

EDITED BY COLLIN HANSEN, SKYLER R. FLOWERS, AND IVAN MESA

“The best introduction to cultural apologetics on the market.” —KEVIN VANHOOZER

“A treasure trove of both biblical and cultural insight.” —SAM ALLBERRY

The Gospel After Christendom

An Introduction to
Cultural Apologetics

**BOOK
PREVIEW!**

Praise for *The Gospel After Christendom*

At a time when some say Christianity has become culturally obsolete, this book, the best introduction to cultural apologetics on the market, provides demonstrations—rational, artistic, and practical—that the story of God with and for us, the gospel of Jesus Christ, is as necessary as ever for the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty, the sum and substance of human flourishing in all areas of life.

—KEVIN J. VANHOOZER, research professor of systematic theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Boy, do we need this book! In an era where cultures collide and Christianity is often dismissed in many of them or worn with a facade that is not the real thing, we need an approach that is culturally aware and says the gospel is better than the variety of things currently being offered to people. These chapters point the way for all of us to accomplish the calling God gives believers to represent God well in a challenging world. It calls for boldness and care in a way that listens to others' longings and engages with a biblical response full of grace and truth. Well done.

—DARRELL L. BOCK, executive director of cultural engagement at the Hendricks Center, and senior research professor of New Testament studies at Dallas Theological Seminary

Many fellow believers are used to preaching Christ in non-Christian and anti-Christian cultures. American Christians are not. We need to be. Read this book to discover how.

—MICHAEL HORTON, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

This volume brings together some of today's most creative Christian thinkers to tackle the problem of how to make the case for faith to cynical, secular Westerners who think they've already heard it all. The result is both an encouragement and a challenge to twenty-first-century believers.

—MOLLY WORTHEN, author of *Spellbound: How Charisma Shaped American History from the Puritans to Donald Trump*

Christian witness requires, among other spiritual capacities, a kind of bility. We must be fluent in the truth of the Scriptures and in our cultural contexts. *The Gospel After Christendom* is an essential primer in this fluency that enables powerful gospel proclamation, and I highly recommend its collected wisdom.

—JEN POLLOCK MICHEL, author and speaker

Apologetics has perennially endeavored to persuade about the Christian hope. The best approach has been Cultural apologetics, meaning recognizing whole persons, their history, and their circumstances. This anthology introduces us in a superb manner to the need for the vindication of the Christian faith in a post-Christendom world. It a must-read for anyone concerned to explain the faith to outsiders and insiders alike in these perplexing times.

—WILLIAM EDGAR, professor emeritus of
apologetics, Westminster Seminary

It's no secret that Christianity has receded significantly in the West. So what does faithful witness look like in this age? Collin Hansen, Skyler Flowers, and Ivan Mesa convene the brightest Christian minds to offer theologically rich, biblically faithful, and pastorally wise direction to help God's people discern the times. Neither cynical nor naive, this resource will both encourage and challenge any believer who earnestly desires revival and gospel advance. Every pastor should have this book on his shelf.

—DANIEL DARLING, director of the Land Center for Cultural
Engagement at Southwestern Seminary, author of several
books, including, *The Dignity Revolution*, *Agents of Grace*,
and the forthcoming *In Defense of Christian Patriotism*

This wonderful book represents so many great things all at once: a practical handbook on evangelism, a treasure trove of both biblical and cultural insight, a powerful apologetic for cultural apologetics itself, and the fruit of the joyous collegiality we've found together at the Keller Center. I can't think of another book I'd rather have close to hand when thinking about engaging western culture with the beautiful message of Jesus Christ."

—SAM ALLBERRY, associate pastor, Immanuel Nashville; author,
Is God Anti-Gay? and *Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With?*

In an increasingly unpredictable world, which throws up phenomena from “culture wars” to “vibe shifts,” Christians need more than ever to understand the deep currents at work in our culture. *The Gospel After Christendom* explains what cultural apologetics is, the various ways in which it can be pursued, and the kinds of big questions that it can address. Readers will find elucidating, encouraging, and helpful chapters from experts in a variety of areas who are continuing the legacy of Tim Keller in understanding, and speaking the gospel into, our cultural moment.

—DR. SARAH IRVING-STONEBRAKER, associate professor of history at Australian Catholic University and author of *Priests of History: Stewarding the Past in an Ahistoric Age*

Culture is a moving target. Thus, Christians must be deliberate, nimble, and shrewd in the practice of cultural apologetics. *The Gospel After Christendom* is a helpful resource in developing the grace and dexterity to effectively evangelize in the culture, while maintaining the courage and convictions to reject the idols of the culture.

—JUSTIN E. GIBONEY, president of AND Campaign

Just like the weather, culture is changing rapidly, and Christians are quickly discovering how challenging it is to navigate the emerging cultural climate. *The Gospel After Christendom* is an excellent resource to help them chart a way forward. Drawing from a diverse group of Christian thinkers, it not only frames the key issues but also offers practical wisdom for cultural engagement. I encourage pastors and Christian leaders to pick up a copy and explore how Christianity can thoughtfully and faithfully engage in cultural apologetics.

—STEPHEN O. PRESLEY, PhD, associate professor of church history, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

The label may be relatively new, but from the time Paul first set foot in Athens, if not before, Christians have engaged in cultural apologetics. It is perennially necessary, but especially important for the church’s witness in the West today. This book helpfully covers the what, why, how, and where of cultural apologetics with material that is fresh, insightful, and eminently practical.

—JAMES N. ANDERSON, Carl W. McMurray Professor of Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

For many of us, the word *apologetics* started to leave a bad taste in our mouths, since it too often reflected Enlightenment assumptions and sensibilities while also generating a tone and attitude that seemed more combative than loving, more arrogant than thoughtful. Our apologetics must be holistic (head, hands, and heart), culturally informed, and gospel saturated. Consequently, I am especially thankful for this volume, which is both substantive and generous in content and tone. There is much here for all of us as we seek to give a reason for the hope that lies within us.

—KELLY M. KAPIC, Covenant College

Cultural apologetics is not new; it retrieves a historic, holistic, and hopeful approach to Christian witness. This volume helps us reckon with the cross-pressures of our secular age, its apathy and activism, hubris and despair. These authors show us how to listen more carefully and testify more convincingly to the beauty, goodness, and truth that is found in Christ alone.

—JUSTIN ARIEL BAILEY, dean of chapel and
professor of theology, Dordt University

This book is a marvelous primer in an age-old practice with a catchy new name: cultural apologetics. It takes us behind the arguments and proofs often debated by those assessing the intellectual merits of Christianity and explores the more basic, instinctual, imaginative, and affective lives of those seeking goodness, truth, and beauty. It offers a witness designed not merely for the head but for the heart and hands as well—helping us address the inclinations and assumptions of our post-Christian age and reorient our loves in the way of Jesus Christ.

—DOUGLAS A. SWEENEY, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University

What an outstanding guide to the practice of cultural apologetics! *The Gospel After Christendom* equips church leaders to live as wise cultural climatologists, adapting their witness to the unchanging glories of Jesus to face the challenges of ever-changing cultural contexts. The authors are well aware of the challenges of our current moment, but they do not give in to pessimism or panic. The result is a resource that is clear and yet kind, uncompromising but still meek, concerned with current challenges and still rich with hope.

