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Rethinking Apologetics as an
Entry Strategy for Missions in Europe

OUACHITA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY
SPRING 2024 HONORS THESIS
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Abstract

In my thesis, I propose two questions. Firstly, “Does apologetics play a role in modern-day missions at all?” When discussing this question with current missionaries, the answer became apparent: apologetics can be an effective tool to aid in missions, but it does not prove effective or even beneficial in every cultural context. This realization begs the following question: “In what kind of cultural context can apologetics help rather than hinder missions?” Through my research, I found that the post-modern, secular context of Europe provides a ripe harvest for apologetics in missions. Throughout my paper, I explore a broad biblical framework for apologetics in missions then expound specifically on the need of apologetics in European missions. A critical aspect of this thesis includes excerpts from the interviews I conducted with missionaries, cross-cultural strategists, and missiologists, as their insight ultimately enabled me to construct my conclusion.

My interest in Europe arose as I worked with Breakthrough, a ministry in Poland in partnership with Campus Ministries at Ouachita Baptist University and the International Mission Board. Through weekly discussions with my Polish conversation partner on Polish culture, history, faith, and life, I realized that post-modernism and secular academia gripped her worldview. As we discussed spiritual topics, her hesitations to become a follower of Jesus fell into two categories: either intellectual, focusing on science or the complicated history of Christendom. Or deeply personal, surrounding her own negative experiences and that of others within the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. Conversations with my Polish friend sparked my interest in European missions and the potential role of apologetics in mission work. I wondered if apologetics could be useful in reaching my Polish friend with the Gospel. As we continued to converse, I found that she responded attentively and enthusiastically to apologetics discussion within our friendship. All this ultimately led me to explore the topic further.

Introduction to Apologetics

Apologetics derives from the Greek word *apologia*, which means “reasoned defense.” It does not signify apologizing for one’s Christian faith nor verbally attacking those who think differently. Rather, apologetics is the winsome art and precise science of defending the validity of the Christian faith. When correctly practiced, apologetics involves tact, compassion, active listening, and interpersonal communication. Yet, as Joseph E Torres explains, “Apologetics doesn’t stand alone. By its nature, apologetics is an integrative discipline, utilizing multiple fields of study to corroborate claims of the Bible.”¹ There are five methods of apologetics: classical, evidentialist, presuppositional, cumulative, and cultural. As it pertains to our discussion on missions in Europe, we will specifically address the classical (also called reasonable or philosophical), evidentialist, and cultural (also called imaginative) because these methods can be best utilized on the mission field compared to others. This is not to say that the other methods would be ineffective on the field. However, these are the methods I have found to be the most practical for implementing apologetics in cross-cultural conversations.

Apologetics Methodology

The classical approach comprises a two-step method associated with prolific apologists such as Thomas Aquinas, William Lane Craig, R.C. Sproul, and Norman Geisler. The first step of the classical approach is to establish God’s existence (theism) through philosophical arguments. These arguments include the argument for God from causation (the cosmological argument) and the impossibility of an infinite regress of moments before the present one (the Kalam cosmological argument). After establishing a firm foundation of theism, the classical apologist progresses to the second step, which entails introducing historical arguments that

¹ Joseph E Torres, “Apologetics: Many Approaches, One Goal,” Northamericanmissionboard.com (January 10, 2024) Online: <https://www.namb.net/apologetics/resource/apologetics-many-approaches-one-goal/>.

present theism alone as insufficient, leaving Christianity as the only reasonable option. Here, Torres notes that the apologist might “address the challenges of religious pluralism, the reliability and preservation of the biblical text, with their centerpiece as the historical resurrection of Jesus Christ.”²

The evidentialist approach resembles the classical in several ways. However, it is different in that it suggests one step rather than two. Some well-known modern apologists who hold this method include Josh McDowell, John Warwick Montgomery, and Gary Habermas. As Habermas writes, “Evidentialism may be characterized as the ‘one-step’ approach to this question, in that historical evidence can serve as a species of argument for God. Instead of having to prove God’s existence before moving to specific evidence (the “two-step” method), the evidentialist treats one or more historical arguments as being able both to indicate God’s existence and activity and to indicate which variety of theism is true.”³ For the evidentialist, well-presented historical arguments, such as the reliability of the resurrection of Christ and the Bible, answer the essential questions of God’s existence that get addressed in step one of the classical approach.

Lastly, according to Paul Gould, cultural apologetics can be defined as “The work of establishing the Christian voice, conscience, and imagination within a culture so that Christianity is seen as true and satisfying, and it has both a global and local component.”⁴ C.S. Lewis’ work contributed to laying the foundation of cultural apologetics. Lewis explains that human

² Torres.

³ Gary R. Habermas, “Evidential Apologetics,” in *Five Views on Apologetics* Ed. By Steven B. Cowen (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 92.

⁴ Paul Gould, “The Task of Cultural Apologetics,” *StandtoReason.com* (January 12, 2024) Online: <https://www.str.org/w/the-task-of-cultural-apologetics>.

imagination and reason must work together. In Lewis's words, imagination is the "organ of meaning," and reason is the "organ of truth." In other words, "Through meaning, imagination furnishes the material with which reason works."⁵ Gould is careful to emphasize in his book that one can be a classical apologist, an evidentialist, a cumulative case apologist, a presuppositionalist, or a Reformed Epistemologist and still benefit from the approach of cultural apologetics he suggests in his book. Thus, cultural apologetics moves beyond the question of which methodology best fits apologetics. Instead, it capitalizes on apologetics methods that focus on reason, imagination, and human conscience, integrating them into a "vision of what it means to be an embodied human that shapes and is shaped by culture."⁶

Not every apologetics method is or will be well-received. Classical apologist William Lane Craig claims that cultural apologetics constitutes a different apologetics entirely than the classical model. Craig makes this claim on the basis that cultural apologetics is not concerned with epistemological issues of justification and warrant. In essence, Craig believes cultural apologetics does not attempt to show in any positive sense that Christianity is true.⁷ In his view, cultural apologetics merely explores consequences for humanity, society, and culture should Christianity be false. However, Gould disagrees, contending in his book that cultural apologetics is concerned with the truth and justification of Christianity. Cultural apologetics works to present plausible answers to universal human longing. In the process, cultural apologists desire to create outcomes that reflect the truth, beauty, and goodness of Christianity. Ultimately, faithful cultural

⁵ Meghan Joy Riles, "What Is Cultural Apologetics?," Anunexpectedjournal.com (January 11, 2024) Online: <https://anunexpectedjournal.com/what-is-cultural-apologetics/>.

⁶ Gould, 24.

⁷ Ibid.

apologetics not only establishes the *truth* of Christianity. But it goes one step further than classical and evidential apologetics to establish its *desirability*.

Apologetics in Missions: Culture Matters

Classical, evidential, and cultural apologetics play a role in discipleship and evangelism on the mission field. At the same time, exactly how and why these methods are utilized in missions vary according to the needs of the people and their cultural context. As William Lane Craig writes, “The Gospel is never heard in isolation. It is always heard against the background of the cultural milieu in which one lives.”⁸ What may work for an American atheist likely will not prove effective for a theistic Muslim or a pantheistic Hindu. For example, in Middle Eastern contexts where Islam remains a predominant religion, the causal and Kalam arguments of the classical method will not appeal to Muslims due to their fixed belief in theism. Evidential arguments such as that of the reliability of the Bible and the resurrection of Christ might appeal more to those influenced by Islam. In a Hinduist context, missionaries might combine apologetic methods to navigate the tension of myth, history, and the pantheist worldview of Hinduism. At the same time, while many Europeans retain a nominal affiliation with Christianity, only 10 percent remain practicing believers and less than half of those are evangelical in theology.⁹ Thus, as missionaries encounter a post-Christian context in Europe, they may utilize all three methods in different situations with different people, depending on their specific questions and religious background.

Is Apologetics Hurting or Helping the Missionary Task? Insight from Missionary Jamie Naramore

⁸ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway 2008), 20.

⁹ Craig, 21.

