

Apologetics in Preaching *A Claim on Reality*

By Michael Berg

I teach freshman, a lot of freshman. As I become acquainted with the spiritual lives of these brand-new college students, it is apparent that there is often a separation between their spiritual lives and their lives of reality. These two separate realms don't often meet. When they do meet, it is not necessary that they correspond. Students might have a truth in their spiritual lives and a truth in their day-to-day lives, and it doesn't bother them if they do not match...as freshmen anyway.

A student might believe in guardian angels but be incredulous at the idea of demon possession. A student might believe that God has authored a life plan for him but is not the author of mathematical constants. A student might believe that she has a soul but that there is no non-physical entity at play in biology or physics.

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This should not surprise us since a very clear message has been sent to our society: Christianity is not a claim on reality. St. Peter would differ. "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Pt 1:16). Christianity is a claim on reality. Peter saw with his own eyes the real Jesus performing real acts in a real place in real time. St. Paul takes the argument to a further level when he says that if Jesus didn't rise from the dead the whole Christian faith is useless. It all depends on the historicity of the resurrection. If Jesus remained in the grave, Christianity loses its power and

you are being duped by such preaching. Spiritual truth needs to match reality.

Here is where some of the "New Atheists" are often the most honest ones in a conversation. It is one thing to tell your children a fairytale which they know (or eventually will figure out) is only a myth. It is quite another thing to indoctrinate your children into a worldview that is based on a falsity, especially one that has been the source of exclusion, violence, and even war. Some "New Atheists" even accuse religious parents of child abuse. Their line of thought is not off the mark. We might say the same thing about a cult leader who has convinced his followers that he is Christ returned. It's wrong, and there is no neutral ground in the matter.

So there really is no room for a demythologized Christianity which denies the resurrection of Christ. It's not intellectually viable. Nor is this demythologized Christianity redeemable as a moral code, not considering the scandals of the church. Christianity is not benign. It is either the way to salvation or it is a lie that has led to exclusion and even worse. There is no spiritual truth and real truth, just truth. On this we and the "New Atheists" can agree. It is becoming less and less acceptable in our culture to believe in a moralistic Christianity especially without a salvific resurrection. St. Paul was right all along.

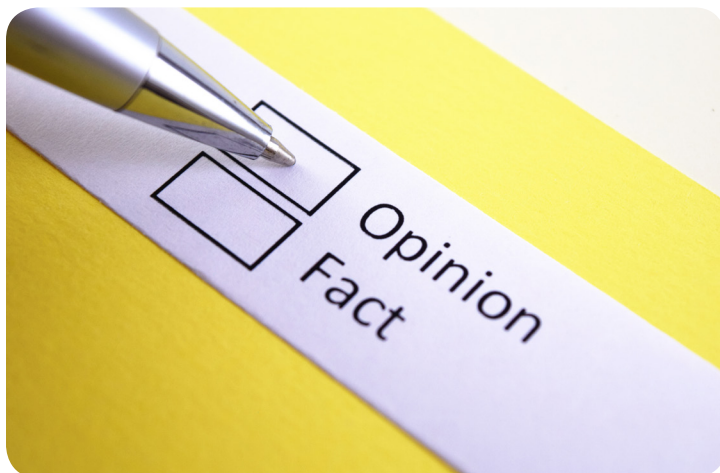
While it is true that faith is believing in what we cannot see, it is not a blind faith based on myth. My faith is only as good as the object of that faith. Yet some have left the impression that faith is separated from fact. Again, a clear message has been sent: Christianity is not a claim on reality. Some of the blame is to be laid at the feet of the academy. The 19th century

brought clarity to college campuses on an issue that had been incubating since the Enlightenment: Which discipline is the Queen of the Sciences? It started with a separation between the so-called hard sciences and soft-sciences. Chemistry is a claim on reality; theology is not. Physics deals in reality; philosophy does not. The hard sciences do truth; the humanities do opinion. And if there is a disagreement between the two, the hard sciences will win (and get the funding too).

American preachers have helped to solidify a false division between fact and opinion.

Yet some of the blame belongs at the foot of the pulpit. American preachers have helped to solidify a false division between hard and soft, fact and opinion. Some have left the impression that science is out to get theology, and Christians should be wary of intellectual inquiry. Perhaps too many words have been spoken about topics better left to the psychologist (matters that are, rightly or wrongly, called “soft”), and not enough words have been spoken on Christianity’s claim on truth and the robust worldview it offers (matters based on “hard” facts). Perhaps we have unwittingly accepted the division of hard and soft, admitting our place in the latter. After all, we just do faith.