—TIMOTHY PAUL JONES, PhD, C. Edwin Gheens Professor of
Christian Family Ministry and chair of apologetics, ethics, and
philosophy, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

The
Gospel
After
Christendom

The Gospel After Christendom

An Introduction to
Cultural Apologetics

COLLIN HANSEN, SKYLER R. FLOWERS, AND IVAN MESA, EDITORS



ZONDERVAN REFLECTIVE

The Gospel After Christendom

Copyright © 2025 by The Gospel Coalition

Published by Zondervan, 3950 Sparks Drive SE, Suite 101, Grand Rapids, MI 49546, USA. Zondervan is a registered trademark of The Zondervan Corporation, L.L.C., a wholly owned subsidiary of HarperCollins Christian Publishing, Inc.

Requests for information should be addressed to customer care@harpercollins.com.

Zondervan titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fundraising, or sales promotional use. For information, please email SpecialMarkets@Zondervan.com.

ISBN 978-0-310-17556-8 (audio)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hansen, Collin, 1981– editor | Flowers, Skyler R. editor | Mesa, Ivan editor

Title: The gospel after Christendom : an introduction to cultural apologetics / Collin Hansen, Skyler R. Flowers, and Ivan Mesa, editors.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Zondervan, [2025] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025011776 (print) | LCCN 2025011777 (ebook) | ISBN 9780310175476 hardcover | ISBN 9780310175483 ebook

Subjects: LCSH: Apologetics—United States | Christianity and culture—United States | Evangelical and Reformed Church—Missions

Classification: LCC BT1103 .G665 2025 (print) | LCC BT1103 (ebook) | DDC 239--dc23/eng/20250602

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025011776>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025011777>

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®). Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.Zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®

Any internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Without limiting the exclusive rights of any author, contributor or the publisher of this publication, any unauthorized use of this publication to train generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies is expressly prohibited. HarperCollins also exercise their rights under Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive 2019/790 and expressly reserve this publication from the text and data mining exception.

HarperCollins Publishers, Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper, Dublin 1, D01 C9W8, Ireland (<https://www.harpercollins.com>)

Cover design: Brian Bobel Design

Cover image: © Ultraforma / GettyImages

Interior design: Denise Froehlich

Printed in the United States of America

\$PrintCode

*For Timothy J. Keller (1950–2023),
cultural apologist par excellence
and mentor to us all*

Contents

Contributors xiii

Acknowledgments xix

Introduction: We Need Cultural Climatologists 1
COLLIN HANSEN

Part 1: What Is Cultural Apologetics?

1. A Tool for Evangelism 15
TREVIN WAX

2. A Biblical Vision 31
CHRISTOPHER WATKIN

3. A Framework for Retrieval 43
JOSHUA D. CHATRAW

Part 2: How Is Cultural Apologetics Done?

**4. The Posture: Neither Accommodating
nor Condemning** 61
ALAN NOBLE

**5. The Missiology: Subversively Fulfilling
the Social Imagination** 73
DANIEL STRANGE

6. The Goal: Healing Hard Hearts and Dark Minds 87
N. GRAY SUTANTO

7. The Approach: Exposing Unbelief as Unlivable 101
GAVIN ORTLUND

Part 3: What Questions Does Cultural Apologetics Answer?

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|------------|
| 8. Is Christianity Good? | 115 |
| REBECCA MCLAUGHLIN | |
| 9. Is Christianity Beautiful? | 127 |
| RACHEL GILSON | |
| 10. Is Christianity True? | 139 |
| DEREK RISHMAWY | |

Part 4: Where Does Cultural Apologetics Happen?

- | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| 11. The Church: A Witness to the World | 155 |
| BOB THUNE | |
| 12. Front Porches: Why We Still Need Them | 167 |
| JAMES P. EGLINTON | |
| 13. Everyday Life: The Cultural Texts We Live By | 179 |
| SAM CHAN | |
| Conclusion: The Narrow Road to Eternal Life | 191 |
| COLLIN HANSEN | |
| Scripture Index | 197 |
| Subject Index | 199 |

Contributors

Sam Chan (PhD, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is the head trainer and mentor at the EvQ school of evangelism, an initiative of the City Bible Forum. He speaks around the world on the practice of evangelism in a post-Christian culture. He shares the gospel with high schoolers, city workers, lawyers, doctors, and college students. Sam is the author of the award-winning book *Evangelism in a Skeptical World*. He blogs at EspressoTheology.com.

Joshua D. Chatraw is the Beeson Divinity School Billy Graham Chair for Evangelism and Cultural Engagement at Samford University. His recent books include *The Augustine Way*, *Surprised by Doubt*, and *Telling a Better Story*. He also serves as an inaugural fellow with the Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics and a fellow at the Center for Pastor Theologians.

James P. Eglinton (PhD, University of Edinburgh) is the Meldrum Senior Lecturer in Reformed Theology at the University of Edinburgh. He is the author of *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* and *Trinity and Organism*. He edited and translated *Herman Bavinck on Preaching and Preachers*, coedited and cotranslated *Christian Worldview*, and coedited *Neo-Calvinism and the French Revolution*. He has written for *Christianity Today*, *The Times*, *The Herald*, *The Scotsman*, *Nederlands Dagblad*, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Skyler R. Flowers is an associate pastor at Grace Bible Church in Oxford, Mississippi, and the associate program director at the Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics. He earned an MDiv from Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida, and he is currently a PhD student at the University of Aberdeen. Skyler and his wife, Brianna, have two children.

Rachel Gilson serves on the leadership team of theological development and culture with Cru. She is the author of *Born Again This Way: Coming Out, Coming to Faith, and What Comes Next* and *Parenting Without Panic in an LGBT-Affirming World: Discipling Our Kids with Jesus' Truth and Love*. Rachel holds an MDiv from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and is currently pursuing a PhD in public theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Collin Hansen serves as vice president for content and editor in chief of The Gospel Coalition, as well as executive director of the Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics. He hosts the *Gospelbound* podcast and has written and contributed to many books, including *Timothy Keller: His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation* and *Rediscover Church: Why the Body of Christ Is Essential*. He has published with *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and offered commentary for CNN, Fox News, NPR, BBC, ABC News, and *PBS NewsHour*. He is an adjunct professor at Beeson Divinity School, where he also cochairs the advisory board.

Rebecca McLaughlin holds a PhD in Renaissance literature from Cambridge University and a degree in theological and pastoral studies from Oak Hill Theological College in London. She is the author of *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion*—named Book of the Year 2020 by *Christianity Today*—as well as *10 Questions Every Teen Should Ask (and Answer) About Christianity*, *The Secular Creed: Engaging 5 Contemporary Claims*, and *Is*

Christmas Unbelievable? Four Questions Everyone Should Ask About the World's Most Famous Story.

Ivan Mesa (PhD, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) is editorial director of The Gospel Coalition. He's editor of *Before You Lose Your Faith* and coeditor of *Scrolling Ourselves to Death* and *Faithful Exiles*. He and his wife, Sarah, have four children, and they live in eastern Georgia.