There are many instances where apologetics in missions could hurt rather than help Christian witness. Cross-cultural strategist and missionary Jamie Naramore from the Arkansas Baptist Convention recalls an example. Naramore attempted to use apologetics to defend the historicity of the biblical narrative, specifically that of the New Testament, in a conversation with a dear Muslim friend in Egypt. Naramore says “He brought up extra-biblical sources (such as the Gospel of Thomas and Gospel of Barnabas) that Muslims are taught prove the corruption of the New Testament by Christians. I was well- prepared for a defense, having studied the topic extensively.” As Naramore continued to explain his position, he remembers at one point his friend “finally had enough.” Naramore’s Muslim friend asked, “Are you suggesting that a Muslim created fake documents or sayings to make it look like the Quran was right and Christians were wrong?” to which he replied, “I did not say that, but you seem to have drawn that as a possible conclusion based on the history.” Naramore reflects on the situation: “I thought I was smart, clever, and now witty. He, however, jumped across the table and tried to fight me. In my effort to win an argument I had lost sight of the individual, and almost lost a friend.” In the end, Naramore and his friend reconciled their friendship but their conversations were never quite the same. Naramore says, “Apologetics had removed a hurdle, but then went another step and burnt – rather than built – a bridge.”¹⁰

Addressing Misunderstandings and Misuses of Apologetics in Missions

Experiences like Naramore’s tend to create opposition against apologetics among the missionary community. This is especially true if one’s idea of apologetics has been formed by pictures of brash, argumentative street evangelists or heated intellectual debates on a stage.

¹⁰ Jamie Naramore, Personal Interview. January 8, 2024.

Jonathan Kiehl is the Founder of the Family Missions Company and is a missionary in Ecuador. He argues that apologetics and missions cannot coincide. “Missions is about evangelization and the Good News, whereas apologetics is often about winning an argument,” Kiehl states.¹¹ Is the goal of apologetics in missions something as trivial as winning an argument? When the goals and methods of apologetics are clearly defined, apologetics can be lovingly effective on the mission field. Consider this analogy. The potential of apologetics in missions is like that of fire. In a fire pit, that fire is useful to dispel the cold and create warmth, gathering people around. Yet ignited and untamed outside the bounds of the fire pit, that same fire causes immense destruction, sending people *away* rather than *to* its flames. When utilized within the proper bounds and context, apologetics is useful to both cut through cultural confusion with clarity and address intellectual roadblocks to the Gospel. Yet when left untamed, unchecked, and unaccountable, apologetics burns rather than builds bridges between the unbeliever and the believer, as Naramore’s story recounts. If used in missions, the goal of apologetics should always center around building bridges between the believer and unbeliever. As Naramore notes, “Apologetics is important, though of course the person is priority. Apologetics always needs to be undertaken in a “truth in love” manner, and always mindful of the audience – whether broad or individual – and contextualized accordingly.”¹² Apologetics in missions should gather people *around* the fire, not repel them from it. With this said, what boundaries can be put in place to ensure that apologetics is practiced in this way? How can apologetics help rather than hinder the missionary task?

Apologetics in Missions Needs the Holy Spirit

¹¹ Jonathan Kiehl, “The Problem with Apologetics,” Familymissionscompany.com (February 2, 2024) Online: <https://www.familymissionscompany.com/the-problem-with-apologetics/>.

¹² Naramore.

To form a proper, biblical approach to apologetics, it is essential that we acknowledge the vital role of the Holy Spirit in all apologetics efforts. While I could not find a specific source describing it as so, perhaps one argument that could be raised against apologetics in missions is that it sacrifices the power of the Holy Spirit on the altar of human intellect. Rebecca Drumsta explores how the typical, evangelical model of apologetics, common in Christian circles today, has gotten some things wrong. A quick google search will show you that most individuals claiming to be apologist or to have a love of apologetics are evangelical and fundamental Christian. Teachings on the Holy Spirit...are basically non-existent within most of those environments.”¹³ Drumsta is correct in that many teachings on apologetics today do not acknowledge the critical role the Holy Spirit plays in it. To maintain a biblical view of apologetics in missions, we have to revisit and reemphasize the Holy Spirit’s fundamental role. Arthur Khachatryan, a former agnostic, writes, “Christian apologetics does not compete with the Holy Spirit. It is consistent with how God wants us to worship him. It glorifies him. It is consistent with how others have drawn people into the Kingdom...at least for me, you would not be reading any of this had it not been [for the Holy Spirit].”¹⁴ As Khachatryan explains, it is imperative that missionary’s partner with the Holy Spirit, operating not out of the wisdom of man but that of Christ which is “first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere” (James 3:17).

In submission to the Holy Spirit, missionaries attain all they need to navigate challenging conversations with unbelievers tactfully and gently, realizing they “do not wrestle against flesh

¹³ Rebecca Drumsta, “Christian Apologetics is Not the Solution to Faith Deconstruction,” Rebeccadrumsta.com (April 14, 2024) Online: <https://rebeccadrumsta.com/blog/christian-apologetics-is-not-the-solution-to-faith-deconstruction>.

¹⁴ Arthur Khachatryan, “Does Christian Apologetics Compete with the Holy Spirit?,” Cltruth.com (February 5th 2024) Online: <https://www.cltruth.com/2017/christian-apologetics-compete-holy-spirit/>.

and blood, but against rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). With this perspective, beliefs inform goals. The goal of apologetics, then, is not to destroy someone or win an argument against them. Instead, with the real Enemy—Satan—in view, the primary goal of apologetics is to point people to Christ out of a disposition to love and serve them. Not only through the truths shared but also *how* these truths are shared. Missionaries who practice apologetics should heed the advice of Proverbs 18:2 and not be like one who takes “no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.” Controlled by the Holy Spirit rather than their flesh, they should aim to be “quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” (James 1:19). Ultimately, in this sense, apologetics engages not only the intellect but also the spiritual battle between light and darkness. To win not only minds but also hearts to Christ, the Holy Spirit needs to be the one leading our apologetics efforts. Not us and our desire to be right or win an argument.

Apologetics in Missions Needs the Love of God

The Holy Spirit will never lead believers to do or say anything that undermines the heart and character of Christ. For example, yelling, brash speech, manipulation tactics, and a zeal for God void of knowledge (Romans 10:2) are not reflective of Christ’s heart for the unbeliever. Thus, they should never accompany apologetics practice in missions. A believer can present a beautifully eloquent and coherent defense of the Gospel yet if they “do not have love, [they] gain nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:3). The love of God, then, is the foremost context in which apologetics should be practiced in missions. This entails a deep love for Christ, the Gospel, and the people to whom one is called to minister. Before ever implementing apologetics in missions, believers should take inventory of their hearts, asking the Lord “Search me, O God, and know

my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Psalm 139:23-24). If we lack the love of God, our apologetics efforts will be mere intellectual pursuit, void of eternal value. With the love of God, however, one’s study, practice, and implementation of apologetics in missions can become a worshipful, Gospel-advancing effort for the nations.

Apologetics in Missions Needs Relationship

Aside from the Holy Spirit's direction and the love of God, apologetics is generally best practiced within the bounds of trusted relationship. This does not imply that the Holy Spirit cannot work through other means, such as conversations with a stranger. However, unless clearly prompted by the Holy Spirit, it might be best to steer clear of apologetic-based discussions until a relationship with an unbeliever has been nurtured. To provide an example of what this might look like in missions, let us return to the Polish ministry example. Over the course of my 4 years in college, I have built a friendship with a Polish student through the International Mission Board. I never approached friendship *planning* to utilize apologetics. However, after a few conversations in, I learned she grew up Catholic but was currently agnostic. She loved the traditions of her youth but lacked a personal relationship with Christ. She also viewed her faith as primarily works-based (we have, as a result, had many conversations about the nature of grace). Aside from her religious background, it became clear to me that media, post-modernism, and secular humanism shaped her worldview. Before we ever had a direct Gospel conversation or I ever utilized apologetics in our discussions, I communicated to her that I desired to be a student of her culture and background. I attempted to cook a Polish meal and sent her photos, wrote her a Christmas card (and she sent one back too!), researched Polish feasts and traditions, and had many conversations with her, covering topics that may be considered trivial to some,

such as her interests, dreams, goals, and childhood memories. Even still, these conversations remain dear to me. They laid the foundation of friendship, paving the path for many rich Gospel conversations in the future. These conversations ultimately created a trusting bond between us. *Understanding* her became a prerequisite for eventually being *understood* by her. The application here is twofold. My friendship with this Polish student demonstrates the beauty of relational apologetics. Yet it also shows an opportunity for believers to bear God's image more fully in missions.

