

in terms of why we suffer and how we suffer. Apologetics is our answer to those at whose hands we suffer as well as those who witness our suffering. Apologetics says to a watching world, "We have been captured by something so profound that we are willing not only to be considered fools, but to suffer as such."

"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit" (1 Pet. 3:18).

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have examined the identity, attitude, speech, and character of the apologist. We have also seen that our apologetic is rooted in a righteousness that is ours in Christ. We will see in the next chapter that the absence of this righteousness accounts for the unbelief of those who oppose us. While we proclaim the truth in the righteousness that is found in Christ, they suppress the truth in unrighteousness. As such, our next stop is the first chapter of Paul's epistle to the Romans.

## 3

# Why Unbelief?

It's a familiar scene. You are engaged in a conversation with someone and the topic turns to religion. The person to whom you are speaking is quick to point out that, although he is quite "spiritual," he is not religious. You inquire as to what he believes, he gives you a halfhearted answer, and you begin to share your faith.

However, at each point, he presents an objection. First, he objects to religion as a whole, to which you respond with a well-reasoned answer. Next, he objects to the specific religion of Christianity. Again, you answer. Then he objects to the Bible, and, of course, you have a cogent, winsome answer. Eventually, you discover a pattern: you make a point, he makes an objection, you answer the objection, he ignores your answer and moves on to something else.

I call this the Cycle of Foolishness. The name stems from the biblical idea of answering the

fool, and the frustration of dealing with such foolishness. The Bible acknowledges this cycle with one of the most confounding Proverbs: "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes" (Prov. 26:4-5).

In the first instance, "after, or according to his folly, is ... equivalent to recognizing the foolish supposition and the foolish object of his question." <sup>1</sup> In other words, "Do not accept the foolish supposition or object of the fool."

The *sic et non* here lying before us is easily explained; after, or according to his folly, is this second time equivalent to, as is due to his folly: decidedly and firmly rejecting it, making short work with it (returning a sharp answer), and promptly replying in a way fitted, if possible, to make him ashamed.<sup>2</sup>

### THE SPIRAL OF UNGODLY UNBELIEF

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth" (Rom. 1:18). At first glance, these words may seem to have nothing to do with apologetics.

However, a closer examination reveals that this verse not only touches on the topic of apologetics; it is actually one of the foundational principles upon which our approach to the topic rests.

Romans 1:18 informs us about man's spiritual condition in relation to the truth we are trying to proclaim. Here, Paul makes it clear that our hearers don't have an information problem; they have a sin problem. Of course, ignorance figures into the equation. However, at a fundamental level, ignorance is not their issue. They "suppress the truth" in their unrighteousness.

Paul's theme in Romans 1:18-3:20 is the universality of sin and condemnation. Murray notes, "It is to the establishment of this thesis that this whole passage is directed." Paul makes this clear "by reprising 1:17 in 3:21."<sup>3</sup> In 1:17 and 3:21 Paul references the fact that the just, or righteous, live by faith. Moo argues, therefore, that 1:18-3:20 should be seen "as a preparation for, rather than as a part of, Paul's exposition of the gospel of God's righteousness."<sup>4</sup>

This influences our strategy directly. If man's problem is a lack of information, then our approach in apologetics must be information-heavy. Our goal has to be finding the areas where the hearer is uninformed and informing him.



Moreover, if his problem is an information problem, we can rely on the information to do the work of convincing and converting.

If, on the other hand, man's primary problem is a sin problem, then information alone is not sufficient. The answer to sin is not information, but repentance! Hence, we need to back up a couple of verses. In 1:16, Paul reminds us that the gospel is "the power of God unto salvation." In the next verse he connects that truth to the question of righteousness: "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith'" (v. 17). When we read in verse 18 of "men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth," our attention should be drawn back to the previous statement.

What, then, is the great need of those who suppress the truth in unrighteousness? The answer, according to verses 16 and 17, is the faith! *Therefore, we should never divorce apologetics from gospel proclamation.* To do so would be to (1) fail to meet our hearers' greatest need, (2) neglect the greatest tool at our disposal, and (3) ignore the spiral of ungodly unbelief.

