

# The Gospel After Christendom

An Introduction to  
Cultural Apologetics

COLLIN HANSEN, SKYLER R. FLOWERS, AND IVAN MESA, EDITORS

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*The Gospel After Christendom*

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*For Timothy J. Keller (1950–2023),  
cultural apologist par excellence  
and mentor to us all*



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*Christmas Unbelievable? Four Questions Everyone Should Ask About the World's Most Famous Story.*

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## Acknowledgments

The three of us editors have the joy of serving at The Gospel Coalition where we on a daily basis think through cultural apologetics—understanding the world we live in and strategizing ways to make the gospel of Jesus Christ clear and compelling in our secular age. Tim Keller’s influence on our work at TGC is deep and abiding, as he (along with D. A. Carson) cofounded our organization twenty years ago and served as one of our biggest cheerleaders and conversation partners. Over the years, several of us had the opportunity to dialogue with Tim about the topics of this book. So it was only natural that these efforts gradually blossomed into the Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics, with its inaugural group of fellows picking up the torch in fresh and faithful ways. Since launching in 2023, the Keller Center has increased the time and other resources we can devote to this leading edge of ministry as we pray that God would make us faithful in the task of evangelism and discipleship. In many ways, this book is the fruit of Tim’s passion and the areas that were top of mind and heart in the final years of his life. We dedicate this volume to him. May his tribe increase!



# Introduction

## *We Need Cultural Climatologists*

COLLIN HANSEN

Back in 2016, I asked the noted sociologist James Davison Hunter a few questions about that season’s tumultuous political campaigns. Who better to answer than the scholar who popularized the phrase “culture war”?<sup>1</sup> His response startled me. He waved off my questions and said he doesn’t forecast the weather.

He studies climatology.

The message stuck with me. We need more cultural climatologists today. We need people not just responding to the immediate events in our daily newsfeed (“the weather”) but also studying and assessing the deeper-rooted values, ideologies, narratives, and patterns at work in our culture (“the climate”).

At the Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics, we don’t necessarily think cultural apologetics is the only—or even always the best—way to defend the Christian faith. But we do think the climate is ripe for cultural apologetics. This practice connects us to vital

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1. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Control the Family, Art, Education, Law, and Politics in America* (New York: Basic, 1991).

sources of biblical, theological, and historical wisdom so we can share and apply the gospel in compelling ways for our secular age.

Indeed, we're living amid the largest religious transformation in American history. Some forty million Americans have left the church in the last twenty-five to thirty years.<sup>2</sup> Many other Western countries have already seen similar declines. But that's not the only challenge. Since the decline and fall of Christendom, as church attendance cratered across many Western nations in the twentieth century, believers in Western countries now face a strange mixture of apathy and antagonism toward the gospel. Many of our neighbors view Christianity as yesterday's news but also as the source of today's problems.

This is a new challenge. A big challenge. And many church leaders have no idea what to do. We hope this book will help.

## It's All Cultural

For many, apologetics is associated with arguments over rational, philosophical proofs. It's a matter of the head instead of the heart, a debate over facts instead of feelings.

But no matter what kind of apologetics you practice, you're arguing according to a certain set of rules, in a particular language, attuned to what you expect to resonate in your time and place. In other words, it's always cultural, never purely timeless.<sup>3</sup> And it's never purely rational.

We need to recover apologetics as a matter of the heart and hands as well as the head. We need to recover apologetics as a project for the whole church and not just for those who enjoy arguing. Cultural apologetics isn't a new academic discipline. It's a means to reconnect

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2. Jim Davis and Michael Graham, with Ryan P. Burge, *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2023).
  3. Mark Allen and Joshua D. Chatraw, *The Augustine Way: Retrieving a Vision for the Church's Apologetic Witness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023).