Apologetics in Missions Needs Imago Dei and Missio Dei

So far, we have covered three principles of apologetics in missions to avoid hindering rather than helping the missionary task: the Holy Spirit, the love of God, and relationship. Within relationship exists the idea of *imago Dei*, the image of God, and *Missio Dei*, the mission of God, which are both critical to a biblical understanding of apologetics in missions. Looking at a history of the Missional Church movement in the late 90s helps us better understand where the church has been recently and is currently in its view of missions. It can also deepen our understanding of apologetics within the context of relationships. Understanding the relationship between *imago Dei* and *missio Dei* can help us love those to whom we are called.

In the late 90s, in response to growing disinterest in missions among the Western church, a group of scholars and churchmen launched the Missional Church movement. The book, "*Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church*," launched the movement. According to George B. Bannister, the professors and pastors who made up the group drew many of their ideas of *missio Dei* from Leslie Newbigin's missionary insights on North American missions. The book essentially capitalizes on the idea that churches in North America lost their missional focus. Its authors reached the consensus that churches had focused too much on numbers, self-

preservation, and the growth of church programs, rather than on the Great Commission. In his dissertation, Fourie van den Berg argues that ideas of *missio Dei* have become fluid among some Christians. Similarly, Fourie van den Berg says, *missio Dei* “was replaced with an “ecclesiocentric understanding of missions... this made mission Dei all about church and church membership, instead of discovering that the church is God’s instrument for missions.”¹⁵ These pastors hoped that Newbigin’s insights would revitalize the Western church, sparking new passion for missional living. While this missional movement left a positive impact in a post-Christian world, it “left so many concepts ill-defined...[resulting] in ambiguity.”¹⁶ Many voices defined *missio Dei* in a variety of ways, resulting in misunderstanding of the concept at large. Perhaps in viewing both *imago Dei* and *missio Dei* as counterparts rather than separate entities, we will form a cohesive picture of these concepts, especially as they apply to apologetics in missions.

Apologetics in Missions: Imago Dei within Mission Dei

Clark D. Fobes argues in his paper that “the image of God and the mission of God or *imago Dei* and *missio Dei* are not separate mandates but complement and inform one another.”¹⁷ *Imago Dei* refers to humans created in God’s image to reflect his character. At the same time, *Missio Dei* refers to God’s mission for humans, restoring *imago Dei* in them through the fulfillment of *missio Dei*. Part of *Missio Dei* is helping others to experience the reality of *Imago Dei*. Missiologist Josh Laxton writes, “In essence, the mission of God is to create a people for

¹⁵ Fourie van den Berg, “*Imago Dei* as *Missio Dei*,” Digital Commons at George Fox University (April 2009).

¹⁶ George B. Bannister, “Missional Apologetics: An Examination of Essential Elements in the Apologetic Approaches of Early Christian Era Apologists in Light of the Mission of Christ to a Pluralistic World,” from Liberty University Rawlings School of Divinity (December 2018), 30.

¹⁷ Clark D. Fobes, “*Imago Dei* in *Missio Dei*: Biblical Foundations for Work and Missions,” from The Evangelical Mission Society (March 2018), 11.

himself (from all peoples) that would reflect his glory in all spheres of life. Therefore, the *missio Dei*, at the core, aims at restoring and renewing the *imago Dei* in men and women.”¹⁸ Joining God on mission, in the context of relationship, helps us bear God’s image more fully. In addition, it enables those with whom we build cross-cultural friendships to bear God’s image more fully as well. How does *Imago Dei* relate to our discussion of apologetics in missions? In missions, it is crucial that we not become fixated on methodology, programs, or apologetic efforts that we lose sight of the people to whom we are called. Rather, we must realize that the mission of God will not be effectively accomplished if we do not engage and interact with unbelievers as people, intricately created and loved by God.

On a practical level, keeping *imago Dei* in hand with *missio Dei* means building friendships with unbelievers and remaining a curious, respectful student of their culture. It also means that as we labor to accomplish *missio Dei*, we as believers get to be among the first to lay out the concept of *Imago Dei* for unbelievers, *both* through our obedience to God’s mission and our value of them as image-bearers of God. As we fulfill *missio Dei*, *imago Dei* must be an underlying factor of all relationships in which apologetics is practiced.

Apologetics in Missions: A Biblical Overview

Apologetics is not a one-way answer to every intellectual or cultural roadblock in missions. Nor is it a weapon to arm one against unbelievers. Instead, it is one of many tools useful in aiding missionaries to reach unbelievers and disciple believers. Through a biblical lens, apologetics should be practiced with these three pillars: the power of the Holy Spirit, the love of God, and relationship motivated by *imago Dei*. During his missionary journey, Paul incorporated

¹⁸ Josh Laxton, “The Convergence of the Mission Dei and the Imago Dei: A Way to Discipleship” Joshlaxton.com (February 4, 2024). Online: <https://joshlaxton.com/2020/08/26/the-convergence-of-the-missio-dei-and-the-imago-dei-a-way-to-understand-discipleship/>.

each of these four pillars, laying a framework of principles for doing apologetics in missions today. In the next section, I will conduct an exegetical overview of three passages in Acts where Paul used apologetics, each in different cultural contexts. From these passages, I hope to first bridge understanding between apologetics in the early church to apologetics now, presenting an argument for Paul as an apologist in his missionary journey. Lastly, I hope to derive scriptural applications from these passages to consider for modern-day missions. Before we enter these exegetical explanations, let us set the scene by considering the overall cultural and historical context of Paul's three missionary journeys.

Paul's First Missionary Journey

Paul shares the Gospel in a myriad of different cultural contexts. He travels over 10,000 miles proclaiming the Gospel, taking him on land and sea through present day Israel, Syria, Turkey, and Greece. In response to the Holy Spirit, the church in Antioch chose Barnabas and Paul to proclaim the gospel (Acts 13:1-3), marking this trip as Paul's first missionary journey. Throughout this journey, Barnabas and Paul travel first to Cyprus then to Antioch in Pisidia, a city in present day West Central Turkey. Then they go to Iconium, Lystra, and Derba, returning through Perga to Antioch. As they stop in each city, their entry strategy includes entering the synagogues to preach Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the true fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises.

Paul's Second Missionary Journey

During Paul's second missionary journey, Barnabas and Paul separate over a disagreement (15:36-40), causing Barnabas to return to Cyprus. Paul went from Jerusalem to the churches in Lystra and Iconium. During this trip, Paul receives a dream in which God calls him

to bring the gospel to Macadamia. Paul crosses the Aegean Sea in present day Greece, traveling down the east coast of Greece. Stopping in Athens, he attempts to proclaim the Gospel in Athens but was met with indifference among the people there (17:16-32). Paul then goes to Corinth; there, he establishes a church that instills in him both great joy and pain as is evident throughout 1 and 2 Corinthians. Traveling through Ephesus, Paul presents a successful teaching that won many to Christ, much to the dismay of local charm dealers (19:21-40). Paul then returns to Antioch by way of Jerusalem.

Paul's Third Missionary Journey

During Paul's third and longest missionary journey, he travels overland through present day Turkey then across the Aegean Sea to Greece. Pastoral motives lead Paul to revisit many of the churches he founded, imparting further instruction and encouragement to them. While in Ephesus, Paul gets word of a concerning prophecy, advising him against returning to Jerusalem lest he be imprisoned. The churches he visits there plead with him to not go; however, strongly devoted to the call of Christ and compelled by the Holy Spirit's prompting, Paul determines to go anyway.

