# THE THINKING TEEN:

# AN EXPLORATION, EVALUATION AND APPLICATION OF THREE APOLOGETIC STRATEGIES IN COMMENDING THE BIBLE TO CONTEMPORARY WESTERN ADOLESCENTS

BY

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ABSTRACT

In this study I consider how we may best facilitate the thinking of teens—especially youth who are secular, New Age, devotees of other religions, or only nominally Christian, collectively termed "outsiders"—toward embracing the inspiration and authority of Scripture. I do so by critiquing the strategies of three contemporary apologists—Francis Schaeffer, Lee Strobel, and Rob Bell—in light of the psychosocial context of contemporary western adolescents. Considerable attention is given to the common assumption that today's teens are "postmodern."

Four conclusions are reached. First, all teens are "thinking teens" who seek to make sense of their world to varying degrees. As such, any approach which emphasizes the emotional and experiential to the exclusion of the mind is at best incomplete and at worst detrimental in our attempt to commend the Bible to adolescent outsiders. Second, in light of the psychosocial complexity and diversity among today's teens, we require a flexible and multifaceted approach capable of opening ears by undermining secularism, establishing trust through advancing plausible truths, and arousing interest by engaging experience. With some modifications, the approaches of Schaeffer, Strobel and Bell effectively meet these needs. Third, despite conflicts among these three approaches, we may legitimately integrate them in a cumulative case argument that supports the reasonable, if not superior, conclusion—warranted by logical, empirical and existential support—that God's Word is plausible, credible and relevant. Fourth, we are wise to pursue a person-centered apologetic driven by insightful questions in the context of

authentic dialogue. I propose a process of "apologetic triangulation," through which we may identify the unique perspective of our interlocutor and thereby determine the most effective response. This apologetic serves to challenge, inform and inspire the thinking teen to read the Scriptures with an open and receptive mind, through which the Holy Spirit may convince the adolescent outsider that the Bible truly is the inspired and authoritative Word of God. In closing, I suggest that—as with all apologetic endeavours—this framework holds meaning only when it is empowered by the Spirit and located within the overarching mission of our Triune God.

CONTENTS

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Thank you to all these special people. Any errors or shortcomings are my own.

## ABBREVIATIONS

*CWFS*. The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview, 2d ed., 1982.
FAS. Francis A. Schaeffer
*GWIT*. CWFS, Volume 1, Book 1, *The God Who Is There*, 1968.
*EFR*. CWFS, Vol. 1, Bk. 2, *Escape From Reason*, 1968.
*HIT*. CWFS, Vol. 1, Bk. 3, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, 1972.
*BFD*. CWFS, Vol. 1, Bk. 4, *Back to Freedom and Dignity*, 1972.
*GST*. CWFS, Vol. 2, Bk. 1, *Genesis in Space and Time*, 1972.
*NFC*. CWFS, Vol. 2, Bk. 2, *No Final Conflict*, 1975.
*JFBH*. CWFS, Vol. 2, Bk. 3, *Joshua and the Flow of Biblical History*, 1975.
*BBS*. CWFS, Vol. 2, Bk. 4, *Basic Bible Studies*, 1972.
*AB*. CWFS, Vol. 2, Bk. 5, *Art and the Bible*, 1973.
*NLP*. CWFS, Vol. 3, Bk. 1, *No Little People*, 1974.
*TS*. CWFS, Vol. 3, Bk. 2, *True Spirituality*, 1971.
*NSS*. CWFS, Vol. 3, Bk. 3, *The New Super-Spirituality*, 1972.
*TCTR*. CWFS, Vol. 3, Bk. 4, *Two Contents, Two Realities*, 1974.
*CETC*. CWFS, Vol. 4, Bk. 1, *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century*, 1970.
*CBWW*. CWFS, Vol. 4, Bk. 2, *The Church Before the Watching World*, 1971.
*MC*. CWFS, Vol. 4, Bk. 3, *The Mark of the Christian*, 1970.
*DC*. CWFS, Vol. 4, Bk. 4, *Death in the City*, 1969.
*GED*. CWFS, Vol. 4, Bk. 5, *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, 1984.
*PDM*. CWFS, Vol. 5, Bk. 1, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, 1970.
*HSWTL*. CWFS, Vol. 5, Bk. 2, *How Should We Then Live?*, 1976.
*WHHR*. CWFS, Vol. 5, Bk. 3, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, 1979.
*ACM*. CWFS, Vol. 5, Bk. 4, *A Christian Manifesto*, 1981.

# CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

There once was a time when "The Bible says . . ." really meant something. Evangelists could challenge the unchurched to "Repent, die to yourself, and take up your cross!" and they essentially understood. Many even converted. And all this was based upon the broadly accepted authority of "God's Word." Try this in dialogue with youth at the local mall today, and you will find that times have changed. Adolescents seemingly trust *Cleo* magazine over Christ. They question what relevance this ancient account could possibly have for twenty-first century living—why they should heed the words of long-dead, primarily Jewish men. Christians should rightly be concerned. The particular contours this challenge follows are unique in all of history: Christendom is collapsing, multiculturalism is spreading, science is still advancing, yet mistrust is mounting. The call to respond with an appropriate *apologia*, however, is anything but new.

"All Christian apologists," explain Kenneth Boa and Robert Bowman, "have as part of their 'job description' the task of persuading people to accept the Bible as God's word—as inspired Scripture."[1] Intellectually gifted Christians may function as a vanguard in such an endeavour; *all* Christians, however, are called to be apologists, in the sense of being "ready to give an answer when someone asks you about your hope" (1 Peter 3:15, CEV). If we take seriously the command to share and live the gospel as we

[1] Kenneth Boa and Robert M. Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons: An Integrative Approach to Defending Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2001), 64.

"make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19, ESV), then it is crucial that hearers are respectful toward, or at least open to, the Bible. The gospel we share is embedded within the Bible; if one dismisses the witness of the Word, then his or her attitude to the gospel will hardly be more favorable. Furthermore, the Bible is a significant means of grace by which we may experience God. Beyond all we may say to a non-believer, the Word itself—if engaged—is powerful to convict of unrighteousness and draw one to Christ, always achieving that for which it was sent.[2] Clearly, *the Word is worth defending*. As such, history reveals thousands of faithful Christians collectively employing a multitude of strategies to commend the Scriptures, each responding to God's call in their generation. These efforts should inform our present response. But how may we best appreciate and access these strategies?

Bernard Ramm, in *Varieties of Christian Apologetics*, suggests that we frame these strategies within a three-fold apologetic typology.[3] The first system stresses *subjective immediacy*, highlighting personal experience and the unique encounter of Christian grace.[4] Such an approach may commend the beauty and relevance of the Scriptures, making one wish they were true through existential appeal apart from proof. The second system emphasizes *natural theology*, appealing to reason and the empirical foundations of faith.[5] The Bible is deemed trustworthy by recourse to history, archaeology, science, and fulfilled prophecy. The third system offers a middle ground between subjectivism and rationalism by underscoring *revelation*. For those having placed their faith in God,

[2] Cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-17; Heb. 4:12-13; Isa. 55:10-11.

[3] Bernard L. Ramm, *Varieties of Christian Apologetics*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1961).

[4] Ibid., 15-16.

[5] Ibid., 16.

His Spirit illuminates our minds such that Scripture can function as the foundation for all thought.[6] Starting from the Bible, then, this approach may commend the superiority of God's revelation, relative to other starting points and systems, as the source and standard for all knowing. As a typology, Ramm's scheme helpfully clarifies the relationship between faith and reason, epistemologically grounding various apologists' claims. Nevertheless, as Steven Cowan notes in his introduction to *Five Views on Apologetics*, Ramm's theoretical criteria fail to recognize the many and distinct apologetic strategies that can operate upon similar core convictions—for instance, inductive and deductive strategies are blended under *natural theology*.[7] Furthermore, strategies employed by apologists are always more integrated and nuanced than any typology suggests. Blaise Pascal, characterized by Ramm as a subjectivist, also appealed to miracles, history and prophecy.[8] Thus, as we seek to understand how best to defend and commend the Bible, we can perhaps see the options more clearly as various "argumentative strategies" pursued by particular apologists which basically align with one of Ramm's types.[9]

A further complicating factor in this pursuit of an ideal apologetic for the Scriptures concerns *audience*. There is no such thing as a timeless apologetic, as

> quite properly . . . most apologists have sought to speak meaningfully to their contemporaries rather than to later generations. Not surprisingly, therefore, no apologist from previous centuries or generations precisely fills the prescription that might be written for a present-day apologetic.[10]

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[6] Ibid., 16-17.

[7] Steven B. Cowan, ed., *Five Views on Apologetics*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 12-14.

[8] Ibid., 13.

[9] Ibid., 14.

[10] Avery Robert Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 2d ed. (Ft. Collins, CO: Ignatius Press, 2005), xx.

Apologetics involves interpersonal dialogue and so the strategy pursued must vary by time and place. John Duns Scotus's (1266-1308) scholastic argument, for instance—in part appealing to *auctoritas scribentium* (i.e., the claim of Biblical writers to speak for God) and *irrationabilitas errorum* (i.e., "the evident unreasonableness and immorality of those who reject the Scriptures")[11]—lacks warrant in an age of growing agnosticism and a culture of scientific reductionism and moral relativity. Additionally, maturity must factor in. A detailed lecture on fulfilled prophecy supporting Scripture may impress an adult, yet confuse and bore a teenager. Many youth today live in a complicated cultural matrix of pervasive ideologies, shallow media images, and myriad worldly pleasures vying for their attention. It is critical that we cultivate the soil of their thinking to recognize the authority of Scripture and subsequently receive the seed of the gospel.

Misunderstanding one's audience can render an apologetic impotent, or even counterproductive. It may well be that people are *most* convinced of Scriptural inspiration through *encountering* the Bible rather than *arguing* about it. Nevertheless, as John Stackhouse notes, "Apologists often have to talk about the Bible before they can invite people to read it."[12] Faced with so many challenges, then, how can we best dialogue with this particular audience of nominal and non-Christian contemporary western adolescents?

In this study I pursue an apologetic that targets the thinking of teens toward embracing the inspiration and authority of Scripture. This is achieved by way of critiquing the strategies of three contemporary apologists in light of the psychosocial context of youth. This thesis will argue that *by drawing upon the strategies of Francis*

[11] Ibid., 129-30.

[12] John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 194-95.

*Schaeffer, Lee Strobel, and Rob Bell, integrating them into a person-centered apologetic empowered by the Spirit, apologists are equipped to open ears by undermining secularism, establish trust through advancing credible truths, and arouse interest by engaging experience, thus effectively commending the Bible to contemporary western adolescents.*

This study is significant for at least three reasons. First, and most broadly, it points the way to a contemporary, contextualized, and multifaceted apologetic that is particularly pressing for youth workers, given that the Bible is foundational to all Christian truth claims. Our goal may be to bring youth to encounter Christ, yet if they think the inspiration and thus authority of Scripture are untenable, then Jesus himself becomes unbelievable. Our acceptance of the incarnation, atonement and resurrection hinges upon the historicity of the New Testament documents.[13] Contemporary western youth culture presents many and diverse challenges to the credibility of the Bible, effectively forming a road-block to belief. Yet it is prior to adulthood when most people choose to follow Christ. The Bible may be self-authenticating through the Holy Spirit, and the story of Jesus "inherently attractive,"[14] but the challenge is for youth to willingly read the Bible with an open mind. A fresh apologetic addresses this challenge.

Furthermore, in an age of naïve subjectivism—as culture in general and youth in particular seek absolute freedom and personal autonomy from all limits—respect for Scripture will help safeguard teens from paths that seem right but end in death (Proverbs

[13] J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), 133.

[14] James W. Sire, "On Being a Fool for Christ and an Idiot for Nobody: Logocentricity and Postmodernity," in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, 101-27 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 121-22.

14:12).[15] As Schaeffer contends, "only a strong view of Scripture [with a strong accompanying apologetic] is sufficient to withstand the pressure of an all-pervasive culture built upon relativism and relativistic thinking."[16]

Second, this study brings into conversation overlapping yet insufficiently integrated academic disciplines including theology, apologetics, missiology, psychology, pedagogy, sociology, and communication studies. Over the last generation, youth ministry specialists have commendably progressed from relatively unreflective activity-based models to theologically grounded ministry-based models that address our missional mandate. Nevertheless, as chapter two will establish, youth ministry's predilection for the latest trend has meant that many writers have only selectively read contemporary social data. The result: simplistic specification of an "everything must change" approach to "postmodern youth ministry." Moreover, these specialists have largely bypassed issues of adolescent psychological development, which have significant implications for how we engage the thinking teen. It is easier for youth ministries to entertain youth than educate them. As such, apologetics is often shelved, objections are left unanswered, and the task of commending the Bible to nominal and non-Christians is reduced to a vacuous experiential journey. This thesis reappraises the psychosocial context of youth toward an integrated academic discourse and informed engagement.

Third, this study helps ground the practice of youth apologists, moving proponents past simply repackaging adult apologetics and employing segmented strategies. When apologetics is undertaken with youth, authors typically adjust their approach employed for adults by pedagogically "dumbing it down" and "dressing it up":

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[15] Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1984), 21, 32, 40.

[16] Ibid., 48-49.

shorter arguments, simpler wording, punchier stories, and a graphical layout.[17] Such changes are warranted, yet essentially the same apologetic strategy remains. Few have considered the effectiveness of particular approaches in essence—such as Schaeffer's "point of tension," Strobel's journalistic fact-finding case, or Bell's narrative "repainting of the Christian faith"—for contemporary western teens. Would such strategies shake their prejudices toward openness, establish the Bible's credibility, and draw them to Christ? Or, perhaps, would these approaches instead incite anger over intolerance and triumphalism, with the Bible brushed off as one of many interesting stories consumerist youths reject in their quest for immediate gratification? Furthermore, must these presuppositional, evidential and existential strategies be separately employed, or can they be synergistically incorporated in a person-centered approach? I am not aware of any youth apologetics organization formally analyzing youth culture beyond ideological concerns, toward an integrated and contextualized apologetic appropriate for this contemporary audience. This thesis, in pursuing such answers, will offer guidance to youth apologists beginning a pre-evangelistic dialogue with teens that speaks to their core concerns and nature. It is my expectation that apologetics can yield some of the most engaging conversations in youth work, a precursor to fruitful evangelism.

A number of key terms will be used throughout this study, of which we must have a common understanding. In particular, we must define *teen*, *contemporary*, *western*, and *apologetics*. Strictly defined, a *teen* is a person thirteen to nineteen years of age. *Adolescence* refers to the period of transition from childhood to adulthood, synonymous

[17] See, for instance, Lee Strobel's *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), compared with Lee Strobel with Jane Vogel, *The Case for Christ: Student Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2002).

with *youth*.[18] For the purposes of this thesis, I am particularly concerned with teens aged fifteen through nineteen. As we will consider in chapter two, it is during this period that powerful new cognitive abilities (first developed in early adolescence) become established, enabling meaningful apologetic dialogue. Thus, these three terms—*teen*, *adolescent*, and *youth*—will be used interchangeably for this period, though at times research will be drawn from, and findings will be extended to, all in this transition from childhood to adulthood.[19] Furthermore, my particular attention is upon non-Christians (comprised of both *seculars*—"the nonreligious, ex-religious and undecided"—and those of other religious and New Age outlooks), and marginally or nominally Christian youth (characterized by identification with a denomination, but participation in church once a month or less, and little engagement in Christian practices such as prayer and Bible reading).[20] Collectively I term these youth *outsiders*: "those individuals who look at Christianity [and the church] from the outside in."[21] Such a term is less semantically pejorative than alternatives. In 2007, this represented approximately 40 percent of Americans aged sixteen through twenty-nine.[22] In 2005, this represented approximately 80 percent of Australians aged thirteen through twenty-four, here termed *Generation Y*.[23]

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[18] Physically, adolescence begins with puberty.

[19] This process is rarely completed before the late twenties. See Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3-25.

[20] Following Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton, and Ruth Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia* (Mulgrave, Australia: John Garratt Publishing, 2007), 6, 140-47.

[21] David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity … and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 249.

[22] Ibid., 17-18.

[23] Mason and others, *Generation Y*, 63, 70. This generational grouping is referred to variously as *Gen Y*, *Millennials*, *Mosaics*, and *Echo-Boomers*. Data for this thesis derives from multiple studies, each employing their own age ranges for Generation Y. Following Mason and others (p. 63), Gen Y ideally

By *contemporary* I mean current. This study provides insights most applicable to adolescents living today. Yet, conducting and disseminating research necessitates a delay. Furthermore, there are both discontinuities and continuities between the nature of youth in adjacent generations. As such, research concerning youth culture will be primarily drawn from the 1990s onwards, whilst I expect my findings to adequately address 'contemporary' youth until perhaps 2015, by which time such a survey should be repeated.

By *western*, I mean characteristic of regions in the "western" parts of the world. Whilst this broadly includes Europe, Australasia, and North America, my particular attention will be upon America and Australia, cross-checked with Canadian data. America represents one of the most influential nations on earth, affecting youth culture internationally. Australia—my home country—is far less religious, and thus provides a contrast, making this thesis more applicable to especially secularized locales such as Vancouver, Canada.

In the broadest terms, *apologetics* properly includes "*anything* that helps people take Christianity more seriously than they did before, *anything* that helps defend and commend it . . . ."[24] Thus, apologetics is concerned not simply with truth and the intellect, but also goodness and beauty. For the narrower purposes of this thesis, and following David Clark, "apologetics is best defined as the art of the reasoned defense of the Christian faith in the context of personal dialogue."[25] Adopting the framework of

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represents those born between 1981 and 1995, yet my emphasis is upon the characteristics of outsiders, not precisely quantifying the size of this group.

[24] John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 115. Cf. 1 Pet. 3:15-16.

[25] David K. Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics: A Person-Centered Approach to Christian Defense* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1999), 100. "Defense" here includes commending the Bible.

Boa and Bowman, apologetics may be understood through four types of argumentative *strategies*.[26] *Classical* apologetics stresses reason and logic in commending the rationality of the Christian faith. *Evidentialism* stresses facts empirically understood in commending the high probability of Christianity. *Presuppositionalism* stresses the authority of Biblical revelation in exposing conflicting foundations as unsustainable, thus commending the necessity of a Biblical world view.[27] *Fideism* stresses faith and subjective experience in calling people to encounter God.[28]

In addressing my statement of inquiry, I will proceed through five phases. First, in chapter two I seek to establish the relative neglect, yet also contend for the validity and necessity, of teen apologetics particularly in reaching adolescent outsiders. In doing so, I briefly explore various conceptualizations of youth ministry, and also draw upon psychological, neurological, and pedagogical research. This chapter advances the thesis by addressing challenges that presently undermine the pursuit of an integrated apologetic for the thinking teen. This chapter also reveals the psychological context of youth.

Second, in chapter three I consider the social context for contemporary western teens. The latest research and cultural commentators are drawn upon to survey the influence of factors such as pluralism, postmodernity, secularism, consumerism, and fragmentation upon adolescents.[29] Particular attitudes to spirituality and religious beliefs,

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[26] Boa and Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 56-57.

[27] Also referred to as *Reformed* apologetics by Boa and Bowman.

[28] Being the least recognized of the four apologetic strategies, Boa and Bowman devote chapters 16-19 to its explanation. In this approach, revelation is seen to transcend history and faith carries its own basis of assurance in a transformed life. Scripture is thus a witness, or pointer, to Jesus as the eternal Word of God who can be experienced today.

[29] For Australia, see Mason and others, *Gen Y*; also Philip J. Hughes, *Putting Life Together: Findings from Australian Youth Spirituality Research* (Fairfield, Australia: Fairfield Press, 2007). For America, see Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of*

Christianity, and the Bible complete this portrait. At this point, a clear picture should emerge of the subject to whom we wish to apologetically commend the Bible.

Third, in chapter four I will explore the apologetic strategies of Francis Schaeffer, Lee Strobel, and Rob Bell in commending the Bible to their particular audiences. These three are most fitting for our purposes as each seeks to apologetically dialogue with outsiders, rather than simply bolstering the faith of current believers. Additionally, they collectively represent both Ramm's apologetic types—Schaeffer, Strobel and Bell primarily align with *revelation*, *natural theology*, and *subjective immediacy*, respectively—and Boa and Bowman's argumentative strategies—Schaeffer is essentially a presuppositionalist who utilizes the classical approach to establish the illogicality of foundations other than a Biblical worldview; Strobel is primarily an evidentialist, appealing to experts in establishing the case for Christianity; and Bell dialogues as a fideist who addresses a religiously disenfranchised generation by calling people to experience the joy of walking Jesus' way. None of these thinkers write specifically for youth, which is part of their appeal for this project: through them I can reach beyond simplified and repackaged teen resources to interact with the essence of three diverse strategies, thus better assessing relevance to adolescents beyond the question of style. In providing insights for youth workers, I want to assess apologists whose beliefs are orthodox and evangelical, and whose approaches have demonstrated considerable popular appeal indicating a resonance of their strategy with contemporary culture.[30]

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*American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). For Canada see Reginald W. Bibby, *Canada's Teens Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2001).

[30] Some concerns have been raised over Bell's orthodoxy, particularly regarding his views of atonement and the inspiration of Scripture. Given his widespread acceptance by evangelical culture, however, it is timely to scrutinize his approach. See, for instance, Chad Hall, "Heresy on Tour? Popular Pastor/Author Rob Bell's Controversial Message: God Loves You," *Out of Ur Blog*, 26 November 2007, http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2007/11/heresy_on_tour.html#more (accessed 26 June

Fourth, in light of the psychosocial context of contemporary western youth established in chapters two and three, I will critique the strategies of Schaeffer, Strobel, and Bell in chapter five as to their usefulness in commending the Bible to adolescent outsiders. Furthermore, I will consider ways each approach may be modified and extended for greater effectiveness with this target audience. Finally, in chapter six I will move toward an integrated, dialogical strategy which harnesses the strengths of each model. Some suggestions toward implementation of this strategy will complete the study.

As an interdisciplinary study, there are many issues necessarily left partially explored or skirted altogether. Five such limitations are recognized here. First, each apologist has produced a large body of work, within which they utilize a range of apologetic approaches to engage their audience. Chapter four explores only what I consider to be the *essence* of each apologist's approach in commending the Bible. Chapter six briefly considers how each apologist embraces other strategies, contributing to my pursuit of an integrated apologetic.

Second, I do not intend to argue for an evangelical understanding of the Bible, nor for the validity of apologetics as part of Christian evangelism. Rather, both of these views are assumed for the purposes of this thesis. In essence, *commending the Bible* entails moving youth toward belief in the *plausibility*, *historicity* and *relevance* of the Scriptures as God's *inspired* Word, thus increasingly accepting God's *authority* over their life as exercised through the Bible.[31]

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2008). Also, Mark Edward Sohmer, "Elvis on the Ed Sullivan Show: A Review of Rob Bell's *Velvet Elvis*" (2007), http://www.sohmer.net/Velvet_Elvis.pdf (accessed 30 June 2008).

[31] N.T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 23.

Third, the history and development of both youth ministry and apologetics is not of interest, nor do I intend to critique the broad schools or types of apologetics. Such matters will be considered only insofar as they relate directly to the effectiveness or otherwise of particular approaches in commending the Bible to contemporary western adolescents.

Fourth, perhaps more clarification than limitation, I recognize that in today's increasingly postmodern context, people are often concerned with "experience before explanation," "belonging before believing," and "image before word."[32] Thus, friendship and love, alongside a consistent Christian witness in lifestyle, is crucial as the broader context within which apologetics is most fruitfully conducted.[33] Furthermore, I acknowledge in this media age of excessive and empty talk that "corollary apologetics" such as impressive art, piercing poetry, power encounters in the Spirit, engagement in justice and charity, and experience of a caring Christian community provide the "plausibility structures" within which the Bible may be accepted by an unbeliever as inspired and authoritative in his or her life.[34] An effective apologetic is holistic, seeking to "engage the mind, enchant the emotions, empower the will, and restore relationships."[35] Nevertheless, my particular focus is on what dialogue may take place in

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[32] Rick Richardson, *Evangelism Outside the Box* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 51.

[33] The apologetic strategies I offer in this thesis are best understood and applied within the incarnational model for relational outreach outlined by Pete Ward in *God at the Mall: Youth Ministry That Meets Kids Where They're At* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 52-79.

[34] Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 193, 206-26; Dennis Hollinger, "The Church as Apologetic: A Sociology of Knowledge Perspective," in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Phillips and Okholm, 182-93; Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociology of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 45.

[35] Scott R. Burson, and Jerry L. Walls, *C.S. Lewis & Francis Schaeffer: Lessons for a New Century from the Most Influential Apologists of Our Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 252, also 150-55, 270-72.

commending the Bible to teens, whether within or outside this preferred context, as questions inevitably arise. Engaging in such dialogue with adolescent outsiders requires that we first get outside the "Christian bubble" of insular community, and be with youth where they are.[36]

Finally, I recognize that no spiritual truth may be apprehended apart from the Holy Spirit's illumination. Whilst my thesis is that we have in these three approaches resources to open ears, establish trust, and arouse interest, they are only effective inasmuch as God draws a person and that person willingly responds, ultimately in repentance.[37] Nevertheless, I do not plan to unpack the nature of this intimate relationship between Spirit and truth in any detail, other than to acknowledge that apart from God's empowerment, our words are wasted.

Having outlined the nature, significance, and limitations of this study, we turn now to examine the relationship between apologetics and the thinking teen.

[36] Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 39-48, 236-37, 248.

[37] Cf. John 6:44; Acts 3:19; 2 Tim. 2:25. Concerning the limits of reason and the centrality of the Holy Spirit, and thus prayer, in all apologetics, see Dulles, *History of Apologetics*, 367; Cowan, *Five Views*, 376; and Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 196-97, 229-31.

## CHAPTER TWO

## APOLOGETICS AND THE "THINKING TEEN"

### INTRODUCTION

Apologetics has always been a contentious enterprise. "Numerous charges are laid at the door of apologetics," writes Avery Dulles in *A History of Apologetics*, " . . . its neglect of grace, of prayer, and of the life-giving power of the word of God; its tendency to oversimplify and syllogize the approach to faith; its dilution of the scandal of the Christian message; and its implied presupposition that God's word should be judged by the norm of fallible, not to say fallen, human reason."[1] Such charges caricature the master practitioners; yet in seeking to become "all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Cor. 9:22, TNIV), apologists can easily distort their message according to the *Zeitgeist* of their age.[2]

The same challenges, and pitfalls, confront apologetics geared toward adolescent "outsiders." Apologetics must always be done in culturally appropriate ways. Tony Jones, in *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, suggests we adopt a missional stance: "Much as a missionary might wear the native dress of the land in which she is living out of respect for the people, we may take on some of the apparel of our students and their culture. This is not selling out or backsliding. It is a wise, missionary tactic."[3] Questions, however,

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[1] Avery Robert Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 2d ed. (Ft. Collins, CO: Ignatius Press, 2005), xix.

[2] Ibid., xx.

[3] Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 79. It is a wise tactic, provided we do not compromise our mission and message.

are raised. What precisely *is* the culture of youth with whom we engage? And what is the culture of one's youth ministry, from which such missionaries are sent?[4] Failure to answer such questions may prove devastating to the apologetic enterprise. We may rightly seek to contextualize our witness, yet falsely read our audience, and thus further undermine the credibility of the Bible. Additionally, various conceptualizations of youth ministry may so neglect outsiders that apologetics either is ignored or becomes an exercise in triumphalism. In order to effectively explore, evaluate and apply various apologetic strategies in commending the Bible to contemporary western adolescents, we must first consider the larger frame of reference. How are youth ministry, youth culture, and the apologetic enterprise interrelated? What factors, in this interaction, serve to hinder or enable a more contextualized and thus effective apologetic?

This chapter will consider four challenges that presently limit and undermine apologetics for adolescent outsiders: insular youth ministry; neglected minds; a defensive posture; and the postmodern assumption. I then assess these challenges—drawing upon psychological, neurological, and pedagogical insights—in contending for the validity, and indeed necessity, of teen apologetics. At this point sufficient ground will have been cleared to pursue the central purpose of this thesis: a contextualized apologetic commending the Bible to adolescent outsiders.

## THE CHALLENGES

### *Insular Youth Ministry*

[4] A further question concerns our theology of the Bible—and gospel therein—which we seek to commend. As limited in the introduction, however, a broadly evangelical view of the authority and inspiration of Scripture is assumed for the purposes of this thesis.

Apologetics, for the purpose of this thesis, fits under the broader umbrella of evangelism: sharing the gospel. More specifically, seeking to commend the Bible is *pre-evangelism*—Francis Schaeffer's term for "the preparatory work necessary to bring a modern non-Christian to an awareness of his [or her] need for the evangel."[5] As such, the priority of apologetics for any youth ministry is tied to its evangelistic mobilization. Herein lies the first challenge to the apologetic enterprise: *youth ministries, by nature, tend toward insularity*. That is, *inward-looking* groups unwittingly exclude outsiders.

Veteran youth minister Doug Fields, after laying out the five purposes of a youth ministry, offers in the form of letter grades a "sweeping generality of what [he sees] when training youth workers across [America]."

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|---|---|---|
| Fellowship: | A | |
| Discipleship: | B | |
| Worship: | | C+ |
| Ministry: | | C- |
| *Evangelism*: | *D*+[6] | |

Referring to the "holy huddle syndrome," Fields laments that "many youth ministries do an excellent job of coddling insiders and a lousy job of reaching the lost."[7] Youth ministries are often perceived by parents and pastors as "holding tanks where youthful zeal [can] be channeled into harmless activities," a kind of storm security for turbulent teens.[8] Such an attitude is not surprising given the history of youth ministry.

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[5] Thomas V. Morris, *Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics: A Critique* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), 17.

[6] Doug Fields, *Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 50-51; emphasis mine.

[7] Ibid., 106-7, 110-11.

[8] Mark H. Senter III, ed., *Four Views of Youth Ministry and the Church: Inclusive Congregational, Preparatory, Missional, Strategic* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), xii.

Youth ministry is a relatively recent phenomenon, spawned in *reaction* to a distinct youth subculture emerging with the funding of public high schools in the late nineteenth century. Youth increasingly found their identity apart from family and church, creating a "generation gap" of sorts. Churches scrambled to accommodate these drifting youth within exciting programs, seeking to keep them involved as the reservoir for *future*—though not present—leadership. Over the last century, various parachurch organizations formed to pick up and run with the missional baton—including YMCA, Youth For Christ, and Young Life.[9] Yet, as Senter notes elsewhere—based upon these groups' own records—"conversions have remained primarily within a homogeneous grouping compatible with the values of the evangelical church."[10] Many of these youth ministry models, developed in the 1940s through 60s, are out of touch and increasingly stagnant evangelistically.[11] The vast majority of outsiders—except perhaps conservative youth in cliques with Christians—are out of reach, whilst leaving an "increasing number of youth ministers to communicate more effectively to an ever-decreasing population."[12] According to Senter, "the most effective youth groups in the nation rescue only an average of nine converts each year." We are due a revolution in youth ministry.[13]

It is disconcerting, then, to find little of a revolutionary nature emerging from youth ministry academicians or practitioners. Senter edited *Four Views of Youth Ministry*, in which Malan Nel argued for the inclusion of youth into the wider congregation, Wesley

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Mark H. Senter III, *The Coming Revolution in Youth Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992), 29.

[11] Ibid., 20-21, 29, 130.

[12] Ibid., 148.

[13] Ibid., 29, 156.

Black argued for youth ministry as preparatory toward future leadership, and Mark Senter argued for separate youth churches. Only Chap Clark—who rallied for youth ministry as essentially missional—challenged the status quo.[14] Clark's approach was not without detractors: Black, in particular, highlighted the need for *both* evangelism and discipleship in fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20), though conceded that "the church probably teaches more than it reaches."[15] Nevertheless, Clark's central concern stood strong: "Let me speak frankly: no approach but the Missional seems to take seriously the mandate to disciple all of the youth culture. Unless I missed something, the vast majority of the energy you suggest we put into youth ministry begins and ends with church people."[16] Christ commanded us to "Go!" yet ministries beckon youth to come, seemingly ignorant of the cultural disconnection. If ministry-based, purpose-driven exemplars struggle to subvert the insular bent of youth ministry, evangelism—and thus effective apologetics therein—is further undermined by the majority of activity-based approaches built largely upon entertainment.

*Neglected Minds*

Beyond their insular nature, evangelical youth ministries are often characterized by a programmatic *neglect of the mind*. In *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Mark Noll notes evangelicalism's tendency toward anti-intellectualism which is "activistic, populist, pragmatic, and utilitarian." He claims that "the effective evangelism and moral fervor of an earlier age had not been matched by comparable Christian attention to the

[14] Senter, ed., *Four Views*.

[15] Wesley Black, "Response to the Missional Approach from a Preparatory perspective," 100-103 in *Four Views*, ed. Senter, 102.

[16] Chap Clark, "Rejoinder," 109-12 in *Four Views*, ed. Senter, 109.

mind."[17] Working with teens whose development is often assumed to be strictly "from the neck down,"[18] this tendency has magnified. Facing dwindling attendance and an increasingly secular, post-Christian culture, many youth ministers—despite lacking adequate resources—have sought to "create programs attractive enough to compete with the world."[19] Additionally, youth ministries have placed a premium on engaging adolescent emotions, creating memorable experiences, and "practicing passion" in all aspects of programming.[20] Both approaches are prone to overlook the thinking teen.