Remaining in the arena of the soft is problematic because there is no way to prove a soft truth other than, perhaps, a personal experience. And even then we are left with a faith detached from an object. The strength of that subjective faith becomes the ultimate determining factor for Christian conviction instead of the facts of Christianity. A person can believe in anything, but that doesn’t make it true. This is not to dismiss emotional and passionate reactions to God’s saving actions or grief at losing a loved one which is comforted with a promised resurrection. It is just that those emotions and passionate reactions should be grounded in the reality of Christ.



Too many freshman come to college with the mindset that their faith is mere opinion, tradition, or a psychological aid. Faith is, at best, a virtue. It can be valuable. It is good, but it is soft. Real truth, reality itself, is to be discovered in the laboratory. Religion might be useful for psychological well-being but has little, if any, purpose in the real world. But we can’t remain freshmen forever. Eventually we are confronted with this thought: Do I turn my brain off in the spiritual realm and just accept my faith as a soft truth that does not necessarily correspond with hard truth (i.e. reality), or do I simply leave behind such childish things?

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When serving as a parish pastor I experienced a memorable moment on this topic: a young adult woman told me that I had given her permission to think. She had the impression that thinking was antithetical to her Christian faith—even that it was wrong. In humility she did not want to question what she had been taught, but this only made her doubt more. She was at an existential crossroads. Do I keep turning my brain off in this spiritual realm, or do I finally succumb to reality and reject the whole thing as myth, a useful myth maybe, but just a myth? It was a false dichotomy. She only needed to see that Christianity is a legitimate claim on reality, that it offers an intellectually satisfying worldview. She needed permission to think.

Our faith is a simple faith but not a simpleton faith. So we preachers should ask ourselves some questions: Does my preaching inspire a simpleton faith or a robust worldview emerging from the simple truths of scripture? Have any listeners been intellectually turned off by my preaching? Have I, as a preacher, concentrated on the *method* of preaching confident that I had the right message, but not plumbing the depths of that message? Have I conflated the simple and unchangeable message of the gospel with a simpleton message? We preachers are in an office that demands asking such humbling and penetrating questions.

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Preachers should be careful not to leave the impression that the Christian faith cannot compete with other worldviews. Christianity can and has. One of the tasks of the apologist is to create a level playing field on which he can make the claims of Christianity over against other claims. The apologist wants the

skeptic to use the same reason and logic which he or she uses with every other fact in life. From there a presentation of Christ may be made through which the Spirit may do his saving work of faith. A satisfying Christian worldview can then be developed. In turn preaching becomes more robust, dismantling the idea that Christianity is an unintellectual crutch for the weak.

Christianity has a lot to offer. The most important thing is salvation, of course, but it does not end there. Springing from the love of God in Christ comes a worldview that deals with all the big questions in life. It is a complete worldview, the only one on the market. For far too long the secular world has lived off the borrowed capital of the Judeo-Christian worldview. While the preacher is a proclaimer of grace and not a salesman, this does not mean that he should ignore the completeness of the Christian message. This is important when dealing with the skeptic who has yet to believe that salvation is in Christ. All she sees is what Christianity offers in a broad sense. And if all she sees is a shallow ideology, she is less likely to give the gospel a hearing.

Christianity deals with all of the big questions of life. Who are we? Where are we going? What is our purpose? What is the point of suffering? What is the good life? How should we act? Not every worldview offers satisfactory answers to these questions. A materialist has no answer to suffering other than that it is something to be eradicated. Christianity has the theology of the cross. The Buddhist scrambles to find a purpose in day-to-day life other than the Eightfold Path to eliminate Dukkha (suffering or mental dysfunction). Christianity offers a divine purpose in vocation (love of neighbor as God's coworker or mask).

Christianity has also been significant in its contributions to many endeavors: the university, hospitals, human rights, modern science, just war theory, ethics, law, education, and music. No doubt misguided Christians have fought against the good in some of these, but abuses in the name of the Christian faith do not negate the true message of Christianity. It is to our shame that atrocities have happened in the name of Christ. Yet Christianity has an answer even for that: forgiveness for even the most misguided people.

The task of the apologetically-minded preacher is to promote the robust worldview of Christianity without arrogance, all the while making sure the gospel predominates. The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany offers an opportunity on February 17, 2019. The assigned texts offer a clear distinction between the person who trusts God and the person who trusts man. In the First Reading (Jr 17:5-8), Jeremiah promises blessings to the faithful and predicts doom for the unfaithful. Psalm 1 continues this contrast between the one who walks in the counsel of the wicked and the one who does not.



