

“Chris Brooks’s *Urban Apologetics* is a timely and welcome work on such a critical issue. Brooks tells us flat out that to be effective in the urban environment (where family breakdown, religious pluralism, abortion, poverty, and a justified wariness of religious hypocrisy are rampant), the Christian apologist’s actions must speak more loudly than his words. Brooks’s book is a call first to understanding (of the gospel, the Christian worldview, and the urban environment) and ultimately to deeds of love in the name of Christ.”

—Alan B. Terwilleger, President,  
The Chuck Colson Center for Christian Worldview

“Christopher Brooks thinks deeply, evaluates biblically, and researches exhaustively. In his *Urban Apologetics* he wades into some of the most difficult and complex issues—both philosophically and practically—that are perplexing today’s analytical thinkers. His use of empirical evidence, combined with his rock-solid belief in the absolute truth of Scripture, enables him to peer into areas such as sexuality, the family, and social justice with extraordinary clarity and precision. Further, he has a good sense of aesthetics, acknowledging the place of art and the humanities along with research from hard science and social science in illuminating problems particularly cogent to urban families. This is not a quick read—I recommend reading, rereading, and making Brooks’s chapters the subject of serious thought and discussion. Here is meat for the hungry intellect and drink for the soul thirsty to illuminate a relativistic society with the unchanging truths of God’s Word.”

—Bill Katip, PhD, President,  
Grace College & Seminary, Winona Lake, Indiana

“I urge you to read *Urban Apologetics* written by my dear friend, Christopher Brooks. There is such a hunger and need within our urban communities for truth, specifically God’s truth, and I am excited that Christopher has tackled this issue head-on. He brings sound theological principles in a contemporary way that engages the urban audience to learn and apply the teachings not only to their lives but to the broader, inner-city community.”

—Paul Cannings, PhD, Senior Pastor, Living Word Fellowship Church,  
Houston, Texas, and president of Power Walk Ministries

“Until now, the discipline of apologetics has neglected a sizeable and needy audience: city dwellers. As such, those who live urban often doubt the relevance and veracity of biblical Christianity. With their questions ignored at best and stifled at worst, people of the city have sought answers from competing systems to Christianity, such as Islam. For this reason, I am deeply grateful for Christopher Brooks and his book, *Urban Apologetics*. It needs to be in the hands of every believer who has a passion to reclaim the urban centers of America for Christ.”

—J. Paul Nyquist, PhD, President, Moody Bible Institute

“Far too often these days, the proclamation and defense of truth is sacrificed as we try to be relevant and missional to various segments of American culture. Chris Brooks both knows and acts differently, and in this book he describes how and why apologetics is still as necessary as ever, including in the urban context. Chris is both theoretician and practitioner, a rare combination. This book is both a significant contribution to the field of apologetics, and a call to those ministering in the urban context to not choose between love and truth; in that, it too is a rare combination.”

—John Stonestreet, Speaker and Fellow for the Chuck Colson Center for Christian Worldview and cohost of BreakPoint radio

“Chris Brooks is an intelligent and compassionate voice in our day. His keen understanding and winsome style make *Urban Apologetics* a valuable resource for anyone interested in understanding the diverse issues that face those working and living in our major cities and learning how to address those issues in biblically practical ways. *Urban Apologetics* is a must-read for anyone interested in reaching the mind and heart of today’s urban generation.”

—Abdu H. Murray, Speaker and author of *Grand Central Question: Answering the Critical Concerns of the Major Worldviews*

“In the earliest days of the church, apologetics was an activity done in the urban centers of the Mediterranean region. Christopher Brooks transported me back to that rough and tumble ancient world using modern urban issues and categories. This is a much needed book that deserves a wide reading.”

—Craig J. Hazen, PhD, Director, MA Program in Apologetics, Biola University, and author of the apologetics novel *Five Sacred Crossings*

WHY THE GOSPEL IS  
GOOD NEWS FOR THE CITY

# URBAN APOLOGETICS

CHRISTOPHER W. BROOKS

 Kregel  
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# FOREWORD

Several years ago I read the account of a remarkable young man of faith—a visionary of considerable ability, integrity, and honesty. He held a key position on the staff of the leader of a major world power. Despite his humble sounding job title, he had major administrative responsibilities. He was a valued advisor to the country’s leader and determined who had access to him.

Most in such a position would consider themselves “set for life,” but this was not the case with *this* young man. His people were trapped in a dysfunctional urban situation—the “hood.” They were suffering the effects of a past ordeal that depleted much of the population while simultaneously experiencing a present oppression. Not only was the “hood” in bad shape, the whole city was degenerating because of bad public policy, dishonest politicians, and corrupt government. As a result, much of the city had deteriorated. Major structures were in ruins and the people were demoralized, apathetic, and broken. Furthermore, they were in the midst of a grave cultural crisis.

When a close family member informed this young man of the tragic plight of his people, he was moved with compassion as he fasted and prayed for them. Not only that, but he acted on that compassion in practical ways by taking a leave of absence from his prestigious job to bring on-site help and empowerment to his downtrodden people.

Having assembled the necessary public and private sector resources, he discretely arrived in the “hood” to check things out. There was no fanfare.

Instead he quietly listened to the people's core concerns, and developed a plan to rehab the burned-out ruins and restore their faith. In essence, *he was engaging in urban apologetics.*

Christian apologetics has always been involved with defending and commending the faith. In this case, most of the residents of the "hood" were people of biblical faith, but in their distress, they had strayed far from their faith, both in belief and practice.

The apologetics ministry of this young man had a profound effect on his people. Not only were the ruins restored, *their faith was renewed.* The exploitative practices the wealthier residents inflicted on their poorer neighbors were ended, and the people were empowered to live lifestyles closer to a biblical worldview.