Alan Noble (PhD, Baylor University) is associate professor of English at Oklahoma Baptist University. He has written for *The Atlantic*, Vox, BuzzFeed, The Gospel Coalition, *Christianity Today*, and *First Things*. He is also the author of *Disruptive Witness*, *You Are Not Your Own*, and *On Getting Out of Bed*.

Gavin Ortlund (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) serves as the president of Truth Unites, theologian-in-residence at Immanuel Nashville, and visiting professor of historical theology at Phoenix Seminary. He is the author of several books, including *Why God Makes Sense in a World That Doesn't* and *What It Means to Be Protestant*.

Derek Rishmawy (PhD, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is the Reformed University Fellowship (RUF) campus minister at University of California, Irvine.

Daniel Strange (PhD, University of Bristol) is director of Crosslands Forum, a center for cultural engagement, and he's in theological leadership at the London Project (City to City). He is a visiting professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and a fellow of the Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics. Daniel is the author of *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock: A Theology of Religions*, *Plugged In*, and *Making Faith Magnetic*. He is a contributing editor for *Themelios* and an elder of Hope Community Church, Gateshead, UK.

N. Gray Sutanto (PhD, University of Edinburgh) is associate professor of systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Washington, DC. He is the author of *God and Knowledge* and *God and Humanity*, coauthor of *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction*, cotranslator of Herman Bavinck's *Christian Worldview*, and coeditor of *Handbook to Neo-Calvinism*. Gray is married to Indita, and they have two daughters. He is an ordained minister in the International Presbyterian Church.

Bob Thune (MA, Reformed Theological Seminary) is the founding and lead pastor of Coram Deo Church in Omaha, Nebraska. He is the author of *Gospel Eldership* and *Gospel Training for Deacons*, coauthor of *The Gospel-Centered Life* and *The Gospel-Centered Community*, and creator of *The Daily Liturgy* podcast. In addition to his work as a pastor and writer, he helps to lead a classical Christian school, coaches and trains church leaders, and serves on the council of The Gospel Coalition.

Christopher Watkin is associate professor of French and Francophone studies at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. His books include *Difficult Atheism*, *French Philosophy Today*, and *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*. Many of his talks and interviews are available on thinkingthroughthebible.com, and you can find him on X (formerly Twitter) @DrChrisWatkin.

Trevin Wax is vice president of resources and marketing at the North American Mission Board and a visiting professor at Cedarville University. A former missionary to Romania, Trevin is a regular columnist at The Gospel Coalition and has contributed to *The Washington Post*, *World*, and *Christianity Today*. He has taught courses on mission and ministry at Wheaton College and has lectured on Christianity and culture at Oxford University. He is a founding editor of the

CONTRIBUTORS

Gospel Project, has served as publisher for the Christian Standard Bible, and is currently a fellow for the Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics. He is the author of multiple books, including *The Thrill of Orthodoxy*, *The Multi-Directional Leader*, *Rethink Your Self*, *This Is Our Time*, and *Gospel-Centered Teaching*. His podcast is *Reconstructing Faith*. Trevin and his wife, Corina, have three children.

Acknowledgments

The three of us editors have the joy of serving at The Gospel Coalition where we on a daily basis think through cultural apologetics—understanding the world we live in and strategizing ways to make the gospel of Jesus Christ clear and compelling in our secular age. Tim Keller’s influence on our work at TGC is deep and abiding, as he (along with D. A. Carson) cofounded our organization twenty years ago and served as one of our biggest cheerleaders and conversation partners. Over the years, several of us had the opportunity to dialogue with Tim about the topics of this book. So it was only natural that these efforts gradually blossomed into the Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics, with its inaugural group of fellows picking up the torch in fresh and faithful ways. Since launching in 2023, the Keller Center has increased the time and other resources we can devote to this leading edge of ministry as we pray that God would make us faithful in the task of evangelism and discipleship. In many ways, this book is the fruit of Tim’s passion and the areas that were top of mind and heart in the final years of his life. We dedicate this volume to him. May his tribe increase!

Introduction

We Need Cultural Climatologists

COLLIN HANSEN

Back in 2016, I asked the noted sociologist James Davison Hunter a few questions about that season's tumultuous political campaigns. Who better to answer than the scholar who popularized the phrase “culture war”?¹ His response startled me. He waved off my questions and said he doesn't forecast the weather.

He studies climatology.

The message stuck with me. We need more cultural climatologists today. We need people not just responding to the immediate events in our daily newsfeed (“the weather”) but also studying and assessing the deeper-rooted values, ideologies, narratives, and patterns at work in our culture (“the climate”).

At the Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics, we don't necessarily think cultural apologetics is the only—or even always the best—way to defend the Christian faith. But we do think the climate is ripe for cultural apologetics. This practice connects us to vital

1. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Control the Family, Art, Education, Law, and Politics in America* (New York: Basic, 1991).

sources of biblical, theological, and historical wisdom so we can share and apply the gospel in compelling ways for our secular age.

Indeed, we're living amid the largest religious transformation in American history. Some forty million Americans have left the church in the last twenty-five to thirty years.² Many other Western countries have already seen similar declines. But that's not the only challenge. Since the decline and fall of Christendom, as church attendance cratered across many Western nations in the twentieth century, believers in Western countries now face a strange mixture of apathy and antagonism toward the gospel. Many of our neighbors view Christianity as yesterday's news but also as the source of today's problems.

This is a new challenge. A big challenge. And many church leaders have no idea what to do. We hope this book will help.

It's All Cultural

For many, apologetics is associated with arguments over rational, philosophical proofs. It's a matter of the head instead of the heart, a debate over facts instead of feelings.

But no matter what kind of apologetics you practice, you're arguing according to a certain set of rules, in a particular language, attuned to what you expect to resonate in your time and place. In other words, it's always cultural, never purely timeless.³ And it's never purely rational.

We need to recover apologetics as a matter of the heart and hands as well as the head. We need to recover apologetics as a project for the whole church and not just for those who enjoy arguing. Cultural apologetics isn't a new academic discipline. It's a means to reconnect

2. Jim Davis and Michael Graham, with Ryan P. Burge, *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2023).

3. Mark Allen and Joshua D. Chatraw, *The Augustine Way: Retrieving a Vision for the Church's Apologetic Witness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023).

the church to the best biblical and historical resources for presenting and defending the faith “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

In the Gospels, we see Jesus commonly deploy illustrations from everyday life that connect with his neighbors in an agricultural society. In the book of Acts, Peter’s sermon at Pentecost and Paul’s sermon on Mars Hill convey the same gospel message but strike different notes based on their respective hearers: the Jewish diaspora and Greek philosophers (Acts 2:14–41; 17:16–34). Justin Martyr’s *First Apology* in the second century and Augustine’s *City of God* in the fifth century speak timeless truth in timely ways for dramatically different moments in the history of the Roman Empire.⁴

From these biblical and historical examples, you can see there’s nothing new about cultural apologetics. No matter your strategy, you can’t avoid culture, because culture itself is another way to describe what we mean by religion. Everybody worships—someone or something. Missiologist Lesslie Newbigin argued that culture is really just another way we describe religion, how we pursue meaning and understanding from life.⁵

Religion isn’t downstream from culture. Culture is downstream from religion, the inevitable human pursuit of meaning and eternity. And we see that pursuit everywhere we turn, from dense academic texts down to catchy television jingles. Everything from hip-hop music to arthouse films conveys our society’s deepest longings. Watch a sporting event, especially in person, and you’ll learn a culture’s hopes and fears.

