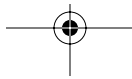


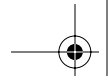
Foreword

Phillip E. Johnson

I belong to one of the evangelical congregations in a mainstream denomination that has been dominated for many years at the national level by theological liberals who preach a very different gospel. Our First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley (PCUSA) nurtures many candidates for the ministry, and my wife, Kathie, is active on the candidate care committee. We worry every time we send these dedicated young (sometimes not-so-young) men and women off to seminary because we know they will be influenced there by teachers and fellow students who are committed to modernist and postmodernist concepts that change the Christian gospel into something else altogether.

It isn't that we want to protect future ministers from challenges to their faith commitments and their moral standards. On the contrary, it would be a poor education that failed to inform them that the prevailing view in religious as well as secular academic institutions is that the Bible is thoroughly unreliable as history, that the historical Jesus was no more than a fallible human teacher who was deified by his followers, and that the current moral agenda for the church should be to use all its influence against social evils like racism, sexism and homophobia. The problem is not that the case for modernist and postmodernist theology is argued but that the argument all too often goes unanswered. Indeed, the biggest problem is that the naturalistic assumptions that underlie both modernism and postmodernism often are assumed rather than explicit, so that they lie unobserved behind what is actually said instead of being brought forward for analysis and criticism. The student learns not to proclaim that naturalism is true but to avoid being stigmatized as a "fundamentalist" by saying or thinking anything that directly challenges modernist assumptions. Where naturalism is advocated, it is usually not under its own name but as an

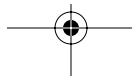
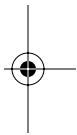


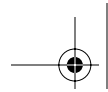


assumed component of “science” or just “rationality.”

Kathie and I think it is stupid to try to protect people from dangerous ideas; we prefer to inoculate them. When a few years ago I found a copy of Martin Gardner’s novel *The Flight of Peter Fromm*, then out of print, we decided we had the perfect vehicle and bought all the author’s remaining private stock for use at seminar discussions with our church’s seminarians. This novel of ideas tells the story of a young Christian fundamentalist, Peter Fromm, who enrolls in the University of Chicago Divinity School because he plans to convert the world and wants to start with the toughest audience. At Chicago Peter falls under the influence of a divinity school professor and Unitarian minister named Homer Wilson, who sets out to convert Peter step by step to his own agnostic liberalism. Homer’s mephistophelean arguments are smoothly persuasive, and as Peter succumbs to them, he goes through one phase after another: a flirtation with Roman Catholicism; close encounters with Marx and Freud; intellectual immersion in the theologies of Barth, Bultmann, Niebuhr and Tillich; and finally a disastrous apprenticeship with a worldly minister reminiscent of Norman Vincent Peale. In the end Homer does not get Peter’s soul, however; Peter somehow hangs on to a corner of his faith and asserts his own spiritual integrity at the cost of a mental breakdown in hilarious circumstances.

Gardner himself is thoroughly skeptical of orthodox Christianity, and his novel has since been republished by the vehemently anti-Christian Prometheus Press. What makes the book a wonderful teaching tool, however, is that it brings the basic issues to the surface and forces the reader to confront them through the eyes of both the sophisticated Homer and the initially innocent and increasingly bewildered Peter. Both men agree with each other and with the apostle Paul that the critical issue is whether Christ rose from the dead in the physical, empty-tomb sense, and both share a determination not to put up with the efforts of so many modern theologians and clergy to avoid committing themselves on this critical question. One thing we learn is that theologians who want to stay academically respectable while avoiding outright apostasy must become skillful at double talk. Homer Wilson divides the world of modernist clergy into “loyal liars” and “truthful traitors.” Both assume that nature is all there is and that the methodological naturalism of scientific reasoning does not permit us to believe that a man who is truly dead can rise from the tomb and live again, much less live forever. The loyal liars reassure their congre-

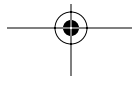
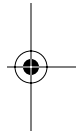


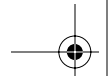


gations by pretending to believe, and the truthful traitors outrage them by spilling the beans. Seminarians who study the novel learn to recognize and criticize the ideas. More importantly, they learn to recognize how a teacher can escape addressing the inescapable issues without the class or congregation noticing.

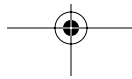
Besides acquainting prospective seminarians with the ideas and evasions, it is important to furnish them with an effective support group. The occasional evangelical seminary professor who knows the score can be a helpful counselor, but there are limits on how far he or she can go without seeming to be disloyal to the seminary and to individual colleagues. What the student needs are mentors outside the institution and a peer group inside. In our church we try to provide the former in the form of elder advocates who help the future ministers maintain intellectual and spiritual contact with the lay people whom they will eventually be serving. William A. Dembski and Jay Wesley Richards have created what deserves to be called the mother of all seminary peer groups, an apologetics seminar where the tough issues are debated even in front of outside critics. Of course, this kind of forum has to be supplemented with more supportive prayer and fellowship circles, but the issue is whether those prayer groups are helping seminarians to confront the tough questions or to retreat from them. By founding their movement, and especially by (appropriately) seizing the banner of Charles Hodge as their flag, Dembski and Richards offended some faculty but did the only thing that could enable them to make a difference. I would like to think that Christian revolutionaries, following their master, will be charitable and loving. I would not like to think that they would be reluctant to step on a few complacent toes.

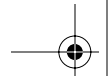
Behind this student movement is a more general intellectual movement that will bear fruit in the coming century. It is a bit thin on the ground for now, but so was the Christian faith in the first century. Materialism as a philosophy is superficially powerful but moribund, as we saw when the Soviet Union collapsed without a struggle a decade ago. Methodological naturalism is a branch on the materialist tree that will lose its power to intimidate when the tree is known to be hanging in midair. The Spirit moves when and where it chooses, and those who are moving with it are never afraid to perturb established branches and twigs that have lost sight of their own roots. That is the point of the intelligent design (or “mere creation”) movement, to which Dembski and Richards have contributed much—to remind us of our roots, so we can carefully prune the branches.





We come from creation by God, not from unguided nature, and people who wish to be rational must recognize that fact. Show me a mainstream seminary that is unafraid to say that without equivocation, and dare the wrath of the scientific and academic establishments for doing so, and I will show you an institution that deserves your enthusiastic support.





Introduction

RECLAIMING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

William A. Dembski

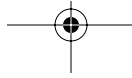
Jay Wesley Richards

In 1943 Christian apologetics was still a required course at Princeton Theological Seminary. In 1944 apologetics was no longer offered even as an elective. Except for sporadic references to it, apologetics ceased to be part of the seminary curriculum. Princeton was not alone in abandoning apologetics. Indeed, a person would be hard-pressed to find a denominational seminary that includes it today. For post-Enlightenment liberalism the very idea of rational argument on behalf of the Christian faith is offensive.

And yet, throughout Scripture, Christians are enjoined to defend the faith through rational argument. Thus Peter urged, “Always be ready to make your defense [*apologia*] to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet 3:15). Paul understands his own ministry as constituting a “defense [*apologia*] and confirmation [*bebaiosis*] of the gospel” (Phil 1:7). The Greek *apologia* denotes a legal defense, and the Greek *bebaiosis* means “verification” or “proof.”

The Demise of Apologetics

Rational argument used to be regarded as an ally of the Christian faith, but this changed two hundred years ago during the Enlightenment. The father of liberal theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher, who came just after the Enlightenment, epitomized this change when he remarked, “We entirely renounce all attempts to prove the truth or necessity of Christianity; and we presuppose, on the contrary, that all Christians . . . have already the inward certainty that their religion cannot take any other form than this.”





Karl Barth continued this negative attitude toward apologetics into our own day (cf. his *Church Dogmatics* 1/1).

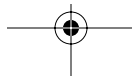
Are Schleiermacher and Barth right? Throughout the book of Acts we find that Paul does not merely *proclaim* the gospel, hoping to score a conversion here and there. Instead he actively *persuades* people of the truth of the gospel, striving to convince both the hearts and the minds of his listeners. Indeed, it is instructive to trace the Greek *peitho*, the verb that means to persuade, through the book of Acts. Active persuasion, and not bald assertion, characterize Paul's ministry.

