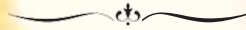


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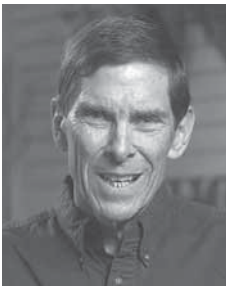
Apologetics

Firmly Rooted in Truth



Goals of Apologetics • Apologetics and Missions • Apologetic Methodology

Apologetics and Missions



Steve Van Horn

Steve Van Horn is a former pastor and founder of ITEM, International Training & Equipping Ministries, begun in 2003. Dr. Van Horn is currently building a ministry for the emerging generation of leaders across Africa using apologetics as the springboard.

My international ministry started in 1998, after serving as a pastor for seventeen years. During my first conversation with the principal of a seminary in Kenya where I was invited to come and teach, I was made aware of two important factors. First, the church in Africa is a mile wide and an inch deep. Second, syncretism (the blending of African traditional religions with Christianity) is prominent in most African churches. A few months later when I returned to teach again, a student told me that the only difference between a Christian and a non-Christian in Africa is that the Christian goes to the witch doctor at night (when no one is watching).

In 2003 I founded International Training & Equipping Ministries (ITEM) to provide untrained pastors with a biblical and theological foundation upon which they would be able to build their ministry. In recent years, as we have transitioned to a new director, my focus has been on engaging the emerging generation of leaders in Africa, using apologetics as a springboard. As I reflect on doing apologetics in missions, I will focus on Africa but as I've talked with missionaries from other parts of the world, I believe the challenges are similar everywhere.

As we know, we are to be ready to give an answer, make a defense for our hope in Christ (1Pe 3:15), and contend earnestly for the faith (Jude 3). Both are subsets of practicing apologetics. I would suggest that Jude was telling us to contend for "what" authentic, biblical Christianity teaches (i.e. the faith) and Peter was exhorting us to be ready to answer the "why" questions people ask us about our hope and the truth claims of Christianity.

Pastor Ebenezer Afolabi, a faculty member at LIFE Theological Seminary in Lagos, Nigeria, in his book *Doing Apologetics with an African Mindset*, states that there are four major doctrinal issues needing attention when doing apologetics.¹ The first, as mentioned earlier, is syncretism.² "Some African scholars," writes Afolabi, "suggest

that a more constructive word like enculturation should be used...because elements of the gospel are replaced by religious elements from the host culture or other cultures."³ Examples of this, cited by the author, include "speaking to their offerings what they want to receive in return or bringing live rams, pigeons, etc., for redemption. Others may be told to give money, food, clothes to beggars to avert impending danger or to win the goodwill of some spiritual entities or attract the sympathy of one's ancestors."⁴

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The second is simony, named for Simon Magus, who offered to pay two disciples of Jesus in exchange for power from the Holy Spirit.⁵ Examples of this today in Africa, explains Afolabi, is when unqualified individuals are put into ecclesiastical office which the candidates then pay for. Other examples are selling (so-called) anointed water and handkerchiefs for protection, favor, and goodwill.⁶

I have heard stories of self-proclaimed prophets renting stadiums and selling vials of water, that they claimed were "anointing water," for the local equivalent of \$5, and most of those in attendance were more than willing to pay that price.

One Sunday night when I was in the Democratic Republic of Congo, I passed a compound with loud shouting coming from over the wall. I asked my interpreter what was going on and he told me that I was near a "prophetic church" and the pastor was prophesying over the people about who would get rich, who would be traveling to America, and who would be getting a house soon. Everyone would give an

offering. None of his prophecies would come true, but the next week his church was full again for a similar service and another offering. Endless stories like these could be told.

The third issue Pastor Afolabi mentioned is cultism. One unique cult is what the author refers to as the “Cult of the Owner-Pastor.” There are five characteristics of this cult. Pastors take an ownership attitude toward their church, its ministry, and its people. Second, these leaders demonstrate a reliance on their own strengths and abilities. Third, they protect their reputation at all costs, absorbing praise and deflecting criticism. Fourth, they see people around them as a means to accomplish their agenda. And, finally, they lament that they never have enough of what they need.⁷ Some may say that this sounds like some pastors here in the States. Yes, it does and that is why doing apologetics internationally is not that different than doing apologetics at home.

ACFAR, the African Center for Apologetics Research (www.acfar.org), deals mainly with the cults in Africa including Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, Adventists, and Islam. Because of the lack of real Bible knowledge in Africa, the population is very vulnerable to articulate and persuasive false teachers seeking a following. Besides these well-known cults, there are a plethora of smaller, lesser-known cults blanketing the continent.

Another factor that can easily draw people to a cult or false religion is poverty. I have been told that Muslims promise women a good life with financial security if they marry a Muslim man. Men, including pastors, are offered jobs by Muslims, but they must work on Sundays as part of their employment agreement.

The final issue is “plutolatry,”⁸ which is the excessive devotion to wealth. This is most often manifested by prosperity preachers, in particular Pentecostal and Word of Faith preachers.⁹ From experience, I can say that this is a dominant theology in Africa. At one seminar, when speaking about the history and theology of the Word of Faith movement, and quoting some of their prominent teachers, I was told, “These are our heroes, our teachers!” Another comment was, “We need to reflect on

what you are saying (about the health and wealth gospel, which says if we have enough faith, we can receive wealth and health) because we have only heard the other side.” In summarizing this issue, Afolabi writes:

The gospel of wealth paints a bad picture about God and Christianity. It is the bringer of all sorts of unholy practices among Christians in Africa, i.e., pastors scamming church members, believers scamming fellow believers, ritual killings, financial crime, and the like.¹⁰

In addition to these four issues, from my experience, I have concluded that witchcraft is an “invisible” influence in most African churches as well. I say “invisible” because it is baked into the culture and the traditions.