Once in Jerusalem, Paul is arrested and accused of violating the Temple (21:27-36). However, the Roman tribune intervenes and brings him to the barracks. Defending himself, Paul appeals his case to the emperor as a Roman citizen. He then gets sent to Rome to have his case resolved. At this point, Paul's missionary journey seems to come to a close as Luke ends Acts with Paul's arrival in Rome. From Rome, the Gospel spreads like wildfire throughout the world, powerfully transforming society, politics, and culture in the process.

Pauline Apologetics

Two things set Paul apart as one of the first apologists: his various arguments for the deity of Christ and his frequent use of reason to share Christ with both Jewish and Greek people. He may not stand among the early church apologists due to his apostolic status, but his apologetic usage and methodology is significant nonetheless for our discussion. From Paul, we learn the fundamentals to being an effective missionary and apologist. For example, Paul critically evaluates people and their worldviews, often utilizing what they already knew to point them to Christ. He also appeals to the cultural interests of people at the time through history and philosophy. In many instances, Paul demonstrates great cultural awareness and sensitivity. All these skills set Paul apart as an exemplary model in missions and apologetics. As we will see through the following passages, his example models a tactful approach to conversations with people on the mission field, especially those with whom we disagree on matters of truth and belief.

Exegetical Overview of Paul’s Apologetic Work in Missions

Acts 17:2-4: Paul reasons for the Messiah in the synagogue

“As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days, he **reasoned** with them from the Scriptures, **explaining and proving** that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.”

Matt W. Lee notes that Acts 17 “contains arguably the most popular and thorough apologetics preaching from Paul.”¹⁹ In this speech, Paul addresses the audience at the

¹⁹ Matt W. Lee, *Cultural Contextualization of Apologetics* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2022), 209.

Areopagus, known for its religious passion. Paul is invited to speak on a new idea about God. Further cultural context is needed here. Lee mentions that “one of the distinctive features of the Hellenistic world was its philosophical diversity and religious syncretism.”²⁰ The imperial cult often accompanied this philosophical and religious context. According to Lee, “mystery and magic cults along with a plethora of idols and gods were pervasive throughout Paul’s world.”²¹ In Athens especially, where Paul’s apologetic speech takes place, *The World of the New Testament* handbook emphasizes that gods were everywhere in the Greco-Roman world. “There were gods for lovers, gods for poets, gods for bakers, gods for farmers, gods for travelers, gods for protecting the hinges on one’s door, and many others.”²² In addition, within Athens, Lee says that another important aspect of cultural context “comes from the fact that the Areopagus is a testing ground.”²³ Athenians were particularly interested in entertaining new ideas, which was unique to their context and a “severe deviation to the typical cultural mindset.”²⁴ Areopagus is the best-known place of judgment in Athens as well, creating the perfect scene for Paul’s speech. Paul’s speech here in Areopagus (17:22-34) would have been perceived as the “initial legal instrument in the process of admission of new impartial gods or goddesses.”²⁵ Socrates did something similar, instructing Athenians through trial about true religion. Areopagus also has two options in meaning: “first, the hill of Ares; and second, the legal authorities.”²⁶ Lee believes

²⁰ Lee, 210.

²¹ Lee, 212.

²² Moyer V. Hubbard, “Greek Religion,” in *The World of the New Testament*, ed. Joel B. Green, Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013), 222.

²³ Lee, 212.

²⁴ Hubbard, 223.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

that due to Luke's emphasis in Acts and the significance of location in the narrative, the latter is more accurate.

The presence of the imperial cult provides the backdrop to this scene in 17:2-4 and further in the following verses of the passage. Here, Luke confronts the Athenians' rampant belief in gods with the Gospel of Jesus Christ—a worldview, Lee says, that is “incompatible with the visual culture underlying the visibility of gods and kings.”²⁷ In verse 1, there are two significant factors to note. Firstly, Paul went to the synagogue because that is where Jews would gather. He went to the Jews first, then the Gentiles, as the best way to preach to the Jews was within their religious hub of the synagogue. Next, in verse 2, Luke mentions that Paul went to the synagogue *on the three Sabbath days*. During the three Sabbath days, Paul had the best audience as Jews assembled to hear discussion of Scripture during these days. Paul responded to the cultural objections of his hearers at Athens in several ways. Specifically in verse 2, Luke points out that Paul reasoned with them *from* the Scriptures. This is a recurring theme throughout Paul's speeches. Paul consistently pointed his Jewish hearers to the Scriptures to confirm and communicate the deity of Christ. Paul is also perceptive to the needs of his audience. In verse 3 Paul is careful to note that the Jesus he proclaims to them is not divorced from the Old Testament narrative. Instead, he emphasizes that this Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

Scriptural Applications for 17:2-4: Reason from Scripture and Meet People Where They Are

Considering these verses and the passages from which they come, what are some practical applications for apologetics in missions today? In 17:2-4, Paul demonstrates through

²⁷ Lee, 210.

physically going where the Jews gathered (synagogue) that an integral part to knowing one's people or audience is to go where they are. This can be applied to apologetics in missions in many ways. For example, in some countries in the Middle East and especially in Europe, Muslim women often gather at coffee shops. Strategically, then, missionaries should purposefully go where they are, and enter conversation with them there as opposed to "waiting" for them to enter through the church doors or knock on their door. Knowing the common gathering areas of a people group is critical to developing organic friendship with them. It can also help to build bridges for them to the Gospel, such as through apologetics.

Another lesson to draw from 17:2-4 is Paul's ability to "reason with them from the Scriptures." Paul shows missionaries here that apologetics in missions does not have to *always* look like drawing from non-Scriptural sources such as science or culture to share the truth of Christ. Nor does it have to look like laying out a cosmological argument. Scripture is a logically sound source to respectfully reason through. Missionaries can look to Paul as an example and encouragement to use the Bible when conversing with non-believers, especially when it concerns the resurrection.

Daniel Dewitt says, "Evidence doesn't interpret itself. There is indeed a great amount of evidence for the resurrection. However, it is naive to conclude that the evidence alone can establish the miraculous event of Jesus rising from the dead. Evidence must be interpreted."²⁸ Dewitt goes on to explain that to "properly interpret the facts of the resurrection we need God's revelation of himself."²⁹ This is how Paul and the first disciples made sense of and

²⁸ Daniel Dewitt, "How Should We Use the Bible in Apologetics?" Namb.net (June 24, 2019) Online: <https://www.namb.net/apologetics/resource/how-should-we-use-the-bible-in-apologetics/>.

²⁹ Dewitt.

communicated the resurrection in the early church. They explained the resurrection according to the authority of Scripture. Furthermore, the first Christian creed is found in 1 Corinthians 15...” Christ died... according to the Scriptures...and was raised... according to the Scriptures.” This early creed demonstrates how the early disciples held firmly to Scripture.

They viewed the Bible as both revelation from God as well as a trustworthy historical document. As a result, they used the Bible to interpret the historical event of the resurrection and explain it to unbelievers. Therefore, while still helpful in apologetics, historical evidence is not self-interpreting. As Dewitt notes, “We cannot, we should not, divorce the resurrection from Scripture or pit evidence for the resurrection against Scripture. The first disciples didn’t. We shouldn’t either. The Bible is the foundation of our faith and our apologetics.”³⁰ While we can and should utilize evidence outside of the Bible, the way we make sense of Gospel claims and help unbelievers to do the same should derive first and foremost from Scripture.

