



Apologetics: Why Your Church Needs It

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The ambiguity of the word *apologetics* provides the apologist with a natural icebreaker in public or private conversations on the topic: the apologist does not exist to “apologize” for being a Christian, or indeed for anything else. The assumption behind the pun is that the listeners would have a fair understanding of what apologetics is even if they cannot attach a formal definition to the concept. Unfortunately, this assumption is not always accurate.

During a conversation at a major apologetics event recently held in a large church, an attendee asked me what “apologetics” meant. I explained to her that apologetics is the branch of Christian theology that seeks to address the intellectual obstacles that keep people from taking the gospel of Jesus Christ seriously. I gave her some examples of questions that are important in the context of apologetics. For example, why does evil exist if the world was created by an all-good, all-powerful God? How do we know Christianity is true in light of the numerous religions that exist in the world?

I finished my answer to her by quoting 1 Peter 3:15, which instructs us to be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks for the reason for the hope that is within us. Her reaction was surprising.

“Are you sure the Bible says that?” she asked.

I assured her that it does. I explained to her that the word translated “answer” in that verse is the Greek word *apologia* that means “defense” and from which we get the English word *apologetics*. She had been a faithful member of a prominent evangelical church for most of her life, and yet she did not understand the meaning or importance of apologetics in the life of the local church. Sadly, I have seen such scenarios repeat themselves so frequently that I have now come

to expect them whenever I go to a new place to speak.

Even among those who do understand what apologetics is and why it is important, there are some who suspect that it is reserved for a select minority among the elect—perhaps just for those with a questioning mind, or for an intellectual elite. Tertullian’s famous question, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” echoes loudly in the hearts and minds of many a follower of Jesus in our time, with the resounding answer being “nothing.” The explosion of knowledge has made it possible for different people legitimately to focus on specific areas at the exclusion of others. This has complicated the process of cooperation among experts in different fields of study, the result being that often the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing. Thus, for example, it is possible for a local church to function without apologetics.

In what follows, I hope to demonstrate why I believe apologetics is absolutely crucial to both the health and the witness of the church and why it is a serious mistake for followers of Jesus to ignore it. My goal is not to cast blame, but to call upon those who are committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ to take seriously the application of its truth to all areas of life. Unless the gospel is understood at the worldview level, its impact upon those who accept it as well as its ability to change the structures of their societies will always fall short of God’s best for his people. But, as I will argue, the gospel cannot be understood at the worldview level without apologetics.



J.M. Njoroge

Orders to Prepare

The first reason why believers cannot ignore the life of the mind is that the Bible itself is opposed to anti-intellectualism. As already mentioned, the Scriptures instruct us to be prepared to give answers to those who raise questions about our faith (1 Peter 3:15). When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus declared that it is to love God with the entirety of our being, including our minds (see Matthew 22:36-38)—an injunction beautifully modeled for us by biblical characters themselves.

For example, within the context of apologetics, Paul's practice of reasoning from the Scriptures when in discussion with Jews about the identity of Jesus is well known. But as we see in Acts 17, Paul was willing to depart from this practice when he debated the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens: he started from where they were in order to introduce the gospel to them. He could not reason from the Scriptures with them since they, unlike the Jews, did not accept the authority of the Scriptures.

Similarly, Matthew 22 contains a fascinating account of Jesus' interaction with a group of Pharisees and Sadducees, the Ivy League scholars of the day. Jesus navigates masterfully through their traps regarding the requirement to pay taxes to Caesar, the status of marriage in the afterlife, and the prioritization of the commandments given to us by God. In each case, he exposes the misconceptions that had led to erroneous interpretations of God's Word. Jesus caps the chapter with his own question to the experts. How could King David, under the inspiration of the Spirit, refer to the Messiah as his (David's) Lord if the Messiah was just David's son (or descendant)? "No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions" (Matt. 22:46).

Although apologetics is mostly associated with such penetrating thinkers as C.S. Lewis, the practice of serving God with the mind has been an integral part of the life of the church throughout its history. This is evident in the formulation of complex biblical doctrines, such as the Trinity. The precision of the words used in the creeds and the determination to avoid contradictions are impressive examples of the priority the church has always given to the life of the mind.

