more able than I have dealt with this problem in much greater detail. Alister McGrath, C. S. Lewis and Ravi Zacharias for instance have all covered this ground before. There is certainly no shortage of literature on this subject. I only offer a brief outline here that may be of use in your own thinking.

Although we frequently phrase this question as the problem of pain, I really do think that we should first of all address the problem of love. Many will recognise that the idea of life without love is an abhorrent one. Whether it is expressed in music or in psychology, love is seen as an essential ingredient in life.

Now, if I were to put a loaded gun to your head, and ask if you loved me, my guess is that you will immediately say that you do. However, how sincere a declaration that would be is certainly debatable. For a declaration of love to be meaningful, it must be freely given. However, if it is capable of being freely given, then it must also be capable of being freely withheld. This I think is the starting point for understanding the issue.

If God were to create a world in which love can be expressed and experienced, he must create a world in which humankind has freedom. Not only do we need a world with freedom; we also need a world in which there are real alternatives for us to

exercise that freedom. When Henry Ford announced to the world that they could buy any colour of car they wanted so long as it was black, everyone understood that there was no choice to be made. You do not give someone freedom by simply stating that they can have any colour they like- different colours must be available.

When God created the world, he created one that had freedom in order that it may love. Yet if we are free to love, then we are also free to do evil. I think that at this stage, anyone who wants to object must somehow demonstrate that it is possible to create a world capable of love and in which there is no freedom. It cannot be done.

We must also remember that choices entail certain consequences. We are free to make our choices, but not free to dictate the consequences. You can choose to thrust your bare hand into a hot coal fire. You cannot choose not to be burned as a result. However, the choices we exercise affect not only ourselves, but also the environment in which we live. Choosing to rebel against God has had consequences not only for us but also in the world.

Now, we must also be clear in our minds that when God created the world, he did not sit back quietly holding his breath hoping that nothing would go wrong, and then reacted with surprise when it did. The Scriptures talk of the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world (Rev 13:8, NIV). Not only did God want to create a world that could enjoy love, he knew what would go wrong and was prepared to pay the price to rescue it when it did. And the price was not a trivial one. As a matter of fact, it is the pain and suffering of the Cross that that rescue is made possible.

This is only the beginning of understanding the problem- it merely sets the scene. Any of the books recommended at the end of this chapter would help you deal with it in more depth.

In their footsteps.

“And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets – who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated – of whom the world was not worthy – wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should be made perfect. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

We live in a time in the west, in which we find it hard to imagine the scenes described here. Yet if you were to talk to some of our brothers and sisters gathered here this week from around the world, not only would you discover that they can imagine such things, they have seen, witnessed, and in some cases even experienced these things. Ours is not a peaceful world. Much of Christendom is not at peace right now. Today, as I write this outline, just a few days before this week began, I received the following email:

Dear friends,
Greetings. It is with great sadness that I am sharing this news with you. On the evening of June 21, a group of Christians was worshipping in a house in Peshawar, NWFP, when terrorists came on two trucks and kidnapped 32 worshipers on gunpoint. Police has confirmed the news. Christians have been taken to the Tribal area. Christians from Charsada, Mardan and Peshawar had been receiving threatening letters from the extremists to convert to Islam, leave or be killed. It is a very dangerous situation. Please pray for their safe return.

If this were an isolated incident, the church would rise in prayer and support, and respond. Yet there are so many incidents, we can become numb to them, indifferent, or perhaps even worse, simply ignore them for fear that the fact that such things happen could lead us to doubt a God of love. Yet Jesus, in preparing his disciples for the trials of this world, told them that difficulty would come. They might have thought

that, with God on their side, no suffering would ever befall them. Jesus however told them:

“I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think that he is offering service to God...”¹

Immediately, before he utters these words, Jesus says “And you also will bear witness...”² The word witness, as I am sure has already been explained to you this week, is from the Greek word “martyr.” This word was translated into Latin “martir”, and as its use was developed down through church history it became the word “martyr” as we have and understand it today. Even in the New Testament though, this theme or connection between being a witness and the suffering it entails is very clearly there. We are all called to be witnesses. In being a faithful witness to Christ, persecution *will* come. “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”³ “The world hated me,” Christ said⁴, and so we should not be surprised at the hatred that we ourselves attract on account of his name.⁵ As we read in Hebrews, faith and faithfulness lead both to great victories in his name, and to great cost as the world would see it. Isaiah was sawn in two.