Acts 17:22-23: Paul Addresses Areopagus According to Cultural Observations

“So Paul, standing in the midst of Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with the inscription: “To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”

Paul’s strategy for relating to his audience in Athens is worth taking note of. Here, Paul draws from the surrounding culture to best communicate the Gospel to his hearers in Athens. In verse 22 specifically, he perceives where his hearers are spiritually... “I perceive that in every way you are very religious” (17:22). From this we can derive that Paul is perceptive of his

³⁰ Dewitt.

hearers in Athens and uses that perception to gauge where they stand spiritually. Paul is also observant of the cultural artifacts of his hearers in Athens... “For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with the inscription...” (17:22). Paul utilizes his perception, observation, and cultural artifacts to “correct the error of the imperial cult and dismantle its foundation.”³¹ Later in the passage, Paul clarifies exactly what he means by “the unknown God.” Right now, however, he prepares to confront the pagan culture and worldview. Lee mentions that Paul’s discussion of the nature of God cannot be separated from the Christological message “for such a nature of God is attested through the resurrection.”³² Once Paul references the altar inscription he saw in the city, he takes this as evidence that they were ignorant of the one true God. He then proceeds to impart the knowledge of God to them. F.F. Bruce says that “the idiom and the quotations are classical, but the teaching is biblical”³³ While Paul draws from culture as an entry strategy to reach his hearers, his message remains steeped in Scripture. He points his hearers ultimately to the Gospel of Christ, emphasizing the Christological message that appealed to much of philosophical thought at the time.

Scriptural Application for 17:22-23: Example of Cultural Apologetics

Acts 17:22-23 presents an excellent example of cultural apologetics that missionaries can benefit from today. To communicate the Gospel effectively, we should pay attention to how those within a culture think and live. We should take note of any cultural artifacts that may point to a gap in their knowledge or an opportunity to explain the Gospel. Paul did so here by

³¹ Lee, 210.

³² Ibid.

³³ F.F. Bruce, *Acts: A Bible Study Commentary* (Nashville, Tennessee; Kingsley Books, 1982), 166.

referencing the altar inscription he saw in the city, taking this as evidence that the people were ignorant of the one true God. Missionaries should be perceptive and observant like Paul in 17:22-23, keeping awake to any windows of opportunity in one's culture or religion with which to relate to the Gospel.

Insight from Missionaries Dr. Sam James and Jamie Naramore Relating to 17:22-23

There are two ways Dr. Sam James, a retired missionary from Vietnam whom I interviewed, recommends approaching cultural apologetics. In Southeast Asia, Dr. James worked with many Buddhists. Dr. James mentions that he never attempted to pit Buddhist teaching against that of Christianity. Instead, he took one object of the Buddhist faith—desire—which is viewed as bad within Buddhism and presented it as good through the Christian worldview. Through this, he explained what God gives apart from us, giving the Buddhists a positive example of Christianity. While not in Europe, the method Dr. James executes here could be replicated in Europe. The “objects” with which to relate to the Gospel do not also have to be directly from culture or religion. Perhaps they could derive from one's life experiences. In missionary Jamie Naramore's work with Europeans, for example, those with whom he has worked have come mostly from atheist or agnostic worldviews. Many of those with whom he has conversed, such as Muslims who have been displaced to Europe through war, tend to view the Church as a perpetrator of evil throughout history. Here is an “object” with which to potentially relate to the Gospel or explain God's love and justice. In these scenarios, Naramore says that he “feels like [the unbelievers] simply echo what they have heard and use it as a smokescreen to cover up something more personal—like a death of a loved one or some injustice they have

suffered.”³⁴ In all these conversations, Naramore did what Paul does well in 17:22-23. Naramore listened carefully and took notes of any objects he could use to point to the Gospel. But most importantly, like Paul, his approach in all these conversations was to “work out from the empty tomb to allow for suffering, justice, and hope as [he] builds a case not only for the existence of God but particularly a Christian understanding of him.”³⁵ From this passage, we ultimately learn to observe “objects” with which to relate to the Gospel and God’s nature in conversations with unbelievers.

Acts 19:8-10: Paul stops reasoning in one synagogue and goes to a lecture hall to continue reasoning with Jews and Greeks

“Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, **arguing persuasively** about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and **had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus**. This went on for two years so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.”

While this passage is not one of Paul’s apologetic speeches, it contains some insightful points for apologetics in missions. Firstly, Paul speaks boldly and argues persuasively (other versions say reasoned) about God’s Kingdom for three months. Paul’s stay shows steady faithfulness to Christ and those before whom he spoke. Yet eventually, Paul had to leave as some of his hearers “became obstinate... refusing to believe and publicly [maligning] the Way”

³⁴ Naramore.

³⁵ Ibid.

(19:9). Bruce mentions that the move from the synagogue in Ephesus to the lecture hall of Tyrannus was a common occurrence.³⁶ It also followed the pattern that Paul had already been familiar with in other cities. Essentially, the synagogue authorities in Ephesus tolerated Paul's preaching for long enough and decided enough was enough. Paul eventually had to find another auditorium in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. Once at Tyrannus, Paul had discussions daily with both Jews and Greeks there. Thus, one of Paul's key strategies as seen here was to engage in discussion with others. With this Paul found much success, as Luke notes that "all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (19:10).

Scriptural Application from 19:8-10: Know When to Press in Deeper and When to Step Away

19:8-10 contains valuable insight for missionaries as it relates to doing apologetics on the mission field. Perhaps the first point here is to simply be faithful and stay the course. 19:8 says Paul "entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there **for three months, arguing persuasively** about the kingdom of God." Apologetics can be a wearisome task and Paul's actions here encourage us to "not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9). When doing apologetics in missions, we should follow Paul's advice to "give [ourselves] fully to the work of the Lord, because we know that [our] labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58). However, as Paul demonstrates in this verse, we should also take a gentle step back if and when necessary. 19:9 says that as Paul argued persuasively with the Jews, "some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them." As we converse with unbelievers and incorporate

³⁶ Bruce, 167.

apologetics into our conversations, there will be times we need to reassess the situation, step back, and even, if applicable to the situation, exit graciously, knowing a different – but equally valuable — ministry awaits us on the other side of that exit.

Why Apologetics in Europe?

Now that we have laid biblical framework for apologetics in missions, one must ask: why Europe? What is it about Europe that elicits the need for apologetics? In the final section of this thesis, I will evaluate the cultural and religious context of Europe, challenges to the Gospel there, and the work missionaries and missionary organizations are currently doing there for the advancement of the Gospel. With this information, I hope to ultimately demonstrate the need for apologetics in European missions, proposing a culturally contextualized, Kingdom-centered framework for practicing apologetics in Europe today.

Gaining Entry in European Missions: Culture and Language

According to the Center for Great Commission Studies, entering missions mid-term (2 months-3 years) or long term (3+ years) is more than just getting a passport, visa, plane ticket, and place to stay.³⁷ Three areas to focus on in the entry stages are culture and language, geography, and history. The International Mission Board's breaks this down in six components of the missionary task; the first being "entry."³⁸ Entry first entails understanding people groups, levels of evangelism, Bible translation, and the network of one's mission's agency. Next, it moves into the task of getting to the people by exploring their political, economic, and religious

³⁷ Matthew Hirt. "Entry: An Essential Part of the Missionary Task." *Cgcs.org*, (April 15, 2024). Online: <https://www.thecgcs.org/resources/post/entry/>.

³⁸ "Six Components of the Missionary Task." *Imb.org* (April 16, 2024). Online: <https://www.imb.org/topic-term/six-components-missionary-task/>.

environment, and acquiring necessary skills and or resources to live in their culture. Lastly it focuses on developing one’s ability to communicate with the people through language learning and culture.

Culture and language are intrinsically intertwined when it comes to the entry stage for missions. The Center for Great Commission Studies notes that “Language... shapes how people think and understand the world around them.”³⁹ The goal here is not to become an expert on culture and language but to work diligently to a place of understanding culture and language, keeping the goal in view to proclaim the gospel, make disciples, plant churches, and develop leaders. For the purpose of our discussion, we will explore European cultural context in hopes of learning why and how apologetics ministry is effective there.

Cultural Context of Europe: Insight from Missiologist Dr. Garrison

In my interview with Dr. David Garrison, International Mission Board’s Global Strategist for Evangelical Advance, Garrison says, “My assignments have me to more than 80 countries, including within Europe such as Germany, France, and England.” When asked about the cultural climate in Europe, Garrison emphasized, “There is so much polarization, and many terms—like evangelism or Christian—get tossed around by those even outside of Europe, when really these terms mean different things to different people, depending on their geographical and religious context.” Garrison recommends that we avoid painting broad strokes of assumptions across Europe when it comes to culture and religion. “Instead of looking at the percent of people who do or do not affiliate with Christianity statistically, ask “What is said about these people?” but “What do these people say about *themselves*?” and let people self-diagnose themselves.”⁴⁰ In our discussion of European culture, we will try our best to avoid generalized statements. Europe

⁴⁰ Dr. David Garrison. Personal Interview, February 10, 2024.

is a vast and diverse continent. Its complexity in culture, religion, and history—depending on where one in Europe lives and works—is worth acknowledging.

