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Apologetics in a Postmodern Age

by Don Matzat

**For many, there is no such thing as absolute truth. Rather, there are competing truths.
The Christian Gospel is simply one truth among many "truths."
How do we present the Gospel in this age of relativism?
Has the time come to reconsider the role of apologetics in Christian theology?**

The word *apologetics* comes from the Greek word "apologia". It means to defend a person or a position by providing evidence for the truth. The word is found in I Peter 3: 15: "Always be ready *to make a defense* to everyone who asks you to give reason for the hope that you have." An apologist is one who "argues the case." The Apostle Paul "argued the case" with the Athenians on Mars Hill (Acts 17) and defended Christianity before King Agrippa who was almost persuaded to become a Christian (Acts 26). In his Gospel, Luke appeals to history by citing the various rulers who were in power when Jesus was born and when John the Baptist began his ministry.

Christian apologetics may involve the discussion and debate of a variety of subjects such as the existence of God, creationism versus evolution, the truth of the Bible, or the factuality of the resurrection. The Christian apologist may appeal to history and cite the findings of archeology, or appeal to reason and cite a variety of philosophic arguments to demonstrate the existence of God, or present internal evidence such as the changed behavior of the disciples to show the truth of the resurrection.

The goal of apologetics is evangelism. The hope of the apologist is to convince the unbeliever of the truth of Christianity so the unbeliever will become a believer. For this reason, how one defines the goal of Christian apologetics is closely related to his doctrine of conversion.

There are generally three positions that are maintained today regarding the method of doing apologetics: *evidentialism, presuppositionalism and fideism.*

The *evidentialist* provides external evidence for the truth of Christianity, attempting to convince the unbeliever that Christianity is true. Those who believe that conversion is produced by the unbeliever "deciding" to become a Christian, or what is called Arminianism, present evidence in the hope that the unbeliever will make a decision to accept Christ.

Roman Catholic apologists Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli (*Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994) also attempt to convince [using] reason and rely heavily on the theistic arguments for the existence of God.

Lutheran apologist Dr. John Warwick Montgomery does believe that conversion is totally the work of the Holy Spirit but also believes that the Holy Spirit works through the evidence provided by the apologist to remove the obstacles to faith (*Faith Founded on Fact*, Newburgh, IN: Trinity Press, 1978). As a young man at Cornell University, Dr. Montgomery became a Christian because the evidence that Christianity was true convinced him. As a result, he heard the Gospel and came to faith.

The *presuppositionalist* begins with the assumption that the Christian perspective is the true perspective and requires no defense. Since the unbeliever's reason is darkened, providing evidence is a futile task. Presuppositionalism, arising primarily out of the theology of the late Cornelius Van Til, is by in large a Calvinist perspective. God will bring the elect to faith.

The *fideist* believes that the best defense is the preaching of the Gospel. As the Gospel is preached, the Holy Spirit creates faith and leads the person to accept the truth of Christianity. Lutheran theologians have generally approached apologetics from a fideist position.

Recently, on *Issues, Etc.*, I interviewed a Lutheran theologian who had written an article on the Word of God. I asked the question: "Is it necessary for a person to accept the historicity of the record of the Four Gospels on the basis of external evidence before believing the message of the Gospel?" He responded by saying it was not Lutheran to attempt to prove the historicity of the record of the Four Gospels by providing evidence or rational arguments. "We preach the Gospel," he said, "and when the Holy Spirit creates faith, the individual will accept the historicity of the Biblical record."

Noted Lutheran Dogmatician J. T. Mueller expressed the fideist position in his *Christian Dogmatics*. He wrote:

Christian theology is the ability to exhibit, or preach, the Gospel, but not to prove it true by human arguments of reason or philosophy. As the Christian theologian proclaims the truth, he wins souls for Christ, but not as he endeavors to prove true the mysteries of the faith by principles of human reason. This is also the meaning of the axiom: "The best apology of the Christian religion is its proclamation." Let the Gospel be made known, and it will of itself prove its divine character" (J. T. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, St. Louis: Concordia, 1934, p. 71).

In the past, the study of apologetics, or how to defend the Christian faith, was an integral part of theological education. But in the modern world, with the rise of science, apologetics has fallen on hard times. Christian theologians generally felt that the evidence for Christianity would not stand up against scientific investigation. The unbelieving rationalist with his scientific "what's the data" mentality could not be persuaded.

Dr. John Warwick Montgomery writes concerning the present state of the study of apologetics, "Though traditionally considered one of the three major branches of systematic theology, it is hardly represented at all in seminary curricula today" (*Faith Founded on Fact*, p. 28).

