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APOLOGETICS FOR A NEW GENERATION

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SYNOPSIS

Most Christian teenagers today are rolling through life without much thoughtful reflection about their faith. They have deep confusion about the nature and character of the Trinitarian God, other essential Christian truth claims, and the nature of truth itself. Most of their worldviews are shaped by a pluralistic culture rather than biblical literacy, so, naturally, their beliefs diverge widely from biblical standards. As a result, many teens are leaving the faith they grew up with, and of those who remain in the fold, few are living as bold witnesses for Christ.

Dedicated teenagers who embrace an authentic Christian worldview, however, not only are *less* likely to abandon the faith, but are *more* likely to practice it in their daily lives. This is why apologetics training is such a critical component in the discipling of youth. If we can help them to internalize the truth and beauty of Christianity, they will be far more likely to live out its goodness.

History has shown that people act on what they believe—not what they *say* they believe, or *want* to believe, but what they *really* believe. People who believe that God truly has spoken through the Bible are far more likely to follow its guidance and are much bolder in their witness for the truth of Christianity than are those who are not so convinced. We must lovingly train young people to be able to defend their faith with confidence and authority.

The lunch bell rang and Mike sheepishly slipped into my classroom, slouched into a desk, and buried his face in his folded arms. As a typical high school sophomore, he didn't want to appear "uncool" in front of friends, so he came to talk to me when no one would be around. As I approached, he sat up, looked me in the eyes, and said abruptly, "Mr. McDowell, we need to talk. I think I am losing my faith."

Like many young people, Mike was caught up in his day-to-day routine, without much thoughtful reflection about his Christian beliefs. The night before we talked he came across an atheist Web site that raised difficult questions about his beliefs. Lacking the intellectual tools and the confidence to answer the challenges, he started to wonder: Is the Bible really true? What about evolution? How can I believe that Christianity is the only way to God? How could a loving God who is all-powerful and who could prevent evil allow it to happen? Doubts such as these came crashing down like bricks to assail and overpower his confidence in God.

Fortunately, Mike trusted me enough to enlist my guidance during this challenging part of his faith journey, and over the next few months we spent many lunch hours exploring crucial apologetics questions. We examined the Bible's authenticity as well as extrabiblical evidence for Christianity's truth claims in history, philosophy, and science. Mike appreciated having a knowledgeable adult to help him through the hard questions, and later shared with me that had I not been there, he likely would have jettisoned his faith.

THE APOLOGETICS DIFFERENCE

As Mike demonstrates, apologetics training is (or should be!) a critical component in the discipling of youth. All young people inevitably will have their beliefs directly challenged, whether while they are in high school, during college, or when they get out in the “real world.” We must train young people to love God not only with their hearts and souls, but with their *minds* (Matt. 22:37) as well, and to be able to offer a defense of their faith to all those who ask (1 Pet. 3:15).

For the past decade or longer, the Christian marketplace has been flooded with books about how to do ministry in a postmodern world. Their authors rightly have pointed out many cultural changes due to postmodernism, but often have failed to realize how much has actually remained the same. I am perplexed when I read contemporary writers, particularly some in the “emerging church” movement, who question the need for apologetics in ministry to postmodern youth.

Sociologist Christian Smith, who has conducted one of the most extensive research studies of culture and contemporary youth, points out that youth today are not in need of a “radically new ‘postmodern’ type of program or ministry.”¹ Smith believes, instead, that one of the key things young people need is to be challenged to consider *why they believe what they believe* and to learn *how to articulate* their faith. It is certainly true that living the Christian life with consistency and conviction can be an attractive witness to teens, but this must not deter us from making a rational apologetic for the knowability of truth, or the coherence of Christian truth claims with reality.

My experience has been that, especially when given the privacy of a note card to respond, students often ask the tough questions, and are interested in reasons for belief in Christianity and its claims. In speaking engagements throughout the United States, I have collected thousands of these questions from curious students. “How can I know God is real?” “How can there be only one right religion?” These types of questions demand an apologetic response by an adult mentor or leader who is well versed in apologetics issues. We need to give our youth reasons why Christianity is objectively true, why the Bible is God’s inspired and infallible Word, and how we know Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is more than mere mythology or an elaborate hoax. If we cannot rise to the task, we run the risk of losing our children and generations to follow. One might argue that such a disturbing and tragic loss already has begun.