We follow in the footsteps of the martyrs, the witnesses, who went before us. They cheer us on. They are not simply spectators wishing to be entertained. They have already gone ahead of us, and run the race well. They are not few in number, they are a great cloud. The stands are not sparsely occupied – they are packed – with those who laid down their lives in service of Him who is the author of life itself, and who now have eternal life through the founder and perfecter of that faith. We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, we read in Hebrews, let us not lose heart, nor lose our way, but rather, fixing our eyes on Christ, let us run after him who despised the shame of the Cross, and is now seated at the right hand of God. Let us fix our eyes on things above.

One of the most depressing books I have read in a long while has been written by Prof. John Gray, formerly Professor of European Thought at the London School for Economics. I find it depressing, not because I disagree with what he says, but because I agree with it. Given his presupposition that Christianity is wrong – that the God of the Bible is a superstition – then what he describes, and the challenges he issues to his fellow atheists, I think logically follow.

In the west, we live in a Humanistic world. I capitalise it because it is the dominant ideology. Gray calls it a religion⁶:

...Humanism is not science, but religion – the post-Christian faith that humans can make a world better than any in which they have so far lived.

¹ John 16:1-2

² John 15:27

³ John 15:20

⁴ John 15:18

⁵ John 15:21

⁶ “Straw Dogs. Thoughts on Humans and Animals.” John Gray, Granta Books. 2002.

However, he says, the truly secular view of the world, is one that doesn't intellectually permit the belief in, or hopes of, Humanism. As he says, "A truly naturalistic view of the world leaves no room for secular hope." The problem with Humanism, he argues, is not due to its atheism and Darwinian roots, but that it has not been true to those roots. Humanism, he argues, has actually been taken captive by the Christianity that came before it. Humanism is simply Christianity in a secular form, which has replaced the idea of God's providence with that of progress. He writes:

"... Christians understood history as a story of sin and redemption. Humanism is the transformation of this Christian doctrine of salvation into a project of universal emancipation. The idea of progress is a secular version of the Christian belief in providence... The idea of progress rests on the belief that the growth of knowledge and the advance of the species go together – if not now, then in the long run."

However, he immediately goes on to say,

"The biblical myth of the Fall of Man contains the forbidden truth. Knowledge does not make us free. It leaves us as we have always been, prey to every kind of folly."

So, he argues that the idea that we are fallen is actually closer to human nature than the utopian view of man advocated by Humanism. This being the case, however, he argues that the conviction that "progress" will make us better is wrong.

"To believe in progress is to believe that, by using the new powers given us by growing scientific knowledge, humans can free themselves from the limits that frame the lives of other animals... Darwin showed that humans are like other animals, humanists claim they are not. Humanists insist that by using our knowledge we can control our environment and flourish as never before. In affirming this, they renew one of Christianity's most dubious promises – that salvation is open to all. The humanist belief in progress is only a secular version of this Christian faith. In the world shown us by Darwin, there is nothing that can be called progress."

The idea of humanity taking charge of its destiny makes sense only if we ascribe consciousness and purpose to the species; but Darwin's discovery was that species are only currents in the drift of genes. The idea that humanity can shape its future assumes that it is exempt from this truth."

Of course, there is then a problem with the notion of truth itself.