## Men Know God

The spiral of ungodly unbelief is the process whereby men go from the knowledge of God to the unabashed worship of idols. The spiral begins with God's revelation of himself to man. Paul presents this in Romans 1:19-20: "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse."

Three phrases in this paragraph support Paul's conclusion that people are "without excuse" in terms of general revelation. First, the phrase, "is plain to them," reminds us that the knowledge of God we receive from general revelation does not require unusual effort. The second phrase, "God has shown it to them," reminds us that general revelation is not hidden or secret. The third phrase, "have been clearly perceived," reminds us that *general revelation* (Rom. 1:18-31) cannot be missed by accident. Doing so requires suppression.

Put these three together and we see that God has provided a means of knowing about him that requires no special effort, is not hidden, and cannot be missed unless, of course, we *want* to miss

it. And *that* is why those who "miss it" are said to be "without excuse." Thus, the spiral begins when men reject God's general revelation. Consequently, they continue downward and refuse to honor the God they know.

### **Men Do Not Honor the God Whom They Know**

Having no excuse does not necessarily make men sin. In the following chapters, Paul is going to point to the faithfulness of both Jews and Gentiles. In both cases, they were without excuse, but they ended up righteous as opposed to sinful. Why? Because they honored God. Those who continue downward on the spiral of ungodly suppression, on the other hand, go from bad to worse: "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom. 1:21).

### **Men Become Fools**

"Claiming to be wise, they became fools" (Rom. 1:22). The Greek word translated *fools* in this verse (*moros*) means "to become insipid; figuratively, to make as a simpleton."<sup>5</sup> It is the word

from which we derive our word *moron*. The Bible literally says that men who deny God's existence are morons who are so foolish, they actually think they are wise. Or as my grandmother used to say, they're "educated fools." *The New International Theological Dictionary of New Testament Theology* adds, "*Moros* means foolish, stupid and, like *moros*, foolishness denotes inappropriate behavior, thought or speech, both of single lapses of sense as well as in the sense of a permanent attribute."<sup>6</sup>

In other words, people who claim to be wise apart from God are not just acting foolishly in the moment; they are demonstrating the lifestyle and worldview they have adopted, and the impact thereof. The idea behind the word *moros* is that there is "a power which dominates man."<sup>7</sup> His foolishness is beyond his comprehension or control. He acts foolishly, but believes that his foolishness is wisdom. This is a critical point for the expository apologist. We need to be aware of the fact that what sounds foolish to us sounds wise to our interlocutor. We must know that while we're asking ourselves, "Does she really believe this foolishness?" she is actually thinking, "Does he really believe this foolishness?"



Knowing this will impact both our expectations and our perspective. We need to know that we are dealing with fools—not in the sense that we look down on people or despise them, but in the sense that we recognize their blindness. Knowing this changes the way we define success. If I define success as being able to talk to people on their terms, then I will adopt foolishness as a starting point. However, if I define success as exposing and refuting the foolishness of the fool, then I will adopt God's truth as a starting point.

We also need to remember that we are dealing with people who believe *we* are fools. This will disabuse us of all notions of gaining "cool points" in the eyes of fools who think themselves wise as a direct result of their rejection of the one true God. Understanding the "folly" of God's wisdom to sinners (1 Cor. 1:25) is the essence of presuppositional apologetics.

### **Men Exchange the Glory of God for Idols**

The manifestation of man's foolishness came in the form of idolatry as he "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things" (Rom. 1:23). Clearly, this must be understood in

light of God's command against idolatry in the Decalogue. The use of imagery like birds and animals and creeping things corresponds directly to the prohibitions in the second commandment:

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Ex. 20:4-6; cf. Deut. 5:8-10)

I will say more about this in chapter 7. For now, it's enough to say that God's universal, transcendent, perpetual moral law lay at the foundation of every aspect of man's downward spiral into ungodliness and unrighteousness. This is true in regards to both the first and second table of the law. Not coincidentally, Paul's statement about man's idolatry (the violation of the first table of the law) is followed by his explanation of man's unholiness (the violation of the

second table of the law). Vertical sin becomes horizontal.