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the church to the best biblical and historical resources for presenting and defending the faith “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

In the Gospels, we see Jesus commonly deploy illustrations from everyday life that connect with his neighbors in an agricultural society. In the book of Acts, Peter’s sermon at Pentecost and Paul’s sermon on Mars Hill convey the same gospel message but strike different notes based on their respective hearers: the Jewish diaspora and Greek philosophers (Acts 2:14–41; 17:16–34). Justin Martyr’s *First Apology* in the second century and Augustine’s *City of God* in the fifth century speak timeless truth in timely ways for dramatically different moments in the history of the Roman Empire.<sup>4</sup>

From these biblical and historical examples, you can see there’s nothing new about cultural apologetics. No matter your strategy, you can’t avoid culture, because culture itself is another way to describe what we mean by religion. Everybody worships—someone or something. Missiologist Lesslie Newbigin argued that culture is really just another way we describe religion, how we pursue meaning and understanding from life.<sup>5</sup>

Religion isn’t downstream from culture. Culture is downstream from religion, the inevitable human pursuit of meaning and eternity. And we see that pursuit everywhere we turn, from dense academic texts down to catchy television jingles. Everything from hip-hop music to arthouse films conveys our society’s deepest longings. Watch a sporting event, especially in person, and you’ll learn a culture’s hopes and fears.

In this book, we provide tools to develop your climatology skills. Rooted in the gospel, we want to help amateur and experienced apologists correct and connect to their cultures so they can better help non-Christians see their sin and seek the Savior.

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4. Justin Martyr, *The First and Second Apologies*, trans. Leslie William Barnard (Mahwah, NJ: Newman, 1997); Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York City: Modern Library, 1994).
  5. Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

## Bridge of Hope

Apologetics can never be purely rational because the head never reasons alone. Culture shapes which desires we indulge and which we reject. In the Augustinian tradition, cultural apologists recognize desire as a key motivator for faith.

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has described the relationship between intuition and reason as an elephant and its rider. Reason may steer, but intuition will only move when motivated. What the heart wants, the head will rationalize. Our intuitions follow our aspirations: What kind of person do I want to be? Or, to ask the same question another way, who's my tribe? We might imagine ourselves as independent, rational actors who weigh arguments with careful consideration of objective truth. More often, we're activated by tribal instincts that filter which beliefs we're willing to entertain—let alone which beliefs we would allow to transform our lives. Until we want to change, until we can envision ourselves in a new community, we're not likely to lower our rational defenses.<sup>6</sup>

Cultural apologetics, then, helps non-Christians want the gospel to be true even before they may fully understand this good news. We offer the beauty of the lordship of Christ as opposed to the ugliness of the lordship of the principalities and powers (Eph. 6:12).

Against pervasive cultural nihilism across the West, we offer hope. In Christ, we find fulfillment to our desires for beauty, justice, peace, truth, and goodness.<sup>7</sup> Most people will find that hope in the context of church community, where they see the effects of the gospel in changed lives.<sup>8</sup> The church can provide an alternative climate, a life-giving atmosphere that challenges the dark clouds of the surrounding cultural weather system. Christians themselves are the

6. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage, 2012).

7. Ted Turnau, *Popologetics: Popular Culture in Christian Perspective* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012).

8. Lesslie Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016).

best bridge between hope and non-Christians. The world sees Jesus in how the body of Christ lives together with grace, in truth, for love. Thus, cultural apologetics seeks spiritual and moral renewal in the church as testimony to the gospel's transforming power.

Paul Gould defines cultural apologetics as the “work of establishing the Christian voice, conscience, and imagination within a culture so that Christianity is seen as true and satisfying.”<sup>9</sup> In this noisy culture, with seemingly infinite voices competing for attention, the church captures the imagination of non-Christians when we love them and each other. This is what Jesus prayed in John 17:23—the world will know the Father sent him when we are one.