Indeed, biblical thinking played a foundational role in all that went into the formation of what is known as Western culture. Without the Bible, Western culture would not have the shape it has today. Notwithstanding loud protests to the contrary, it was biblical thinking that gave rise to modern science and technology. As C.S. Lewis put it, "Men became scientific because they

expected law in nature and they expected law in nature because they believed in a lawgiver." They believed the universe was crafted by a purposeful God who created humanity in his image, creatures who could (to borrow Johannes Kepler's famous phrase) "think God's thoughts after Him." To Kepler, "The chief aim of all investigations of the external world should be to discover the rational order which has been imposed on it by God, and which he revealed to us in the language of mathematics."

It was also the Bible that gave the world a foundation for human rights. The Bible makes the astonishing claim that what separates human beings from other creatures is the fact that they were created in God's image. Although others may claim that all human beings should be considered to be of equal worth, only the Christian worldview provides a philosophically solid and consistent basis for such a claim.

After all, we don't all come into the world "equal" in any objective sense. My boys were born in Los Angeles, California, around the same time that the children of a famous celebrity were born. Though there was a barrage of reporters and paparazzi hoping to catch a glimpse of the celebrity's children, no one showed up with a camera at the hospital where my boys were born (though I can assure you, as objectively as a dad can, that my boys were much better looking!).

We don't all start life in this world on an equal footing, given the huge range of gifts and attributes people have—musical or athletic ability, good looks, and intelligence. The only basis we have for attaching any meaning to the claim that all human beings are "equal" is the biblical teaching that we are all made in God's image. So pervasive was such thinking in Western culture that such phrases as "all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights" were taken to be self-evident truths at the founding of the United States.

One can only wonder what the Declaration of Independence would look like if it were drafted today, when some of our leading intellectuals are telling us that we have pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps and we therefore have no need for God. It is difficult to see how "inalienable rights," rights that exist independently of any human authority, can be justified without a transcendent anchor.

With all its warts, the church has, in the past, acknowledged a duty to think through issues so that it can anticipate and then answer the questions people have. In other words, it has taken its role as the light of the world much more seriously than is evident today. C.S. Lewis did not invent apologetics any more than Michael Jordan invented basketball.

Spiritual Warfare

A second reason why the church cannot afford to ignore the life of the mind is that apologetics is a form of spiritual warfare. The more I study the Word of God and the nature of the spiritual problems that plague human beings, the more convinced I become that ideas are the most effective of all of our enemy's tools. Slavery is a grievous evil, but never more so than when it is the mind rather than merely the body that is enslaved. At that point, the slave will do the enemy's bidding without any physical restraints, for whatever controls your mind owns you.

In 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 (NIV), Paul says,

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

There is a strong emphasis on the cognitive aspect of our being in this passage. The "strongholds" that we are to demolish as divinely inspired warriors are arguments and pretensions that set themselves up against our claim to know God. We are to take thoughts captive to make them obedient to Christ. The word Paul uses for arguments is the Greek word *logismous*, which refers to "the product of a cognitive process." If that is true, it is hard to imagine Paul ignoring the claims of those who would today argue that we cannot really "know" God in any meaningful sense. He did not shy away from engaging the Athenian philosophers in discussions on such matters.

But the power of ideas is most clearly demonstrated in the absolute effectiveness of the Tempter's strategy in the Garden of Eden. How did Satan succeed in driving Adam and Eve away from God? Not through demon-possession or illness, and not by overpowering their will: he succeeded by planting an idea in their minds. Ever since the human race bought the lie that we can actually become gods ourselves in place of God, we have been willing—even resolved—to do our enemy's bidding. The key arena for this spiritual battle has been our minds.

If the biblical account is right, then it is not surprising that some of those who finally succeed in defying God would experience a certain degree of liberation. God has given us the ability to make real decisions with eternal consequences. When we exercise our freedom to choose, we affirm our true humanity. But if we were created by

God in order to have a personal relationship with him, then to choose against him is to dethrone the essence of our humanity. We function at our best when we are properly related to God. From cults to distorted biblical teaching, false ideas continue to exert their power on humanity with many casualties along the way. As ambassadors of Christ in a hurting world, we play a dangerous game when we ignore the life of the mind.