### **Men Indulge Their Lusts**

It has been said, "We become what we worship." In fact, that is the title G. K. Beale chose for his *tour de force* on the subject of idolatry.<sup>8</sup> God created us as image bearers; we are made in his image to reflect his glory. When we turn that worship in another direction, we do not cease to be what we were created to be; we simply pervert the reflection. As we worship, we are conformed to the image of the one or ones to whom we give our allegiance, adoration, obeisance, time, talent, and treasure.

It makes sense, then, that as we continue in Romans 1, we read, "Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves" (1:24), since this is a reflection of the idols to which man's attention is turned. And to remove any doubt as to why this happens, Paul adds, "*because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen*" (Rom. 1:25). It is this exchange of true worship

for idolatry that leads directly to man's indulgence of his ungodly lusts.

### **Men Shatter the Image They Bear**

If the introduction of the idea of man's indulgence of his lust seems to imply sexual immorality as the chief means of expression, the next phase in the downward spiral leaves no doubt:

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Rom. 1:26-27)

Unlike the previous statement, which pointed to a general indulgence in sexual sin, this reference points explicitly to homosexuality. Schreiner argues that this is due to the fact that homosexuality "functions as the best illustration of that which is unnatural in the sexual sphere."<sup>9</sup> Of course, this is a volatile statement in the contemporary political environment.



However, the facts are undeniable from a biblical, theological perspective. Homosexuality mars our view of the image of God by denying the complementary relationship between men and women. It denies procreation, one of the principal purposes for which God designed marriage and sex. It blasphemes the illustration of Christ's self-sacrificing love for his church. And it violates clear commands of Scripture. Hence, while all sexual sin is an expression of idolatry, homosexuality is a step further down the road of depravity. However, it is not the last step.

### **Men Lose Their Minds**

The final phase in the downward spiral happens when men lose their minds and throw off all restraints. Having crossed the barriers of sexual morality, all other bets are off. The results? "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done" (Rom. 1:28).

Paul goes on to give practical examples of what it looks like when this final barrier is crossed:

They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They

are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. (Rom. 1:29-32)

The phrase "though they know God's righteous decree" is an obvious reference to the law of God. Again, Paul makes it clear that there is an objective standard involved here. Men are not merely doing things that are not profitable; they are violating the law. Nor is Paul's ire raised only against those who practice such immorality. In using the phrase "they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them," he makes it clear that failure to expose and/or condemn such action is equally vile in God's sight.

### **THE APOLOGETIC RESPONSE TO THE SPIRAL**

Much more could be (and has been) said about this section of Romans. However, for our purposes, a few things are important to remember. First,

it is important to remember that God has informed us of the true condition of our hearers. Men are not as rational as we think. No matter how "intelligent" you think your hearers are, God says they are fools. And they are not only fools; they are deceived fools who think they are wise. They are immoral fools who think they are righteous. Therefore, we must not be intimidated by them.

I frequently receive letters and e-mails that begin with, "I have a friend/parent/child who is extremely intelligent ... " What follows is usually an impassioned plea for some kind of special apologetic methodology for the awesomely intelligent. It is as though we believe people who have studied science, philosophy, or mathematics stand on some lonely pedestal where not even the Holy Spirit can reach them. Suddenly, we believe Hebrews 4:12 reads, "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart ... *unless, of course, the person is really smart!*"

Romans 1, however, reminds us that this is not the case. Men are not too wise for God—just too wise for their own good. Nor is the answer to

their deception some special apologetic voodoo preserved especially for them. Don't be intimidated by the wisdom of men.

Second, remember that God has informed us of our hearers' greatest need. They may have questions that need to be answered. However, that is not their greatest need. Their greatest need is the gospel! The same gospel that saved you. The same gospel that saved Paul. The same gospel that is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16).

Any approach to apologetics that is not centered around the gospel is insufficient. What good does it do for me to convince a man that the earth is young if I don't convince him he is a sinner in need of a Savior? What good does it do to reason with him in an effort to win him to "theism" if that theism remains undefined? What good does it do to convince a man that Jesus really lived if I don't tell him that Jesus really died and rose again? And what good does it do if I walk away from an interaction having won an argument, but lost a soul?