It is obvious that the debate over the nature and role of apologetics is set into the context of the modern world of enlightened reason and scientific investigation. How do we approach the scientific rationalist who has his own arguments against the faith? Will the claims of Christianity stand up against the scrutiny of scientific investigation? Perhaps to simply share the Gospel is the best approach. It would be improper to confront proud reason with what is perhaps our own proud reason. We shouldn't give proud human reason "the time of day." The idea of sin and grace humbles proud reason.

But today, we are living in a new age, which demands a new look at the role of apologetics. The issue of providing evidence for the truth of Christianity is no longer tempered by the threat of scientific rationalism. We are confronted today with alleged competing religious truth-claims. We must ask, "What is the evidence for these claims?" Christian apologetics is taking on new relevance. We are living in a new age.

I. Postmodernity

For the past five years, I have hosted the radio program *Issues, Etc.* Five days a week for two hours each day I have the opportunity to dissect the thinking of some of the leading voices in Christianity: theologians, apologists, cult-watchers, religion editors from the major news magazines and cultural and social prognosticators. As a result, I have been able to gain a rather broad understanding of where we are as the church of Jesus Christ and what challenges we face.

From what I have gleaned, we are literally experiencing the dawning of a new age. Many speak of the fact that we are in a paradigm shift—or as Peter, Paul and Mary predicted in the '70s, "The Times, They Are A-Changin." I believe we can compare this age with past ages where historians have identified various radical shifts in thought and behavior such as the Renaissance, or the Industrial Revolution, or perhaps even the Age of Enlightenment. It is impossible to predict how history will define this age. Some speak of it as postmodernity. Perhaps it will be called "The Age of Chaos." Whatever terms are used, the fact is the world awaiting my grandchildren is not the same world in which I cut my teeth. The playing field has not only changed, but the entire game is different.

Disillusioned Rationalists

The age of enlightenment elevated human reason as the *sine qua non* of cultural and social development. Man and his enlightened understanding and technological genius had within his grasp, so he thought, the possibility of engineering a great society—or at least a good one.

The modern age was marked by advancements in knowledge, science and technology. We modernized! The desire was for human growth and the pursuit of excellence. We were dedicated to ideals! Our fathers and grandfathers were very willing to sacrifice their lives to see the triumph of right over wrong, and good over evil. We sought education, wisdom and knowledge for its own sake, not merely for the income we could derive from it. As a nation, we attempted, with a good level of success, to export our culture, our ideals, our values and our political system into the world community so that freedom, democracy and capitalism would mark every society.

Yet from all indicators, the idealism of the modern age has crumbled down around us. Human reason as the instrument of progress has failed. World War II demonstrated that the age of reason and enlightenment had produced very little in the way of human evolution. The holocaust underlined man's ability to inflict incredible suffering upon his fellowman. The war in Japan was terminated because human reason had produced a weapon of mass destruction and had decided to use it. In the years following the war, disillusionment was compounded by the rise of the communist ideology, the threat of nuclear annihilation, the Vietnam fiasco, youth rebellions, assassinations, political corruption, racial wars, gas shortages and ecological concerns.

The modern age produced many technological advancements and successes, but each had its drawback. While the automobile created a mobile society, it also polluted the environment. Modern technology improved our lot in life but also trashed Mother Earth. In the '70s, the Cleveland fire department was called out to extinguish a chemical fire on the Cuyahoga River. The newspaper of the Cleveland "hippie" community was aptly named "The Burning River Times."

Without a doubt, the greatest technological achievement of enlightened human reason occurred 30 years ago when men walked on the moon. While it was a great achievement, it produced nothing of lasting value that could be used to better the human condition. At least we could say, "We did it!"

We rejoiced when the Communist system crumbled and the wall in Berlin came tumbling down. Yet we were shocked to discover that as the East Berliners crossed the border after years of separation, the longest lines in West Berlin were not at the churches, museums or even new car dealerships, but at the adult book-stores. So much for enlightenment.

We began to doubt our own abilities to produce a great society via human reason, knowledge and technology. Somewhere in between John Kennedy's famous "Ask not what your country can do for you" and Bill Clinton's veto of a bill that would outlaw infanticide because he felt the pain of a handful of women, something drastic happened in the societal psyche.

When Did the Shift Occur?