The fact that the mind is an intensely active spiritual battlefield is seen in the large number of young people whose faith is shaken when they encounter ideas that challenge the truth of God's Word. This is a familiar story on many university campuses. Biblical thinking can only regain the respectability it once had by making its case in the marketplace of ideas. When reasoned discourse takes a backseat in any culture (and reasoned discourse in turn is only possible in the context of a shared assumption that truth exists and can be discerned), the only alternative is the exercise of raw power. This is clearly seen in the priority given to court cases in the so-called culture wars without an equal emphasis on shaping public opinion through a reasoned defense of biblically sound positions.

While court cases have their legitimate role, real victory will only come when Christianity is once again recognized to be a legitimate option in public discourse. Fighting culture wars through the courts alone is at best a temporary solution; it is just a matter of time before the weight of cultural opinion lends an unstoppable momentum to false and destructive ideas. It is not accidental that Paul refers to the church as the pillar and foundation of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15). When biblical Christianity is understood at the worldview level, it has the power not only to change the hearts and minds of individual adherents but also to influence the ideas that shape the opinions of a culture.

Implicit in what has already been said is the third and final reason why I believe it is a serious mistake for the church to ignore apologetics: apologetics is indispensable in the proper application of the gospel to all of life. To flesh out this point, we will examine briefly the role the gospel played in transforming British culture in the nineteenth century in contrast to the limited impact it has had in Africa in recent decades despite its obvious popularity on the continent.

Borrowing a Page in English

Church historian Ian C. Bradley credits the evangelicals of the nineteenth century with the revival of a high view of morality in Victorian-era Britain. He

argues that it was the evangelicals who led the campaign to abolish the slave trade and who tempered the excesses of imperialism in places such as Africa and India. On October 28, 1787, William Wilberforce wrote in his diary, “God almighty has set before me two great objects; the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners.”

It was not surprising that the “reformation of manners” would be ranked together with the abolition of the slave trade in Wilberforce’s mind. As Bradley writes,

It did not take a Saint to feel that English society stood in need of reform at the end of the eighteenth century.... There can be little doubt that there was something depraved about a society whose favourite country pastimes included hurling stakes at chained cocks and setting dogs on cats thrown into ponds, where townspeople regularly complained of being kept awake by the screams of victims of assault and rape and the cries of prostitutes, and in which an eighth of the deaths in the capital were attributed to excessive drinking. The eighteenth century was probably no more vice-ridden than any other but no other age has ever paraded its weaknesses quite so openly or excessively.

Despite the enormity of the task, Wilberforce and others like him succeeded in impacting their nation. So profound was the transformation of British society that Bertrand Russell, one of the most prominent and influential atheists of the last century, could later write, “It is doubtful that the method of Mahatma Gandhi would have succeeded except that he was appealing to the conscience of a Christianized people.” The process of Christianization did not occur by accident but as the result of a careful understanding of the Scriptures and the application of God’s Word to all of life. The Christian leaders who had laid the foundation for the moral rebuilding of their nation understood what a community of committed believers should produce: people of deep-seated character and integrity who can discern the times in which they live and who can influence others, including their leaders, not only to become believers but also to live their lives and conduct their Christian witness with biblical wisdom in spite of cultural pressure to the contrary.

That is what Wilberforce hoped would be passed along to the generation that succeeded his own. In his book, *Real Christianity*, he exhorted parents to incorporate apologetics in the upbringing and training of their children. He wrote,

In an age in which infidelity abounds, do we observe them [parents] carefully instructing their children in the

principles of faith which they profess? Or do they furnish their children with arguments for the defense of that faith? ...When religion is handed down among us by heredity succession, it is not surprising to find youth of sense and spirit beginning to question the truth of the system in which they were brought up. And it is not surprising to see them abandon a position which they are unable to defend.