Nor am I proposing an either/or proposition. In each of these instances, I want both! I want to convince people that the earth is not billions of



years old *as* I point them to the Creator and Law-giver whose image they bear and whose law they've broken. I want people to see the truth of theism *as* I point them to the one true God. I want them to know the historicity of Jesus's life *and* his resurrection, as well as the implications of both for their life and eternity. In short, I want to win the person, not just the argument. And the only thing that can accomplish that is the gospel.

Third, remember that God has informed us of the likely response of our hearers. I am often amused as people ask me for ways to do apologetics that are least likely to offend lost people. It reminds me of one Mother's Day when I was riding in the car with my mother. We were driving down the street in our beat-up old Volkswagen Beetle when a police officer pulled us over.

The officer was very professional and even courteous. However, my mother was in a hurry. Besides, who wants to be pulled over by a cop? Eventually, he wrote her a citation, placed it in her hand, smiled, and said, "Happy Mother's Day." You would have thought he slapped her in the face! My mother went off. She started saying things I would never write in this book. I was terrified that the officer, who could obviously hear

her, was going to come back and slap the cuffs on her.

Today we look back on that exchange and laugh. However, at the moment, it was anything but funny. But what was the officer supposed to do? The sheer fact of his presence was an irritant. The fact that he was hindering her only added to the irritation. And the fact that he gave her a citation, well, that was just icing on the cake. There was nothing he could have said to make that exchange less "offensive" to my mother.

Engaging in apologetics can often be like this. People are riding along enjoying their life when all of a sudden, here we come. We slow them down, tell them they're wrong, and offer correction. There is no way to do this without risking offense. In fact, just like the officer learned that day, our efforts to be sweet and polite can often be the very flame that lights the fuse on an already volatile situation.

We need to be aware that "the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil" (John 3:19). We need to be reminded of some of the most poignant words Jesus ever spoke:

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. (John 15:18-19)

Attempting to be loved by the world often leads to compromise. As apologists, we do not wish to be more offensive than necessary. However, we know that there will be offense. We might as well offend with the gospel.

Finally, remember that God has informed us of the fate of our hearers. These are people who "deserve to die" (Rom. 1:32). This is not simply a reference to the Mosaic law and its civil penalties for the aforementioned sins. This is something far worse. These people deserve "the second death" (Rev 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8). These people deserve hell. And, lest we be puffed up with pride, this list in Romans 1:29-32 reminds us that we, too, deserve hell. The point here is to give us a sense of urgency, not superiority.

How, then, do we approach apologetics in light of these truths? It is the belief in the aforementioned realities that has led me to expository apologetics.

## **BELIEVE NO ONE WHO CALLS HIMSELF AN ATHEIST**

If what Paul says is true, there is ultimately no such thing as an atheist. Anyone who calls himself one is wrong on at least three fronts. First, someone who claims to be an atheist is suppressing the truth he knows. According to Romans 1, "What can be known about God is plain to them" (v. 19), and their denial is an expression of the fact that they are among those "men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth" (v. 18). Therefore, whatever they believe about themselves, the God who made them says otherwise, and we must believe God rather than man.

Second, anyone who claims to be an atheist is contradicting the God of truth. It is one thing for a person to be wrong about himself. It is quite another thing for him to be in disagreement with what God says about him. God says every man knows. Therefore, anyone who says he doesn't know is calling God a liar. It's a bit like a man arguing with his mother about what day he was born. Only in this case, it's not his mother, but his inerrant, infallible, Creator.

Third, anyone who claims to be an atheist is ignoring his greatest need, and his only hope for its fulfillment. Man's greatest and ultimate need



is God. Apart from God, man is incomplete. Moreover, he is utterly incapable of achieving or attaining what he lacks. This is what drove Solomon to write, "Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun" (Eccles. 2: 11). This is the state of every person apart from God.