When did this modern era end? When did the social and cultural commentators conclude that we were totally unable to solve our problems with reason, knowledge, science and technology? Some point to World War II while others say the modern age ended with the youth rebellions and the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. One sociologist has pinpointed the end of the modern age of reason and enlightenment as a day in 1967 when the Pruitt-Igoe housing development in St. Louis was blown up. This development stood as a classic example of social engineering until high crime, the difficulty of policing and urine-soaked elevators caused its demise. When this paradigm shift occurred, many suggested that the modern age, for all practical purposes, was over! Welcome to postmodernity! We are living in a new age.

II. The Postmodern Mentality

The postmodern mind-set offers a unique challenge to the Christian witness. The issue is no longer whether or not we should demonstrate the truth of the Christian message against the threat of science and the doubts of the enlightened rationalist. Postmodernists will not challenge the message. For the postmodernist, the battle is no longer truth versus untruth, or right versus wrong, as was the case in the modern age. The concept of error or wrong has been removed from the postmodern vocabulary with one exception -- it is wrong to say that someone's world view, religion, culture, philosophy or experience is wrong. The only absolute truth that exists in the postmodern mentality is that there is no such thing as absolute truth, and as far as the postmodern scholar is concerned, *that is absolutely true*.

Dr. Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, explains postmodernity:

Modernity has given way to postmodernity, which is simply modernity in its latest guise. Claiming that all notions of truth are socially constructed, the postmodernists are committed to total war on truth itself, a deconstructionist project bent on casting down all religions, philosophical, political, and cultural authorities (*Here We Stand*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996, p. 61).

Gene Edward Veith, in his book *Postmodern Times*, echoes the same sentiments. He points out that for the postmodernist, truth claims are actually "power plays" in disguise. He writes:

For the deconstructionists, all truth claims are suspect and are treated as a cover-up for power plays. . . . Today's universities, while ostensibly devoted to cultivating truth, now argue that truth does not exist. This does not mean that the universities are closing their doors. Rather, the universities are redefining what scholarship is all about.

Knowledge is no longer seen as absolute truth; rather, knowledge is seen in terms of rearranging information into new paradigms Contemporary scholars seek to dismantle the paradigms of the past and "to bring the marginal into the center" (rewriting history in favor of those who have been excluded from power—women, homosexuals, blacks, Native Americans, and other victims of oppression). "Patriarchal religions" such as Judaism and Christianity are challenged and replaced with matriarchal religions; the influence of the Bible is countered by the influence of "goddess-worship." Homosexuality must no longer be considered a psychological problem; rather, homophobia is. (*Postmodern Times*, Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994, pp. 56-7.)

Truth is Subjective: It is True If it Works For Me!

Our culture is saying truth is no longer that which corresponds with reality. Truth emerges out of a specific community or culture. Christians have their truth. Muslims have their truth. The New Age advocates have their truth.

Individually, truth is that which will produce a better reality for me or give me an excuse for having messed up my present reality. It is my truth if it works for me.

On a recent PBS special dealing with the claims of those whose memories of childhood abuse were recalled via recovered memory therapy, one woman's claims against her parents were challenged since they did not correspond with objective reality. It was obvious they were not true. She responded by saying, "They are my memories. They are truth to me.

In his book *Lost Daughters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), Reinder Van Til comments on the understanding of truth within the Recovered Memory Movement:

Postmodernists . . . deny the modernist assertion that words signify reality in an objective world around us and affirm instead that in a fundamental sense words construct our reality—in fact, that apart from words there is no

reality. Some have understood this to mean that whatever we feel or perceive at any given moment constitutes reality (p. 284).

Outlandish claims that would have been rejected by the modern rationalist are allowed to stand as private truth by the postmodernist. For example, many claim they have been abducted by aliens and taken on to a spacecraft. If their beliefs are challenged, the usual response is, "How do you know it didn't happen?" Obviously, you don't, since it is impossible to prove a negative. Therefore, it is your responsibility to let them have "their truth" no matter how absurd their claims might be.

Rejecting the "Truth Mongers"

Not only is the claim of absolute truth rejected, but also those who claim to possess such truth are scorned. The claim to have discovered an absolute truth is no longer the ideal, but is rather the problem. While the postmodern thinker freely adopts all the open-minded religions of the world, those narrow-minded Christians who claim to an absolute truth we all must believe in order to be saved are the objects of his scorn and ridicule. It is such haughty individuals who cause nation to rise against nation, people against people, ideology against ideology and, of course, religion against religion.

John Lennon imagined a world in which there would be no borders, no political systems and no religions. Without the absolute truth-mongers claiming that my system, or my culture, or my religion is better than yours, we can all love one another. After all, isn't love what it is all about? We could fulfill the appeal of Rodney King who begged on national television, "Can't we all just get along?" Of course, while John Lennon "imagined" this beautiful utopian society, what he did not imagine is that someone would take a gun and kill him.