The name of this young visionary was Nehemiah, and the world power was ancient Persia. The leader was King Artaxerxes I, the time was the mid-fifth century B.C., and the "hood" was Jerusalem.

Christopher Brooks's call for urban apologetics should not come as a surprise to any serious student of the Bible. Scripture addresses all human core concerns, and it is the duty of the Christian apologist to wisely apply God's Word to all forms of controversy including poverty, bad public policy, injustice, ethical chaos, the devaluation of human life, the disintegration of the family, the loss of identity, and gender confusion, to name just a few. It is also the duty of the apologist to apply the Word to all forms of unbelief—both doctrinal and functional apostasy from the Christian faith as well as the challenge of other belief systems ranging from Islam to atheism to "apathism" (apathy about the existence or nonexistence of God).

Traditional apologetics has largely remained silent on many forms of controversy and unbelief associated with contemporary realities of the "hood." *Urban Apologetics* is a welcome contribution to filling this gap. This gap becomes more prevalent as issues we have associated with the "hood" spill over into mainstream culture. Pastor Brooks skillfully shows us how classical apologetics can and does address many core issues we increasingly face, issues that are contributing to a developing cultural crisis in this country and throughout the globe.



It is my hope that *Urban Apologetics* will inspire others to take on the noble task of commending and defending the Christian faith in non-traditional cultural contexts. This would certainly glorify God. We would also be far better off as a society with an army of people like Nehemiah and Christopher Brooks applying and living out the restorative truth of God's Word where people are hurting the most.

*Urban Apologetics* is a necessary addition to the library of anyone who is serious about the Great Commission.

CARL F. ELLIS JR.  
Lecturer in Practical Theology  
Westminster Theological Seminary



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Additional thanks goes to Nicole Johnson and Ruby Bailey who used their time and talents to edit the original manuscript, to Michael Smokovitz who made a huge sacrifice of time to write the appendix, and to Latitia Watkins for her excellent executive administrative support and, even more importantly, faithful intercession on my behalf. Your prayers have made an immeasurable difference in my life.

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# INTRODUCTION

For the past five years, I have had the extraordinary privilege and, at times, the unenviable task, of hosting a series of public forums entitled “Answering the Challenge.” The goals of this meeting are simple—select a proactive topic, bring together folks from around the community who care deeply about the issue, present the biblical worldview on the subject, and allow the group to engage in a respectful, but no holds barred, conversation. The result of these gatherings has been an amazing mixture of passionate dialogue and compassionate evangelism. I have found that by discussing a topic that is important to both Christians and non-Christians alike in an environment that values ideas, a passion is ignited to find truth and answers to the tough questions facing our society. This straightforward approach to addressing the critical issues of our day from a gospel-centered perspective is what some have called *apologetics*.

Maybe the most beautiful aspect of the work that I am doing is the fact that it is taking place in the heart of urban Detroit. For some, this may seem to be the least likely place for meaningful philosophical discourse, but for the thousands who participate in these town hall–type “rap sessions,” nothing could be further from the truth. As an African-American, I am keenly aware of the lack of urban voices in the crucial conversations of our time. In my estimation, this void is not due to a deficit of well-trained, critical thinkers in our urban settings. Rather, it is often the case that these voices have been convinced that there is no audience for their

dialogue and no space for them in apologetics. My hope is that this work will debunk that myth.

Increasingly, publishers are recognizing the growing hunger among urban Christians for books on theological topics from authors who can understand and relate to their unique sociological concerns and specific context of life and ministry. Additionally, there is far more awareness than ever before of the number of highly qualified authors who come from an urban background and possess the skills to do great theological writing. This has contributed to the success of authors such as Anthony Bradley, Tony Evans, Bruce Fields, Voddie Baucham, and Thabiti Anyabwile, just to name a few. To be clear, these scholars possess the intellectual ability and creditability to write broadly on an unlimited range of subjects. They are not simply “urban” intellectuals. However, their life experiences enable them to relate to the interpersonal realities of the urban reader in a unique way. Yet, as more doors are opened for minority voices in the field of biblical studies, what is still desperately lacking are books that equip urban Christians to take the teachings of Christ and apply them to the most important and defining issues facing our communities and society.

## The Dual Challenge

To be sure, there are legitimate reasons why there is a shortage of books dealing with this subject matter. One of the greatest obstacles an author who desires to write an urban apologetics text faces is the daunting task of composing a work that speaks to a dual audience. On the one hand, a book of this nature must make a reasonable attempt to honor the long tradition of Christian apologetics and those who have contributed to its growth and acceptance as a valuable field of study. This group has historically been, by and large, ethnically homogeneous, having very little racial diversity.

On the other hand, if an author expects an urban audience to become excited about his work, he must demonstrate the ability to connect on a more soulful level and not give in to the temptation to avoid addressing sensitive social issues. However, this is not a challenge without precedent.

We can draw an analogy from the life of C. S. Lewis who was confronted with a similar difficulty as he attempted to appeal to both the academic Oxford University audience and the lay-level Anglican Church audience of his day. Oxford, known for its staunch intellectual naturalism, and the Anglican Church, which possessed deep biblical conviction and faith, were miles apart in their thinking during Lewis's day. However, Lewis chose to be energized rather than intimidated by the challenge of bringing these two groups together. As ambitious as it may be to address a dual readership, the urban apologetics author, by necessity, must fully embrace this opportunity to be a true bridge builder.