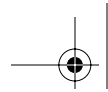
The failure of the mainline denominations to take Christian apologetics seriously is at least in part responsible for the steady decline of these denominations, not only in size but also in vision. At stake in apologetics is the question whether Christianity is true—objectively true. “Objective truth” is a dirty word these days. It is chic to relativize, contextualize and politicize the truth of the gospel. On the other hand, it is terribly gauche to cramp our free-swinging academic style by giving credence to objective truths, which by their nature are obligatory across the board and thus not subject to our control.

Lay people with the good fortune not to have been educated out of their good sense want to know whether the fundamental claims of Christianity are objectively true. A Christ who is merely a social or political or ethical construction does not interest them—and rightly so. Miguel de Unamuno's definition of belief in God is too thin a soup on which to nourish a vibrant Christian faith: “To believe in God is to long for His existence, and, further, it is to act as if He existed.”¹ To desire that God exists and to act as though God existed express but a vague hope. Does God actually exist? And more to the point, Who is this God? and How can we know anything about this God? These are questions people need answered if their faith is to be sustained and strengthened.

By jettisoning apologetics from their seminary curricula, the mainline denominations have undermined the training of their ministers. Errors and confusions taught at seminary propagate not only up the denominational hierarchy but also down to the grassroots. Lay people these days scratch their heads at the theological disarray of their denominations. They are amazed because what was unthinkable only a few years back is

¹Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. J. E. C. Fitch (1913; reprint, New York: Dover, 1954), pp. 184-85.





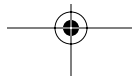
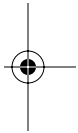
now considered normal. They needn't be amazed—one semester at a mainline seminary is enough to dispel the amazement. What with Union Seminary in New York holding a voodoo chapel service, Harvard Divinity School offering a theology class in which students are taught that the Virgin Mary was raped by God, and Princeton Theological Seminary's gay-lesbian caucus stuffing the campus mailboxes with a flier showing two men in the Garden of Eden and with a caption reading "God created Adam and Steve," it is hardly surprising when today's pastors are more confused than their congregations.

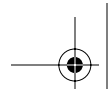
In response to this theological malaise, a group of students at Princeton Theological Seminary, organized as the Charles Hodge Society, decided to offer a weekly seminar on Christian apologetics known as the Princeton Apologetics Seminar. These seminars began in the spring of 1995 and continue to the present. Semester themes for the seminar have included the authority of Scripture, Christian missions and Christianity's cultured despisers. The essays in this volume are largely taken from that seminar. We present these essays for two reasons: (1) to strengthen the faith of seminarians and other Christians who struggle with the theological disarray of our times, and (2) to provide an example of what a student group can do on a seminary campus to combat false and destructive ideas.

Besides starting an apologetics seminar, the Charles Hodge Society also reinstated the *Princeton Theological Review*, a journal founded by Charles Hodge but disbanded by the seminary in the 1920s.² *The Princeton Theological Review* has published many of the papers presented at the Princeton Apologetics Seminar.

In adopting Charles Hodge's name, the Charles Hodge Society wished to recognize his towering presence in the early history of Princeton Theological Seminary. Charles Hodge was the premier American theologian in the nineteenth century. Unlike today, when theology is considered a second-class discipline readily ignored by the cultural movers and shakers, scientists and statesmen alike eagerly awaited Hodge's wisdom on everything from slavery to Darwinism. The Charles Hodge Society therefore wished to recognize his outstanding role in stimulating the intellectual and spiritual life of the seminary and of our nation.

²For subscription information write to the *Princeton Theological Review* at Princeton Theological Seminary, P.O. Box 821, Princeton, NJ 08542.





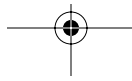
Fundamentalism and Accommodationism

Martin Luther once noted that “we can get along without burgomasters, princes, and noblemen, but we can’t do without schools, for they must rule the world.” If we take seriously that Christianity embodies humanity’s chief truth—that God was in Christ Jesus reconciling the world to himself—then the most important school of all is the seminary. The seminaries teach our ministers who in turn teach their congregations about Jesus Christ. Whether they do so faithfully and truthfully depends on the training they receive at seminary.

The Roman statesman Seneca observed, “If you want a man to keep his head when crisis comes, you must give him some training before it comes.” Seminary breeds many a crisis of faith. It is common for young men and women who are enthusiastic about serving God to go to seminary, lose their heads and turn away from the truth of Christianity. Since Christian symbols are easily reinterpreted within secular categories, often a form of Christianity remains. But once seminarians come to view orthodox Christianity as simplistic, biblicist or morally deficient—as is regularly taught at the mainline seminaries—loss of faith is inevitable. Students need to be equipped to handle the assaults on heart and mind that they encounter at seminary. For this reason apologetics is indispensable in the education of Christian ministers.

What will it take to reinvigorate Christian apologetics and thereby help reclaim theological education? We need to cultivate a certain attitude. Our work as Christian apologists must be of the highest quality and rigor to deserve the respect of the secular academic community (and this includes the mainline seminaries). Yet at the same time we must view any respect we actually receive from this community as inconsequential. Our attitude must combine two competing ideals: the desire to produce work worthy of respect, and a repudiation of any desire for actual acceptance or, respectability.

Why is this attitude so important? To transform mainline seminaries in particular and the secular academic world in general, the Christian apologist must steer clear of two obstacles. One obstacle is fundamentalism, which assumes all conceptual problems facing Christianity are easily resolved. The other obstacle is accommodation to the prevailing secular ideologies, which gives up so much ground as to lose any robust Christian witness. Fundamentalism prevents us from doing the quality work that’s needed to deserve the respect of the secular world. On the other hand,





accommodationism is so caught up in gaining the respect of the secular academic world that it loses its integrity as a Christian witness.

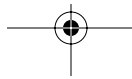
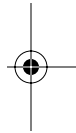
Consider an analogy. In earlier centuries actors were classified with thieves, prostitutes and pimps—the scum of society. Actors, and entertainers generally, make their living by pleasing an audience. As a result they are easily tempted to prostitute their art to the all-too-often debased tastes of their audiences. This temptation is so strong that many entertainers succumb, with the result that the profession has traditionally been viewed as scandalous.

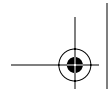
The temptation to prostitute ourselves, which is so evident in the entertainment industry, is equally a danger to Christian scholars. There is only one way for Christians to resist this temptation and that is to accept fully the offense of the gospel. Christian apologetics must never be divorced from the offense of the gospel. The secular academy sets ground rules that doom Christianity from the start. For Christian apologists to play by these rules, whether in the name of ecumenism or pluralism, is to capitulate the faith.

That said, our response as Christian apologists must not be to stick our heads in the sand and mechanically repeat a creed. We are to engage the secular world, reproving, rebuking and exhorting it, pointing to the truth of Christianity and producing strong arguments and valid criticisms that show where secularism has missed the mark.

Will we be appreciated? Hardly. The Pharisees of our day—those who know themselves to occupy the moral high ground—reside preeminently in the academic world. The Pharisees killed Jesus and are just as ready to destroy our Christian witness if we permit it. Nevertheless, this is our calling as Christian apologists, to bear witness to the truth, even to the point of death (be it the death of our bodies or the death of our careers). The church has a name for this—martyrdom. The early church considered martyrdom the highest Christian calling. Martyrdom was counted an honor and privilege, a way of sharing in Christ's sufferings and living out the Christian life in its most logical and complete form.

Christian apologetics that's worthy of the name is a call to martyrdom—perhaps not a martyrdom where we spill our blood (although this too may be required) but a martyrdom where we witness to the truth without being concerned about our careers, political correctness, the current fashion or toeing the party line. We are not called to please the world; we are called to proclaim the truth within whatever context and conventions we find





ourselves. This means we must have a thorough knowledge of our context and conventions. We must be informed. We must listen. We must know where we stand, and we must know where we are withstood. This requires effort.