III. Postmodern Spirituality

Postmodernism, in addition to being an age of relativism, is an age of spirituality. The notion of a superior being or one who is the highest expression of an enlightened master is not at all adverse to postmodern mentality. Postmodern spirituality is an eastern spirituality. Classic Christianity is western in the sense that truth is objective. It is outside of you.

The New Age Movement, a mixture of Eastern philosophies and practices together with the alleged science of transpersonal psychology, has widely infected the modern mind-set. The movement is not without celebrities. Shirley McLaine, Richard Gere, Harrison Ford seek spiritual reality in Eastern religions. Tom Cruise and Demi Moore cling to the tenets of Scientology. Melissa Mathison, the screen-writing wife of Harrison Ford, explains America's fascination with Eastern religions: "The fascination is the search for the third eye. Americans are hoping for some sort of magical door into the mystical, thinking that there's some mysterious reason for things, a cosmic explanation."

In the midst of an age of relativity, there still remains a spiritual search for meaning and understanding in life. The New Age movement has spawned a wide variety of spiritual expressions. Many today, probably for the purpose of bringing excitement into their otherwise boring lives, establishing a claim to fame, or profiting financially, insist that they have had strange spiritual experiences. Amazingly, in the postmodern age, their claims are not challenged, but widely embraced.

Betty Eadie's tale of her near death experience (NDE), titled "Embraced by the Light," has sold millions, even though there is no hospital documentation to support her claims. Books by Deepak Chopra, Marianna Williamson, Jean Huston and Shirley McLaine are widely read.

The notion of receiving information from a channeled spirit-guide is very popular. Dr. Helen Schucman, a clinical and research psychologist, claims that her very popular "A Course in Miracles" was produced by channeling Jesus. The information in Napoleon Hill's popular book "Think and Grow Rich" was given to him by a company of enlightened masters. At the Emmy awards a few years ago, a popular actress thanked her channeled spirit-guide for

guiding her career. In fact, when you read the account of Jean Huston and Hillary Clinton, it is obvious that Mrs. Clinton was attempting to channel the wisdom of the spirit of Eleanor Roosevelt.

Do Not Criticize!

The postmodern mentality is not openly critical of any of these brands of spirituality. Books promoting the author's spiritual experience, which would have been dismissed as fantasy if not bordering on insanity in the age of reason, are now accepted as a legitimate expression of the author's search for spiritual meaning. Consistent with the swinging of a pendulum, the age of rationalism has been replaced with the age of irrationalism.

Consider, for example, how the media responded to the recent Heaven's Gate suicide compared to the response some years ago to the events in Jonestown. While demented Jim Jones, according to the media, led a group of disenfranchised paranoids to their death, Marshall Applewhite, the Heaven's Gate guru, led his well-educated followers to fulfill their spiritual convictions.

Marshall Applewhite was a classic schizophrenic. He had delusions of grandeur. He believed that he was the present incarnation of Jesus Christ. The life of Christ entered into him as a result of an NDE experience. Did you hear anyone in the media describe Applewhite as being insane? No, he was acting on his convictions. The "New York Times," for example, raised the question as to what was "the underlying pathology that led such seemingly bright and articulate people to a tragic misjudgment."

Misjudgment? When I hit a six-iron instead of a five-iron and come up short of the green, that's a misjudgment. If I eat poisoned pudding thinking that I am leaving behind my physical container in order to ascend to a higher level of existence on a spacecraft—that's insanity!

Jesus is Included! But Which Jesus?

Postmodern spirituality does include Jesus, but he is not the Jesus of Scripture. He is another Jesus who is appreciated by postmodern people. This Jesus was a great teacher, an enlightened spiritual master, but not the Son of God, Savior of the world, and only way to the Father.

This presents a unique challenge. We have to overcome again a former way of thinking. In the past, if people claimed to believe in Jesus, we usually embraced them as Christians because the only people who really believed in Jesus were Christians. The exceptions, of course, are the classic cults: Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Science.

Today, many claim to believe in Jesus. Every new spirituality, without exception, has something nice to say about Jesus. David Koresh and Waco, Marshall Applewhite and Heaven's Gate, Betty Eadie's "Embraced by the Light," Helen Schucman's "Course in Miracles," James Redfield's "The Celestine Prophecy," Elizabeth Clare Prophet and the "Church Triumphant and Universal," Jose Silva and "Mind Control" all appreciate Jesus. The primary guru of the New Age Movement, Dr. Carl Gustav Jung, taught that the "Christ archetype" could be activated and encountered via active imagination or visualization. People today choose Jesus to be their spirit-guide. As they visualize him, he speaks to them and gives them wisdom and guidance. They claim, "I follow the words of Jesus."

