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MAN IN THE DOCK: Courtroom Evangelism in an Age of Idolatry

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Christian observers of the notorious Jesus Seminar are alternately amazed or appalled when they learn of such New Testament "scholars" using colored beads to vote on the authenticity of the words of Christ. At one level, this kind of attack on God's Word should not surprise us, since we know from Scripture that fallen man always seeks to suppress God's truth. Nevertheless, we still find ourselves provoked, wondering how we should respond to the arrogance of sinful humanity's putting God "in the dock" — sitting in judgment on the Judge of all. Is it necessary for us to become New Testament scholars, scientists, or philosophers? Or is there a simpler, more effective way to respond?

Without minimizing the importance of specialized Christian scholarship, I suggest there is another way. Indeed, my thesis here is that God's plan is to turn the tables on His accusers by putting man in the dock, and to do so through ordinary believers like you and me.

A Subpoena from the Great King

I am always grateful to discover biblical tools that might enhance my ability to evangelize; thus, I became excited when I noticed a recurring theme in Scripture, which I call "the courtroom motif," and saw its implications for evangelism and apologetics. Let me introduce this theme with some words from Isaiah, Jesus, and Paul.

The Prophecies of Isaiah. In Isaiah's predictions of the coming kingdom, God speaks of a day when He will put man in the dock. "Be silent before me, you islands! Let the nations renew their strength! Let them come forward and speak; let us meet together at the place of judgment" (Isa. 41:1).¹ In that day the Great King will issue a subpoena, commanding all nations to meet Him in court!

What will be the charge? "'Present your case,' says the Lord. 'Set forth your arguments,' says Jacob's King. 'Bring in your idols to tell us what is going to happen...so we may know that [they] are gods'" (Isa.41:21-23). The charge is idolatry: God will show men the foolishness and culpability of worshipping anything other than

Him.

When will this take place? "The Lord says, 'It is too small a thing for you to be my servant...I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth'" (Isa, 49:6). The trial will occur when the Servant of the Lord appears, through whom God's light will at last reach the nations. In that day, "Kings will see you and arise, princes will see and bow down" (v.7). In other words, the Servant will somehow cause men to repent of their idolatry and turn in faith to the true God, the Holy One of Israel.

The Teachings of Jesus. As Christians, we confess that Jesus is that promised Servant of the Lord (Matt. 12:17-21). Not surprisingly, then, we find that He had much to teach about how God the Father and He Himself will put men back in the dock.

It begins with the Great Commission. God will use His New Testament people to carry the fullness of His truth to all nations. This includes all that Christ taught and commanded, especially concerning creation, probation, fall, and redemption through faith in His divine person and all-sufficient work.

God will also use His "witnesses"—supernatural evidences by which He confirms to men the deity of Christ and the truth of His teaching (John 5:30-47). Since these "witnesses of God" constitute the heart of biblical apologetics, we will later discuss them in detail.

Finally, God will use His Holy Spirit. As the church goes into the world, preaching the truth of Christ and citing the witnesses of God, the Holy Spirit will convict sinners. "When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8). The Spirit thus puts sinful man in the dock, charging him with a rebellious, self-serving idolatry and urging him to turn to God in Christ for pardon and new life.

Note carefully from Jesus teaching that the final verdict in this trial rests upon the sinner: "Everyone who loves evil hates the light..." (John 3:18-21). The Spirit-convicted man who clings to his idols shows that he "hates the light" and therefore, condemns himself. The man who "comes to the light" shows that he hates his idols and sin and, therefore, finds salvation and eternal life.

The Example of Paul. In Paul's evangelism we have both the fulfillment of Isaiah's predictions and the implementation of Christ's teaching. A look at his sermon to the Athenians illustrates much about how God puts pagan man in the dock (Acts 17:16-34).

Note first that the Athenian idolatry deeply vexed Paul, especially because God was no longer willing to overlook or "wink" at it (v. 30). He, therefore, responded by addressing the spiritual tension that he knew to exist in all non-Christians (vv. 22-23): an innate knowledge of God (seen in the Athenian altars) frustrated by ignorance and alienation from Him (seen in the altar to The Unknown God).