### **REMINDE PEOPLE OF WHAT THEY ALREADY KNOW**

*People know there is a God.* As we have already seen, Paul makes it very clear that people know God exists. However, they suppress that truth in their unrighteousness. Nevertheless, the knowledge is within them. We see it in various ways in even the most ardent deniers of deity. (1) We see it in times of crisis, like the days following the tragedy of September 11, 2001, or December 7, 1941. (2) We see it in times of great joy, like the birth of a baby or the moment their team wins the big game. (3) We see it in times of fear, like when the Apollo 13 astronauts were in peril, or during the Cuban Missile Crisis. In times like these, men are well aware that God exists.

*People know there is truth.* Much has been written about postmodernism and its denial of absolute truth. However, even the most hardened truth-denier believes you should take him at his word. The oft-used example is the person who states, "There is no absolute truth," only to be faced with the response, "So you're saying truth exists and Jesus is Lord?" To which he will respond, "No, that's not what I said." Of course, this admittedly simplistic example fails to capture the complexity of postmodernity. However, the point is clear: all people believe in truth. They prove this every time they make a statement that they expect others to understand.

*People know there is right and wrong.* One of the first phrases children learn to say with conviction is, "That's not fair!" We know in our bones that some things are just not right! Events like September 11, 2001, and December 7, 1944, stand as lasting reminders that there is a universal sense of right and wrong. On those days, people didn't stand around debating whether the Bible condemns murder; they just shouted, "That's not fair!" Ironically, many of them did so in direct opposition to the worldview they had embraced. Nevertheless, in moments like these, even fools become wise—at least for a moment.

*People know they are not righteous.* Shortly after we learn to say, "That's not fair!" we learn to say, "Nobody's perfect." This is our way of acknowledging our lack of righteousness without impugning ourselves. You see, if there is one who is perfect, then I am simply a sinner. However, if there is not one who is perfect, then I am no worse than anyone else, and, therefore, righteous by comparison. Of course, there is One who was and is perfect. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to introduce those who have imbibed this falsehood to our perfect Savior.

*People know judgment is necessary.* On May 2, 2011, we discovered that an elite team of Navy SEALs had executed a predawn raid in Abbottabad, Pakistan, where they captured and killed Osama Bin Laden. Response to the news was almost universal, as people from all walks of life sighed in relief knowing that one of the most notorious terrorists in world history had faced swift justice.

Why do people respond this way? Why is the natural, visceral response one of almost universal approval of retributive justice? Because people know that judgment is necessary. They know that wrongs need to be set right. And if they know that, then they know, somewhere down deep in

their own souls, that they, too, deserve justice for the sins they have committed. Of course, people suppress this knowledge in various ways, from appealing to others' worse behavior to judging ourselves by our intentions rather than our actions. But the fact remains that we know better.

*People know they need a Savior.* The fact that people know they are guilty leads inevitably to the fact that they know they need a Savior. Again, people don't admit this. In fact, they suppress it. But they know it. Unwittingly, people will admit this knowledge in various ways. First, they will acknowledge their need for a Savior while claiming to be able to fulfill that role themselves. For example, the one who believes that he's "basically a good person," is essentially claiming to be able to make propitiation for his own sin. The same is true for the person who believes he has done good deeds that make up for his sins. In both cases, the person compounds his guilt by (1) acknowledging God's justice and the need for atonement while (2) elevating himself to the stature and status of God himself, "who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe" (1 Tim. 4: 10).

The fact that people believe these things doesn't necessarily make our job easier. In fact,



the hardest part of expository apologetics is convincing others of that which they already know. The tendency to "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" is not to be taken lightly or trifled with. People will fight tooth and nail against the aforementioned truths. However, there is a power greater than man, and it is that power on which we rely. This is why the expository apologist must say with the apostle, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16).

### **REFUSE TO MAKE THE FOOL GOD'S JUDGE**

In addition to refusing to believe anyone who calls himself an atheist, and reminding people of what they know, we must also refuse to make the fool God's judge. There is a difference between answering the legitimate question of a peer or equal and presenting evidence to a judge. Expository apologetics takes these distinctions seriously. This is very important in light of the fact that the primary objection to this approach is that it reduces everything to Bible quotes and fails to take questions seriously. And if that is the way

we operate, those who object are right to do so. However, the expository apologist must always take questions seriously and answer those he can. Nevertheless, there is a right and a wrong way to do that. The wrong way is to assume that man's greatest need is information. The right way is to remember that man's greatest need is illumination.