In this book, we provide tools to develop your climatology skills. Rooted in the gospel, we want to help amateur and experienced apologists correct and connect to their cultures so they can better help non-Christians see their sin and seek the Savior.

4. Justin Martyr, *The First and Second Apologies*, trans. Leslie William Barnard (Mahwah, NJ: Newman, 1997); Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York City: Modern Library, 1994).

5. Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

Bridge of Hope

Apologetics can never be purely rational because the head never reasons alone. Culture shapes which desires we indulge and which we reject. In the Augustinian tradition, cultural apologists recognize desire as a key motivator for faith.

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has described the relationship between intuition and reason as an elephant and its rider. Reason may steer, but intuition will only move when motivated. What the heart wants, the head will rationalize. Our intuitions follow our aspirations: What kind of person do I want to be? Or, to ask the same question another way, who's my tribe? We might imagine ourselves as independent, rational actors who weigh arguments with careful consideration of objective truth. More often, we're activated by tribal instincts that filter which beliefs we're willing to entertain—let alone which beliefs we would allow to transform our lives. Until we want to change, until we can envision ourselves in a new community, we're not likely to lower our rational defenses.⁶

Cultural apologetics, then, helps non-Christians want the gospel to be true even before they may fully understand this good news. We offer the beauty of the lordship of Christ as opposed to the ugliness of the lordship of the principalities and powers (Eph. 6:12).

Against pervasive cultural nihilism across the West, we offer hope. In Christ, we find fulfillment to our desires for beauty, justice, peace, truth, and goodness.⁷ Most people will find that hope in the context of church community, where they see the effects of the gospel in changed lives.⁸ The church can provide an alternative climate, a life-giving atmosphere that challenges the dark clouds of the surrounding cultural weather system. Christians themselves are the

6. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage, 2012).

7. Ted Turnau, *Popologetics: Popular Culture in Christian Perspective* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012).

8. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016).

best bridge between hope and non-Christians. The world sees Jesus in how the body of Christ lives together with grace, in truth, for love. Thus, cultural apologetics seeks spiritual and moral renewal in the church as testimony to the gospel's transforming power.

Paul Gould defines cultural apologetics as the “work of establishing the Christian voice, conscience, and imagination within a culture so that Christianity is seen as true and satisfying.”⁹ In this noisy culture, with seemingly infinite voices competing for attention, the church captures the imagination of non-Christians when we love them and each other. This is what Jesus prayed in John 17:23—the world will know the Father sent him when we are one.

Of course, no one will conclude just from watching our life together that Jesus is the Son of God, that he died and rose for sinners, and that he's coming again soon to renew the heavens and the earth. We must tell them this good news, warn them to repent of their sin, and call them to believe. When they can see the gospel's effects in us, non-Christians can better recognize this news as good. Surely they will see us fall short; they will see us fail; they will see us sin. We don't offer them perfection. We point them to the same blood of Christ that washed away our sin. Those who know they have been forgiven are full of love for fellow sinners (Luke 7:47).

Compelling Community

Love, however, is not the most common perception of the church today by outsiders. Shortly before the 2016 presidential election, I met with a group of Christian students at Cornell University. They had invited me to Ithaca to speak on the history of the Religious Right—not exactly a powerful force on their Ivy League campus. Still, the topic was relevant because of how Christians in far-flung corners of the United States could affect their reputation and mission in upstate New York.

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

I asked these students what their classmates associate first with Christianity. I couldn't believe their answer. Since then I've repeated the question with audiences around the country. And every time I hear the same thing.

Westboro Baptist Church.

So, I said with some bemusement, let me get this straight: When students at one of the nation's most prestigious universities consider the world's largest religion, they think about an overgrown family cult in Topeka, Kansas. How can this be?

No matter how persuasive our cultural apologetics may be, we shouldn't always expect a positive response. Indeed, Jesus promised us tribulation (John 16:33). Peter warned us that honorable conduct wouldn't guarantee favor from non-Christians (1 Pet. 2:12). At the same time, Paul emphasized that negative perceptions of the church can stem from immoral behavior in the church (1 Cor. 5:1; Rom. 2:1). Sometimes we get what we deserve.

I attribute some of the church's perception problems to a superficial understanding of culture—too much weather, not enough climate. Weather often gravitates toward focusing on what's wrong with others. Climate focuses on the conditions that affect everyone, inside and outside the church. Maybe we don't see more evangelistic fruit because the church doesn't look much different from the world. What is compelling about our community?¹⁰ Instead of living for Christ, we're often conforming to the world. Even in many evangelical churches, the gospel has become an accessory to middle-class mores. We might vote a certain way to "save the culture," meaning, to oppose the evil of our political opponents. But what about our own cultural captivity to consumerism or convenience or comfort? How does the church stand out by offering fear and loathing in a world already full of it?

Consider the difference with a community that shows love

10. Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop, *The Compelling Community: Where God's Power Makes a Church Attractive* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

even to outsiders, even to enemies (Matt. 5:44). Consider a community that counts others more important than themselves (Phil. 2:3). Consider a community that realizes we only find life when we lose it (Matt. 10:38–39). The culture of that community commands attention even from a skeptical world. That community will help non-Christians see the transforming power and hope of the gospel. That community will shock the world by admitting its own flaws and mistakes instead of covering them up.

One Storm to Another

It's easy to forecast the weather as cloudy with a 100 percent chance of culture war. But climatology tells us we're in the eye of the civilizational hurricane. We've passed through one destructive storm. Now, we enter another. For hundreds of years, Christian values supplied the beloved and fiercely defended foundation of Western civilization—tolerance, minority rights, equal justice, and much more. But Christianity has been forgotten (at best) or blamed (at worst) in what philosopher Charles Taylor describes as the “subtraction story” of secularism—we could have everything we want if we just subtracted Christianity.¹¹

Secularism, however, hasn't delivered a stable new foundation for the West. The so-called Enlightenment, too, has fallen despite attempts to ground universal values without help from religion.¹² Cultural apologetics helps us observe how secularism remains a spiritual project searching for a common good. Sociologist Christian Smith writes,

To make everything new, to leave behind the past, to be unbound by any tradition, to enjoy maximum choice, to be free from any

11. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2007).