## Defining Terminology

One of the goals of this book is to bring about a greater connection between urban Christians and those who do the work of apologetics and theology. A major key to this task is defining certain terms that will be used throughout. It is vital that we don't mistakenly assume a common understanding of the basic terminology within our conversation on how apologetics looks in an urban context. Walter Martin illuminates this point in his famous book, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, by highlighting the unique danger in apologetics and evangelism of assuming that just because two people are using the same jargon, phrases, or vocabulary that they are ascribing the same meaning to those words. "The student of cultism," Martin states, "must be prepared to scale the language barrier of *terminology*. . . . He must acknowledge the very real fact that unless terms are defined . . . the semantic jungle that the cults have created will envelop him, making difficult, if not impossible, a proper contrast between the teachings of the cults and those of orthodox Christianity."<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, whenever I reference the word *apologetics*, I mean the art and science of commending and defending the gospel of Jesus Christ. More specifically, I am referring to the responsibility every Christian has to always be ready to give a reason for the hope that lies within (1 Peter 3:15). This hope is based upon several pillars of faith that Christians hold deeply. These tenets will be fleshed out more precisely throughout this book.

Suffice it to say, the apologist is quite simply called to give clear answers to the questions that people are asking concerning what Christians believe, especially in light of the current issues that arise in our culture. This is exactly what the apostle Paul expressed in Colossians 4:6 when he states, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”

Paul realized that living out faith does not happen in a vacuum. Every generation of Christians throughout history has lived in a particular context and has had to interact with those who held different beliefs. Likewise, we cannot ignore the unique lifestyles, moral struggles, artistic expression, and the plurality of religions that are specific to the times in which we live. Nor can we hide from the concerns and challenges that our non-Christians friends, co-workers, and neighbors have about our faith. It is from within this cultural context that we must address the heads and hearts of men and women who are personally and publicly wrestling with how to make sense out of a world that is crazy, fallen, and yet full of God’s glory. This has been the Christian community’s responsibility since our inception. This fact further supports the reality that the world expects, and rightly so, that Christians demonstrate the ability to provide well-reasoned answers to the problems that exist in society. If we cannot give an authentic and articulate response to today’s challenges, non-Christians will be left to assume it is because the gospel lacks a sufficient solution for what ails humanity.

Another important term to be defined is “urban Christian.” I use this term to refer to men and women who live, minister, and are called to reach the residents of our inner cities throughout America. This is an untapped apologetics gold mine that is far too often overlooked by evangelical Christianity. Like most gold mines, it will take hard work and wise excavation to harness the treasure buried within this mission field. Such work requires prophetic vision on behalf of the broader apologetics community and the urban church, but the deep digging is worth our investment.

Never before has there been such a great door, opened so widely, for



the urban Christian to impact the world. The global missions movement is crying out for ethnically diverse faces to go to the nations, which are skeptical of the Christian message and bruised from past missionary failures. Postmodernists are also looking for fresh voices that can speak from an urban perspective and vantage point, not only to contribute but also to mediate the polarizing discussions of our day. As both a pastor and professor, I am compelled by Scripture to thoroughly furnish these men and women with the tools needed to accomplish every good work that Christ has assigned them. The greatest of these tools are wise and well-framed biblical answers to the questions urban America is asking of the faith. These issues range from matters of poverty, public policy, and personal suffering to those of social justice and sexual identity. These questions are as diverse as they are difficult, to say the least. This requires the urban missionary to be both an ethicist and exegete, well trained in the Word and well informed in matters that are shaping our world.

Sadly, too few apologists or missionaries are equipped to engage this audience. Of even more concern is the lack of intentional training and contextualized resources available on this subject for men and women who desire to engage in urban apologetics. It is time for bridges to be built between the urban Christian and the field of apologetics. Most urban Christians have no idea that there is an entire segment of the body of Christ that is dedicated to providing other Christians with thoroughly thought-out answers to the questions they are encountering as they engage culture. Equally true is the fact that most apologists, unfortunately, are not broad enough to factor into their work the particular issues that urban Christians must handle in order to effectively evangelize their community. As Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison once stated, “If there is a book that you really want to read and it hasn’t been written yet, you must write it.”<sup>2</sup>

## Engaging Culture

Cultural engagement of this kind is tremendously complex, but absolutely necessary. Daily, I fight the temptation to resign myself to a form

of comfortable and neat Christianity that buries its head in the proverbial sand and ignores the social ills that grip our communities. There are many days when I find myself mentally exhausted and emotionally numb as I consider the fact that over 70 percent of the babies born into my community don't have a father in the home. Even more disturbing is the fact that many of these babies have "baby daddies" who have become enmeshed in a broken judicial system that incarcerates black males at an alarming rate. As civil rights activist Michelle Alexander reports, there are now more young African-American men behind bars, on parole, or on probation than were enslaved in the 1850s.<sup>3</sup> But, I am ever mindful that if the church takes the indifferent path of an insulated fundamentalism that refuses to acknowledge, let alone engage, the culture by providing Christ-centered solutions to these problems, then we will lose the little credibility that remains for us within the African-American community.

Now more than ever we must ask ourselves, where will the teenager, who is so overwhelmed by the deep disillusionment and desperation that seems to blanket her generation, turn? Who will answer the young man who is screaming at the world in anger, asking why he had to be born into poverty and to a family that is broken and dysfunctional, all while trying to make sense of a community that seems to surround him with only death and depression? She and he are the human faces of urban apologetics. Someone has to help them see how following Christ is a better alternative than hustling on the street and living the thug life. We don't have the luxury of mere academic, classroom, and theoretical discussions about these issues. Real people need real answers to their unfolding, real-life dramas.

Today's urban church faces a daunting challenge. It must seize the opportunity to patiently and lovingly address the wave of emotions that many of its members are agonizing over in their personal battle with same-gender attraction. It must address the tough questions that countless thousands, who feel economically neglected and disenfranchised, are asking of the Christian faith. It must provide a strong urban family apologetic for those who were never taught the principles of biblical manhood

and womanhood and who find themselves living in marriages that hurt so badly that divorce seems like the only option.