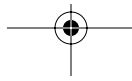
Quietism, Imperialism and Engagement

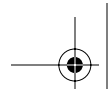
There is another set of twin obstacles that the Christian apologist must avoid—quietism and imperialism. Quietism is the view that the proper response of the Christian toward the world is to wait things out. According to quietism this world is a bad place, in fact so bad a place that our best strategy is to sidestep the world as much as possible. Quietism tries to make it through life unscathed. This approach to the Christian life is a great temptation in our day. Feeling beleaguered by so many hostile forces in our society, we like nothing better than to retreat into a fortress. But this is precisely what the Christian may not do. Christian scholarship has no place in a ghetto.

We have Jesus' own example in this matter. Consider how Jesus began his ministry: "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news' " (Mk 1:14–15). Jesus insists that people change the way they think and act. To a generation that regards religion as a harmless backwater having no real cognitive claims, this is the height of presumption. Jesus, never slow to place demands on people, enunciates here his two primary demands: repentance and faith.

It is important that we understand precisely what Jesus is demanding here. The repentance of which Jesus speaks denotes a fundamental reorientation of the human person and contains a strong cognitive element. Indeed the very word for repentance in the Greek New Testament refers primarily to cognition and has embedded in it the Greek word for mind. Repentance signifies a thoroughgoing change in mental outlook or perspective. Now there is only one way to change one's perspective and that is to move to a new vantage from which to see previously hidden things. The changed perspective that Jesus requires comes from believing the good news—the gospel. Through faith in this good news we reorient ourselves to see things as God means us to see them. This is the good news that God has loved the world and sent Christ to redeem it. The repentance and faith of which Jesus speaks are thus inseparable.

But what gave Jesus the right to demand of his listeners repentance and



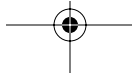


faith? Even if we grant that quietism is not a valid Christian attitude, imperialism certainly does not fare any better. How can Jesus command us to repent and believe? Isn't this the height of presumption? Religion is, after all, a personal and private affair, isn't it? What business then does Jesus have imposing his views on others? How can Jesus be so insensitive? How dare he be so judgmental as to find fault with how other people are living their lives. To paraphrase the gestalt psychologist Fritz Perls, we are not in this world to live up to Jesus' expectations, and he is not in this world to live up to our expectations.

Of course, these criticisms are utterly bogus. Jesus had every right to express his views forthrightly, to find fault where there was fault, and to demand change where justice was flouted. Unlike the crusaders of the Middle Ages, Jesus was not putting the sword to anyone's neck. He was straightforwardly speaking the truth. It is disingenuous to call this imperialism. Imperialism is always a matter of coercion, not a matter of discomfort. The deeper a lie is entrenched, the greater the discomfort when the truth finally unmask it. The Pharisees did not like it when Jesus unmasked their hypocrisy. They did not like it when he showed them that God's purposes for humanity were greater than their narrow, self-righteous parochialism.

Our proper response in approaching the world is therefore neither quietism nor imperialism but engagement. This was Jesus' own attitude. God is reconciling the world to himself through Christ. As Christians we are the body of Christ and thus the instruments through which God reconciles the world. We have a unique calling. Insofar as Christ is reconciling the world today, it is through the lives of his people, the Christians who constitute his church. Our proper response therefore is one of engagement, to engage the world with the truth of Christ.

As we engage the world with the truth of Christianity, we need to recognize how very high are the stakes. Not only does Christianity claim to possess humanity's ultimate truth, but it also claims that this truth is so urgent that a person ignores it at his or her peril. At the heart of Christianity is the overwhelming truth that in Christ God has invaded space and time, making it possible for humanity to take part in the divine life. The opportunity to take part in the divine life is regarded by Scripture and church tradition as good news—indeed, the best there is. But Christianity also has a dark side: those who refuse to embrace this truth face separation from that divine life. Again, the Scripture and church tradition are univo-



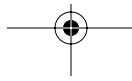
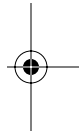


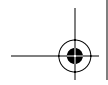
cal on this point; only this time the picture they present is incredibly bleak.

We need to remember that this is a fallen world. This is not the world God originally created. The world of Genesis 1 was, as the author of Genesis puts it, “very good.” But the world that came into being after Adam’s transgression is a different world. To be sure, there is continuity with the original creation. And it is this continuity that ensures God’s love for this present, fallen world. But the present world is a different world from the original one. It is a world in which love and hatred, right and wrong, and good and evil coexist and commingle. It is also a world in which humans must decide their allegiances. There is in the end no straddling of fences. Jesus says that we are either for him or against him. There is no middle ground. This truth is the dark side of the gospel. For those who receive it, the gospel is the best news imaginable. For those who reject it, the gospel signifies sorrow and loss. The apostle Paul put it this way: “We are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life” (2 Cor 2:15-16).

An urgency attaches to the Christian message. People’s lives are in the balance. Not every story will have a happy ending. Everything is not going to turn out all right in the end. Only where God’s grace is manifested will things turn out all right. But where God’s grace is spurned, things will not turn out all right. There is a move afoot these days in theological circles to embrace a position known as universalism—that in the end everyone will be saved. This is the teaching neither of Scripture nor of church tradition. There is no universal safety net. Our feel-good pop psychologies urge us to think it more befitting of God to save everyone. Reality, however, is not ultimately determined by what we think fitting. Certainly we should be comforted in knowing that the God who decides human destinies is rich in love and mercy. But we must never neglect the holiness and justice of God.

Because the truth of Christ is humanity’s chief truth, the truth of Christ is at once glorious and urgent. It follows that Christians have a mandate to declare the truth of Christ. This mandate consists of bringing every aspect of life under the influence of this truth. In an age of unbridled freedom and licentiousness, this no doubt will smack of elitism and intrusiveness. But in fact, unifying every aspect of life around the truth of Christ is the only hope humanity has to find true freedom and fulfillment. In the epistle to





the Colossians, Paul writes that all things were created by and for Christ. To be united with Christ is therefore to fulfill a person's true purpose, whereas to be separated from Christ is to lose his or her way.

Rooting Out False Ideas

If we now grant that unifying every aspect of life around the truth of Christ is the ideal that ought to guide every Christian scholar, the question remains, How do we get there? Let us begin by acknowledging how far we actually are from attaining this ideal. Consider the words of J. Gresham Machen, a well-known Princeton theologian, who was active early in the twentieth century.

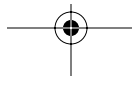
False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the Gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion.³

These words have come true in our own day with a vengeance. Anything that hints at a Christian worldview is routinely discarded within our secular society.

Indeed, we have permitted the collective thought of the world to be controlled by ideas that prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything but a harmless delusion. It needs to be emphasized that we, the Christians, the church of Jesus Christ, have done this. Christianity has never held any illusions about the extent of evil and deception of which a lost humanity is capable. But if evil and deception prosper, part of the blame must inevitably be laid at the feet of those who can help prevent it.

Christians are called to be salt and light in the world, and in this way to stem and overthrow false ideas. Unfortunately we have not exercised our power as salt and light nearly enough. Through self-absorption, inattention and bad theology we have failed to act as salt and light. We have been careless. We have let false ideas prosper without challenge. False ideas have to be rooted out for faith to recover. This is not to say that Christians ought to form vigilante groups, set up an index of proscribed books as in the old days and condemn everything that strikes them as the least bit threatening. The inquisitorial method cannot fulfill God's redemptive purposes for the world.

³J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1951), p. 162.



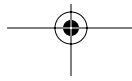


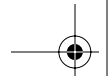
Nonetheless, we are not to leave false ideas unchecked. False ideas must be rooted out, and to do so requires seeing them for what they are. Since Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, humans have known good and evil—the tree delivered what it promised. Indeed, we know good and evil not just abstractly but from experience—all of us have experienced good and evil in our lives. But to understand good and evil, to discern good and not confuse it with evil, this is a different matter entirely. This sort of knowledge eluded our first parents and, but for the grace of God, continues to elude us. Discerning between good and evil is a far different matter from simply having experienced them.

Now false ideas become a problem precisely when we lack such discernment. A false idea is harmless enough if we recognize it as such, if we understand its origin and history, if we untangle its partial truths, if we appreciate why the false idea seems plausible to its adherents, if we understand it better than its original proponents. Once we thoroughly understand a false idea, we need no longer be intimidated by it. Only then can we properly assess its place in the grand scheme of things and so bring it under the authority of Christ.