Post-Modernism: There is No Objective Truth

So, with all this complexity, can we reach somewhat of a consensus on the spiritual state of Europe? By tracing the relevant events and ideological trends that have shaped modern thought and action, I think so. One ideological trend observed in Europe throughout its modern history is post-modernism. The North American Mission Board defines post-modernism as, “Morality, human dignity, truth, and reason rest on foundations other than God (reason, science, race, etc.). All metanarratives are suspect—whether religious or not. No universal foundation for truth, morality, or human dignity exists.”⁴¹ Again, though, we need to avoid overgeneralizing because while post-modernism is a dominant mindset in Europe, it will look different in different countries. Its influence in Eastern Europe, which is heavily dominated by religious orthodoxy, will differ in some ways from Western Europe, where Roman Catholicism is more commonplace. Due to this, it's important to turn to our primary source—missionaries on the ground—and ask, “How have they come to view post-modernism?”

What Are Missionaries Saying about Post-Modernism?

PhD student at Andrews University, Bogdan Platon, argues that views of postmodernism vary among missionaries. For some missionaries, the postmodern mindset is considered a danger for the Christian mission, being associated with paganism, while for others consider it a “time of

⁴¹ “What is Post-Modernism,” In “Apologetics,” <https://www.namb.net>, (April 15, 2024). Online: [https://www.namb.net/apologetics/resource/what-is-postmodernism/#:~:text=Postmodernism%20\(1960s%20%E2%80%93%20present\)&text=Morality%2C%20human%20dignity%2C%20truth%2C%20and%20reason%20rest%20on%20foundations,%2C%20morality%2C%20human%20dignity%20exists.](https://www.namb.net/apologetics/resource/what-is-postmodernism/#:~:text=Postmodernism%20(1960s%20%E2%80%93%20present)&text=Morality%2C%20human%20dignity%2C%20truth%2C%20and%20reason%20rest%20on%20foundations,%2C%20morality%2C%20human%20dignity%20exists.)

opportunity” to share the message of Scripture.⁴² Throughout my interviews with missionaries in Europe such as Dr. Garrison and Dr. Donley, it became clear to me that post-modernism, for them, is both a *danger* and an *opportunity*. While harmful to the spiritual environment of Europe, its influence enables missionaries to relate with Europeans on an intellectual level, such as through apologetic conversations. For example, as a missionary located in Europe, Dr. Donley, says, “The context of many Europeans is post-modern and humanistic. We need to speak to them on their level, which includes knowing at least a surface-level knowledge of the interconnection between science and faith.”⁴³ Offering another perspective of post-modernism though, Naramore says that for many of the Europeans he has spoken to, “Their issue with Christianity has not really been the evidence, but some hurt or circumstance that they can use as motivation for giving the objections more weight than the evidence in favor of Christianity.”⁴⁴ From Naramore’s thoughts, we see that the post-modern context calls for not only willingness to engage intellectually but also to listen attentively. So it is important in these post-modern contexts to not only understand the interconnection between science and faith; the nature of truth as subjective vs objective; or the objections against Christianity. But in addition to this, to respond to these perspectives compassionately and tactfully, pointing to Christ as the Way, Truth, and Life (John 14:6).

Secular Humanism: A False Salvation for Europe

⁴² Bodgan Platon. “Missionary Bridges Toward Post Modernism,” *Digitalcommons.andrews.edu*, (February 5, 2024). Online: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1130&context=sss>.

⁴³ Dr. Donley, Personal Interview. February 10, 2024.

⁴⁴ Naramore.

Secular humanism is another ideology that shapes European culture today. Today the term ‘non-religious’ in Europe often means ‘humanist.’⁴⁵ Again, views on humanism vary, especially in Europe. It can mean a worldview in which man is the supreme being—a sad worldview indeed—or as it meant to Erasmus during the Renaissance, a respect for image-bearers of God and desire for intellectual development. Most often, however, “Secular humanism is a man-centered ethical system which affirms that “man is the measure of all things.”⁴⁶ In addition, the council for Secular Humanism says that “Because no transcendent power will save us, secular humanists maintain that humans must take responsibility for themselves.”⁴⁷ The UU Humanist association also says, “Broadly, humanism can be categorized as a phenomenon of the modern era that has attracted the attention and interest primarily of intellectuals in the West. When considered solely as an intellectual world view, it encompasses the general scientific, philosophical, and religious perspectives of modern Western thinkers. In many respects, it is the ideology of modernity.”⁴⁸ Examples of secular humanism in Europe include the liberalization of euthanasia, abortion, and divorce laws, “all issues, they claim, that give individuals greater freedom to control their own lives.”⁴⁹

Post-modernism and Secular Humanism As Spiritual Strongholds

⁴⁵ “Secular Humanism.” *Christian.org.uk*, (April 15, 2024). Online: <https://www.christian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/secular-humanism.pdf>.

⁴⁶ “Pray for Europe and Impact of Secularism.” *Missionsprayer.net*, (June 20, 2023). Online: <https://missionsprayer.net/2023/06/20/pray-for-europe-and-impact-of-secularism-week-2/>.

⁴⁷ “Secular Humanism Defined.” *Secularhumanism.org* (2002). Online: <https://secularhumanism.org/what-is-secular-humanism/secular-humanism-defined/#:~:text=Secular%20humanism%20begins%20with%20atheism,must%20take%20responsibility%20for%20themselves.>

⁴⁸ Stephen P. Weldon, “Secular Humanism: A Survey,” *UU Humanist Association Journal* 33 (1999): 1.

⁴⁹ Weldon.

In European missions, post-modernism and secular humanism should be viewed not only as intellectual roadblocks to the Gospel but also as spiritual strongholds. Bill Giovannetti writes, “A stronghold is deeply entrenched human reasoning, built over time, reinforced by repetition, deepened by emotion, confirmed by consensus, and corrupted by the devil’s lies.”⁵⁰ The spiritual strongholds of post-modernism and secular humanism keep many Europeans in spiritual bondage, though many live blatantly unaware of that reality. As 2 Corinthians 4:4 says, “Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don’t believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don’t understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God.” The World AG Missions Prayer Network says that the humanist “rejection of the spiritual or supernatural becomes the basis by which Spiritual Strongholds are established – since it blinds people from eternal realities.”⁵¹ At the same time, the post-modern mindset denies objective truth, calling into question the heart of biblical Christianity. Although these challenges are intellectual, we should seek to understand them through a spiritual lens as well to minister effectively in the European context.

Christianity in Europe: Religion Over Relationship

Another prevalent challenge to the Gospel in Europe is what we will refer to as “cultural” Christianity. I encounter cultural Christianity often when conversing with my Polish friend. The term “Christian” holds an entirely different meaning in Poland than it does in America. For my friend, to be Christian is not to follow Jesus; it is to grow up in a Catholic home or affiliate oneself with the Roman Catholic church, even if they do not actively practice it or believe in it

⁵⁰ Bill Giovannetti. “Strongholds,” *Maxgrace.com*, (Sep 25, 2020). Online: <https://maxgrace.com/2020/09/25/apologia20-02-strongholds/>.

⁵¹ “Pray for Europe and Impact of Secularism,” *Missionsprayer.net*, (June 20, 2023). Online: <https://missionsprayer.net/2023/06/20/pray-for-europe-and-impact-of-secularism-week-2/>.

themselves. The International Mission board, in fact, advised me when I first began conversing with my polish friend to not call myself a Christian but to instead call myself a follower of Jesus. This is because for many Poles, the term “Christian” or “Christianity” carries with it much cultural baggage, especially for the youth in Poland who tend to rebel against what they consider the “Catholic religion of their parents and grandparents.” Not all those who affiliate themselves with Christianity believe the same things.