"Modern humanism is the faith that through science humankind can know the truth – and so be set free. But if Darwin's theory of natural selection is true, this is impossible. The human mind serves evolutionary success, not truth. To think otherwise is to resurrect the pre-Darwinian error that humans are different from all other animals." [the belief that humans are special, Gray says elsewhere, is the cardinal error of Christianity.]

...Darwinian theory tells us that an interest in truth is not needed for survival or reproduction. More often it is a disadvantage. Deception is common among primates and birds...

Truth has no systematic evolutionary advantage over error. Quite to the contrary, evolution will select for a degree of self-deception, rendering some facts and motives unconscious so as not to betray – by the subtle signs of self-knowledge – the deception being practised...In the struggle for life, a taste for truth is a luxury – or else a disability.”

The problem, Gray argues, is that though philosophers have shaken off Christianity, they have not “given up Christianity’s cardinal error.” What is that error? “...the belief that humans are radically different from all other animals.” We are not different. Darwin, Gray says, shows that we are animals just like any other. There is nothing special about us, but we have deceived ourselves into thinking that we are special.

If it is granted that mankind was not created in God’s image, (because there is no God for us to be the image of), and that we are much like the animals, and that really truth is a philosophical fiction, then other things must immediately follow

First of all is a collapse of meaning:

“If we truly leave Christianity behind, we must give up the idea that human history has a meaning. Neither in the ancient pagan world nor in any other culture has human history ever been thought to have an overarching significance.”

Secondly, we must get away from the idea of “persons,” that human beings are somehow special because they have personhood – a concept that underlies much thinking about human rights.

“Among Christians the cult of personhood may be forgiven. For them, everything of value in the world emanates from a divine person, in whose image humans are made. But once we have relinquished Christianity the very idea of the person becomes suspect.”

Thirdly, Gray says, since we are not persons, in what sense can we talk about being responsible for our actions? In other words, we must get away from the idea of responsibility.

“We cannot choose to be what we are born. In that case, we cannot be responsible for what we do...”

The upshot of neuroscientific research is that we cannot be the authors of our acts.”

Lastly then, this means that we must abandon the notion of morality, which he labels as an ugly superstition. He illustrates it as follows:

“Here is a true story. A sixteen-year old prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp was raped by a guard. Knowing that any prisoner who appeared without a cap on morning parade was immediately shot, the guard stole his victim’s cap. The victim once shot, the rape could not be uncovered. The prisoner knew that his only chance of life was to find a cap. So he stole the cap of another inmate, asleep in bed, and lived to tell the tale. The other prisoner was shot.

Roman Frister, the prisoner who stole the cap, describes the death of his fellow inmate as follows:

The officer and the kapo walked down the lines... I counted the seconds as they counted the prisoners. I wanted it to be over. They were up to row four. The capless man didn’t beg for his life. We all knew the rules of the game, the killers and the killed alike. There was no need for words. The shot rang out without warning. There was a short, dry, echoless thud. One bullet to the brain. They always shot you in the back of the skull. There was a war on. Ammunition had to be used sparingly. I didn’t want to know who the man was. I was delighted to be alive.

What does morality say the young prisoner ought to have done? It says the human life has no price. Very well. Should he therefore have consented to lose his life? Or does pricelessness of life mean that he was justified in doing anything to save his own? Morality is supposed to be universal and categorical. But the lesson of Roman Frister’s story is that it is a convenience, to be relied upon only in normal times.”

In this world, with these convictions, I do not find it hard to imagine a world in which humans preying on each other, abusing each other for entertainment, and ruthlessly suppressing those who stand in their way, is regarded as normal. It already is normal in many parts of the world, the West will soon catch up as it abandons its Christian roots entirely, and starts to live out what it really believes.

I find the prospect of such a world depressing. I find it scary. Reading books like *Straw Dogs* brings a kind of clarity that is uncomfortable. If it is right in its presuppositions, it is surely right in its conclusions.