False ideas that undermine the Christian faith need to be exposed for what they are before they can lose their sting. Unfortunately, we have grown sloppy in exposing false ideas. We have refused to expend the necessary effort to bring the false ideas of our age under the authority of Christ. In the history of Christianity this is a recent development. From the sixth century up to the Enlightenment it is safe to say that the West was thoroughly imbued with Christian ideals and that Western intellectual elites were overwhelmingly Christian. False ideas that undermined the very foundations of the Christian faith (e.g., denying the resurrection or the Trinity) were swiftly challenged and uprooted. Since the Enlightenment, however, we have not so much lacked the means to combat false ideas as the will and clarity.

The will and clarity to combat false ideas comes from taking Jesus' promise to his disciples seriously: "I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict" (Lk 21:15). What is noteworthy about this promise is how perfectly it was fulfilled in the life of Jesus. Jesus was never at a loss for words. He always saw through the traps of his opponents. He had an uncanny ability for avoiding pitfalls. If this promise was fulfilled in Jesus' life, why should contemporary Christians expect less for themselves? The false ideas that





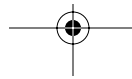
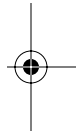
undermine our faith today are no more insidious than the traps and snares that beset Jesus. Why should we not expect the same success in dealing with them that Jesus experienced? The threat that false ideas present is simply too great to be ignored. Jesus did not ignore them but addressed them squarely. How can we demand less of ourselves?

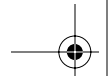
The remedy must be appropriate to the disease. Demons have to be cast out. Infections have to be drained. Cancers have to be surgically removed. And false ideas have to be analyzed, evaluated and refuted. Just as the word of God's truth is good seed that generates new life in Christ, so false ideas are bad seeds which, if allowed to grow, yield bitter fruit. The only way to get rid of seeds once planted is to dig them up. Recovery of faith is the art of cultivation. Weeding is as much a part of gardening as are planting and nurturing. False ideas need to be weeded out. This requires work, patience and diligence. Above all, it requires a willingness to listen and inquire into ideas that oppose the faith. We must be willing to learn from the world. We must grasp what the world is saying even better than it does itself. Only in this way will Christ's authority over the life of the mind be reestablished and the doors of faith reopened.

What is the goal of all our intellectual exertions as Christian apologists? Certainly our goal is not to make a name for ourselves. Nor is it simply to glorify God with our minds by probing the wonders of God's creation. The goal is rather to restore a simplicity of faith to a generation that has grown cold and cynical. As Jesus put it, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 18:3).

The great fault of secularism—and there's plenty of secularism at our seminaries—is that it actively hinders us from coming to such a simplicity of faith. By simplicity of faith we mean a belief in the unqualified goodness, wisdom and trustworthiness of God—that God always has our best interests at heart, that God knows exactly what he is doing, that God is actively involved and interested in our lives and that in spite of circumstances God is always worthy of our praise, gratitude and adoration.

The goal of Christian apologetics is to clear the way for a simple, child-like faith. Indeed, once our doctrines of God and salvation become so encrusted with qualifications, nuances and doubts that we can no longer run to God as a loving father, we're probably better closing up shop. This is not to say that there's no room for sophistication in theology. But the goal of all such sophistication must again be to restore us to the simplicity of the faith.





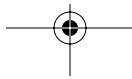
Quarantine Versus Inoculation

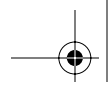
The tendency among evangelical Christians has been to (1) retreat, not simply from the world but also from those portions of the church that have assimilated “worldly” standards and ideas, and (2) build fortresses. This strategy has its own logic: false ideas tend to corrupt and whoever engages such ideas risks corruption. Ideological purity, however, has its own risks. A quarantine maintains safety only as long as one can prevent exposure. Preventing exposure may be possible when combating physical toxins. But when the toxins are false ideas, isolation is difficult to maintain.

The proper model for handling exposure to false ideas is not quarantine but inoculation. Inoculation exposes a person to a disease, but in measured doses so that the destructive effects of the disease are mitigated. The person inoculated against a disease ceases to be at risk, even when exposed to it. The inoculated individual is immune. Similarly, the student who has been inoculated against false ideas is far less likely to succumb to them than the student who has been cloistered from them. Precisely because they have already been exposed to falsehood, inoculated students become convincing critics of falsehood and defenders of truth. For this reason, Christian apologetics needs to stress inoculation.

The mainline and liberal seminaries can be a dangerous place for a student’s Christian faith. Those who surrender their faith at seminary typically lack adequate exposure to the false ideas they encounter, as well as the critical-thinking skills for analyzing those ideas. For students who were previously “quarantined,” a liberal seminary education can constitute overexposure and result in infection. Take, for instance, students whose undergraduate education was at a Bible college. Such students will arrive at seminary with extensive knowledge of the Bible’s content, yet may know little about mainstream biblical studies. So when they arrive at seminary and learn of, say, the documentary hypothesis (i.e., that the first five books of the Bible were not written by Moses but rather are a patchwork of different source traditions closer to the time of the Babylonian exile in 587 B.C.), they lack the tools for evaluating it.

At a mainline seminary, students will hear neither a thorough defense nor a thorough critique of the documentary hypothesis. In all likelihood professors will present a brief sketch of the hypothesis and thereafter simply presuppose it. This is not necessarily because seminary professors seek to indoctrinate students. In most cases professors teach what they think is correct and, because of time constraints, avoid treating alternative





theories. Consequently, students either reflexively reject what they hear without benefit of cogent argument or surrender to it wholesale since everyone around them seems to assume its truth. More insidiously, young seminarians may suspect that their former “fundamentalist” teachers and pastors intentionally kept them in the dark about this “newfound knowledge.” This suspicion can have devastating effects.

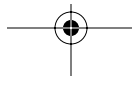
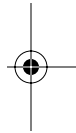
What’s the solution? Students must be exposed to the documentary hypothesis so that not only its claims and presuppositions are presented as fairly as possible (e.g., the role of philosophical naturalism in its formation and defense) but also the reasons for and against it. This approach inoculates students against the destructive power of false ideas while at the same time enabling them to appropriate elements of truth that the idea may contain. Ideally, this should be the task of any good Christian education. Thankfully, there are still Christian institutions that aspire to such a balanced and intentional educational philosophy.

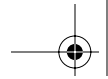
Puncturing the Myth of Invincibility

But what about mainline or liberal seminaries where this educational philosophy is lacking? Should students simply avoid such places altogether? Is it better to go to an evangelical seminary than risk spiritual meltdown? Certainly, some seminaries are so hostile to the Christian faith that it is impossible to acquire a sound education there. Nonetheless, to abandon the large, influential and well-endowed institutions because they are in trouble makes poor strategic sense. The unstated assumption here is that when a seminary’s leadership becomes subverted, all hope is lost—time to pack up and move out. This assumption even comes with its own proof text: “Therefore come out from among them and be separate” (2 Cor 6:17).

Although this text is important for maintaining the integrity of the church, it remains equally important that the church act as salt and light in difficult situations. Yes, the mainline and liberal seminaries are in a tight spot. But that is hardly a reason for abandoning them. Even if their leadership is corrupt, what is to prevent reform and renewal coming from the bottom up—from the students themselves?

The leftist students and campus agitators of the 1960s have become the tenured faculty, political leaders and opinion-makers of the nineties. Similarly, the theological left has successfully employed an incrementalist strategy of gradually displacing orthodox Christianity and replacing it with liberal Christianity. So why isn’t the ideological converse possible?





Why should evangelical students be incapable of similar aspirations? Our own experience at Princeton Theological Seminary made it clear that evangelical students are the key to renewing the mainline seminaries and churches. The faculty and administration of these institutions are typically too entrenched and hidebound to accomplish significant change. The enthusiasm of youth, on the other hand, is wonderfully capable of upsetting the status quo.