Activity-based youth ministries tend to attract leaders who are "very good at the pragmatic type of mental effort which has become the trademark of their profession," yet discourages deeper thinkers who need time to read and reflect.[21] Not surprisingly, then, the largest survey of youth ministers ever conducted discovered that their self-reported top training need concerned "communicating Biblical truth," particularly in the context of sharing the gospel.[22] Confronting tough questions and engaging outsiders in a reasoned defense of their faith is a daunting prospect for many youth workers—and training their teens toward such an endeavour, even more so. Unaware of the many and varied styles of defending and commending one's faith, most youth workers I know consider apologetics dry and rationalistic, beyond the reach or interest of the average teen.[23] It

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[17] Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 12, 107.

[18] Barbara Strauch, *The Primal Teen* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 7.

[19] Fields, *Purpose-Driven*, 105.

[20] Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

[21] Senter, *Coming Revolution*, 199.

[22] Merton P. Strommen, Karen Jones, and Dave Rahn, *Youth Ministry That Transforms: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Hopes, Frustrations, and Effectiveness of Today's Youth Workers* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 306.

[23] This observation is based on ten years' experience as a teacher and/or youth worker in Australia.

represents the antithesis of an exciting, entertaining and engaging program, sure to cost attendance. Thus apologetics has been neglected. As such, few Christian teens—and even fewer of their non-Christian peers—are able to articulate any substantial reasons for reading, let alone trusting, the Bible. In both a society and a faith tradition which seemingly celebrates perpetual adolescence, calling youth ministries from the showy and superficial to the substantial is positively counter-cultural.[24]

*A Defensive Posture*

Dulles notes that through much of the twentieth century, Protestants displayed considerable "ambivalence about apologetics." Shunning liberal capitulation to secular ideas which threatened to undermine the Bible's authority, many theologians—especially those influenced by Karl Barth—made little or "no effort to ground the truth of Christian claims in rational apologetics."[25] There has been since the 1980s, however, "a striking revival of traditional apologetics, especially among Evangelicals."[26] This "revival" has progressively filtered into a number of youth ministries, particularly in response to alarming trends among Christian young people.

Gary Railsback, for instance, found that between 1985 and 1989, of the nearly four thousand students surveyed, between 23 and 51 percent of born-again Christians attending secular colleges had renounced their faith before graduation.[27] Railsback

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[24] John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Evangelical Landscapes: Facing Critical Issues of the Day* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002), 14.

[25] Dulles, *History*, 345.

[26] Ibid., 353.

[27] Gary Lyle Railsback, "An Exploratory Study of the Religiosity and Related Outcomes Among College Students" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, 1994), 57-63. These rates were significantly higher than for Christian Coalition colleges.

encouraged caution interpreting his results given multiple methodological limitations, yet Christian groups repeatedly seize upon such figures in calling for protection of young believers against faith decay at the hands of "secular humanism."[28] As such, even when youth apologetics is practiced, it adopts a particularly *defensive posture*, constituting a third challenge to outward-looking apologetic engagement.[29]

One group specializing in apologetically addressing teens is Summit Ministries in Manitou Springs, Colorado, under the leadership of founder David Noebel. Summit is arguably the "premier organization for training Christians to think in terms of a total world and life view."[30] They seek to equip Christians to defend their views in the marketplace of ideas, particularly in an American context of culture wars where Biblical truth is often challenged. Noebel writes of "worldviews in collision," the need to wage spiritual warfare in response to systems such as secular humanism which are "designed to dethrone Jesus Christ . . . and replace the Biblical Christian worldview with the ideas of fallible but very clever human beings." In this "battle for hearts and minds"—especially against cultural and ethical relativism—"we must do no less than Elijah, Jesus, and Paul did as they withstood those seeking to destroy the wisdom and knowledge of God. If we fail, we will lose every idea and belief that Christians hold dear, as well as the institutions based on them (i.e., home, church, state, education, occupation)."[31]

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[28] Ibid., xi, 147. See, for instance, Summit Ministries, "About Summit," *Summit Ministries*, 2008, http://www.summit.org/about/ (accessed 13 July 2008). "Secular humanism" is a genuine challenge, though I reject the bunker mentality such fear evokes.

[29] Positively, this counteracts *neglect of the mind*. Negatively, it reinforces *insularity*. Such an approach is also at loggerheads with ministries adopting the *postmodern assumption*, as we shall see.

[30] Josh McDowell's endorsement of Summit in David A. Noebel, *Understanding the Times: The Collision of Today's Competing Worldviews*, rev. 2d ed. (Manitou Springs, CO: Summit Press, 2006), back-cover.

[31] Ibid., 2-7, 10-11. Cf. 2 Cor. 10:5.

I believe Summit, and similarly styled ministries, are performing an important role for believers in this context.[32] No doubt, the challenges to Christian faith are considerable. Nevertheless, with such a defensive posture and a polemical edge, this is surely not the most attractive or effective witness. Such an approach would likely repel at least some non-Christians as an exercise in triumphalism, heavy on *truth*—or at least "truth" as the Christian conceives it—yet short on *grace* and irrelevant to their pursuit of happiness.[33] An apologetic that assures Christians in the face of competing claims, equipping them to "defend the faith," may simultaneously be counterproductive in our pursuit of an apologetic that captures the mind, heart, and imagination of outsiders.

*The Postmodern Assumption*

As culture changes, so too must our apologetic. Contextualization to one's audience and thinking style is critical. How, then, do contemporary western teens see the world? Chap Clark summarizes the broad consensus: "It is generally accepted by cultural observers that we live in a society with a *postmodern worldview*."[34] Such sentiments echo through most recent youth ministry writings. Respected youth commentator Walt Mueller simply asserts: "The unique set of glasses young people wear today is the postmodern worldview."[35] Tony Jones goes further, arguing that we must stop justifying Scripture with "an outdated [modern] epistemological scheme . . . and get on to looking

[32] See, for example, Focus on the Family, "Big Dig Events," *BigDigEvents.com*, 2008, http://www.family.org/bigdigevents/ (accessed 13 July 2008).

[33] Cf., John 1:14.

[34] Clark, "Response to the Inclusive Congregational Approach," 27-30 in *Four Views*, ed. Senter, 29; emphasis mine.

[35] Walt Mueller, *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture: Bridging Teen Worldviews and Christian Truth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 56.

at Scripture and the world through postmodern eyes—the *kind of eyes our students have been born with*."[36]

How do "postmodern eyes" see the world? In chapter three, postmodernism will be explained in more detail. For now, brief description will suffice, voiced by Tony Jones. Since about 1980 we have moved from the modern to the postmodern era.[37] In so doing, culture—and the youth therein—have changed credos: "*Objectivity is out, subjectivity is in*," "*question everything*," "*there is no Truth with a capital 'T'*," "*tell stories*," and "*never make lists!*"[38] We have moved from rational to experiential, scientific to spiritual, homogeneous to heterogeneous, exclusive to relative, egocentric to altruistic, individualistic to communal, functional to creative, industrial to environmental, local to global, compartmentalized to holistic, relevant to authentic, and propositional to mystical. Only their "relationality" bridges modern and postmodern youth.[39] Jones's conclusion is near inescapable, given his analysis: "Our students are neck-deep in postmodern culture every day, and God has called us to be right there with them. And *if that's true . . . then our youth ministries had better change, too*."[40] Clearly such beliefs, if substantiated, have far-reaching ramifications for apologetics. *The postmodern assumption*, then, poses the fourth and arguably greatest challenge to the contemporary teen apologetic enterprise.

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[36] Jones, *Postmodern*, 24; emphasis mine. In due course I will challenge this assumption.

[37] Ibid., 49. Jones here draws upon Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 13.

[38] Jones, 26-27.

[39] Ibid., 30-37, 63

[40] Ibid., 43; emphasis mine.

Not surprisingly, Jones—among others—says "it's time to reconceive Christian apologetics."[41] He commends as a "best practice" experiential journeys into the story of the Bible that draw on "music, video, silence, light, darkness, and other stimuli. . . . There are no talks, no explanations. . . . Scripture speak[s] for itself."[42] Mike Yaconelli—owner of Youth Specialties—responds to Jones:

> This generation is longing for . . . the shore of mystery. In other words, they're looking for Jesus. What else do we need to know? . . . It's not hard to define what youth ministry should look like in the future (which is now). No words. No programs. Future ministry should be characterized by silence, solitude, worship, reading, praying, listening, paying attention, and being.[43]

Other youth writers concur. Dean Borgman declares:

> For [contemporary youth] moral authorities have lost their appeal, reason and science their credibility. Logical systems, theological proofs, and legitimate authority no longer count. . . . A pluralistic and secular society is either too busy or disinclined to ask: What is the meaning of life? What is truth?[44]

*Commending* the Scriptures in the contemporary context equates with *encountering* the Scriptures; through songs, sculpting, mime and music, "we provide them with a life-preserving, narrative anchor in a sea of cultural flotsam and jetsam."[45] Mueller contends that youth today use feelings, not reason: "they are not concerned with objective proofs and rational arguments supporting Christianity as a faith system. Instead, they simply

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[41] Ibid., 137. The challenge to reframe youth apologetics for a post-Christian audience is part of a wider conversation concerning evangelicalism as a whole. See Phillips and Okholm, eds., *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, 11.

[42] Jones, 213.

[43] Ibid., 90, 118.

[44] Dean Borgman, *When Kumbaya Is Not Enough: A Practical Theology for Youth Ministry* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 25.

[45] Don C. Richter, "Growing Up Postmodern: Theological Uses of Culture," in *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically About Youth Ministry*, ed. Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and Dave Rahn (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1986), 72.

want to know that it works. Seeing, not knowing, is believing."[46] Pollster George Barna is perhaps most outspoken. Youth, as postmoderns, are comfortable with contradiction. As such, "effective youth work is *not logic based!* . . . Devoting precious resources in an attempt to reconcile these competing realities will likely prove to be an exercise in waste."[47] Experience and emotion are the keys. Those worried by such shifts are admonished: "Get over it."[48]

Such rhetoric leads one to believe that adolescent postmodernism is a given, like gravity. My concern in this thesis is not to make a case for or against postmodernity on Scriptural grounds, but rather to accurately represent the nature of contemporary youth and how they think, toward informed contextualization. If the postmodern assumption is unsubstantiated, or overly simplistic, then such apologetic changes may unwittingly undermine the Bible's credibility in the eyes of outsiders.

## THE POTENTIAL

### *Assessing the Challenges*

Faced with these four challenges—insular youth ministry, neglected minds, a defensive posture, and the postmodern assumption—the reader would be wise to question whether an outwardly directed, rationally grounded youth apologetic is viable, let alone beneficial. To dismiss this enterprise without assessing these challenges from another perspective would, however, be premature.

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[46] Mueller, *Engaging*, 64, 190.

[47] George Barna, *Real Teens: A Contemporary Snapshot of Youth Culture* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), 60, 63.

[48] Ibid., 43, 95.

Consider, for instance, the insularity and defensive posture of many youth ministries. For "evangelical" groups, by definition, evangelism is part of their mandate. As such, the present state of affairs is not championed, but rather regretted by youth leaders. Helping young believers defend their faith—for their own spiritual safe-keeping—need not mutually exclude cultivating an attractive and more engaging apologetic witness to outsiders. As youth leaders continue to shift from activity- to ministry-based models emphasizing evangelism—influenced by mega-churches such as Saddleback Community Church and Willow Creek—I believe they will welcome suggestions to more effectively commend the Bible to adolescent outsiders.[49] With a more integrated apologetic—toward which this thesis points—creativity and rationality form a potent combination that need not sacrifice program quality or attendance, thus countering neglect of the mind. Apologetics is less about complex arguments to be memorized than finding ways of effectively communicating the Christian faith that *challenge*, *inform*, and *inspire* the thinking teen. Accordingly, more pragmatic youth leaders would be empowered, rather than threatened, by such an apologetic.

Two more serious challenges remain. First, that the thinking of teens is not equal to the apologetic task: rational arguments—whether philosophical or evidential—will float over the adolescent's head. Second, with the shift to postmodernity, more so than ever the teen's thinking is a-logical and unconcerned with contradiction. In short, detractors expect teens to rebuff apologetic advances with "don't know and don't care," consistent with stereotypical media portrayals of youth as ignorant and apathetic. An

[49] Fields, *Purpose-Driven*, 50-53, 103-12; Bo Boshers, *Student Ministry for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 95-99, 193-210, 222-38.

additional challenge concerns whether it is even realistic to expect adolescents—in an age of entertainment—to read the Bible at all.

To adequately assess these challenges, we must turn now to insights from psychology, neurology and pedagogy. I contend that *all teens are "thinking teens,"* seeking to make sense of the world to varying degrees. In this critical transitional phase, we not only can, but indeed we must, engage outsiders by commending the Bible.

*Psychological Insights: The "Thinking Teen"*

"Adolescence entails changes in cognitive capacities," explains academic and teen counselor Fred Stickle, "that are just as monumental as the biological changes."[50] The professional youth worker has no excuse for ignorance of the most prominent theories illuminating this change process.[51] Indeed, the adolescent psychological context is no less important than the social setting when considering a contextualized apologetic. In this section I will highlight key psychological insights concerning the "thinking teen" from seminal figures on aspects of adolescent development: *cognitive* (Piaget); *social* and *emotional* (Erikson, Marcia, and Elkind); *moral* (Kohlberg); and *faith* (Fowler).[52]

Cognitive Development

[50] Fred E. Stickle, ed., *Adolescent Psychology*, 5th ed. (Columbus, OH: McGraw Hill, 2007), 45.

[51] Strommen and others, *Youth Ministry*, 308.

[52] Each theorist has built upon a solid research base and confirmed his findings cross-culturally, thus offering powerful schemes explaining central stages in development. The "stages" they propose, whilst occurring in a set order, are better understood as "overlapping waves"—transitioning across phases—than discrete steps. See Jack Snowman and Robert Biehler, *Psychology Applied to Teaching*, 11th ed., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 35.

Few psychologists have been more influential than Jean Piaget (1896-1980) with his theory of *cognitive development*.[53] In essence, Piaget contends that humans innately tend toward both "organization" (systematizing thought processes) and "adaptation" (adjusting to the environment), ensuring efficiency and accuracy of thought and thus conferring survival value. These two tendencies are in tension; we seek "equilibration" through formation of thinking schemes that make sense of (coherence), and accord with (correspondence), our experiences.[54] Adaptation occurs when a new experience challenges an old thinking scheme.[55] In response to apparent contradiction, we are inherently driven to either "assimilate" (reinterpret that experience to fit existing schemes), or "accommodate" (adjust the thinking scheme itself). With *repeated experiences* over *time*, accommodations accumulate to form a new scheme altogether.[56]

At the macro-level, it is in adolescence that we progressively shift from the "concrete operational stage" to a new thinking scheme: the "formal operational stage," also known as "hypothetico-deductive thinking." Whilst children manoeuvre objects, adolescents manipulate ideas extending beyond experienced reality. Similar to growth-related clumsiness, adolescents may display "pseudostupidity"—making simple tasks overly complex when confronted by innumerable mental options—yet, further developments of thought into adulthood are in degree only, not kind.[57]

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[53] See Jean Piaget, *The Construction of Reality in the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1954).

[54] This process is—at least initially—largely *subconscious*, though it can be consciously improved with practice in problem solving.

[55] The new experience causes "disequilibrium" or instability, a type of "cognitive dissonance." See Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957).

[56] Snowman and Biehler, *Psychology*, 33.

[57] David Elkind, *All Grown Up and No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis*, rev. ed. (New York: Perseus Books, 1998), 48.

The implications of "hypothetico-deductive thinking" are highly significant. As Weiten explains, "Many adolescents spend hours mulling over hypothetical possibilities related to abstractions such as justice, love, and free will. . . . Thus, thought processes in the formal operational period can be characterized as abstract, systematic, logical, and reflective."[58] Wadsworth contrasts adolescent versus adult thought, noting the difficulty teens experience distinguishing their utopian idealism from the "real" world: "With the capability for generating endless hypotheses, an adolescent believes that what is best is what is logical."[59] Whilst Wadsworth perhaps overgeneralizes his point, it is clear that the cognitive development of teens inherently drives them to make sense of their world.

## Social and Emotional Development

Associated with these cognitive changes, adolescents are in flux through *social* and *emotional development*. These processes are best explained by Erik Erikson (1902-1994),[60] James Marcia,[61] and David Elkind.[62] Erikson's psychosocial theory of development proposes that across the lifespan there are eight crises that characteristically transform social relationships. Adolescents—in stage five of Erikson's model—are caught in a tug of war of "identity versus role confusion." They each deal with questions

[58] Wayne Weiten, *Psychology Themes and Variations*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001), 447.

[59] Barry J. Wadsworth, *Piaget's Theory of Cognitive and Affective Development*, 5th ed. (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1996), 124.

[60] See Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1963).

[61] See James E. Marcia, "Development and Validation of Ego Identity Status," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 3, no. 5 (1966): 551-58.

[62] See David Elkind, *The Child and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

of "Who am I and where am I going?"[63] In turn, these questions can be answered only in light of the larger "story" which they believe themselves to be within; questions of origins, morality, purpose, destiny, and the existence of God are often simultaneously probed. As Fowler helpfully explains, with formal operational thinking teens are capable of "mutual interpersonal perspective taking": "I see you seeing me: I see the me I think you see."[64] This transcendent, third-person perspective reveals multiple ways of being, often bringing parental and peer expectations into conflict. As identity is strengthened and owned, adolescents are increasingly able to *commit* to a way of being, relationships, and even ideological convictions.

James Marcia extends Erikson's work by proposing four adolescent "identity statuses," each the result of interplay between *crisis* and *commitment*. Immature statuses include "identity diffusion" (low crisis and commitment, characteristically apathetic), and "foreclosure" (low crisis yet prematurely high commitment to parental ideals). Ideally, teens faced with challenging experiences or ideas confront the crisis. If so, they move from a "moratorium" (high crisis yet low commitment as they "try on" alternative identity and ideology) to "identity achievement" (high crisis and high commitment). As such, meaningful apologetic encounters have the potential to alter the life trajectory of late adolescents if they commit to Biblical inspiration during a time of crisis over belief.

Elkind fleshes out the implications of such a process, which he calls "thinking in a new key."[65] Perspectival thinking predisposes teens to "adolescent egocentrism," that is, preoccupation with themselves and self-consciousness before the all-seeing and ever

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[63] Weiten, *Psychology*, 445-46.

[64] James M. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 153.

[65] Elkind, *All Grown Up*, 25-52.

judging "imaginary audience," en route to becoming their own, autonomous person. Their formal thinking enables idealism, constructing an imagined world in stark contrast to that which adults have actually achieved, producing criticalness and argumentativeness. Adolescents display "apparent hypocrisy" in their criticisms, as their fixation with ideas often blinkers them to their inconsistent actions: teens advocating environmental protection may throw litter on the ground without a second thought.[66] In sum, then, the social and emotional development of a teen constitutes a critical time for formation of her identity and ideology as she progressively detaches from parental ideals, experiments with alternatives, and eventually commits to being her own person.[67]

## Moral Development

Utilizing Piaget's insights, Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987) elucidates adolescent *moral development*.[68] Piaget had earlier proposed that children under roughly ten years of age practice a "morality of constraint"—one authoritative standard of right and wrong, with guilt dependent on outcomes. Formal thinking moves teens toward a "morality of cooperation"—multiple perspectives on morality, with guilt dependent on intentions.[69] Kohlberg in turn proposed six stages of moral development, divided into three levels: preconventional morality (moral judgments based on authority, then reciprocal favours); conventional morality (moral judgments based on social approval, then societal determination in law); and postconventional morality (moral judgments based on

[66] Ibid., 50.

[67] Toward late adolescence and "emerging adulthood," they also detach from their peers' ideals. See Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 207-11.

[68] See Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Psychology of Moral Development: The Nature and Validity of Moral Stages* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1984).

[69] Snowman and Biehler, *Psychology*, 53.

maximum good for all, then upon one's own established ethical principles). Adolescents predominantly operate at level two: conventional morality.

Kohlberg's model is primarily criticized for its emphasis on moral *thought* rather than *action*; a rapist who recognizes his wrongdoing may still be morally advanced on this scheme.[70] Nevertheless, it is the most influential model,[71] and informative for apologetic engagement, particularly given the adolescent "apparent hypocrisy" mentioned earlier. The central point concerning adolescent moral development is their increasing ability to weigh competing moral alternatives—pro-life versus pro-choice, chastity versus promiscuity, sharing versus stealing, truth-telling versus lying, war versus disarmament—by consequences, intentions, and ethical ideals, as they construct their own moral system. Tension is experienced by teens—over drug use, for instance—when social approval (stage three) clashes with society's rules (stage four). Engaging teens in dialogue over moral dilemmas helps them achieve postconventional morality, constituting a personal code of ethics. "Moral judgment and action," Kohlberg would contend, "has a rational core."[72] Adolescence, then, is a critical time for moral dialogue—a time at which their interest is piqued—if only we ask the right (and *enough*) questions.[73]

## Faith Development

[70] Seymour Feshbach, Bernard Weiner, and Arthur Bohart, *Personality*, 4th ed. (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1996), 339.

[71] Weiten, *Psychology*, 454.

[72] Fowler, *Faith*, 49.

[73] Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan, "The Adolescent as a Philosopher: The Discovery of the Self in a Postconventional World," *Daedalus* 100, no. 4 (1971): 1051-86.

Finally, let us consider adolescent *faith development*. By bringing Piaget, Erikson and Kohlberg into dialogue, James Fowler illuminates the process. He defines our "god values" as the ultimate concern around which one's life revolves—whether God, self, sport, career, or a relationship.[74] *Faith*, then, is "an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one's hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions." Fowler, based upon nearly one thousand in-depth interviews across the life-span, discerned six faith stages after the undifferentiated faith of infancy. Confirmed cross-culturally, he contends that the sequence is "invariant": "Each new stage integrates and carries forward the operations of the previous stages."[75] Of particular relevance are stages two through four.

In stage two, "Mythic-Literal Faith," pre-teens receive the beliefs and stories passed on by authorities in a literal sense. God is a watchful parent figure, rewarding good and punishing evil. With emerging formal operational thought, young adolescents must confront "conflicts between authoritative stories . . . [such as] Genesis on creation versus evolutionary theory."[76] Literalism breaks down, and without an alternate construction, disillusionment sets in as they reject a religious caricature. Otherwise, challenges are accommodated and a new, more robust—though still largely unexamined—faith emerges.

In stage three, "Synthetic-Conventional Faith," adolescent faith "must provide a coherent orientation in the midst of that more complex and diverse range of involvements . . . a basis for identity and outlook."[77] Faith is "synthetic" in the sense of being non-

[74] Fowler, *Faith*, 4.

[75] Ibid., 99-100, 296-97.

[76] Ibid., 150.

[77] Ibid., 151.

analytical and tacit—teens argumentatively critique alternate views, but unreflectively accept their own as neutral and "just the way it is." It is "conventional" as faith largely conforms to the beliefs of significant others, whether peers or parents.[78] Mutual interpersonal perspective taking allows teens to try on other beliefs as an hypothesis, seeing if different worldviews bring greater clarity.[79] Transition to stage four, "Individuative-reflexive faith," is precipitated by serious challenges to their core convictions, moving late teens from tacit to reflective, individually owned, and explicit belief.[80] For those aged thirteen through twenty, 12.5 percent are transitioning from stage two to stage three, 50 percent are stage three, 28.6 percent are transitioning from stage three to four, and 5.4 percent are stage four.[81]

In summary, as John Santrock contends, "Adolescence may be an especially important juncture in religious development."[82] An increasingly nominal and secular adolescent population is left to combat conflicting scientific, historical and philosophical accounts of reality with fading memories of childhood Bible stories. At the very time they are positioned to logically weigh alternate perspectives and form their identity, asking moral and philosophical questions, they need dialogue partners prepared to intelligently challenge their tacitly held beliefs in the quest for greater coherence and correspondence that in turn enriches life. The latest research from Australia confirms this perspective. In the first analysis of interviews, "'The Teenage Questioner' . . . was

[78] Ibid., 167.

[79] Ibid., 153-54.

[80] Ibid., 173-74.

[81] Ibid., 317.

[82] John W. Santrock, *Adolescence*, 7th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 1998), 424.

considered a possible spirituality type in its own right."[83] The questioning phase is, however, transitional. Moratorium gives way to identity achievement during emerging adulthood, and the taboo topic of religion—alongside whatever beliefs are chosen by the individual—largely subsides into the accepted fabric of one's worldview. Arnett notes that these final beliefs "have surprisingly little connection to their religious training in childhood and adolescence, a reflection of emerging adults' resolve to think for themselves and decide on their own beliefs."[84] Apologetic dialogue during this questioning phase may prove instrumental in altering the life-course of the thinking teen.

*Neurological Insights: The "Connecting Teen"*

Until recently, psychological stage theories—such as Piaget's—were largely unsubstantiated at the neurological level. Cortical grey matter—the brain's outer layer responsible for higher functions—was believed to increase through an overproduction (exuberance) of neurons, dendrites and synapses, but only until the age of four. The enhanced connectivity allowed for "experienced-based brain development," thus making early childhood a critical period for developing interests and abilities "that would shape the consciousness that individuals carry forward into adulthood."[85] From the age of four through twenty, the dual process of synaptic pruning (decrease of grey matter) and myelination (increase of white matter by insulating the remaining connections for greater efficiency) was believed to occur in a linear fashion. The result: an organized and

[83] They are primarily represented by nominal Christians drifting to secularity in secondary school, having suspended or attenuated traditional beliefs once significant challenges and unanswered questions prevailed. See Mason and others, *Generation Y*, 167-70; also Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 134.

[84] Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 166-67.

[85] Daniel P. Keating, "Cognitive and Brain Development," in *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*, 2d. ed., ed. Richard M. Lerner and Laurence D. Steinberg (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2004), 73.

powerful, though less dynamic and malleable brain. With new technology and advanced longitudinal studies—most notably conducted in the 1990s by neuroscientist Jay Giedd at the National Institutes of Health—the adolescent brain now appears anything but static.[86]

Giedd confirmed linear increases in white matter, but discovered regionally specific drastic exuberances of grey matter around adolescence—peaking at age twelve for the frontal and parietal lobes, sixteen for the temporal lobe, and twenty for the occipital lobe—before synaptic pruning and subsequent myelination. The implication: "If the increase is related to a second wave of overproduction of synapses, it may herald a *critical stage of development* when the *environment or activities of the teenager may guide selective synapse elimination during adolescence*."[87] Operating by the "use it or lose it" principle, Feinstein explains:

> The brain selectively strengthens or prunes neurons based on activity. Synapses continually used will flourish; those that are not will wither away. . . . This is a neurological reason to involve adolescents in responsible activities [for instance, problem solving] and introduce them to all kinds of new experiences.[88]

Furthermore, feedback discerning right from wrong action and thought helps drive the synaptic pruning.[89] What, then, in the adolescent brain is undergoing transformation?

The hippocampus undergoes synaptic overabundance, increasing the average memory from six to eight bits of information: teens can manage more facts in an argument. Synaptic overabundance in the corpus callosum (integrating brain

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[86] J. N. Giedd and others, "Brain Development During Childhood and Adolescence: A Longitudinal MRI Study," *Nature Neuroscience* 2, no. 10 (1999): 861-63.

[87] Ibid., 863; emphasis mine.

[88] For instance, by involving teens in the experience of evaluating moral decisions, neurological pathways supporting this process will be strengthened and protected during subsequent synaptic pruning, maintaining this ability into adulthood, Sheryl G Feinstein, *Secrets of the Teenage Brain: Research-Based Strategies for Reaching & Teaching Today's Adolescents* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2004), 8.

[89] Ibid., 39.

hemispheres) increases adolescent awareness of self and others, enabling them to adopt alternative perspectives as temporary hypotheses.[90] The temporal lobe (processing language and emotional behaviour) follows later. When combined with development then refining of the frontal lobe (managing reason, planning and problem-solving) and parietal lobe (logic and spatial reasoning), older adolescents are better positioned than young teens to deal more logically and less emotionally with abstract issues of belief.[91] Under pressure, however, the stress hormone cortisol hinders memory and can prompt a subconscious switch from logical frontal lobe engagement to an emotional response emanating from the more developed amygdala.[92] Additionally, adolescent brains require greater stimulation for equivalent pleasure compared to either children or adults, their attention secured through novelty yet also predisposing teens to risk-taking.[93]

Combining these insights, effective apologetic engagement must challenge the thinking of teens—offering feedback whether through questioning their logic, presenting pertinent facts, or inviting them to try on an alternative perspective—but in such a way that attention is gained and kept through novelty and relevance, without excessive pressure in order to avoid an illogical, emotional argument. The latest neurological insights substantially vindicate the aforementioned psychological stage theories, synaptic pruning and myelination corresponding to adaptation and organization in response to new and challenging experiences.[94] Such engagement is therefore *critical* during adolescence, their brain a "teeming ball of possibilities, raw material waiting to be systematically

[90] Ibid., 4-6.

[91] Ibid., 151.

[92] Ibid., 93.

[93] Lisa F. Price, "The Biology of Risk Taking," in *Adolescent Psychology*, ed. Stickle, 40.

[94] Strauch, *Primal Teen*, 112-13.

shaped," literally molding how and what they think about God, Christianity, and the Bible.[95]

*Pedagogical Insights: The "Reading Teen"*

Clearly the average teen can and does think about worldview issues beyond what the average youth ministry expects or facilitates. School teachers testify, however, that getting them to do so can be a challenge. Is it realistic to encourage teens to read a complicated, ancient book dealing with distant cultures? In an age of entertainment and numerous distractions, do teens read "for pleasure" at all? We now turn to pedagogical insights that illuminate the "reading teen."

In *Exploding the Myths*, Marc Aronson—editorial director and author for a publishing firm specializing in "Young Adult" novels (YA)—challenges many unexamined stereotypes concerning teens and reading.[96] His central contention: "Teenagers are intelligent, engaged, reachable, and much more varied than adults believe them to be."[97] Far from spelling the end of YA literature, the multimedia explosion has freed writing in substance and form to greater creativity and colour, with educated and literate teens moving seamlessly "from screen to online to magazine to book to CD to CD-ROM."[98] How broad is YA literature, and what sells? Aronson suggests, "YA is everything from . . . medieval romance to Beat poetry, from violent hockey stories to Holocaust diaries . . . . YA is as varied as the multimedia mix of teenagers' lives, as

[95] Ibid., 17.

[96] Marc Aronson, *Exploding the Myths: The Truth About Teenagers and Reading*, Scarecrow Studies in Young Adult Literature, ed. Patty Campbell, no. 4 (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2001). The book category of "YA" addresses youth aged fourteen through eighteen (p. 9).

[97] Ibid., inside cover.

[98] Ibid., 7-8, 10.

complex as their stormy emotional landscapes, [and] as profound as their soul-shaping searches for identity."[99] What's "in"? Multiculturalism resonates, revealing the "ambiguous, complex, self-contradictory splendor" and human depth of a non-dominant culture.[100] "Coming of age" stories that capture the intensity of adolescence rate well, describing "a great crossing" from smallness to a larger world of gritty challenge.[101] Surprisingly, with the rise of hip-hop, poetry that captures emotional intensity is again popular.[102] For boys in particular, intricate fantasy novels reign—think Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. "Many are very long, include their own unique languages, and require the reader to understand whole new geographies . . . and particular blends of magic and superscience."[103] Whether in fantasy or non-fiction, sugar-coated moralizing is out; teens want gritty reality, messy endings, and real consequences.[104]

How *much*, then, do teens read? The research is limited, but encouraging. In short, roughly three-quarters of youth aged eight to eighteen regularly read for leisure, averaging 43 minutes per day. The average fifteen- to eighteen-year-old will "spend 13 minutes with magazines, seven minutes with newspapers, and 24 minutes with books."[105]

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[99] Ibid., 11.

[100] Ibid., 16-17.

[101] Ibid., 20-21.

[102] Ibid., 60.

[103] Ibid., 59-60.

[104] Ibid., 79-83, 118. Central characters—like the adolescent readers themselves—are often driven by *ideals*, even while confronting *realism* on their journey.

[105] Victoria Rideout, Donald F. Roberts, and Ulla G. Foehr, *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-olds: Executive Summary* ([Menlo Park, CA.]: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005), 35, 120.

The magazine layout is particularly appealing, given the number and quality of pictures in an image driven culture, while the breezy journalistic style makes for easy reading.[106]

In light of this data, how does the Bible fare? Surprisingly well! Whilst it is not crafted YA literature—Leviticus challenges even the seasoned reader—it certainly resonates with YA themes. Besides individual stories of challenge and temptation—think Joseph, David, and Daniel—the Old Testament collectively tells a gritty "coming of age" story for Israel as a nation, an oppressed minority facing extreme challenge. It contains morals without moralizing,[107] multiculturalism that avoids demonization and ethnocentricity,[108] poetry in Psalms and Song of Songs with unrivalled emotion, and Proverbial wisdom that shames any trite chain-email forward by youth set adrift from collective common sense. All this is offered without even mention of the drama, passion and betrayal—common in diluted form for every teen—in the life of Jesus. It would seem that, with the right framing, even boys might engage this fantastic story of foreign lands, distant dialects, and supernatural encounter.