12. Jonathan Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2021).

constraint, to be able to buy whatever one can afford, to live however one desires—that is the guiding vision of modernity’s spiritual project. It is spiritual (not merely ideological or cultural) because it names what is sacrosanct, an ultimate concern, a vision for what is most worthy in a sense that transcends any individual life. It is spiritual because it speaks to people’s deepest personal subjectivities, their most transcendent vision of goodness, their definition of ultimate fulfillment. It is spiritual because as a deep cultural structure it occupies a position in the modern West homologous with salvation in God that was prized in the premodern Christendom that modernity broke apart. And it is spiritual because, by being sacred, it is worth protecting, defending, policing, fighting for, perhaps dying for, even killing for.¹³

In every way, our secular age remains very religious (Acts 17:22). No less than the chair of the department of human evolutionary biology at Harvard University argues that Christianity has shaped our very psychology in the West. Joseph Henrich says Christian values, applied over centuries, made us WEIRD: Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic.¹⁴ But we can’t see this Christian influence on our culture because secularism tried to recast these religious values as universal truths. So explains the award-winning historian and podcast host Tom Holland. He told me, “The genius of the modern West in recent centuries has been that it has been able to export its profoundly Christian values, concepts like human rights, the notion of consent—all these things are deeply rooted in the seed-bed of Christian history and Christian theology.”¹⁵ A key example is

13. Christian Smith, *To Flourish or Destruct: A Personalist Account of Human Goods, Motivations, Failure, and Evil* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 269–70.

14. Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

15. Tom Holland, interview with Collin Hansen, *Gospelbound*, podcast audio, March 10, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/gospelbound/the-revolution-the-west-wishes-it-could-forget/>.

the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which owes much to Christian assumptions but doesn't mention God.

Indeed, Christianity is a revolution that remade the world. Holland asks, "How was it that a cult inspired by the execution of an obscure criminal in a long-vanished empire came to exercise such a transformative and enduring influence on the world?"¹⁶ In Holland's narrative, the church has become a victim of its own success. Christianity is so pervasive that Western culture doesn't even know it's there. When Christians in Hong Kong protest for democracy, or when Christians in India fight caste-based racism, they're seen as acting for universal progress and not merely a Christian worldview. "If they cast them as Christian values," Holland told me, "then they'd come to seem more culturally contingent to people in India or wherever. If you say, well no, they're universal, then you can export them."¹⁷

We need cultural apologetics, then, to show that what we cherish about our culture depends on Christianity. As we're learning today, when you lose Christianity, you also lose Enlightenment. Dark is the second wall of the hurricane we're entering. We need apologists fired with the love of Christ who will light the lamps that have gone out across the West. We need in our day what Augustine did with *City of God* as the Eternal City and its empire crumbled in the fifth century.

At the Keller Center, and in this book, we seek to support such efforts. Even now you can see flickers of hope, such as Christopher Watkin's *Biblical Critical Theory*,¹⁸ Rebecca McLaughlin's *The Secular Creed*,¹⁹ and Andrew Wilson's *Remaking the World*.²⁰ Much more work remains to be done, as you'll see in the ensuing chapters.

16. Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic, 2019), 12.

17. Tom Holland, interview with Collin Hansen, *Gospelbound*.

18. Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022).

19. Rebecca McLaughlin, *The Secular Creed: Engaging Five Contemporary Claims* (Austin: The Gospel Coalition, 2021).

20. Andrew Wilson, *Remaking the World: How 1776 Created the Post-Christian West* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023).

We hope this book will inspire cultural apologists in local churches, in their neighborhoods, in their classrooms, and in their workplaces. The best cultural apologists know the names of their neighbors. Those neighbors, living quietly amid anxieties they cannot name, need to know the thundering darkness of our current weather doesn't have the last word. Dawn will break; God's kingdom is just over the horizon. They need to know a happy ending is coming—when they turn from sin and trust in Christ.

From Thick to Thin

This book aims to help you discover theological, pastoral, and practical resources that define and shape cultural apologetics. Along with editors Skyler Flowers and Ivan Mesa, I have convened leading scholars and practitioners who serve as fellows at the Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics. We will seek to define cultural apologetics, explain its biblical and historical grounding, and demonstrate how it is important for the church today.

Our fellows don't agree on everything you will read in this volume. They emphasize complementary aspects of cultural apologetics and sometimes differ in the details of a formal definition for this discipline. Such disagreement makes for lively annual retreats in New York! But this diversity of viewpoints, still united in the gospel, has enriched our gathering. In their differences, with complementary gifts and vocations, our fellows push, stretch, and reinforce one another spiritually and intellectually. Such was Tim Keller's vision for the center from its beginning, shortly before his death in 2023. "I'm so grateful for the ministry of the Keller Center," he wrote us. "A major part of what I've tried to accomplish in recent years is to encourage younger writers, scholars, and ministers who are doing exactly what the church in the United States needs to do in order to reach people for Christ. There are many such men and women out there, and they need lots of support. I'm delighted that the Keller

Center will carry this work on for me.” This center, and its fellows, share Keller’s desire above all else that many would come to know Jesus Christ as he is revealed and offered in the gospel.

Part 1 lays the conceptual foundation of our approach to cultural apologetics. Trevin Wax begins by considering the twenty-first-century Western cultural context and offers cultural apologetics as a way that the church might reach the West again (chapter 1). Christopher Watkin follows by demonstrating that cultural apologetics isn’t a modern invention but a methodology displayed in the pages of Scripture itself (chapter 2). Joshua D. Chatraw continues this line of thinking through church history, offering numerous historical examples—notably Augustine—who have shaped Christianity’s cultural apologetic (chapter 3).

Part 2 turns to the task of cultural apologetics. Alan Noble opens with our posture, which is neither accommodation nor aggression (chapter 4). Daniel Strange helps us enter the narratives of a culture, discover their idolatrous co-opting of the Christian story, and demonstrate how the Christian story offers a glorious fulfillment of these hopes and desires (chapter 5). Gray Sutanto builds a holistic theological anthropology that attends to how humans know God and suppress that knowledge in sin (chapter 6). Gavin Ortlund concludes the section by showing how to expose unbelief as not merely untrue but also unlivable and how the gospel answers this despair (chapter 7).

Part 3 drills down into various topics cultural apologists will encounter, namely, the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty. Against many skeptics and detractors, Christianity offers moral goodness in a vision for flourishing, according to Rebecca McLaughlin (chapter 8). Rachel Gilson presents a picture of Christianity’s inherent beauty—compelling just as it is comprehensible and commendable (chapter 9). Derek Rishmawy concludes with a reminder that the Christian story is the grounding reality for all of life (chapter 10).

Finally, part 4 visits the places where cultural apologetics can be deployed. Beginning with its proper home, Bob Thune turns

our attention to the church, institutionally and organically, as it proclaims and embodies the gospel (chapter 11). James Eglinton advances the church's work by considering how Christians might create spaces for engaging non-Christians to safely learn and explore Jesus's claims (chapter 12). To conclude our volume, Sam Chan draws on the resources of preceding chapters to demonstrate for Christians how cultural apologetics can enrich their everyday conversations over cultural texts (chapter 13).

In this book you'll see that cultural apologetics ranges between academic discourse and everyday experiences. From thick books to thin veneers of social graces, cultural apologetics helps Christians live what they believe and proclaim: the gospel that is true for all and good for individuals in unique ways.

Look past the ten-day forecast. Study the climate. Through every weather pattern, the Word of the Lord stands forever (Isa. 40:8). On the other side of this cultural hurricane, you'll find the peace and calm of a kingdom that will never end.