Unfortunately, his warning increasingly went unheeded as the English Evangelicals began to abandon the life of the mind and to retreat instead into an agenda which prioritized personal piety over a scholarly engagement with ideas that opposed a biblical view of the world. As author Jonathan Rice observes, they claimed “God had called them to a purely practical faith: to send forth missionaries, to help the poor and downtrodden, to better peoples’ manners. These were the things pleasing to God; not intellectual debate or true apologetics.”

Sadly, the result was that many of their children and grandchildren abandoned the faith once they were confronted with arguments to which they had no answers. Rice continues,

They tried to salvage the strong sense of morality, duty, hard work and self-control, but without the God who had given it to them in the first place. One of them summed it up this way in 1873: “Let us dream no dreams and tell no lies, but go our way, wherever it may lead, with our eyes open and our heads raised”...There is bravery and integrity in this statement, together with a horrible sense of the tragic. It is the practical creed of a man who had once known and loved God, but had lost Him, and was facing his short life alone and abandoned in a now empty universe.

A few years ago, Lee Strobel interviewed Charles Templeton in the course of research for one of his books. Templeton, a one-time preaching partner of Billy Graham, lost his faith while still a young man. In a discussion about Jesus, Templeton’s eyes welled up with tears, and to Strobel’s astonishment, Templeton said, “I really miss him.” After years of writing books defending his agnosticism, he was still unable to shake off the allure of Jesus. He had learned to love Jesus with his heart but not with his mind. What your mind rejects, your life will eventually reject also, however close it may be to your heart.

It is often said that ideas have consequences. Such a maxim can only benefit us as we determine not to allow it to degenerate into a meaningless cliché. If we lose the next generation to secularism, other religions,

and paganism, it is not going to be because we fought and lost the battle, but because we never entered the battlefield in the first place. God has given us all we need in order to serve him effectively in this world, and our minds are an integral part of the process.

Out of Africa

Perhaps the best way to appreciate the painful effects of anti-intellectualism in the church is to look at places where the rich legacy of Judeo-Christian scholarship has not taken root. A clear example of this problem is the continent of Africa, my homeland. The continent is known for its exotic wildlife, sprawling jungles, beaches, deserts, and its many cultures. But it is difficult to think of Africa without also thinking of all its pervasive problems. Drought, famine, poverty, and disease continue to claim lives throughout large parts of Africa. As a result, physical needs receive the greatest attention from those who feel moved enough to act on behalf of the people of Africa.

But despite the seriousness of the physical needs, I am convinced that the biggest problem Africa faces is ideological. In Matthew 4, Satan tries to get Jesus to turn stones into bread in order to meet his physical need. In response, Jesus says, "It is written, man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (v. 4). The need in Africa remains the same: bread (an allegory for humanity's physical needs) and the Word (ideological needs). This two-pronged diagnosis of humanity's deepest needs is the key to solving Africa's seemingly insurmountable problems.

With respect to the bread (or physical needs), trillions of dollars and untold hours of human labor have been poured into the continent of Africa in recent decades. For the record, I am grateful for those who have devoted so much of their efforts and resources to assisting the people of Africa. RZIM's Wellspring International has played a critical role in the process and we hope to do more in the future. It is impossible to see the need and not feel compelled to do something about it as followers of Jesus Christ. But we also know that offering assistance for physical needs in Africa, though necessary, is only a temporary solution. We are also determined to address the root cause of the problem, which is ideological. God's Word properly applied is the only hope for the world.

Reflecting on the impact of the gospel in Africa over the last few decades, missiologist Ralph Winter laments the fact that it does not seem to have the impact one would expect it to have in places where a

majority of the people claim to be followers of Jesus Christ. Says Winter, "We always used to think, 'Even if things are not going too well in the USA, at least those millions of newly won believers overseas are flourishing in the faith.'"

But Winter points out that the news is not as good as we have thought. He gives some unsettling examples: Kenya, which is 80 percent Christian, with more than 400 denominations and "almost as many Evangelicals as in all of Europe," could not contain the outbreak of the postelection violence that claimed more than 1,200 lives and left over 350,000 homeless in January 2008. The Central African Republic is 70 percent Christian, and yet it also ranks among the most dangerous and corrupt nations of the world. Even Rwanda was considered to be one of the most Christianized nations in the world just before the genocide. Winter refers to this as "the nightmare of a thought that our vast global, hard-won expansion of Christianity is falling to pieces before our eyes." His conclusion is worth pondering:

A Christianity that does not teach the Bible points the way nowhere but to New Age groping, ambiguity, and relativism. However, a Christianity that only teaches the Bible is blind to all the other knowledge God wants us to discover and value.

