

Book Review

Alister McGrath. *Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers and Skeptics Find Faith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2012)

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British evangelical Alister McGrath is well known for his work on the history of the doctrine of justification, which he at one point modestly characterized as “the definitive work on the subject” (see “*Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification.*”). One trenchant reviewer of that book, however, pointed out that McGrath’s method of relativizing each succeeding generation’s interpretation of St. Paul’s teaching on justification had actually resulted in a “refusal to assert that Scripture has any objective, absolute meaning: its teachings, even those as central as justification, are defined only in the continuing history of its interpretation.” (see review by John Warwick Montgomery in *Modern Reformation*, Vol. 9, No. 2, March/April 2000).

In his latest book on apologetics (“*Mere Apologetics*”), McGrath apparently believes (with all modesty, to be sure) that he is an inheritor of the legacy of C.S. Lewis. Were it but the case. Instead, McGrath (utterly contrary to Lewis) insists that the “character of the apologist” is at least as important as the content of the apologist (in the vein of John Stackhouse’s *Humble Apologetics*, a source that McGrath recommends be read along with the sanctified living fare served up by mega-church pastor Rick Warren). Thus we now have McGrath asserting (alas trying to *persuade*, an activity he repeatedly claims is actually pointless in the postmodern context) that the idea of the truth of Christian evidences is a “rationalistic Enlightenment” concept that has little cache anymore in a postmodern culture that values “images, stories and narratives” (pgs. 27-28, 141, 154). McGrath further argues (*contra* his entire thesis that arguments are largely useless in a culture that no longer is interested in objective truth, but does like to talk about “beauty and goodness” and “images and narratives”—pgs. 35, 47) that since Christianity cannot be “absolutely proven” it really reduces to a faith decision, that apologetics and evangelism are essentially exclusive categories that do not overlap (p. 23, 123), that apologetics converts no one and “is not evangelism” (pgs. 23, 44), that there is little value in trying to persuade people of the truth of Christianity anymore because the key to the gospel is its “interpretation” and only the gospel itself gives that interpretation (pgs. 61-62), and

(drum roll please, dramatic finish coming)...well, here it is best to hear McGrath's story directly from McGrath:

“Let me offer some personal reflections. When I was younger, I use to believe that the best way to help other people discover the truth and excitement of Christianity was to argue with them—in other words, to persuade them Christianity was right and true. In short, I adopted what many would now call a “modern” approach. But today I would communicate the truth of the gospel in another way. I would tell the story of how I came to faith. Why? Partly because a story is much more interesting than any argument, but more significantly, my story shows that Christianity is *real*—in other words, that it has the capacity to change people's lives, to give them new reasons for living and a firm hope for the future.” (p. 141).

Before we test these “truth claims” (apologies to the author), we should acknowledge that “*Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers and Skeptics Find Faith*” makes some legitimate points worth reminding those engaged in the apologetical task:

1. Apologetics is both a science **and** an art (p. 38). It requires understanding the unique objections that each succeeding generation raises to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, being sensitive to those objections, and not simply assuming that “one size fits all” when it comes to the apologetical task.

2. That arguments (there is that nasty word again) for the existence of God still have a place in the apologetical repertoire. McGrath feels the need to rename these arguments as “pointers to faith” (I think they were previously called “proofs for God's existence” during the previous 1200 years of Christian apologetics?). He does reference useful evidence for the fine-tuning of the universe, the longing for justice, the splendor of the natural world, God as a person which grounds all personhood, the “intuition of hope” or the experience of transcendent joy, and the existence of “a homing instinct for God.” (Chapter 6). To be entirely fair, the author does have a chapter on the “Reasonableness of the Christian Faith” but the chapter is devoid of any historical or legal apologetics (McGrath doubts the value of historical apologetics for reasons discussed below and appears completely ignorant of the 500 year-old field of legal apologetics, citing not one reference in the field of lawyers who have examined the truth claims of the Christian faith).

3. There is a discussion (though brief) of the so-called “new atheists” and the approaches available to deal with their objections (once again, McGrath has been necessarily forced to use “modernist, Enlightenment and rationalistic” arguments

in order to refute the “modernistic” contentions about truth raised by the new atheists).

This said, the book suffers from a number of serious flaws:

1. *A focus on the character of the apologist as equally important as the content of the apologetical message.* For McGrath, “incarnational apologetics” (p. 35) has a wholly different meaning from the apologetical setting of presenting the historical evidence for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Instead, incarnational apologetics now is about the “faithful living” of the apologist (with a liberal usage of the word “authentic” scattered throughout this discussion). Thus “humble apologetics” reduces to focusing on the character of the apologist at least as much as on the actual message being proclaimed. The story of Jesus plays second fiddle to the story of McGrath.

We simply note in passing how far this is from the apostolic presentation of Christ Crucified. When the focus shifts to the character of the apologist and his/her “authentic living” of the Gospel, you can be sure that Christ in His saving office is no longer of central importance. Similarly, when Rick Warren’s “Purpose Driven Life” is “suggested reading” (to the exclusion of any legal apologetics or the basic works of evidential and historical apologetics) the focus shifts to a Gospel entirely *intra nos* (as opposed to Luther’s *extra nos* or entirely objective Gospel). To be sure, the book would have seriously benefitted from a discussion of the Reformation’s emphasis on trust in Christ being grounded first in evidence and facts (*notitia*), with assent (*assensus*) built on those facts, and then trust (*fiducia*) coming as final active layer in the process of saving faith. It is true that *notitia* does not save, but that is like saying that the foundation of a cathedral is not critical because it is not seen.