Urban missionaries can't afford to overlook those who are searching for meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in a world that appears to be devoid of them all. I am convinced that the gospel has real and relevant answers for the men and women who find themselves tortured by these scenarios. We can choose to shut our eyes and close our ears to the unsavory and sometimes revolting imagery that comes through the lyrics of hip-hop rappers, spoken word artists, and poets, but they are all asking the same question, "Who will give us an answer?" Urban Christian leaders have to answer the call to mentor members within our churches who are courageous and equipped enough to face these realities head-on.

## The Urban Challenge

Many urban Americans are confused and disenchanted by the lack of truthful and honest answers they feel they have received from those who profess to know the gospel. Journalist Marcia Dixon of *The Voice* argues, "If churches want to really reach men . . . they have to acknowledge that some of the struggles young people are experiencing in this constantly changing, post Christian society are way over their heads."<sup>4</sup> This has led to the birthing of all kinds of splinter groups like the Nation of Islam, Five-Percenter, Moors, and the Black Hebrew Israelite movement. Additionally, many have redirected themselves into globally recognized aberrations of Christianity and other world religions such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'ism, and orthodox Islam.

Of equal concern, too, in the shaping of this book, is the emotional distance that, historically, minorities have realized exist between them and conservative theologians. Renowned philosopher Cornel West, in his book *Democracy Matters*, echoes the view that a large number of urban Christians have concerning the way they have been taught the message of Christ and yet have been treated by the majority church: "Black Christians have seen the gospel of Jesus Christ bastardized by imperial Christians . . . and this makes my blood boil."<sup>5</sup> These are hard words, but

West reflects the deep pain, disappointment, and distance alive within the psyche of minorities who feel that they have been marginalized.

All of these factors have caused many to assume that there aren't any compelling or coherent reasons to follow Christ. Unfortunately it is into this void that a host of false teachers and propaganda artists have stepped, providing half-baked conspiracy theories to those who are suspicious about the motives and teachings of Christianity. To this I passionately respond by stating that one may choose to reject Christianity—I hope that they don't! But if a person does, that decision should be based upon honest and accurate information about the Christian faith and not mere propaganda and fallacious statements that have no basis in historical truth.

Painfully, far too many have decided against the message of Jesus due to the persuasive arguments of those who habitually present distorted or false data concerning Christ and His followers. Men like Louis Farrakhan and Dr. Yosef Ben-Jochannan have created influential organizations and garnered a sizeable number of followers by misrepresenting Christian beliefs and practices.

## **An Honest Message**

A difficult reality that must be acknowledged is that although Christ is perfect, His followers are flawed and susceptible to all the vices that weaken humanity and limit human flourishing. This fact may be the greatest disappointment for those who, like me, look to Christianity as the hope for the spiritual and moral renewal of our culture. However, we must remember that the gospel is not that Christ came to seek and save those who were perfect or morally mature. Rather, the message of Scripture is that Jesus has shown mercy to those who recognize their brokenness and lack of virtue and look to Him for salvation (1 John 1:9). It is through this redemptive grace that a person's heart is renovated and mind is renewed. This is why we must do our best to present the gospel in its fullness and to demonstrate the strength of its ability to transform every sector of our world for the good of men and to the glory of God.

To be sure, whenever the Christian engages his culture and presents

the viability of the gospel to provide real and meaningful answers, he is following in the footsteps of Christ and the apostles. Often neglected in our present-day understanding of our faith is the fact that Jesus and His earliest followers had to contend with the same life dynamics that challenge us today. This makes the Bible and its teachings extraordinarily relevant to navigating through contemporary issues. An honest reading of the New Testament reveals a community that dealt head-on with issues such as race, equality, justice, sexuality, money, and economics. Not surprisingly, over two-thirds of the writings of the apostles were intended to lay out an ethical framework for wisely advising Christians on how to properly address these concerns in society in a way that was edifying to the community and pleasing to God.

The urban centers in America are desperately in need of the answers found within the moral framework of Christianity. Certainly, there is a need for Christians who are trained in the academic disciplines of theology, archaeology, and textual criticism, but the vast majority of situations one encounters in urban ministry settings have to do with the moral reservations many struggle with concerning our faith. In the inner city, there is a collective heart cry that questions if God is just and if He can be trusted. There is also the brute utilitarian skepticism that questions the viability and workability of Christian ethics. Simply put, many have come to the harsh conclusion that if it doesn't work, then no matter how smart and systematic our answers are, they are a waste of time. This means the message urban apologists present to their audiences must be biblical, relevant, and workable.

## One Message, Diverse Methods

Additionally, the urban apologist must recognize that if this information is going to be received, there must be equal consideration given to the format by which it is presented. Historically, evangelicals have been guilty of taking a one-pronged approach to apologetics, concentrating solely on academics. But revolutions don't always start in the classroom. It is also through the voices of poets, playwrights, musicians, and artists

that people's hearts are inflamed by the truth. If Christianity has any hope of breaking through the walls that have been erected by the influence of postmodernism upon this generation, we must present our convictions in creative yet everyday language and through artistic formats that are rich in both style and substance. Minorities are generally people whose minds are stirred by the soulful sounds of stanzas, narratives, and hymns, which echo with beauty and truth. The urban apologist must therefore be a preacher-poet if he or she will capture the souls and minds of listeners.

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In her thought-provoking book of poetry, the Rev. Dr. Diane Givens Moffett powerfully states, "The one who is truly a prophet, the one who truly 'forth-tells' the mind of God and the heart of God is, in fact, not just a preacher. The imagery, which that man or woman of God uses, is poetic imagery. The prophet-preacher is, in essence, a poet."<sup>6</sup> This self-realization necessarily thrusts the urban apologist into the ring where he or she must contend with the advent and evolution of such creative artistry as hip-hop and spoken word. (I will critically analyze these art forms in later chapters.)

