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HOW CULTURE HAS CHANGED SINCE THE RELEASE OF *EVIDENCE THAT DEMANDS A VERDICT*

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In the late 1950s, my father Josh McDowell began his investigation of the Christian faith. He was challenged by some Christian college students to investigate historically the reliability of the Bible, the deity of Christ, and the resurrection of Jesus. Thinking these claims preposterous, he set out to collect the research refuting them. Surprised by the historical evidence for Christianity, my father became a Christian. A few years later, when he was traveling worldwide as a debater and speaker for Campus Crusade for Christ (now known as Cru), he decided to compile his research into the book *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. The book was an instant success and has since sold millions of copies and been translated into dozens of languages worldwide.

As his son, the success of this book humbles me. I hardly can speak anywhere in the world without people sharing how *Evidence* either helped them keep their faith in college or brought them to faith in the first place. Many scholars today, such as William Lane Craig, credit *Evidence* as being formative in their own faith journey. My dad has written more than 150 books, but *Evidence* (and probably *More than a Carpenter*) is arguably his most significant work.

In fall 2017, we are releasing a completely updated and revised version. It is still the classic format of *Evidence* (research notes that include lengthy quotes and context), but it contains more than 50 percent new content. As I worked with more than thirty grad students and a dozen scholars to update the book, I had to wrestle with some pressing questions, such as: *What new issues have arisen since Evidence was first published, and how do we address them? Is the format of Evidence still relevant? How has culture changed since the early '70s, when Evidence burst on the scene?*

In this article, we are going to focus on the last issue, namely, how culture has changed since *Evidence* first launched. While there are many issues that could be discussed, the purpose of this article is to highlight five cultural shifts that directly affect evangelism and apologetics today.

OVERLOAD OF INFORMATION

When *Evidence* was first released, its value came from offering information that previously was unavailable, or at least extremely difficult to ascertain. Few people were even aware that there was compelling historical evidence for Christianity.

Because he had saved a sizable sum of money from a painting business, my father traveled to libraries and museums in Europe and the Middle East to investigate rare books personally and to see ancient manuscripts with his own eyes. Since few people had the money, time, or inclination to pursue such a quest, when they heard about the book, many were thrilled to discover that they could access and evaluate evidence for the faith directly. Information on the veracity of the faith was scarce, and so *Evidence* released into an audience with instant demand.

The updated version of *Evidence*, however, releases in a culture with the opposite problem: *abundant* information. There is an overload of information entirely accessible in the palm of the hand. Every second, roughly six thousand tweets are tweeted, over forty thousand questions are Googled, and more than two million emails are sent. And there are approximately five billion web pages (not including the Deep Web).¹ What took massive resources a generation ago is cheaply and quickly available to anyone today with an Internet connection.

Does this make books such as *Evidence*, or other apologetics resources, such as the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, defunct? Surprisingly, I think it makes them *more* important. First, quality resources and brands can provide *trust*. In our digital age, trust has been coined “the new currency.”² With endless voices vying for consideration, people want to know who is worthy of attention and trust. Second, quality resources save people *time*. Sure, apologetics information is widely available and free, but do most people have the time to sort through all the websites, books, and dissertations for themselves? It’s doubtful.

As apologists today, we must develop trust through our character and the quality of our work. We must also present material in a way that matches how people consume content.

INCREASED SKEPTICISM

My father began his quest as a skeptic. While there have been skeptics since long before the birth of Christ, skepticism seems to be on the rise. Why?

There were quite a few conspiracies surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy. A common underlying assumption was *if there were just more cameras, and more information, we could have ascertained the truth*. Fastforward to 9/11. Were there more conspiracies or less? Even though we have far more pictures, videos, testimonies, and information about the 9/11 attacks than the JFK assassination, there are far more conspiracy theories! Why? The answer is somewhat counterintuitive, but true: *greater amounts of information can increase skepticism*.

Given the endless amount of information online, and the vast diversity of opinions, people often wonder, “Can I know anything at all?”³ Obviously, if people

don't think they can know the truth of anything in general, then they certainly won't think they can know the truth of Christianity in particular.

Before discussing the evidence for Christianity with nonbelievers, it is often wise to first discuss how we know things. This is why, in the updated version of *Evidence*, we include chapters addressing skepticism, demonstrating the reality of first principles, and responding to objections against the knowability and importance of truth. As apologists, we need to show the intellectual bankruptcy of radical skepticism. And we also need to help people see that they really *do* know some truths. For instance, the April 3, 2017, cover of *Time* says, "Is Truth Dead?" Either answer, ironically, assumes that truth still matters.

Before getting to the evidence for the faith, it is often first important to help people understand that they really do know things in general, and if so, then there is no good reason *in principle* they cannot know the truth of Christianity in particular.

THE NEW TOLERANCE

When my father first began giving evidence-based apologetics presentations on college campuses in the 1960s and 1970s, people often responded with comments such as, "Prove it" or "Show me more evidence." Students largely assumed truth existed and that reason was one means of finding it.

But in the past few years, my father has encountered different kinds of comments (and so have I). Rather than focusing on truth, students often say things such as, "Who are you to make such a claim? That's intolerant" or "You're bigoted for claiming to know truth." The importance is no longer on *truth* but on how a claim allegedly makes someone *feel*. Authority has shifted from what is true to the feelings and beliefs of the individual. *Feelings now trump truth*. On this view, if you make someone feel bad, even if you are unaware of it and don't intend it, then you are insensitive and hateful.