Concerning "form," publishers have increasingly diversified Bible resources with easier translations and paraphrases, "Biblezine" formats replete with pictures and life-application for teens, and reading tools to facilitate even the Biblically illiterate making sense of the Scriptures.[109] Furthermore, by engaging youth in Bible study groups,

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[106] Sandra Hughes-Hassell and Pradnya Rodge, "The Leisure Reading Habits of Urban Adolescents," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 51, no. 1 (2007): 22-23.

[107] Cf. Judges and the absolute anarchy, with subtle editorial inserts: "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (17:6).

[108] Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 60-70.

[109] For instance, Eugene Peterson's *The Message Remix: The Bible In Contemporary Language* (n.p.: Think Books, 2006); "Biblezines" published by Thomas Nelson (2008), http://www.thomasnelson.com/consumer/dept.asp?dept_id=190900&TopLevel_id=190000 (accessed 15 July 2008); also Doug Fields' *One Minute Bible for Students*, see Fields, *Purpose-Driven*, 363-64.

utilizing constructivist learning principles—for instance, illustrating moral dilemmas from the Biblical narrative, helping them enter the text by connecting to their own experiences, and dialoguing with multiple perspectives rather than lecturing—there is no pedagogical reason to suppose youth cannot step up to higher levels of thinking.[110] As Smith and Denton conclude their survey of American adolescents, "parents and faith communities should not be shy about *teaching* teens. Adults do not hesitate to direct and expect from teens when it comes to school, sports, music, and beyond. . . . We believe that *most teens are teachable*, even if they themselves do not really know that or let on that they are interested."[111] In summary, it is not unrealistic—if the right attitude toward the Bible is cultured—to expect teens to engage with the Scriptures in a meaningful way.

## CONCLUSION: THE VALIDITY AND NECESSITY OF TEEN APOLOGETICS

As we pursue an appropriate apologetic directed to adolescent outsiders, what does it mean to be "all things to all people"? It is commonplace among youth workers to assert that this entails stripping off the modern strait-jacket of rational truth claims, instead donning postmodern garb: subjective lures; creative experiences; unapologetically sharing our story. Yet the psychological, neurological, and pedagogical insights we have surveyed challenge this reading of youth. Adolescents are in a critical period of cognitive, social/emotional and moral/faith development, receptive to alternative constructions of reality as in perhaps no other time in life. They are most decidedly *not* born with "postmodern eyes." Rather, they are socialized *into* such a worldview, in tension with their innate tendency toward cognitive coherence and correspondence

[110] Snowman and Biehler, *Psychology*, 309-46.

[111] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 267.

relative to their experiences. Furthermore, I fear that this "everything must change" response by youth workers to the postmodern philosophical shift in academia is as captive to the *Zeitgeist* of our age as attempts to rationally "prove" the Bible were to the Enlightenment agenda of autonomous reason. Dulles highlights some contemporary sociological factors undermining apologetics:

> In a pluralist society like our own, religious faith is felt to be divisive. To avoid conflict Christians frequently take refuge in the excuse that people should be left free to make up their own minds about what to believe. . . . Even to raise the question of truth in religion is considered impolite. This withdrawal from controversy, though it seems to be kind and courteous, is insidious.[112]

Dulles expresses concern that the privatization of religion and the refusal to offer a sound apologetic countering alternative truth claims have produced "fuzzyminded and listless Christians, who care very little about what is to be believed . . . . It is a degenerate offspring of authentic Christianity."[113] In turn, an *exclusively* "postmodern" approach may further undermine the plausibility of the Bible in the eyes of outsiders as they are taught versions of science and history that render Biblical claims unbelievable, while no answers to their pressing questions are forthcoming from Christian contacts.

At this point, lest I be misconstrued, I want to largely affirm Jones's critique of modern arguments for the Bible: as finite and fallen, we cannot "prove" the Scriptures are God's Word; even if we could, we deal not so much with an infallible Word as our fallible interpretations.[114] Furthermore, I appreciate Jones's creative suggestions for an increasingly postmodern audience: we must help teens "inhabit the Biblical story and

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[112] Avery Robert Dulles, "The Rebirth of Apologetics," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* 143 (2004): 19-20.

[113] Ibid., 120.

[114] Jones, *Postmodern*, 18-24, 194-204

make it their own."[115] I am concerned, however, with the tendency of youth writers to extend hunches into axioms irrespective of data, and apply what is true of one part to the whole. Prominent Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby expresses a similar concern:

> At the level of the individual, both the postmodern and the generational approaches tend to be deductive, starting with a conclusion, then adding the facts. The postmodernist point of view is highly theoretical, rather than empirically derived. Its claims are important and warrant careful research. But at this point . . . *it's a big idea in need of lots of data*.[116]

It is of no small significance that the primary researchers providing the most current and extensive studies in America, Australia, and Canada, all challenge the postmodern assumption of "a radical discontinuity between the contemporary situation and modernity."[117] Smith and Denton are most pointed:

> We have observed a noticeable tendency when it comes to . . . youth workers, to overgeneralize, overstate issues, frame situations in alarmist terms, and latch onto simplistic answers to alleged problems. But the fact is that the . . . religious lives of American youth are diverse and complicated. . . . Religious communities should also stop . . . presuming that U.S. teenagers are actively alienated by religion . . . and so need some radically new "postmodern" type of program or ministry. None of this seems to us to be particularly true.[118]

Interestingly, when Senter suggested various models that may emerge in the forthcoming "revolution" in youth ministry, scenario five—entitled "New Model of Youth Pastor"—introduced readers to a closet intellectual, Don, whose deep thinking on difficult topics attracted inquisitive outsiders struggling to come to grips with a confusing, war-torn world. "The word of the day became, 'Why?' . . . Don found himself overwhelmed with opportunities to discuss the theological and philosophical questions of the day" with

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[115] Ibid., 205-213, 212.

[116] Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 202. See also pp. 164-68.

[117] Mason and others, *Generation Y*, 355.

[118] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 226.

students as he ran "forums" in an evangelistic group setting, bringing the Bible to bear "on issues that were on their minds with which they grappled."[119]

Rational apologetic engagement remains a *valid* and *necessary* enterprise for influencing adolescent outsiders. Given that they are interested in, and intellectually capable of such a dialogue, failure to challenge the "thinking teen" renders us guilty of infantilizing youth.[120] Rather than dumbing down to the lowest common denominator, we must caringly call them to step up to exercise their capabilities in answering questions they are already asking.[121] They will tend to believe claims for which supportive examples most readily come to mind, and once their beliefs are established, they will usually persevere despite contradictory evidence.[122] Accordingly, Barna research suggests that over 90 percent of commitments to Christ in America occur before the age of eighteen.[123] Secular society is not shy in challenging the Bible's authority. Christians must therefore enter this dialogue while adolescent identity is in formation.

Having considered the psychological context of contemporary western adolescents—and in turn having cleared a space for youth ministry supportive of apologetic engagement—we now turn to an empirically informed sketch of their sociological context. It is against this psychosocial backdrop that the contributions of Schaeffer, Strobel, and Bell will be critiqued in chapters four and five. This will lead us toward an integrated and appropriately contextualized apologetic in chapter six.

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[119] Senter, *Coming Revolution*, 176-77, 198-202.

[120] Philip Graham, *The End of Adolescence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 23-24; Robert Epstein, *The Case against Adolescence: Rediscovering the Adult in Every Teen* (Sanger, CA: Quill Driver Books, 2007), 163-72, 369.

[121] Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 149.

[122] Weiten, *Psychology*, 330, 337-38.

[123] Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 72.

## CHAPTER THREE

## THE CONTEXT FOR CONTEMPORARY WESTERN ADOLESCENTS

### INTRODUCTION

In chapter two I argued for the validity and necessity of apologetically commending the Bible to adolescent outsiders. This case was largely built upon psychological insights into the thinking teen. It would be misguided, however, to immediately explore and critique the apologetic strategies of Schaeffer, Strobel and Bell. We have only half the picture, for "young people do not evolve in a social vacuum."[1]

In seeking an accurate *sociological* portrait of contemporary western adolescents, we may begin with a rough outline offered by social commentators. Generational analysis stereotypes "Gen Y" as "wanting instant gratification; technologically savvy; [valuing] family and friends; community-minded; fun-loving; morally relativistic; optimistic about their future."[2] They have been shaped by the Internet, the 9-11 terror attack, Harry Potter, mobile phones, and both the Columbine High School and Virginia Tech massacres. Broader aspects of the social context include "increased instability in family arrangements; rampant consumerism; and individualisation."[3] Aptly and alternatively termed "Mosaics," this generation apparently exhibit eclectic lifestyles,

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[1] Reginald W. Bibby and Donald C. Posterski, *Teen Trends: A Nation in Motion*, abridged ed. (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 2000), 1.

[2] Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton, and Ruth Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia* (Mulgrave, Australia: John Garratt Publishing, 2007), 230.

[3] Ibid., 231.

nonlinear thinking, racially integrated relationships, and a "customized blend of multiple-faith views and religious practices."[4] Such sketches provide useful starting places. Yet as we observed in chapter two concerning the postmodern assumption, the reader is right to question their accuracy. Are such descriptions empirically grounded or overworked caricatures? Our attempts to contextualize the Bible for adolescents will be only as good as our understanding of adolescents.

Ideally, sociological research should set the *particular* portrait of youth—such as their relationships, love of music, search for identity, and generational dislocation—against the *general* background. Indeed, "one of the biggest obstacles to our understanding teenagers' lives is the common apparent inability to see their lives within the larger, very powerful social and cultural context that forms it."[5] This broader milieu—including widespread pluralism, postmodernism, moral relativism, secularism, consumerism, and fragmentation—shapes their attitudes, albeit often unknowingly. The general and the particular context interrelate with the *spiritual context*, affecting the attitudes of teens to spirituality and religious beliefs, Christianity as a whole, and the Bible in particular. My task in chapter three, then, is to paint this portrait for the reader to clearly see contemporary western adolescents.

For what in particular, though, are we looking? And how should we use this data? Walt Mueller helpfully suggests that we adopt the stance not of sociologists, but of Acts 17 crosscultural missionaries. Following Paul, we should seek to understand

[4] George Barna, *Real Teens: A Contemporary Snapshot of Youth Culture* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), 17-18.

[5] Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 264.

"Athens" before engaging the "Areopagus."[6] We must look for clues within a rapidly changing youth culture toward commending the inspiration and authority of Scripture. The following cultural survey, then, takes the reader on a reflective walk through adolescent Athens.[7] Each "citizen" and cluster will have slightly different experiences, yet the city as a whole has a particular vibe. What, in youth culture, can I *commend*? What must I *challenge*?[8] Or, borrowing from Alister McGrath's metaphor of apologetic engagement, what *bridges* offer a point of contact, and what *barriers* must be removed or bypassed so that teens will read the Scriptures for themselves?[9] In chapter five we will answer these four questions as we evaluate the apologetic approaches of Schaeffer, Strobel and Bell. For now, we walk together through the general context of western youth, first attending to *pluralism*.

## GENERAL CONTEXT

### *Pluralism*

John Stackhouse helpfully distinguishes three definitions, or types, of *pluralism*.[10] First, "*Pluralism as Mere Plurality* . . . means the state of being 'more than one.'" Second, "*Pluralism as Preference* . . . affirm[s] that '*it is good* that there is more than

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[6] Walt Mueller, *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture: Bridging Teen Worldviews and Christian Truth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 42.

[7] Ibid., 217.

[8] Ibid., 224-26.

[9] Alister McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 5-6, 24-30, 63-64.

[10] John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3-11.

one.'" Third, "*Pluralism as Relativism*" comes with several varieties: affirming the equality of all options; questioning our ability to judge; or nihilistically denying *good* and *evil*, *truth* and *falsity*. Concerning contemporary culture, Stackhouse notes that while pluralism is not new, "the *scope* of pluralism is greater than ever. . . . The *amount* of pluralism is extraordinary. . . . The *pace of change* is unprecedented. . . . [And] widespread *doubt* about whether anyone has the answer, and whether we could recognize it if they did, is new."[11] Youth culture surely offers "Exhibit A."

Millennials constitute "America's most racially and ethnically diverse, and least-Caucasian generation," less than two-thirds white.[12] Ninety percent have friends of a different race.[13] An influx of immigration, combined with media exposure that gravitates to the new and unusual, has proliferated ethnic and lifestyle adolescent social identities. The old-school hierarchical system—cheerleaders and jocks, preppies, geeks/nerds, then alternatives—has morphed into innumerable groups and variations on a theme—"Skaters" embrace hip-hop, "Goths" advocate environmentalism, "Rednecks" seek tutoring, "Lebs" (Lebanese cliques) don Adidas—each mixing and matching where "status inequality is relatively muted."[14]

Beyond pluralism as "mere plurality," *multiculturalism*—as the official policy for both Canada and Australia—has embedded "pluralism as preference" in the popular imagination.[15] As the west has diversified through immigration and high minority

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[11] Ibid., 36-37.

[12] Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 15.

[13] Ibid., 220.

[14] Murray Milner, Jr., *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 100-102, 130.

[15] Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 35-36.

birthrates, the impossibility of *assimilation*—seeking to meld a common identity from all cultures—has given way to pursuit of utopian *cultural pluralism*: we must strive to maintain and celebrate cultural differences and identity for the richness of all.[16] Schools teach history from indigenous perspectives and celebrate "multicultural day" while sampling traditional dances and exotic foods. Most youth appear to have internalized such values, shunning racism. Yet such superficial displays of tradition create "ethnic box" versions of multiculturalism, presenting a unified culture detached from the daily life of most migrants.[17] Australian social commentator Hugh Mackay, referring to Australia as "Kaleidoscope Nation," notes the loss of a clear Australian identity in the face of unprecedented ethnic diversity. With terrorism on the rise, some youth recoil from imposed multiculturalism toward insularity; an attitude of self-protection supposedly justifies poor treatment of illegal immigrants politically and riots such as those by flag-wielding Australians against Lebanese youth in Sydney, 2006.[18]

Turning to religion, then, one would expect the open display of many faiths and the apparent embrace of pluralism to translate into a boom in other religions and eclectic spirituality.[19] While there has been significant growth in other religions, it is primarily through immigration, not conversion. In both America and Australia, other religions represent less than 7 percent of Generation Y. Religious "switching" or "syncretism" is likewise minimal. Those advocating for multiculturalism want youth to celebrate the

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[16] Snowman and Biehler, *Psychology*, 135-36.

[17] Amanda Wise, "On Youth, Hybridity and the Politics of Representing the East Timorese Community," in *Ingenious: Emerging Youth Cultures in Urban Australia*, ed. Melissa Butcher and Mandy Thomas (North Melbourne, Australia: Pluto Press Australia, 2003), 84-85, 99.

[18] Hugh Mackay, *Advance Australia Where?* (Sydney, Australia: Hatchett Livre Publishers, 2007), 137-38, 144-48, 256-61.

[19] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 37-38.

religious options available while avoiding any attempt to discuss or judge the incommensurate truth claims therein. Disagreement is perceived as a threat to societal stability. Youth lack guidance to differentiate or choose between religions; all options begin to look alike. All options are thereby cheapened, undermining commitment to any given belief system. Perhaps as a result, the majority of youth retain their traditional commitment to Christianity by default, or slide into nominal Christianity or outright secularity. Few youth exercise their option to experiment or engage with the religious smorgasbord. Adolescents exhibit their preference for pluralism, however, in shunning exclusive claims to truth: nearly 70 percent believe many religions may be true, while almost half are against attempts to convert others. Their core concern, it would seem, is preserving the freedom to choose your beliefs without forcing this preference on others or denigrating their views.[20] Pluralism has encouraged an "openness to possibility," and an unwillingness to sign off on any particular religious story in the name of tolerance. As Clark notes, however,

> unfortunately, this tolerance of difference is not based in knowledge or a desire for understanding. While young people say that they believe all religions are equally good, they often know little about the tradition with which they identify themselves, let alone the traditions of others.[21]

*Postmodernism*

The rhetoric of "all options are equally good" is one manifestation of *postmodernism* among adolescents. In chapter two we explored the common assertion that western youth are *postmodern*. To reiterate, I believe that youth developmentally

[20] Ibid., 71, 89-90, 137, 205-6; Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 31-32, 36-37, 72-75, 115, 260.

[21] Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 228.

tend toward logical and ordered thought. Nevertheless, they are socialized toward valuing experience over reason. How, then, are we to understand such social forces? First we must differentiate postmodern*ism* (the philosophical movement) from postmodern*ity* (the related cultural phenomenon).[22]

*Postmodernism*, in broad-brush strokes, is *both* a reaction against the confidence of modernity in "universal, autonomous reason," and a radicalized extension of modernity's pursuit of freedom from premodern authority.[23] In premodern times, by and large, western society was hierarchically structured. Knowledge and virtue were derived from the authority of tradition. The Reformation reduced unquestioned authority to the Bible itself. Enlightenment thinkers such as Descartes went further, seeking a firm foundation for all knowledge and virtue beyond dogma. Modernity sought freedom from ignorance and fear through confidence in the "power of reason."[24] Progress toward "One True Culture," peace and prosperity were expected, all built upon unified and objective knowledge. The project, however, failed. *Philosophically*, "all human perception and thought is necessarily *perspectival* . . . . There is no neutral, disinterested thinking. There are simply angles of vision on things that offer various approximations of the way things are."[25] As such, appeals to "Truth" appeared increasingly naïve. *Practically*, two world wars and industrialization's fallout dismissed modernity's utopia as a "pipe dream."[26]

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[22] James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 20.

[23] Ibid., 65.

[24] Heath White, *Postmodernism 101: A First Course for the Curious Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 37.

[25] Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 26, 27.

[26] J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 20.

Even science, through an explosion of discovery, led not to uniformity but instead further fragmentation of knowledge. This knowledge, in turn, was often used to oppress rather than liberate, as with eugenics, nuclear warfare, and Communism.

Enter postmodernity, tersely defined as "incredulity toward metanarratives" by Jean-François Lyotard—that is, skepticism toward any *grand story* claiming to represent "*the* truth" for all people.[27] This "hermeneutic of suspicion" has undermined the sweeping redemption-narrative of Scripture.[28] Biblical history is seen by skeptics as propaganda to validate the victors; "dangerous" doctrines such as Hell, and salvation exclusively for the faithful, mask a will to power that was seen in the inseparability of western colonialism and Christian mission.

Has this postmodern shift spelled the end of reason? Hardly! The present penchant for *tolerance*—as the equality of all beliefs, contrasted with former notions of respect for those with whom you disagree[29]—is the *most* reasonable response *if* you believe objective "Truth" either doesn't exist or cannot be known. Relativism and diversity effectively guard against oppressive metanarratives, lubricating a pluralistic society. As such, postmodernists don't desire to transcend this malaise; rather, they "swim, even wallow, in the fragmentary and chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is."[30]

Debate exists over how, and how much, postmodern*ism* influences postmodern*ity*.

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[27] Smith, *Postmodernism*, 65.

[28] Wright, *The Last Word*, 7-9, 97-98.

[29] Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *The New Tolerance* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998), 19-20, 43.

[30] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 44. This cognitive compartmentalization is fostered by the flood of disconnected television images captivating teens through "novelty, interest, and curiosity." See Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 51, 65.

James Smith argues that "we take culture seriously by taking ideas seriously. . . . There is a trickle-down effect between philosophical currents of postmodernism and cultural phenomena related to postmodernity . . . ."[31] *Soul Searching* certainly recorded postmodern rhetoric regarding religion: "Everyone decides for themselves," "Who am I to judge?" "There is no right answer," "I don't want to be offensive or anything."[32]

David Wells offers another, equally tenable perspective.[33] He contends that modern fragmentation is unlikely due to popular culture embracing little-read French philosophers. Rather, present skepticism—whether darkly nihilistic, or shallow, uncommitted and flippant—is the result of consumerism. Youth in particular are bombarded with overwhelming choice yet are unsure how to choose beyond recourse to personal preference. In a culture where talk of politics and religion are at times taboo, teens reduce religion to "just another commodity" as they pragmatically construct meaning. While American youth apparently expressed relatively few doubts, youth in general were uncertain of their beliefs.[34] In Australia, approximately 80 percent of Generation Y agreed that "it is hard to know what to believe about life."[35] Few are radically relativistic about all knowledge; science—which fuels technology, providing ever more powerful gadgets for youth to consume—still holds pride of place, relatively free from suspicion. Some teens may hold a simplified version of postmodernism as their philosophy of choice. Nevertheless, the confusion over beliefs that teens confess and

[31] Smith, *Postmodernism*, 20-21.

[32] Smith and Denton, 143, 145, 160.

[33] David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 61-67, 72-78.

[34] Smith and Denton, 40, 87-89, 94.

[35] Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 134-35.

their selective application of suspicion argue in favour of Wells's over Smith's perspective: most teens are not consciously postmodernists. Rather, they have "assimilated it without thought or critique simply because it's part of the cultural soup they've been marinating in for so long."[36]

It would seem, then, that Hughes accurately interprets the pragmatic postmodernism influencing today's teens: the diffuse "cloud" of youth beliefs revolves around a white (or "certain") core of culturally accepted knowledge—such as learned in science (or, less so, history) class; this core diffuses outward to the grey ("uncertain") area of personal opinions and preferences on matters such as morals and metaphysics.[37] These few "certainties" can support only a secular and personal "midi-narrative" that facilitates enjoyment of life in the here and now. Anything beyond this—including Biblical belief—is considered unstable, thus optional and largely irrelevant.[38]

Theoretically, postmodern fragmentation should produce despair.[39] Interestingly, some studies have found Generation Y—at least compared to Generation X—to be at once less cynical and skeptical and less concerned with questions of ultimate meaning, and more optimistic and more engaged with societal institutions. Howe and Strauss suggest Millennials may "rebel" by behaving better, not worse, than their predecessors.[40] Perhaps the hunger for meaning is staved off by the sweets of "short-term, low-level

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[36] Mueller, *Engaging*, 52.

[37] Ibid., 124-26, 170-73, 192. Indeed, the realization of a "plurality of options" may have been decisive in the "moving of religion from the realm of publicly accepted knowledge to the grey periphery of personal decision" (p. 133).

[38] S. Savage, S. Collins-May, B. May and G. Cray, *Making Sense of Generation Y: The World View of 15-25 Year Olds* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006), 36-37.

[39] Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 164.

[40] Ibid., 192-197, 203-4; Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 4-8, 66-67.

meanings, by a lifestyle filled with 'distractions' and 'noise'"; entertainment, Internet, numerous trivial choices, and constant music toward sensory overload drown out uncomfortable questions.[41] If so, such superficial "midi-narratives" may crumble when an insulated teen unexpectedly faces the collapse of a relationship, the suicide of a friend, or the disintegration of a family.

*Moral Relativism*

In a climate of suspicion toward unifying metanarratives, some form of moral relativism is to be expected. *Moral relativism*—defined by Walt Mueller as "the view that each person's personal standard of right and wrong is as legitimate, true and authoritative as any other"[42]—has pervaded youth culture. Across Canada, America and Australia, roughly two-thirds of youth believe that "what is right or wrong is a matter of personal opinion." Concerning morality, the majority claim "everything is relative."[43] Moral relativism is most evident in the area of sexual ethics. The Biblical ideal of monogamous heterosexual union within marriage sounds positively antiquated to most of Generation Y, for whom "losing virginity is considered a rite of passage into maturity."[44] The median age of first vaginal intercourse for Australian youth has dropped from nineteen (in the 1960s) to sixteen (in the late 1990s).[45] The primary reason youth gave for rejecting religion was disagreement with Biblical teaching opposing homosexuality,

[41] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 331-36.

[42] Mueller, *Engaging*, 66.

[43] Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 248; Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 143-45; Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 92-93, 327.

[44] Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Penguin Group, 1994), 207.

[45] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 41.

followed by church refusal to ordain women and then restrictive rules about pre-marital sex and abortion.[46] In Canada, 80 percent of youth approve of sex before marriage when partners "love" each other; 60 percent condone sex if they merely "like each other."[47] Roughly 90 percent of teenagers *expect* to marry and stay married for life—a conservative stance—yet the same proportion approve cohabitation and a "try before you buy" mentality, believing this will safeguard marriage from divorce.[48] The "pro-life" (or "anti-choice") position also appears antiquated when upward of 30 percent of Canadian teenage pregnancies since the 1990s ended in abortion.[49] Meanwhile, over 50 percent approve of homosexual relations—double that of 1984.[50] In sum, youth occupy the centre of their moral universe, free to determine right and wrong for themselves.[51]

This sense of autonomy and relativism is societally reinforced. The *media* offer a "map of reality" by which teens may evaluate moral decisions: what comperes praise or denigrate shapes adolescent moral norms. By depicting upward of nine sexual scenes per hour, and affirming alternative sexual orientations as authentic expressions of identity, MTV teaches teens that sexuality is just a pleasurable game.[52] *Educators* also sow relativistic seeds through the "hidden curriculum" of tolerance toward all lifestyles and

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[46] Ibid., 80, 114.

[47] Bibby and Posterski, *Teen Trends*, 56.

[48] Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 91, 143-44; Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 107; Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 108-116.

[49] Bibby and Posterski, 56.

[50] Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 89-90, 185.

[51] Ibid., 98.

[52] Quentin J. Schultze and others, *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture and the Electronic Media* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 99; Walt Mueller, *Youth Culture 101* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 145-47, 168, 288. See, for instance, Katy Perry's chart-topping "I Kissed a Girl," track 2 from the album *One of the Boys*, produced by Dr. Luke, 2:59 min., Capitol Records, 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1Y8utsY6LY (accessed 2 July 2008).

guidance-free "values clarification" activities.[53] Meanwhile, *parents* often support their lying and cheating children toward academic advancement, the end justifying almost any means.[54]

Adolescent morality appears to be built solely upon preference and pleasure: youth are adrift on the sea of postmodern amorality, lost without a moral compass that would point them to any standard beyond themselves.[55] Such an evaluation is, however, incomplete. Most youth claim to follow their inner light of conscience to the right choice that balances their primary drive to "enjoy life" with their concern to bring "no harm" to others.[56] Over 80 percent said they made moral decisions by doing what they believed to be right, while fewer than 10 percent simply did what brought happiness. If they are internally unsure of right from wrong in a particular situation, however, nearly 40 percent revert to whatever makes them happy, with 30 percent seeking parental advice, and only 8 percent following the Bible. Many youth do feel free to *draw* from the guidance of individuals and institutions in choosing their own position: 37 percent take notice of the moral views of those they respect.[57] Furthermore, the myth of self-determination blinds youth to the fact that their "independently" formed views *are* in fact influenced by many sources—including parents, a latent cultural Christianity, friends, school, and the media—whether they like it or not.[58] As such, the moral behaviour youth exhibit is

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[53] Santrock, *Adolescence*, 417-19.

[54] Anne Marie Chaker, "The New Cheating Epidemic," in *Adolescent Psychology*, 5th ed., ed. Fred E. Stickle, (Columbus, OH: McGraw Hill, 2007), 78-81.

[55] Mueller, *Engaging*, 89, 97.

[56] Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 41, 108-9.

[57] Ibid., 105-6.

[58] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 172-75, 233.

usually more conservative than what they condone. In the last decade, even as sexual experimentation has increased, there has been a linear decrease of around 10 percent in the proportion of adolescents having sexual intercourse and terminating pregnancies. Additionally, while 7 percent of youth admit same-sex attraction, less than 4 percent of teens identify themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.[59] Even for supposed "relativists," it is *not* a case of "anything goes": fewer than 10 percent of Canadian adolescents approve of extra-marital sex, and rape is consistently condemned.[60] Teens defend their right to choose, yet as they experience the physical and emotional fallout from "alternative lifestyles," they often seek a better way.[61] Youth cannot easily change, however, without upsetting their clique.

Chap Clark suggests—based upon a six-month ethnographic study and a corresponding literature review—that contemporary youth feel *abandoned* by adults. As a result, youth form especially close friendship "clusters." Each group constructs its own ways of relating and a binding moral code: a "world beneath" adult awareness.[62] Youth do have ethical standards—they recognize lying and cheating are wrong—but such concerns are a "second-tier ethic," pragmatically relativized to protect oneself and one's

[59] Ritch C. Savin-Williams and Lisa M. Diamond, "Sex," in *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*, ed. Lerner and Steinberg, 206, 213.

[60] Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 91; Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia*, 205-6, 219.

[61] Ibid., 218-19.

[62] Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 59, 98.

friends.[63] Patricia Hersch concurs: youth are not "moral mutants," rather, "they hold morality tightly to their immediate lives where they might have a glimmer of control."[64]

Beyond the cluster's code, and even while saying that most moral matters are merely opinion, only one in ten teenagers deny that "some things are right and other things are wrong."[65] The pretense of relativism is quickly discarded in the face of personal abuse, societal injustice, and terrorist attacks.[66] Over two-thirds of youth are quick to condemn homophobia, racism, genocide, global poverty, environmental degradation, and the moral failings of clergy.[67] Furthermore, youth are quick to commend the spirituality of individuals such as Nelson Mandela and Mohandas Gandhi, who suffered and persevered toward the wellbeing of others.[68] A number of studies have noticed a recent but promising shift back toward world engagement and social concern, stemming from adolescent idealism.[69] Accordingly,

> few teenagers consistently sustain such radical relativism. . . . What almost all U.S. teenagers—and adults—lack, however, are any tools or concepts or rationales by which to connect and integrate their radical relativistic individualist selves, on the one hand, with their commonsensical, evaluative, moralist selves on the other.[70]

Smith and Denton's short interview and gentle but prodding questions had Steve, an agnostic, swing from protecting the poor one minute, to begrudgingly accepting an

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[63] Ibid., 146-52.

[64] Patricia Hersch, *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence* (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1998), 100-103.

[65] Bibby and Posterski, *Teen Trends*, 56.

[66] Ibid., 177-78.

[67] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 31, 78-80, 110-14, 210-14; Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 96, 108, 114.

[68] Hughes, 110.

[69] For instance, Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 216, 301-3.

[70] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 144.

evolutionary rationale for their extermination the next: "I wish it didn't have to be that way," Steve laments. He has one eye on a moral compass of sorts, though no "compelling language" to ground his moral intuition.[71] Mason, Singleton and Webber noted the apparent incongruity in which the "strongest moral value" they encountered among adolescents was the "taboo" against putting your values on others.[72] Such irony is lost on most teens, further evidence of adolescent failure to integrate their relativistic and moralistic selves. Barna's research, while confirming adolescent moral relativism, discovered that most sense morality is a critical issue upon which they haven't spent sufficient time to formulate solid views: "Only one out of every six youths has a firm opinion on moral truth."[73]

*Secularism*

Biblical morality, then, is under duress. So too is Biblical history, simultaneously attacked by postmoderns (as an oppressive metanarrative) *and* moderns (as archaic and unbelievable). Figurehead for the "New Atheists," Richard Dawkins, is quick to contend,

> The Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, the raising of Lazarus, even the Old Testament miracles, all are freely used for religious propaganda, and they are very effective with an audience of unsophisticates and children. Every one of these miracles amounts to a violation of the normal running of the natural world.[74]

Modernity is far from being a "spent force."[75] Modernity and postmodernity at times work in tandem, as both have been nurtured by widespread *secularism*—that is,

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[71] Ibid., 95-96, 101.

[72] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 323.

[73] Barna, *Real Teens*, 63, 90-92.

[74] Richard Dawkins, "Snake Oil and Holy Water," *Forbes.com*, 4 October 1999, http://www.forbes.com/asap/1999/1004/235_2.html (accessed 5 September 2008).

[75] White, *Postmodernism 101*, 158.

"indifference to or rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations."[76] Our understanding of postmodernity must therefore be further nuanced.

Perhaps *postmodernity* is better termed *hypermodernity*: "modernity against itself."[77] Continuities between modernity and postmodernity abound, and much of the supposed fruit of postmodernism—even *relativism*—derives directly from modern beliefs.[78] Einstein relativized space-time around the constant of the speed of light. Darwin effectively relativized morals through the "given" of evolutionary origins.[79] Despite claims that postmodernism affords renewed openness to God, even religion is relativized around the autonomous self which seeks freedom from all constraints. Pragmatism rules as individuals—lacking a grid upon which to evaluate ultimate truth claims—reduce their focus to "happiness now," maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. Spirituality serves a therapeutic end. This quest for "freedom" renders both modernity and postmodernity inherently "naturalistic," tempting us to "live as if God doesn't exist."[80] As Wells wryly observes, moderns constantly need to "be in motion" progressing toward greater freedom—"*post*-Puritan, *post*-Christian, and *post*-modern. . . . They are modern because they have to be post-modern."[81]

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[76] Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/secularism (accessed 5 September 2008).

[77] Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 27.

[78] Smith, *Postmodernism*, 20.

[79] Crystal L. Downing, *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith: Questioning Truth in Language, Philosophy and Art* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 186.