A full examination of how we got where we are goes well beyond the scope of this short article. Suffice it to say that the church, for the most part, did not respond well to the assaults on the faith that gained prominence in the intellectual centers of the world in the nineteenth century. Philosopher J.P. Moreland identifies three principal areas in which the gospel was poorly defended against intellectual attacks: philosophy, science, and German "higher criticism." Philosophers like David Hume and Immanuel Kant insisted that God cannot be known to exist. Charles Darwin's formulation of the theory of evolution seemed to render the role of a Creator of life superfluous, and the Bible itself came under severe attack with the rise of higher criticism in Germany that questioned its historicity.

Moreland argues that the church frequently responded by withdrawing from the centers of intellectual debate. Bible institutes were built to train lay believers to reach the lost for Christ, rather than to equip a generation of believers to defend their faith. As Evangelicals retreated from the broader society, an unhealthy escapism with an emphasis on end-times teaching became popular. The result was a severe marginalization of Christian ideas from the public arena.

Needless to say, reaching souls for Christ is the central objective of our calling, and as Spirit-filled believers, we “groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons” (Rom. 8:23). But in the meantime, we are to endure the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in the believers (Gal. 4:19).

If Moreland’s analysis is largely correct, then the real problem that plagues believers in places like Africa is not hard to identify. Simply stated, the version of Christianity that was planted in Africa was largely divorced from the intellectual legacy of Christendom that had produced first-rate Christian scientists, moral philosophers, political thinkers, artists, business entrepreneurs, etc. It was instead the product of a pietistic strain of evangelicalism which was already in intellectual retreat in the West by the time it was coming to maturity in Africa. In short, since the advent of the missionary movement in the latter eighteenth century, the Judeo-Christian tradition has never been rooted in Africa as it had once been in the West. The West may presently be busy hacking away at the root of its moral foundations, but Africa in one sense has yet even to break ground in order to lay down a strong biblical foundation within its many cultures.

If we do not learn to value the life of the mind, then we will be doing a great disservice to all the missionaries who have sacrificed their resources, time, health, and even lives to take the gospel to places like Africa. In spite of the anti-intellectual flavor of the version of the faith that made it to Africa, the missionaries proved faithful with what was at their disposal. The result, according to the Pew Forum, is that there are now more than 400 million Christians in Africa, and that number is projected to rise to more than 633 million by the year 2025. Far from destroying African cultures, missionaries contributed to their survival by providing them with written expressions of their languages. There is much for which missionaries deserve our gratitude, and the best way to reward their efforts is for African believers to learn to serve God with their minds.

In a different context, Richard Mouw uses the metaphor of the hospital emergency room to make a similar point. The emergency room is a place of much activity and haste. The moment the ambulance pulls in, life decisions have to be made, with no time to waste. But the only reason why the medical experts succeed in saving lives in the midst of the haste and urgency is because medical researchers have already spent countless hours in the labs, conferences, lecture halls, and the library.

Unfortunately, Africa is like an emergency room with a real need for hasty action and urgent care. But there is very little research at the ideological level to

back up the ambulance drivers. Physical and medical needs cannot be denied, but until we recognize that the application of God’s Word to all areas of life is still the final answer to the human predicament this side of the grave, the solution to Africa’s problems will continue to elude us. The Word of God is still the answer, but it must be understood at the worldview level if we are to break down the structures of mental slavery that have oppressed so many for so long.

In December 2008, Matthew Parris wrote an article entitled, “As an Atheist I Truly Believe Africa Needs God.” In that article Parris argued that redemption, not just physical assistance, has to be a part of the process that will give rise to the kind of transformation Africa needs. He concluded his article with a powerful statement:

Those who want Africa to walk tall amid 21st-century global competition must not kid themselves that providing the material means or even the knowhow that accompanies what we call development will make the change. A whole belief system must first be supplanted. And I’m afraid it has to be supplanted by another. Removing Christian evangelism from the African equation may leave the continent at the mercy of a malign fusion of Nike, the witch doctor, the mobile phone and the machete.

