



June 2005

Dear MARS HILL AUDIO listener,

Shortly after I launched MARS HILL AUDIO, I began describing what we do as “journalistic cultural apologetics.” Our work took journalistic form, as opposed to pure lecturing or other didactic methods. The term “cultural apologetics” needs a little more explanation. Traditional apologetics is concerned with making arguments to defend Christian truth claims, and has often addressed challenges to Christian belief coming from philosophical and other more intellectual sources. The term “cultural apologetics” has been used to refer to systematic efforts to advance the plausibility of Christian claims in light of the messages communicated through dominant cultural institutions, including films, popular music, literature, art, and the mass media. So while traditional apologists would critique the challenges to the Christian faith advanced in the writings of certain philosophers, cultural apologists might look instead at the soundbite philosophies embedded in the lyrics of popular songs, the plots of popular movies, or even the slogans in advertising (“Have It Your Way,” “You Deserve a Break Today,” “Just Do It”).

Like traditional apologists, cultural apologists work in both defensive and offensive modes. Sometimes their work defends the faith, using evidence of popular confusion or prevalent false ideas to articulate (by way of negation) what it is that the Church believes in contrast to what the world believes. And sometimes their work is more pre-evangelistic, like Paul’s sermon at Mars Hill, highlighting expressions of spiritual longing or tacit recognition of the need for redemption, and then explaining the Christian account of human sin and of divine deliverance.

There is another dimension to cultural apologetics that the work of MARS HILL AUDIO has tried to advance. It is guided by the recognition that our ideas are formed in part by patterns of experience, that the structures of social and cultural institutions in a given setting make some ideas more plausible than others. So the task of thinking Christianly about culture is not simply concerned with defending or advancing Christian ideas, but with attending to ways in which some cultural forms and institutions are more in keeping with the Biblical account of the nature of things than are other forms. Ideas have antecedents as well as consequences.

Christian cultural engagement is not simply a matter of product placement, of making sure we get our message out. We are interested in how life is lived, not just in what people believe, and so we should be attentive to how the Gospel fully lived out would result in certain patterns of cultural life rather than others. Because the Gospel calls us to total discipleship, thereby regarding all aspects of our life as occasions to honor God's order in creation, we cannot afford to conform to cultural disorder in the interest of evangelism.

It is from the apostle Peter that the Church receives the most succinct mandate for the general vocation to apologetics. In the third chapter of his first letter, Peter urges believers to be "prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you." The Greek word in that verse for "defense" is "apologia," which is, of course, where we get our word apologetics. Peter is concerned that we are able to offer a reason for hope, which has led some Christians to embrace a more rationalistic form of defending hope than the apostle might have had in mind.

It is useful to remember the context in which Peter urges us to be ready to defend our faith. It is part of the concluding passage of this first epistle, in a section of the letter that begins by urging readers to exhibit unity in thought, sympathy for one another, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Peter warns us not to be vengeful, and to be willing to suffer for the sake of righteousness. And when we offer a defense for our faith, we are to do so "with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil."

The task of apologetics is not, then, just a matter of better arguments, but it is also a matter of the right sort of character. The faith is to be defended not because we deserve to be vindicated and delivered from the world's mistaken mockery, but because Christ deserves our witness. Not only is our message Christocentric, but so is our motivation, our method, and our manners.

When we are defending the truth of the Gospel, we are not lobbying on behalf of an abstract philosophy or ideology. We are not simply commending a body of ideas to our contemporaries. We are instead revealing the deepest reality of the cosmos, a reality that is the touchstone for all of life. This is not simply the truth that we affirm, but the truth we strive to live by, indeed the truth all human beings were created to live

by. And so Peter admonishes us to make sure that the pattern of our living is at least as sound as the shape of our arguments.

Of course, this echoes the message of the whole of Scripture, throughout which God's people are called to display his holiness, righteousness, and love as they speak with their lips what He has revealed. The message of the Gospel is not a message that we accept and then go on with the previously established agenda for our lives; it's not like a news bulletin that interrupts regularly scheduled programming for a couple of minutes, then returns to the program already in progress as if nothing had happened. One of the consequences of this fact is that believers must always be alert to the ways in which the assumptions they have about how they ought to live have been shaped by the culture around them.

The task of understanding our culture is absolutely essential so that we can defend the Gospel. We need to know from what direction attacks on the credibility of our beliefs are coming. But understanding our culture is even more important for life *after* evangelism. In addition to the obstacles it presents to basic Christian belief, our culture also conveys pervasive and subtle challenges to Christian faithfulness. So it is important for us not simply to be able to rebut the errors of bad thinking, but to identify the ways we believers have unwittingly conformed the shape of our lives to the patterns of practice and affection encouraged by the culture around us, and thus have come to embrace a mentality, a sensibility, an array of deeply held assumptions about God, about Creation, and about human well-being that are contrary to those found in Scripture.

"The culture" is not simply something "out there." Unless we live in a cave, the culture is something within and about us, in our heads, hearts, and homes. If the Biblical account of life is more than just fire insurance or a self-help system, if the Scriptures present us with a cosmic picture of all of reality that is increasingly denied by modern culture, then life after evangelism means that we have to ask ourselves how many of our own assumptions about life are the product of modern confusion or disorder instead of the product of the renewed minds that Paul commands us to pursue in Romans 12. It is tempting for believers to live with a small package of Christian assertions on top of a huge foundation of anti-Christian assumptions. We want to make Christian claims about a few things without doing the hard work of reforming our conscience and our consciousness in ways that fully honor God.

Cultural apologetics in its richest form acknowledges the symbiosis of belief, character, and cultural practice. There is a wholism about the

abundant life that involves the deepest spiritual realities and the most mundane aspects of life in the body. The new creation that is breaking into the world concerns the individual's personal communion with the Triune God as well as the formal, institutional ways of shared life in fitting patterns of work and worship, of play and commerce, of art and eating. The guests I talk with on our *Journal* and other productions are all people who have some insight either into the ideals toward which we are striving or into the specific confusions that are too often accepted as substitutes for those more excellent ways. It has been encouraging to me (and I know to many of you that have written) to discover so many thoughtful writers whose work can help deliver the Church from the temptation to practice a culturally indifferent or culturally careless faith.

But the work of these thinkers is useless without people who reflect on the insights they have and then adjust their lives accordingly, in great ways and small ones. And that is the most rewarding part of my work: knowing that there are thousands of people working to live more deliberately, less likely to be tossed by every new wind of cultural fashion. The letters you write to us, the conversations I am privileged to have when I meet you during my travels, and the gifts you have faithfully provided to keep our work afloat are all testimony to quiet and unostentatious striving for greater faithfulness, a striving I hope that God continues to encourage and enlarge. Your gifts to support our work will help us continue the role that we have been called to play in that striving. Please consider seriously what your role ought to be, and thank you for your continued prayers.

Sincerely,



Ken Myers