[80] Craig. M. Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World: Or, Why It's Tempting to Live As If God Doesn't Exist* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 17-18, 185-90.

[81] David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 60, 61.

Enlightenment rationality helped end Christianity's monopoly over western thought, with science seemingly supplanting the need for the "God hypothesis": "Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist."[82] Postmodernism has relativized all metaphysical beliefs, reducing them to matters of preference. Science—offering a big story akin to religious metanarratives—has, however, evaded the postmodern scalpel in the eyes of popular culture: technological success has secured its status.[83] Science alone is perceived to offer certainty, rendering competing claims implausible. As Lesslie Newbigin explains, "We are pluralist in respect of what we call beliefs but we are not pluralist in respect of what we call facts."[84]

Secularism sets in. When "religious" voices make absolute claims in the public square—such as "faith-based" schools affirming creationism and a definite code of sexual conduct—they are accused of "balkanizing the community" and constituting a threat to pluralistic peace that must be silenced.[85] Fearing ridicule, Christian students keep their beliefs to themselves.[86] The Gore-Tex-like wall separating church and state keeps the Bible out even as the "neutral" core dogmas of Secular Humanism—

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[82] Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: Norton, 1986), 6.

[83] As mentioned earlier, the modern dream of "science as Saviour" has faltered: knowledge has fragmented, and technology has enabled eugenics, nuclear warfare, genetic modification and so forth. In this regard, the amorality of technology has discredited science. Some youth raise concerns about science in regard to environmental protection, world peace, and the wastage of money on billion-dollar particle accelerators when many are dying of starvation. Nevertheless, skepticism toward and criticality of science was virtually absent from all the youth research, far less than the suspicion directed toward religious and political institutions. In general, science is considered by teens as an authoritative source of knowledge.

[84] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 27.

[85] Michael Bachelard, "Faith School Boom 'Creates Division'," *The Age*, 25 February 2008, http://www.theage.com.au/news/investigations/faith-school-boom-creates-division/2008/02/24/1203788146680.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap1 (accessed 25 February 2008).

[86] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 164.

naturalistic evolution, ethical relativism, legal positivism, and so forth—are allowed to permeate the classroom.[87]

Not surprisingly, then, Smith and Denton observed what they termed "residual positivism and empiricism" among the youth they interviewed: the only beliefs deserving absolute commitment were those perceived to possess "irrefutable material or logical evidence providing positive verification."[88] They observed relatively little religious switching, but noted that for most American adolescents, Christianity had degenerated into a pathetic caricature of itself—"moralistic therapeutic deism"—concerned with being nice to others while supported by a detached God who just wants you to have high self-esteem and be happy.[89] Religion was "not a big deal," operating "somewhere in the background"—"something you're 'supposed' to do," but "low on the priority list."[90] In Australia, this watering down of faith has progressed in the second generation of "unchurched" people to where almost half of Generation Y eschew any religious identification and are either uncertain of or disbelieve in the existence of God.[91] Over 20 percent of formerly Christian youth reject church affiliation before turning 25; most of these join the "No Religious Identification" (NRI) grouping which grew a staggering 27 percent between the 1996 and 2001 Census.[92] The largest part of these—roughly 30 percent of Millennials—are classified as "secular." Ambivalent toward or dismissive of

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[87] David A. Noebel, J. F. Baldwin, and Kevin Bywater, *Clergy in the Classroom: The Religion of Secular Humanism*, rev. 2d ed. (Manitou Springs, CO: Summit Press, 2001), 3-9, 141-44.

[88] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 181.

[89] Ibid., 162, 171.

[90] Ibid., 119, 129, 158, 161.

[91] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 82, 311.

[92] Ibid., 75-78.

religious beliefs, they focus purely on enjoyment in the here and now.[93] "Seculars" typically trust only what they can see, believing that science's evolutionary dictates and a simple lack of evidence have disproved God and the Bible.[94] In their experience, dead people stay dead and God does not speak. The taboo over discussing religion, however, has allowed naïve views to go unchallenged: "There's all these images of what God might be like, but there are no photographs," asserts a fourteen-year-old.[95]

As generations have slid from the church toward unbelief, so too has their attitude to the Bible. A growing number of atheists and agnostics no longer care about religious questions. In summary, "the secular strand in Australian society is flourishing."[96]

*Consumerism*

If the collective beliefs of adolescent outsiders could be boiled down to one worldview, it would be the undemanding "metanarrative of secular individualism." This system builds upon the cornerstone of personal freedom and choice, and seeks to erect an edifice of self-fulfillment and happiness.[97] Eighty percent of Australian youth believe it is okay to pick and choose your religious beliefs in a system that works for you.[98] It would seem that such views relate to unbridled *consumerism*. As Stackhouse explains, "To a consumerist culture, everything looks like goods or services to be bought as the

[93] Ibid., 203-207.

[94] Ibid., 115, 221-22.

[95] Ibid., 222.

[96] Ibid., 53-54, 227.

[97] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 55, 331-34.

[98] Ibid., 91.

sovereign (and perpetually manipulated) individual consumer decides."[99] Adolescents and advertising are inextricably linked: the word "teenager" was first introduced in 1945 as a demographic handle for marketing purposes.[100] Thus, we do well to consider this "symbiotic" and consumeristic relationship between youth and the media, all made possible by technological innovation.[101]

"Millennials are a consumer behemoth, riding atop a new youth economy of astounding scale and extravagance."[102] Those who "have" want more; those without see "having" as the path to happiness. There is much to be had: laptops, sneakers, iPods, cell-phones, brand-label clothing, and music. Possessions are supplemented by experiences: concerts, makeovers, holidays, *American Idol* auditions, extreme-sports, movies, parties, and so forth. Youth are confronted by seemingly limitless choice, each commodity offering the world and calling for attention. Consumerism easily distorts adolescent identity. "Consume-to-live" mutates into "live-to-consume."[103]

Take music, for instance, coming second only to "friends" as a top source of adolescent "peace and happiness."[104] Ninety percent of youth listen to music every day: it provides the soundtrack for their lives. Their favourite genre is hip-hop, with hard-hitting messages that purport to "keep it real"—giving voice to their own sense of alienation.[105] Youth drive the music market as they purchase nearly half of all albums;

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[99] Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 37.

[100] Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (New York: Avon Books, 1999), 8.

[101] Schultze and others, *Dancing*, 11.

[102] Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 265.

[103] Mueller, *Youth Culture*, 232.

[104] Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 20; Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 51-52, 175.

[105] Barna, *Real Teens*, 27-28; Hersch, *A Tribe Apart*, 85; Mueller, *Engaging*, 129-30.

accordingly, more radio stations are aimed at adolescents than any other demographic.[106] In the vacuum of secular culture, however, artists readily take on god-like importance in the eyes of impressionable teens looking for an advocate who understands. Television programs like *Music Is My Life* sing praise through adolescent testimony of how music "saved" them from the brink of despair, securing their life-long devotion—much to the delight (and plan) of media moguls.[107]

Adolescents are voracious media consumers. On average, "Generation M" ("M" for Media) multitask to cram nearly nine hours of media content—in descending order, comprised of music, television, videos, computer/Internet, and movies—into seven hours' exposure per day.[108] In 2005, roughly 30 percent of all movie admissions were sold to youth aged twelve to twenty.[109] Youth lead the uptake of technological innovation, from super-cooled computer systems to SMS.[110] In Australia, over 90 percent of youth aged sixteen to twenty-four possess a mobile phone.[111] Disturbingly, an increasing minority obsessively use their phone (over twenty-five times per day), meeting the criteria for behavioural addiction: "euphoria, tolerance, withdrawal and relapse."[112] Youth have similarly become reliant upon Internet networking programs such as

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[106] Santrock, *Adolescence*, 302.

[107] See http://www.muchmusic.com/tv/musicismylife/ (accessed 8 September 2008).

[108] Rideout and others, *Generation M*, 79-80.

[109] Mueller, *Youth Culture*, 110; Borgman, *Kumbuya*, 132-34.

[110] Elaine Lally, "Mods and Overclockers: Technology, Young People and Cultural Innovation," in *Ingenious*, ed. Butcher and Thomas, 161-73. Cooling liquid increases processing speeds for gamers.

[111] Shari P. Walsh, Katherine M. White, and Ross M. Young, "Over-connected? A Qualitative Exploration of the Relationship Between Australian Youth and Their Mobile Phones," *Journal of Adolescence* 31, no. 1 (February 2008): 78.

[112] Ibid., 88.

Facebook and MySpace, a type of "exhibitionism gone wild" in which their thoughts, pictures, and experiences are freely displayed and "blogged" for all to see.[113]

Come high school graduation, the average American has spent nearly 20,000 hours watching television—almost 7,000 more hours than those spent in the classroom—and has been exposed to roughly 5,000 advertisements and subliminal product placements per day.[114] Consumerism promises freedom. The pursuit of such a lifestyle, however, has driven more youth into part-time work to fund their purchases, alongside extended and expensive years studying in search of a higher-paying job. During this time they have been indoctrinated into "an ethos based on consumerism, conformity, and immediate gratification."[115] Their focus easily becomes fixed on the temporal, further reinforcing secularization.[116] Western culture as a whole is materialistic, yet youth have been particularly prone to its lure. Marketers have exploited adolescent insecurities, building loyalty toward their corporate sponsors who have effectively "pimped" youth to traffic their commercial wares.[117]

With time and money at their disposal, adolescents are a marketer's dream. In seeking to secure the $150 billion teen market, marketers both reflect back what youth desire, and tempt them toward the next "incarnation of 'cool.'"[118] The media depict idealized images of girls as thin and blemish-free, males as toned and tanned, aware that

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[113] Evan Hunter, "Not How They Used To Be: Shifting Trends Among College Students," *Youth Worker Journal* 24, no. 4 (March/April 2008): 14; Mackay, *Australia*, 128-29.

[114] Milner, *Freaks*, 159; Mueller, *Youth Culture*, 219.

[115] James E. Côté and Anton L. Allahar, *Generation on Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 147.

[116] Gay, *Way of the (Modern) World*, 146-58, 212-13.

[117] Schultze and others, *Dancing*, 11-12, 47, 59-61, 77, 178-82, 194-204.

[118] David Kupelian, *The Marketing of Evil How Radicals, Elitists, and Pseudo-Experts Sell Us Corruption Disguised as Freedom* (Nashville, TN: WND Books, 2005), 67.

nearly half of youth are unhappy with their appearance, and that two girls in one hundred are as thin as professional models.[119] As with sex, jealousy sells. "Cool hunters" are employed by corporations such as MTV, Sprite, and Disney to infiltrate teen cliques in search of the latest fad and to talk up their products through "buzz marketing".[120]

Unlimited choices collide with finite resources. Accordingly, youth practice both "selective consumption," and "selective listening."[121] Only those claims and images that appeal to the viewer are heeded. Failing this, the teen—who prefers interactive media and control—will simply switch channels, their short attention span having moved on.[122] In the competition for adolescent time and attention, it would seem that the Biblical story has been swamped by more entertaining voices.[123] Even when adolescent attention is captured, Biblical themes are often reduced by the media to simplistic images that "elicit excitement, fear, and titillation in exchange for profit," as in the case of angels, demons, and Hell in the script of *The Simpsons* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.[124]

It is no coincidence that many youth feel most "at home" while hanging out in shopping malls: all of life is reducible to "buying, consuming and spectating."[125] As our pluralistic society tends to relativize all religious authorities, youth are increasingly free

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[119] Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 13; Kathiann M. Kowalski, "Body Image: How Do You See Yourself," in *Adolescent Psychology*, ed. Stickle, 24-27.

[120] Douglass Rushkoff, "The Merchants of Cool," *Frontline*, produced by Rachel Dretzin and Barak Goodman (PBS: 2001), http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/ (accessed 8 September 2008).

[121] Bibby and Posterski, *Teen Trends*, 95; Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 65-70.

[122] Mackay, *Australia*, 124-26; Mark McCrindle and Mark Beard, *Seriously Cool: Marketing and Communicating with Diverse Generations* (Baulkham Hills, Australia: McCrindle Research, 2006), 40.

[123] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 270.

[124] Clark, *Angels*, 13.

[125] Mandy Thomas, "Hanging Out in Westfield Parramatta," in *Ingenious*, 102-123, ed. Butcher and Thomas, 114.

to pick and choose from disparate belief systems that serve their needs. Adolescent attitudes to religion have shifted "from obligation to consumption."[126] This is clearly seen in the rise and eclecticism of "New Age" spirituality in Australia, representing 17 percent of Generation Y as a whole and nearly forty percent of NRIs.[127] Even here, commitment levels are low: 30 percent of youth believe in phenomena such as reincarnation, though only 10 percent regularly engage in New Age practices—yoga, meditation, tarot cards—and fewer than 4 percent are seriously involved.[128] Hugh Mackay dubs today's youth "The Options Generation."[129] Faced with ever expanding choices, they are commitment-phobic, always waiting for the "new thing" to replace an obsolescent option in the hope that this will perfectly fulfill their desires.[130] For many—especially New Agers—this has meant bypassing the Bible's authority, and settling for a bricolage of beliefs of their own construction. Youth are often unaware, however, that their preferences may be harmful.[131]

After a twenty year longitudinal study of the association between religious beliefs and mental health, Rosemary Aird discovered that "belief in a spiritual or higher power other than God is positively associated with anxiety/depression, high levels of delusional ideation, and antisocial behaviour."[132] She noted the association between consumerism and do-it-yourself spirituality, warning that youth had simply swapped the "perceived

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[126] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 228.

[127] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 306-7.

[128] Ibid., 70, 187-88.

[129] Mackay, *Australia*, 171.

[130] Ibid., 109, 170-80.

[131] Bibby and Posterski, *Teen Trends*, 170-72.

[132] R. L. Aird, "Religion, Spirituality, and Mental Health and Social Behaviour: A Longitudinal Study" (Unpublished Ph.D. diss., School of Population Health, The University of Queensland, 2007), 205.

tyranny of institutionalised religion" for the "tyranny of self."[133] All options are *not* equal, after all.

*Fragmentation and Fragility*

As we have sketched this portrait of Millennials, the picture that emerges is one of *fragmentation*. Developmentally, adolescence is the period when teens should progress toward integrated and logical thought, redefined relationships with parents and friends, and a definite identity. Instead, our world produces cognitive compartmentalization, relational disconnection, and identity confusion. Most teens seem to function well most of the time, multi-tasking and adapting their behaviour as they interact with family, teachers, and friends. Yet, fragmentation has made adolescents particularly *fragile*. Parents wonder how their apparently well functioning and optimistic teen simultaneously struggles with self-harm or suicidal ideation: their child is a walking paradox.

Superficially, today's teens are *surprisingly upbeat*. Approximately 90 percent of Australian teens are moderately or highly satisfied with their lives.[134] Furthermore, only 7 and 11 percent agree that "I don't belong" and "My life has no purpose."[135] Mason, Singleton and Webber concluded that "there is no evidence from this study of a widespread plague of meaninglessness, social alienation or lack of social support."[136] Similarly, in both Canada and America, nearly 90 percent of teens describe themselves as

[133] Ibid., 220.

[134] Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 42.

[135] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 269. It is noteworthy, however, that happiness declines across the teen years, and that active Christians fare on average 5 to 10 percentage points better than nominal Christians, New Agers and Seculars.

[136] Ibid., 321.

happy with life and optimistic concerning the future.[137] Furthermore, Millennials are the first generation in over sixty years to reverse the slide on numerous behavioural indicators: compared to Generation X, they are less likely to have sex, get pregnant, use drugs, commit a violent crime, or attempt suicide.[138] Such rosy results seemingly justify researchers who declare that this "Sunshine Generation" will head a revolution to rebuild society.[139]

This celebration is premature, however, for today's teens are also *highly stressed*. Over 20 percent of adolescent outsiders feel negatively about themselves and report that they are "hurting deep inside and nothing seems to help."[140] The majority report that they regularly worry about diverse factors such as school grades, post-school direction, gang violence, abuse and rape, AIDS, environmental degradation, economic collapse, terrorism, and suicide.[141] Not surprisingly, then, stress and depression have skyrocketed. In 2000, 30 percent of college freshmen reported being "frequently overwhelmed," double that of 1985.[142] In America, 2007, 18 percent of students carried a weapon to school, 6 percent skipped school for fear of violence, 8 percent of students were raped, 15 percent seriously contemplated suicide, and 7 percent of students attempted suicide.[143]

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[137] Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 148; Barna, *Real Teens*, 46-48.

[138] Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 19, 35, 204, 210.

[139] Ibid., 66-67, 178.

[140] Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 9, 11, 63.

[141] Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 34-36, 42-43.

[142] Reed Larson, "The Future of Adolescence: Lengthening Ladders to Adulthood," in *Adolescent Psychology*, ed. Stickle, 14.

[143] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2007," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report: Surveillance Summaries* 57, no. SS-4 (6 June 2008): 7-12 http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss5704a1.htm (accessed 1 July 2008).

While some negative trends may be down,[144] harmful risk taking is still epidemic. In the month prior to this national survey, approximately 45 percent of teens drank alcohol (with 26 percent binge drinking); 35 percent had sex (40 percent of those were "unprotected," and 23 percent combined sex with alcohol or drug use); 30 percent rode in a car with a drunk driver; 20 percent smoked marijuana; and 5 percent used methamphetamines.[145] For females in particular, rates of eating disorders, self-harm—such as "cutting" to modulate stressful emotions—and rape are still on the rise.[146]

Many teens are unsure where to turn for help. Traditionally, the family has been the primary relational unit. With parents working longer hours across multiple jobs for financial security, many teens have become "latchkey kids"—they control their coming and going from the house, alone and unsupervised.[147] Relational disconnection is further exacerbated by rising divorce rates (splitting nearly 50 percent of marriages), greater age differences between parents and children, and shrinking family sizes.[148] Adolescents—possessing the raw machinery physically and cognitively for adulthood—are often told to "grow up," but are then infantilized by numerous societal restrictions such as limited work opportunities, capped wages, tough driving laws, and involuntary hospitalization.[149] Our culture offers teens no recognized rites of passage into adulthood, while ballooning credentialism keeps youth in school, out of work, and dependent on parents for longer. It

[144] Ibid., 33-36.

[145] Ibid., 13-26.

[146] Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia*, 157-58, 170, 184-85, 219-24, 230.

[147] Santrock, *Adolescence*, 196, 284.

[148] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 232-33.

[149] Epstein, *Case against Adolescence*, 9-11, 32-51.

is no surprise that many teens are bucking the system and turning to violent gangs in search of control.[150] These factors all push teens toward their peers for affirmation.[151]

Even in cliques, however, youth rarely feel the freedom to find, let alone be, "themselves." The school environment facilitates status-relations as students compete for a place in the pecking order.[152] Youth identity is further fragmented as they "edit" themselves before even their closest friends to protect from "peer shock": exclusion, betrayal, and disillusionment.[153] It would seem that "hooking up" is not simply experimentation to satisfy their physiological sex-drive, but for many is the search for a "temporary salve" to ease loneliness.[154]

Chap Clark, in reconciling the paradox of simultaneously upbeat and stressed teens, compares adolescents to

> the vaudevillian plate spinner who is skilled at getting several plates to spin at once and even making it look easy at times. But the performer and the audience both know that the plate spinner is one small event, decision, or experience away from having the entire show fall to pieces. . . . [Likewise] the energy it takes to keep them on their poles is taking its toll on the hearts and psyches of midadolescents.[155]

He suggests that adolescents often lack a whole sense of self, and as such "appear genuinely happy, carefree, and seemingly healthy," even as underneath they are fragmented and fragile. Adults, however, will know the truth only if they care enough to probe and persevere.[156]

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[150] Côté and Allahar, *Generation on Hold*, xv-xvii, 3-4, 68-69, 106-7.

[151] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 232-33.

[152] Milner, *Freaks*, 4-7, 22-25, 166.

[153] Hersch, *A Tribe Apart*, 213-14, 262; Elkind, *Grown Up*, 81-97.

[154] Clark, *Hurt*, 123.

[155] Ibid., 67.

[156] Ibid., 20, 42. See also Elkind, *All Grown Up*, 21 regarding unintegrated "patchwork selves."

*Spirituality and Religious Beliefs*

Having painted a particular portrait of youth set against the general cultural background, we now turn to consider adolescent attitudes to spirituality and religious beliefs. A number of attitudes have already been identified. For instance, contrary to popular postmodern expectations, less than 4 percent of Australian and American youth are "serious spiritual seekers" *outside* of historical religious traditions. Christianity is still, by far, the dominant religion in Australia (46 percent) and America (75 percent).[157] Eclecticism of belief is virtually restricted to New Age devotees; the majority of youth are following their parents' beliefs, or are sliding into either a disengaged and watered down version of traditional Christianity—"moralistic therapeutic deism"—or outright secularism. Furthermore, we noted that the majority of teens "lean toward an open and inclusive religious pluralism on the matter of religions' truth claims."[158] What, then, characterizes the spirituality and beliefs of Millennials?

*First*, most Millennials are *theists*. Eighty-four percent of American teens believe in God, 12 percent are unsure, while 3 percent are atheists.[159] Of the 16 percent of Millennials classified as NRIs (No Religious Identification), only 17 percent altogether disbelieve in God.[160] In Australia, 51 percent of Generation Y believe in God, 32 percent

[157] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 180, 301-7, 319, 331; Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 31, 79-82.

[158] Smith and Denton, 73.

[159] Ibid., 41. While two-thirds held to a Biblical conception of God, over 30 percent were deists, New Agers (ascribing to a generic higher power), or generally uncertain.

[160] Ibid., 31, 41.

are unsure, while 17 percent are atheists.[161] For NRIs (more so the "New Age" cohort), 82 percent either believe in God or a personal higher power.[162] This is significant for our purposes, as disbelief in God would seem to fatally undermine any claim of Scriptural "inspiration." The challenge is still pressing, however, as in Australia only half of youth confidently believe in the existence of Jesus, or that God communicates with humans.[163] Many youth are confused about who Jesus is, with increasing numbers in upper secondary school skeptical as to whether he lived at all.[164]

*Second*, most Millennials are *open* to the supernatural. Perhaps in reaction to our culture's overwhelming materialism, Generation Y are more interested in and accepting of non-material phenomena than Generation X.[165] Lynn Clark in her media study *From Angels to Aliens* noted the strong appeal of supernatural programs to teens—*Buffy*, *Smallville*, *Angel*, *Harry Potter*, *Matrix*, and so forth. She reflected on themes in these shows and concluded that "today's young people want to be a part of something that is bigger than themselves: they want a destiny, a calling, a challenge that is ultimately worthy of their time and energy."[166] Concerning definite Australian belief in particular phenomena, 39 percent of Generation Y believe in miracles (12 percent NRI), 56 percent in life after death (42 percent NRI), 44 percent in angels (24 percent NRI), and 35 percent in demons (23 percent NRI).[167] Definite belief in "New Age" phenomena was also

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[161] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 301.

[162] Ibid., 82-87.

[163] Ibid., 96.

[164] Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 146.

[165] Mackay, *Australia*, 14, 281-82.

[166] Clark, *Angels*, 69, 234.

[167] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 96.

significant, including fortune-telling (21 percent), communication with the dead (23 percent), astrology (25 percent), and reincarnation (31 percent).[168] In comparison, American youth are on average 15 percentage points *more* likely to believe in Biblical phenomena, yet 15 percentage points *less* likely to believe in paranormal phenomena than their Australian counterparts.[169] Interestingly, the American data reveals that anywhere from 28 percent (concerning fortune-tellers) to 57 percent (concerning life after death) of NRIs "maybe" believe in these phenomena.[170] Youth, then, are *open* to the supernatural.

*Third*, most Millennials are *confused* over their beliefs. Uncertainty over God's existence has climbed among Australians, from Boomers (26 percent), through Generation X (28 percent), to Generation Y (32 percent). Forty-four percent of Australian NRIs were uncertain as to God's existence.[171] The vast majority of youth express their difficulty at times in deciding what to believe. Exposed to so many alternatives, many are lost in an ever-expanding metaphysical mist.[172] Even though some youth were certain about their "yes" or "no," all researchers noted that the vast majority could not coherently communicate their own beliefs, let alone explain another's worldview.[173] This incoherence reflects our cultural taboo against serious religious discussion: if youth rarely talk about their beliefs, or experience the challenge of competing views in conversation, they are unlikely to be articulate when pressed. Furthermore, youth have more pressing things about which to talk: sport, school, music,

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[168] Ibid., 186.

[169] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 43.

[170] Ibid., 43.

[171] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 82, 84.

[172] Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 11, 126, 140, 149.

[173] For instance, Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 217, 344; Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 27, 262.

gossip, parties, sex, and so forth. Youth may be "open" to the spiritual dimension, but it is one of their lowest priorities.[174] At best, only 20 to 40 percent of Australian, American and Canadian youth highly valued "spirituality" or "religion."[175] There is, however, no lack of interest in pondering the tough questions: in Canada, for example, 70 percent of teens often or sometimes wondered about life after death, how to find happiness, the purpose of life, why we suffer, the world's origin, and if God exists.[176] This questioning is most prominent among nominal believers and New Agers, who drift into secularity if solid answers are not forthcoming.[177]

*Christianity*

As a Christian dialogues with teens, he or she must be cognizant of how teens perceive Christianity in general. Christians are stereotyped, for better or worse, creating expectations that modify judgments of both the apologist and the message they bring.[178] Based on nationally representative polling by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons in America, this is a significant cause for concern, for "Christianity has an image problem."[179] Sixteen- to twenty-nine-year-old outsiders perceive Christianity as antihomosexual (91 percent), judgmental (87 percent), and hypocritical (85 percent). The majority view Christians as "old-fashioned, too involved in politics, out of touch with

[174] Hughes, 134.

[175] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 70, 174, 260; Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 68, 266; Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 13-14.

[176] Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 119.

[177] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 167-71.

[178] Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics*, 191, 199.

[179] Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 11, 251-53.

reality, insensitive to others, boring, not accepting of other faiths, and confusing."[180] Roughly 60 percent think that Christianity makes little or no sense, and 70 percent believe it holds minimal relevance for their lives. Regrettably, many of those willing to reconsider perceive that Christians either have no answers, or that Christians are unwilling to participate in genuine dialogue, simply seeking to shout down the opposition.[181] Christians are identified primarily by what they oppose rather than affirm.[182] Even positive impressions of Christianity reflect misunderstanding: 80 percent of respondents approve Christianity for "teach[ing] the same basic idea as other religions."[183] In general, Jesus is still positively perceived. Christians, in contrast, appear positively "unChristian."

Nearly 20 percent of secular Millennials voice similar vitriol against Christians.[184] Such views are reinforced by media stereotypes—think Ned Flanders and fallen tele-evangelists—and misrepresentation from reducing complex metaphysical and moral discussions to thirty-second soundbites that are unlikely to advance any discussion in a highly politicized environment.[185] Teens often cluster by belief—only one of five best friends for nonreligious teens were believers—such that misperceptions remain uncorrected. Christian youth thereby appear to be an insular, judgmental clique.[186]

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[180] Ibid., 27.

[181] Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 28, 33.

[182] Ibid., 26.

[183] Ibid., 27.

[184] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 78-80; Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 104-5.

[185] For instance, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfrpdaTnSGw (accessed 20 October, 2008).

[186] Smith and Denton, 57.

Each of these attitudes must be taken into account. We will engage Millennials only to the degree we are comfortable with complexity, keen to listen, calm and caring in conversation, and prepared to explain before we proclaim. Nevertheless, this dour critique of contemporary Christianity likely overstates the problem for three reasons. First, justifications offered for rejecting the church may be rationalizations after the fact. Prominent media criticisms provide a ready excuse when, in reality, the vast majority simply stopped going to church—or never went in the first place—because they had higher priorities, lacked transport, or couldn't be bothered. Religion may not be a "big deal" to many, but few are openly hostile.[187] Second, most of these critiques are from the "culture wars" context in America. Australia and Canada are less politically and religiously polarized than America, and church attendance is usually chosen rather than forced. While only 40 percent of Australian youth attend church at all, 83 percent of these find their church "warm and welcoming."[188] Third, these critiques primarily represent Generation X. Faced with rampant consumerism, fractured individualism, and imminent terrorism, Generation Y are more open to religion than their predecessors.[189] It appears that high-demand religious groups with definite teaching and expectations—like Pentecostal and conservative Protestant churches—are able to sustain, or even gain, numbers, while less distinctive mainline churches lose nearly 30 percent of their youth to secularization.[190] In Canada, commitment to Christianity and weekly participation in religious groups have returned to 1980s levels after a fall in the 1990s.[191] In both Canada

[187] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 108-9, 117-18; Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 104-6, 116, 119.

[188] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 99, 102.

[189] Mackay, *Australia*, 11, 275-77.

[190] Mason and others, 135-37.

[191] Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 196-97.

and America, nearly half of Millennials are open to greater involvement.[192] Half of nonattending teens are positive about religion, and a further third are neutral.[193] Therefore, while there is genuine opposition to Christianity, it is unwarranted and unhelpful for Christians to adopt a defensive posture in dialogue with outsiders.

*The Bible*

The Bible is presently an embattled book, as it has been for two centuries or more. Media-savvy scholars announce damaging assessments. Bart Ehrman cautions that "there are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament."[194] The Jesus Seminar—cited nearly every Easter and Christmas by *Newsweek*, *Time*, and the like—claims that only 2 percent of Jesus' sayings are authentic; the remainder are either dismissed outright (82 percent) or are doubtful (18 percent).[195] Best-selling novels and their screen adaptations have esteemed (though fictional) historians accusing the church of burning earlier gospel accounts that emphasized Jesus' humanity over his divinity.[196] Such revisionism is then readily absorbed and espoused by an anti-authoritarian populace as Christianity's real history.[197] The church's internal disagreements over Scripture have not helped. Fundamentalists at times treat Genesis like a science textbook, while liberals tend to "safeguard" religious meaning by

[192] Ibid., 130; Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 37-38.

[193] Smith and Denton, 63, 104.

[194] Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 89-90.

[195] Gregory A. Boyd, *Jesus Under Siege* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1995), 88; Robert Walter Funk and Roy W. Hoover, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus: New Translation and Commentary* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

[196] Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, special illustrated edition (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 242.

[197] Kimball, *The Like Jesus*, 193.

mythologizing all historical assertions.[198] The "right" and "left" seemingly turn to the Scriptures only to support their own agenda. In turn, this casts suspicion on anyone quoting the Bible, whether concerning sexual ethics or foreign policy: "That's just your *interpretation*!"[199]

This culture has clearly shaped adolescent attitudes to the Bible. Even Christian teens in America are quick to state that "I'm not too religious." "I'm not a fanatic, I don't . . . go up and down the street waving a Bible," testifies a fourteen-year-old Texan.[200] NRIs commonly perceive Christians as on a moral hobbyhorse with the Bible acting as a megaphone to amplify judgment, especially against "gays."[201]

Secular NRIs simply discount the Bible's miracles—creation, healing, resurrection, and so forth—deferring to conventional scientific and historical accounts.[202] Upward of 60 percent of Australian youth disbelieve most or all of these Biblical stories.[203] Over 70 percent do not affirm that "The Bible is God's Word and all it says is true."[204] Not surprisingly, then, in Australia 73 percent of Millennials as a whole and 92 percent of NRIs never read the Bible.[205] In Canada, over twice as many youth read their horoscope (33 percent) as the Bible (13 percent) in a given week.[206] In general, American teens are far more respectful toward the Scriptures. According to Barna (2001), 90 percent

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[198] *CWFS, NFC*, 121-24.

[199] Ehrman, *Misquoting*, 217.

[200] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 141, 143.

[201] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 78-80, 214.

[202] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 81.

[203] Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 147-48.

[204] Ibid.

[205] Mason and others, 120.

[206] Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 124. Similarly for America, see Barna, *Real Teens*, 40.

consider the Bible a good source for moral guidance, 75 percent believe the miracles in the Bible, and 60 percent of teens affirm total Biblical accuracy. Nevertheless, with only one out of three teens regularly reading the Bible, few really know which morals, miracles and history they are affirming. Furthermore, 60 percent of teens believe that "all religious faiths teach equally valid truths."[207] Nearly 70 percent of American teens may claim to be "very familiar with all the major principles and teachings of the Christian faith."[208] The reality is, however, that today's youth are *Biblically illiterate*.

In 2005, the Gallup Organization conducted a nationally representative survey of American teens concerning Biblical knowledge.[209] Positively, the majority of American teens were familiar with Christian usage of "'Easter,' 'Adam and Eve,' 'Moses,' 'The Golden Rule,' and 'The Good Samaritan.'" Only one-third to one-half of teens could identify key sayings from the Sermon on the Mount, what Jesus did at Cana, and Paul's experience on the road to Damascus.[210] The majority of English teachers surveyed were concerned over decreasing adolescent Biblical literacy.[211] Less than 10 percent of public schools taught a Biblical unit, primarily because teachers feared claims of intolerance and legal repercussions.[212] Lacking even a rudimentary knowledge of Biblical facts, it is

[207] Barna, *Real Teens*, 125-27. More recent research by Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian* (2007), report that only 30 percent of sixteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds believe the Bible is "accurate in all the principles it teaches" (p. 24).

[208] Barna, 130.