To this sobering statement from an atheist, I would add that apologetics must be a part of the equation, for millions of Africans have already responded positively to Christian evangelism. What remains now is for the believers in Africa to demonstrate what the gospel can do to societal structures when it is properly applied. Learning to love God with their minds is the surest way to supplant oppressive belief systems with the life-changing Word of God. I should also note that I am not offering apologetics in place of the gospel: the gospel is what is needed. But in the process of applying it to all of life, apologetics is indispensable.

What It Will Take

The first thing it will take in order for the followers of Jesus to turn this ship around is a sacrificial commitment to the course of truth. The church must produce gifted men and women who are not ashamed of the gospel and who will serve God with their minds as historians, artists, moral philosophers, scientists, politicians, business entrepreneurs, university professors, media personalities, etc. In other words, we must strive to raise a generation of believers who are not just professionals who happen to be Christians but

diligent Christians who understand that their professions are a means to glorify God.

Fortunately, this is already happening, especially in the U.S., as followers of Christ respond to the marginalization of biblical ideas in the culture by making the case for the truth and centrality of the Bible. The message of the gospel is simple but it is by no means simplistic. Proper understanding and application of its truth requires careful study and contemplation. An impassioned “What-do-I-say-when-he-or-she-says-such-and-such” approach to apologetics alone will not do: we must be willing to roll up our sleeves for the sake of truth, for no one has a greater stake in it than those of us who claim to follow him who is the Truth.

Secondly, it will take the entire community of faith working together. No one person can do this alone. Given the multiplicity of tasks that many pastors bear, pointing out the value of apologetics to them can at times sound insensitive, if not insulting. Pastors tend to be very easy targets of criticism, but over the years I have worked closely enough with a number of them to appreciate the demands their calling places upon their lives on a daily basis. There are not many pastors who are in search of extra-curricular activities to fill up gaps in their schedules.

Consequently, believers must be more intentional about sharing the available resources as we all function together as one body. The biblical mandate for individuals and churches to use their gifts for the benefit of the entire body is clear. It is up to church leaders to create the opportunities for cooperation among believers. This means that no one person should feel left out; the gifts God has given each one of his followers are equally valuable in his eyes and we must embrace them with gratitude and use them to benefit others. Not all of us are called to be apologists, and not even the most gifted pastor can play all the roles God has assigned to any local congregation. Church leaders must be willing to open the door for the members of their congregations to exercise their God-given gifts, including serving God with their minds.

And finally, it will take dependence upon the power of the Spirit of God for authentic, transformed Christian lives. This is not only the ultimate goal of everything we do, it is also the only safeguard against letting our service to God with our minds degenerate into a mere academic exercise. Just as we can use other gifts of God, like material wealth, to oppose God, we can do the same with reason. In his book *Beyond Opinion*, Ravi Zacharias declares, “I have little doubt that the single greatest obstacle to the impact of the gospel has not been its inability to provide answers, but the failure on

our part to live it out.” That is a warning worth heeding. The one Bible verse that comes close to giving us a definition of eternal life is John 17:3. It says, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” Eternal life is not just something that will happen some day after we die; it is knowing God through Christ, and it begins the moment we believe.

Thus apologetics is necessary for the health of the church because it helps the believer to overcome intellectual obstacles in the course of the believer’s spiritual growth. It is necessary for the witness of the church because it helps clear away the obstacles that can keep the nonbeliever from taking an honest look at his or her true spiritual condition. The life of the mind is an integral part of Christian discipleship, and it is indispensable in the process of applying God’s Word in our individual lives as well as in our role as the bearers of God’s light in a dark world. To ignore the life of the mind is to play right into the hands of the enemy of our souls. For the sake of our own lives in Christ, our young people, our nation, and indeed our world, we will do well to rediscover the primacy of loving God with our minds in the context of our local churches.

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Discipleship of Heart and Mind

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