The Loss of Faith

Thousands of teenagers who claimed no religious system of belief said, when interviewed for the 2005 National Study of Youth and Religion, that they had been raised to be religious, but over time had become “non-religious.”² The teenagers were asked, in an open-ended question with no set answers from which to choose, why they left the faith in which they were raised. The most common answer (thirty-two percent) was *intellectual skepticism*. Their answers included, “Some stuff was too far-fetched for me to believe in,” “I think scientifically there is no proof,” and “There were too many questions that can’t be answered.”³ Young people are leaving faith behind because the Christian community is failing to engage their minds as well as their hearts.

I once met a young man who told me that he had lost his faith in God. The reason he gave for this was the inexplicable and unforgivable death of his best friend—something he believed a loving God never could allow. I asked him whether he, prior to the death of his friend, had ever thought about the problem of evil and suffering. He admitted that he hadn’t thought about it, assuming such a thing would never happen to him. His problem was one of ignorance, since he had never wrestled with the problem of suffering *before* his tragedy and had never developed a biblical worldview that could help prepare him for such an event.

Those who give thoughtful reflection to the reality of suffering *ahead of time* have far greater odds of holding fast to their faith when tragedy strikes. As parents, educators, and youth ministers, we can give children a priceless gift by helping them to think biblically and to defend their faith *before* they leave our sphere of influence.

The Crisis of Belief

Most adults are concerned about the behavior of young people. Few, however, go deeper to the source of their behavior: their beliefs. Glenn Schultz demonstrates how beliefs influence behavior in his book *Kingdom Education*: “At the foundation of a person’s life we find his beliefs. These beliefs shape his values, and his values drive his actions.”⁴ If we want to shape the behavior of young people, then, we must guide them to truthful beliefs about the world and help them to strengthen and build on their existing true beliefs and convictions.

People act on what they believe—not what they *say* they believe, or *want* to believe, but what they *truly* believe. Young people who have a biblical worldview are not only less likely to leave the faith, they are more likely to practice it in their own lives, and those who believe that God truly has spoken through the Bible are far more likely to follow it than are those who are not so convinced. Teens who trust in God’s plan for purity, for example, are much more likely to abstain from impure acts.

This is why it is so critical to help our youth come to terms with their *actual* beliefs and to help address their doubts, questions, uncertainties, and fears honestly. This doesn’t mean that we should pretend to have all the answers (teens are far too savvy today to believe that anyone has it all figured out), but that we should guide them lovingly to a greater understanding of the truth.

Given the importance of truthful beliefs, we should be deeply concerned about our youth today. In his top religious trends of 2005, George Barna concluded:

American Christians are biblically illiterate. Although most of them contend that the Bible contains truth and is worth knowing, and most of them argue that they know all of the relevant truths and principles, our research shows otherwise....the younger a person is, the less they understand about the Christian faith...With fewer and fewer parents teaching their kids much of anything related to matters of faith, young people’s belief systems are the product of the mass media.⁵

Consider some of the beliefs of conservative Protestant youth:⁶

- Eighteen percent believe that God is either a personal being who created the world but is not involved in it today (as in deism) or an impersonal entity, something like a cosmic force (as in pantheism);
- twenty-three percent are not assured of the existence of miracles;
- thirty-three percent either “definitely” or “maybe” believe in reincarnation;
- forty-two percent are not assured of the existence of evil spirits;
- forty-eight percent believe many religions may be true.

Take a moment to consider the implication of these statistics. How can our young people have vibrant prayer lives when nearly one in five (18 percent) do not believe God is personally involved in the world today? How can they avoid falling into “the snare of the Devil” (1 Tim. 3:7)⁷ when more than two in five (42 percent) are not even assured of the existence of evil spirits? How, finally, can they confidently believe that Jesus is “the way the truth and the life” (John 14:6), when nearly one in two believe that many religions may be true?

This is why Paul attaches such prime importance for spiritual transformation on the training of the mind: “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). Helping our youth, then, to transform their reasoning and understanding and to become like Jesus begins with helping them to think like Jesus and to put those thoughts into action. This involves asking not just, “what would Jesus do?” but, more importantly, “*why* would Jesus do what He would?”