[209] Marie Wachlin and Byron R. Johnson, *Bible Literacy Report: What Do American Teens Need to Know and What Do They Know?* (New York: Bible Literacy Project, 2005), 1-5, http://www.bibleliteracy.org/Secure/Documents/BibleLiteracyReport2005.pdf (accessed 27 May 2008).

[210] Ibid., 24-25.

[211] Ibid., 14.

[212] Ibid., 5-7, 16-18.

reasonable to conclude that adolescent understanding of the overall Biblical story, and the mission of Jesus therein, is even more limited and distorted.[213]

## CONCLUSION

We began this chapter with a sketch of western youth: pluralistic, skeptical, morally relativistic, consumeristic, and individualistic. Having now completed this sociological survey, a few caricatures have necessarily been softened: the "bogeyman" of the "spiritual-but-not-religious" seeker has been dismissed,[214] and the radical postmodern relativist was more accurately depicted as a confused pragmatist overwhelmed by too many choices with too little guidance.[215] A more nuanced portrait has emerged as we have painted within these lines: most youth follow their parents' religious convictions; we are decidedly not *post*-Christian (though we are *post*-Christendom); secular skepticism and scientism are prevalent; all hold *some* moral absolutes; and increasing numbers of youth are reacting to a superficial and solitary existence by pursuing meaning and community. Teens are often unsure of their beliefs, protective of their autonomy to decide, and hostile toward Biblical authority. Yet, many are still contemplating life's biggest questions, looking for answers that make sense of their existence and that work relationally. Many adolescents desire compassionate guidance and resources to deal with the numerous stresses of being a teen as they pursue an enjoyable (and resilient) life. Each teen and teen subculture varies in subtle though important ways from this general

[213] Australian and Canadian Biblical literacy, as less Christian countries, would be worse.

[214] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 266.

[215] Bibby and Posterski, *Teen Trends*, 170.

portrait, requiring further adjustments toward a tailored apologetic. Nevertheless, it is into this broad cultural context that we must "translate" the Bible.[216]

Having toured adolescent "Athens," we now turn in chapter four to consider three individuals reasoning in the marketplace: Schaeffer, Strobel, and Bell. In chapter five I will bring the aforementioned psychosocial observations to bear, evaluating and extending their approach for fruitful engagement with contemporary western adolescents. At that time, what we must *commend* and *challenge*, alongside the *barriers* to bypass and *bridges* to cross, will become explicit.

[216] Borgman, *Kumbuya*, 32.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# EXPLORATION OF THREE APOLOGETIC STRATEGIES COMMENDING THE BIBLE

## INTRODUCTION

We turn now from the psychosocial portrait of contemporary western adolescents to hear three voices commending the Bible in the marketplace of ideas. As was suggested at the outset of this thesis, *all* Christians are charged with giving an *apologia* for their hope within; this, in turn, requires that we each, in our own way, commend the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures to those around us. As we seek our own contextualized approach, we do well to learn from gifted *apologists*. For this purpose, Francis Schaeffer, Lee Strobel, and Rob Bell were chosen.

The central purpose of this chapter is to understand the essence of each apologist's approach in commending the Bible. Why do they believe their audience rejects the Bible? How do they defend the Scriptures against such objections? How do they advance the Bible and explain its relevance? Each approach will then be illustrated, allowing the reader to eavesdrop on the apologist's dialogue with an outsider. Each section begins, however, by introducing the apologist in their own context. Just as a teen's thinking is shaped by his or her social location, so too have the apologetics of Schaeffer, Strobel and Bell been shaped by their surroundings. As we will discover, it was perhaps during their "trying teens" that each was set on a unique trajectory for how

he would view Christianity as a whole, and the Bible in particular. We begin with Francis Schaeffer, the least contemporary of our three apologists.

## FRANCIS SCHAEFFER AND THE GOD WHO IS NOT SILENT

### *Introducing Francis Schaeffer*

Francis August Schaeffer (1912-1984), alongside C. S. Lewis, is regarded as one of the two most influential apologists of the twentieth century.[1] By the end of Schaeffer's life, he had written twenty-two books that sold many millions of copies, lectured at the most prestigious academic institutions, featured in a film series, and left behind the thriving ministry of L'Abri—a study centre for primarily university-age seekers with branches now in many countries including Sweden, Australia, and South Korea.[2]

Schaeffer's apologetical foundation was that "the infinite-personal God who exists has not been silent, but has spoken propositional truth in *all* that the Bible teaches."[3] This conviction was forged while Schaeffer studied at Westminster Theological Seminary in 1935. At the same time, the encroaching of modernity's naturalistic presuppositions precipitated a schism in the seminary; Schaeffer followed the fundamentalists who sought

[1] Scott R. Burson, and Jerry L. Walls, *C.S. Lewis & Francis Schaeffer: Lessons for a New Century from the Most Influential Apologists of Our Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 17; John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "By Their Books Ye Shall Know Them," *Christianity Today* 40, no. 10 (16 September 1996): 59.

[2] Burson and Walls, 42; James I. Packer, "Foreword," in *Reflections on Francis Schaeffer*, ed. Ronald W. Ruegsegger (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1986), 8; Corrie Cutrer, "L'Abri Turns 50: Francis Schaeffer's Ministry is Bigger than Ever," *Christianity Today* 49, no. 5 (May 2005): 22, 24.

[3] Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1984), 60.

to "quarantine the uninfected" from liberals with a low view of Scripture.[4] He held firm to orthodoxy, working as a Presbyterian pastor for ten years until moving as a missionary with his family to Switzerland in 1948. It was not until a spiritual crisis in the early 1950s that Schaeffer rethought his separatist approach to instead make "love the final apologetic."[5] Shortly thereafter, in 1955, he established L'Abri (French for "the shelter") as a small ministry with little agenda other than asking God to "demonstrate that he exists in our generation."[6] Hospitality—courtesy of his wife, Edith—was alloyed with Schaeffer's concern to offer "honest answers to honest questions."[7] This was perhaps most clearly seen in how he commended the Bible to "rebellious and disillusioned young people who lived outside the reach of the institutional church."[8] Through their eldest daughter, Priscilla, word spread among students that Schaeffer could make sense of their lives and offer real answers from Biblical foundations. He responded not so much to the key intellectuals of his day as to each student's understanding of these intellectuals;[9] as such, "Schaeffer was generally correct in the central thrust of his critique, but frequently in error on specific details."[10] Nevertheless, the responses sketched by this "crusading 'cartoonist'"—whilst perhaps too imprecise for the scholar—were able to "ram home a

[4] Burson and Walls, *Schaeffer*, 38.

[5] Ibid., 38-40, 43, 65; Michael S. Hamilton, "The Dissatisfaction of Francis Schaeffer," *Christianity Today* 41, no. 3 (3 March 1997): 24.

[6] Francis A. Schaeffer, *Introduction to Francis Schaeffer* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 36.

[7] *CWFS, TCTR*, 407.

[8] Bryan A. Follis, *Truth with Love: The Apologetics of Francis Schaeffer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 71.

[9] James Sire, Schaeffer's editor, shared this with Michael Maudlin, "Inside CT: Midwives of Francis Schaeffer," *Christianity Today* 41, no. 3 (3 March 1997): 6.

[10] James B. Hurley, "Schaeffer on Evangelicalism," in *Schaeffer*, ed. Ruegsegger, 273-74.

judgment" and bring many to faith.[11] As his fame spread, Schaeffer's answers crystallized and he found opportunity through public lectures to tell the world of "the God who is there."[12]

In many ways, Schaeffer's story hinges on an experience in his teens. Schaeffer was on the verge of rejecting Christianity for agnosticism or atheism. Before moving on, "intellectual honesty" compelled him to read the Bible cover to cover for the first time, comparing it to Greek philosophy. Over six months, he became convinced that while the philosophers asked all the right questions about metaphysics, morals, and epistemology, "the full answer which the Bible presented was alone sufficient to the problems I then knew, and sufficient in a very exciting way."[13]

*Schaeffer's Approach to Commending the Bible*

Schaeffer's approach to commending the Bible is perhaps best understood by unpacking his metaphor of the mutilated book:

> Imagine a book which has been mutilated, leaving just one inch of printed matter on each page. Although it would obviously be impossible to piece together and understand the book's story, yet few people would imagine that what was left had come together by chance. However, if the torn-off parts of each page were found in the attic and were added in the right places, then the story could be read and would make sense. The whole man would be relieved that the mystery of the book had been solved . . . . So it is with Christianity: the ripped pages remaining in the book correspond to the abnormal universe and the abnormal man we now have. The parts of the pages which are discovered correspond to the Scriptures which are God's

[11] Packer, "Foreword," in *Schaeffer*, ed. Ruegsegger, 10, 13.

[12] Ibid., 42-43.

[13] *CWFS, EFR*, 264.

> propositional communication to mankind, which not only touch "religious" truth but also the cosmos and history, which are open to verification.[14]

Every day our five senses force us to face "the universe and its form": shining stars, crashing cars, toxic mould, barking dogs, and so forth. Furthermore, we are confronted by the "'mannishness' of man": personality and our ability to verbalize; creativity and our appreciation of art; morality and our sense of justice; love and our need for significance and belonging; self-awareness, memory, and our fear of death.[15] Such phenomena are seemingly part of a larger "story." They raise three sets of big questions that troubled Schaeffer as a teen. *Metaphysically*, why does a universe exist at all, let alone one replete with structure, order and complexity? *Morally*, why do I have "moral motions" yet fall so far short of meeting them?[16] *Epistemologically*, how can a finite being know anything with certainty, or integrate myriad particular experiences into universal laws?[17] True and sufficient answers to these questions solve the mystery of the mutilated book, making sense of the story.

We cannot live without some sort of answers to these "big questions"; as such, we each have a "world-view."[18] Our worldview is built upon a number of *presuppositions*, that is, consciously or unconsciously held beliefs that affect our subsequent reasoning, much as glasses we wear affect the way we see the world.[19] Schaeffer suggests that, ideally, "presuppositions should be *chosen* after a careful consideration of what world-

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[14] *CWFS, GWIT*, 119-20.

[15] *CWFS, WHHR*, 357.

[16] *CWFS, HIT*, 277-79.

[17] Ibid., 295.

[18] Ibid, 279-80; *CWFS, WHHR*, 360.

[19] *CWFS, GWIT*, 200.

view is true," rather than *caught* like measles from family and society.[20] How, though, do we know which presuppositions and subsequent world-view are true? Put simply, "the theory must be noncontradictory and must give an answer to the phenomenon in question. [Also, we] must be able to live consistently with our theory."[21] That is, just as evidence may confirm or disconfirm a scientific hypothesis, the "universe and its form" and the "mannishness of man" *verify* whether or not our presuppositions adequately answer the big questions.[22]

Like a jigsaw piece to a puzzle, or a key to a lock, our propositions must cohere internally and then correspond to these two phenomena.[23] Schaeffer contends that the *only* presuppositions verifiable in this way and able to make sense of the "mutilated book" of human existence—like matching pages found in the attic—are those found in the Bible. "God gives the pages, and thus God gives the answers," for "the infinite-personal God is there, but also he is not silent; that changes the whole world."[24] This

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[20] *CWFS*, *HSWTL*, 84; emphasis mine.

[21] *CWFS*, *GWIT*, 121.

[22] Schaeffer is thus a *presuppositionalist* in the sense of exposing and addressing underlying beliefs (see Morris). Yet, unlike his former teacher, Cornelius Van Til—for whom Biblical presuppositions were axiomatic—Schaeffer invites the other to consider all presuppositions, including his own, as mere *hypotheses* rather than beliefs taken on blind faith. This temporary suspension of conviction is purely for the purposes of verifying or disconfirming these presuppositions (see Edgar). In this sense, Schaeffer is a *verificationist* (see Lewis and Follis). Additionally, Schaeffer's apologetic is *classical* in that he both reasons from God's existence to the reasonableness of revelation, and appeals to "antithesis" (the law of non-contradiction) as the base for all reasoning, thus forming common ground with his interlocutor (see Smith). Thomas V. Morris, *Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics: A Critique* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), 17-22, 63, 77; William Edgar, "Two Christian Warriors: Cornelius Van Til and Francis A. Schaeffer Compared," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 75; Gordon R. Lewis, "Schaeffer's Apologetic Method," in *Schaeffer*, ed. Ruegsegger, 71, 78-79; Follis, *Schaeffer*, 108-15; Smith, *Postmodernism*, 27-28.

[23] *CWFS*, *WHHR*, 357-59.

[24] Ibid., 383; *CWFS*, *HIT*, 276.

appeal to verification enabled Schaeffer to challenge skeptical outsiders to "consider the biblical system and its truth without an appeal to blind authority."[25]

Schaeffer believed that two main alternatives rivaled the Biblical world-view. *Eastern pantheism* held that all is God, and the world is an illusion. *Western materialism* held that all is matter, reducing humanity to a conditioned machine. Both systems were fundamentally *impersonal*.[26] Schaeffer was convinced that neither system corresponded with the universe and the uniqueness of humanity; to consistently live such beliefs would result in "irrationality, amorality and total meaninglessness."[27] Nevertheless, impersonal presuppositions—for instance, "the uniformity of natural causes in a closed system" [28]—rendered implausible the notion of a personal God propositionally communicating to humans, as we have in the Bible. Schaeffer responded in three steps as outlined below and illustrated in the following section.

(1) *Expose the "point of tension" in the other's presuppositions.* Through insightful questioning in the course of conversation, Schaeffer would seek out a "point of tension"—that is, where his interlocutor has not consistently lived out the logic of her presuppositions.[29] Schaeffer would expose her inconsistency to "the blows of the real world, both internal and external," a process called "taking the roof off."[30]

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[25] *CWFS, EFR*, 264.

[26] *CWFS, WHHR*, 370.

[27] Burson and Walls, *Schaeffer*, 152.

[28] *CWFS, EFR*, 230; *CWFS, HIT*, 324-25.

[29] *CWFS, GWIT*, 131-32, 135.

[30] Ibid., 139-41.

(2) *Contrast impersonal presuppositions with realistic Biblical presuppositions.* Lacking a sufficient foundation for her core concerns, Schaeffer would invite her to try on Biblical presuppositions as an alternative hypothesis.[31] In Schaeffer's estimation, *only* this answer "fits" what she knows of the universe and herself.[32]

(3) *Affirm the rationality of revelation.* Based upon the presupposition of "the uniformity of natural causes in a *limited* system, open to reordering by God and by man," revelation (and miracles) *are* plausible. Therefore, she is unreasonable to reject revelation *a priori*, especially when only this foundation adequately answers humanity's fundamental questions. Furthermore, it is rational to *expect* that a good, infinite, and personal God would communicate to us necessary answers to our existence.[33]

*Illustrating Schaeffer's Approach*

To fairly consider the following compressed illustrations of Schaeffer's apologetic dialogues, we must keep in mind both his tears of compassion over the lostness of youth, and his common saying: "If I only have one hour to spend with someone, I will spend the first fifty-five minutes listening, and the final five providing an answer."[34] Anything less leads to misrepresentation.[35]

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[31] *CWFS, HIT*, 349.

[32] Ibid, 288.

[33] *CWFS, HIT*, 324-25, 345-49.

[34] Quoted by Burson and Walls, *Schaeffer*, 47-48.

[35] Follis, *Schaeffer*, 59.

The most vivid example of Schaeffer *exposing the point of tension in another's presuppositions* comes from a group conversation at Cambridge. Schaeffer queried an antagonistic student who was Sikh by heritage, Hindu by religion:

> "Am I not correct in saying that on the basis of your system, cruelty and non cruelty are ultimately equal, that there is no intrinsic difference between them?" He agreed. . . . The student in whose room we met, who had clearly understood the implications of what the Sikh had admitted, picked up his kettle of boiling water . . . and stood with it steaming over the Indian's head. The man looked up and asked him what he was doing, and he said with a cold yet gentle finality, "There is no difference between cruelty and noncruelty." Thereupon the Hindu walked out into the night.[36]

Schaeffer exposed his point of tension: the Hindu did not live consistently with his relativistic presuppositions. We are not told what became of the Hindu. By clearing away a smokescreen and silencing his pride, Schaeffer was hopeful that this humbled Indian would further humble himself to hear Biblical presuppositions.[37]

Schaeffer's pithy claims—even when unsubstantiated—were sufficient to *contrast another's impersonal presuppositions with Biblical foundations*.[38] More so than Bible-believing Christians, skeptics require a mystical and irrational "leap of faith" from their impersonal and naturalistic presuppositions to existential meaning.[39] A lover cannot be sure the object of his affection even exists, or that her affection in return is more than a conditioned response.[40] A scientist cannot explain why the categories in her mind

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[36] *CWFS, GWIT*, 110.

[37] The intensity of Schaeffer's challenge corresponded with his interlocutor's antagonism.

[38] Morris, *Schaeffer's Apologetics*, 66-68.

[39] *CWFS, GWIT*, 43, 53.

[40] Ibid., 24, 68, 105.

correspond to observations.[41] An activist cannot ground his decision to protect rather than purge an oppressed racial minority.[42] A teen defends her right to choose an image, even as materialism renders choice and personality an illusion.[43] In a closed system, "what *is*, is right": how then can we condemn a man—rendered stronger by nature—for using a weaker woman for pleasure?[44] Schaeffer draws upon arguably the most contentious portion in the Bible, Genesis 1-11, in answering our deepest questions and grounding our fundamental moral motions:

> In these chapters we learn of the historic, space-time creation out of nothing; the creation of man in God's image; a real, historic, space-time, moral Fall; and the understanding of the present abnormality in the divisions that exist between God and man, man and himself, man and man, man and nature, and nature and nature. These chapters also tell us the flow of the promise God made from the beginning concerning the solution to these divisions. This is what Genesis 1-11 gives us, and it is climactic. Naturalistic, rationalistic history only sees the results.[45]

From these presuppositions we are justified in resisting racism, practicing science, protecting the environment, alleviating poverty, admiring art, and defending human rights.[46] In light of this contrast, "the superior attitude [of materialists] toward Christianity—as if Christianity had all the problems and humanism had all the answers—is quite unjustified."[47] The materialist may describe the mysteries of "mass, energy, and motion," but science can never speak to the unseen realities at the heart of our being:

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[41] *CWFS, HIT*, 329.

[42] *CWFS, BFD*, 365-67.

[43] Ibid., 382.

[44] *CWFS, EFR*, 231-32.

[45] *CWFS, GST*, 114.

[46] *CWFS, NFC*, 137-139; *PDM*, 30-33, 47; *HSWTL*, 152-53; *AB*, 393-99; *WHHR*, 290, 385-87, 405.

[47] *CWFS, WHHR*, 356.

personality, morality, significance, belonging, origins, destiny, freedom, and love. The Bible reveals essential truths the scientist could never discover.[48]

After demonstrating the superiority of Biblical presuppositions, Schaeffer would *affirm the rationality of revelation* by stringing together a series of "*if* . . . , *then* . . . " hypotheticals, challenging the interlocutor to find any contradiction.

> So if a personal God has made us to be language communicators—and that is obviously what man is—why then should it be surprising to think of Him speaking to Paul in Hebrew on the Damascus road? Why should it be a surprise? . . . Equally, if the personal God is a good God, why should it be surprising, in communicating to man in a verbalized, propositional, factual way, that He should tell us the true truth in all areas concerning which he communicates?[49]

Schaeffer develops a metaphor to illustrate that trusting in the Bible is not a leap of faith as naturalists assert.[50] Suppose that while climbing high in the Alps you become lost in the fog and trapped on a ledge. Ten more feet down, out of reach, you could avoid freezing to death overnight. Were you to simply drop off the ledge without more information—potentially to your death—this would be a leap of faith. But suppose a voice in the fog calls out, claiming to be an experienced guide who is aware of your exact position on the ledge by the sound of your voice. He assures you the drop over the ledge is both safe and necessary. You may ask questions until you are satisfied he truly has the answer, all before choosing to drop. This second scenario parallels trust in the God who has spoken sufficient answers revealing what we could not know through our own resources. We are "invited to ask adequate and sufficient questions and then believe Him." This is reasonable faith.

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[48] *CWFS, DC*, 288-92.

[49] *CWFS, HIT*, 327.

[50] *CWFS, HIT*, 351-52.

In both of these illustrations, Schaeffer's logic was watertight, though not necessarily compelling: the *possibility* and *actuality* of trustworthy revelation are separate issues, no matter how many answers one's system affords.[51] Furthermore, Schaeffer's reasoning was less effective in adjudicating between competing authorities, each claiming to guide us through the metaphysical haze: the Bible, Qur'an, Bhagavad Gita, Book of Mormon, *Origin of the Species*, and so forth.[52] These detailed problems lay behind the story of our next apologist, Lee Strobel.

## LEE STROBEL AND THE CASE FOR CHRIST

### *Introducing Lee Strobel*

Lee Strobel describes his life as "the story of one modern skeptic's journey to faith."[53] Born in 1952, Strobel was always the "skeptical sort"; his childhood admiration of "aggressive and tough-minded" journalism propelled him toward an award-winning career as a legal reporter with *The Chicago Tribune*.[54] Strobel's parents pushed him through Sunday school, but his persistent questions were neither appreciated nor

[51] Morris, *Schaeffer's Apologetics*, 60.

[52] Morris, *Schaeffer's Apologetics*, 32. His approach did, however, undermine *a priori* rejection of the Bible by atheists, agnostics, pantheists, and deists.

[53] Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry & Mary: How to Reach Friends and Family Who Avoid God and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 13.

[54] Ibid., 18.

answered: "While many of the other students seemed to automatically accept the truth of the Bible, I needed reasons for trusting it."[55]

This was the first of three experiences paving Strobel's path to atheism.[56] The second and most decisive experience was as a fourteen-year-old student in biology class.[57] In Strobel's thinking, evolution's undirected process "put God out of a job."[58] Furthermore, this reduced the Bible's account of origins to mythology, casting doubt over the Scriptures as a whole:[59] "In short, you don't need the Bible if you've got *The Origin of Species*."[60]

The final experience cementing Strobel's atheism was a college course on "the historical Jesus."[61] The New Testament, and the resurrection accounts therein, was discredited as "irreparably flawed" and distorted after the fact, merely a case of "legend and wishful thinking."[62] Strobel had never thoroughly examined the Bible.

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[55] Lee Strobel, *The Case for a Creator: A Journalist Investigates Scientific Evidence That Points toward God* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2004), 18-19.

[56] Lee Strobel, "The Case for a Creator," interview by Greg Koukl, 57 min., *Stand to Reason Weekly Podcast*, 1 May 2005, http://digg.com/podcasts/Stand_to_Reason_Weekly_Podcast/296639 (accessed 1 July 2008).

[57] Strobel, *Creator*, 19.

[58] Ibid., 23.

[59] Strobel with Vogel, *Christ*, 10.

[60] Strobel, *Creator*, 24.

[61] Lee Strobel, "Is the Bible Reliable as a Historical Document?" interview by Jerry Jenkins (n.d.), 7:29 min, http://www.leestrobel.com/videoserver/video.php?clip=strobelT1142 (accessed 30 June 2008).

[62] Lee Strobel, *God's Outrageous Claims: Discover What They Mean For You* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2005), 210.

Nevertheless, rejecting its contents freed him to rejects its moral code.[63] The evidence was sufficient to convince him that the Biblical case for Christ was closed.[64]

Strobel mocked all things spiritual until his wife, Leslie, came to Christ in 1979—the same year Strobel completed his masters degree at Yale Law School. Her transformation softened Strobel to attend church, where he accepted a challenge to re-open the case for Christ.[65] Thus began a two-year investigation. Suspending his prejudice to the best of his ability, Strobel made a commitment to "go wherever the answers would take me."[66] He used his legal training to "cross-examine" arguments offered by respected historians—both for and against Christianity; his hard-edged journalistic style also helped with "ferreting out facts."[67] In November, 1981, he reached a verdict: "Christianity had not been absolutely proven. . . . But when I weighed the facts, I concluded that the historical evidence clearly supports the claims of Christ beyond any reasonable doubt."[68]

Strobel committed himself to following Christ. Since that time he has become a *New York Times* best-selling author of nearly twenty books. He has also pastored at two mega-churches, hosted a cable-television show, "Faith Under Fire," and now runs a video-based apologetics ministry and web-site under the slogan: "Investigating Faith—

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[63] Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith: A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Objections to Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 179.

[64] Strobel, *Christ*, 13.

[65] Strobel, *Harry*, 28-30.

[66] Strobel, *Christ*, 14; Strobel, *Creator*, 29.

[67] Strobel, *Harry*, 29.

[68] Ibid., 41.

Find Answers to Your Faith Questions."[69] Strobel's *investigative journey* from atheism to faith functions as a template for his apologetic approach to commending the Bible.

*Strobel's Approach to Commending the Bible*

Strobel's essential approach is best seen in his first apologetic book, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (1998). The book as a whole, and each chapter therein, begins with a story from his career as a hard-nosed legal editor. Each story highlights the importance of a particular type of "evidence" in a trial. Each story makes the point that initial appearances and superficial examination of the evidence, such as presented in a prosecutor's opening speech, do not decide a case: "Evidence can be aligned to point in more than one direction. . . . The key questions were these: *Had the collection of evidence really been thorough?* And *which explanation best fit the totality of the facts?*"[70] Strobel regularly offers insight into his own skeptical mindset: "When I changed those lenses—trading my biases for an attempt at objectivity—I saw the case in a whole new light. Finally I allowed the evidence to lead me to the truth, regardless of whether it fit my original presuppositions."[71] He also directly engages his readers: perhaps they, too, have superficially examined the evidence and come to a conclusion about Christ. However,

> if you were to dig deeper—to confront your preconceptions and systematically seek out proof—what would you find? That's what this book is about. In effect, I'm going to retrace and expand upon the spiritual journey I took for nearly two years. *I'll take you along* as I interview thirteen leading scholars and authorities who have

[69] See http://www.leestrobel.com/Bio.php (accessed 3 October 2008).

[70] Strobel, *Christ*, 12; emphasis in original.

[71] Ibid., 13.

> impeccable academic credentials. . . . In this quest for truth, I've used my experience as a legal affairs journalist to look at numerous categories of proof—eyewitness evidence, documentary evidence, corroborating evidence, rebuttal evidence, scientific evidence, psychological evidence, circumstantial evidence, and, yes, even fingerprint evidence . . . . These are the same classifications that you'd encounter in a courtroom. And maybe taking a legal perspective is the best way to envision this process—*with you in the role of a juror*.[72]

Strobel asks his readers to "pledge" to be "open-minded and fair"—willing to follow the evidence to the "best possible conclusion."[73] Their verdict is crucial: "If my conclusion in the case for Christ is correct, your future and eternity hinge on how you respond to Christ."[74] Strobel's obligation is to play proxy for the skeptic, "reading all sides of each topic and posing the toughest objections that have been raised."[75] He must thoroughly cross-examine evidence supplied by expert witnesses, raising challenges from "the current theories of atheists and liberal professors."[76]

In the body of the book, Strobel seeks to establish the historical trustworthiness of the Scriptures[77]—independent of inspiration—to then make the case for Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.[78] In fulfilling numerous Biblical prophecies, Jesus established his identity as the promised Messiah, the Son of God.[79] In turn, *if* Jesus is God incarnate,

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[72] Ibid., 14-15; emphasis mine.

[73] Ibid. 15.

[74] Ibid., 271.

[75] Strobel, *Creator*, 28.

[76] Strobel, *Christ*, 266.

[77] See Part 1 of Strobel, *Christ*, "Examining the Record," 19-130.

[78] See Part 2 of Strobel, *Christ*, "Analyzing Jesus," 131-190, and Part 3 "Researching the Resurrection," 191-258.

[79] Cf. Ps. 22; Isa. 52:13-53:12; Luke 24:25-27; John 5:39-40; Acts 2:22-32.

and given Jesus' affirmation of Scriptural inspiration, *then* we should rightly consider the Bible as inspired and authoritative for our lives.[80]

In each chapter, then, Strobel introduces us to the Christian scholar he will interview—his narrative style gives you the sense of being there with him in a fast-paced investigation, eavesdropping on a lively conversation. Each cross-examination revolves around a central question: "Can the biographies of Jesus be trusted?" "Do the biographies of Jesus stand up to scrutiny?" "Were Jesus' biographies reliably preserved for us?" "Is there credible evidence for Jesus outside his biographies?" "Does archaeology confirm or contradict Jesus' biographies?" "Did Jesus—and Jesus alone—match the identity of the Messiah?" and so forth.[81] He then proceeds to question each expert's case, pressing on weaker points, challenging assertions, and seeking solid answers. Each interview closes with Strobel asking the experts what difference this evidence makes in their lives. They typically share how the evidence has strengthened their faith in God; as they have followed Jesus, their lives have been transformed. Strobel concludes with a list of recommended reading under the heading, "For Further Evidence."[82]

Although the facts are offered by others, they constitute Strobel's own argument: he selects the experts to interview, directs their testimony with pointed questions, and then affirms this "overwhelming avalanche of evidence" as having compelled his verdict that Jesus is "the one and only Son of God."[83] In Strobel's concluding chapter, then, he

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[80] Cf. Matt. 5:17-19; 26:54; Mark 12:36; Luke 24:44; John 4:46-47; 10:35; 14:26; 16:13.

[81] Strobel, *Christ*, 19, 38, 55, 73, 92, 171.

[82] Ibid., 37.

[83] Ibid., 266. Cf. Strobel, *Harry*, 28-43.

shares how his skepticism had "buckled under the weight of historical truth"—his belief in Christ, to whom the Bible points, was "a decision compelled by the facts."[84] He again turns to the reader to establish the relevance of his verdict: "If Jesus is the Son of God, his teachings are more than just good ideas from a wise teacher; they are divine insights on which I can confidently build my life."[85] While Strobel was convinced of both Christ's and the Bible's trustworthiness, he emphasizes that

> in the end the verdict is yours and yours alone. . . . Maybe questions still linger for you. . . . I trust that the amount of information reported in these pages will at least have convinced you that it's reasonable—in fact, imperative—to continue your investigation.[86]

Undecided readers are encouraged to define their objections, seek our further evidence, study the Bible for themselves, and ask this God of whose existence they are unsure to guide them to the truth.[87]

Each of Strobel's apologetic books and DVDs follows a similar format: playing "devil's advocate," he tests arguments and evidence in an engaging narrative, thereby crossing the "chasm separating our popular discourse from our expert knowledge."[88] He never claims to be an authority; he is merely someone committed to uncovering the truth to his own satisfaction on important issues, then inviting us along for the journey.[89]

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[84] Strobel, *Christ*, 266.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Ibid., 270.

[87] Ibid., 270-71.

[88] Michael Maudlin, "Inside CT: A Six-Pack of Strobels," *Christianity Today* 43, no. 2 (8 February 1999): 5.

[89] Strobel, *Christ*, 53.

*Illustrating Strobel's Approach*

Having considered Strobel's approach in general, we will now explore some specific examples that commend the historical trustworthiness of the Biblical accounts. We begin with Strobel's broadest claims.

Strobel's *Faith Under Fire* television show hosted a debate between the founding publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, Michael Shermer, and New Testament scholar Ben Witherington III. The topic was "Is the Bible Bogus?" In the associated *Participant's Guide*, Strobel concludes by characteristically identifying with skeptics, sharing his own findings, and challenging them to come to their own verdict:

> For years, I was a skeptic about the Bible . . . . I had heard enough snippets of criticism through the years to poison my view of the book. It wasn't until I analyzed the Bible thoroughly that I concluded it must have a divine origin. . . . The Bible is based on key eyewitness accounts; it has been repeatedly corroborated by archaeological discoveries; it has specific predictions that were made hundreds of years in advance and that were literally fulfilled against all mathematical odds; and it contains credible and well-documented miracles that confirm its message. The New Testament's historical reliability . . . is especially well-established, and the unprecedented proliferation of ancient manuscripts provides confidence that the Bible was accurately transmitted to us over the centuries. So let me ask this: Do you know of any other book that matches its credentials?[90]

Each of these claims rest upon expert witness. We find a good example of Strobel's interrogative cross-examination in his interview of New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg. Strobel quotes a contemporary scholar who dismisses the gospel accounts as late and corrupted by mythical elements. He directly challenges Blomberg to offer his best evidence against this seemingly reasonable hypothesis.[91] In response, Blomberg uses Luke-Acts—which closes abruptly before Paul's death or Jerusalem's destruction—

[90] Lee Strobel and Garry Poole, *Faith Under Fire 2: Faith and Facts Participants Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 21.

[91] Strobel, *Christ*, 32-33.

to set an outside date of A.D. 62. Luke incorporates the gospel of Mark, bringing Mark back to within thirty years of Jesus' death.[92] Strobel pushes further, seeking the earliest material affirming Jesus' resurrection. Blomberg then highlights Paul's technical language in passing on an oral creed (1 Corinthians 15:3-7) he most likely received at some point between his conversion (A.D. 32) and his first meeting with the disciples in Jerusalem (A.D. 35), placing Christian belief in the resurrection to within five years of Jesus' death.[93] Strobel concedes the point, but then switches to testing the eyewitness evidence using legal criteria. For instance, Were the disciples *able* to accurately remember and record what happened? He queries Blomberg:

> You've probably played the game of telephone yourself: one child whispers something into another child's ear—for instance, "You're my best friend"—and this gets whispered to others around a big circle until at the end it comes out grossly distorted—perhaps, "You're a brutish fiend."
>
> "Let's be candid," I said to Blomberg. "Isn't this a good analogy for what probably happened to the oral tradition about Jesus?"[94]

Blomberg stands firm. As these claims were made in the presence of a knowing community comprised of both believers and hostile detractors, "the community would constantly be monitoring what was said and intervening to make corrections along the way. That would preserve the integrity of the message."[95]

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[92] Ibid., 33-34.

