



May 31, 2001

Dear MARS HILL AUDIO listener,

The work we do at MARS HILL AUDIO is sometimes called “cultural apologetics.” Apologetics is a good word with a solid history. *Apologia* is the Greek word for defense; it’s the word the apostle Peter uses when he counsels believers “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the *reason* for the hope that you have.” That word “answer” is rendered “defense” in earlier translations of the Greek word “apologia.” But Peter reminds us that in our defending the faith, we are to observe certain manners: “Do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. It is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.” [1 Peter 3:15ff.]

So when we defend the faith, we are not to be offensive, though many Christians are. One reason may be that they are still working hard to convince *themselves* that the Gospel is true. They can’t take time to be gentle because they are still intensely at war with their own doubt. When we feel that those around us, indeed that cultural patterns themselves, are a threat to our faith, an inducement to doubt, it is understandable that we get defensive. Understandable, but not defensible.

The cultural framework in which we are called to explain our faith has changed dramatically in the last two generations. At one time, Christians were challenged because the more sophisticated and cosmopolitan segments of society questioned the specific truth claims that we made, such as the assertion that Jesus was the Son of God, or that he rose from the dead on the third day, or that sin is a terminal condition of alienation from God remediable only by grace through faith. Such truth claims were once countered with vigorous and often vicious rebuttals. To be a modern person was to throw off superstition and faith, and to embrace the *certain* knowledge delivered by science and pure reason. And since science could not demonstrate such beliefs as the resurrection or the atonement, they couldn’t be true in any universal sense of the word. In that cultural setting, apologetics was characterized by the amassing of arguments that could win arguments with skeptics.

Today, our truth claims are less likely to be argued against than cheerfully ignored. The mood of our time is one that writer James Morris has labeled “the tyranny of indifference.” Commenting specifically on the consequences of this laid-back mindset to the sphere of manners, Morris writes: “In this age of ‘whatever,’ Americans are

becoming slaves to the new tyranny of nonchalance. ‘Whatever.’ The word draws you in like a plumped pillow and folds round your brain; the progress of its syllables is a movement toward surrender and effacement, toward a universal shrug. It’s all capitulation. No one wants to make a judgment, to impose a standard, to act from authority and call conduct unacceptable.”

And, we might add, no one wants to claim that something is *true* for everyone. In the age of “whatever,” the greatest challenge to Christian faith is not that of unbelief but of the privatization of belief. If in the 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural elites asserted that Christianity was false, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century they are more likely to say that it may be true for you (and that’s very special for you, I’m sure) but it’s not true for everyone.

But of course, a privatized, tribal faith is not Christian faith. The faith of the New Testament operates from assumptions about God and about the human condition that are held to be universally true. Our creeds begin with the assertion of God the Maker of Heaven and Earth. He is not simply *our* Maker, he is the Maker of all things. And Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world; the message of salvation is universally valid, a story for the whole world, not just for the members of the “Christian movement.”

Our culture still presents challenges to our faith, but they are different sorts of challenges, and we need to be wise about them. But I believe that the challenges to faithfulness are deeper than the challenges to faith.

When I first began the work that I’m now doing with MARS HILL AUDIO, I was committed to the task of understanding how Christians could best respond to the challenges of contemporary culture. And when I began, I thought that most of my work would be focused on the challenges to maintaining belief and to communicating that belief to others.

But over the past eight years, as I’ve studied the cultural sources of those challenges, I have been persuaded that there is a much more basic struggle that confronts us, involving the way that our culture challenges our *faithfulness*. Contrary to the predictions of early 20<sup>th</sup> century social scientists, Christian churches continue to grow. Faith in Jesus Christ is still regarded by millions of people as an important part of their lives. The Church is still a powerful source of hope and meaning for many people. But while basic belief may still be held by millions, the consequences of that belief are not being lived out as they should be. People still have *faith*, but I am not sure that many of them are struggling hard enough to be *faithful*.

So the focus of my work has shifted from them to us, that is, from countering the arguments against belief that are “out there” in the surrounding culture, to looking

at the ways in which faulty assumptions about reality have taken up residence “in here,” in the community of the Church. Like charity, the task of “confronting the culture” begins at home, and it begins by considering the ways in which believing Christians have embraced a distorted understanding of who God is, of what his Creation is all about, and of what our place and task is in it.

Where some practitioners of cultural apologetics want to help us re-frame our proclamation to make it plausible and “relevant” in a new (and allegedly “neutral”) cultural setting, I want to ask whether the new cultural arrangements are in fact neutral, and if not, how they might be renounced in the lives of believers in such a way that will make our very lives a testimony to the truth about God, our Maker and Redeemer. For, if the cultural patterns of modernity and postmodernity render the gospel implausible, how can believers in good conscience continue to embrace and extend the influence of those patterns?

To put this positively, an alertness to cultural life allied with a concern for apologetics should evoke the question: “Within what sorts of cultural arrangements would the Christian message seem most plausible?” And then: “What can Christian communities do to begin to approach such arrangements, and what sort of actions can we take as citizens to effect those arrangements in the common social and political life?” In the language of Jeremiah, how do we seek the welfare of the city?

Both Old and New Testaments seem to assume that the way believers live, their cultural ways, will be consistent with the account of the meaning of our humanity and the description of goodness and truth that the Scriptures offer us. In this sense, the fabric of our existence is the most powerful of defenses for the hope that is within us. The living out of a fully ramified Christianity (in our economic life, in our engagement with Creation, in the shape of our families, in the laws we champion, in the art and music and poetry we delight in, in our whole cultural life) is an extension of the hope Jesus expresses in John 17:23, that the observable unity of believers will be a sign of his coming and of the Father’s love. After all, part of our love of one another involves encouraging one another to good works (Hebrews 10:24), and those works are to be manifest to the world in all aspects of our lives (Matthew 5:14-16).

I know from letters and conversations that many of our subscribers are asking these same sorts of questions. And I think that the interviews we feature on our *Journal* (and the books written by our guests) are among the resources that will help us all find the answers we need.

If I knew all the answers now, it would be easier to do the fund-raising we need to do to stay in business. It’s easier to raise money for a project that claims to be able to

fix everything. If we could identify a specific cultural foe and promise to expose, eradicate, outlaw, or vanquish such a foe, we'd be rolling in money. But the only simply defined foe I can isolate is worldliness, and the only strategy I can suggest is wisdom. Those are awfully vague claims.

But fortunately our guests aren't as vague. They have all spent hundreds of hours wrestling with very specific details of historical, social, and cultural phenomena, and struggled to analyze, synthesize, and summarize what they have learned. And in their comments I think there are many specific footholds for the slow climb to faithfulness expected of each of us.

We cannot continue without the support of fellow climbers, of those who value our work, and we hope that you are among that generous and faithful band. (Your contribution is fully tax-deductible, which might be a slight additional incentive.) We also hope that you will help us let others know about our work. Referrals from existing subscribers are still the most significant source of new subscribers. The enclosed form will make it easy for you to let us know the names and addresses of some people who might like our work as you do.

I hope you have a delightful summer. Many of you take MARS HILL AUDIO with you on long car trips, and we're always glad when people stock up on tapes to improve the experience of the Interstate system. Whatever the shape of your summer, I hope it provides leisure for some reflection about the meaning of faithfulness in cultural life.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ken Myers". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Ken Myers  
Producer and Host