In *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, author Ron Sider concludes that people who have a biblical worldview demonstrate genuinely different behavior. They are nine times more likely to avoid “adult-only” material on the Internet, three times as likely not to use tobacco products, and twice as likely to volunteer to help the poor.⁸ People’s beliefs about God, the world, and truth itself *do* make a difference in their practice of the Christian faith.

THE CONFUSION ABOUT TRUTH

This past summer I was the guest speaker at a youth Bible camp in Northern California. The theme throughout the week was Matthew 22:37—loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind. I taught from passages such as 1 Samuel 16:7, which show that God judges the heart rather than appearance, and encouraged the students to consider Jesus' teaching in Matthew 10:28: "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." I challenged them to use their minds to consider the claims of Jesus as the sole means of salvation (Acts 4:12).

I asked the campers for feedback at the end of the week, and their responses shocked me. One camper summed it up in these words: "We like his stories, but that's just *his* truth. I don't want to judge him, but I have a different truth." Her response probably should not have surprised me as it did, especially since recent studies reveal that the majority of our youth (81 percent) have adopted the view that "all truth is relative to the individual and his/her circumstances."⁹ The common attitude toward religion and morality is, "Something may be true for you, but not true for me." Many young people claim to be Christians, but I can't help but wonder how many truly understand that Christianity is *the* truth, the *only* hope for salvation, and the *sole* opportunity for a relationship with the living God who created the universe.

Christian Smith demonstrates that for youth today, "The very idea of religious truth is attenuated, shifted from older realist and universalist notions of objective Truth to more personalized and relative versions of 'truth for me' and 'truth for you.'"¹⁰ Smith says we often hear youth proclaim, "Who am I to judge?" "If that's what they choose, whatever," and, "If it works for them, fine." Many youth see truth pragmatically as that which "works" in their lives, rather than upholding the classical view of truth as "that which corresponds to reality." If Hugh Hefner's hedonistic motto, "If it feels good, do it," characterized the 1960s, the rallying cry of relativism, "If it works for you, it's right," describes today's youth.

The Division of Truth

Why do youth think they can pick and choose religious beliefs, as if they were merely choosing movies to watch or iTunes to download? In *Total Truth*, Nancy Pearcey explains that contemporary culture holds widely divergent opinions about the concept of truth itself. According to Pearcey, culture has drawn a dividing line between the sacred and the secular, and ascribed religion, morality, and "private" understanding to the sacred, subjective realm, and science and "public" knowledge to the secular, objective realm.¹¹ "In short," she writes, "the private sphere is awash in moral relativism....Religion is not considered an objective truth to which we *submit*, but only a matter of personal taste which we choose...."¹² As Pearcey has realized, religious and moral claims are considered matters of personal preference rather than knowledge claims about the real world.

As a result of this cultural divide, teenagers have been trained to compartmentalize their belief in God away from their daily lives—to keep their beliefs about God in the private, subjective realm and not to consider them objective knowledge. This compartmentalization is revealed most clearly in the way youth prioritize spirituality.

A study by the Harvard University Institute of Politics revealed that seventy percent of students consider religion "somewhat" or "very" important in their lives.¹³ This at first may seem like a sign of spiritual vigor but when researchers asked students what they got excited about, what pressing issues they were dealing with, and what experiences or routines seemed most important in their lives, their answers were radically different. Rather than talking about their religious identities, beliefs, or practices, most teens talked about their friends, their My Space accounts, music, romantic interests, or other personal issues.

Christian Smith observed, "What a number of teens apparently mean in reporting that religion is very important in their lives is that religion is very important in the strictly religious sector of their lives. Religion influences them religiously—that is, when it comes to church attendance, basic beliefs, prayer, and so on—but not necessarily in other ways."¹⁴ He then concluded, "What our interviews almost never uncovered among teens was a view that religion summons people to embrace an obedience to truth regardless of the personal consequences or rewards."¹⁵

This division into realms of truth poses no problem for some religions, but biblical scrutiny exposes it as incompatible with orthodox Christianity. We must help young people to grasp that what makes Christianity unique is that it is identified with the life, work, character, and person of Jesus Christ—who walked on the earth 2,000 years ago and claimed to be both the Son of God and God-in-the-flesh.