[93] Ibid., 34-36. Cf. Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20.

[94] Ibid., 44.

[95] Ibid. Cf. Acts 2:22-32. In the student edition of *The Case for Christ*, Strobel uses simple diagrams and stories to illustrate this modified telephone game and the abundance of Biblical manuscripts compared with other ancient sources: "If I heard 29 kids at the end of 30 telephone games all saying, 'Jesus is Lord,' I'd figure that's what the original statement was. When 24,000 New Testament manuscripts say virtually the same thing, it makes sense that they are accurate copies of the original" (pp. 61-62).

Under Strobel's scrutiny, each expert contributes a piece of the jigsaw puzzle; when the pieces of evidence are combined, we are left with trustworthy Scriptures depicting Jesus as the unique Son of God.[96] From Bruce Metzger we discover a "mountain of manuscripts" allowing us to reconstruct the original text with nearly total certainty.[97] From Edwin Yamauchi we discover that "we have better historical documentation for Jesus than for the founder of any other ancient religion":[98] hostile witnesses—Josephus, Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Thallus, Phlegon, and so forth—substantially corroborate Jesus' life, death, and claimed resurrection from the outset.[99] From John McRay we find that archaeological digs have vindicated many of the New Testament's details—often overturning academic skepticism, such as in the case of Luke's use of "politarchs" for city officials (Acts 17:6), and John's description of the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-15).[100] Gregory Boyd's expert testimony established that "mystery religions"—such as Mithraism—have likely borrowed from Biblical claims about the historical figure of Jesus to shore up their mythical gods.[101] Finally, Strobel cross-examines Louis Lapides, a Messianic Jew, to challenge whether Jesus truly fulfilled dozens of Biblical prophecies written hundreds of years before his birth.[102] The verdict:

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[96] Strobel, *Harry*, 41.

[97] Strobel, *Christ*, 60-65.

[98] Strobel, *Christ*, 86.

[99] Ibid., 77-88.

[100] Ibid., 97-100.

[101] Ibid., 119-21.

[102] For instance, Ps. 22; Isa. 53:3-9.

beyond coincidence, fabricated claims, or intentional maneuvering by Jesus, these fulfilled prophecies suggest both that the Bible is inspired, and Jesus is Lord.[103]

Strobel's other investigations further commend the trustworthiness of the Bible. In *The Case for a Creator* (2004), Strobel concludes that "Design"—akin to God's creative activity as described in the Bible—more so than Darwinism, "best accounted for the most current data of science."[104] In *Exploring the Da Vinci Code,* Scot McKnight and Paul Maier outline common criteria for assessing all historical claims, thereby dispatching Gnostic gospels as inferior accounts relative to Biblical testimony.[105] Finally, in *The Case for the Real Jesus,* Strobel confronts Paul Copan with the challenge of historical relativism: "history is . . . interpretive, and thus we can't be absolutely sure what happened in the past"; additionally, "certainty leads to oppression."[106] In response, Copan acknowledges our limitations and the perspectival nature of all knowledge, including historical assertion. Nevertheless, "some explanations do a much better job of accounting for the historical facts—they're more comprehensive, they're less ad hoc, they're better supported. . . . We have excellent historical data concerning Jesus."[107] Furthermore, truth does not *necessarily* oppress: "Jesus actually came to the marginalized."[108]

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[103] Ibid., 178-86. Cf. Luke 24:44.

[104] Strobel, *Creator,* 284-85.

[105] Lee Strobel and Garry Poole, *Exploring the Da Vinci Code* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 16-17, 34-40, 49-52.

[106] Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus: A Journalist Investigates Current Attacks on the Identity of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2007), 233, 243.

[107] Ibid., 244.

[108] Ibid., 250.

In summary, Strobel pursues a multi-faceted evidential apologetic in commending the Bible. For Schaeffer, the Bible is a system of God-breathed answers. For Strobel, the Bible is a trustworthy historical artifact pointing to Christ. Neither apologetic, however, draws us into the Biblical *story*. For this, we turn to our final apologist.

## ROB BELL AND REPAINTING THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

### *Introducing Rob Bell*

"Please understand, I stumbled into this gig," explains Rob Bell.[109] Bell had aspirations to be a stand up comedian, then a rock star, but never a Bible teacher.[110] As a teen, exposure to manipulative altar-calls nearly ended Bell's faith.[111] Yet in 1992—as a new graduate from Wheaton—Bell offered to speak at a summer-camp chapel service. With no prior experience, he sought God for direction. He heard a voice from within: "Teach this book, and I will take care of everything else."[112] This call has defined Bell's ministry ever since.[113]

From there, Bell completed a Master of Divinity degree at Fuller Theological Seminary and apprenticed for three years at Calvary Church, out of which Bell planted Mars Hill Bible Church in 1999 at Grand Rapids, Michigan. Mars Hill rapidly grew from

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[109] Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 40.

[110] David Van Biema, "The Hipper-Than-Thou Pastor," *Time*, 6 December 2007, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1692051,00.html (accessed 26 June 2008).

[111] Bell, *Elvis*, 176-77.

[112] Bell, *Elvis*, 40.

[113] Ibid., 41.

1,500 to over 10,000 attendees.[114] Bell's love for the rawness of punk music shaped the ethos of his church: "strip everything away and get down to the most basic elements."[115] Services include thirty minutes of worship and an hour of Bell's Bible teaching:

> [Our] assumption is that those who've never opened a Bible before are fully capable of engaging with serious Biblical content. So, you may have never have heard any of this, but you can dive into the deepest issues of faith. And there will be something in there for you.[116]

Over the first two years at Mars Hill, Bell taught through *Leviticus*, and then *Song of Songs*, verse by verse, probing God's provision to draw us into relationship with Him, and the links between sexuality and spirituality.[117] His predilection for props—reconstructed altars, prayer shawls, live goats—and his creative blend of images and stories, communicate meaningfully to a media-driven cohort.[118] His sensitivity to secular culture and disillusioned young Christians inspired Bell to pursue a "fresh take on Jesus and what it means to live the kind of life he teaches us to live"—that is, to *repaint the Christian faith* for a new generation.[119]

Bell came to prominence through his *Nooma* DVDs: eight to fifteen minute parables unpacking Biblical themes such as love, forgiveness, identity, and stewardship, set to the

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[114] Mark Edward Sohmer, "Elvis on the Ed Sullivan Show: A Review of Rob Bell's *Velvet Elvis*" (2007), 50, http://www.sohmer.net/Velvet_Elvis.pdf (accessed 30 June 2008). Calvary is one of Michigan's largest churches. Calvary's head Pastor facilitated this sizeable church plant.

[115] Bell, *Elvis*, 99.

[116] Rob Bell, "The Premier Interview with Rob Bell," interview by John Buckeridge, *The Premier Interview* n.d., 33 minute video, http://player26.narrowstep.tv/nsp.aspx?player=Premier2&void=33061 (accessed 26 June 2008).

[117] Ibid.

[118] Rob Bell, "The Subversive Art: Drawing from the Prophets, the Rabbis, and Jesus to Confront the Culture," interview by editor, *Leadership Journal*, 1 April 2004, http://www.ctlibrary.com/le/2004/spring/1.24.html (accessed 26 June 2008).

[119] Bell, *Elvis*, 14, 10.

music of independent artists and tangentially related cinematography.[120] Bell presently has two books in the top ten of Amazon.com's "faith" category, as well as two DVDs capturing his sold-out speaking tours.[121] Once described as "an heir to Billy Graham," Bell's style of stand-up monologue draws listeners into the Biblical story: "His stagecraft is legendary."[122]

Bell shuns labels—particularly "emergent" and "postmodern"—preferring to see his project as a "conversation" that reconnects the Bible and culture. Both labels are apt, however, raising questions for some over Bell's orthodoxy.[123] Nevertheless, "it's worth church leaders' time to notice Bell's apologetics and learn from his example the Pauline imperative to address the psyche of our host culture."[124] When Bell's faith was nearly ship-wrecked as a teen, it was Jesus' "better way" that held him fast. His whole approach is, in a sense, a call to authenticity: keep it real.[125]

*Bell's Approach to Commending the Bible*

Bell's approach to commending the Bible flows from his particular understanding of the Bible. Chapter two of *Velvet Elvis*, entitled "Yoke," lays out this understanding.

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[120] Rob Bell, *Nooma*, DVD series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan and Flannel Films, 2002-2008); see http://www.nooma.com/ (accessed 9 October 2008). Presently there are twenty-two DVDs in the series.

[121] http://www.amazon.ca/gp/bestsellers/books/953674/ref=pd_zg_hrsr_b_1_5_last/701-3597537-0515518 (accessed 9 October 2008).

[122] Van Biema, "The Hipper-Than-Thou-Pastor."

[123] Andy Crouch, "The Emergent Mystique," *Christianity Today* 48, no. 11 (November 2004), http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/november/12.36.html?start=2 (accessed 1 July 2008); Sohmer, "Elvis," 7; Hall, "Heresy on Tour?"

[124] Chad Hall, "What Leaders Can Learn from Rob Bell," *LeadershipJournal.net*, 26 November 2007, http://www.christianitytoday.com/leaders/newsletter/2007/cln71126.html (accessed 26 June 2008).

[125] Bell, *Elvis*, 176-77.

Not afraid of mystery or messiness, Bell draws us immediately into some of the Bible's more difficult passages—God commanding genocide (Joshua 6), and Paul distinguishing his thoughts from the Lord's thoughts (1 Corinthians 7:12). He asks: "How is *that* still the word of God?"[126] The Bible affects Bell more than any book. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that people have used the Bible to justify racism, slavery, and sexism: "the more people insist that they are just taking the Bible for what it says, the more skeptical I get."[127] He deconstructs these oppressive abuses of Biblical authority. Instead, Bell sees the Bible as an unfinished story which the community of believers must thoughtfully enter.[128] Jesus "put flesh and blood on the words," and then bestowed authority on his followers to decide "what it means to actually live the Scriptures" in new circumstances (for instance, Acts 15 with the Jerusalem Council).[129] Bell believes we must understand the context and intent of the Biblical authors toward faithful interpretation—yet we must acknowledge the perspectival nature of our interpretation.[130] As such, he rejects metaphors of the Bible as "timeless truths," or "the Bible-as-owner's manual":

> We have to embrace the Bible as the wild, uncensored, passionate account it is of people experiencing the living God. . . . Real people, in real places, at real times, writing and telling stories about their experiences and their growing understanding of who God is and who they are.[131]

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[126] Ibid., 41-42.

[127] Ibid., 43.

[128] Ibid., 65-66.

[129] Ibid., 48, 49-52.

[130] Ibid., 55-56.

[131] Ibid., 63. In chapter five we will briefly consider the disparity of Bell's affirmation of Biblical inspiration with his actual reduction of God's revelation to the status of an inspiring story.

While Bell draws on insights from the Ancient Near East and Jesus' rabbinic context, he largely sidesteps the question of historicity to emphasize contemporary relevance:

> Is the greatest truth about Adam and Eve and the fruit that it *happened*, or that it *happens*? This story, one of the first in the Bible, is true for us because it is our story. We have all taken the fruit. We have all crossed boundaries.[132]

Bell declares, though never defends, the historicity of Jesus; his priority is helping us connect into the story: "We live in the metaphors."[133]

The Bible, then, is a signpost pointing to a God who may be experienced. More precisely, the Bible points us to Jesus and his way of living—forgiveness, compassion, peace, and love. We all have faith in—and follow—somebody.[134] Bell follows Jesus:

> The reason this is the best way to live is that it is rooted in profound truths about how the world is. You find yourself living more and more in tune with ultimate reality. . . . Jesus exposes us to reality at its rawest. So the way of Jesus is not about religion; it's about reality. It's about lining yourself up with how things are.[135]

If God is the ultimate reality, and Jesus showed us what God is like, then living Jesus' way keeps it real. Bell offers a sort of existential verificationism: try the "Jesus way" and you'll discover life to the full.[136] The complex of Bible, doctrine, and Spirit, are like a trampoline:

> You rarely defend a trampoline. You invite people to jump on it with you. I am far more interested in jumping than I am in arguing about whose trampoline is better. You rarely defend the things you love. You enjoy them and tell others about them and invite others to enjoy them with you.[137]

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[132] Bell, *Elvis*, 58.

[133] Ibid., 124, 61.

[134] Ibid., 19-20.

[135] Ibid., 21.

[136] Cf. John 7:17; 10:10; 14:6-9.

[137] Bell, *Elvis*, 26-27. In this analogy, the springs are our doctrines to make sense of the Bible—they "stretch and flex . . . firmly attached to the frame and the mat, yet [with] room to move" (p. 22). It is left to

Bell shares stories from the Bible in order to draw us into Jesus' invitation to "jump"—that is, connecting them to the *joy* of living in Jesus.[138] Rather than seeking to answer all our questions about the Bible, Bell invites us into the mystery—"to live the way of Jesus and see what happens."[139]

Tying all these themes together, how does Bell commend the Bible? In short, Bell locates *our stories*—filled with questions, longing and awe—within the larger *Biblical story*—that of creation, fall, Christ, and consummation. As a "tour guide," Bell has eyes to see how everyday moments are pregnant with meaning and point to "something bigger."[140] He explains, "It is searching for the things they have already affirmed as real and beautiful and true and then telling them who you believe is the source of all that."[141] The Biblical story then unveils Jesus, "who in some mysterious way [is] *behind it all*."[142] As listeners resonate with this story, they are invited to place their faith in Jesus and walk in the way that fulfills their deepest desires and brings lasting joy. As one reviewer observed, "Rob sees mundane things as talismans of deeper spiritual realities."[143] Bell weaves these stories together, supported by props and pictures that engage our senses, stimulate our imagination, hold our attention, yet draw us to see

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the reader to infer what part of the trampoline represents the Bible (perhaps the frame?) and the mat (Spirit?).

[138] Ibid., 28, 34-35. Bell speaks of joy that "transcends [our] struggles and difficulties" (p. 35).

[139] Ibid., 34.

[140] Ibid., 77.

[141] Ibid., 87.

[142] Ibid., 83. Cf. Col. 1:17.

[143] Ben Witherington, "Rob Bell's Nooma Videos 11-15," *Ben Witherington Blog*, 24 February 2007. http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/search?q=Nooma+Videos+11-15 (accessed 30 June 2008).

and think more clearly about the God of the Bible.[144] As Bell explains, stories "stay with us," as they point to "larger truths about how life is."[145] It is fitting that he named his church after Mars Hill: "Bell has identified the postmodern version of 'the unknown god' and is attempting to proclaim Jesus in the midst of this pantheon."[146]

*Illustrating Bell's Approach*

Bell's second book, *Sex God*, best illustrates his approach. It begins: "Once there were two brothers."[147] Bell then uses short, sharp sentences to tell the story of Jacob stealing Esau's blessing, before fleeing for his life (Genesis 25-27). The pace slows as Bell describes Jacob's encounter with God in some "random place by the side of the road": "This God doesn't need temples and holy sites and rituals. This God will speak to anybody, anywhere, anytime."[148] Jacob sets up a stone pillar, naming it "the House of God."[149] Bell imaginatively projects forward to Jacob's children questioning him over the significance of the rocks. Jacob explains: "They're rocks, but they're more than rocks."[150] Bell then ties us into the story—we do the same, as with photos on the wall:

> This physical thing—this picture, trophy, artifact, gift—is actually about that relationship, that truth, that reality, that moment in time. *This* is actually about *that.* Whether it's what we do with our energies or how we feel about our bodies or

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[144] Bell, "The Subversive Art."

[145] Rob Bell, *Sex God: Exploring the Endless Connections Between Sexuality And Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Company, 2007), 88.

[146] Hall, "What Leaders Can Learn." Cf. Acts 17:23.

[147] Bell, *Sex God*, 10.

[148] Ibid., 11.

[149] Cf. Gen. 28; 35:7.

[150] Bell, *Sex God*, 12.

> wanting to have the control in relationships or trying to recover from heartbreak or dealing with our ferocious appetites or the difficulty of communicating clearly with those we love or longing for something or someone better, much of life is in some way connected with our sexuality.[151]

Our sexuality points to something more "behind it all"—"Sex. God. They're connected. And they can't be separated."[152]

The following chapters then flesh out these connections. Bell draws us into stand-alone stories such as Amnon's destructive lust after his sister, Tamar.[153] His greater project, however, is to place our story within the book-ends of creation and fall, and God setting things right again with a recreated earth. Bell ties our fragmentation to the Bible's "creation poem": God's blessing on all creation "went south" when Adam and Eve chose another way; we are born into this world of disconnection "and we feel it in every fiber of our being." Sexuality, then, is both an awareness of our disconnection, and "all of the ways we go about trying to reconnect."[154] Bell vividly illustrates our contemporary struggle with sexual discrimination and objectification, our disconnection from each other and the environment, our animal-like imprisonment to bodily urges, our heartbreak over relational rejection, and our desire for validation and unashamed intimacy.[155] *Sex God* climaxes in chapter five as Bell traces the universality of "heartbreak" to God's own heartbreak:

> Jesus is God coming to us in love. Sheer unadulterated, unfiltered love. Stripped of everything that could get in the way. Naked and vulnerable, hanging on a cross,

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[151] Ibid., 13.

[152] Ibid., 15.

[153] Ibid., 68-69. Cf. 2 Samuel 13:1-22.

[154] Ibid., 39-40.

[155] Ibid., 18-28, 34-36, 51-54, 75, 96-100, 124, 154-57.

> asking the question, "What will you do with me?" . . . If you have ever given yourself to someone and found yourself waiting for their response, exposed and vulnerable, left hanging in the balance, you know how God feels.[156]

Virtually ever chapter of *Sex God* draws us back to Genesis, or points us on to restoration in Revelation. After locating our story within the Bible's larger story—that of a passionate God loving disconnected people—Bell invites us to "jump." In the closing chapter, "Whoopee Forever," he relates "sex now to life forever," as depicted in Revelation.[157] Our desire to know and be fully known, to be connected in a loving and pure embrace, is the hope of heaven: "Do you long for that? Because that's the center of Jesus' message. An invitation. To trust that it's true, to trust that it's real, to trust that God is actually going to make all things new."[158]

We now turn to briefly consider the *Nooma* series. *Nooma* began in 2002 when some of Bell's friends wanted to capture his teaching at church for a wider audience. The intent was to tell modern day parables that resonate with all people.[159] Each *Nooma* has Bell share a simple but profound story, set to ethereal music, and centered on an everyday image: a tree, rain, a toy, luggage, and so forth. At under fifteen minutes each, clips are "compact, portable, and concise."[160] Bell creatively captures his audience's attention, linking the everyday to eternity.[161]

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[156] Ibid., 105-6.

[157] Ibid., 165.

[158] Ibid., 168.

[159] Bell, "The Premier Interview."

[160] http://www.nooma.com/Info/About.aspx (accessed 11 October 2008).

[161] Bell, "The Subversive Art."

A good example is *Noise*.[162] The video opens with Bell reclined on a sofa in an everyday apartment, staring blankly at you as he points a television remote-control your way. The ambient noise of "cop-music" and sirens, lines across the screen, and mirror-image channel numbers appearing with each press of the remote, indicate that you are watching him from *within* the television. Thirty seconds pass before Bell sits up and engages you through the screen: "I was reading about this guy named Bernie Krauss who records nature sounds for film and television." In 1968 it would take Bernie fifteen hours of recording to capture one hour of undisturbed nature sounds: no aeroplanes, cars, and so forth. Today it takes him two-thousand hours of recording time. Bell continues, "It reminds me of a story of one of the great Jewish prophets, Elijah." In a conversational tone, Bell shares how Elijah was "totally fried—he doesn't even know if he wants to go on." Bell retells 1 Kings 19, where Elijah encountered God not in the wind, earthquake, or fire: "God was in the sheer silence."[163] Bell then switches off the television. For nearly a minute you sit in awkward silence, staring at a black screen. Eventually, a sequence of questions and statements appear—"Why is it easier to surround myself with noise and keep moving than to stop, be silent, and listen?"—linking the noise in our lives (MP3, cell-phone, television), our inability to hear God, and the Biblical call to silence and solitude.[164]

Bell brings this same approach to his public performances, using narrative threads to weave together a compelling account that invites hearers into the *relevance* of the

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[162] Rob Bell, *Nooma. 005 Noise*, 10 min. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan and Flannel Films, 2003), DVD.

[163] This reflects how some Jewish commentators interpreted 1 Kings 19:12.

[164] Cf. Deut. 27:9; Ps. 4:4; Hab. 2:20; Mt 11:28-30; Lk 5:16

Biblical story. In "The Gods Are Not Angry," Bell tells of the uniqueness in all of human history of a God who acts on our behalf—who makes the sacrifice and gives, rather than demanding a sacrifice to get.[165] Our modern obsession with serving angry gods who are never satisfied—money, possessions, jobs, status—and the sacrifices we make—guilt, shame, self-harm and suicide—reveal age-old idolatry. Bell invites his audience to "trust and respond" to the new reality, that God in Christ has made the ultimate sacrifice, inviting us to walk in freedom and together reach out to heal a broken world: "May you remember that God is love."

In sum, Bell reveals that in the Biblical story, our own stories makes sense.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have considered the apologetic approaches of Francis Schaeffer, Lee Strobel, and Rob Bell, as three voices commending the Bible in the marketplace of ideas. *Schaeffer* addresses outsiders who reject the Bible because of their naturalistic and impersonal presuppositions which render revelation implausible. As such, he seeks to *open ears* by exposing the illogicality and unlivability of his interlocutor's presuppositions. He then argues for the superiority of the Biblical system in answering our metaphysical, moral, and epistemological questions in a coherent manner, verified by what we know of the universe and our human nature. *Strobel* addresses outsiders who reject the Bible because of skepticism over its claims. As such, he seeks to *establish trust* by cross-examining experts who supply evidence supporting

[165] Rob Bell, "The Gods Are Not Angry," presentation delivered at Moore Theatre in Seattle, WA., 11 November 2007.

the Bible's historicity, which in turn offers trustworthy testimony to Christ. He then calls his interlocutor to offer an impartial verdict that best fits the facts. Finally, *Bell* address outsiders who reject the Bible because the church and its message seem unrelated to their everyday existence. As such, he seeks to *arouse interest* by tying our stories, and our sense of transcendence in even mundane moments, into the larger Biblical story about the one who is behind it all: Jesus. In response, he invites us to "jump"—to experience the joy of walking Jesus' way.

We are now positioned to evaluate and apply these three apologetic strategies in commending the Bible to contemporary western adolescents.

# CHAPTER FIVE

# CRITIQUE AND APPLICATION OF THE THREE APOLOGETIC STRATEGIES

## INTRODUCTION

Thus far we have traced a portrait of today's teens and explored the essence of three diverse apologetic approaches to commending the Bible to a contemporary audience. We must now integrate our findings to determine how useful are the strategies of Schaeffer, Strobel and Bell in light of the psychosocial context of adolescent outsiders. Furthermore, we must consider if we may improve upon each approach.

In chapter three I suggested that we must study youth culture with four questions in mind: What can I *commend*? What must I *challenge*? What *bridges* offer a point of contact? and What *barriers* must be removed or bypassed so that teens will read the Scriptures for themselves? In this chapter, I will propose how the strategies of Schaeffer, Strobel and Bell helpfully answer these questions. I will also discuss problems with each approach that hinder our efforts to commend the Bible to adolescent outsiders, in turn suggesting how we may be more effective. There is much that could be said in such a critique. Thus, I remind the reader of a limitation acknowledged at this study's outset: I intend to appraise the broad schools or types of apologetics—and the approaches of Schaeffer, Strobel and Bell therein—only to the degree that it impinges upon the effectiveness of commending the Bible to youth. It will emerge that Schaeffer helps us open ears by undermining secularism, Strobel helps us establish trust through advancing

credible truths, and Bell helps us arouse interest by engaging experience. We begin by evaluating the usefulness of Schaeffer's apologetic.

## FRANCIS SCHAEFFER: OPENING EARS BY UNDERMINING SECULARISM

### *Critique as to Usefulness in Commending the Bible to Teens*

Of the three apologetic approaches we are critiquing, Schaeffer's approach most fully takes into account the psychological context of the thinking teen. As teens progressively detach from their parents, they seek to establish an identity in relation to an all-encompassing worldview. Just as Schaeffer was pondering profound questions in his adolescence—Why do I exist? How can I discern right from wrong? How can I know anything with certainty?—contemporary adolescents are likewise seeking to make sense of their world. Western culture discourages metaphysical inquiry: fear of irreconcilable difference in a multicultural setting has made discussion of competing religious truth claims taboo, and adolescents' frenetic pace of living and their preoccupation with mass entertainment media tend to fix their focus on immediate concerns. Nevertheless, Schaeffer's approach equips apologists to enter the teen's internal questioning, starting from the area of his or her "own real interests": science, art, music, the environment, poverty, sexism, racism, relationships, love, trust, choice, and so forth.[1] Teens are experimenting with hypothetico-deductive thinking, pursuing an ideal world, judging the contradictions of authority figures, and appreciating alternative worldviews through mutual interpersonal perspective-taking. Through insightful questions, Schaeffer turns these predispositions back upon adolescents to probe their "synthetic-conventional

[1] *CWFS, GWIT*, 139.

faith"—that is, their unquestioning internalization of the beliefs held by their significant others, whether parents or peers.[2] As their tacit convictions become reflective, individually owned and explicit, teens are more open to considering Biblical answers that internally cohere and externally correspond to what they know of the world and human nature. As youth are required to articulate their beliefs, perhaps for the first time, they recognize that their own foundations are unstable. This approach is most effective with *secular youth*, whether atheist or agnostic: both groups live as if God doesn't exist. Their materialistic presuppositions (the universe as a closed system of cause and effect), which are built upon residual positivism and empiricism, *a priori* dismiss the Bible as inspired. Either God does not exist, or he cannot act in the material world. Schaeffer helps such teens discover the logical conclusions of their beliefs: morality, personality, communication, memory, freedom and love are illusory, or at least ungrounded. He then exposes their point of tension by revealing their failure to live accordingly. As such, Schaeffer's questions and challenges create a new experience that confronts an old thinking scheme: in response to apparent contradiction, teens are driven toward adaptation by adjusting their thinking schemes. The potential result is openness to the Bible as its foundational presuppositions are able to assimilate all observations about the universe and human nature. Schaeffer's approach, then, is of greatest use in *opening ears by undermining secularism.* By challenging the illogicality and unlivability of impersonal presuppositions, then contrasting them with the coherence and correspondence of Biblical answers, the skepticism of secular adolescents is softened so that they are more open to a respectful reading of the Scriptures.

[2] James M. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 167.

Schaeffer's apologetic also has great relevance in light of the sociological context of contemporary western adolescents. Schaeffer would have us *commend* youth for their desire to make a difference in this broken world, reflected in their readiness to point out the tragedy of environmental destruction, racism, sexism, homophobia, greed, and even the moral failings and judgmentalism of the church. At the same time, Schaeffer helps us *challenge* the apparent incongruity of professed tolerance and moral relativism with the moral outrage frequently expressed by youth over societal and personal injustices. Are all beliefs equal? Are right and wrong merely a matter of preference and social contract? Is there moral equivalence between loving and raping a person, saving and destroying a life, telling the truth and deceiving, defending and invading? If so, why do youth readily label terrorism as evil, the Iraqi occupation as unjustifiable, the Darfuri genocide as despicable, pollution as reprehensible, Christian hypocrisy as intolerable, and gossiping friends as unfaithful? Upon what foundation do youth ground these moral judgments? Schaeffer's approach is ideal for exploring such tensions, demonstrating adolescent failure to integrate their relativistic and moralistic selves, and pointing them to a more solid foundation as found in the Bible. This is especially important as radical relativism and adolescent egocentricity frequently deafen youth to the unique answers in the Bible and obscure their need for liberation from sin.

We have already explored how Schaeffer's approach challenges atheists and agnostics. As we discovered in chapter three, however, most youth believe in some type of God or Higher Power who simply wants them to live a good life and be happy. Yet the God of "moralistic therapeutic deism" is mute. A mute and distant Deity creates a

significant *barrier* to acceptance of the inspiration and authority of Scripture.[3] Here, too, Schaeffer's approach helps open adolescent ears by undermining this form of secularized Christianity. In effect, Schaeffer asks: "Why do you think God doesn't speak? If God is there, why should he stay silent? What makes you so sure that the Bible is not a record of God's having spoken?" Having revealed the adolescent's unfounded presupposition that God cannot or does not speak, Schaeffer invites them to try on Biblical presuppositions about God's nature: "Isn't it at least *plausible* that a personal, intelligent, and relational God would communicate with humanity answers to the human condition that we cannot discern for ourselves, as we claim to have in the Bible?" In so doing, a significant obstacle to acceptance of the Bible is removed. This argument is strengthened by the apologetic *bridge* Schaeffer constructs as he gives "honest answers to honest questions,"[4] thus countering the stereotype of Christians as sheltered and closed to intellectual dialogue. Schaeffer suggests how the Bible makes sense of the adolescent's anger at injustice, her struggle to be good even while judging others as bad, her desire to love and be loved, her experience of calculations in science class corresponding with reality, her sense of responsibility for a struggling planet, and her need to poetically express her emotions. In short, the Biblical foundation, more so than her midi-narrative of secular individualism, is able to ground all that she considers true, good, and beautiful.

Schaeffer's approach, while useful in commending the Bible to teens, is not without *problems*. Psychologically, Schaeffer's strategy of "taking the roof off," as illustrated in chapter four by his encounter with the relativistic Hindu, induces considerable stress for his interlocutor. Today's fragmented teens are already stressed—additional duress may

[3] Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162, 171.

[4] *CWFS*, *TCTR*, 407.

counterproductively hinder their ability to recognize inconsistencies as elevated cortisol levels subconsciously switch their brain from logical frontal lobe engagement to an emotional and protective response from the more developed amygdala. Pragmatically, Schaeffer's claim that the Biblical system is not just the "best answer to existence; it is the *only* answer"[5] smack of triumphalism akin to western colonialism spreading "one true culture" for the supposed benefit of all. This is unpalatable to teens who prefer inclusivity and openness to metaphysical possibilities. Such exclusivism plays into stereotypes of the Bible as the weapon of choice for intolerant and judgmental Christians. Furthermore, such claims cannot be proved by even the tightest philosophical reasoning.[6] (Even if they could be, it is questionable whether teens would understand or care.) At best, then, Schaeffer's approach exposes genuine tensions within secular systems and moves us toward more sufficient Biblical presuppositions. Schaeffer's arguments are even less effective in challenging other theistic and polytheistic systems such as are common in a multicultural society.[7] Schaeffer's approach shows considerable promise for commending the Bible to contemporary western adolescents, yet it cannot be applied "as is." Some modifications will help us utilize his approach for greater effect.

*Modification and Application*

The first modification entails softening Schaeffer's claims. John Stackhouse helpfully distinguishes three claims that we may make for any apologetic: the *protective* claim asserts that we are rationally warranted to hold our views; the *comparative* claim

[5] *CWFS*, *HIT*, 288.

[6] Thomas V. Morris, *Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics: A Critique* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), 35.

[7] Ibid., 20, 57, 73-74, 116.

asserts that our views are more warranted than our interlocutor's views; finally, the *imperative* claim asserts that our views alone are warranted.[8] By making the unprovable imperative claim, Schaeffer undermines his whole argument in the eyes of skeptical youth who are suspicious of a forceful sales pitch. Schaeffer's approach would be more effective were he to "own" his perspective and humbly offer it to his dialogue partner: "I may be wrong, but I'm not sure that what you're saying makes sense. Can you help me understand how you see it? How about trying on another perspective. Maybe you'll find it makes more sense if you start with the way the Bible says the world is." This doesn't essentially change Schaeffer's approach, but it does appropriately restrain his rhetoric.[9] Biblical answers may then be shared as a gift rather than imposed as a duty. Schaeffer's arguments are most effective against atheism. As such, his claims may need to be further softened in dialogue with theists or polytheists who believe in a personal God or Higher Power. For instance, in dialogue with a Muslim who considers a Triune God impossible and thus rejects the Bible as corrupted, we may settle for the protective claim: "A 'three-in-one' God is a mystery which I cannot prove but can only know by revelation. Even so, the Biblical view of God seems to make sense of why community and family, and mutual giving and receiving, are essential to our existence—we were created for relationships by an intrinsically relational God. How do you account for this?"

A second modification of Schaeffer's approach concerns the importance of genuine dialogue set in a relational context. As discussed in chapter four, Schaeffer emphasizes compassionate listening before speaking. Nevertheless, his apologetic encounters read more like an inquisition to seek out a core contradiction, followed by a

[8] John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 149.