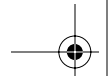
What we are urging, then, is an intentional activism by evangelical students directed at the mainline seminaries both to renew and to reclaim these institutions. What should evangelical students do? Some activities are obvious and essential: They should seek like-minded students for spiritual and psychological support, maintain a vigilant prayer life, read Scripture, participate in the sacraments and worship God. But there's more: Evangelical students need to take up the mantle of public apologist.

But isn't this presumptuous? How can we expect mere students to defend ideas publicly when their professors, who enjoy more education and experience, are daily dismissing those very ideas? Is this not sending sheep to the slaughter? Not at all. We speak from experience when we say that the heterodoxy of the mainline seminaries is far from invincible. Fashion tends to rule the day and is easily upset by students bold enough to challenge it. What the Charles Hodge Society accomplished at Princeton Theological Seminary is possible at every other mainline seminary, provided that a handful of committed evangelical students are willing to put their necks on the ideological chopping block.

Here is what we did: Since Princeton Theological Seminary offered no course in apologetics and was unlikely to reinstate apologetics in the curriculum at our request, we decided to supplement the curriculum. Specifically, we decided to conduct apologetic seminars on campus, open them to the public and lead them ourselves. This might seem onerous given that we were already full-time students. But in truth, running an apologetics seminar can be done without a great deal of extra effort. What is required, initially, is that a group of students, say six to ten, be willing to lead one or two seminars per semester.

We held the seminars every Tuesday at 8:00 p.m. in a seminary classroom. We chose a semester theme and divided up relevant topics. The bulk of the labor for seminar leaders therefore went into writing an extra paper per semester (approximately 6,000 words for a 45 minute presentation, which was then followed by questions and answers). Typically we also had



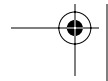
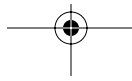
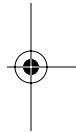


a designated respondent to analyze and critique the paper that had just been presented. After the paper was presented, it was put on reserve in the seminary library.

As semester themes we chose those that were of particular concern to the seminary community. The first semester of the apologetics seminar was devoted to the discipline of *apologetics*: its history at Princeton Seminary and elsewhere, its different types, its value and also several case studies of apologetics in action (e.g., the challenge of the biological and human sciences). The following semester we tackled the doctrine of *Scripture*: inerrancy, inspiration, aberrant treatments of biblical authority (such as Paul Tillich's), different evangelical doctrines of Scripture and so on. We had a local priest come and defend the Roman Catholic doctrine of Scripture. We also had a convinced Barthian present Barth's view of the inspiration of Scripture. Friendly and even not-so-friendly adversaries were always welcome at our podium.

The next semester we treated *missions* (an unpopular topic in many mainline seminaries these days, except as a surrogate for leftist political activism). Although our preference has been to keep the apologetics seminar "owned and operated" by students, we broke with tradition that semester and invited a retired evangelical professor of missions, Samuel Moffett, to speak on the continued need for evangelistic missionaries from the West. The next semester we examined *orthodoxy* and treated the main themes of the Apostles' Creed such as the Fatherhood of God, the virgin birth, Christ's human and divine natures, the resurrection, the atonement and the definition of the church. Again students did most of the speaking, but one week the director of InterVarsity for Princeton University graduate students, Gary Deddo, defended Christian language of God as Father (his essay is included in this volume).

Our theme the next semester was Christianity's Cultured Despisers (a takeoff from Schleiermacher's *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*). We treated specific arguments against Christianity from famous historical figures like Hume, Darwin, Marx, Freud and Bertrand Russell. The story continues, and the Princeton Apologetics Seminar is active to this day. Its great strength is its ownership by Princeton students. We do not depend on speakers outside the seminary community. We do not look for the esteem of faculty and administration. Those of us who participated in the apologetics seminars received a broader and more liberal education (in the true sense) than those who limited themselves to the seminary cur-





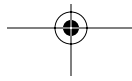
riculum. There is no reason that students at other seminaries cannot do the same.

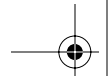
Students at today's mainline seminaries are more conservative than their faculties (at least at the beginning of their studies). This contrasts with the situation in the 1960s, in which students were much more liberal and radical than their professors. There are now far more students from evangelical congregations than from liberal ones that attend seminary. In contrast, liberal Christianity has great difficulty regenerating itself. Hardly anyone converts from agnosticism to liberal Christianity. Many liberal Christians started out as evangelicals. Indeed, liberal Christianity is parasitic. To survive it must recruit evangelical Christians. What's more, the key recruiting ground is the theological seminary.

What we are proposing, then, is to exploit the theological disparity between students and faculty at mainline seminaries through focused and intentional student activism. To succeed, such activism requires that a few committed seminary students be willing to risk their status, security and popularity. Additionally, it requires the help and encouragement from faithful people in the pews—this includes spiritual, emotional and financial support. Financial support is especially important. Seminary students tend to be poor. What's more, apologetics remains sufficiently unpopular at the mainline seminaries that funding, which is readily given to other campus groups, tends to get diverted from evangelical students engaged in apologetics. For instance, the *Princeton Theological Review* would long be defunct were it not for subscriptions by supporters outside the seminary as well as for donations by the students themselves (donations we could ill afford to make).

Standing up for Christian orthodoxy at a mainline seminary is a quick way to lose friends and alienate people. Members of the Charles Hodge Society were threatened with two lawsuits for their work on the *Princeton Theological Review*, threatened with physical violence, accused of racism and sexism, denied funding that other campus groups readily received, had posted signs destroyed and removed, and were explicitly informed by faculty that membership in the Charles Hodge Society jeopardized their academic advancement. Nonetheless, we also met with approval and encouragement from some faculty and administrators, from lay people in the churches who heard of our efforts, and from fellow students who saw us as giving them a voice.

In retrospect our hardships were minor—even trivial—and do not merit

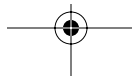
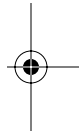


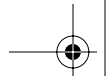


INTRODUCTION

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comparison with the sufferings of Christians throughout history and in many parts of the world today. Nonetheless, we mention them because students at other institutions who want to take a similar stand need to do so with their eyes open. Although every institution is unique, the response we received at Princeton Theological Seminary is likely to be typical. There is a price to be paid. But there are also rewards to be reaped. The liberal Christianity of the mainline seminaries is not invincible. But it is up to seminary students to puncture that myth of invincibility.

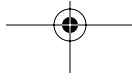
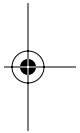
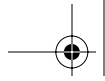


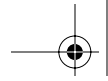


PART 1

FOUNDATIONS







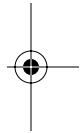
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THE TASK OF APOLOGETICS

WILLIAM A. DEMBSKI



WHAT IS THE TASK OF APOLOGETICS? ACCORDING TO THE NEW TESTAMENT writer Jude it is this: “Contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 1:3). I want in this essay to flesh out Jude’s characterization of apologetics. Jude urges us to contend for the faith. What does this mean? The very idea of contending for the faith rings foreign to our modern and postmodern ears. To contend for something, after all, presupposes we have something worth contending for—that the faith is something definite and precious, all too easily lost, and therefore in need of being vigorously preserved. I want therefore to begin this essay by showing that it is legitimate to think of the faith in these terms, that is, as something definite, precious and worth fighting for.



The Stability of the Faith

The idea of contending for the faith rings foreign to our ears because we have become accustomed to viewing all our beliefs about God and the world as in flux. Evolution and revolution are the dominant metaphors of our age. Nothing stays the same. Either a thing so changes with the times that we can’t recognize it after a while, or it doesn’t keep up with



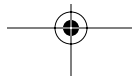


the times, in which case it becomes obsolete and has to be replaced. In other words, things either evolve or get overthrown. Our throwaway society mirrors this state of our minds.

In contrast, Jude affirms that the Christian faith is stable and unchanging. Christians are to contend for a faith that has been entrusted to them *once for all*. The metaphors of evolution and revolution are thus implicitly rejected. We are not called to contend for a sociologically constructed faith or a historicized faith or a demythologized faith or a politicized faith or any other enculturated faith. We are called rather to contend for the faith that Christ entrusted to the apostles and which the apostles in turn entrusted to us through the intervening generations of Christian witnesses.