Then, as usual, Jesus flips everything upside down. Luke's version of the Beatitudes (Lk 6:17-26) tell us that the poor are blessed and that the hungry will be satisfied. Those who trust in God will have all of these beautiful benefits, but they might have to wait until the Promised Land of heaven much like the faithful in Jeremiah's day had to wait until after the exile for their Promised Land.

But Christ did rise from the dead, and this fact changes the world.

Then consider the Second Reading from 1 Corinthians 15, part of a *lectio continua* during the Epiphany season, year C. Here St. Paul lays out for believers a clear apologetic message: If Christ did not rise, then Christianity is a fraud. But Christ did rise from the dead, and this fact changes the world. A sermon on these readings could tackle the issue of Christianity as a claim on reality. Maybe something like this....

Paul is pretty confident in his faith, isn't he? It is not a false confidence. The distinction between a false confidence and a confidence based in fact is hugely important for us. If we are to judge a person's religious claims by his or her confidence, then the suicide-bomber wins out. Who is more confident than he? No, Paul is confident that Jesus rose from the dead because Jesus actually rose from the dead and Paul investigated the matter. Not only did Jesus appear to him on the road to Damascus and teach him in Arabia, but Paul also knew of eyewitness accounts of the resurrection. So Paul defended himself before Agrippa and Festus with this statement: "What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner" (Ac 26:25-26). These things were not done in a corner but out in the open for all to see. You can investigate these facts.

Armed with both the facts and the Spirit's gift of faith, Paul is confident enough to say that everything depends on the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then the whole thing falls apart and Christianity is a fraud. Paul puts everything on the line. Not with a bomb strapped to his chest but armed with reasonable truth and Spirit-given faith.

So Christianity is not neutral, is it? It's not a self-help program that is valuable whether or not Jesus actually rose from the dead. It's not a moral code with a nice fable about a man who overcame great evil but indifferent to the claim that he is God Almighty. It's not an inspiring story that encourages us but is divorced from the facts of Christ's life. It is a claim on reality. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then Christianity is a lie and we should not be Christian.

And quite frankly, a lot of other things fall apart too. Do we have the same concept of human rights without the concept that mankind is created in the image of God and loved enough to be redeemed by God? If I am just a pile of molecules like everything else, do I really have value? Do we have the same amount of scientific progress without the concept of an ordered universe that is given to us to for exploration? If the physical world is divine, as many ancients thought, should we even carry out scientific experiments since it would be playing with the divine? Do we have the same sense of morality without an absolute being? What gives anybody the right to say "This is right" or "This is wrong" if it is just my opinion versus yours? I would argue that we wouldn't have the same world that we live in without God and the resurrection of his Son. We would have something far worse.

Of course none of that really matters unless we have internal peace and eternal hope. And we can't have peace and hope without a resurrection from the dead. So this is the question that Christianity answers above all else: Where am I going after this life? Well, here is your peace and hope: the resurrection of Christ. And it isn't a myth; it really happened. This gives you internal peace: You know that you stand righteous before God on account of Christ. This gives you eternal hope: No matter what happens, eternal bliss belongs to you.

But there is more. Along with this peace and hope comes a full life, a life of value, rights, exploration, purpose, and joy. It answers all the questions mentioned above. Christ really is the answer to all of life's questions. This is the difference between the man who walks in the counsel of the wicked and the man who does not as we sang in the psalm. This is the difference between the person who trusts God and the person who trusts man as Jeremiah contrasted for us today. Trusting in man over God forces us to put a disordered world into order and answer the great questions of life by ourselves. On the other hand, trusting in God means that we have an ordered world given back to us in gospel freedom—a world full of meaning, purpose, and opportunity.

And even better, we have a God who forgives us and will resurrect us despite the fact that we have and will fail in this life. This claim is true. The apostles witnessed his resurrection and have reported it to us. Through their words the Spirit grants us faith and even confidence, a Paul-like confidence. With this we live free, free to explore, think, learn, take chances, all with internal peace and an eternal hope.

Books for further study:

Gunning for God: Why the New Atheists are Missing the Target by John Lennox

How Christianity Changed the World by Alvin Schmidt

Human Rights and Human Dignity by John Warwick Montgomery

Postmodern Times by Gene Edward Veith

The Spiritual Society: What Lurks Beyond Postmodernism? by Frederic Baue

Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air by Francis Beckwith and Gregory Koukl

Requiem: A Lament in Three Movements by Thomas Oden

Solomon among the Postmoderns by Peter Leithart