To grasp this shift, the key is to see that the meaning of many words such as dignity, respect, diversity, inclusion, and tolerance has changed.⁴ For instance, tolerance used to mean to recognize and respect others when you don't share their beliefs. Yet today tolerance means respecting that everyone's values, beliefs, practices, and truth claims are equal. On this new view of tolerance, the only "sin" is to criticize someone else's beliefs or practices. R. R. Reno captures this sentiment: "A friend was visiting his family in San Francisco recently. On a city bus, the man next to him set about to inject heroin into his arm. Nobody said anything. To object is to sin against nonjudgmentalism."⁵

As apologists, we certainly need to point out the incoherence and tragedy of individualism and nonjudgmentalism. We cannot stop speaking truth, for it is truth that sets people free, but it is more critical than ever that we speak truth with a heart of compassion and love. In a culture that writes off people who believe in evangelism and natural marriage as intolerant extremists,⁶ we must show people through our words *and* lives that Jesus is the one who truly offers the good life.

BROKEN FAMILIES AND BROKEN LIVES

In 1960, roughly when my father first set out to research *Evidence*, nearly three-quarters of kids lived in a traditional home with two married parents (73 percent). Today it is less than half (46 percent).⁷ As a result, many kids are growing up without the love and guidance of a father in the home. And the consequences are devastating.

In his book for *Scientific American*, Paul Raeburn notes that fatherlessness has a *negative* effect on children, such as contributing to criminal behavior, early sexual activity, out-of-wedlock births, lower educational achievement, depression, alcohol abuse, and poverty.⁸ As a result of fatherlessness (and other forms of relational breakdown), there is rise in anxiety and depression among young people across all demographics.⁹ Technology cannot solve this problem. In fact, as Sherry Turkle has argued, technology often exacerbates loneliness.¹⁰

Why is this important? Our relationships shape how we see truth. Before my father was a Christian, the idea of a heavenly father was distasteful to him. After all, his own father was a drunk. Why would he want another father-type figure in his life? While the evidence for Christianity got my father's attention, it was ultimately the *love* of God, which he came to understand through a mentoring relationship with a pastor that drew him to Christ.

For some people today who are experiencing relational brokenness, our greatest apologetic can be our love — for God, for fellow believers, and for others. We need to offer people careful arguments for Christianity *and* relational healing.

ENDLESS OPTIONS

A few decades ago, people had limited options for most areas of life. While there was a variety of sodas, for instance, the real question seemed to boil down to Coke vs. Pepsi. And yet today, there is an endless variety of sodas to choose from (as well as energy drinks, smoothies, and coffee selections). And if you're not satisfied with available options, buy your own soda-making machine, and personalize both the fizz and flavor!

When my father first wrote *Evidence*, people certainly had heard of Islam, Hinduism, and other world religions, but these simply were not live options for most people. Atheists were even a smaller minority (and certainly less vocal) than they are today. Most people defined themselves as belonging to some religion, and the most common affiliation was Christianity.

And yet today, like with soda, religious options are endless. There are Eastern religions, Western religions, new religious movements, and even a growing Jedi faith.¹¹ Nevertheless, while people are turning away from organized religion, they are still drawn to Jesus. Even in an endless sea of religious options, the person and character of Jesus is uniquely attractive. Apologists today must bring attention first and foremost to the person of Jesus.

Culture has changed radically since the release of *Evidence*. The information revolution has transformed how we understand and process truth. And yet apologetics

is as important as it has ever been. While the gospel message remains the same, and evidence still matters, we must be willing to adapt our strategy to reach this new generation.

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NOTES

- 1 Stephanie Pappas, "How Big Is the Internet, Really?" *Live Science*, March 18, 2016, <http://www.livescience.com/54094-how-big-is-the-internet.html>.
- 2 Dorote Lucci, "Trust: The New Currency in the Digital Age," *Huffington Post*, January 27, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dorote-lucci/trustthe-new-currency-in-_b_14228792.html.
- 3 I wrote an entire blog on the question of whether we know anything at all. See Sean McDowell, "With Endless Information, Can We Know Anything at All?" November 18, 2016, <http://seanmcdowell.org/blog/with-endless-information-can-we-know-anything-atall>.
- 4 See Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *The Beauty of Intolerance* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Press, 2016), 21.
- 5 R. R. Reno, "While We're at It," *First Things*, April 2017, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2017/04/while-were-at-it>.
- 6 See David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Good Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 11–23.
- 7 "Parenting in America," *Pew Research*, December 17, 2015, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/17/1-the-american-family-today/>.
- 8 Paul Raeburn, *Do Fathers Matter? What Science Is Telling Us about the Parent We've Overlooked* (New York: Scientific American, 2014), 221.
- 9 Susanna Schrobsdorff, "The Kids Are Not All Right," *Time*, November 7, 2016, 47.
- 10 Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).
- 11 Tim Donnelly, "Thousands of People Have Converted to the Jedi Faith," *New York Post*, December 14, 2015, <http://nypost.com/2015/12/14/the-jedi-faith-is-very-real-and-itssurging-in-popularity/>.