PART

1

What Is Cultural Apologetics?

1

A Tool for Evangelism

TREVIN WAX

In his 1896 lecture “The Will to Believe,” American philosopher William James (1842–1910) described religious beliefs as either “live” or “dead” wires. A live hypothesis is a real possibility for someone. For example, James said, if he were to ask you to believe in the Mahdi (someone claiming to be the messianic figure in Islam who is to appear at the End Times to rid the world of evil and injustice), you’d probably not even know what was being asked. There’s no “electric connection with your nature.” No spark of credibility at all. It’s a *dead wire* for you. But if he were to ask an Arab (even if not one of the Mahdi’s followers), the possibility would be live. “Deadness and liveness in a hypothesis are not intrinsic properties,” James said, “but relations to the individual thinker.”¹

The possibility of a religious belief is either a live or dead wire.

1. William James, *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Auckland, New Zealand: Floating, 2010), 14–15.

“A living option is one in which both hypotheses are live ones.” For many in James’s time, the choice between being a Muslim or a theosophist was basically a “dead option,” but the choice between being “an agnostic or a Christian” was alive. (And many of his contemporaries opted for agnosticism over traditional Christianity.)

Today we’re witnessing both a rise in secularism and a corresponding decline in the percentage of people who belong to religious organizations or claim religious faith. Around forty million Americans have left the church in the last twenty-five years.² Other countries have seen similar declines. Such a massive shift in religious demographics cannot help but alter a society’s underlying beliefs, desires, and hopes. There was a time when the decision *not* to adhere to a religious tradition was rare and atheism implausible. Today, the plausibility structures have shifted to the point where it’s more unusual in some places to believe in God or to attend church than to not.

For centuries in the West, much of human life was understood within the conceptual framework of a society influenced by Christianity. Belief in an unseen realm, or the assumption of heaven or hell after death, or the reality of human sin and the need for divine salvation—these were so widespread as marks of “common-sense thinking” that the evangelistic task was relatively straightforward: *Show that Jesus is the One who overcomes the powers of evil and brings deliverance from sin. Show that Jesus is the only Way to eternal life because he took on himself the punishment for our sin. Show that we’re sinners in need of a Savior, and Jesus is the Son of God who meets us in our need and accomplishes our redemption.* With the fading of a Christian framework in society, these cultural touchpoints can no longer be assumed. An evangelist’s work becomes more complex. We often have to start further back—whether we’re talking about God’s existence, distinguishing between cultural conceptions of sin and what the Bible says about human depravity, or making a case for the goodness and beauty of the church.

2. Davis and Graham, with Burge, *The Great Dechurching*.

In a world where shared cultural assumptions have been lost, what does it mean to call someone to follow Jesus? In a world where religion is personalized and privatized, often relegated to the realm of chosen values and not public truth, many people will assume when we share the gospel that we're merely recommending a new type of religious experience, something to help achieve inner peace or cope with the vicissitudes of our modern world. And if Christianity continues to decline, it's possible at some point that calling someone to follow Jesus will make about as much sense as asking the average American in 1896 if they'll follow the Mahdi. If secularism slowly remakes Christianity into a less plausible option, a "dead wire" for most people, how should we respond?

Cultural apologetics is one way of addressing these concerns, a way both new and old of preparing the soil for the gospel seed. It's old because the approach has an ancient pedigree, something we can trace back through the centuries of church history. It's new because we've often overlooked this tool in recent decades, as we've been slow to realize many of the cultural touchpoints we once assumed no longer exist, and we've sometimes opted for a one-size-fits-all approach to making a case for the gospel. It's an old tool in the toolkit, but it needs to be dusted off and repurposed for today's world.

Cultural Apologetics as a Tool

This approach begins with a particular posture toward the culture. The missionary theologian Lesslie Newbigin (1909–98) urged Christians toward a missionary encounter between the gospel and whatever culture we are trying to reach.³ We want to present Christianity in a way that is comprehensible, commendable, and

3. See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); Michael W. Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

compelling in our context. Likewise, we don't want to appeal only to the mind but also to the heart and to the imagination as we cultivate the soil and pray for its receptivity to the seed.

In this light, cultural apologetics is a form of preevangelism. It requires us to listen carefully and then enter the story of a culture so we can “renarrate” someone’s outlook on the world. We shine the light of the gospel in a way that affirms their God-given deepest longings and aspirations while exposing the misdirection that leads to lies, half-truths, and unhappiness. Cultural apologetics does this twofold work: showing how the gospel fulfills the deepest longings of the people in a society *and* exposing the lies people in that society believe. Often the longings and lies are connected. It’s the longing for transcendence, for a relationship with God, when misdirected, that leads us to believe lies and to fall for falsehoods.⁴

Cultural apologetics is about discovering what makes people in a culture “tick.” *Why do they believe what they believe? What is plausible in this society? What is their view of the good life?* We can discern these sensibilities in films; in television series; in books, songs, musicals, and even YouTube tutorials; and especially in one-on-one conversations. This manner of apologetics examines the culture and then looks for ways to bring the truth of the gospel to bear into a missionary encounter with that culture.

If traditional apologetics is about making arguments to defend Christian truth, *cultural* apologetics is about making arguments that showcase Christianity’s beauty and goodness, using cultural touchpoints as an opportunity for gospel witness. It’s a precursor to evangelism. It sets the stage so the gospel’s beauty can be accentuated.

In what follows, I offer four reasons why cultural apologetics should no longer be a neglected tool but a necessary way of engaging people in a secularizing world.

4. This is the construct of my book *This Is Our Time: Everyday Myths in Light of the Gospel* (Nashville: B&H, 2017).

1. Because We Want to Respond Wisely to New Social and Cultural Narratives

Returning to William James's analogy of dead and live wires, we may wonder, *Is Christianity—traditional Christianity and its creeds and confessions and congregations and cathedrals—a plausible option for radically secular, never-churched people? Is it a live wire, a possibility for most people? Or is it increasingly a dead wire?*

Asking this question gets to the root of anxiety among Christians today. The reason many Christians worry about Christendom's decline and the loss of traditional moral values is that it seems to make evangelism and discipleship more challenging. Likewise, the loss of cultural Christianity is met by the rise of new social and cultural narratives—different visions of the good life and how we find fulfillment.

Expressive Individualism

One of the dominant visions of life today can be summed up by the term *expressive individualism*, an outlook described in *Habits of the Heart* by Robert Bellah and several other American sociologists. Bellah defines it this way: "Expressive individualism holds that each person has a unique core and feeling of intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality is to be realized."⁵ In other words, every person is unique, and the way we come into our own as human beings, the way we fully realize our humanity, is when that feeling of what we are inside, that spark of uniqueness, can unfold publicly.

There's another way of describing expressive individualism, which comes from the philosopher Charles Taylor's work in *The Malaise of Modernity* and *A Secular Age*.⁶ He says we live in the "age

5. Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, new ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 334.

6. Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1991); later published as *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007).

of authenticity.” Many of us Christians react positively to the word *authenticity* because we tend to pit it against *hypocrisy* (and Jesus was right to chastise hypocrites!), but this isn’t the way Taylor uses the word. The opposite of *authenticity* in Taylor’s telling isn’t *hypocrisy* but *conformity*. To be authentic means you refuse to *conform* your life to any vision that comes from outside yourself. Here’s Taylor’s definition:

The understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.⁷

In other words, in the age of authenticity, the dominant questions are these: *How can I find my true self and express my inner essence to the world? How can I make sure the presumptions of my family, my society, my religion—all these cultural expressions—don’t get in the way of me being me?*

These definitions help us understand what is meant by expressive individualism, but most of the people we talk to every day have never heard these academic terms. They’re more likely to capture the ethos in slogans like “You be you,” “Be true to yourself,” “Follow your heart,” or “Be yourself.” These sayings, in one way or another, capture the essence of expressive individualism.⁸ Countless self-help books reinforce this idea.

7. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 475.

8. Several recent books trace the development and influence of expressive individualism. See Trevin Wax, *Rethink Your Self: The Power of Looking Up Before Looking In* (Nashville: B&H, 2020); Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020); Graham Tomlin, *Why Being Yourself Is a Bad Idea: And Other Countercultural Notions* (London: SPCK, 2020).

Other Cultural Narratives

Expressive individualism is just one example of a cultural narrative that has risen in recent decades. We could point to various other outlooks on life.

Naturalism. Some see the world in purely naturalistic terms, adopting either a perspective that is atheistic and possibly hostile to religious faith or a secular mindset that, while open to some type of religious experience, interprets everything within an immanent frame, ruling out the truly transcendent.⁹

Freedom. In the United States, the value we place on freedom and the right to pursue happiness has shifted from a holistic, positive sense of becoming free *for* something (free to achieve a particular hard-won vision for success in life) to a negative sense of primarily breaking free *from* something (usually, the constraints imposed on us from close relationships, religious groups, family expectations, and so on).¹⁰

Identity Politics. Another social narrative that gives meaning to people in society today is seen by the upsurge in identity politics. Within an immanent frame of reference, there is no transcendent community or transcendent meaning. Thus, when someone identifies with a “tribe” and engages in identity politics, they seek to become part of a “chosen people” who are on a mission bigger than themselves, a cause that endows meaning and significance to their life. Anyone, any tribe, who opposes their mission, is opposing them personally and obstructing their pathway to finding (or making) meaning and significance.¹¹

Intuitionist Religions. The agnostic-versus-Christian hypothesis that William James saw as a live wire for educated people in 1896

9. Phil Zuckerman, *Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions* (New York: Penguin, 2014).

10. See Timothy Keller, *How to Reach the West Again: Six Essential Elements of a Missionary Encounter* (New York: Redeemer City to City, 2020), 39.

11. See Mary Eberstadt, *Primal Screams: How the Sexual Revolution Created Identity Politics* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton, 2021).

has been replaced by what Charles Taylor describes as the “nova effect”—an explosion of different options for belief and meaning in a secular age. It’s not just *this* position or *that*; it’s *this* choice among *that*, and *that*, and *that*, and *that*—myriad beliefs and practices, many “remixed” in some way, as pointed out by Tara Isabella Burton, who has also chronicled the shift from “institutional” religion to “intuitive” faiths.¹² It’s no surprise, then, that pastors and church leaders today feel as if they must answer not only the question of “Why Christianity?” but also of “Why not whatever?”

Jesus Is Better

If we’re to be good missionaries, we cannot ignore a changing cultural context. Perhaps we’ve gotten accustomed to relying on aspects of cultural Christianity or Christendom in the past to smooth the way for gospel presentation. We can no longer do so. In our world today, we shouldn’t assume biblical literacy. We shouldn’t assume a favorable atmosphere for the gospel. We shouldn’t assume the plausibility of Christianity’s moral vision. We shouldn’t assume that the methods we’ve used in the past will continue to bear fruit the same way in the future. Missionaries must adapt to conditions on the ground, and so should we.

Cultural apologetics is one way of adapting our mentality and our methods to these new conditions, helping us make a holistic case for Christianity. Our response to these cultural narratives will not be to merely point out the flaws and failures in what our neighbors believe but also to show them why these outlooks on life are ultimately unsatisfying and why only Jesus brings salvation, both for this life and the next.

12. Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020).

2. Because Caring for Your Neighbor Implies Curiosity About the Neighborhood

Another reason why the discipline of cultural apologetics matters today? Because culture matters. There is no such thing as a non-contextualized gospel presentation. When we proclaim the gospel, we are always presenting a divine and powerful message in cultural terms. As we see in 1 Corinthians 1, the message will be a stumbling block to some (Paul preaching the message to Jews) and will sound like foolishness to others (Paul preaching the message to Greeks).

Depending on the cultural context, some aspects of Christian teaching resonate with people and others sound foolish. Not long ago, I had a conversation with a church planter in Germany whose ministry is directed to both highly secular people and immigrants from the Middle East. Sometimes, during just one day of conversations, he'll witness the same aspect of Christianity acting as a stumbling block for different reasons. The Christian view that any sex outside of marriage is sin is an obstacle for a secular German, yet for the immigrant Muslim, Christian compassion for all kinds of sexual sinners is the obstacle. In the first conversation, the pastor must explain why Christian teaching on sexuality is good and not hateful toward those who identify as LGBT. In the second conversation, the pastor must turn around and explain why Christian teaching on human sin and God's love is good and why God's mercy toward us rules out any sense of superiority or hatred toward other sexual sinners.

As more and more cultures collide in the West, we will not be able to fall back on the same apologetic method for Christianity as if all or most people are the same. One way we learn to love our neighbors effectively is to seek to understand them—what they hope for themselves and loved ones, what they think about the world, and what they want the world to be. To care about your neighbor means you'll give some attention to the neighborhood—the norms, the values, the presuppositions, the culture of the world we live in.

Cultural apologetics means we give attention to the culture not because we want to be “cool” or “relevant” or make the gospel palatable to every society. We care about culture because culture is part of human life. We can’t really love our neighbors (real people in real places) if we don’t care about the cultural influences and artifacts that affect “real people” or distinguish one “real place” from another. We can’t love our neighbor without having some idea of our neighborhood. And cultural apologetics helps us understand the world around us so we can share the gospel in comprehensive and compelling ways.

3. Because We Address the Whole Person— the Imagination Alongside the Intellect

Jesus is the only way to God, but there are many ways to Jesus. As we call people to faith in Christ, we must be attentive to multiple realities and ways of engaging the heart. C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) was one of the last century’s foremost Christian apologists, and he relied on more than one tool in the toolkit when making a case for Christianity. We encounter not only his reasoned and rational defenses for Christian truth claims but also his imaginative retellings of Christianity’s story. Lewis referred to “stealing past watchful dragons” to describe how stories, particularly fantasy, can bypass the defenses of our intellect and skepticism.¹³ By engaging readers’ imaginations, these stories convey deeper truths and moral lessons without triggering the resistance that might arise if presented more directly.

