

## **The Best Apologetic for the Marginalized Church**

### **1 Peter 2:11-12**

1. The strongest exhortation in the book (2:11-12). This call is rooted in our salvation (1:3-12), moral formation (1:13-2:3), and special identity (2:9-10), which gives Christians a unique place in the world.
2. Two components to this strong imperative:
  - A. Negative – Abstain from sinful desires that war against your soul (call to purity and holiness)
  - B. Positive – Live good lives before the pagans (call to exemplary goodness and good social reputation, blamelessness)
3. Result
  - A. World sees our good deeds
  - B. Glorify God on the day of visitation
4. Given the context of Peter’s recipients, we must ask how Christianity was able to spread. They were not able to use market-driven approaches in their hostile environment. Contemporary methods of evangelism often begin with “holy accommodations” to appeal to the felt needs of potential converts or with some other direct presentation to audiences that, if not receptive, are largely polite and tolerant. These early Christians, however, had assumed their unique moral identity to the extent that the surrounding culture ridiculed, slandered, and sought to intimidate them (cf. 4:3-4). Their responsibility to evangelize was no less than ours, but it took place under conditions that were radically more difficult. How did Christianity spread under such unfavorable circumstances?

Certainly, early Christian assemblies had an impact on outsiders (1 Cor. 14:23), perhaps partially explaining how Peter’s recipients heard the gospel (1:23-25). The impact of individual Christians sharing their faith in the home and marketplace was also strong. Peter, however, strikes at something that is even more foundational in the early church’s evangelistic effectiveness – the distinctiveness of their lifestyle in contrast to the pagan society (2:11-12).

The surrounding culture consisted of people who were slaves to their passions, but the Christians had rejected this part of their past (1:14, 18; 4:3-4). They now submitted their passions to God. The effect of this was evangelistic. Outsiders took notice of the difference. (see 1 Pet. 2:15; 31; Matt. 5:16; Phil. 2:15; Col. 4:5; 1 Thess. 4:12)

“The significant evangelistic strategy of 1 Peter included the power of dedicated lives to win over those who first scorned the strangeness of the alien lifestyle.

Did the strategy work? Historians list as one of the chief reasons for the triumph of Christianity the fact that Christians made high moral demands and had the power to live up to those demands. A clear alternative was offered to the decadent pagan society, and many chose the stern discipline of the Christian community over the paganism that demanded nothing.

What is the key to effective evangelism in an increasingly non-Christian culture? What could be more powerful and more compelling than communities which present an alternative lifestyle or counterculture to the prevailing norms? Imagine a community that is shaped by the gospel message of selflessness, a community where ambition, pride, and the hunger for power have no place. A community which finds joy in single-minded commitment to the faith would be powerful enough to win over many of the most cynical critics of Christianity, for no one could argue against the power of Christian lives.

A missionary in India went from village to village entertaining the people with films and magic tricks before he spoke to them about Christ. Once when he spoke of Christ, and elderly man, a Hindu, stood up and said.

Dear pastor, we have listened with interest, yes, with respect, to your words about Jesus Christ. We love Christ and honor him as the unique man and as God. We also like to read the Bible, when we have the time and are not too tired. But, pardon me for saying this, this does not make us want to become Christians. Don't we know your parishioners? Don't we know how they live? How much hostility and enmity, how much drunkenness and deceit there is among them? They live no better than we do.<sup>1</sup>

#### 4. Apologetics

The term is from the Greek *apologia* (απολογία), “speaking in defense.” In ancient Greco-Roman usage, it referred to a courtroom defense in a normal judicial procedure. The accused would have an opportunity to refute charges. In the New Testament, the term appears 17 times, usually translated “defense” or “answer” (e.g., Philippians 1:7, 16; 1 Peter 3:15). In the second century and beyond, there were many “apologists” who defended the beliefs and practices of Christianity against attacks – Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Irenaeus. And in more recent times, this includes writers such as C. S. Lewis, William Lane Craig, Gary Habermas, Tim Keller, etc., who defend Christian faith in relation to scientific, historical, philosophical, ethical, religious, theological, or cultural issues.

Four functions of apologetics:

- To make a positive case for Christianity.
- To defend Christian faith against attacks, misunderstandings, and misrepresentations in order to remove obstacles to belief.
- To refute opposing beliefs, answering arguments non-Christians give in support of their own beliefs.
- To persuade people to adopt the Christian way of life as opposed to other alternatives.

“Embodied apologetics” is a term often attributed to Robert Webber. It assumes people are slow to accept Christian faith purely on rational grounds. Instead, they must see Christian faith “embodied,” or “lived out,” especially in community. Scripture affirms this in several places. For example, Jesus stressed the convincing value of love and unity (John 13-34-35, 17:20-21), which led Francis Schaeffer to say, “beauty in human relationships is the *final apologetic*.” Another clear expression of the embodied apologetic is here in 1 Peter 2:11-12.

Sometimes, this approach makes use of other types of apologetics (classical, evidentiary, presuppositional, etc.) but in the context of winsome community and witness. An example is the late Timothy Keller (author of *The Reason for God*), who was noted for leading thousands of highly skeptical onlookers in New York City to believe in Jesus. He frequently observed that you must first lead people to *want* Christianity to be true before trying to prove that it *is* true. He was especially appreciated for his gentle clarity and fairness. For example, in one of his debates with an atheist, as his opponent struggled to articulate his viewpoint, Dr. Keller listened and kindly helped him, “If I may, I think I hear you trying to say...., and proceeded to express the other perspective, and checked several times with his opponent to ensure he had expressed it clearly (i.e., not a “straw man”). Only then did he proceed to refute it.

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<sup>1</sup> James Thompson, *The Church in Exile* (ACU Press, 1990), 52.

5. In what ways might we need to be especially mindful of this “embodied apologetic” in our time? A few suggestions:

- Hope in an age of despair
- Commitment in an age of compromise
- Kindness in an age of “programmed contentiousness”
- Civility in an age of polarization
- Radical love in the place of exclusion
- Clarity in an age of confusion
- Purity in an age of permissiveness
  
- Others?