This faith is grounded in the truth of the gospel, a truth that must itself be stable and unchanging if the faith that it grounds is to be stable and unchanging. Though the idea that truth can be stable and unchanging is foreign to our contemporary mindset, it is an idea that nonetheless prevails throughout Scripture. The unchanging quality of truth is at the heart of how the Scriptures characterize God and God's word. For instance, we read in Isaiah 40:8: "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever." Similarly, we read in the epistle of James that with God "there is no variation or shadow due to change" (Jas 1:17). God does not change. God's truth does not change. To be sure, our knowledge of this truth will always be partial. Yet insofar as it is knowledge at all, it must be accurate. And where this knowledge is accurate, it must not change.

This conception of truth as something stable and unchanging has few advocates in the academic world these days. The very idea that truth can be immune from the vagaries of sociohistorical contingency is problematic for contemporary thinkers. Why is this? The past two hundred years have witnessed a series of intellectual and sociological revolutions in which many of the things we thought were solid have been swept away. In physics, Newtonian mechanics had to give way to relativity theory and quantum mechanics. In biology, the view that biological systems are designed gave way to the view that biological systems are solely the product of naturalistic mechanisms. Marx showed us that economic forces govern history. Freud showed us that unconscious psychic forces beyond our control govern our personalities. In the arts, the absence of any stable reference points has become a cause célèbre. It has become increasingly difficult to



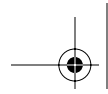
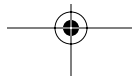
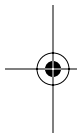


chart continuities over time. What continuities there are invariably exhibit dramatic variation. And no continuity continues indefinitely. Once again evolution and revolution show themselves as the dominant metaphors characterizing the growth of knowledge.

The question remains, however, whether these metaphors should continue to dominate our understanding of the growth of knowledge. Granted, we are fallible creatures. We've made plenty of mistakes in the past and will continue to make plenty of mistakes in the future. How dare we then be dogmatic about having gotten anything right? But turn the question around. Have we gotten nothing right? Is there nothing about which we can assert with confidence, *This is the way it is—period?* Or is the only thing about which we can say, *This is the way it is—period*, that nothing ever stays the way it is? If so, we've committed a fallacy of self-referential incoherence.

I regard myself as blessed for having been at one point in my career research mathematician. Though the appeal to human fallibility has become a trump card for contemporary skeptics and relativists, the card loses its magical appeal quite quickly in mathematics. Despite Morris Kline's ill-titled *Mathematics, the Loss of Certainty*, mathematics remains a fully cumulative enterprise, whose practitioners are refreshingly unconcerned that the edifice they are building will suddenly collapse on them, much less that it has already collapsed. Pythagoras' theorem, though first demonstrated 2,500 years ago, remains just as valid and compelling today—not merely in its statement but also in its proof. Once a mathematical result has been demonstrated, it is here to stay.

Mathematics therefore is a field where we do seem to get unchanging truths. Is mathematics unique in this regard? Not at all. For the evolution and revolution metaphors to do their dirty work, they must trade in high degrees of generality, where human thinking becomes fuzzy and uncertain, and thus must employ heuristic aids that by their very nature cannot be reliable. In other words, for the evolution and revolution metaphors to do their dirty work, they must studiously avoid the concrete and particular. In science, for instance, general scientific frameworks (theories, as they're called) are notorious for being overturned. But who seriously questions the efficacy of the smallpox vaccine in controlling smallpox or the capacity of morphine to suppress pain? And who thinks that our judgment about these matters is likely to change in the future? A little thought ought to convince us that there are plenty of low-level scientific claims that we





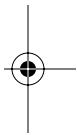
take to be perfectly secure and without danger of being overturned. The same is true for concrete historical claims—for example, that Abraham Lincoln was president during the Civil War. Indeed, any discipline worthy of the name will make low-level concrete claims that we may take to be perfectly secure and without danger of being overturned.

On closer inspection the fallibility objection to unchanging truth is therefore hardly persuasive. No one is denying that humans make mistakes. Indeed, as a general rule it is healthy to regard all our claims as potentially fallible in the sense that they can always be scrutinized, criticized and overturned in the light of new evidence. But the mere possibility of being wrong neither precludes the possibility of being right nor the possibility that we can be thoroughly justified in thinking we are right and will continue to be right. Still, it is one thing to assert with full confidence that we are right, another to assert that we cannot be wrong. The absolute certainty that denies the possibility of being wrong is by its nature beyond the reach of finite, rational agents like ourselves. Yet our inability to attain absolute certainty in itself provides no grounds for thinking that our knowledge of the world is shaky or arbitrary or wrong, especially when we are dealing with the concrete and particular.

Thus in the face of innumerable claims that continue to stand the test of time, the mere possibility of being wrong hardly constitutes a good reason for doubting the stability of a truth claim. Ludwig Wittgenstein, for instance, allowed no room for a skepticism based solely on the possibility of being wrong. He wrote, “I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again, ‘I know that that’s a tree,’ pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: ‘This fellow isn’t insane. We are only doing philosophy.’”¹

If the fallibilism card doesn’t succeed in undermining the stability and unchangeability of the faith, the contextualism card is likely to be employed next. This card is extremely common at the mainline seminars. Unlike the fallibilism card, the contextualism card allows that you might be right and even affirms that in many cases you are indeed right. But the contextualism card doesn’t leave it there. Having admitted that you are right in many cases, the contextualism card immediately adds that when you are right, it is because you have acted in accord with the norms, practices and beliefs of the community of discourse to which you belong.

¹Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 61e, no. 467.





Having identified your context with the community of discourse in which you happen to find yourself, contextualism asserts that your context determines what is true.

Contextualism leads easily to bizarre conclusions. If, for instance, your context happens to be a tribe of cannibals, then it is right for you to feast on missionaries because this action is consonant with the norms, practices and beliefs of the community to which you belong. If contextualism can lead to such absurd conclusions, what is its appeal? Contextualism's appeal consists in rightly acknowledging that our contexts *condition* what we can know to be true. But having rightly observed that, the contextualist goes on to assert that contexts also *determine* what is true. It's this last point that doesn't hold water (for more on this, see chapter two).

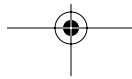
In sum, skeptics and relativists oppose the classical view of the Christian faith as something definite, stable and precious by playing either the fallibilism or the contextualism card. Neither of these cards is a trump card. Indeed, when we leave the realm of generalities and concentrate on the concrete and the particular, we find that many claims about the world are stable and unchanging. Neither fallibilism nor contextualism therefore undermines the stability of the Christian faith.

The Core of the Faith

Since I am attributing to the Christian faith stability and unchangeableness, you may well ask, What, pray tell, is stable and unchanging about it? Haven't I heard of doctrinal development? And don't Christians fight over just about everything? Vincent of Lérins, a fifth-century theologian, stated a rule of faith known as the Vincentian Canon: *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est* (what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all).² As we shall see, this rule of faith tells us where to locate the stability of the Christian faith.

Does this rule of faith make sense for the present day? Is there anything about which the church stands in universal agreement? The Vincentian Canon was criticized as far back as the twelfth century. In his widely cited *Sic et Non (Yes and No)*, Peter Abelard noted how on question after question the early church fathers disagreed. You may therefore contend: "Okay, so the fallibilism and contextualism cards don't work. But you, Bill Domb-

²"Vincentian Canon," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingston, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 1443.





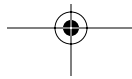
ski, have yet to establish what about the Christian faith is stable and unchanging. So far all you have shown is that arguments against the stability of the faith have proven less than decisive.”

I accept the challenge. Thankfully, the challenge is easily met. To identify what about the Christian faith is stable and unchanging, we need but look in the right places. Certainly we won't find the stability of the Christian faith by, in the first instance, concentrating on such controversial topics as homosexuality, double predestination or the ethics of a just war. What is stable and enduring about the Christian faith must be located at a more fundamental level.

To understand what is stable about the Christian faith, it will help to draw a distinction. In analyzing a worldview, a theoretical system, an economy of thought, a way of grasping the world, a paradigm (à la Thomas Kuhn), a research program (à la Imre Lakatos), a research tradition (à la Larry Laudan) or an episteme (à la Michel Foucault)—call it what you will—you need to identify three components: (1) its physical content, (2) its theoretical content and (3) its regulative principles. Because the Kuhnian term *paradigm* continues to be in vogue, I'll use it.