Assuming that man's greatest need is information leads to an approach to apologetics that seeks only to answer people's questions. The idea is that (1) people are asking legitimate questions, and (2) good answers will satisfy them and lead them to truth. This is usually wrong on both counts. First, people are rarely asking legitimate questions-or at least they are not asking the right ones. Frequently, their questions are mere smokescreens meant to stump you, make themselves sound more intelligent than they are, change the subject, or end the discussion. Rare is the person who has legitimate questions and is actually seeking legitimate answers.

Second, the fact that these questions are often illegitimate leads to the phenomenon I like to call "whac-a-mole apologetics." If you've ever been to an amusement park, you've probably seen the Whac-A-Mole game. This is where you take a big

mallet and stand in front of a series of holes. When the game starts, moles pop up from the various holes and you have to whack them on the head before they disappear back from whence they came. Frequently, apologetic encounters resemble this game: People ask you a question, you answer, they shrug it off, and they ask another question. They don't acknowledge that you've just given them "evidence that demands a verdict," to quote Josh McDowell's legendary book. Instead, they move on, undaunted that you just demonstrated that their best reason for disbelief is a farce. That question merely disappears back into the hole from which it arose, and another question pops up in another location. And you just go on playing Whac-A-Mole as if they'll eventually run out of questions and bow the knee to Christ.

Unfortunately, this is not the way the game ends. This game ends much like the amusement park version. Time runs out, the moles stop popping up, and you've made no progress at all. This is about as frustrating as it gets for the apologist. However, there is another way. For the expository apologist, the goal is not just to whack the moles as they pop up. Our goal is to get to the gospel so that at the end of the "game" we are left with

more than doubts as to whether we've wasted our time. We can know that when we rely on God's Word, we can also rely on the promise of him who said, "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:11).

Practically speaking, this is a matter of perspective. Do we believe that an apologetic encounter is an appeal to the mind of man, or to the Word of God? Do we believe that man is an impartial, all-powerful judge whom we must convince of the rightness and truthfulness of our claims? Or do we believe him to be a fool who suppresses the truth in unrighteousness, and will go on refusing to acknowledge the rightness and truthfulness of our claims "until the day dawns and the morning star rises in [his] heart" (2 Pet. 1:19)?

If the former is true, we will lay down our Bibles and try to convince our interlocutor of the rightness and truth of our claims by stepping out of our worldview and into his. We will say things like, "You can't use the Bible with people who don't believe it" and, "You've got to meet people where they are." The irony is that when we



assume this posture, we essentially negate our claim to hold to a biblical worldview. We have agreed with our interlocutor that there can be truth apart from God. We agree with him that the Scripture is neither sufficient nor necessary. We have answered the fool and become "like him" (Prov. 24:4).

However, if the latter is true, we will hold on to the Scriptures, believing that God is the fountainhead of all knowledge and Christ is the repository of all wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3). We believe that "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). As a result, like a warrior whose opponent does not believe in the existence of his sword, we refuse to lay down our arms and argue, opting instead to hack away, knowing that eventually, he will believe ... or he will perish!

Nor do we simply quote Bible verses and ignore all questions. On the contrary, we answer! We answer just as though we were speaking *for* the Judge not *to* a judge.

## **DON'T TRY TO CURE UNRIGHTEOUSNESS WITH INFORMATION**

Ultimately, what it all boils down to is what we believe man's true problem is, and where we go to find the solution. If man's problem is a lack of information, we rely on information alone. If man's problem is unrighteousness, we rely on the gospel. Expository apologetics definitely opts for the latter. Yet we still have to answer questions. And when doing so, we must remember to do three things.

1. ***Answer honest questions.*** The heart of apologetics is answering legitimate questions. After all, the apostle Peter defined apologetics as "always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet. 3:15). In the coming chapters, we will examine just what he meant by that. For now, suffice to say that he means for us to give answers to those who pose legitimate questions about what we claim to believe.

