

Review: Understanding What We Are About

1. **Definition of Apologetics:** to graciously, honestly, intelligently, and winsomely...
 - Answer hard questions, challenge hard hearts, *and*
 - Give a heartfelt “defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you... with gentleness and respect,” (1 Pet 3:15).
2. **No soul is spiritually neutral.** All people live either for themselves or for Jesus (2 Cor. 5:15). Those who serve themselves rather than God, who refuse to acknowledge and honor God, become “futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened... because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!” (Rom. 1:21-25)
3. **Human thinking is never spiritually neutral.** All people trust either in God or in themselves for certainty. If we ask ourselves or others the question, “Why do you believe that?”, we will ultimately come down to either “Because the Bible says this is true,” or, “Because I say this makes sense!”
4. **Skepticism is self-deception.** In every person there is a deep knowledge of God, though professing skeptics ‘suppress’ this knowledge (Rom. 1:18). This knowledge manifests itself in three major ways: the order of creation (Rom. 1:19-20; cf. Ps. 19:1-3), the voice of conscience (Rom. 2:14-15), and a sense of eternity – God “has put eternity into man’s heart,” (Eccl. 3:11). Ultimately, then, **unbelief is never a matter of lack of evidence.** It comes from suppressing the truth [the evidence] available to all of us (Rom. 1:18).
5. **Every person, every day, must assume certain things about the nature of reality and truth in order to think and work and live.** This may or not be something we consciously think about, but they are real – and real for everybody.
 - Example: “Why is it *always* true that $2 + 2 = 4$?”
 - Christians: “God upholds the universe in a logical manner,” (Gen. 8:22; Heb. 1:3).
 - Non-Christians: “Because that’s just how math works!”
“Unbelievers can count, but they cannot account for counting.” (Cornelius Van Til)
 - **Only Christianity can explain these basic pre-suppositions we all make every day!**
6. **Apologetics cannot change hearts, but it can raise spiritual self-awareness.** We seek not to argue a person into faith, but to facilitate God’s work in their lives by helping them see:
 - Christianity is the only explanation for the realities they assume every day.
 - Skepticism is not ultimately about lack of evidence, but rejection of authority.
 - Unbelief is therefore not an honest mistake, but an act of “cosmic treason.”
 - The gospel is logical *and* beautiful: cosmic treason forgiven by divine substitution.

Contextualization: Understanding Where We Are

I. Introduction

- If we want to be effective in apologetics/evangelism, we must understand our context.
- 1. ‘Context’ = the things which surround something else
- 2. ‘Contextualization’ = “the faithful and relevant communication of the unchanging message into the language and cultural thought forms of those to whom it is communicated.”¹
- If we want to communicate the gospel in a way that will *change* lives, we must have a clear understanding of the way our culture *thinks about life*!
- **Question:** Don’t we already know how our culture thinks about life?
But do we understand how our culture’s thinking has shifted?

II. How Our Culture’s Thinking Has Shifted

3. According to one scholar, **American culture has gone through essentially three phases** in how we think about the purpose of life and the hope of our society:²

Cultural Phase	Cultural Hope
God (1600-1800)	<u>Jesus is the Redeemer:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God-centered view of reality • Religious (Christian) liberty the highest value • Biblical Christianity flourishes
Nation (1800-1960)	<u>America is the “Redeemer Nation”:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • America-centered view of the world • Civil liberty and patriotism the highest value • Christianity privileged, but Modernism spreading • “<i>Make the world safe for democracy...</i>” (W. Wilson)
Self (1960-Today)	<u>I Am My Own ‘Redeemer’:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-centered view of life • Self-definition and self-expression the highest value • “Exclusive humanism” flourishes

¹ B.J. Nicholls, “Contextualization” in *New Dictionary of Theology*.

² Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream*, cited in Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (Dutton, 2009), 129-130.

4. As our culture’s hope has shifted away from Christ to self, so **our culture’s underlying presuppositions have also shifted from God-centered to self-centered assumptions** about life, reality, and truth. This new worldview can be illustrated as follows:

You’re a pastor or a church planter who has moved to Brooklyn or Berkeley or Boulder... You came with what you thought were all the answers to the unanswered questions these “secular” people had. But it didn’t take long for you to realize that the questions weren’t just unanswered; they were unasked. And they weren’t questions. That is, your “secular” neighbors aren’t looking for “answers” — for some bit of information that is missing from their mental maps. To the contrary, they have completely different maps. You’ve realized that instead of nagging questions about God or the afterlife, your neighbors are oriented by all sorts of longings and “projects” and quests for significance. There doesn’t seem to be anything “missing” from their lives — so you can’t just come proclaiming the good news of a Jesus who fills their “God-shaped hole.” They don’t have any sense that the “secular” lives they’ve constructed are missing a second floor. In many ways, they have constructed webs of meaning that provide almost all the significance they need in their lives...³

5. The worldview described above is called **exclusive humanism**,⁴ which has two tenets:
- There is nothing beyond the physical universe, *and therefore*
 - There is no final goal beyond personal happiness in this life.
6. The differences between *biblical supernaturalism* and *exclusive humanism*:

	Biblical Supernaturalism	Exclusive Humanism
Who Made Us?	God (supernatural creation)	Nobody (matter/energy are eternal)
Who Takes Care of Us?	God’s Providence (ordinary & miraculous)	Impersonal Natural Laws (automatic, mechanical)
Why Do We Exist?	Glorify & enjoy God	Yes (no/every answer valid)
What Defines Right & Wrong?	God’s Moral Law (fixed morality)	People and/or Society (relative/evolving morality)
I Should Care Deeply About...	Worship, work, and witness as a means of facilitating relationships with God and others – since souls last forever.	Feeling good and following my heart – “YOLO!”