[9] Ibid., 228-29.

pointed monologue fired as a heat-seeking missile to destroy another's protective presuppositions. Few adults enjoy being interrogated by someone with an offensive agenda. Youth are even more sensitive. As explored in chapter three, many youth feel relationally disconnected from and controlled by adults. As Chap Clark observes, "Midadolescents are an extraordinarily perceptive lot, and they can smell inauthenticity, judgment, and dismissive critique a mile away."[10] Pete Ward suggests that we must develop trust through extended contact during which period "direct questions may be inappropriate, but there will be a need to go with the flow of what individuals bring up in conversations."[11] A meandering conversation largely controlled by teens, peppered with our well placed questions and alternative perspectives that introduce some cognitive dissonance and challenge into their worldview, would likely be more effective in commending the Bible than Schaeffer's direct approach.[12] Randy Newman calls this strategy "Questioning Evangelism," the goal of which is to "help people know *how* to think about an issue more than *what* to think."[13] Insightful questions are more relational, less controlling and less pressured than assertions.[14] From a constructivist learning perspective, answers that adolescents determine for themselves—rather than those they are told—are the most persuasive.[15] Most teens at least occasionally contemplate the big questions, so probing deeper gives them permission to voice their thoughts on matters

[10] *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 92.

[11] *God at the Mall: Youth Ministry That Meets Kids Where They're At* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 63.

[12] For instance, see http://www.dare2share.org/gospeljourneymaui/12 (accessed 30 October 2008).

[13] Randy Newman, *Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People's Hearts the Way Jesus Did* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004), 15.

[14] Ibid., 26-30.

[15] David K. Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics: A Person-Centered Approach to Christian Defense* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1999), 161.

they may not usually feel the freedom to raise. They inherently desire consistency and correspondence in their belief system—articulation exposes where they are confused, providing its own impetus for teens to resolve the dissonance without undue external pressure. An apologist may gently press a teen's answers with further questions: "You *really* think that? Why? Maybe you're right, but I'm not so sure. Is that the only option? I wonder if . . . ."[16] When the teen becomes confused, he may relieve the pressure he feels by asking the apologist what she thinks. She can then share how the Biblical view makes better sense, at least to her way of thinking. In light of the plausible answers the Bible offers, she may ask if he's ever read it for himself, encouraging him to do so: "It wouldn't make sense to close out this option before even checking it out. I have yet to find better answers to these big questions than those in the Bible. Why don't you take a look for yourself?" In this way, the Bible expands rather than limits the teen's intellectual options. Such an approach would challenge stereotypes of Christians as quick to talk but slow to listen. It is unhelpful to "take the roof off" each and every teen we encounter while we are establishing rapport. Rather, "more commonly we will have opportunity to dislodge a shingle or two, or offer a concerned opinion about the structural integrity of the roof rather than undertake its wholesale demolition."[17]

A third modification of Schaeffer's approach is to dialogue with adolescent outsiders within their group context. As we discussed in chapter three, adolescents form tight-knit "clusters" in which they feel most freedom to authentically express themselves. Groups often assume a collective identity that shapes each individual's beliefs.[18] If we

[16] Newman, *Questioning Evangelism*, 57-71, 254-55.

[17] Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 187.

[18] Clark, *Hurt*, 79, 84-86.

engage a teen by himself, he will likely feel more threatened than when situated within his cluster. In turn, he may either be closed to discussion, or share agreeable yet contrived answers to avoid any sense of awkwardness. In the cluster, however, he is free to voice his opinion as the group offers a plausibility structure for his views. While discussions of religion are somewhat taboo, most teens will speak up in response to an open ended question concerning morality, origins, purpose, truth, the meaning of life, death and spirituality in general. As a group, they may even see it as a challenge to show the superiority of their view. By employing Schaeffer's approach with a cluster, we may simultaneously influence each individual's secular presuppositions toward greater openness to the Bible. An antagonistic group, for instance, may reject the Bible because of its miraculous accounts. The apologist may then inquire, "What makes you so sure miracles can't happen? Are miracles, and a miracle-working God, incompatible with science? You say that science has disproved God's existence—but how does a material process assess an immaterial being? How much of all knowledge would you need to possess to say for sure God doesn't exist? If the God of the Bible exists, and if He designed these laws in the first place, then isn't it possible that He could temporarily suspend them?" Such questions mitigate their hostility by revealing problematic presuppositions. They may then be open to hear how Biblical presuppositions provide a more sure foundation for the modern scientific endeavour.

In sum, while Schaeffer is the least current of the three apologists we consider, his apologetic still speaks to contemporary western adolescents. The aforementioned modifications to Schaeffer's approach—less forceful claims as part of a genuine dialogue in a group context—may serve to more effectively open ears by undermining secularism.

*Critique as to Usefulness in Commending the Bible to Teens*

As with Schaeffer's approach, Strobel's approach confronts teens with evidence that perhaps contradicts what they presently think about the Bible. In doing so, their oppositional thinking may be stretched to accommodate the new information by greater openness to the Scriptures. Strobel invites youth to consider these evidences not as isolated facts, but rather as part of a larger hypothesis: the Bible is trustworthy as it contains credible truths, which in turn point to Jesus as the Christ. Such an approach has considerable merit in light of the psychological context of adolescents. Most teens have already transitioned from their "mythic-literal faith," in which many rejected the little they knew of the Bible—its miraculous accounts and creation story—in the face of conflicting authoritative stories.[19] In science class they encountered evolution as a certainty, and in history class they were perhaps told that "Biblical history" is a contradiction. The media foster further doubt as they produce movies and documentaries that present radical scholarship as though it were widely accepted, suggesting that the church has conspired to hide the truth or has manipulated the Biblical text. It is not surprising, then, that many teens question whether Jesus even existed.[20] Information that youth hear first tends to be more persuasive—known as the *primacy effect*—even when this information has little substance. It takes powerful counter-evidence presented in novel ways to overturn these impressions.[21] Yet, such skeptical impressions are often

[19] Fowler, *Faith*, 150.

[20] Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton, and Ruth Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia* (Mulgrave, Australia: John Garratt Publishing, 2007), 96.

[21] Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics*, 169.

formed and embedded within their worldview before youth have the cognitive facilities to weigh the evidence. As they progress into "synthetic-conventional faith," the Bible's lack of credibility is "just the way it is."[22] During this phase, however, teens develop formal thinking abilities. Synaptic overabundance in the hippocampus and frontal lobe enable teens to question beliefs and handle multiple pieces of evidence simultaneously in forming an opinion and weighing alternative perspectives. Furthermore, they are prone to question authority. By adopting a skeptical stance in his investigation of the Bible, Strobel challenges teens to not simply dismiss the Bible—which would be closed-minded—but instead to raise their best questions and join him in searching for the truth. Strobel's fast-moving narrative and novel presentation of the evidence serve to maintain adolescents' short attention span by personally involving them in the story rather than reducing them to the role of a passive spectator. By challenging youth to come to their own verdict, weighing the evidence as the search progresses, they form stronger beliefs than if they were simply asked to accept Strobel's own conclusions. In all these ways, Strobel's approach serves to positively affect adolescent attitudes to the Bible.

As we consider the sociological context, Strobel would have us *commend* those youth—particularly seculars—who are concerned with finding and following the truth such that they skeptically weigh and dismiss claims that have no substance. This impulse is also reflected by many of the Biblical authors.[23] If God truly did create, and Jesus truly did live, die, and rise from the dead, then the Bible invites empirical scrutiny. Strobel helps us *challenge* these adolescents to be more skeptical—they must even question their own taken-for-granted beliefs. Have they thoroughly examined the Bible, considering all

[22] Fowler, *Faith*, 167.

[23] Cf. Luke 1:1-4; John 21:24; Acts 17:11, 24-31; 1 Cor. 15:1-20; 2 Pet. 1:16; 1 John 1:1.

the evidence? Have they read the Bible for themselves as "Exhibit A"? Have they decided criteria by which to evaluate the evidence and then consistently applied these criteria to all hypotheses? (How solid, for instance, is the evidence supporting claims within *The Da Vinci Code*?) Or have they, as did Strobel as an adolescent, settled for a quick verdict as it suits them to have no authority over their lives? Strobel challenges these teens to commit to impartiality, like a juror, and follow the evidence wherever it leads. His frequent asides—offering insight into his motives and how he used to feel about the Bible—resonate with skeptical teens, giving voice to their own doubts. He models for apologists a way of walking alongside questioning teens without pretending to know it all, together pursuing an understanding of the Bible that best accommodates all the evidence. In the contemporary context, where the Bible is repeatedly under attack, some form of evidential apologetic must answer the myriad detailed questions that are raised, and challenge the dismissive attitude of many teens toward Biblical credibility.

One *barrier* to Strobel's approach is his appeal to the expert. Adolescents tend to resist any authority whom they have not personally chosen. Nevertheless, Strobel's choice of credentialed and respected academics across a range of disciplines neutralizes any appeal by skeptical youth to authorities they have accepted in justifying their disbelief. It focuses all parties on the importance of solid argumentation. Strobel's interrogative style may encourage youth to hear the evidence as the scholars have to work hard to make their case. As with Schaeffer, Strobel's approach counters perceptions among adolescent outsiders that Christians are anti-intellectual and believe the Bible on faith without any good reasons for doing so. From experience, most adolescents are surprised to discover that the Bible's characterization of Jesus is largely corroborated by dozens of credible sources—a sizeable minority of which are hostile witnesses—

contemporaneous with Jesus and the early church.[24] Fresh evidence can significantly impact doubting teens. Strobel builds a *bridge* to these teens by framing his investigations around respected processes of obtaining knowledge familiar to teens from their science, history, and legal studies classes. At the same time, Strobel's approach connects with teens who trust fortune-telling and astrology as he reveals the incomparable prophetic accuracy in the Bible.

Strobel's approach would be more effective if two *problems* were addressed. First, an evidential apologetic for the Bible—requiring teens to wade through many historical details, slowly building toward the conclusion of credible Scriptures—will bore many teens. Youth are able to deal with many details. Yet are they motivated to do so? Strobel's web-site has packaged the evidence into short segments suitable for a teen's attention span. Further modifications toward effective delivery are, however, required.

Second, Strobel unhelpfully underestimates the power of presuppositions. Positively, Strobel does acknowledge the role of presuppositions and motives in shaping how we view the evidence. Thus, he encourages his readers to form their own verdict, recognizing that some remain unconvinced. Strobel largely keeps to the comparative claim: it is more reasonable to believe the Bible is credible than it is to dismiss it. Nevertheless, he verges on an imperative claim by implying that if his readers follow his lead and try to be objective, they too will we overwhelmed by an "avalanche of evidence" carrying them beyond any reasonable doubt to conclude that the historical evidence supports the Biblical witness.[25] For a teen tacitly holding atheistic presuppositions, it is

[24] See, for instance, Gary Habermas, *The Verdict of History* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988) for his analysis of thirty-nine ancient sources collectively yielding over one hundred reported facts concerning Jesus' life, teachings, crucifixion, and resurrection.

[25] Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 265.

highly unlikely that historical evidence would ever be sufficient to compel him to believe in the incarnation or resurrection. Furthermore, once he believes that the Bible is literally incredible, he will tend to selectively read the evidence to confirm his beliefs, ignoring contradictory data—a phenomenon known as *confirmation bias*.[26] In this mindset, Strobel's pretensions to play the skeptic on his behalf may look weak and further undermine the credibility of the Bible.[27] Other youth, equipped through English studies to deconstruct advertisements, may dismiss Strobel's attempt at an "objective" account of history as fundamentally flawed: "How can you suppose to separate fact from fiction in the Gospel accounts? As with all 'promotions,' I suspect that the disciples put the best possible 'spin' on the story to make their product more appealing." As we noted in chapter four, Strobel reasonably responds to postmodernists in *The Case for the Real Jesus.* Nevertheless, he fails to sufficiently acknowledge the limitations of historical assertion in his other writings.

*Modification and Application*

The problems with Strobel's apologetic considered above do not essentially invalidate his evidential approach. For instance, concerning Strobel's underestimation of the power of presuppositions, we may employ his approach for greater effect by acknowledging that the Biblical writers interpreted history from a particular perspective and toward a particular end: that we may believe Jesus is the Christ (John 20:30-31). It is reasonable, however, to hold that because the disciples were convinced that Jesus is the

[26] Wayne Weiten, *Psychology Themes and Variations*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001), 337.

[27] Paul Doland, *Case Against Faith*, 4th ed. (Internet Infidels Inc., 2006), http://www.caseagainstfaith.com/ (accessed 30 June 2008).

Christ, they took extra pains to accurately record what they had seen and experienced. Additionally, we would be wise to indicate where our argument is weak, acknowledge that we may be wrong, and commend our interpretation of the data as warranted rather than necessarily compelling—each of which are "winsome" moves in dialogue with outsiders who are suspicious of any truth claims.[28]

A number of modifications to Strobel's approach could fruitfully be made in terms of *delivery*. Other than giving teens *The Case for Christ* and directing them to his website, it is not immediately apparent how we may use his approach to commend the Bible to adolescent outsiders. Strobel does, however, offer some helpful suggestions in his first book which may guide our dialogue with youth.[29] Strobel suggests that it is initially more effective to ask questions than take on the burden of proof in affirming the Bible's credibility. An apologist may begin by asking a teen to describe what he believes about the Bible, and then letting him talk. This is particularly helpful if a teen displays incredulity that anyone would trust what the Bible says. The apologist may ask a range of questions in the course of conversation: "What do you think about the Bible? Have you read it for yourself? Do you think it is trustworthy? Why is that? Where did you get that viewpoint from? How accurate is that source? What particular contradictions have you found in the Bible? Is that the only explanation? Is there one major objection you have to trusting what the Bible says?" As the apologist listens, the teen is affirmed in his search for truth as he can freely speak without having to parry defensive interjections. As he verbalizes his beliefs, however, he may realize that he doesn't know as much as he thought. He may ask questions in return, creating an opportunity for the apologist to

[28] Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 90, 97-98, 149, 170, 229, 232.

[29] Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry & Mary: How to Reach Friends and Family Who Avoid God and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 53.

"help him see the firm foundation on which Christianity is based."[30] Rather than pretending she has all the answers, the apologist may be candid in her limitations and invite him into a shared journey seeking what makes best sense of the historical data: "I'm no expert, but I know that what the Bible says has huge implications for us both, if it's true. If I'm wrong, I really want to know. How about we help each other search this out?" They may swap sources and arrange a time to talk through what they each discovered. This is less threatening to both the teen and the apologist. Strobel models an economy of words by focusing the discussion on Jesus and the gospel accounts. David Clark offers helpful advice for when the time comes to offer an answer. Rather than sharing all she knows in one speech—after the first thirty seconds of which the teen will likely "switch off"—she is better to offer a brief and impactful statement that invites him to ask more questions.[31] For instance, he may ask, "How can you believe what the Bible says about Jesus? It's just a lot of stories made up hundreds of years after he died." She may reply, "It's interesting you say that. From what I've found, if you throw out the Bible as bad history, then you have to discard pretty much everything from that whole time period. I think there is better documentation for Jesus than for the founder of any other ancient religion." The core claims offered by each of the experts interviewed by Strobel become the first assertion the apologist may make in response to his questions, inviting him to challenge these claims, thus maintaining his attention. The apologist may then add a supporting claim, working down toward the sufficient grounds upon which the first claim is based.

[30] Ibid., 53-54, 104-5.

[31] Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics*, 220.

Beyond issues of delivery, Strobel's approach must be extended from defending the historical credibility of the Bible to making the more pressing case for the Bible's *moral* credibility. Many adolescent outsiders believe the Bible is irrelevant, not because it ignores their concerns—happiness, sexuality, finances, relationships—but rather because it clashes with majority opinion.[32] Only a compelling case for Biblical morality will help "'choosers' come to accept external authority in beliefs and morals."[33] Strobel recognizes that many youth are less concerned with asking, "Is the Bible accurate?" than asking, "Does it work?"[34] Perhaps for this reason Strobel modified his youth version of *The Case for Christ* to include a section on the Bible entitled, "Words that Work." Even if the Bible is historically trustworthy, many youth may think, "Big deal. We've got a really old, really accurate book. What does it have to do with me?"[35] Strobel then shares how living what the Bible says positively transformed his marriage and his struggles with anger, a key step towards his conclusion that the Bible really is a revelation from God.[36] Similarly, in *God's Outrageous Claims,* Strobel defends Biblical credibility with a modified evidential argument. Especially relevant to adolescent outsiders, Strobel argues that "God's rules on sex can liberate us."[37]

> As outlandish as it may sound to some, real sexual liberation and true intimacy are found within the moral boundaries that God has compassionately designed for us.

[32] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 118.

[33] Ibid., 339.

[34] Strobel, *Harry*, 56-58. He emphasizes, however, that Biblical wisdom works *because* it is true.

[35] Strobel with Vogel, *Christ*, 63.

[36] Ibid., 64.

[37] Ibid., 162-181.

> In fact, as this chapter will show, the latest research by social scientists is confirming over and over again that God's way is the best way.[38]

In this Strobel wisely extends his essential apologetic strategy. Nevertheless, he has dropped his hard-nosed investigative style in giving ready assent to a relatively weak case built upon a mixture of anecdotes and inconclusive studies. There is no shortage of reputable sociological research documenting the "positive association between greater teen religiosity [i.e., following Biblical morality] and positive life outcomes" in terms of mental health, community participation, risk taking and overall well-being.[39] As we explored in chapter three, increasing numbers of teens are experiencing the adverse effects of pursuing whatever brings immediate gratification, thereby raising questions about the fantasy of a risk-free existence promulgated by popular culture. Strobel's approach could well be modified to answer these questions, in turn helping skeptical adolescent outsiders establish trust through evidencing the Bible's historically and morally credible truths.

## ROB BELL: AROUSING INTEREST BY ENGAGING EXPERIENCE

### *Critique as to Usefulness in Commending the Bible to Teens*

Bell's approach has some useful features that resonate with psychologically developing teens. As we explored in chapter two, youth are completing the transition from "concrete" to "formal operations" thinking—that is, youth progress from manipulating objects and observable phenomena to manipulating abstract ideas. Bell's creative use of pictures and props are particularly helpful in this transition, binding youth

[38] Ibid., 166.

[39] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 233. See also pp. 28, 218-40, 263, 330 n.9, 333 n.15.

to the Biblical story in ways that propositions cannot. Furthermore, these images help capture the attention of youth as they are drawn by novelty and unpredictability.

Bell's focus on linking our stories into the greater Biblical story is particularly useful. Adolescence is a time of constructing one's own "life story" and identity, enabling her to coherently assemble all her experiences and ideas with a sense of "biographical continuity."[40] In so doing, she seeks to make sense of her story in light of a larger metanarrative that grants her life unity and purpose. In a society offering little guidance and few "norms" for living, her need for a "sense of spirituality, of something greater" than herself, is of heightened importance.[41]

Additionally, Bell's presentation of a personal and loving God at the centre of the Biblical narrative—a God who knows and accepts her completely—is powerful during this phase when she most desires "companionship, guidance, [and] support."[42] As we discovered in chapter two, youth prefer stories that represent the messiness of their own lives with gritty realism eliciting emotions of fear and excitement. They shun simplistic answers and artificial resolutions. Appropriately, then, Bell often draws from the seamier side of the Bible—such as Adam and Eve's unashamed nakedness destroyed with the fall, or Amnon's rape of Tamar—thereby identifying with adolescents' disconnection and dysfunctionality. Bell reframes their sexual fascination as an unknowing search for something more. In short, Bell effectively *arouses interest in the Bible by engaging adolescent experience*.

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[40] Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 49-50.

[41] David Elkind, *All Grown Up and No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis*, rev. ed. (New York: Perseus Books, 1998), 265.

[42] Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 153-54.

Of the three apologetic approaches explored in this thesis, Bell's most powerfully addresses the sociological context of contemporary western adolescents. Bell would have us *commend* youth in their pursuit of an exciting life and happiness.[43] This meshes with Bell's portrayal of the Biblical story as an invitation to "jump" and experience joy.[44] Concurrently, Bell helps us *challenge* the way in which youth pursue happiness: maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. Have their multiple sexual encounters and plethora of purchases healed their underlying sense of fragmentation and disconnection? Are they truly happy? Or, do they feel their emptiness even more acutely? In contrast, walking Jesus' way brings a deeper joy that can endure disappointment, as it aligns with ultimate reality.[45] Bell also helps us challenge the western myth of self-determination by disclosing that "everybody follows somebody, and I'm trying to follow Jesus" as "I think that the way of Jesus is the best possible way to live."[46] Bell dispels images of the Bible as a weapon to enforce a particular moral code; rather, it is a story of many people encountering the living God as the path to freedom and happiness. Bell's Bible stories speak to youth who reject authoritarian coercion yet may accept an invitation to experience an abundant life. He mounts this challenge without being judgmental or defensive. By painting a vision of a connected, integrated and joyful life, Bell challenges stereotypes that Christians are always against something and have nothing positive to offer. His authenticity disarms an image-is-everything generation.

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[43] Philip J. Hughes, *Putting Life Together: Findings from Australian Youth Spirituality Research* (Fairfield, Australia: Fairfield Press, 2007), 48-49.

[44] Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 28.

[45] Ibid., 34-35.

[46] Ibid., 20-21.

Bell removes a major *barrier* blocking youth from engaging with the Bible: adolescent outsiders are often Biblically illiterate. Many youth simultaneously display post-Christian attitude to, and pre-Christian understanding of, the Bible. They claim to know what it is about, convinced that there is nothing fresh and no "good news" left in this archaic story, yet they have minimal knowledge around which to frame whatever they do hear. Rather than explaining why adolescents should listen to the Bible, Bell uses his talents to tell the Biblical story in a fresh and compelling way. By helping his audience identify with the emotions, struggles and hopes of the Biblical characters, youth are drawn into the Bible's relevance. Frequent asides link these stories to current events, popular culture, movies and music, thus giving the Bible a contemporary feel. Furthermore, as we saw in *Sex God*, Bell shows how the Biblical story challenges taken-for-granted sexual practices—premarital sex, lust, and so forth—in a way that resonates with the deep desire to connect and be loved that is common to all adolescents. Bell helps teens find their story in the dislocation of the Fall, the heartbreak and passion of the cross, and the hope of heaven. Youth need not be familiar with the Bible to enter its story; Bell opens up, rather than argues about, the Bible.

While Schaeffer and Strobel begin with Biblical answers to questions youth may or may not presently be asking, Bell's approach offers a *bridge* to adolescent outsiders by starting with their felt needs and their stories, thereby connecting with interest that is already there. He affirms their heightened sense of meaning as they join with thousands singing at a rock concert, as they find acceptance in a lover's embrace, and as they stand awestruck at the beauty of a sea-side sunset. Each experience is special in itself, even as it is a sign pointing to something more. In turn, the Bible's love story of an infinitely giving God may woo a generation for whom "sexual issues [are a] doorway to the

soul."[47] The Bible is thereby seen to provide inspiration to youth who seek an exciting life through "experiential markers and techniques"[48]—Proverbs provides daily wisdom, Song of Songs captures the rapture of love, Exodus symbolizes their "coming of age," Psalms voices their emotional highs and lows, and Revelation yields hope that one day all things will be made right.

Clearly, Bell's approach commends the Bible as relevant to today's teens. Yet we must consider whether in offering the Bible to adolescents as a take-it-or-leave-it inspirational story, we have inadvertently undercut the authority of the Bible as the revelation of God which demands from its readers a response. A number of *problems* with Bell's apologetic must be addressed. I believe it is legitimate to start an apologetic with the felt needs of youth, seeking to show the Bible's relevance in terms of its identification with adolescent experience and as a story that directs their pursuit of happiness. Nevertheless, by almost exclusively focusing on how the Biblical story fulfills their deepest longings for something more, Bell borders on presenting an anthropocentric gospel shorn of its ability to challenge idolatries that imprison adolescents. In particular, the rampant consumerism and therapeutic individualism of adolescent culture have gone largely unchecked. To Bell's credit, he has endeavoured to challenge these idolatries *within* the church by expounding our Biblical responsibility to care for the oppressed and marginalized.[49] This prophetic voice is, however, muted in his encounters with outsiders. If the narcissistic heart of sinful youth goes without challenge,

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[47] Scott Davis, "From Pimped to Pure: Helping a Sexualized Generation Experience Intimacy," *Youth Worker Journal* 24, no. 1 (September/October 2007): 50.

[48] Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 203.

[49] This is most evident in Bell's latest book (with Don Golden), *Jesus Wants to Save Christians: A Manifesto for the Church in Exile* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

and the call to repentance is not declared, then our commendation of the Bible is incomplete.[50] Faithful Biblical proclamation identifies sin and heralds the Lordship of Christ, even as it reveals eternity hidden in an adolescent's heart.

A second problem with Bell's approach is its undermining of Scripture. It is good to acknowledge, as does Bell, the perspectival nature of our interpretations, instances when Christians have oppressively abused Biblical authority, and the irreducible mystery of God as presented in the Bible. Nevertheless, Bell so thoroughly deconstructs the Bible to appease postmodern sensibilities—without offering any defense of why he believes the Bible to truly be the word of God, or explanation of how we may properly interpret what it says—that his affirmation of Biblical inspiration appears meaningless, or at least unwarranted. Nominal Christians and New Agers may appreciate his candour. Skeptics, however, will find further justification for rejecting the Bible, and Bell's stories with it, without further consideration. Even for those youth who are open to hearing a Biblical story, it is hard to see why they should attend to Bell's message in the midst of a media age saturated with marketing that exploits and then promises to fulfil myriad adolescent desires without self-sacrifice. Bell unnecessarily distances himself from more rational and empirical arguments that may warrant a teen listening to the Bible over the cacophony of competing voices. We will explore the benefits of an integrated apologetic in chapter six. Presently we must modify Bell's approach toward a prophetic stance.[51]

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[50] Walt Mueller, "Culture Watch: Me Almighty," *Youth Worker Journal* 24, no. 1 (September/October 2007): 14-15.

[51] By itself, Bell's approach does not adequately commend the Bible as revelation. A prophetic stance, as advocated below, moves in this direction by enabling his approach to somewhat challenge adolescents rather than simply inspire them. Even so, this apologetic must be added to something akin to Schaeffer's and Strobel's approaches to commend the Bible as inspired and authoritative. Rather than trying to make each approach meet all needs—thereby losing the distinct strengths of each strategy—I have chosen instead to work with the basic structure of each approach, aware of its shortcomings, in the belief that only together can these strategies effectively commend the Bible. This will be worked out in chapter six.

*Modification and Application*

As we considered in chapter three, while western adolescents may be materially rich compared to those in the "two-thirds world," they are often spiritually poor. Our individualistic and hyper-consumeristic society has left many teens fragmented and fragile, disconnected from nurturing relationships, manipulated into empty purchases, infantilized by societal restrictions, and over-stimulated by pervasive media which distract youth from their fundamental need for relationship with a liberating God. For too many teens, self-harm, suicide or gangs offer their only hope of escape or empowerment.

Bell's stories draw on this angst to call individuals to something deeper. Yet this individual angst is symptomatic of institutional idolatries that God would have us confront. As the "Almighty Dollar" fails, terrorist threats abound, abortion is deemed a human right, and western greed is juxtaposed with endemic poverty and environmental degradation, the prophetic voice within the Bible must be recovered. Throughout the Bible, and in the Old Testament in particular, we find many examples of God's spokespeople employing dramatic theatre.[52] Props, powerful images and subversive stories served to *criticize* national hypocrisy and indifference to the cries of the oppressed, and in turn *energize* individuals and communities toward a vision of love, justice and righteousness.[53] Bell's approach could be extended to challenge the exploitation of adolescents by corporate interests. It could, for instance, be used to expose the "nearly invisible" MTV directors by "focus[ing] the public spotlight on the

[52] Cf. Exod. 7-12; 1 Kings 18:16-39; 1 Sam. 1:10-20; 3:13-26; 35:1-10; 42:1-9; Isa. 20:1-6; Jer. 13:1-14; 24; 45-51; Ezek. 4-5; 17:1-21; 23; 31; Hosea 1-2; Amos 7-8; Zech. 1-7. Jesus' parables (e.g., Luke 14:31-33) and John's challenge to all anti-kingdoms in Revelation further illustrate this point.

[53] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 3.

new image merchants to the youth culture."[54] Adolescent idealism and individualism may be "somewhat leveraged" to "show youth how very conventionally they are actually acting" by buying into the manipulation of mass-consumer capitalism.[55] By painting the compelling Biblical vision of *shalom*, we may thereby challenge youth to take real risks associated with a less materialistic and countercultural lifestyle of healing the world and freeing the captives as epitomized by Jesus.[56]

The addition of a prophetic edge to Bell's approach could take many forms. We may, for instance, invite adolescent outsiders to join us in serving the homeless and caring for the poor on a missions trip. During this time we could together read through the book of Micah, noting God's heart for the disenfranchised.[57] Perhaps we will find in today's hip-hop lyrics an "emancipatory discourse that 'keeps it real' by speaking about racism, sexism, broken families, economic injustice, failing public education, police brutality, and the search for God."[58] We could gather a group of teens interested in hip-hop to listen to songs such as Kanye West's "Jesus Walks," linking this to the Exodus narrative of God responding to embittered cries and acting on behalf of the downtrodden.[59] We may then ask these teens, "What kinds of oppression do you see in the world today, or have you personally experienced? How does God respond? How

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[54] Quentin J. Schultze and others, *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture and the Electronic Media* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 206.

[55] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 177, 268.

[56] Cf. Matt. 5:1-12; 6:19-34; Luke 4:16-22, 9:58.

[57] Cf. Mic. 2:1-11; 6:1-8.

[58] Harold J. Recinos, "Loud Shouts Count," in *For Such a Time as This: Esther 4:14*, The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church and Culture, ed. Douglas John Hall, Barbara A. Holmes, Patrick D. Miller, and Harold J. Recinos (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2006), 76-77.

[59] Kanye West, "Jesus Walks," produced by Kanye West, 3:13 min., Roc-A-Fella and Island Def Jam, 2004, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpzRPa1I81o&feature=related (accessed 2 July 2008).

would He have you respond?" We could together compose lyrics addressing contemporary evils, drawing on the Bible's prophetic words. These modifications to Bell's approach further establish the Bible's relevance by connecting their stories of struggle into the larger metanarrative of liberation. Youth may also find in the Bible both patterns of mourning and meaningful answers in the face of seemingly meaningless tragedy, guiding them in both lament and theodicy in a culture allergic to suffering.[60]

A second modification of Bell's approach for greater effect concerns delivery. Particularly for those of us who are not gifted storytellers, we would do well to shift Bell's apologetic from an entertaining monologue to an interactive and cluster-based dialogue in which we share stories. To this end, the work of Bob Ekblad is promising. Ekblad has developed a participatory Bible study suitable for "outsiders and alienated insiders"—poor migrants, prisoners, drug addicts, and so forth.[61] He notes that the marginalized often identify the Bible with the dominant culture, thus seeing it as a tool of tyranny. As such, Ekblad suggests we start by asking the participants, "What struggles, trials, temptations [and] challenges are you facing?"[62] He then chooses a Bible story that addresses their particular hardship. Ekblad helps participants "identify contemporary equivalents to the biblical narrative (location, characters, verbs, and other details) in their own lives and world."[63] Close questioning of the text reveals how God acts to free the marginalized, thus subverting their view of both God and the Bible.

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[60] Bob Yoder, "The Good News of Lament: How We Can Help Kids Face Tragedy and Grief," *Youth Worker Journal* 24, no. 1 (September/October 2007): 45-47. Cf. Pss. 13; 35; 50; 81; 86.

[61] Eugene Robert Ekblad, Jr., *Reading the Bible with the Damned* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), xiv.

[62] Ibid., 6-7.

[63] Ibid., 5. In Ekblad's exploration of the woman at the well (John 4:1-26), participants identity their "well" of choice—the mall, music, sex, drugs—yet also their unquenchable thirst (Ibid., 164-67). Jesus is

In one study, Ekblad asks participants "whether they envision God as a judge, and what they think sin is."[64] One inmate voices the dominant ideology that he is in trouble for failing to obey rules similar to those in the Bible. Ekblad says that he is not so sure. Turning to Genesis 2:16-17, he draws out through questions that God's first command was positive—to eat from all the trees in the garden—with the second command intended to preserve their life by keeping them from harm.[65] The prisoners are drawn to see that God wants the best for them, and that the Biblical story is a record of what happens when we do, or don't, trust this good God. Again, the participants' own stories of temptation, trust, and their at times misguided pursuit of freedom are drawn out, connecting them to the greater Biblical story. Ekblad's approach—especially when trained on passages such as the Fall in Genesis 2-3 and Jesus' dialogue with the Pharisees in John 8:31-36—enables us to address perhaps the most essential stumbling block that keeps both moderns and postmoderns from heeding the Bible, best expressed as a question: "What is freedom?"[66] In what sense are Christians—who submit to the authority of God exercised through the Bible—*more free* than adolescent outsiders who only recognize science, or who relativize all supposed authorities to serve their own desires? Is true freedom found in the elimination of all constraint—jettisoning the Bible's restrictive morality—or by embracing our God-given form as revealed in the Biblical story?[67] These questions drive us further to consider the relationship of individuals to society, what it means to love and

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portrayed as satisfying their underlying needs. This study could help teens recognize how consumerism fails to satisfy their thirst for joy, significance, belonging and love, in turn pointing them to Jesus.