Many religions of the world are based on timeless principles, but Christianity is based primarily on the historical resurrection of Jesus. Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 15:17: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.” Christianity is “total truth,” in that it encompasses all of reality, sacred as well as secular, public as well as private.

One of the greatest obstacles we face in ministry to youth today is their distorted view of truth. This is why I spend nearly three weeks teaching my high school seniors about the nature of truth. Paul warns us in his second letter to the church in Thessalonica that people perish for not loving truth (2 Thess. 2:8–10). Unless we rebuild the foundations of truth among our youth, they will be “tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men” (Eph. 4:14).

Do Youth Really Care about Truth?

Philosopher Francis Beckwith once had a skeptical student who questioned him every day in his ethics class. One day she asked, with an air of superiority, as though her question would undo her professor’s philosophical foundations, “Dr. Beckwith, why is truth *so* important?” After thinking for a moment he replied, “Well, would you like the *true* answer or the *false* one?” In other words, her very question assumed the existence, knowability, and importance of truth.

Deeply rooted in the hearts of young people is the awareness that truth is a necessary bedrock for life. We should not dismiss the fact that youth believe in truth, that they want truth, and that they organize their lives around what they believe is ultimately true. They just need help to clear away the misconceptions about truth that they unwittingly have adopted from our culture.

Dan Kimball, pastor at Vintage Faith Church, reinforces this truth in his book *The Emerging Church*: “I am finding that emerging generations really aren’t opposed to truth and biblical morals. When people sense that you aren’t just dogmatically opinionated due to blind faith and that you aren’t just attacking other people’s beliefs out of fear, they are remarkably open to intelligent and loving discussion about choice and truth.”¹⁶ I have found that although they clearly are turned off by people who arrogantly think they have all the answers, *young people respond positively to someone who can lovingly lead them to truth.*

The purpose of apologetics is *not* merely to win an argument, but to draw people into a loving relationship with their Creator. It often is our attitude that speaks more powerfully than our words; thus, if we have the greatest arguments in the world but have not love, it profits us nothing (1 Cor. 13:1–3). The old axiom, “People don’t care how much you know, unless they know how much you care” still applies.

More than ever, we need to follow the advice of Peter and give our youth reasons for believing in the truth that concurs with reality, yet do it with gentleness and respect. Living the truth is just as important as defending it, especially for a generation that judges truth by how well it “works.” This crucial concept is worth repeating: *living the truth before a teenager is just as important as defending it.*

Clearing Up the Confusion

How then do we help young people see that Jesus’ claims are about objective reality and simply cannot be true for one person, and false for another? I once performed the following experiment with my students. I placed a jar of marbles in front of them and asked, “How many marbles are in the jar?” They responded with different guesses: 221, 168, and so on. Then, after giving them the correct number of 188 I asked, “Which of you is closest to being right?” They all agreed that 168 was the closest guess, and they all agreed that the number of marbles was a matter of fact, not personal preference.

Then I passed out *Starburst* candies to each one of my students and asked, “Which flavor is right?” As you might expect, they all felt this was an unfair question because each person had a preference that was

right for him or herself. “That is correct,” I concluded. “The right flavor has to do with a person’s preferences. It is a matter of subjective opinion or personal preference, not objective fact.”

Then I asked, “Are religious claims like the number of marbles in a jar, or are they a matter of personal opinion, like preference for flavors of candy?” Most of my students concluded that religious claims belonged to the category of candy preference. I then opened the door for us to discuss the objective claims of Christianity. I pointed out to my students that Christianity is based on an objective fact in history—the resurrection of Jesus. I reminded them that while many people may reject the historical resurrection of Jesus, it is not the type of claim that can be “true for you, but not true for me.” The tomb either was empty or it was occupied on the third day—there is no middle ground. I also pointed out that Christianity has an objective view of creation, the nature of the triune God, the nature of man, and the authenticity of the Bible.