Of final consideration in any serious discourse on the topic at hand is the reality that many of the suspicions and struggles that urbanites have concerning Christianity are not merely intellectual. Rather, most are the result of poor modeling and abuses that they have experienced at the hands of those who profess to be followers of Christ. Christianity, unfortunately, has often been the religion of choice for men and women whose behaviors and actions are offensive to the church and society as a whole. This hypocrisy is in clear contradiction to Christian belief. Many have rejected the message we preach because of the lifestyle of the messenger.

All of this leads to one very important conclusion: a strong and effective urban apologetic cannot afford to be mere conjecture or speech. It must be an embodied ethic, which is incarnate in the lives of the men and women who defend the gospel of Jesus Christ. Without such an embodied ethic, our message will fall on deaf ears and our cities will continue the decay that has come as a result of the lack of moral coherence.

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of Jesus Christ.

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So, as we journey through this book, I want to address two audiences. One is the urban Christian who simply and sincerely desires to evangelize his or her community and to reach family, friends, and loved ones with the gospel. These are the people who are searching for answers to the questions they encounter as they share their faith within an urban context.

The other audience I will focus on is the apologetics student who feels a calling to and sees the value in reaching our inner cities with the gospel message using methods that will resonate with urban men and women. All of this will be done with the highest commitment to biblical faithfulness. So, let the journey begin!

## Notes

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4. Marcia Dixon, "Why Are Black Men Turning Away from Christianity?" *The Voice*, September 6, 2013, <http://www.voice-online.co.uk/article/why-are-black-men-turning-away-christianity>.
5. Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 171–72.
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## CHAPTER 1

# CHRIST & THE CITY

### *Is the Christian Message Still Relevant?*

In November 2011, I received an unexpected phone call from the general manager of a local Christian radio station serving the Metro Detroit area. It was not often that he called, but when he did, I tried my best to oblige him. I consider Chris MacCourtney a friend and, more importantly, a brother in Christ who takes the gospel seriously. Typically, I was prepared to say “yes” to just about anything Chris asked of me because I knew his motives were upright and his strategic ventures had proven to work well in advancing the message of Christ throughout our region. With his typical candor and directness and after our normal salutations and warm inquiries about how life and family had been faring, he threw me an abrupt curveball. On this day, however, the request seemed to be somewhat misguided and, though sincere, obviously ill-timed from my perspective.

“Pastor Chris, how would you like to begin a daily talk show on our station?”

He went on to say that the station was looking for a host for its evening drive-time program. I confessed to being caught off guard. Though flattered, the idea of a daily news, talk, and commentary show was not a project that I had ever considered pursuing. After gathering my composure, I responded with a polite, redirecting comment and asked if I could get

back to him. My nonanswer to MacCourtney's request was, honestly, a tactical move, intended to buy me enough time to figure out a diplomatic way to decline his proposal.

## Stepping Up to the Plate

Over the years, however, I have learned two powerful practices that help to maintain peace in my life. The first is to always pray and ask God for His wisdom before deciding on anything. The second is to always talk to my wife before I make any major life choice, and this definitely would be a life-altering decision. My wife's response surprised me. Her immediate thought was that the Lord was clearly in this new opportunity and that this platform was exactly what I needed in order to truly engage in the apologetics work that I was so passionate about. Strangely enough, I had not drawn the connection between the two. We spent the next few days praying, and God began to unfold a vision to us of a daily apologetics radio program that would examine the major events of our time through the lens of a Christian worldview. Slowly, what seemed to be a curveball began to look like just the pitch we had been waiting for. So after a few months of talking to key advisors, I finally accepted Chris's offer and agreed to launch a new drive-time talk show.

Selecting the right name for the program was enormously important to me—but not for vain marketing reasons. I wanted a name that would clearly communicate to the audience and act as a daily reminder to me of why God had placed me there. I wanted a name that was missional and purposeful. So after much prayer, deep thought, and several dozen failed concepts, we ultimately found one that just felt right. About a year before Chris's call, I had preached one of the more significant sermon series of my ministry. It was a call for believers to live for the good of their city and not simply for internal purposes. A selfish church, I concluded, was not a biblical church and could not be effective in redeeming culture or winning souls.

The text for the series was the challenging words found in Jeremiah

29:7: “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” This passage revolutionized my theology and broadened my mission. Jeremiah’s challenge to God’s people of his day was to live lives of truth and compassion, to engage with the culture in redemptive ways, and to use their influence and energy to benefit the community they dwelt in. I was humbled by the visual image of leading my congregation into the wilderness of the world around us armed with only two weapons—truth and love. Compelled by this image, I decided that this would be the focus of my new radio show. The title of my sermon series, “Christ and the City,” would become the name of the broadcast.

## The Elephant in the Room

In my heart, this name represented a big question that I believed was the elephant in the room when it came to evangelism and apologetics—is Christ still relevant in our urban centers? My quest was to prove that the gospel had much to say about the issues that were shaping our culture. So in April 2012, the show was launched and the task was undertaken to persuade my audience that the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ had broad and relevant implications for the whole of life and its individual parts. As the Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper once famously stated, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over *all*, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”<sup>1</sup>

What I discovered, however, is that just as natural as it was for me to possess a high confidence in the applicability of the gospel to the contours and nuances of life, there were also those who were equally convinced of the utter irrelevance of the eternal teachings of Scripture as it pertained to the critical concerns of our day.