The physical content of a paradigm is what the paradigm tells us specifically about the state of the physical world. Any change in the physical content of the paradigm corresponds to a change in the physical world. To take the Darwinian paradigm as an example, its physical content includes the claim of *common descent*, that all organisms trace their genealogy back to a common ancestral stock. You have parents, they in turn had parents, and so on. When you trace your genealogy back far enough, do you get to a single-celled organism? Common descent says yes. Common descent has physical content because it is compatible with only certain states of the physical world and not with others. To take a silly example, if, like Aphrodite, your parents originated from the froth of the sea, common descent would have to be ruled out, and the physical content of the Darwinian paradigm would be wrong.

Next let us turn to the theoretical content of a paradigm. The theoretical content of a paradigm is what the paradigm employs to explain its physical content. To use the Darwinian paradigm again as an example, since the Darwinian paradigm includes within its physical content the claim of common descent, the obvious question is how common descent ought to be explained? Our usual experience, after all, is that organisms exhibit only limited variation. It's not as though a mouse gives birth to a cat or

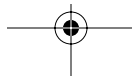
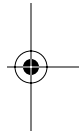


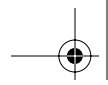


vice versa. Like seems to beget like. How then can one account for a single-celled organism being the ancestor of the human race? To account for common descent, the Darwinian paradigm posits that a *mutation-selection mechanism* governs the slow, gradual development of organisms over vast periods of time. It's the mutation-selection mechanism that belongs to the theoretical content of the Darwinian paradigm, and that explains its physical content.

It needs to be stressed that though this mechanism helps explain the physical content of the Darwinian paradigm, the mechanism itself is not part of its physical content. Theoretical content is always underdetermined. Unlike physical content, theoretical content can be changed without logically compelling a change in physical content. In place of a mutation-selection mechanism, for instance, a person can substitute a Lamarckian mechanism, according to which acquired characteristics are inherited. Though this mechanism could, at least in principle, also account for common descent, it is at variance with the Darwinian mechanism. Nevertheless, while physical content never uniquely determines theoretical content (or as philosophers of science would say, theories are underdetermined by data), physical content can provide evidence or support for theoretical content. For instance, Lamarck's theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics has been strongly disconfirmed in experiments with laboratory animals, whereas Darwin's mutation-selection mechanism has been confirmed, at least to a limited degree, in experiments with bacteria and fruit flies.

Finally, let us turn to the regulative principles of a paradigm. The regulative principles of a paradigm are those that govern how the paradigm is to be applied in practice. To take the Darwinian paradigm again, one of its regulative principles is a commitment to naturalism, or what may be called *methodological naturalism*, the commitment to explaining the facts of biology through purposeless, purely naturalistic mechanisms. Thus when some novel structure is observed in an organism that is more complex than we ever imagined, this principle will be invoked as a way of keeping the Darwinian paradigm on track and not veering into vitalist or teleonomic explanations. The use of regulative principles requires discernment. Methodological naturalism constrains the Darwinian naturalist to employ naturalistic categories in explaining a novel structure. But just which naturalistic explanation is preferable or even right is something methodological naturalism cannot decide. Regulative principles limit our



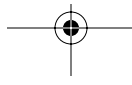


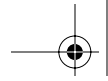
options but do not tell us which of the remaining options is best.

Common descent, the mutation-selection mechanism and methodological naturalism thus belong respectively to the physical content, theoretical content and regulative principles of the Darwinian paradigm. More is true. They also belong to the core of the Darwinian paradigm. The *core* of a paradigm is the part of the paradigm that is nonnegotiable, which cannot be modified without destroying the paradigm. Whether life evolved over a period of three billion years or three-and-a-half billion years is negotiable within the Darwinian paradigm. Nothing stands or falls with the precise time period over which evolution occurred. The duration of the evolutionary process therefore does not belong to the core of the Darwinian paradigm. On the other hand, common descent, the mutation-selection mechanism and methodological naturalism do. Tinker with any of these and you are no longer working within the Darwinian paradigm. To use Thomas Kuhn's phrase, if you change any of these, you'll be introducing a "paradigm shift." Note that the core of a paradigm includes physical content, theoretical content and regulative principles—all three. Thus we may speak respectively of the physical core, the theoretical core and the regulative core of a paradigm.

Having analyzed the concept of paradigm and delineated the core of a paradigm, we are now in a position to understand wherein the stability of the Christian faith consists. The *once-for-all* character of the Christian faith consists in its nonnegotiable core that must be maintained lest the faith fall into ruin. This core divides into a physical core, a theoretical core and a regulative core. Though in general a precise delimitation of the core of a paradigm is not possible (sometimes it doesn't become clear whether some aspect of a paradigm is nonnegotiable until someone starts monkeying with it), there are always clear cases that stand out and must be included in the core. For the Christian faith the following constitute such clear cases (Protestant, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox confessions traditionally have been united on these cases): To the physical core of the Christian faith belong the virgin birth, the crucifixion and the resurrection. To the theoretical core belong the incarnation, the redemption through Christ and the Trinity. To the regulative core belong the reliability of Scripture, the preeminence of Christ and a commitment to truth. These elements certainly do not exhaust the core of the Christian faith, but they suffice for the purposes of illustration.

Let us consider these elements briefly. First the physical core. The vir-

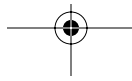




gin birth, the crucifixion and the resurrection all clearly constitute physical claims. In conceiving and giving birth to Jesus, either Mary was inseminated by a human being or she wasn't. Note that simply as a physical claim the virgin birth does not invoke the category of miracle. For all we know, an incredibly improbable thermodynamic accident may have occurred in Mary's womb, giving rise to Jesus. In merely affirming the virgin birth we are not committing ourselves to any explanation of it. Emil Brunner's pooh-poohing of the virgin birth by saying it constitutes an unwelcome intrusion into Mary's gynecology misses the point. You don't have to be a gynecologist to understand whether someone has had sex. So too the crucifixion and resurrection constitute physical claims. Either Jesus was crucified or he wasn't. Either Jesus' corpse went on rotting (whether in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb or somewhere else), eventually to decompose, or Jesus' corpse revived. A video camera focused continually on Jesus from Good Friday through Easter Sunday would be quite capable of confirming or disconfirming the resurrection. Again the category of miracle need not be invoked. In affirming the resurrection we are not committing ourselves to any explanation of it.

Next let us turn to the theoretical core. Unlike the physical core, with the theoretical core we actually are committing ourselves to certain explanations of events like the virgin birth and the resurrection. The incarnation, the redemption in Christ and the Trinity all constitute theoretical claims that explain the physical core of the Christian faith. How is it possible for Mary to conceive without being inseminated by the sperm of a male human being? Answer: it was God who caused her to conceive. Moreover, God did this in order to assume human form. Why was Jesus crucified and resurrected? Answer: this was God's way of redeeming sinful humanity. How is it that Jesus, though God, can pray to God as Father and promise God as Holy Spirit to his disciples? Answer: God is not an undifferentiated unity but a threefold unity. Note that I'm not saying the physical core of the Christian faith logically entails the theoretical core. There are other conceivable ways of interpreting the physical core of the Christian faith. Nevertheless, to offer alternate interpretations that contradict, say, the incarnation, the redemption in Christ and the Trinity is to violate the theoretical core of the Christian faith and thus to violate the Christian faith.

Finally, let us consider the regulative core. The reliability of Scripture, the preeminence of Christ and a commitment to truth all constitute regulative claims. The Christian faith is not an algorithm that spits out precisely



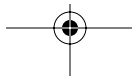


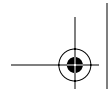
what humans are to do and think in every conceivable circumstance. Rather, the Christian faith provides us with regulative principles that in the light of its physical and theoretical content help us navigate through the circumstances of life. Navigation is not a precise science but always involves risks and discernment. Anything that treats Scripture as less than a marvelous gift of God must be repudiated. Anything that in any way minimizes the importance or scope of Christ and his work at the cross must be repudiated. Anything that compromises truth must be repudiated.