Ken Myers, longtime host of the acclaimed *Mars Hill Audio Journal*, distinguishes traditional from cultural apologetics. “Traditional apologetics is concerned with making arguments to

13. C. S. Lewis, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said,” *New York Times Book Review*, November 18, 1956, 3, <https://www.nytimes.com/1956/11/18/archives/sometimes-fairy-stories-may-say-best-whats-to-be-said.html>.

defend Christian truth claims,” he says, “and has often addressed challenges to Christian belief coming from philosophical and other more intellectual sources.”¹⁴ In contrast, cultural apologetics refers to “systematic efforts to advance the plausibility of Christian claims in light of the messages communicated through dominant cultural institutions, including films, popular music, literature, art, and the mass media.” By defining cultural apologetics in this way, Myers emphasizes the role of imagination and the need for deeper understanding of influential cultural artifacts. He goes on: “So while traditional apologists would critique the challenges to the Christian faith advanced in the writings of certain philosophers, cultural apologists might look instead at the sound bite philosophies embedded in the lyrics of popular songs, the plots of popular movies, or even the slogans in advertising.”

There are many roads to Jesus. For some, the journey will begin with an exploration of Christianity’s truth claims. For others, it will begin with a sense of dissatisfaction and curiosity, as someone is drawn to the beauty of Christianity in the world. Some might find the church’s communal life warm and inviting, what Lesslie Newbigin called the “hermeneutic of the gospel,” where the gospel is put on display. More than a few will look to Jesus when life goes crazy in periods of sorrow and suffering. Still others may find their imaginations ignited by the epic stories in our world that showcase the beauty of the story of redemption, all the echoes that find their resonance in the gospel’s symphony. Cultural apologetics is one way of recognizing that we bring the whole gospel to the whole human person. We cannot argue someone into the faith, as if conversion were merely the rational winning of a debate. We woo people into the faith, as we rely on the Spirit to showcase Jesus’s beauty in ways that appeal to all aspects of our being.

14. Ken Myers, as quoted in Paul M. Gould, *Cultural Apologetics: Renewing the Christian Voice, Conscience, and Imagination in a Disenchanted World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 20. The quotes in this paragraph are taken from the same source.

4. Because the Goodness and Beauty of Jesus Are Worthy of Display

Make no mistake, the gospel is good, and Jesus is beautiful. Cultural apologists want to do justice to that beauty, to answer the question of not only why Christianity is true but why it is *good*. The French philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–62) laid out a path for cultural apologetics several centuries ago: “Men despise religion, they hate it and are afraid it might be true. To cure that we have to begin by showing that religion is not contrary to reason. That it is worthy of veneration and should be given respect. Next it should be made lovable, should make the good wish it were true. Then show that it is indeed true.”¹⁵

What we see here is a beautiful intersection of truth, goodness, and beauty (more on this in later chapters). Traditional apologetics helps to clear away the obstacles, to show that Christianity isn’t contrary to reason but is worthy of respect. Cultural apologetics goes a step further, demonstrating the beauty of the gospel, presenting it in such a way that the person with a heart stirred by the Spirit will wish it were true. “Show it to be lovable,” Pascal says. Don’t just present proofs and rational arguments, important as they may be. Highlight the beauty.

One way we highlight the beauty is by remembering the church’s centrality. Don’t underestimate the power of relationships. The church is where Easter comes alive. A renewed fellowship of people who follow Jesus together is indispensable in the conversation about Christianity’s plausibility. Charles Taylor points out the power of relationships in a world with so many religious options:

This kind of multiplicity of faiths has little effect as long as it is neutralized by the sense that being like them is not really an option for me. As long as the alternative is strange and other,

15. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings: A New Translation*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 12.

perhaps despised, but perhaps just too different, too weird, too incomprehensible, so that becoming that isn't really conceivable for me, so long will their differences not undermine my embedding in my own faith.

Unless something happens that suddenly makes another person's faith option seem viable. And that happens usually through relationship. He goes on:

This changes when through increased contact, interchange, even perhaps inter-marriage, the other becomes more and more like me, in everything else but faith. . . . Then the issue posed by the difference becomes more insistent: why my way, and not hers? There is no other difference left to make the shift preposterous or unimaginable.¹⁶

Rodney Stark made a similar point about early Christianity. Conversion is more likely when "people have or develop stronger attachments to members of the group than they have to nonmembers."¹⁷ This is still true. Both personal evangelism and corporate fellowship are vital if we're to *show* the world that following Christ is a real and viable option in a radically secular world.

A Few Caveats

Why care about cultural apologetics? Because we love Jesus and our neighbors. This tool deserves to be pulled from the toolkit and used. Of course, as we engage in this method, we should mention a few caveats, since every tool has its positive and negative sides.

16. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 304.

17. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (1996; repr., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 18.

One caution in prioritizing cultural apologetics is that the *culture* part can dwarf the *apologetic* part. By so emphasizing study of the culture or the society you're called to reach, you may become underdeveloped in studying the Scriptures. You can lose sight of the reason you're engaging in the task in the first place: to foster a missionary encounter with others. And not just an encounter or dialogue but a gospel-shaped missionary moment where, yes, you find areas of common ground on which to build, but then you tackle the areas of conflict, where the gospel's offense must remain.

Another risk in prioritizing cultural apologetics is that you so focus on understanding the people you're trying to reach that you tailor the presentation of Christianity *only* to the needs and questions they already have. You try to fit Christianity into another framework of thought, showing how it answers and fulfills people's longings. As a starting point, this is fine. I've heard it said we're to listen carefully for the questions being asked in each generation and then show how the gospel answers those questions. That's good, but it doesn't go far enough. Faithfulness to the gospel means we don't merely answer the questions people in society are asking—we also raise questions people should be asking but aren't. The gospel upends all earthly and cultural scripts and frameworks, at least at some level. The gospel presses different questions. The risk with cultural apologetics could be that the cultural trends and questions drive everything and the challenge that Christianity poses to the world gets muted.

One last caveat, perhaps the most important: We mustn't be so faithless as to think the gospel needs cultural Christianity or cultural apologetics to remain the power of God unto salvation. The church before Christendom wasn't propped up by cultural Christianity, and Christians in many parts of the world today walk with God just fine with no need for cultural crutches. Yes, Christendom may be an asset to Christianity in terms of plausibility structures, making it a live wire in a sociological sense. But theologically, we must never assume cultural Christianity supplies the electricity. It's the Spirit

who makes the gospel spread like wildfire, blowing when and where he pleases.

Conversion is always impossible without supernatural intervention. Cultural Christianity may be one of the tools God uses to smooth the path so some will understand the basics of biblical truth before being confronted with Christ's specific claims. But God doesn't depend on Christendom, and we shouldn't either. Whether we labor in fields where Christianity seems as far-fetched a possibility as becoming Zoroastrian, or whether we labor in areas that still bear the fragrance of commonly held Christian values, our call to evangelism and missions remains the same—even if certain methods must change based on cultural context.

No matter what approaches we suggest or methods we use, we mustn't forget that in the end, the primary reason anyone believes the implausible testimony that Jesus of Nazareth walked out of his grave isn't because of live or dead wires, traditional or cultural apologetics, or our expertise in sharing the gospel. The reason is the Spirit's awakening.