Of course, no one will conclude just from watching our life together that Jesus is the Son of God, that he died and rose for sinners, and that he's coming again soon to renew the heavens and the earth. We must tell them this good news, warn them to repent of their sin, and call them to believe. When they can see the gospel's effects in us, non-Christians can better recognize this news as good. Surely they will see us fall short; they will see us fail; they will see us sin. We don't offer them perfection. We point them to the same blood of Christ that washed away our sin. Those who know they have been forgiven are full of love for fellow sinners (Luke 7:47).

### Compelling Community

Love, however, is not the most common perception of the church today by outsiders. Shortly before the 2016 presidential election, I met with a group of Christian students at Cornell University. They had invited me to Ithaca to speak on the history of the Religious Right—not exactly a powerful force on their Ivy League campus. Still, the topic was relevant because of how Christians in far-flung corners of the United States could affect their reputation and mission in upstate New York.

9. Paul M. Gould, *Cultural Apologetics: Renewing the Christian Voice, Conscience, and Imagination in a Disenchanted World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 21.

I asked these students what their classmates associate first with Christianity. I couldn't believe their answer. Since then I've repeated the question with audiences around the country. And every time I hear the same thing.

*Westboro Baptist Church.*

So, I said with some bemusement, let me get this straight: When students at one of the nation's most prestigious universities consider the world's largest religion, they think about an overgrown family cult in Topeka, Kansas. How can this be?

No matter how persuasive our cultural apologetics may be, we shouldn't always expect a positive response. Indeed, Jesus promised us tribulation (John 16:33). Peter warned us that honorable conduct wouldn't guarantee favor from non-Christians (1 Pet. 2:12). At the same time, Paul emphasized that negative perceptions of the church can stem from immoral behavior in the church (1 Cor. 5:1; Rom. 2:1). Sometimes we get what we deserve.

I attribute some of the church's perception problems to a superficial understanding of culture—too much weather, not enough climate. Weather often gravitates toward focusing on what's wrong with others. Climate focuses on the conditions that affect everyone, inside and outside the church. Maybe we don't see more evangelistic fruit because the church doesn't look much different from the world. What is compelling about our community?<sup>10</sup> Instead of living for Christ, we're often conforming to the world. Even in many evangelical churches, the gospel has become an accessory to middle-class mores. We might vote a certain way to “save the culture,” meaning, to oppose the evil of our political opponents. But what about our own cultural captivity to consumerism or convenience or comfort? How does the church stand out by offering fear and loathing in a world already full of it?

Consider the difference with a community that shows love

10. Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop, *The Compelling Community: Where God's Power Makes a Church Attractive* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

even to outsiders, even to enemies (Matt. 5:44). Consider a community that counts others more important than themselves (Phil. 2:3). Consider a community that realizes we only find life when we lose it (Matt. 10:38–39). The culture of that community commands attention even from a skeptical world. That community will help non-Christians see the transforming power and hope of the gospel. That community will shock the world by admitting its own flaws and mistakes instead of covering them up.

## One Storm to Another

It's easy to forecast the weather as cloudy with a 100 percent chance of culture war. But climatology tells us we're in the eye of the civilizational hurricane. We've passed through one destructive storm. Now, we enter another. For hundreds of years, Christian values supplied the beloved and fiercely defended foundation of Western civilization—tolerance, minority rights, equal justice, and much more. But Christianity has been forgotten (at best) or blamed (at worst) in what philosopher Charles Taylor describes as the “subtraction story” of secularism—we could have everything we want if we just subtracted Christianity.<sup>11</sup>

Secularism, however, hasn't delivered a stable new foundation for the West. The so-called Enlightenment, too, has fallen despite attempts to ground universal values without help from religion.<sup>12</sup> Cultural apologetics helps us observe how secularism remains a spiritual project searching for a common good. Sociologist Christian Smith writes,

To make everything new, to leave behind the past, to be unbound  
by any tradition, to enjoy maximum choice, to be free from any

11. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2007).