My informal discovery of the growing spiritual apathy that had taken such a strong grip on the minds of the masses was also supported by qualitative research. The 2011 Baylor University Religion Survey revealed that 44 percent of those questioned spent no time seeking “eternal wisdom”

and 19 percent said, “It’s useless to search for meaning.” Similarly, in 2011 the Nashville-based evangelical research agency Life Way Research found that 46 percent of those asked told pollsters that they “never wonder whether they will go to heaven.” Nearly 20 percent of the individuals queried in this survey “scoffed at the idea that God has a purpose or plan for everyone.” These numbers were quoted in a *USA Today* article written by Cathy Lynn Grossman entitled “For Many, ‘Losing My Religion’ Isn’t Just a Song: It’s Life.”<sup>2</sup> This data has caused some sociologists to suggest that it may be time to update our standard worldview taxonomy to add a new category of people known as “apatheist.”<sup>3</sup> However, as William Lane Craig expressed in a recent post on his *Reasonable Faith* blog, “apathism is not a truth claim and can be neither true or false. It asserts nothing and denies nothing. It merely is an attitude or a psychological state of indifference with respect to God’s existence.”<sup>4</sup> Whether or not one believes that apatheism is a philosophical category akin to atheism or simply a psychological state, what is clear is that these are individuals who just don’t care about the whole God conversation and are therefore resistant to the Christian worldview. This group finds religious discussion so irrelevant that they aren’t even moved enough to declare themselves atheists because this would require too much thought and conviction about the matter.

These numbers, and the sentiment that underlies their reality, are sufficient cause for concern for those of us who are in the ministry of soul care and have dedicated our lives to winning men and women to Christ. How do you even begin a conversation about the need for salvation when the person you are talking to doesn’t even care about heaven or hell? How do you engage a person around the meaning and fulfillment that Christ can bring to their lives when they could care less about the concepts of meaning and purpose? This is a daunting task to say the least, and for so many such an impossible one that they concede the culture to the apatheists and the secularists.

The fact is that these statistics are truly alarming. The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS 2008) reveals that the hottest

religious trend of the past decade was the rise in the number of people who define themselves as having “no religious identity.” This group jumped from 8 percent in 1990 to 15 percent in 2008.<sup>5</sup> So how do we make sense of our evangelistic task in this type of environment? Does Christ still matter to the city? Is the gospel still relevant to this generation and, in particular, to those living in the urban areas of our country?

I believe that the answer to our apathetic dilemma can be found by examining another set of numbers which expose the emotional iceberg that exists underneath the surface of our apparent passiveness concerning things that matter most. On March 21, 2011, Gallup released a report on their most recent poll. It was entitled “Americans’ Worries About the Economy, Budget Top Other Issues.” It showed that 71 percent of those questioned worry about the economy “a great deal.” Nearly 60 percent are deeply interested in finding solutions to available and affordable health care; 46 percent say that they fear an energy crisis is looming; 42 percent are passionate about the issue of immigration; and 41 percent named hunger and homelessness as the biggest issue on their minds.<sup>6</sup>

## The Things That Matter

Why are these numbers important and what do they have to do with the message of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ? I believe they are tremendously relevant and they present us with our clearest pathway to reaching the people in our communities with the gospel. What the Gallup report confirms is that humans are still humans and that we actually do care about the big issues in life. The problem is not a lack of interest in things that matter. The problem is a perceived disconnect in the minds of many between the things that matter and the message we preach.

The task of urban apologists should be to show that Christ and the gospel have much to say about issues such as economics, health care, hunger, energy, homelessness, and immigration. Our mission, in light of the current environment we find ourselves ministering within, is to present a Christianity that is as concerned with human flourishing as it is with

doctrinal orthodoxy. Every experienced apologist knows that answering the wrong question can be as devastating to our evangelistic moment as answering the right question wrongly. In other words, Christians may be doing a fine job in crafting well-researched, well-reasoned, and well-intended answers. But if they are dealing with questions that people don't care about, then the answers will fall on deaf ears that are unable to hear over the sounds of their own self-interests. We have to do a better job at the work of anthropology if we hope to maintain our role in the public discourse.

Peter Kreeft defines anthropology as “a theory or philosophy about mankind or human nature.”<sup>7</sup> The church must ask, why are people the way they are? And we wrestle with how insights into human nature can shape our evangelism. One case in point is the question of the impact of social media on apologetics. What does the increasing desire for high volumes of social interaction apart from personal intimacy and human touch reveal to us about the psyche of this generation? How do we go about explaining and defending the concept of having a “personal relationship” with Jesus Christ to those who have little experience with the dynamics of truly “personal relationships”? It is time for many within the church to abandon the hypothesis that focusing on what makes humans tick necessarily leads to theological compromise. If we take trends in human behavior seriously, rather than leading to theological compromise it will lead to greater theological understanding.

The gospel should meet people at the point of their deepest confusion and at the height of their loftiest ideals. The apostle Paul, in Acts 17, demonstrates this very point. By beginning his dialogue with the Greek philosophers and poets of Athens, he shows that the starting point of our evangelistic discussions can be as diverse as the audiences we are attempting to reach. What matters most—whether we are beginning our conversations with Adam and the origins of humanity, with America and the birthing of a nation, or with the civil rights movement and the history of the fight for racial justice—is that we bring Christ into every moment of human history and every point of human concern.

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An example of this approach, when attempting to reach African-Americans, would be to address the massive concerns with the public school crisis that face almost every inner city in the United States. By showing that the gospel has much to say about the quality of life we should provide for our children and about issues of education and literacy, we connect to both the hearts and heads of those we hope to reach. Another opportunity is seen in the deep anxiety that many Latinos and Hispanics currently have over immigration reform. By providing a biblically centered message that marries scriptural teaching on personal responsibility and compassion, we will penetrate the souls of many living in these communities. Christians should be well versed in what the Bible has to say about human sexuality and economic issues as well as effective methods of compassion for helping the poor and most vulnerable if we hope to gain a hearing with those living in our urban areas.