For New Agers, the Christ is often separated from the man Jesus. Jesus became aware of his Christ-identity in the same way we spiritually develop into beings with Christ-consciousness. This "Christ-consciousness" is developed in an altered state of consciousness—the mystical trance. As Dr. Timothy Leary promoted the mind-altering drug LSD as a means of gaining a quick trip to the Almighty, the same principle is taught in the New Age with one exception—the altered state is not drug-induced but self-induced via mind altering techniques.

Some years ago as I was leaving a hospital room after visiting my sister, the woman in the next bed stopped me. She wanted to talk. She surmised that I was a Christian since I had a prayer with my sister. She was a Jewish psychologist and a New Age advocate. She said, "I just want to let you know that I very much appreciate your Jesus."

He was one of the great-enlightened spiritual masters. But tell me," she continued, "Why is it that you Christians claim that Jesus is the only way to the Father?"

"We don't claim that Jesus is the only way to the Father," I explained. "Jesus himself claimed that he was the only way to the Father." I quoted the Bible verse from John 14.

"Well," she responded, "How do you know he really said that? Somebody probably made that up."

"Wait a minute," I responded. "You said you appreciated my Jesus. The only way you or I know anything about Jesus is from the Bible. Do you only accept the statements about Jesus that fit into your way of thinking?"

She concluded the conversation with, "Well, obviously we are not going to agree" and turned her head away somewhat disgusted.

Spiritual Science

Consistent with relativistic thinking, the postmodern mentality distrusts the accomplishments of modern science. Gene Veith explains:

The anti-rationalism and environmentalism of contemporary culture have in fact promoted a widespread distrust of science. In the popular mind, for better or for worse, science no longer provides absolute truth (Veith, p. 182).

In the modern world, the single greatest threat to the truth-claims of Christianity was the theory of evolution. I would not at all be surprised if within my lifetime Darwin's theories are put to rest. The work of Philip Johnson of the University of California at Berkeley (*Darwin on Trial*) and Michael Behe of Lehigh (*Darwin's Black Box*) give very convincing arguments for an intelligent designer behind the universe. The problem is, the chances are probably greater that people will identify this intelligent designer as a superior enlightened master surveying our planet in his spacecraft rather than the God of the Bible. For Christians since the Scopes trials, the issue has always been Genesis versus Evolution. These were the two competing positions. You were either a creationist or an evolutionist. This is no longer the case.

Michael Behe reports that Sir Francis Crick who, more than 40 years ago, together with Philip Watson, won the Nobel Prize for his discovery of DNA, proposes the theory that life on earth began when aliens from another planet sent a spaceship to earth with spores to seed the planet. Commenting on this and other theories, Behe writes:

The phrase intelligent design . . . quickly invites questions about who the designer might have been. Will persons with philosophical commitments against the supernatural be painted into a corner by the theory? No. The human imagination is too powerful . . . The primary reason Crick subscribes to this unorthodox view is that he judges the undirected origin of life to be a virtually insurmountable obstacle, but he wants a naturalistic explanation (*Darwin's Black Box*, New York: The Free Press, 1996, p. 248).

The Best of Times; The Worst of Times

There are some who would suggest that the demise of the age of reason and the beginning of postmodernity present a wonderful opportunity for proclaiming the Gospel. But is this true? While the age of reason and enlightenment questioned the truth-claims of Christianity, the postmodernist merely ignores Christian truth by identifying it as the truth of a specific community of people—of which they are not a part, a rather closed-minded community at that. Perhaps this age is best described in the sentiments of Charles Dickens, who began "*A Tale of Two Cities*", with "It was the best of times. It was the worst of times."

Dr. William Edgar, head of the department of Apologetics at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, assesses the postmodern opportunity by saying:

There is much that is appealing in the vision of the postmodern present as a great opportunity for the gospel. Human reason as a rigid, universal standard is not finally compatible with a sovereign, creator God. But the end of the "Age of Reason" is not necessarily the beginning of the age of faith. For one thing, at the heart of the postmodern mentality is a culture of extreme skepticism . . . There is no more truth; there is no greater key to

the meaning of life. According to many postmodernists, knowledge is no longer objective—not even useful—and ethics is not universal. All we have is data and language games. This is hardly a world compatible with the gospel (*Reasons of the Heart*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1961, p. 25).