Christians must always affirm these principles. To deny them is to deny the faith. Yet how to apply these principles in practice is not always straightforward. Take the following example. The Gestapo knocks at your door. They ask, "Do you have any Jews in this house?" Does a commitment to truth require answering, "Yes, up the stairs, second door on the right"? Clearly no. Similarly, is it impugning the preeminence of Jesus to admit that Jesus got angry, sick and tired like the rest of us? The Gnostics would say yes, for all these things represent human weakness and are thus beneath God's dignity. The Gnostics, however, got it wrong, whereas the church fathers got it right. What Christ has not assumed is not healed. It is to Christ's glory that he assumed human frailty, not that he evaded it. So too with Scripture. Is it impugning the reliability and worth of Scripture to take certain passages figuratively or to ask as a matter of human construction how the Scriptures came together? Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* answers no.

In identifying a core to the Christian faith, all I have done is refine the Vincentian Canon and bring it up to date. The stability and universality of the faith that is implicit in the Vincentian Canon (recall, *what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all*) receives a precise formulation in terms of paradigm, core, physical content, theoretical content and regulative principles. To assert that the Christian faith contains a stable core that is at least in part explicitly specified is a way of making precise the Vincentian Canon. Note that this reformulation of the Vincentian Canon leaves plenty of room for doctrinal development as well as plenty of room for controversy in all departments of the Christian faith.

The perpetual virginity of Mary, for instance, is a physical claim but does not belong to the physical core of the Christian faith. It continues to be a point of controversy between Protestants and Roman Catholics. The addition of the *filioque* to the Nicene Creed by Roman Catholics is a theoretical matter that continues to be a sticking point in negotiations between Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. The question whether Christians



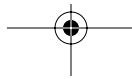


should be pacifists is a regulative concern that continues to divide Protestants in the Reformed and Lutheran traditions from Protestants in the Anabaptist tradition. If a stable core of Christian belief does not stop Christians from fighting among themselves, much less does a stable core stifle theological inquiry. Theologians committed to a stable core of Christian belief have spilled barrels of ink writing about the implications of that core. A commitment to a stable core of Christian belief is therefore compatible with vigorous theological inquiry and multifarious doctrinal development.

Contending for the Faith

Given that the Christian faith has a stable core, the general task of apologetics is now clear enough, to wit, defending that stable core. All the same, the question remains how to defend the core in practice. Are we simply to mouth the claims that constitute the core of the Christian faith, repeating them like robots programmed to handle repetitive tasks? An apologetic of the form “You deny X, but X belongs to the core of the Christian faith, and therefore you are wrong to deny X” hardly constitutes a persuasive argument. Typically when someone attacks X, it is not simply by claiming that X is false or unimportant or in need of reimagining. Some such claim will of course be made. But in addition to the claim there will be an argument supporting it. When someone attacks X, it is to persuade others that there is a problem with X. The challenge facing the apologist, therefore, is not simply the assertion that X is problematic but the argument employed to show how X is problematic. To defend X it is therefore not enough simply to keep reasserting X. Rather, one must in turn challenge the argument that is being used to attack X.

It is for this reason that theologians have traditionally linked apologetics and polemics. Apologetics connotes a defensive posture, whereas polemics (from the Greek word for war) connotes an offensive posture. Yet in practice, the two cannot be separated. The adage that “the best defense is a good offense” holds true in Christian apologetics. Invariably the apologist finds him or herself in the following situation: an antagonist has targeted X, where X belongs to the core of the Christian faith. The antagonist has also advanced an argument Y, which in some way undermines X. The antagonist may, for instance, use Y to explicitly deny X or to minimize the importance of X or to reinterpret X inconsistently with how X has traditionally been understood. For example, X might be the virgin birth, and Y might be an argument to the effect not that X is false but that X is irrele-

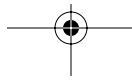


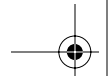


vant to the faith (this was Emil Brunner's move against the virgin birth). Confronted with an attack on X, the apologist must now carefully identify the argument Y that is being used to justify the attack on X. It's here that all caricaturing and misrepresentations must be avoided. The apologist needs to know exactly what are the antagonist's grounds for attacking X.

Having carefully analyzed Y, the apologist's next order of business is to formulate a counterargument Z that refutes Y. Such a refutation can take any number of forms. Z may simply note a rather obvious logical error in Y. Alternatively, Z may be an argument that confirms X better than Y disconfirms X. The possibilities are limitless. Just how the apologist formulates Z will depend not only on Y but also on the audience that the apologist is trying to persuade. Typically the antagonist, in attacking X and offering Y as an argument to undermine X, is trying to influence a certain audience. It is this audience that the apologist will in turn want to influence, this time on behalf of X. If, for instance, Y is an argument presupposing certain premises that the audience does not agree with, then it will be fairly easy to refute Y—simply point to the offending premises. On the other hand, if the audience is already hostile to the Christian faith and assumes many propositions at variance with the core of the Christian faith, refuting Y may be more difficult. In general, to persuade an audience the apologist must work as far as conscience permits on the audience's own terms. If the audience is already hostile to the Christian faith, the apologist will share little common ground with the audience, so that finding a persuasive counterargument Z may require diligence and ingenuity.

To sum up, the task of the apologist is to find counterarguments to the arguments being used to attack the faith. It follows that Jude's exhortation about contending for the faith appropriately characterizes the apologetic task. Passivity has no place in Christian apologetics. We do not sit idly by while the faith gets trashed. When an attack is directed against the core of the Christian faith, the attack's power invariably resides in an argument. The apologist's task is then to find a counterargument that disables the argument. Until the audience is persuaded that the apologist's counterargument has indeed disabled the antagonist's original argument, the apologist's work is unfinished. Sometimes we have to chalk up the failure to convince an audience to the stubbornness of people's hearts. These days, however, the fault is more likely to lie with ourselves—that we haven't done the necessary conceptual work to carry an effective counterargument through to completion.





Apologetics is not an exact science but an art that requires ingenuity, skill and rhetorical sensibility. Though apologetics appears to place undue weight on logic and rhetoric, it is serious theological business. Most of the great doctrines of the church have been forged in the fires of controversy by theologians adopting the stance of apologists. Marcion's rejection of the canon of the Old Testament, the Gnostic's denial of the full humanity of Christ, Arius's denial of the deity of Christ and Nestorius's separation of Christ's two natures—all of these constituted attacks on the core of the Christian faith. In repulsing these attacks apologists have, among other things, given us the canon of Scripture, the doctrine of the Trinity and the Chalcedonian formula.

In closing this essay I wish to leave you with two thoughts, one about heresy, the other about seeking truth. Within late twentieth-century North American Christianity, *heresy* has become an unpopular word. Can't we all just get along and live together in peace? Unfortunately the answer is no. Peace cannot be purchased at the expense of truth. In 1 Timothy, Paul writes that we are to pay close attention to ourselves and the doctrine and to continue in it, for in doing so we shall save both ourselves and those who hear us (1 Tim 4:16). There is an inviolable core to the Christian faith. Harsh as it sounds, to violate that core is to place ourselves outside the Christian tradition. This is the essence of heresy, and heresy remains a valid category for today. This is not to endorse a McCarthyism that finds heretics under every rock. Nor is it to deny the action of God's grace in anyone's life. But it is to own up to the fact that truth is never supplemental but always fundamental to Christian community.

The second point I wish to make is this: The Christian apologist is a contender for the faith, not merely a seeker after truth. Seeking after truth certainly seems a less combative and more humble way of cashing out Christian apologetics. Unfortunately, it is also an inadequate way of cashing out apologetics. The question I would ask of any seeker after truth is this: Have you found any truth lately? And if so, is it worth fighting for? If you are a seeker after truth with the misfortune of not having found any, then it may be time to redirect your efforts. Alternatively, if you are a seeker after truth who has found some but do not think it is worth fighting for, I can only assume that the truth you have found is insignificant and that you are probably wasting your time. Only if you have actually found truth worth fighting for can your search for truth be regarded as worthwhile. And if this is the case, you are called to be not merely a seeker after truth but an apologist for the truth.