Paul sought to relieve the tension by announcing the truth; first, by bringing to light the nature of God, His works, and His purpose for the nations. He says God is an infinite, personal being who created and sustains the universe (but is distinct from it);

that He made all nations from one man (Adam); and that His purpose is to test them to see whether they will love Him enough to "grope for Him" (vv. 24-28).²

Although Paul is bold to accuse them of idolatry (v. 29), there is hope; for they also acted in ignorance so that God "winked" at it. Now, however, He has sent His Son, His people, and His completed revelation into the world. Now, ignorance is no excuse, and God "commands all people everywhere to repent" (v. 30). Now they must turn from their idols to Him, and to the One whom He has appointed to judge the world in righteousness (v. 31).

Paul concludes and affirms his message by citing the most powerful of the witnesses of God, the resurrection of Christ (v. 31). Paul thus puts the Athenians in the dock; and, as his Master had predicted, some turned away, mocking, while others joined him and believed (vv. 32-34).

The Witnesses of God

As mentioned above, our Lord taught us to use "the witnesses of God" in our evangelism (John 5:30-47). They are God-given supernatural evidences by which the Spirit reveals the deity of Christ, the truth of His teaching, the meaning of His work, and the culpable idolatry of all who reject Him; thus putting man decisively in the dock. Here are seven of the most important:

The Father (John 5:32, 8:18). God is really the only witness, since He is the source of all the rest. Nevertheless, the visible presence and audible testimony of the Father at Christ's baptism and transfiguration when He publicly affirmed the deity and authority of His Son are unique and important (Matt. 3:17; 17:1-6; 2 Pet. 1:16-18). In sharing Christ let us, therefore, not forget to call the powerful witness of the Father to the stand.

The Son (John 8:14-19). Jesus declared, "Even if I bear witness of Myself, My witness is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going." Being assured of His nature, mission, and sinlessness, Jesus contributed His own testimony in the courtroom of God with His great "I AM" statements (John 6:35; 8:12, 58; 10:7, 11; 11:25; 15:1). particularly — "I am God's Son" (10:36).

The Holy Spirit (John 15:26). As our non-Christian friends learn of Christ, the Holy Spirit bears witness to their hearts, urging them to consider Jesus' life and teachings. This testimony may be resisted (Acts 7:51) or even rejected (Acts 13:46); however, having heard it, a person is eternally accountable for his or her response (John 3:18-19; 12:48). Let us, therefore, urge our friends to respond to the Spirit by sincerely pondering the claims of Christ.

The Holy Scriptures (John 5:39, NKJV). Jesus told the Jews, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (see also Luke 24:25-27). Here is a great miracle! The Bible is really a collection of books, 66 of them, written by over 40 authors over the course of some 1,500 years. The miracle is

that each one contributes to a single unfolding story of redemption, while testifying to the person and work of the one Redeemer.

The Christ-centered unity of the Scriptures is obvious in the Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Revelation; but it is subtly and powerfully present in the Old Testament, as well, where Christ is hidden away under hundreds of amazing foreshadowings, types, and prophecies as well.³ According to Paul, the mystery of Christ must be made known to the nations by means of the prophetic Scriptures (see Rom. 16:25-26; 2 Pet. 1:16-21).

The Works of Christ (John 5:36). God wrought these miraculous signs through Christ in order to confirm His message. Jesus taught us to boldly proclaim His works, saying, "The very work that the Father has given Me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me" (see also John 10:25; 14:11).

Christ's works bear witness to His words, and His words bear witness to His divine person and redemptive mission (John 15:22-24). His incomparable power to heal, deliver from evil spirits, raise the dead, miraculously feed multitudes, and command the elements all point to His deity and to the final "restoration of all things," which He will accomplish at His return (Phil. 3:20-21).

The Resurrection of Christ (Matt. 12:38ff.). Our Lord not only predicted this unprecedented event on several occasions but also singled it out as the preeminent sign that validates His claims (see also John 2:18-21). Christ's resurrection was foreshadowed in Old Testament history (Heb. 11:17-19); predicted by the Old Testament prophets (Ps. 2; 16; Isa. 53); witnessed by hundreds of believers (Acts 10:40-41; 1 Cor. 15:6); and became the capstone of the apostolic preaching of the gospel (Acts 1:22; 2:31; 4:2, 33; 17:18; 1 Cor. 15:1ff). Through the Resurrection, God testifies that Jesus Christ is His divine Son (Rom 1:4), and that He died as an effective sacrifice for our sins (Acts 2:24; Rom. 4:25).