2. ***Keep things simple.*** There is a saying in diagnostic medicine: "When you hear hoofbeats, think horses not zebras." This is basically a reminder for doctors that, as Occam's razor states, the simplest answer is usually the best. Doctors shouldn't jump to the conclusion that they're dealing with the most exotic disease imaginable; they should start with the most likely

one, because it's ... most likely! The same is true for the apologist. Sometimes people will ask you about the origin of the universe because they are well read in PhD-level astrophysics and really do want to know if the Bible has answers to questions at the highest intellectual levels (zebra). However, more often than not, you'll be dealing with people who can't tell Darwin from Dickens, and wouldn't be able to understand a high-level explanation if you gave it to them (horses).

More importantly, both the horse and the zebra in this case need the same thing: the gospel! I may not be able to give PhD-level answers to astrophysics questions. However, that does not mean that I have nothing to say to a PhD in astrophysics. Remember Paul's word to the Corinthians:

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block

to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." (1 Cor. 1:2 31)

3. *Always find a way to get to the gospel.* Sye Ten Bruggencate caused a great deal of consternation in the apologetic community with the publication of his video *How to Answer the Fool*. The controversy stemmed not only from his presuppositional approach, but from the fact that he



criticized some of the best-known and respected apologists of our day or any other for their failure to "get to the gospel" in their interactions with unbelievers.

At one point, the video includes a clip of a well-known apologist answering questions after an hour-long lecture. During the Q&A, a young man objects to the apologist's "Christian assumptions," at which point the apologist fires back, "I never once mentioned Christianity.... I've only argued for theism." Bruggencate's response to this is dismay. How dare a Christian speak for an hour in front of an audience of unbelievers and not press the claims of Christ? How dare he fail to "get to the gospel!" Regardless of your take on Bruggencate's approach, it is hard to argue with him on this point . . . unless, of course, you subscribe to the notion that apologetics is only a precursor to evangelism, and that it is better to bring people closer to theism—which is closer to Christianity than atheism—than it is to alienate them altogether and risk losing a hearing by bringing the Bible and Christianity into the mix.

It is beyond the scope of this book to argue the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches to apologetics. However, make no

mistake that I am arguing for an approach that refuses to leave the Bible behind. I am not assuming negative motives for those who travel other routes. Far be it from me to assume that I know all there is to know about apologetics. I am simply sharing the approach that I have come to view as the best and most accessible. My goal is to remove the barrier in people's minds that causes them to refuse to engage in apologetics because they view it as something beyond the reach of the average Christian. I want to promote and uphold the sufficiency of God's Word for apologetics.

I believe there is a place for high-level apologists who engage in discussion and debate with the academic world. However, I do not believe that doing so requires an abandonment of the Reformed, presuppositional approach. A classic example of this is James White. Dr. White is proficient in Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic. He is a New Testament scholar *par excellence!* He debates some of the biggest and brightest brains in the world. However, in doing so, he always gets to the gospel. I have seen him stand toe-to-toe with Muslims, atheists, Roman Catholics, Mormons, and homosexual activists, just to name a few, make high-level arguments worthy of the best

New Testament critical scholars, and turn right around and press home the fact that the reason it all matters is because Jesus really is who the Bible says he is and he really did what the Bible says he did.

The goal of this book is not to turn us all into James White. Most of us don't have brains that big (present company included). However, we don't have to become James White in order to give an answer for the hope that is in us and point people to Christ. And that is exactly what men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness need more than anything else in the world.

## 4

# Paul's Expository Apologetic

If expository apologetics is nothing more than a fancy gimmick I've invented, it is of little use to anyone. It will be difficult to understand, hard to remember, and impossible to place any faith in. If, on the other hand, expository apologetics is a biblical approach to dealing with objections, the story changes altogether. It will be much less complicated, easier to remember, and worthy of our faith. And, of course, we will be able to see examples of it in the Bible. That is why this chapter is so important. In this chapter, we will examine expository apologetics in action. More importantly, we will examine it in the New Testament.

Remember, expository apologetics is mainly about three things. First, it is about being biblical. We answer objections with the power of the