Connected with this fixation on the character of the apologist comes a deficient definition of apologetics, which McGrath calls “...a willingness to work with God in helping people discover and turn to his glory.” (p. 41). Maybe it is McGrath’s particularly ethereal brand of Calvinism bearing fruit a hundred fold at this point, or maybe it is the announcement that the book is not “committed to any particular school of apologetics” (p. 12), but “turning people to God’s glory” is not the Gospel as St. Paul defines it in I Corinthians 15: 1-5. Other Calvinist apologists (Van Til, Warfield, Frame, Sproul, Gerstner) have at least realized that Classical or even presuppositional apologetical approaches cannot simply leave people in mere theism, which is precisely where McGrath leadeth.

2. *The biblically unwarranted creation of the hermetically sealed compartments of apologetics (generally negative in character) versus evangelism (the closing of the deal that only God does by means of the Holy Spirit).* Does Scripture put these endeavors in tight compartments? Most certainly not! When the affirmative use of evidence (as opposed to McGrath’s main focus on apologetics as merely “removing barriers”) is employed so as to focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, any meaningful distinction between apologetics and evangelism vanishes. Contrary to McGrath who in a former life used to persuade people of the truth of Christianity but now “tells his story,” the Apostle Paul aggressively presented the truth claims of Christianity in a Roman culture surely as relativistic and “post-modern” as ours, employing apologetics in the task of evangelism (see, Acts 26:28, for example, where Paul—obviously by the power of the Holy Spirit, had “almost persuaded” King Agrippa to become a Christian).

3. *The belief that post-modernism has changed the game fundamentally in terms of apologetics.* McGrath goes so far as to denigrate “older apologists” who are supposedly answering questions “no one is asking” since the earlier concept of truth found in “modernism” is no longer holding the day (pgs. 28, 31). Making a persuasive case based on facts and evidence that call for a decision based on the truth of assertions is apparently outdated (which will be news to the legal and medical professions that operate on these basic premises every day to make literally life and death decisions).

But McGrath, as the Native Americans found out when dealing with the White Man, “speaks with forked tongue” when claiming that arguments and evidence are largely worthless in dealing with postmodern man. For example, he refutes the new atheists based on arguments grounded in evidence. It appears he does not see the irony in his *necessitarian* use of reason, evidence, facts and persuasion in his own volume. For surely if “*Mere Apologetics*” is not intending to present truths and to persuade, what exactly is its value?

Underneath McGrath’s deficient view of the value of truth questions for modern man is a highly narrow and inadequate understanding of “proof.” This is perhaps the consequence of an apparent total lack of familiarity with legal apologetics and the evidentiary standards of proof when dealing with questions of fact (see the work of Montgomery, Simon Greenleaf, Ross Clifford, Charles Lamb, Lord Hailsham, Sir Norman Anderson, Edmund Bennett, and the many legal apologists who have worked on critical issues of evidence and “proof” in apologetics). Defaulting to “faith” as the key to eternal security in Christ (as opposed to Luther’s discovery of grounding one’s security in the objective means of grace presented in the promises of baptism and the Lord’s Supper), the author concludes that since the

case for Christ cannot “**absolutely** be proven” in the end it all reduces to a question of “faith” (see especially p. 94 where the remarkable assertion is made that there is not enough evidence to prove that *any* worldview is right and all reduce to a matter of faith!). While there is a short treatment of the problems with the verification principle as developed by Logical Positivism (McGrath claims the principle itself is incapable of verification), the author appears totally unaware of the *necessitarian* character of employing that construct (see Montgomery’s *Tractatus Logico-Theologicus*, at proposition 2.994—“Sound methodological proposals are accepted on a *necessitarian* basis, in that whenever the critic herself is forced to make decisions of a crucial nature in ordinary life, she is found to be employing the very proposal she is criticizing.”).

Mere Apologetics is another example of how a supposedly “practical book” on apologetics is anything but practical in dealing with flesh and blood non-Christians. By choosing a title that alludes to the work of C.S. Lewis, the bar is set high. McGrath, unfortunately, never delivers but instead devalues persuasive arguments based on the facts of Christ’s dying on the cross and rising again from the dead. In doing so he has turned Dr. Luke’s “many infallible proofs” (Acts 1:3) into “one of many narratives to choose from.”

Lewis’ fellow Inkling, J.R.R. Tolkien, in referencing the deeply mythic and poetic qualities of the biblical narrative, spoke of legend and history having “met and fused” in the person of Jesus Christ (indeed Lewis himself spoke of Christianity as the marriage of heaven and earth, where perfect myth and perfect fact conjoin). By untethering the mythic and narrative aspects of the Scripture from its sheer facticity and verifiability (an approach utterly rejected in Lewis’ unsurpassed *Mere Christianity*), McGrath ends up with neither legend nor history but, sadly, only “another story” for post-modern man to fuse with a life devoid of “the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”

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