The postmodern mentality rejects absolute propositional truth while continuing the quest for truth—for answers to the cosmic questions—in a new spirituality. It is a strange combination.

IV. Proclaiming and Defending the Faith

How do we present the Christian faith to the postmodernist? Do we defend Christian truth against other competing *truths*? In other words, do we engage in apologetics and attempt to demonstrate with evidence the historic truth of the Christian message?

In the modern age, when sharing the Gospel with the enlightened rationalist, the Christian may have felt somewhat insecure. Claiming that God sent His Son into this world to suffer and die for the sins of humanity would be a little hard for the rationalist to accept. After all, the story does include a virgin birth, a resurrection and an ascension into heaven which, by and large, had to be accepted on the basis of faith. The scientific mind would respond by saying, "What's the data?"

For this reason, most Protestant theologians rejected the notion of providing evidence for the truth of Christianity. Rather than providing objective evidence, they simply opted for the notion that the presuppositions of the Christian were not compatible with those of the rationalist, or they simply focused on the preaching of the Gospel and ignored any evidence for factuality or historicity.

But today, compared to some of the spiritual concoctions that are popularly held, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is no longer a strange, irrational message. Also, given the popularity of channeling other spirits, it is not bizarre for Christians to claim that the Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit. When it comes to the origin of the universe, science is becoming increasingly aware of the necessity of an intelligent designer. The question is, "Was that intelligent designer the God of the Bible or an extraterrestrial alien?"

The issue is this: *Are the truth claims arising out of the new spirituality as credible as the truth claims of Christianity? Are we willing to allow Christianity to be seen as merely one body of truth among many bodies of truth?*

How we answer these questions will determine the role of apologetics in our theological system. Consider the two popularly held views on apologetics by Lutherans and Calvinists, presuppositionalism and *fideism* in the light of the present spiritual age.

The "Heaven's Gate" Presuppositions

"Heaven's Gate" guru Marshall Applewhite began with his assumptions and had no interest in proving they were true. He believed there was a large company of enlightened masters who had come down to this planet in order to occupy human bodies. His task was to locate these masters and, in ET style, get them home. He had no interest in proving to people that what he believed about these enlightened masters was truth. He did not defend his claims. As he traveled the country, speaking in various gatherings, he simply told his story about these enlightened masters who came to earth and were now occupying human bodies. He informed his hearers that *if they believed what he was saying* they were probably the incarnation of one of these masters and should join his cult. In other words, Applewhite was out to gather *the elect*!

While we might suggest that the assumptions of Christians and the assumptions of unbelieving scientific rationalists are not compatible and that we should simply begin with our presuppositions and not argue the case, would we make the same assessment of the assumptions of Marshall Applewhite? In other words, are the truth claims of Applewhite and his disciples as credible as the truth claims of Jesus and his disciples?

Hank Hanegraaff, president of the Christian Research Institute, was recently a guest on the Larry King TV talk show. The subject matter was the Heaven's Gate cult. During the discussion, Hanegraaff derided the present cult-like state of much of experience-based spirituality. Larry King, in typical postmodern style, told Hanegraaff that he was merely stating his opinion against the opinion of others. Hanegraaff retorted rather vehemently. "Larry, look at the evidence. Christianity is based upon historical evidence. Look at the evidence." King immediately went to a commercial break.

I believe that Hank Hanegraaff was right to confront the postmodern mentality of Larry King with an appeal to the evidence for the truth of Christianity. How would the presuppositionalist have responded to Larry King? Would it not have been foolish to allow the assumptions of Applewhite to stand unchallenged by reason and evidence?

Fideism in an Age of Relativism

Today, in the midst of the spiritual and religious postmodern smorgasbord, the fideist position is also far less credible. In fact, upon examination, the fideist position fits nicely into the thinking of this age. While it is contrary to the rationalist, it is compatible with the postmodernist who can simply respond by saying, "You have your faith, and I have mine."

First of all, fideism is pragmatic. Christianity is true because the Gospel produces faith. Or "*It is truth because it works!*"

Second, fideism defines truth as personal. I believe Christianity is true because the Holy Spirit has brought me to faith by the Gospel. Or "*It is my truth!*"

Third, fideism presents a truth that emerges out of the community of faith. Christianity is true for those who have faith. Or "*It is our truth!*"

Finally, fideism defines truth as emerging from experience. I know that the Gospel record is true because the Holy Spirit has created faith in my heart. Or, "*It is truth because of my experience of faith!*"

The fideist position is built on the truth that Scripture is self-authenticating. The Gospel is supernatural. The Holy Spirit opens eyes and creates faith through the proclamation of the Gospel. He warms hearts. He changes minds. Luke (24: 45) reports that Jesus opened the minds of the disciples so they would understand the Scripture. The Emmaus disciples had their eyes opened. I remember being taught as a child that the Bible, unlike all other books, is unique because it is self-authenticating. The Holy Spirit works through the Gospel to convince us of the truth of the Bible.