According to the Pew Research Center on Religion, “The majority of Europe’s Christians are non-practicing, but they differ from religiously unaffiliated people in their views on God, attitudes toward Muslims and immigrants, and opinions about religion’s role in society.”⁵² What exactly “Christianity” means varies from country to country. Often, it can mean a religious, works-based strand of Catholicism or a deeply cultural acceptance of Eastern Orthodoxy. Dr. Gina A. Zurlo, director for the Center of Global Studies at Gordon Conwell seminary, says, “Catholics and Orthodox still make up over 80% of all Christians in Europe.”⁵³ While the percentage of those who affiliate with Christianity remain high, this does not speak to the overall spiritual health of Europe. Zurlo explains that in continental Europe and its four regions, Christianity is declining largely through what is now called “religious switching,” mainly to agnosticism and atheism.⁵⁴ We can trace the cause of this “religious switching” to many different things: post-modernism, secular humanism, and even academia.

⁵² “Being Christian in Western Europe,” *Pewresearch.org* (May 29, 2024). Online: <https://obu.edu/wp-content/blogdir/christianstudies/files/2011/06/Guidelines-for-Research-Papers.pdf>.

⁵³ Gina A. Zurlo, “Christianity in Europe,” *Gordonconwell.edu* (February 2, 2024). Online: <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/blog/christianity-in-europe/>.

⁵⁴ Joseph H Bragg, “The Concept of History in the Thought of Rudolf Bultmann and Reinhold Niebuhr.” *Digitalcommons.butler.edu* (January 7, 1967), 69. Online: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1435&context=grtheses>.

Academia in Europe: Insight from Missionary Dr. Sam James on Rudolf Bultmann

According to another missionary I interviewed, Dr. Sam James, one of the biggest challenges to the Gospel in Europe is hyper-intellectualism. Dr. James mentions, “So much philosophy and reasoning is involved that there is no faith there; Christian faith has become academic; there is no life or living Christ who guides behavior in it. Approach to faith in Europe has become intellectual.”⁵⁵ Dr. James pointed me to Rudolf Bultmann as someone who made huge strides in the intellectualization of European faith. In essence, Bultmann’s theology taught that stories in the New Testament may or may not be *true* but are merely making some sort of moral point. Dr. James points out, “Because of Bultmann’s theology, the stories in the NT may or may not be true but are teaching a lesson or making a point. You can’t prove them true either way. So this creates a faith assumption and is a big apologetic problem.”⁵⁶

Joseph H. Bragg Jr. notes that in Bultmann’s “The Christ of faith cannot be separated as easily from the Jesus of history as Bultmann proposes. He subordinates the objective-historical events to the point of making the history of Jesus at least shadowy and almost diotically spiritual.” This is, of course, in opposition to the historical Jesus Paul centered is apologetic ministry in missions around. Bragg says, “The early Church was extraordinarily firm in its insistence that the religion should be firmly grounded in history and, as though providentially guided, would have no tampering with the flesh of Christ as though he were someone who did not endure real pain nor experience true humanity as they knew it.”⁵⁷ Bultmann does not go as far to say there is no objective truth, as post-modernism claims, or that there is no spiritual being, as

⁵⁵ Dr. Sam James, Personal Interview. January 12, 2024.

⁵⁶ James.

⁵⁷ Bragg, 70.

secular humanism claims. Even still, Bultmont ultimately influences Christian thought in Europe by challenging views of Christ's nature and that of historical truth in general.

Europe's Identity Crisis

Europe's current identity crisis presents another challenge to the Gospel and the missionary task. Combined with the decline of Christianity in Europe, the recent influx of immigrants and refugees causes Europeans to question who they are, why they exist, and what defines them. Ted Kim also notes, "The intellectual giants who pioneered the modern and secular Europe are all dead, and their descendants must decide how to live in an increasingly empty world."⁵⁸ For example, Kim shares that when Notre Dame burned down, many Parisians felt as if they had become orphans. "Human beings are not so strong that they can live with the disappearance of familiar persons, institutions, and symbols."⁵⁹ According to German theologian Ulrich Schmiedel, "The arrival of significant numbers of refugees in 2015 caused a European crisis of identity, including over religion."²⁹ Schmiedel explains that Christianity today has become the motive to "save Europe," both for those in support of and against refugees. Schmiedel explains that Christianity's role in the refugee crisis is far from straightforward. On all sides of the political spectrum, Christianity is viewed as a motivation to the identity of Europe—either by advocating for or against open borders.⁶⁰ Missionary Dr. David Garrison says, "There are two frontiers in Europe to consider: indigenous (locals) and immigrants" (Muslims or Hindus)."⁶¹

⁵⁸ Ted Kim, *Save Europe: Reintroducing Christianity to Post-Christian Europe* (Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2021), 11.

⁵⁹ Kim, 12.

⁶⁰ Ulrich Schmiedel, "Religion Is Key to Europe's Identity Crisis Over Refugees," *Deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org*, (March 9, 2018). Online: <https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/refugees/community/2018/03/09/religion-is-key-to-europes-identity-crisis-over-refugees>.

⁶¹ Garrison.

Essentially, as Europeans shed off the old world, they have yet to replace the old world with anything else, positioning them in a national identity crisis.

This paper will not provide direct answers to the complex issue of immigration and refugee increase in Europe. That is not the purpose of this paper. However, keeping this issue in mind alongside post-modernism, secular humanism, and cultural Christianity helps us form a more cohesive view of the spiritual state of Europe. Looking at the many challenges to the Gospel in Europe, we will now look at current missionary efforts and consider how apologetics might address these challenges.

Apologetics and the Missionary Task in Europe: Insight from Missionaries

As I discussed challenges to the Gospel in Europe with several retired or on-the-field missionaries today, opinions on *how* to approach the intellectual challenges of Europe varied. For example, Dr. James said that one cannot prove either way that these stories are true and it might be a waste of time if one did so. He holds that we cannot argue if they are true in an absolute sense. However, by living out our faith, we build a testimony of faith that essentially confirms for us and others the truth of these stories. Ultimately, Dr. James recommends that missionaries tell the story of Jesus *as though it was true* rather than *arguing* whether it is true or false. However, missionary Dr. Donley believes missionaries need to talk to Europeans at their level. In Donley's missionary work, he has observed problems with people who do not understand the Bible due to Bultmont theology and post-modernism. When evangelizing with unbelievers, Donley uses a "Socratic method" of apologetics. In conversations, he gets an idea of where they are and meets them at their intellectual level. Then he does Colombo apologetics, asking them questions to put the burden of proof on them and get them to a place of realizing the flaws of their worldview. Contrary to Dr. Jame's approach to facing the intellectual challenges of Europe, Dr. Donely

prescribes a method of deep intellectual engagement. He intends to get people to a crisis of belief so that they begin to question their atheism and agnosticism. Once he does that, he points them to answers in the Christian worldview, providing a window to Gospel conversation. Donley's approach involves *interacting with* unbelievers within their intellectual context and explaining *why* the Bible is true rather than, like Dr. James, assuming it is true.

Missionary Opportunity in Europe

Let us consider the perspectives of both Dr. James and Dr. Donley. Both missionaries emphasize matters that are different albeit integral to effective apologetics on the mission field in Europe. Firstly, Dr. Sam James emphasizes the importance of not only professing but living out one's faith. Rather than explaining *why* Christianity is true, Dr. James believes the missionary task focuses on living out the faith. In addition, sharing the Bible with unbelievers *under the assumption* that it is true. While this approach may not prove 100% effective in Europe due to its heavily intellectual context, we do not want to completely forgo Dr. James's advice. One of the greatest means of convincing one of the truth, beauty, and goodness of the Christian faith is indeed with the "apologetic" of our life, which includes living in a community of faith. Missionary based in Malaysia, who goes by Dave for his protection, writes regarding apologetics in Malaysia that, "Many people, inundated by totalizing claims of rationality, increasingly yearn for spirituality in the context of authentic community. They also want to see the fruits of our belief. Having been a layperson practitioner in various settings, I am convinced *that apologetics should be lived out artfully as much as it is argued rationally*, in a trust-building community where Kingdom perspectives are demonstrated."⁶² Just as true as this is in the Church in

⁶² Dave, "Reason for Hope: Doing Apologetics in Malaysia," *Scribd.org*, (Jan 20, 2011). Online: <https://www.scribd.com/document/47245718/Reason-For-Hope-Doing-Apologetics-In-Malaysia>.