### **Who Is Our Neighbor?**

As followers of Christ, we are often accused of being disconnected, callous, and uncaring when it comes to the human struggles that are happening all around us. Although there is much evidence to rebut this sentiment, we would do well to revisit the lessons that can be found in the story of the Good Samaritan. Let us not forget the context of the account in Luke 10:29–37. A lawyer (a first-century expert in interpreting the Old Testament law) challenged Jesus' proclamation that the second great commandment was to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. He was unable to question Jesus' pronouncement that the first great command was to love God with our whole hearts—to question that would be tantamount

to challenging God Himself! So the lawyer quickly took aim at limiting the immediate implications of Christ's directive that we unconditionally love those we live with and interact with daily.

So with a hint of "I gotcha" in his voice, the self-righteous attorney raised his objection: "Who is my neighbor?" Unspoken, but clearly implied, is the accompanying question: "and why should I care?" Jesus' reply was brilliant. Using His masterful style of storytelling, He exposes our narrowness of empathy by defining our neighbor as anyone who we come across who has been battered and beaten by life.

It's one of the most familiar stories in the New Testament, but it's helpful to recall the main players in this first-century episode of *Law and Order*. A traveler heads off down the steep roadway from Jerusalem to Jericho that drops some three thousand feet in just eighteen miles—a perfect setting for an ambush. Sure enough, he's beaten by robbers, stripped of his clothes and belongings, and left to die in the ditch.

Three other travelers come on the scene. The first is a priest, a full-time religious professional who serviced the temple in Jerusalem. He cautiously moved to the other side of the road and kept moving. Next on the scene is a Levite, a member of the one tribe of the twelve tribes of Israel that was dedicated to priestly duties. He takes to the far side of the road as well.

The third traveler is the one from whom the story of the "Good Samaritan" gets its name—a Samaritan, from the northern part of the country, a descendant of Jews who intermarried with pagans during the times of the Jewish exile and refused to worship in Jerusalem. For a self-righteous Jewish person like the lawyer, a Samaritan had two strikes against him: the wrong religion and the wrong race.

As we remember, it's the Samaritan who stops, gives the man first-century first aid, takes him by donkey ambulance to the nearest inn, and pays for his room and treatment. He leaves him in the care of the innkeeper and promises to pay for whatever other costs are incurred before his return. When Jesus is done with the story, he turns the table on the lawyer by asking him a pointed question: who proved to be the man's neighbor?



Our neighbors, according to Christ, are those whom we encounter as we travel on our path to spiritual maturity and theological faithfulness, whose pain produces the need for salvation both in this life and the life to come. Our neighbors are as varied and diverse as the global community. They may be different from us racially, ethnically, or even geographically, but we are instructed by the Spirit to take off the blinders from our eyes and our hearts so that we can see them. Mending their brokenness then becomes our new sanctification process. Medicating their wounds becomes our pathway to pleasing God.

Christ further puts egg on our faces by exposing the hypocrisy of the religious leaders within this parable and by celebrating the authentic morality shown by, of all people, a Samaritan, considered a “half-breed” and heretic by the Jewish establishment. When reflecting on the tale of the Good Samaritan, I find it interesting which characters I naturally identify with and where I typically place myself in this ancient, but extraordinarily contemporary, story. I quickly dismiss any affiliation that I may have with the preoccupied priest and the pretentious Levite. After all, I am nowhere near as self-righteous and distracted as they were. Or am I? Moving on because of the clear discomfort that thought brings, I find it much easier to connect emotionally with the man who has been plundered by the unforgiving villains of life. I think of such people and of the things that have robbed me of my economic, physical, and spiritual power over the years.

On the other hand, in my more heroic moments, I see myself as the Samaritan who comes to the rescue of a man overtaken by abuse, saddling his horse and riding off into the sunset always ready to help the next victim. But as I have grown in my understanding of the person God wants me to be, I have matured in the way I read this text. What becomes clear is that I have far more in common with the priest and the Levite than I care to admit and that Jesus does not want me to selfishly see myself as the wounded, afflicted man on the roadside. Within the context of the story, this grief-stricken man is most certainly placed there to cause me to consider the original question, “Who is my neighbor?”

If I am honest, I am not as heroic as I like to imagine myself to be in my dreams. No, the hero in this tale is Christ who rescues human beings from their beaten and battered state. So who is left in this narrative? The answer is the often-overlooked innkeeper, whose simple job was to care for this broken man who had been rescued by the Lord until He returns. The only promise given to the innkeeper is that he would eventually be repaid whatever expenses he incurred as he cared for his neighbor. Let us consider the innkeeper as we reflect on this story. Over the course of time, Jesus will drop people off at our doorsteps and ask us to care for their needs with the promise that He Himself will repay us for any expense or inconvenience we incurred while loving our neighbor as ourselves. Our good deeds will open the door for us to share the good news of Christ. Our willingness to embrace the realities of our neighbor's difficulty is what empowers our witness and makes our testimony of Christ effective and hearable.

## A New Way of Seeing

This perspective seems to run in contradiction to what we have been taught as Christians. The traditional emphasis in sharing the gospel or soul winning or witnessing (whatever terminology we use) has been on the *conclusion* of the evangelistic moment. After all, isn't the goal to move as hastily as possible to the big finish by asking them to accept as Lord a person whom they aren't even convinced cares about the present hurts of their lives and the affairs of their hearts? Certainly not! We have been so wrapped up on where we are trying to take the person that we haven't given sufficient thought to where we have to pick them up.