³ James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular* (Eerdmans, 2014), preface.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

III. Result: from ‘Christendom’ to “Post-Christian” Mission Field

7. In this transition from a biblical, supernatural worldview to an exclusive humanistic worldview, **our society has moved from ‘Christendom’ to “post-Christian”**:

- When the Puritans first came to New England, there is no doubt that they saw American society as part of an extension of the hope of ‘Christendom’ – a society where church and government cooperated to extend Christ’s rule over all of life:

We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, “may the Lord make it like that of New England.” For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. (John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” 1630)

- This notion was so strong that, in some places, it endured even as our culture’s hope shifted from ‘God’ to ‘Nation’ – and even enjoyed a bit of a ‘revival’ during the 2nd half of the 20th century under conservative political and religious leaders.
- However, whether or not the United States was ever truly “Christian nation,” the reality is that we are now living in a “post-Christian” mission field.

8. With this shift, **our position as Christians within society has also shifted**:

- From the beginning of our society through most of our lifetimes, Christianity has enjoyed a privileged and respected place in American culture. This had many benefits – and many temptations.
- For our purposes in studying apologetics and evangelism, perhaps the most important of these are:
 - We could assume a certain “background knowledge” of biblical ideas/stories.
 - Christian teaching could generally gain a respectful hearing – i.e., large numbers of people would attend Billy Graham crusades, evangelists could go door-to-door, etc.
- As our society becomes increasingly and consistently post-Christian, however, our position begins more and more to look like that of the church in the 1st century:

At whatever level in society it was attempted, evangelism in the early church was a very daunting undertaking. It was a task involving social odium, political danger, the charge of treachery to the gods and the state, the insinuation of horrible crimes and calculated opposition from a combination of sources more powerful, perhaps, than at any time since.⁵

⁵ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Eerdmans, 1970), 47.

9. **Though new for us, this situation is biblically, globally, and historically normal.**
This presents us with both challenges and encouragements:

The Challenges

- *Venues*: Does our approach to apologetics and evangelism take into account our new cultural situation, or are we still relying too much on older models? What can we learn from the early church about apologetics/evangelism in a hostile culture?
- *Communication*: Do we know how to share the gospel with people who do not possess any Christian vocabulary or knowledge of the Bible?

We will explore each of these topics over the next few weeks!

The Encouragements

- Whatever worldview is currently reigning in popular culture, people are still people – made in the image of God, and carrying within them the threefold knowledge of God we reviewed previously (order of creation, voice of conscience, sense of eternity). Everybody still needs to make the same assumptions to live, and these presuppositions can only be explained by Christianity.
These points of contacts can never be erased!
- However sophisticated and insulated from God our society tries to be, the Lord has his ways of shaking us up and reminding us all that eternity is only a heartbeat away – witness the COVID-19 pandemic, and the pervasive fear of death it has spawned. These are opportunities for awakening and revival!
- Though uncomfortable for believers, early church history – and the spread of Christianity in other regions of the globe today – shows that Christianity thrives under cultural hostility. Instead of worrying, “What will they do to us?”...let us humbly, prayerfully wonder, “What might God do through us?”
- The glory and wonder of the gospel has not changed!

The enthusiasm to evangelize which marked the early Christians is one of the most remarkable things in the history of religions. Here were men and women of every rank and station in life, of every country in the known world, so convinced that they had discovered the riddle of the universe, so sure of the one true God whom they had come to know, that nothing must stand in the way of their passing on this good news to others... “The discovery that the ultimate force in the universe was Love, and that this Love had stooped to the very nadir of self-abasement for human good, had an effect on those who believed in which nothing could remove.”⁶

⁶ Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 236.

IV. Cracks in the Dome

- Exclusive humanism tries to portray the universe as an iron dome – a sealed system where there is no God and where no God is necessary to explain life...
- How do we help our friends see that exclusive humanism cannot explain the assumptions they make every day in order to live?

10. Exclusive humanism cannot explain our deep sense of justice.

- Tim Keller's challenge:

Is there any person or any group of people, anywhere in the world today, who are doing things that you wish you had the power to stop? (ex. abuse of power, child trafficking, abuse of women, racism, etc.)

There are plenty of people who say, "...I believe that right and wrong are relative to people and cultures." But isn't it true that the very next minute, you act as if there is such a thing as justice? If you see someone being ruthless... don't you feel that whatever they may believe about what they are doing, it is just wrong? You don't think to yourself, "According to my moral feelings this is wrong, but according to his it may not be." No, you instinctively know that there are things that are wrong even if their culture or their family or their feelings condone it. Even if it feels natural to them, we know nonetheless it's not the way things are supposed to be. And what's natural can be wrong only if there is a "super-natural" standard by which you could judge it.⁷

11. Therefore, exclusive humanism cannot explain the difference between "human happiness" and monstrous evil.

- If there is no fixed standard of right and wrong, and if every person is free to define their own "personal happiness," how can we ever say what is an acceptable pursuit of "personal happiness" and what is wrong?
- If we say "you can do anything you want, so long as you don't harm another person," how can we say what is really harmful versus what is just other people being oversensitive?
- If we say "society determines what is acceptable," what do we say when whole societies accept practices we know are wrong (slavery, the Holocaust)?

Note: we are *not* saying our humanist friends approve of the Nazis. The whole point is that they *don't* approve of them. **Our friends *do know* that human self-control is necessary – but a humanist worldview *cannot* explain why.** But Christianity can!

⁷ Tim Keller, *Encounters with Jesus* (Dutton, 2013), 134-135.