

WE NEED CULTURAL APOLOGETICS

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We can think of apologetics in the Bible in two dimensions, defensive and offensive. Defensively speaking, the term *apologia* (apologetics) appears nineteen times in the New Testament. It means literally "to talk oneself off a charge" or "to defend oneself." In most instances *apologia* refers to a Christian's response to legal prosecution, religious persecution, accusation or inquiry in the narrow, defensive sense of the term. For this reason the word is rendered in the English Standard Version as defense, make a defense, argue in defense, how to answer, and clear yourself (other versions: answer, excuse, or explanation).

Speaking more broadly and offensively, apologetics also refers to cultural critique, polemical theology, elenctics, or even iconoclasm. I believe, in fact, that the biblical worldview (as indeed all worldviews) are iconoclastic in nature. The Bible teaches that all of life is apologetic. Romans 1:21 declares that every human finds themselves in God's courtroom to offer an apologetic (defense) for their idolatry and wickedness. (Mankind is *anapologetos*, "without a defense," Rom 1:20) John 16:8 declares that the Holy Spirit "will convict (*elengchōs*, elenctic) the world concerning sin." Thus, even though the term, apologetic, does not appear often, conceptually every page of the Bible is polemically engaged with its social-religious-intellectual context.

In the Old Testament we read about God's encounter with the god, Dagon (1Sam 5:1-12). The Philistines' worldview was polytheistic. They had captured the Hebrew's Ark of the Covenant and placed it in their temple to demonstrate their victory over Israel and its God. But, the next morning the statue of Dagon was found lying on its face. The clear cultural-religious message was that Dagon had assumed the position of a slave before his master or a vassal before his king or a worshiper before his God -- Yahweh. The Philistine priests re-set Dagon upon his platform, but the following day his hands and head were broken off. In this case Yahweh graphically demonstrated that Dagon was completely powerless, since it was customary to remove the heads and hands of defeated soldiers for the same reason.

In the New Testament long before Paul traveled to the cities of Asia Minor, Greece, or Italy an antithetical worldview and alternative gospel was firmly entrenched in the mindset and structure of pagan society. The Roman imperial ideology and *Pax Romana* insisted that Jupiter and the gods had handed power over to Caesar Augustus (BC 30-AD 14). After 100 years of bloodshed and chaos, peace and security was achieved in victory in the Battle of Actium (BC 31). As a result, Augustus was called: "son of god," "god from god," "savior and benefactor," "god and lord," "hereditary god and savior of the common race of humanity," and "most divine Caesar." According to their ideology, salvation had come to earth through the Roman Empire and justice would flow throughout the earth from the bosom of Rome. In fact, Augustus was considered a representative of a new kind of human being and he ushered in a new age. However, when Paul declared about Jesus, God's Son, "who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 1:3-4), he threw down the gauntlet apologetically. Paul even used common Roman propaganda terms to challenge the prevailing pagan worldview, for example: salvation (*soteria*), good news (*euggelion*), the Lord's coming (*parousia*), Lord (*kyrios*), and righteousness (*dikaiosisune*).

Even today, the Bible *demand*s an iconoclastic response to the false gods and destructive worldviews of our day. We should sense the same provocation of spirit as Paul when he observed the idolatry and alternative gospels in ancient Athens (Acts 17:16). Jacques Ellul expressed this notion forcefully:

It means standing up to them while taking them for prince charmings -- gods of the stadium, of speed, of consumer goods, of utility, of money, of efficiency, of knowledge, of delirium, of sex, of folly, of revolution, of agnostic learning, of politics, of ideologies, of psychoanalysis, of class, of race, gods of the world calling for unheard of holocausts... the veiled, hidden, and secret gods, who besiege and seduce all the more effectively because they do not openly declare themselves as gods.

So, in terms of cultural apologetic, whenever we hear a neo-Babelite battle cry from an individual or group, "Let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves" (Gen 11:4); whenever would-be Pharaohs exclaim, "Who is the Lord?" (or "Who is the true God and the real people of God?", Exod 5:2); or whenever an ideology proposes to "put an end to war and set all things in order" (*Pax Romana*), Christians should take heed. Their motive may be religious or philosophical, but the manifestations are usually totalitarian and theocratic. The forms can be explicitly religious (Islam or medieval Catholicism), ideologically secular (communism, National Socialism, Imperial Japan, North Korean Juche), or implicitly religious (consumerism). But, they are all idolatrous at the root.