But is this experiential, self-authenticating experience associated with the Gospel unique to the Bible? Perhaps it was for Luther as he confronted Rome. Perhaps it was for modern Christians who confronted the enlightened rationalists. But we are living in a new age.

The self-authenticating role of the Gospel in bringing a person to accept the truth of Scripture is not unique to Christianity. The Mormons claim that the truth of the Book of Mormon can be confirmed. They tell the seeker to read the book and pray that God will confirm its truth by creating a burning in the bosom. The approach of the fideist and the approach of the Mormon are identical. They both claim that their source is self-authenticating. Christians, operating from a rationalist position over against Mormonism, may seek to debunk the notion of a "burning in the bosom." But, if you talk with former Mormons, they will tell you that it is a real experience. There actually is a "burning in the bosom" which causes a person to accept the truth of the Book of Mormon.

There is a young man, a classic proud rationalist, who is one of my regular callers. In confronting him on the radio, I had used the fideist approach. In other words, I simply shared the Gospel with him, trusting that the message the Holy Spirit would bring him to faith.

One day he asked: "If the Holy Spirit is the one who convinces me of the truth of the Bible by bringing me to faith in Jesus Christ, how is this any different than what the Mormons teach about a burning in the bosom causing me to believe that the Book of Mormon is true?"

In responding to his question, I immediately became an evidentialist and stated that while there is much evidence to confirm the truth of Scripture, there is absolutely no evidence to confirm the truth of the story in the Book of Mormon. How else should I have responded to his question?

One of my frequent guests on *Issues, Etc.* is Dr. Paul Maier, professor of ancient history at Western Michigan University and author of the book, *In the Fullness of Time*. Dr. Maier provides much archaeological evidence for the truth of Christianity. For example, within the past few years the tomb of Joseph Caiaphas was discovered. An inscription naming Pontius Pilate was also discovered. There is no doubt that the Gospel writers set out to write accurate history.

Can you imagine how Mormons would rejoice if some evidence of the existence of the Nephites and the Lamanites was discovered? If some tomb or inscription were archaeologically uncovered? Or if they discovered numerous additional documents telling the same story of the Book of Mormon. They would be shouting it from every housetop in Utah. Mormons are trying very hard to confirm the historical truth of their Book of Mormon. They even have an archaeology department at BYU. Alas, they have had no success nor should they expect to have any in the future. J. T. Mueller quoted the axiom, "The best apology for Christianity is its proclamation." It is also true that the best apology for Mormonism is reading the book of Mormon and praying for heartburn.

If we present Christianity from the fideist position, we are giving credibility to all other religious expressions that are pragmatic, personal, emerge out of a community of believers, and are based on experience. Therefore, the claims of Mormons for the truth of the Book of Mormon are no less credible than the claims of Christians for the truth of the Bible. Is this how we want to present Christianity?

Evidence is Not Relative!

How do we deal with the relativist who debunks science, rejects reason, scorns philosophy, accepts the miraculous, operates on the basis of feelings and experience, and embraces a personal, pragmatic, spirituality? Hillary Clinton, for example, is willing to embrace the idea of being guided by the visualized spirit of Eleanor Roosevelt. How would we convince her of the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ? Vice President Gore wrote a book promoting American Indian spirituality. How would we convince the Vice President that Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father? In these cases, the apologetic task is not to defend truth against reason but to defend Christianity against competing "truths," many being irrational.

It is interesting that in this "kinder and gentler" age, the drama of the courtroom has become very popular. An entire cable network is dedicated to providing live courtroom action for the public consumption. Not since the trials of Bruno Hauptmann and the Rosenbergs has the public been so enamored with guilt and innocence, the reliability of evidence, and the pronouncement of verdicts.

On the basis of the evidence, most feel that O.J. Simpson got away with murder. The evidence was sufficient to sentence Timothy McVeigh to death, in spite of the emotional appeal of McVeigh's parents. While the Menendez brothers hung the first jury by appealing to their emotions and feelings, they certainly didn't get away with it the second time. The feelings of the jury were changed with solid evidence!

