

VBC

Guest Speaker: Corey Miller

1 Peter 3:15-16

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Why American Christianity Must Change or Die

First, thank you all for providing a flourishing environment for my family over these last two years while directing the high school ministry. There are many reasons why we would want to stay: great friends, a solid staff, an enthusiastic church, opportunities for me to teach at Multnomah, and my wife to perform in the arts. With all that, why go? Answer: God's calling!

I've recently become the apologetics and philosophy advisor, writer, and speaker for TNET, a mission organization to the Islamic world. Also, in August I'll begin Ph.D. studies in philosophy at Purdue U., the final stage of a 13-year vision. My ultimate goal is to invade the secular universities to teach comparative religion and philosophy from a Christian perspective, while being involved in the local church, equipping believers in their faith to reach a lost world. Like the story of the Greek Trojan Horse & the city of Troy, the church has been unsuccessful in breaching the walls of the university from outside. Therefore, we must engage and take back the enemy castle from within.

Those of you who know me, recall that I was raised as a Mormon in Salt Lake City, Utah. The first few years after my conversion to Christ were rough, faced with the possibilities of either reconverting back into Mormonism or even conceding skepticism. As I became immanently aware of so many other competing religions and philosophies, I found comfort in the fact that there were reasons to believe my new Christian faith. And I thank God that there were deep and articulate believers who could help love and ground me in the answers of faith, who were instrumental in my spiritual and intellectual growth, and equipping me for the task of evangelism. And the longer I've been a Christian, the need to defend the faith hasn't diminished. Yet, I sense a great aversion towards it in our American Christian culture.

How many of you feel like you could defend your faith with a Mormon missionary (ave. Baptist), or a university religion or science professor who claims the Bible is inaccurate? My sermon title, "Why American Christianity Must Change or Die," is taken from a book written by the liberal Ep Bishop, John Shelby Spong, who believes that evangelical Christianity must modernize itself and do away with talk of miracles, the supernatural, God, and the like. He points out that most evangelical Christians are not aware of the battle taking place in the university. I agree only with his last point. My intent with this title is that unless Christians prepare for the task of defending historic Christian truth intellectually, sustained by a virtuous Christian lifestyle, American Christianity may die. Note carefully, I do not want you to take home that you should all become intellectuals. Rather, it is my intent, and the intent of Scripture, that we all learn to intelligently engage our faith so that we can intelligently engage the world about our faith. Much of my life revolves around the passage we'll explore: I Peter 3:15-16 (p. 858).

(15) "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. (16) But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."(p.858 in Pew Bibles)

This was likely written just prior to the massive persecution under Caesar Nero in AD 64 where many Christians were placed on stakes and burned alive to illuminate the roads to Rome. In the ancient world, much like today, Christian faith was viewed with skepticism and scorn. Peter was encouraging believers to stand up for their faith even in the midst of intense suffering. Quoting Isaiah in v. 14, he says that even if we suffer for our beliefs, we are blessed and that we shouldn't fear the powers of this world. Instead, it should be God whom we fear, with a righteous reverence. In v. 15 Peter then says, "sanctify the Lord God in your hearts." Make Him the epicenter of your soul. In light of this, we are told "always be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you," and the manner in which we are to do this is with "gentleness and respect." By this winsome manner, no one can have a charge against you, and they may well become attracted to you.

Well, what is this word, "apologetics," I mentioned earlier? It doesn't mean as it sounds in English – to apologize – as if you're sorry for something. The Greek word *apologia* translated here in vs. 15 as "to give an answer" literally means to make a defense, like an argument used by the defense in a court. Scripture doesn't invite us to participate in giving reasons for our beliefs; we are commanded to do so! And it is modeled by someone so noteworthy as Paul (Acts 17).

We are commanded to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give a reason for your beliefs. What is a "reason"? The Greek word is *logos* from which we derive our English word logic or reason. Therefore, in our evangelism we are told to make a rational defense to everyone who asks us about our hope and faith in Christ. Our belief in Christ isn't supposed to be something merely mystical or emotional. God is also a rational God and we are created in His image. Christianity is not a blind faith; rather, it is a reasonable faith. Faith and Reason are compatible.

Now, I'm not opposing the concept lifestyle or relationship evangelism where our lives ought to reflect our faith and aid the task of evangelism. Peter tells us here to live an apologetic lifestyle. Someone once asked, if you were held on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence in your lifestyle to convict you? Our lives ought to preach! However, relationship-only-evangelism, a great starting point for reaching our generation, is a terrible ending point as it is both unbiblical and impractical. How, for example, would a prospective convert decide between becoming a Christian vs. another religious position, assuming both moral lifestyles are equivalent? When two contradictory religions seem equal in lifestyle, something else must make a difference. And that thing which should make a difference, namely that Christianity is true and not any of its competitors, is exactly what most Christians lack – the ability to articulate and defend even though souls depend upon it! No matter how accurately you reflect the Christian lifestyle, you still need to verbalize and give reasons. No one wants to believe something stupid or absurd, do you? You could be the nicest person that individual knows, but also the most gullible.

In the West, we've enjoyed what has largely been known as a Christian civilization for centuries. Many don't realize this, but the very notion of the modern university was developed in Medieval Christian Europe because theology, the study of God, was viewed as the unifier of all knowledge disciplines (e.g. economics, history, science, medicine, family affairs, etc.) Hence, the "unity" in "diversity" in the term "university." It was Christian thinkers who started virtually every major sub-discipline in modern science. Medieval pastors were rigorously trained in the intellectual virtues and were often viewed as moral AND intellectual authorities in culture.

