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CAST YOUR BREAD ON THE WATERS: TAKING RISKS AND BEING CREATIVE IN CHRISTIAN WITNESS

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The book of Ecclesiastes has been an enduring source of wisdom throughout my long Christian life. This is especially so in recent years as I relate more to the book's concluding reflections on aging and death, which are edifying in a sobering and poetically unmatched fashion. "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, 'I find no pleasure in them'—before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain" (Eccl. 12:1–2; all references NIV except where noted).

While some find the Preacher's reflections pessimistic or impenetrable, Ecclesiastes is just as much "the living and active" Word of the Lord as is any other book in Holy Scripture (Heb. 4:12). When Jesus said that "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35), Ecclesiastes was included. While some foolishly speak of being "red letter Christians" (focusing on the words of Jesus), we should be "all letter Christians." Jesus underscores this: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (Matt. 5:17–19). We should heed the entire Bible, Ecclesiastes included. But what might it say concerning Christian witness in general and apologetics in particular?

A unifying theme in Ecclesiastes is the uncertainties and injustices of life "under the sun." Even for the man who looks to God for wisdom, much of life is imponderable.

"I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all" (Eccl. 9:11 KJV).

But far from being the counsel of despair, the Preacher takes this uncertainty to heart and considers how to live with wisdom and purpose nonetheless. Many lessons can be mined from this theme, but let us consult the verses that precede the long description on aging referred to above. The Preacher knew from his long life and painstaking observations that life cannot be charted out precisely or trusted to yield particular results, "because time and chance happeneth to them all." ("Chance" does not mean random, since the Preacher knows that God orders all things [12:13–14], but rather "beyond human prediction.") Therefore, Ecclesiastes 11:1–6 (KJV) suggests we should invest in several endeavors, since we cannot know which one (if any) will be successful.

Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.

Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth.

If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth: and if the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be.

He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.

As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all.

In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.

These verses concern agriculture and commerce, but the underlying principle pertains to the use of scarce resources under uncertain conditions. Our lives are short; time is scarce; thus, we should invest wisely. As Moses writes, "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12; see also James 4:13–16; Eph. 5:16).

How might this wisdom apply to Christian witness and apologetics? By Christian witness, I mean the responsible presentation of our Christian convictions. As Paul says, “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17; see also Matt. 6:33; 1 Cor. 10:33).

Apologetics concerns our Christian witness as it bears on the rational defense of the objective truth and its pertinence to all of life is (1 Pet. 3:15; Jude 6). While all Christ-followers are summoned to give a reason for their hope, some of us, by the grace of God, have been given the time, interest, and skills to specialize in this necessary endeavor. We need both the preparation and the opportunities to teach what we have learned. How we need the fear of God with respect to knowledge (Prov. 1:7; 9:10)! “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check” (James 3:1–2; see also Mal. 2:7–8; 2 Tim. 2:15; Heb. 5:11–14).

However, when we are ready for apologetic engagement, *we need gigs* (in jazz lingo). Jesus said, “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:14–16).

There is a delicate balance between being too shy or promoting oneself self-importantly in public ministry. We can only learn this balance through prayer, trial, and error. But if we have a justified confidence in our apologetic abilities, we should seek opportunities to use them for the glory of God. We cannot expect the unbelieving world to knock on our doors, go to our apologetics conferences, call our cells, email our accounts, or message us on Facebook. Often, we must take the initiative. This is where Ecclesiastes 11:1–6 speaks to us. We must cast our apologetic “bread on the waters” and “invest in seven ventures, yes in eight.” As Jesus said, “The field is ripe for harvest,” and we need those who sow (apologists) and those who reap (evangelists). Since we walk by faith, not by sight, we cannot know ahead of time which of our outreach ideas will be accepted, which will be rejected, and which will be ignored. But that is no reason to hide our lamp under a bowl (Matt. 5:16). Here are examples from my ministry.

Recently, I read in the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL that Sean McDowell was having success with giving question-and-answer sessions with atheist groups. (Since the advent of the “new atheism” of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and others, these groups are increasing in number.) Instead of a debate, Sean offers himself to the atheists with no agenda except to help atheists learn more about Christians and vice versa. I was

excited by this idea, and offered to do such an event with an atheist group. One club responded with insults and patronizing remarks. Another group was interested and wanted me to debate one of their spokesmen. I accepted, and did the debate recently on a prestigious secular campus. It was a friendly exchange and worth doing. I know of one unbeliever who was impressed to take Christianity more seriously and desired to read my work on the subject.

My schemes often fail. Having met the president of a Buddhist graduate school in my area, I asked if he was interested in helping set up a dialogue (Buddhists do not like debates) on Christianity and Buddhism. He seemed interested and took my business card. But after several emails, I gave up on the idea. Nevertheless, I have not forgotten the school and may pursue some other approach, especially since that president has left. In the past few years, I have gotten to know an atheist philosophy professor at a local university. I even endorsed one of his books. He invited me to speak in his classroom on my book *Christian Apologetics* (IVP 2011). I did not have to pray for discernment on taking him up on that. I had a delightful time for two hours in his class with about twenty students. Given this opportunity, I asked the professor if he would like to co-teach a class with me at his school called "Atheism and Theism." This class had been taught there before. He declined for several reasons, but there were no hard feelings.

Having been a philosopher and apologist for many years (see Eccl. 12:5), I could recite many stories of success and failure. By the grace of God, I do not think I have done poorly enough in any public setting so as to bring disgrace on the name of Christ, but I have failed to win an audience many, many times. On the other hand, I have sometimes declined opportunities I should have taken. But I keep on trying, casting my bread on the waters, hoping to be neither foolhardy nor reticent. May all who read these words develop their apologetic skills and therefore be active in seeking opportunities to explain, defend, and commend the matchless gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul should inspire us: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Rom. 1:16-17; see also 2 Tim. 1:7).

If we are not ashamed of the gospel, neither should we be afraid to propose many apologetic ventures for the sake of the gospel, even at the risk of rejection and disappointment. The cause is just; the time is short; the need is great. —*Douglas Groothuis*

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