Malaysia, so it is true in the European Church as well. But for it to be true in Europe, missionaries must divorce the European church model from that of the American church. They must also be willing to explore Gospel outreach and Christian community beyond denominational bounds.

Dr. Garrison says the Church in Europe will not look like the church in America nor should we try to replicate it. So often, according to Dr. Garrison, Southern Baptists plant churches in Europe, try to strengthen them, and hope they will increase. But in doing so, Dr. Garrison argues that these churches mirror “our kind of American church” and they do not bear much fruit in the end. Dr. Garrison says that this mindset of planting “our kind of church” pits the European Christian against culture and they end up being more part of the culture war than a loving community of faith. Dr. Garrison says, in the end, “Lift up Christ, the Gospel, and the Spirit of God, and you’ve got something not cultural but that transcends culture.” These churches may not look like the American church or operate in the same way. That is okay. They should be distinct. They should look different. They should be unique to the various demographic and spiritual needs of Europeans. Perhaps in some ways, to gather such a community and effectively reach unbelievers, it requires purposeful interdenominational partnership. Dr. Garrison shares a beautiful story of community, interdenominational partnership, and the Holy Spirit’s power to reach Muslims in Europe.

Elijah 21 is an interdenominational ministry to Muslim immigrants. The ministry invited Muslim immigrants to dinner, many of whom had walked all the way from Afghanistan to Germany. 300 people ended up coming. They shared a meal together with Christians of all different denominations. The Christians sat and listened to the Muslims. The Muslims sat and listened to the Christians. After dinner, they showed a film about Jesus in different languages.

Afterward, they respectfully told the Muslims that if they would be open, the Christians would love to share with them about the Gospel. The Christians prayed with the Muslims who demonstrated openness. In the end, 20-30 people came to faith, based on love, respect, interdenominational representation, clear gospel presentation, and discipleship that would be followed up with in the lives of the immigrants afterward. Dr. Garrison emphasized that Christian missionaries should be willing to collaborate with fellow brothers and sisters for the sake of the Gospel, even if they do not share the same denomination. His rule of thumb is: “Plant churches with likeminded people (doctrinally); share the Gospel with all kinds of people you may not plant churches with (denominationally).”⁶³ This is not directly “apologetics related” but perhaps it is indirectly related. A vibrant, loving community of faith is one of the most powerful apologetics, convincing unbelievers of the truth and beauty of Christianity. Thus, biblical, effective, servant-hearted apologetics will truly be *incomplete* apart from a strong community of faith.

Looking Ahead: Incorporating Apologetics in European Missions

In addition to a making an apologetic for the Christian faith through a vibrant community, how can we effectively incorporate apologetics European missions? Through interviewing seven missionaries in Europe and gleaning their insight and experience, I have formed a 3-part strategy for effectively, carefully, and lovingly incorporating apologetics in European missions: (1. Involving apologetics in pastoral training; (2. Making apologetics integral to discipleship of believers; and (3. Approaching apologetics as a missions entry strategy for the Gospel in Europe.

(1. Apologetics Pastoral Training Program Derived from Missionary Dr. Donley

Firstly, involving apologetics in pastoral training in Europe; what does this look like? Adopted in Bosnia, Budapest, Montenegro, and Serbia, Dr. Donley has developed apologetics

⁶³ Garrison.

training program for pastors in Europe that caters specifically to the intellectual context and needs of their congregants. This apologetics program does not have a name; according to Dr. Donley, it is simply a “general apologetics program” he created from his Masters and PhD studies. The program right now takes place in the form of a training lasting 5-6 days. Dr. Donley starts from square one, teaching 10 doctrines of the faith. Once he lays this foundation, he covers general concepts of all the worldviews. Next, he addresses 10 of the most brought up objections to Christianity and details cohesive, clear responses to them. Everything he teaches focuses on general concepts that pastors do not need a PhD to grasp. Currently, Dr. Donley is working on transferring his training material into videos that can be converted into different languages for more pastors—and eventually students—across Europe. To incorporate apologetics into mission work in Europe, Dr. Donley suggests we start with pastors and missionaries. In addition, perhaps missionary agencies should require their missionaries to complete apologetics training if they are or plan to work in Europe. Dr. Donley’s strategy of pastoral training holds incredible potential for mission work in Europe. Missionaries and missions agencies could facilitate this kind of pastoral training. It could even be expanded into different training courses for different demographics—youth, college students, and young professionals--but with the same core training and purpose.

(2. Utilizing Apologetics in Discipleship)

The second part of this strategy is to make apologetics integral to discipleship. We are called not to make *converts* but to make *disciples* (Matthew 28:19-20). The heart of the missionary task is not to convert unbelievers or “grow church attendance” but to follow the conversion of unbelievers with relational, Spirit-led, biblical discipleship. This is done with the sincere hope and earnest prayer that they will go on to convert and disciple someone else. As a result, faithful

disciples of Jesus will multiply, the Church will be built, and the Gospel will be advanced.

Within discipleship relationships, new believers are taught “the basics” like the core tenants of the faith and spiritual disciplines such how to pray, how study the Bible, or why to be a part of the local church. To be clear, these are the basics of the Christian faith and relationship with Christ. They *should* come first. However, down the road of understanding and maturity in faith, these new believers in Europe should eventually be taught general concepts of all the worldviews, core objections to Christianity, and how to respond in the face of them. Due to its intellectualism, apologetics should be integral to the discipleship of believers in Europe.

(3. Rethinking Apologetics as An Entry Strategy for the Gospel in Europe

As part of the “entry” stage of missions, missionaries decide on several ways to approach a people group effectively with the Gospel through the lens that appeals to their culture, values, and experiences. In Nigeria, storytelling, drama, songs, and dance are four “entry strategies” for reaching Nigerians with the Gospel. These stories and songs in Nigeria do not hold salvific power. However, they give missionaries a foot in the door of that culture, creating opportunities to share the Gospel in Nigeria. Another example takes place in Tanzania where Dr. Donley currently helps fund and build an orphanage. Dr. Donley says, “The orphanage will not save people spiritually. The orphanage itself is not the goal of the task; the goal is to share the Gospel. But the orphanage is our entry strategy; a way to get the door open so that we can eventually share the Gospel.” Similarly, apologetics cannot save anyone. Apologetics itself is not—and nor should it ever be—the goal of missions. Sharing the Gospel and making disciples of all nations must remain the goal; the message that propels us into missions. Yet creating opportunities for the Gospel to be shared is integral to fulfilling that Great Commission goal. In European missions, then, apologetics should be viewed as an entry strategy through which missionaries can

speak to Europeans “in their language,” at their philosophical and intellectual level, and share the Gospel within a relational context.

As we have considered the challenges of Europe for missions—post-modernism, secular humanism, cultural Christianity, loss of national identity, and a hyper intellectualized faith—the future might appear bleak. At the same time, from a biblical perspective, each period of history endures challenges to the Gospel—physically, linguistically, and intellectually. These challenges do not mask the future with darkness but rather clarify the missionary task at hand. Gleaning again at Paul’s example as a missionary and apologist, he overcame the challenges of his time through the means of evangelism and apologetics. As a result, even amid political, intellectual, and physical challenges, the early church witnessed a rapid spread of the Gospel through what is now Europe and the Middle East. Could a similar spread of the Gospel be reignited in Europe today? Through a biblical, compassionate, and Spirit-led approach to apologetics as an entry strategy for missions in Europe, I believe so. Perhaps, in the end, rethinking apologetics as an entry strategy for European missions could help birth the spiritual awakening Europe needs.

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