Evidence is not relative. While it adjusts how we feel about a situation, it is not based upon feelings. While Johnny Cochran could speak of Marsha Clark's perspective as being "her opinion," and her explanation as being "her spin," he could not say that the overwhelming evidence was "her evidence." Evidence is evidence and demands a verdict. It is obvious from the reading of the Four Gospels that the writers were presenting historical data. While I accept by faith the benefits of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (the forgiveness of sins, life and eternal salvation), there is much evidence for the historicity of the biblical record. Read Luke 3, for example, and note how carefully the evangelists set up the historical cross hairs, citing numerous rulers and governors. This is history.

In this age of competing truth-claims, the historical evidence for the truth of Christianity must be presented. We cannot allow Christianity to be seen as merely one religious expression among many others with no unique claims to truth.

Dr. John Warwick Montgomery, who is both a theologian and a lawyer, has stated that if the objective evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ were presented in a court of law it would demand a verdict of truth.

Begin with Jesus!

While the classic theistic arguments may to some degree demonstrate the existence of a God (first cause, unmoved mover, necessary being, ontological argument, etc.), this God is not identified. For New Age advocates, he may be some alien out there floating around in his spacecraft.

The writer to the Hebrews tells us that in this present age God has made himself known to us in Christ. Therefore, I believe that the apologetic enterprise begins with Jesus Christ and the historicity of the Gospel record concerning him.

In Luke 7: 18-23 we read of the account of John the Baptist sending representatives to Jesus and asking, "Are you the one who was to come or should we look for another?"

John was not a rationalist. He believed that God would send a Messiah to Israel. John questioned whether, among many messiahs, that Jesus was indeed the one.

The question today is very similar. Who is the ONE? Is it Mohammed? Is it Joseph Smith? Is it Rev. Moon? Is it David Koresh or Marshall Applewhite? Is it one of the Eastern Mystics? Perhaps it is Elizabeth Clare Prophet? Or is it Jesus Christ?

Note how Jesus responded to John's question. He did not say, "Tell John to only believe, all things are possible, only believe!" Nor did he say, "Tell John that his presuppositions are faulty, and that his fallen human nature has blinded his eyes to the truth." NO! Jesus said, "Give John the evidence—the blind see, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news preached to them."

Jesus confronted the questions of John with evidence. We should do the same.

Conclusion

In the age of reason, knowledge and truth were rational and scientific. The question of the scientist was "What's the data?" What's the objective evidence? Is the conclusion rational?

In confronting the modern age, most Protestant Christians simply preached the Gospel recognizing that the Holy Spirit operated beyond reason. The assumption was, while there is evidence, it would not stand the test of scientific scrutiny. It was evidence for the person who had faith. The person who did not have faith, whose understanding was darkened, required a work of the Holy Spirit to bring him to faith. While evidence for the truth of Christianity was available, most Christians thought that for the scientific mind, which operated in affirmatives and negatives, in truth versus untruth, the evidence could be countered with rational explanation. The supernatural was readily rejected on rational grounds.

Today, in a postmodern age, the pendulum has swung to the other side. Reason, science, data are no longer the issue. Truth is relative, and spirituality and religious expression, often irrational if not insane, are rampant. Rather than accepting a religion based on any evidence for the truth of the claims, the appeal is to feelings and experience. "if you like what I am saying, come and join my group." Read the Book of Mormon and get a burning in the bosom. Visualize Jesus, ask him questions, you'll discover that it works.

Earlier I mentioned Betty Eadie's book titled "Embraced by the Light." She tells the story of her NDE. She claims she died on the operating table. There is no evidence in the form of hospital records to support her claim. Yet, it makes no difference. Because her book makes people feel good and provides a false hope, millions of copies have been sold.

As we present the Gospel today we must clearly make it known that the Christian's claims are different from the claims of the Mormons, Betty Eadie, Marshall Applewhite and New Age gurus. Our Gospel is based upon historic events. Our faith is founded on facts.

The Christian, in confronting this culture, must not allow his message to be lumped with every other religious and spiritual expression by giving the impression that Christianity is "my truth," which "works for me" and is based on "my experience". There is a case for Christianity! Present the case! Give the evidence!

While presenting evidence for the historic truth of the Christian message will not bring a person to faith in Jesus Christ, it will at least cause that person to take another look at Christianity. He cannot be permitted to lump the Christian message into the same category with the strange and irrational religious claims made by those who offer alleged competing truths. Not to present evidence for the truth of Christianity is to do a gross injustice to the evangelists, apostles and prophets who handed down to us an accurate record of how God entered into history in the person of Jesus Christ.

The time has come to take a new look at the role of Christian apologetics as we combat this age of relativism.