While the church today is progressing in some areas, it is dying in others. Did you know that we currently have over 2,000 missionaries ministering in America from 115 different countries (an

indicator of our decline)? We need to ask ourselves a few important, but painful questions. First, why is our impact on our culture so paltry or disproportionate to our numbers? With all our millions of adherents and billions of dollars in resources, why do we not create more than a dent in our culture? In fact, the reverse is true. And second, how is it possible to be a member of an evangelical church for 10-15 years and still know next to nothing about the history and theology of Christianity? Or not possess the skills needed for serious Bible study and the ability to articulate and defend our faith in our culture where 25% of people of age hold a college degree?

Norman Malcolm

“In Our Western academic philosophy, religious belief is commonly regarded as unreasonable and is viewed with condescension or even contempt. It is said that religion is a refuge for those who because of weakness of intellect or character are unable to confront the stern realities of the world.”

The two most prominent areas that the current church is most unlike its ancestry are in the areas of moral and intellectual virtues. We're spiraling downward. In the 60's, while great evangelism took place in the Jesus Movement, we lost the Bible and prayer in the public schools. In the 70's abortion was legalized (1/3 of all babies are aborted); the 80's saw the country polarized over homosexuality; since this time, we have had university professors advocate infanticide and nearly every sort of sexual perversion imaginable that I probably should not even mention from this pulpit. And why not expect these things to occur? They were practiced by most cultures throughout the history of the world with some exceptions like Judeo-Christian civilization. If our culture believes God to be an artifact or myth, then there is no moral law higher than culture and ethics becomes a matter of personal or cultural preference like flavors of ice cream.

[Sunset High experience – class question about torturing a baby for fun amounted to rejecting God]

We cannot hope to advance a Gospel in a culture that considers Christian belief akin to belief in the Flat Earth Society. To many, Christians are viewed, at best, as good hearted but brainless people; at worst, immoral persons claiming moral prominence when in fact their ranks are filled with pedophile priests and other hypocritical lifestyles. To many in this hostile world, we have not the moral or intellectual authority driving people to ask us for the reason for the hope that lies within us. Peter told us to be “prepared” to give an answer and in this we're failing in American Christianity. Many Christians are afraid to share their faith largely because they feel ill-prepared and don't know what they'd say if asked tough, or even sometimes basic questions. We live in an age when many now think that being a Christian and being brainless are synonymous.

Edmund Burke

“All that needs to happen for evil to triumph is for good men to stand by and do nothing.”

Near the beginning of last century, the Christian community withdrew itself from academia, media and government. We have paid an exorbitant price for this decisive move and are now feeling its results. We pay thousands of dollars every year for our students to go to secular universities only to have their faith undermined by anti-Christian professors and ideologies. And since the church, for various reasons, is at its intellectual nadir (or low point) over the last 2000 years, we fail to train our students for this arena. (*If able, please stand*) Campus Crusade for Christ, Josh McDowell Ministries, and Barna, all record that 70% of all high school graduates from youth groups fall away from their faith while in college! The Princeton's and Yale's of the Christian past are now fully under the majority control by anti-Christian philosophy. This is why I believe the secular university is a definite mission field with a great lack of Christian influence.

Adolf Hitler said, “Give me the textbooks and I will control Germany.” And he did! Thomas Jefferson said, “The philosophy in the school room in one generation will be the philosophy of government in the next.” He was right! Beliefs form Behavior. Are we prepared? Are our youth prepared? The word on the street is that when we were children we learned about Santa and God in the same breath, and when we hit college we become enlightened to what these concepts really are: fables. The common statistic is that people become Christians in America primarily before age 18 and after this we may well have lost them. But is this because we/God can’t win them to Christ, or merely because we aren’t winning them to Christ because we fail to attract them when they are intellectually inclined during and after their college years?

Mark Noll

“There is not much of an evangelical mind.”

Bertrand Russell

“Most Christians would rather die than think—in fact, they do.”

Is it any wonder why we aren’t reaching a large segment of our culture? For many, it just isn’t plausible to hold an intellectual belief in Christianity and its God and savior. An anti-intellectual Christianity is shown to spawn a half-breed Samaritan kind of Christianity that is neither good, practical, nor biblical in terms of loving God with our minds (Matt. 22:37) or accomplishing the great commission in this life (Matt. 28:18-20), both of which Jesus commands.

[Juliet Story]

While down in S. California working on an MA in Philosophy, I ran into a girl named Juliet studying philosophy at a coffee shop. As I engaged her in conversation, she informed me that she was a believer who converted from atheism. She came over from E. Europe as an atheist, studying psychology at USC. While there, she took a course in philosophy under Dallas Willard, a Christian philosopher and devotional writer. She was absolutely amazed by this man for he was the first intelligent Christian she’d ever met, she says. Intrigued by this, she took another course under him and began noticing that his character was head and shoulders above the other members of the faculty. This professor presented an intelligent Christianity sustained by a virtuous moral life, which ultimately attracted her to convert from atheism to Christ.

This example provides a model for all of us, not to become intellectuals per se, but to intelligently engage our faith so that we can intelligently engage the world about our faith, sustained by a virtuous moral life and see people converted.

By way of application, how can you help reverse this anti-intellectual trend?

- (1) **Become an authentic committed Christian**
- (2) **Watch your lifestyle ensuring consistency with what you say you believe**
- (3) **Be more intentional with your time & read Scripture, pray, and do evangelism**
- (4) **Read books that help defend your faith & use reason in your soul’s transformation:**
 - a) *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*
 - b) *Why I Am a Christian*
 - c) *The Case For Christ.../Faith/...Creator series*
 - d) *Love Your God With All Your Mind*