[64] Ibid., 27.

[65] Ibid., 28-31.

[66] Heath White, *Postmodernism 101: A First Course for the Curious Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 163-64.

[67] This distinction comes from *CWFS, GED*, 308-310.

be loved, and the freedom that comes with forgiveness as we see in Jesus' anointing by a prostitute (Luke 7:36-50). As teens share times when they have felt most free, alive, connected and loved, we will hear echoes of God's call on their lives to experience Him.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have critiqued three distinct approaches that commend the Bible in order to discern their usefulness with contemporary western adolescents. Furthermore, I have suggested modifications toward greater effectiveness that address the shortcomings of each apologetic. In doing so, this study's central thesis has been supported.

*Schaeffer's approach equips apologists to open ears by undermining secularism.* It is especially effective with antagonistic atheists and uninterested agnostics and deists who have *a priori* rejected the possibility of an inspired revelation. Its primary function is to *challenge* teens by revealing weaknesses in their foundational presuppositions and inconsistency between what they profess and how they live. Exposing these disparities undermines their confidence, affording new openness to considering the Bible as a plausible system of answers to the big questions with which they grapple. We may modify this approach for greater effect by softening Schaeffer's assertions, pursuing genuine dialogue, and engaging teens within the context of their friendship clusters.

*Strobel's approach equips apologists to establish trust through advancing credible truths.* It is especially effective with skeptical teens who doubt Jesus' existence and dismiss the Bible as a corrupted collection of fables. Its primary function is to *inform* teens by demonstrating that the Biblical accounts can withstand scrutiny, thereby demonstrating its historical veracity. As their detailed questions are directly answered

with novel evidence, youth may decide that the Bible is more trustworthy than their skeptical reconstructions in accounting for all the data, thereby motivating them to read the Biblical account for themselves. As with Schaeffer's approach, we may modify this approach for greater effect by softening Strobel's assertions: our case for Biblical historicity is warranted though never compelling. Strobel's approach is best delivered by asking teens questions and progressively revealing our case rather than wasting words. Furthermore, we should extend his approach to support the Bible's moral credibility.

*Bell's approach equips apologists to arouse interest by engaging experience.* It is especially effective with nominal Christians and New Agers who are open to insights irrespective of source—teen magazines, star charts, song lyrics, the Bible—that excite their imagination, enthrall their emotions, and propel their pursuit of happiness. Its primary function is to *inspire* teens by making sense of their stories within the Biblical metanarrative, inviting them to fulfil their desire for something more by experiencing the joy of living Jesus' way. For a Biblically illiterate generation, this strategy non-coercively shares stories which demonstrate the existential truth, goodness and beauty of the Bible, thereby establishing its relevance as a resource upon which teens may draw in constructing a meaningful life. We may modify Bell's approach for greater effect by incorporating a prophetic edge that challenges contemporary idolatries in light of God's justice as declared in His inspired Word, and by sharing our stories with adolescent outsiders in a participatory Bible study that moves beyond entertaining monologues to an interactive and engaging group-based dialogue.

Our final task is to integrate these approaches into a person-centered apologetic that is responsive to the psychological and sociological positioning of individual adolescents.

# CHAPTER SIX

# CONCLUSION

## INTRODUCTION

How may we best facilitate the thinking of teens toward embracing the inspiration and authority of Scripture? As we have pursued an answer to this study's central question, we have confirmed the contemporary relevance of three distinct apologetic approaches. Francis Schaeffer's approach equips apologists to open ears by undermining secularism, thereby challenging teens to read the Bible as a plausible worldview. Lee Strobel's approach equips apologists to establish trust through advancing credible truths, thereby informing teens to read the Bible as a reliable account. Rob Bell's approach equips apologists to arouse interest by engaging experience, thereby inspiring teens to read the Bible as a relevant story. The final ascent from these penultimate conclusions to the pinnacle—that being an ideal apologetic commending the Bible to contemporary western adolescents—may seem a short walk. In reality, however, we must trek a thin ridge that avoids precipices on both sides: simplistic integration on the left, and partisan apologetics on the right.

On the left, an apologist is tempted to immediately integrate the strategies of Schaeffer, Strobel and Bell by challenging, informing and inspiring her adolescent interlocutor as opportunity presents. Granted, these three approaches do complement each other. Nevertheless, simplistic integration may be problematic for at least two reasons. First, a series of partially presented arguments may be incoherent and thus less

effective than one sustained argument. Each approach has a definite structure that may be compromised by too readily switching strategies, thus confusing a teen. For instance, having opened a teen's ears by questioning why he advocates for Amnesty International even while believing in survival of the fittest and moral relativity, it is more effective to proceed by contrasting his answers with logical and livable Biblical presuppositions than immediately switching to archaeological support for the Gospel of Luke or stories of Jesus announcing freedom for prisoners (Luke 4:18). That said, the apologist must be responsive to her interlocutor, and may wisely incorporate elements of other approaches to reinforce her central argument.

A second and more substantial problem with simplistic integration is that "apologetic arguments are not neutral resources that can be employed equally by all theological traditions. One's apologetic must naturally cohere with and emerge from one's worldview."[1] As we noted in chapter one, the distinctiveness of our three apologists' approaches arises in part because of competing theological convictions associated with systems stressing revelation, natural theology, or subjective immediacy.[2] Pragmatically, each approach has its place. Nevertheless, an apologist risks making all her arguments suspect by affirming contradictory claims.[3]

On the right, and in light of the aforementioned barriers to an integrated apologetic, another apologist may be tempted toward partisan apologetics—that is, playing the three approaches off against each other to argue for the superiority of his

[1] Scott R. Burson, and Jerry L. Walls, *C.S. Lewis & Francis Schaeffer: Lessons for a New Century from the Most Influential Apologists of Our Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 237-38.

[2] Bernard L. Ramm, *Varieties of Christian Apologetics*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1961), 15-17.

[3] The nature of these conflicts will be explored in the following section.

preferred system. Partisan apologetics "presuppose[s] without reflection that one correct apologetic method must apply to all apologetic situations. One size fits all!"[4] As we discovered in chapter three, however, a pluralistic society comprised of diverse youth—secular, New Age, nominal Christians, and other religious devotees—requires a multifaceted approach. As Burson and Walls note, in a "pluralistic, therapeutic, consumeristic, visually oriented age . . . Christians must offer a significant degree of ingenuity, creativity, sensitivity and versatility if we are to be heard above the cacophony of voices in today's chaotic marketplace of ideas."[5] It is better to synergistically meld Schaeffer's emphasis on reason, Strobel's emphasis on evidence, and Bell's emphasis on subjective experience than to engage in fruitless factionalism.[6] At the same time, "it would be wrong merely to paper over differences, to make . . . positions appear closer than they really are."[7]

In this final chapter, then, I map a path toward an integrated apologetic that preserves the integrity of Schaeffer, Strobel and Bell's approaches, even as it joins their strengths through mutually reinforced arguments that connect with a diverse audience. Furthermore, I commend to the reader a person-centered strategy that is responsive to the uniqueness of each adolescent with whom we may dialogue. I conclude the chapter by reviewing the key findings of this study and then exploring the challenge and hope associated with this apologetic enterprise.

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[4] David K. Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics: A Person-Centered Approach to Christian Defense* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1999), 111.

[5] Burson and Walls, *Schaeffer*, 21.

[6] John M. Frame, "Closing Remarks," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 358-59. Cf. 1 Cor. 1-3.

[7] Ibid., 359.

## TOWARD AN INTEGRATED APOLOGETIC

Before we can integrate the approaches of Schaeffer, Strobel and Bell, we must consider where their apologetic strategies and theological convictions conflict. As we explored in chapters four and five, Schaeffer was prone to claim that the Biblical system offers the only set of answers that are coherent and livable.[8] As a presuppositionalist he acknowledges that the fall has impaired our ability to think—known as the noetic effect of sin—such that he started his argument with the Scriptures as the only sufficient *standard* of truth.[9] Schaeffer would likely criticize Strobel's understatement of the role of presuppositions in weighing evidence, as though there were such a thing as a "neutral" or "objective" way of seeing the world and obtaining knowledge. As such, he may be uncomfortable with Strobel setting aside the inspiration of Scripture to consider it merely as a *source*—that is, "a collection of ancient documents claiming to record historical events."[10] In many ways Bell echoes these same concerns with Strobel's approach: we are finite and fallen, so our interpretations of evidence are perspectival and prone to error.[11] Bell's deconstruction of human knowing is, however, extended to our reading and interpretation of Scripture. He rhetorically asks, "It is possible to make the Bible say

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[8] *CWFS*, *HIT*, 288.

[9] Kenneth Boa and Robert M. Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons: An Integrative Approach to Defending Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2001), 523-24. Granted, Schaeffer was prepared to treat Biblical presuppositions as hypotheses that could be verified by what we perceive of "the universe and its form" and the "mannishness of man," but his underlying conviction was that objective truth is only found by *beginning* with what God has spoken (*CWFS*, *WHHR*, 381-82).

[10] Lee Strobel with Jane Vogel, *The Case for Christ: Student Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2002), 54.

[11] Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 56.

whatever we want it to, isn't it?"[12]—thereby threatening Schaeffer's claims that the Bible offers the only sufficient answers to human existence. How can one press the imperative claim when there are myriad ways of seeing the world and reading the Bible? Is there such a thing as *the* Biblical worldview or *the* Biblical set of answers? Bell's reframing of the Bible's authority as a self-attesting *story*—which he will happily tell but declines to defend—would trouble both Schaeffer and Strobel.[13] Schaeffer would likely warn that Bell's approach hastens our society's slide into epistemological relativism. Why offer only subjective lures when the Bible truly does answer the destructive confusion of contemporary teens influenced by postmodernism? Schaeffer may wonder whether Bell's purely experiential affirmation is any better than expecting teens to believe Biblical inspiration based upon "blind authority."[14] Strobel may challenge that Bell inconsistently seeks an historically informed interpretation of Scripture when it suits him—for instance, using Rabbinic insights to understand Jesus' teachings[15]—yet fails to defend the historical credibility of the Bible and the eyewitness accounts of the resurrection, upon which our faith is based.[16] Bell's demonstration that the Biblical story is true because it "happens" in our own personal stories—recapitulating the sequence of innocence, fall and redemption—fails to warrant his bald assertion that the Biblical story also "happened."[17] Strobel may similarly challenge Schaeffer: establishing that the Biblical system is coherent and therefore plausible fails to convince a skeptical teen

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[12] Ibid., 44.

[13] Boa and Bowman, Bell, *Elvis*, 27.

[14] *CWFS, EFR*, 264. As Clark notes, anecdotal evidence must be augmented with argumentation, for "using a story as the only evidence can be special pleading" (*Dialogical Apologetics*, 144-45).

[15] Bell, *Elvis*, 47-50.

[16] Cf. 1 Cor. 15:1-20.

[17] Bell, *Elvis*, 58-59.

unless you can show the Bible's correspondence to what actually happened in history, thereby making it credible.

These disagreements are significant, yet we need not fall into partisan apologetics for each strategy may serve to reinforce the others. Schaeffer's approach undermines an adolescent outsider's presuppositions thereby unsettling her to consider the plausibility of the essential Biblical framework. Granted, as Bell observes, there are many ways of interpreting the Bible, and the Scriptures are more than a system of answers or a rule-book. Nevertheless, the essential system of Biblical beliefs—a pre-existent and personal Trinitarian God, creation, the Fall, redemption through Christ, coming judgment and the consummation of all things—may be perceived to offer more satisfactory answers to her metaphysical, moral and epistemological questions than whatever beliefs she presently holds, especially if she has unreflectively accepted some from of naturalism or deism. Having exposed any presuppositions that hinder acceptance of an inspired revelation, Strobel's approach may invite her to see that not only are the Bible's answers plausible, but the Bible's historical and moral claims are credible. Based upon Biblical presuppositions, she cannot summarily dismiss as untrustworthy the eyewitness accounts that constitute the Gospels. Having established warrant for this adolescent outsider to trust the Bible, Bell's approach may capture her attention by showing how her own experience of disconnection and desire for something more fits within the Biblical metanarrative. As the Biblical story resonates with what she has experienced, her thinking schemes which were formerly closed to the Bible are further challenged to adapt in the direction of openness. This may in turn prompt her to reconsider the evidence and read the Bible for herself. We need not privilege one approach over another: each serves a unique purpose. It is therefore undesirable to blend these three approaches into an

entirely new strategy—rather, "the diversity of apologetic approaches is unavoidable and may actually be a good thing."[18] As we cycle through the actions of challenging, informing and inspiring the teen, drawing upon the complementary resources of reason, evidence and experience, each approach consolidates the others, thereby more effectively commending the Bible.

Not surprisingly, then, we find each apologist at various times branching out from his essential approach to reach a wider audience. Schaeffer briefly addresses the "critical problems" hindering outsiders from believing the Bible by making a case for the historical veracity of the Bible and the miracles therein.[19] He also begins his apologetic at the most notable point of existential tension in his interlocutor's life, thereby engaging in a form of argument akin to Bell addressing felt needs.[20] As we noted in chapter five, Strobel branches out by acknowledging the role of presuppositions in coming to a fair verdict, also moving beyond asking of the Bible, "Is it historically true?" to holistically asking, "Does it practically work?" Bell expands his approach by offering a cosmological argument—built upon the fine-tuning of universal constants and the anthropic principle—to make the protective claim that it is at least reasonable to believe in a Creator as described in Genesis.[21] Additionally, he asserts that Jesus' existence is historically supported even "if there wasn't a Bible."[22] Each apologist pursues a form of verificationism in which he begins with a tentative hypothesis, then subjects these

[18] Boa and Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 535.

[19] *CWFS*, *EFR*, 218-19; *WHHR*, 389-406, 517-32.

[20] *CWFS*, *GWIT*, 139-41; Boa and Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 474-75.

[21] Rob Bell, "Everything is Spiritual," presentation, 2006, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jzR_zKvAik (accessed 30 June 2008).

[22] Bell, *Elvis*, 124.

hypotheses to "testing and confirmation or disconfirmation by the coherence of [his] account with the relevant lines of data."[23] Schaeffer draws on what his interlocutor knows of the universe and her own human nature toward *logical* verificationism: the Bible is coherent. Strobel draws on historical data toward *empirical* verificationism: the Bible corresponds with what really happened. Bell draws on experiential data toward *existential* verificationism: living Jesus' way as described in the Bible works because it accords with ultimate reality.[24] A plausible, credible and relevant Bible is a reasonable—if not superior—hypothesis to the degree that it has been logically, empirically and existentially verified.

All theological traditions recognize "some role for the process of human thinking," even though "this human thinking is not by itself sufficient for salvation."[25] Apologists will continue to debate precisely how faith and reason relate in light of the noetic effects of sin: Strobel is relatively optimistic that Christians share common ground with outsiders, enabling us to reason together; Bell is relatively pessimistic about this same possibility—he believes that "what you look for, you will find" as people's beliefs about God and His Word are "not ultimately a cognitive ruling they've made. It's a posture of the heart"; Schaeffer sits somewhere in the middle. As such, the path to a legitimately integrated apologetic must follow the contours of some form of what David Clark calls *soft rationalism*.[26] That is, our fallenness, finitude, and the perspectival nature of all knowing preclude any imperative and "absolutist claims to knowledge." At the

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[23] Gordon R. Lewis, "Schaeffer's Apologetic Method," in *Reflections on Francis Schaeffer*, ed. Ronald W. Ruegsegger, (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1986), 71, 101.

[24] Bell, *Elvis*, 21. Cf. John 7:17.

[25] Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics*, 11.

[26] Ibid., 100.

same time, however, soft rationalism eschews "conceptual relativism" by protectively and comparatively commending what seems to us the most warranted hypothesis in light of logical, empirical and existential verification.[27] The modified approaches of Schaeffer, Strobel and Bell may then be synergistically integrated in a *cumulative case argument* which allows apologists to construct a "more informal argument with . . . several lines or types of data" all converging to commend the inspiration and authority of the Bible.[28] This path of integration minimizes the conflict among constituent approaches and maximizes the impact through mutually reinforced arguments, thereby forging an optimally flexible apologetic that is suitable for engaging a diverse adolescent audience in a pluralistic context. With greater flexibility, however, apologists must decide how to effectively enter each particular dialogue and which approach will best commend the Bible to that particular thinking teen. We require a person-centered apologetic.

## TOWARD A PERSON-CENTERED APOLOGETIC

Of the three approaches we have considered, Schaeffer's approach is the most complex procedurally.[29] As such, we must doubly note his warning against mechanistic application of any apologetic system:

> As Christians we believe that personality really does exist and is important. We can lay down some general principles, but there can be no automatic application. If we are truly personal, as created by God, then each individual will differ from everyone else. Therefore, each person must be dealt with as an individual, not as a case or statistic or machine.[30]

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[27] Ibid. This is similar to Burson and Walls' commendation of "firm apologetics" (*Schaeffer*, 244-247, 259), and Stackhouse's support of "critical realism" (*Humble Apologetics*, 104-5, 159-60).

[28] Cowan, ed., *Five Views*, 17-18.

[29] *CWFS, GWIT*, 129-48.

[30] Ibid., 130.

Furthermore, Schaeffer suggests what should be the "dominant consideration" driving every apologetic encounter:

> I do not believe there is any one apologetic which meets the needs of all people. . . . I think these things turn on love and compassion to people not as objects to evangelize, but as people who deserve all the love and consideration we can give them, because they are our kind and made in the image of God. They are valuable, so we should meet them in love and compassion. Thus, *we meet the person where he or she is*.[31]

Heretofore we have pursued an ideal apologetic for commending the Bible to a representative thinking teen. Granted, our understanding of this thinking teen is built upon an empirically informed psychosocial portrait of contemporary western adolescents as a whole. Yet, as David Clark notes, "I have never spoken to a human-in-the-abstract."[32] He contends that while "*truth* describes statements that accurately reflect objective states of affairs, . . . *knowledge* describes some person's grasp of truth."[33] As such, "all knowledge is person-centered. . . . Judging the effectiveness of an apologetic argument, therefore, means assessing the consequences of the argument for a particular person. . . . Knowing is a function of persons, not of brains."[34] In this sense there can be no "ideal" apologetic, for the same argument will be differently received by each adolescent relative to his or her mental skills, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, place of residence, relationship with the apologist, previous experiences with the Bible, parents' beliefs, presuppositions, predispositions, hopes, fears, and so forth. In tangible terms, my claim that the Bible is plausible, credible and relevant will be uniquely received by an Aborigine in Darwin, an African-American boy in Harlem, a disabled girl

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[31] Ibid., 176; emphasis mine.

[32] *Dialogical Apologetics*, 111.

[33] Ibid., 99.

[34] Ibid., 98.

in Vancouver, an atheistic preppie in Beverly Hills, and an ostracized Sikh in Surrey. Person-centered knowledge demands a person-centered apologetic. How, then, do we "locate" the thinking teen in order to "meet the person where he or she is," especially when today's adolescents are "complicated and 'all over the map'"?[35]

Perhaps an analogy will help the reader to visualize the multi-stage conceptual method I will soon suggest, that being *apologetic triangulation*. Imagine that you are part of a rescue operation searching for an adolescent lost in the wilderness. You possess an accurate map of the region and a cell phone allowing communication with the teen, though you have not yet determined where he is. You ask the teen to describe where he has walked and what he presently sees. He speaks of memorable creeks and mountains, though his present perspective is of nondescript trees and undulating hills. You encourage him to move toward higher ground—whether by inspiring, informing, or challenging him, it does not at this stage especially matter. As the dialogue continues and he moves upward, the obstacles obscuring his vision diminish. He now responds to your questions from a distinctive vantage point, helping you orient the map to his descriptions—a knoll here and a valley there. At this point your increasingly specific questions help you ascertain his position relative to the three most distinct surrounding features separated by the greatest angle. Using these rough angles you are able to draw three intersecting lines as "back-bearings" on your map which effectively *triangulate* where the teen is.[36] You may now more directly approach the teen from the direction of the nearest feature—though always with the other two features in view.

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[35] *CWFS, GWIT*, 176; Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 26.

[36] If orienteering is unfamiliar to the reader, see the section entitled "What If You Get Lost? Triangulation" at http://www.ussartf.org/compass_basics.htm (accessed 5 November 2008).

As this analogy implies, I am essentially suggesting that apologists pursue an integrated apologetic driven by insightful questions in the context of personal dialogue.[37] As Clark explains, "My knowledge of the other need not depend solely on group-based generalizations. I gain knowledge by asking honest questions, signaling openness and safety (verbally and nonverbally), and listening carefully."[38] Each question asks the teen to "take a step at the edge of [his or her] latitude of commitment" toward talking about, then considering, and finally reading the Bible for himself or herself.[39]

This thesis offers the reader a map of sorts that traces the psychosocial contours of contemporary western adolescents. At points this map is perhaps more an artistic representation than a work of scientific precision. Nevertheless, it is accurate enough to help you locate the whereabouts of the particular teen with whom you dialogue. A limitation of this analogy must be acknowledged at the outset: most adolescent outsiders do not perceive themselves as lost, and thus may resent and resist efforts to rescue them. Your dialogue must therefore be patient and noncoercive. By authentically entering into a teen's life, listening to stories of his journey thus far, you may earn his trust and discover reference points for subsequent dialogue. Based upon the little you know of this teen, you may ask indirect first-level questions inviting him to open up about how he sees the world—that is, encouraging him to move up higher.[40] Following Bell you may ask him to share what presently makes him most happy, hopeful, alive or afraid. Following Strobel you may ask him his opinion on what he was taught in science or history class or

[37] Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics*, 114.

[38] Ibid., 199.

[39] Ibid., 224.

[40] Walt Mueller shares a helpful list of twenty questions toward better understanding individual teens in *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture: Bridging Teen Worldviews and Christian Truth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 49.

saw in a related movie or documentary. You may also ask what he thinks about moral standards in light of the latest schoolyard gossip. If he still seems uninterested or resistant to opening up, you may gently probe how he reconciles apparent contradictions between what he says ("Right and wrong are relative") and what he does (judging others' indiscretions as self-evidently immoral). As he opens up, you will find opportunity to inspire, inform and challenge the teen, thus advancing the dialogue. As Stackhouse explains, in this initial process of trial and error you should "offer all the warrants you think might interest your friend. Who knows what might speak to the central issues in his heart?"[41] In the context of commending the gospel, he notes that

> only conversation that probes and tests, that questions and listens, will divulge how open someone is to receiving the gospel. And it will take time, in many instances, to determine whether the degree of resistance is primarily intellectual, moral, spiritual, or along some other dimension or combination of dimensions.[42]

If in doubt concerning where to start, I suggest the reader adopt Bell's approach which most powerfully (and least defensively) speaks to the sociological context of contemporary western adolescents. As a general guideline, Bell's approach is most effective with relatively open nominal Christians and New Agers, Strobel's approach is most effective with skeptical teens asking detailed questions, and Schaeffer's approach is most effective with atheists, agnostics and deists who are antagonistic toward or dismissive of the Bible as an inspired and authoritative revelation.

As the dialogue continues and the teen articulates what were formerly tacit beliefs and attitudes, you will form an increasingly clear sense of his interests, character and perspective. You may then ask more direct second-order questions that relate what he

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[41] Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 180.

[42] Ibid., 146.

has already shared to the Bible. A useful set of opening questions may include the following: Have you ever read the Bible? Why? (Or why not?) What did you make of it? If there were reasons to believe that the Bible really is God's inspired Word—and I said *if*—how might this make a difference in your life?[43]

Questions may then be asked which derive from the three distinct approaches of Schaeffer, Strobel and Bell. Following Bell you may ask what he understands to be the Bible's basic storyline, and if he identifies with any of the characters or subplots therein. (If he is unsure, you can share connections based upon what you already know of his life journey.) Following Strobel you may ask if there is one major objection he has to trusting what the Bible says. Following Schaeffer you may ask if he thinks it is possible that the Bible is a genuine account of a personal and intelligent God communicating with His creation. (Also, you may ask how the teen could discern whether the Bible is or isn't God's Word.) How he responds to these questions—with interest or indifference, clarity or confusion, warmth or hostility—roughly *triangulates* his location relative to the three approaches. At this point you may primarily engage the teen from the direction of whichever approach is most proximate and prominent to him personally—seeking to engage his experience, advance credible truths, or undermine secularism—drawing upon the other two approaches as needed in a cumulative case argument.[44] Such an approach may also be employed in dialoguing with adolescent clusters as you principally engage

[43] This final question paraphrases Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics*, 218.

[44] Boa and Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 511. For instance, while you may primarily be seeking to inform a skeptical teen of the Bible's historical and moral credibility, you may find it useful to challenge his naturalistic presuppositions that block him from accepting miraculous accounts and also share your story of how believing and living what Jesus taught has transformed your life.

the most vocal individuals speaking on behalf of the group. In doing so you engage in an integrated and person-centered apologetic flexible enough to be all things to all people.[45]

Beyond the scope of this thesis to explore in any depth, it must be noted that each apologist also possesses a particular locatedness which must be factored into all dialogues. For instance, I most identify with—and therefore prefer to argue from—Schaeffer's approach, followed by the approaches of Strobel and Bell. In the context of community I would be wise to introduce a teen most receptive to Bell's approach to a Christian friend with a gift for storytelling and a desire to inspire.

In sum, I propose to the reader the integrated and person-centered strategy of *apologetic triangulation.* I believe this strategy will fruitfully guide your efforts in commending to contemporary western adolescents the Bible as the Word of God. You may rightly ask at this point what can reasonably be expected of such a strategy. Positively, and in line with my central argument outlined in the introductory chapter, I contend that this strategy does facilitate the thinking of teens toward embracing the inspiration and authority of Scripture as it opens ears by undermining secularism, establishes trust through advancing plausible truths, and arouses interest by engaging experience. In light of the psychosocial context of today's teens, each of these three elements is necessary in reaching diverse youth. The reader can expect this strategy to move teens *toward* embracing the Bible as the Word of God. Negatively, however—and in spite of my great hopes for such a model—I contend that no apologetic is capable of *proving* the inspiration and authority of the Bible. We are finite and fallen and could be

[45] Cf. 1 Cor. 9:22.

wrong about all we claim. Therefore, no argument, irrespective of how tailored it is to an individual adolescent, can ever compel belief.[46]

Ultimately, "to truly believe . . . is itself a gift that God alone bestows. . . . God alone can change minds so that those minds can both see and embrace the great truths of the gospel, and the One who stands at their center."[47] "Success in dialogue," however, "is presenting the case for Christianity, by the Spirit's power, with rational force, cultural appropriateness, and personal sensitivity in the context of relationship."[48] Genuine dialogue demands nothing less than apologists being willing to patiently journey with adolescents, compassionately listen in identifying with their lives, and sensitively speak in blessing their lives, shaping and being shaped by that engagement.[49] To the degree that fruitfulness depends on our efforts, I believe *apologetic triangulation* is a success.

## CONCLUSION AND CHALLENGE: TOWARD AN EMPOWERED APOLOGETIC

How, then, may we effectively commend the inspiration and authority of the Bible to contemporary western adolescents? As we conclude this study, it is fitting to review what we have found. First, we must recognize that all teens are "thinking teens" who seek to make sense of their world to varying degrees. As such, any approach which emphasizes "the personal, the relational, the emotional and the aesthetic" to the exclusion of the mind is at best incomplete and at worst detrimental in our attempt to apologetically

[46] Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 228.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics*, 122.

[49] Philip J. Hughes, *Putting Life Together: Findings from Australian Youth Spirituality Research* (Fairfield, Australia: Fairfield Press, 2007), 205.

commend the Bible to adolescent outsiders.[50] Second, in light of the psychosocial complexity and diversity among today's teens, we require a flexible and multifaceted approach capable of opening ears by undermining secularism, establishing trust through advancing plausible truths, and arousing interest by engaging experience. With some modifications, the approaches of Schaeffer, Strobel and Bell effectively meet these needs. Third, despite conflicts among these three approaches, we may legitimately integrate them in a cumulative case argument that synergistically supports the reasonable, if not superior, conclusion—warranted by logical, empirical and existential verification—that God's Word is plausible, credible and relevant.[51] Fourth, in light of the unique locatedness of each teen and the Biblical affirmation of personality, we are wise to pursue a person-centered apologetic driven by insightful questions in the context of authentic dialogue. Through the process of *apologetic triangulation* we may roughly identify the particular perspective of our interlocutor, thereby determining our direction of approach. This responsive and custom-made apologetic serves to challenge, inform and inspire the thinking teen to read the Scriptures with an open and receptive mind, through which the Holy Spirit may convince the adolescent outsider that the Bible truly is the inspired and authoritative Word of God.

If, as I have argued, this integrated and person-centered apologetic effectively commends the Bible to contemporary western adolescents, then it may well provide a

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[50] Burson and Walls, *Schaeffer*, 253-54.

[51] By "verification," in this context, I mean the *process* of comparing two levels of system specification for proper correspondence—such as the process by which Strobel claims that the empirical evidence corroborates Biblical history. My use of "verification" is independent of the strength of my assertion, which clearly stops short of the imperative claim (i.e., that we have *proven* that the Bible is the Word of God, thereby dismissing all other hypotheses as unreasonable). Rather, I am contending for the protective or comparative claim (i.e., that this conclusion is reasonable, if not superior to other hypotheses). It is more to do with the common process of *verificationism* by which Schaeffer, Strobel and Bell's approaches may be understood to warrant the claim that the Bible is plausible, credible and relevant.

balanced framework guiding the construction of pre-evangelistic youth resources—Bible studies for campus groups, interactive web-sites, camp programs, Religious Education seminars, and so forth.[52] This approach should work equally well whether employed with an individual or an adolescent cluster. Although I am optimistic about the prospects for such a strategy, I close this study with a challenge to all of us who are prone to pragmatism: our hope is not in a tripartite apologetic; our hope is in the Triune God.

In our search for a more effective framework, we must remain forever watchful of our pride, aware of our limitations, and certain of our calling—lest we undermine the power of God with human wisdom (1 Cor. 2:5). Our apologetic efforts are at best a meaningful yet imperfect attempt to love God with our whole mind and our neighbour as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-40). Having done our best to talk about the Bible, and in an attitude of prayer-filled expectation, we must commit the teen to God in the hope that she will read the Scriptures for herself and then, in response to the Spirit's drawing, call out to be rescued by Christ—the one to whom the Scriptures point.[53]

We may be coworkers with God in the coming of the Kingdom, but we are never prime movers in the *missio Dei*.[54] We are drawn and elected by the Father, commissioned and sent by the Son, then empowered and directed by the Spirit.[55] Furthermore, we are adopted through Christ that we may proclaim the Kingdom of the

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[52] Indeed, it was the unanticipated receptivity of adolescent outsiders to a three-session interactive apologetic workshop I designed for Religious Education classes that motivated this present study.

[53] Randy Newman, *Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People's Hearts the Way Jesus Did* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004), 127. Cf. Luke 24:27; John 5:39.

[54] Cf. 1 Cor. 3:9; 4:11.

[55] John 6:44; Rom. 8:28-33; Titus 1:1-3; 1 Pet. 2:9; Matt. 8:28-30; John 17:18; Acts 1:8; 16:6-10.

Father, share the life of the Son, and bear the witness of the Spirit to the glory of God.[56] Our apologetic endeavours are only meaningful when situated within and contributing to the mission of God through the power of the Spirit. In apologetically commending the Bible, we do not defend a static book. God is speaking and His Word is living and active.[57] In this sense our arguments serve the overarching "witness of the Holy Spirit."[58] Ultimately it is the ongoing—though at times imperceptible—dialogue between the Spirit and the adolescent outsider that is pivotal in how he or she receives the Bible.[59] That being the case, it is insufficient for apologists to merely commend the Scriptures as the account of a God who is there and is not silent.[60] We must also know the power of God and continue "listening to the God who speaks."[61] In Schaeffer's words, "If we would work with these people, we cannot apply the things we have dealt with in this book mechanically. We must look to the Lord in prayer, and to the work of the Holy Spirit, for the effective use of these things."[62]

Humbly, then, do I offer in this study an apologetic approach that may effectively commend the Bible to contemporary western adolescents. I do so in faith that God will receive it as an act of worship in spirit and truth for His glory, and in hope that "The Bible says . . ." may once again really mean something to the thinking teen.

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[56] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995 [1978]), v, 64-65. Cf. John 17:18-23; Gal. 4:4-7; Eph. 1:3-14; Col. 1:11-20.

[57] Isa. 55:10-11; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; Heb. 4:12-13.

[58] Paul D. Feinberg, "Cumulative Case Apologetics," in *Five Views*, ed. Cowan, 157-58.

[59] Cf. 1 Cor. 2:12-16.

[60] *CWFS*, *HIT*, 276.

[61] Klaus Bockmuehl, *Listening to the God who Speaks: Reflections on God's Guidance from Scripture and the Lives of God's People* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1990). Cf. Matt. 22:29.

[62] *CWFS*, *GWIT*, 130.

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# VITA

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