12. Jonathan Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2021).

constraint, to be able to buy whatever one can afford, to live however one desires—that is the guiding vision of modernity’s spiritual project. It is spiritual (not merely ideological or cultural) because it names what is sacrosanct, an ultimate concern, a vision for what is most worthy in a sense that transcends any individual life. It is spiritual because it speaks to people’s deepest personal subjectivities, their most transcendent vision of goodness, their definition of ultimate fulfillment. It is spiritual because as a deep cultural structure it occupies a position in the modern West homologous with salvation in God that was prized in the premodern Christendom that modernity broke apart. And it is spiritual because, by being sacred, it is worth protecting, defending, policing, fighting for, perhaps dying for, even killing for.<sup>13</sup>

In every way, our secular age remains very religious (Acts 17:22). No less than the chair of the department of human evolutionary biology at Harvard University argues that Christianity has shaped our very psychology in the West. Joseph Henrich says Christian values, applied over centuries, made us WEIRD: Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic.<sup>14</sup> But we can’t see this Christian influence on our culture because secularism tried to recast these religious values as universal truths. So explains the award-winning historian and podcast host Tom Holland. He told me, “The genius of the modern West in recent centuries has been that it has been able to export its profoundly Christian values, concepts like human rights, the notion of consent—all these things are deeply rooted in the seed-bed of Christian history and Christian theology.”<sup>15</sup> A key example is

13. Christian Smith, *To Flourish or Destruct: A Personalist Account of Human Goods, Motivations, Failure, and Evil* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 269–70.

14. Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

15. Tom Holland, interview with Collin Hansen, *Gospelbound*, podcast audio, March 10, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/gospelbound/the-revolution-the-west-wishes-it-could-forget/>.

## INTRODUCTION

the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which owes much to Christian assumptions but doesn't mention God.

Indeed, Christianity is a revolution that remade the world. Holland asks, "How was it that a cult inspired by the execution of an obscure criminal in a long-vanished empire came to exercise such a transformative and enduring influence on the world?"<sup>16</sup> In Holland's narrative, the church has become a victim of its own success. Christianity is so pervasive that Western culture doesn't even know it's there. When Christians in Hong Kong protest for democracy, or when Christians in India fight caste-based racism, they're seen as acting for universal progress and not merely a Christian worldview. "If they cast them as Christian values," Holland told me, "then they'd come to seem more culturally contingent to people in India or wherever. If you say, well no, they're universal, then you can export them."<sup>17</sup>

We need cultural apologetics, then, to show that what we cherish about our culture depends on Christianity. As we're learning today, when you lose Christianity, you also lose Enlightenment. Dark is the second wall of the hurricane we're entering. We need apologists fired with the love of Christ who will light the lamps that have gone out across the West. We need in our day what Augustine did with *City of God* as the Eternal City and its empire crumbled in the fifth century.

At the Keller Center, and in this book, we seek to support such efforts. Even now you can see flickers of hope, such as Christopher Watkin's *Biblical Critical Theory*,<sup>18</sup> Rebecca McLaughlin's *The Secular Creed*,<sup>19</sup> and Andrew Wilson's *Remaking the World*.<sup>20</sup> Much more work remains to be done, as you'll see in the ensuing chapters.

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16. Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic, 2019), 12.

17. Tom Holland, interview with Collin Hansen, *Gospelbound*.

18. Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022).

19. Rebecca McLaughlin, *The Secular Creed: Engaging Five Contemporary Claims* (Austin: The Gospel Coalition, 2021).

20. Andrew Wilson, *Remaking the World: How 1776 Created the Post-Christian West* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023).

We hope this book will inspire cultural apologists in local churches, in their neighborhoods, in their classrooms, and in their workplaces. The best cultural apologists know the names of their neighbors. Those neighbors, living quietly amid anxieties they cannot name, need to know the thundering darkness of our current weather doesn't have the last word. Dawn will break; God's kingdom is just over the horizon. They need to know a happy ending is coming—when they turn from sin and trust in Christ.