The Church (Acts 1:8). "You will be my witnesses," Jesus said to His disciples, and from the days of the apostles onward such has been the case. This witness includes the words of Christians who relate to others what they themselves have seen of Christ, and it also includes their lives, miraculously transformed by Christ. The church is a heavenly people, sojourning through history toward a heavenly kingdom. As God spotlights the church to a watching world, she bears witness to her heavenly King (2 Cor. 2:14-16).

These amazing witnesses stand shoulder to shoulder in the courtroom of God and supply a ringing testimony to the truth of God and of Christ—one that puts man squarely in the dock!

Courtroom Evangelism in an Age of Idolatry

The "courtroom evangelism" predicted by Isaiah, taught by Christ, and exemplified by Paul is an abiding mandate and trust for the church. We conclude by considering its implications for modern evangelism.

First, it teaches us that the world is still given over to idolatry, which is simply an allegiance to any false image of the truth, usually as a means of exalting man and suppressing the knowledge of the true God. Today's evolutionary naturalists, pantheists, and relativists—the very ones who like to put God in the dock—therefore, must be seen as idolaters, as surely as were yesterday's polytheists who bowed before blocks of wood and stone.

Second, it means that our vexation over modern idolatry reflects something quite significant: the fact that God is no longer willing to overlook it! Indeed, now that Christ has come, He is eager to equip and send His people out into the world so that through us He might turn the tables on His accusers, expose their idolatry, and bring them safely to His Son (Acts 26:16-18).

Third, He invites us to follow the lead of Paul, who depicted life in a religiously diverse culture as a test. We can explain to our non-Christian friends that God permits competing religions and philosophies in order to test our love for the truth. Will we use our freedom to "grope" in this present darkness for the God we all know is there?⁴

Fourth, it means that evangelism should center on the promulgation of Christ's worldview and the confirmation of it by the witnesses of God. One approach is to explain that God loves us and desires us to pass His test. He, therefore, has sent His Son into the world to bring us His truth and has confirmed it by means of His supernatural "witnesses." If we are willing to examine Christ's teachings and listen to the witnesses, we will see that He is the One sent to remove both our ignorance of God and our alienation from Him.

Finally, it means we must not shrink from challenging the dominant idols of our own day (e.g., Naturalism, Pantheism, Relativism, etc.); thus opening doors for some interesting discussions! We should always remember to anchor ourselves to the marvelously attested, authoritative Word of Christ, graciously pointing out that it exposes all other ways as error and idolatry.

Courtroom evangelism is no panacea. Scripture and experience teach us to respect God's sovereignty and man's freedom, both of which preclude "sure-fire" methods. Nevertheless, under God's sovereign hand this simple, biblical approach can be highly effective for putting man in the dock, thereby delivering men from their idols and binding them gladly to His beloved Son.

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NOTES

- 1 Bible quotations are from the NIV, except as otherwise noted.
- 2 Because cosmic evolutionism (whether naturalistic or pantheistic) is the dominant idol of our era, we should declare as a prelude to the gospel the foundational biblical truths of an initial good creation;

the probation of the first Adam; and the entrance of sin, suffering and death into the world through Adam's fall. We can buttress this prelude (and our faith) with helpful scientific evidences supporting the biblical account of origins (see, e.g., Jonathan Sarfati, *Refuting Evolution*; and Don Batten, ed., *The Revised Answers Book* (both Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 1999, 2000). We should always remember, however, that our final court of appeal is the testimony of Christ and Scripture, confirmed by the witnesses of God and impressed on hearts by the Spirit of truth (see, e.g., Mark 10:6; Rom. 5:12; 8:20-23).

- 3 Some exciting Old Testament types of Christ are Noah's Ark (Gen. 6-9); Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22); and the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). Messianic prophecies should be mastered, as well, such as the incarnation of the Messiah (Isa. 9:6; Mic. 5:2); His atoning death (Isa. 53); His resurrection (Ps. 16); His ascension and heavenly reign (Ps. 2); and His deity and heavenly priesthood (Ps. 110).
- 4 Most people readily accept the scriptural idea that life is a test (John 3:19; Acts 17:27; 2 Thess. 2:10). By evangelizing from within this paradigm, we put an obligation on our non-Christian friends; not to believe (which only God can grant), but to seek the truth and examine the evidence (which only man can do).