But then I read Hebrews. I read Acts. I read the Epistles and the Gospels. I read the Psalms and the Prophets. This is not new. This is not a unique time in history. The Gospel prevailed before, it will prevail again. But there is a cost. It is a cost that perhaps many who claim Christ may not ultimately be prepared to pay. But this is the world in which the Gospel took root and spread. And it is in the face of exactly this kind of ideology that we see the fastest growing church in the world today.

The book of Hebrews tells us several things:

- 1) Travel light. Don’t be held up by the weight of sin or the weariness that comes from the world.
- 2) Be aware. Watch out for the sin that so easily entangles us and clings to us, slowing us down and eventually tripping us up.
- 3) Run. Run the race with endurance. This is not a quick sprint. Be ready to run.

- 4) Focus. Fix your eyes on Christ. Don't be distracted – that so easily leads to despair – but instead keep your eyes fixed on our goal, the one to whom we are with and will be with for eternity.
- 5) Rejoice. Christ looked forward to the Cross with joy. Not because it was going to be a pleasant experience, but because of the result it would bring. Rejoice in the fact, though outwardly we may waste away, inwardly we are being renewed. If we run well, there is much to look forward to, even in the face of death - Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.

This passage in Hebrews is riddled through from beginning to end with the hope of the resurrection. I am so delighted that Gary Habermas has been able to be part of this week, unplanned by us. We follow in the footsteps, not of the dead, but of those who have the hope of new life in Christ, a resurrected life that Christ has already won for us.

The presuppositions of this position of course must be critiqued. The grounds of our faith must be presented. As A.A. Trites has written:⁷

...for all the major NT writers the historical facts of Christian origins are of paramount importance. This is patently true of the four Evangelists, who felt it necessary to set out the life of Christ in the form of Gospels...It is certainly true of Paul, who declared the basic facts of the gospel to be “of first importance”, and appended a list of witnesses to the risen Christ. In fact, it was of supreme significance to the New Testament writers that the apostolic teaching was not based on a collection of myths, but on the experience of eyewitnesses...

The Fourth Gospel provides the setting for the most sustained controversy in the NT. Here Jesus has a lawsuit with the world. His witnesses include John the Baptist, the Scriptures, the words and works of Christ, and later the witness of the apostles and the Holy Spirit. [I would add that we too are being called as witnesses.] They are opposed by the world... John has a case to present, and for this reason he advances arguments, asks juridical questions and presents witnesses after the fashion of the OT assembly. The same observation is true of the Book of Acts, though Luke develops his case somewhat differently from John.

All of this material is suggestive for twentieth-century apologists. The person and place of Jesus... is still very much a contested issue. The claims of Christ as the Son of God are currently widely disputed. In such an environment a brief must be presented, arguments advanced and defending witnesses brought forward, if the Christian case is to be given a proper hearing. To fail to present the evidence for the Christian position would be tantamount to conceding defeat to its opponents. That is to say, the controversy theme, so evident in the

⁷ “Witness, Testimony” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol.3, Trans with additions from *Theologisches Begriffslexikon Zum Neuen Testament*, A.A. Trite, Colin Brown, General Ed, 1976.

NT, appears to be highly pertinent to the missionary task of the Church today...
... it is noteworthy that faithful witness often entails suffering and persecution.”

We need witnesses today. There are three marks of these Biblical witnesses:

- 1) First, witnesses are passionately involved in the case they seek to present. They have been apprehended by it, and so they have an inner compulsion to plead its merits with others. Like their first-century predecessors, they cannot but speak of what they have seen and heard.
- 2) Secondly, witnesses are held accountable for the truthfulness of their testimony. Perjury was, and still is, a serious offence punishable by heavy penalties. This solemn sense of being responsible under God for speaking truthfully appears in Paul, who four times declares “God is my witness”...
- 3) Thirdly, witnesses must be faithful not only to the bare facts of the Christ-event, but also to their meaning. This entails presenting Christ and his message which genuinely belongs to them.”

We need to be prepared to give an answer to those who ask the reason for the hope that we have. We need to be a witness.