### From Thick to Thin

This book aims to help you discover theological, pastoral, and practical resources that define and shape cultural apologetics. Along with editors Skyler Flowers and Ivan Mesa, I have convened leading scholars and practitioners who serve as fellows at the Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics. We will seek to define cultural apologetics, explain its biblical and historical grounding, and demonstrate how it is important for the church today.

Our fellows don't agree on everything you will read in this volume. They emphasize complementary aspects of cultural apologetics and sometimes differ in the details of a formal definition for this discipline. Such disagreement makes for lively annual retreats in New York! But this diversity of viewpoints, still united in the gospel, has enriched our gathering. In their differences, with complementary gifts and vocations, our fellows push, stretch, and reinforce one another spiritually and intellectually. Such was Tim Keller's vision for the center from its beginning, shortly before his death in 2023. "I'm so grateful for the ministry of the Keller Center," he wrote us. "A major part of what I've tried to accomplish in recent years is to encourage younger writers, scholars, and ministers who are doing exactly what the church in the United States needs to do in order to reach people for Christ. There are many such men and women out there, and they need lots of support. I'm delighted that the Keller

## INTRODUCTION

Center will carry this work on for me.” This center, and its fellows, share Keller’s desire above all else that many would come to know Jesus Christ as he is revealed and offered in the gospel.

Part 1 lays the conceptual foundation of our approach to cultural apologetics. Trevin Wax begins by considering the twenty-first-century Western cultural context and offers cultural apologetics as a way that the church might reach the West again (chapter 1). Christopher Watkin follows by demonstrating that cultural apologetics isn’t a modern invention but a methodology displayed in the pages of Scripture itself (chapter 2). Joshua D. Chatraw continues this line of thinking through church history, offering numerous historical examples—notably Augustine—who have shaped Christianity’s cultural apologetic (chapter 3).

Part 2 turns to the task of cultural apologetics. Alan Noble opens with our posture, which is neither accommodation nor aggression (chapter 4). Daniel Strange helps us enter the narratives of a culture, discover their idolatrous co-opting of the Christian story, and demonstrate how the Christian story offers a glorious fulfillment of these hopes and desires (chapter 5). Gray Sutanto builds a holistic theological anthropology that attends to how humans know God and suppress that knowledge in sin (chapter 6). Gavin Ortlund concludes the section by showing how to expose unbelief as not merely untrue but also unlivable and how the gospel answers this despair (chapter 7).

Part 3 drills down into various topics cultural apologists will encounter, namely, the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty. Against many skeptics and detractors, Christianity offers moral goodness in a vision for flourishing, according to Rebecca McLaughlin (chapter 8). Rachel Gilson presents a picture of Christianity’s inherent beauty—compelling just as it is comprehensible and commendable (chapter 9). Derek Rishmawy concludes with a reminder that the Christian story is the grounding reality for all of life (chapter 10).

Finally, part 4 visits the places where cultural apologetics can be deployed. Beginning with its proper home, Bob Thune turns

our attention to the church, institutionally and organically, as it proclaims and embodies the gospel (chapter 11). James Eglinton advances the church's work by considering how Christians might create spaces for engaging non-Christians to safely learn and explore Jesus's claims (chapter 12). To conclude our volume, Sam Chan draws on the resources of preceding chapters to demonstrate for Christians how cultural apologetics can enrich their everyday conversations over cultural texts (chapter 13).

In this book you'll see that cultural apologetics ranges between academic discourse and everyday experiences. From thick books to thin veneers of social graces, cultural apologetics helps Christians live what they believe and proclaim: the gospel that is true for all and good for individuals in unique ways.

Look past the ten-day forecast. Study the climate. Through every weather pattern, the Word of the Lord stands forever (Isa. 40:8). On the other side of this cultural hurricane, you'll find the peace and calm of a kingdom that will never end.