By way of analogy, consider a bus driver who stops at an empty bus stop with an empty bus. The truth is that he's going to have a very lonely trip even though he's en route to the right ultimate destination. We have to think deeply about what matters most to those we wish to impact for Christ and be sure to begin any talk about salvation around the issues of their heart. This is truth and love at its finest. This, I believe, is our pathway to recapturing our cultural relevance.

This apologetic approach is not something new or avant-garde. From

the time of Francis of Assisi to contemporary organizations that care for orphans, provide medical care, and fight hunger, the church has wired into her DNA a commitment to good deeds that produce goodwill and open up the door for the good news.

A classic example of this approach to redeeming culture as a means to witnessing about Christ and His resurrection is seen in the life of the eighteenth-century evangelical British activist and politician William Wilberforce. Wilberforce is most famously known for his work as a social reformer and, in particular, for leading the British movement to eradicate slavery by passing the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. As Eric Metaxas reminds us in his bicentennial tribute to the life of Wilberforce, *Amazing Grace*, “Wilberforce vanquished something even worse than slavery, something that was much more fundamental and can hardly be seen from where we stand today. . . . He destroyed an entire way of seeing the world. . . . Included in this old way of seeing things was the idea that the evil of slavery was good.”<sup>8</sup> By challenging the greatest social ill of his day, Wilberforce was able to utterly transform the worldview of not only his countrymen in Britain but also the whole of civilized humanity.

Although slavery still exists in parts of our world, no one continues to defend its morality or rationally justify its value as an ethical means to greater economic prosperity. Wilberforce’s concern for the plight of the slave gave him a platform to declare where the ideas for his new way of seeing the world had derived from. Metaxas tells us that after Wilberforce’s conversion to Christianity at the age of twenty-six, “He saw God’s reality. . . . He saw the idea that all men and women were created equal, by God, in his image and are therefore sacred.”<sup>9</sup> Only heaven knows how many have come to Christ as a result of the life of this saint, but what we do know is that the credibility of his witness is forever linked to the care he had for humanity.

## Missional Balance

Let me take a moment to clarify what I am *not* saying by encouraging this missional approach to evangelism and apologetics. By urging

a greater focus on human nature and the improvement of the human condition, I am not minimizing the need for a strong and robust theology. Our social concern should be matched by our scriptural faithfulness. We should not experience a theological discomfort when it comes to this type of issues-focused, gospel-centered apologetic. The apostle Paul makes this clear in Ephesians 4:15 when he tells us to “speak the truth in love.” Admittedly, this is much easier said than done and presents a tension for many in the church. The duty of balancing truth and love has proven to be quite elusive for the vast majority of believers, yet it is possible to find harmony between these two virtues.

History reminds us of the two major pitfalls that we must avoid in our attempts to help people experience salvation in both this life and the life to come. If we are to eschew the dysfunctions that result from giving in to either extreme of “love” or “truth,” namely Christian liberalism or Christian legalism, we must recognize the dangers associated with either of these two extremes. Truth and love are not mutually exclusive and must be married together in order to see the full glory of God in our evangelism. Whenever they are divorced, the gospel is stripped of its beauty and, more often than not, rejected by those who need it.

Christian liberalism has been the historic label given by conservative Christians to those who have become so committed to enhancing the living standards of people who suffer from the broken systems of our world that they lose sight of the central claims of the faith. We must never forget that although love is the primary ethic of the church, winning people to Christ is and always will be the primary mission of the church. To this end, the doctrines of sin, repentance, the uniqueness of Christ, and the sovereignty of God in all things are essential. Christianity is currently being crippled by professing believers who have convinced themselves that “loving” people means that we have to give up on our commitment to the exclusive teachings of Scripture and the call to repentance that all individuals must submit to.

The best way to steer clear of this mistake is to remember that *sin* is the reason for the problems we face in society and what sent our

Lord to the cross. The only remedy for our hostility toward God is to turn from self-centeredness and to fully trust in the Lord and faithfully obey His commands. The fundamental flaw that many well-meaning Christians make in their sincere but misguided compassion is to separate love from obedience. The words of Christ echo throughout all generations reminding us, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

The other trap that has frequently ensnared the church is what is commonly called Christian legalism. This is the antithesis of liberalism. Whenever Christians become so extremely dedicated to the letter of the law that they disregard those whom the law was created to protect and save, they become like the Pharisees of Christ’s day. Jesus condemned those religious leaders for being more passionate about their tradition than they were about the precious people Christ had come to seek and to save. The only way we can avoid this type of legalism is to live in the awareness of Matthew 25:40: “As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” By seeing the face of Christ when we look into the eyes of the homeless, the hungry, or the hurting, we ensure that the fruit of the Spirit will anchor our theology.

Finally, I want to make clear that I am not implying that the Word of God is somehow lacking in its own independent relevance. Nor am I saying that it is our job to make it more appealing. As C. H. Spurgeon put it, in a sermon entitled “The Lover of God’s Law Filled with Peace”:

The Word of God can take care of itself, and will do so if we preach it, and cease defending it. See you that lion. They have caged him for his preservation; shut him up behind iron bars to secure him from his foes! See how a band of armed men have gathered together to protect the lion. What a clatter they make with their swords and spears! These mighty men are intent upon defending a lion. . . . Let the pure gospel go forth in all its lion-like majesty, and it will soon clear its own way and ease itself of its adversaries.<sup>10</sup>

God's Word is eternally relevant for one great reason—it is God's Word. As Dr. Ramesh Richard, professor of pastoral ministry at Dallas Theological Seminary, so eloquently stated in a recent interview, "The Bible answers questions which men haven't even invented yet! It will never lose its value or relevance." What I am saying is that when we restrict God's Word to speaking only to "religious" issues, we strip it of its relevance to the whole of life. The gospel, when presented in its full boundlessness, speaks just as much to our day as it did to its original audience.

## Notes

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