A STRATEGY FOR CHANGE

Once we have cleared up the confusion about truth, we have laid the groundwork for beginning to help teenagers understand creation, the historical Jesus, the problem of evil, and other important apologetic issues. In my own work with teens, I have found four helpful strategies.

First, help teens develop the skills of critical thinking. In our fast-paced, image-oriented culture, youth are more persuaded by images and stories than reasoned proofs. Few have cultivated the ability to think critically, yet critical thinking is the very skill they need to distinguish truth from error. All young people should be able to identify self-refuting statements such as, “There is no truth,” ad-hominem fallacies such as, “Christianity is false because there are so many hypocrites,” and appeals to emotion such as, “We must legalize abortion because so many unwanted babies get abused in the world.” Basic logic skills are indispensable for training students in apologetics. I regularly bring in to my students examples of logical fallacies from magazines or the newspaper to help them identify poor thinking.

Second, use examples from the media to teach biblical truths. Studies indicate that students spend more time interacting with the media outside the classroom (e.g., the Internet, television, video games) than they do interacting with subject material in the classroom, which makes media examples powerful tools. I try to incorporate a media example nearly every time I teach youth. Film clips and song lyrics are great springboards for discussion and thoughtful reflection on issues pertaining to God and society. One of the best lessons I had in high school about thinking biblically and critically was watching *Schindler’s List* with my family and interacting with my dad over dinner about truth, morality, and God. I remember that valuable lesson to this day.

Third, ask pointed questions. The best way to help teenagers learn how to defend their faith often is through probing questions and interaction rather than “preaching” or lectures. This is how Jesus Himself taught: When Jesus was challenged or asked a question, He often responded with a question. I often begin a lesson with a thought-provoking question (which also helps me to find out what my students *truly* believe about a subject). For example, I recently asked, “Does it benefit a couple to live together before they get married?” About half of my students thought that it does, and this gave me the chance to challenge their thinking and to help them come to terms with a biblical perspective on marriage.

Fourth, help teenagers put their knowledge into practice. Without application, apologetics is often simply a head game that makes little difference in their lives so we must provide supervised opportunities for them to apply what they have learned in real-world situations. I know of one group, for example, that has taken Christian students on a trip to the University of California at Berkeley¹⁷ to expose them to secular thought *before* they go to college. The youth were not thrown into this situation suddenly, but trained for months before the trip on defending the Christian faith. Students got connected with Christian groups on campus, but also heard presentations against theism from students involved in Berkeley atheist clubs. The youth were able to interact personally with the atheist students, to ask good questions, and to put their faith on the line. As a result, many of the students walked away with a renewed zeal for learning apologetics.

A Bold Stand for Truth

As I reflect back on my conversations with my student Mike, I realize that his progress developed in a particular fashion. Once Mike realized there were answers to his deepest questions, he started to wonder about how he could share these truths with his non-Christian friends. A key principle that I learned in our discussions is that *when young people find answers to their questions about the Christian faith, they often become bolder in their witness for Christ*. Apologetics training creates confidence and courage. If we want our young people to be bold witnesses for Christ, we must equip them with the intellectual tools to defend their beliefs.

NOTES

1. Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 266.
2. The Web site for the National Study of Youth and Religion is www.youthandreligion.org. The methods of the study as well as the findings are chronicled by Smith in *Soul Searching*.
3. Smith, 89.
4. Glenn Schultz, *Kingdom Education* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1998), 39.
5. George Barna, "Barna Reviews Top Religious Trends of 2005" (December 20, 2005)
6. Smith, 41–45, 74.
7. All Bible quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).
8. Ron Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 128.
9. George Barna, *Real Teens* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), 92.
10. Smith, 144.
11. Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 20.
12. *Ibid.*, 20.
13. As cited in "Youth Culture Update," *YouthWorker Journal* (July/August, 2006): 9.
14. Smith, 138.
15. *Ibid.*, 149.
16. Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 86.
17. See Brett Kunkle, "You're Taking Students Where?!" Student Impact, Stand to Reason, http://www.str.org/site/DocServer/brettkunklenews0602.pdf_1.pdf?docID=903, and "The Berkeley Mission Report," Student Impact, Stand to Reason, <http://www.str.org/site/DocServer/brettkunklenews0603.pdf?docID=882>.