A very helpful, eye-opening book was written by Dr. Michael O. Fape, an Anglican minister from Nigeria and a contributor to the *New IVP Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Dr. Fape holds degrees from Yale Divinity School, Aberdeen University, and the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. His book is entitled, *Powers in Encounter with Power: Spiritual Warfare in Pagan Cultures*.¹¹

In chapter six, Dr. Fape outlines the African concept of spiritual warfare which includes witchcraft, satanic dreams, the use of magic, and incantations. I must admit that I was naïve when I first started going to Africa, but over the years, I began to ask questions and listen to stories, and this book came alive for me. Let me be quick to add that Dr. Fape makes it very clear that the power of God, the cross of Christ, and the provisions in Ephesians 6 will bring victory to those who are followers of Christ if they will avail themselves of them. And that is a challenge for most Africans who are the products of generations of traditional practices. I encountered this at a Baptist church in Uganda when the pastor conducted a baby dedication ceremony and asked the parents, “Do you promise not to introduce this child to witchcraft?” He explained to me later that this is necessary, or parents may follow traditional beliefs and practices as the child grows up to “ensure the best possible life” for their new child. I had another opportu-

nity to learn about witchcraft in Africa when I interviewed a former witch doctor who had become a follower of Christ. All I did was ask questions and listen for an hour.

These are examples of the doctrinal challenges facing those in Africa. The reason they are so dominant is because of the apparent deficiency of discipleship. Afolabi rightly states:

The church has neglected discipleship for other peripheral activities, thus denying believers of the opportunity to grow in their walks with Jesus and to be thoroughly prepared to guard themselves against false teachers who are infiltrating the church. . . Discipleship is essential to the preservation and transmission of biblical truth.¹²

Afolabi elsewhere adds:

The African continent has been ravaged [by] poverty, social tension, sicknesses, diseases, insurgencies, abductions, injustice, corruption, insecurity, and illiteracy. Therefore, to defend the faith in Africa, apologists must do so with consideration for the socio-cultural beliefs of the people, and also understand their socio-political and economic challenges...The apologetic endeavor that will thrive in Africa must present the gospel and the Christ that can connect with the living experiences of Africans.¹³

This was made apparent to me when I started focusing on the emerging generations of leaders in Africa. I asked the African apologists and others who worked with this emerging generation what questions that generation was asking. Here are a few: “There is a war going on in Cameroon. The churches are praying God will stop the war and He hasn’t. Why not?” Or “Why did God allow the genocide in Rwanda in 1994?” Other questions asked include, “There is a drought in Kenya that is killing people and livestock. Is God punishing Kenya?” “Are people in poverty because they have disobeyed God?” and “Is Christianity just a white man’s religion? All of the pictures of Jesus we see show Him to be a white man.” (Some say Africans should follow a black messiah.)

The younger generation in Africa is highly influenced by what they see on social media, music, and television shows. They are being influenced by all of the same radical, progressive, anti-Christian, anti-Bible narratives that are strongly influencing the younger generations in the US and they are beginning to ask the same questions, such as: Is the Bible reliable? How do we know that Christianity is the one true religion? Is Jesus the only way to God? If God is all-powerful and loving, why is there so much suffering? If God is so good, why does He send people to hell? More recently, LGBTQ questions have begun to surface because even though over half of the nations on the African continent have laws forbidding homosexual behavior, the Kenyan government has permitted an LGBTQ group to set up an NGO and the churches are not sure how to respond.

If the situation in Africa is typical of other places across the globe, then these are issues that must be addressed in the mission field. Most of these are the same or similar to the issues we must be prepared to address by contending

earnestly for the faith which means teaching sound doctrine (Tit 1:9) and being ready to give an answer (1Pe 3:15) to the questions being asked about the Christian truth claims. One difference worth mentioning is that in Africa atheism is not the challenge that it is here. Belief in God is common, but a biblical understanding of God is not.

There is one more issue in apologetics that I want to close with. That is the way we practice apologetics, especially when engaging the younger generation. In *Apologetics for a New Generation*¹⁴, David Kinnaman (President of Barna Group and author of *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity*) states:

Apologetics is changing because young people are resistant to mere intellectual arguments, yet they seem to be as open as any generation to meaningful, transparent, long-term, and loving relationships. Our research confirms this over and over: Relationships are the nuts and bolts of spiritual conversations, spiritual conversions, and spiritual maturation.¹⁵

Learning to do apologetics conversationally is key. That requires the apologist to be a good listener, asking good clarifying questions, not trying to “score a touchdown” or “hit a home run” by leading the person to place their faith and trust in Christ during the first conversation.

Tim Muehlhoff in his chapter entitled “Christians in the Argument Culture: Apologetics as Conversation” concludes with this exhortation:

If we want our friends and neighbors to listen to our story, then we must listen to theirs. If we want others to attend to our convictions, then we must attend to theirs. If we desire for others to cultivate common ground with us, we must do so first. In doing so, we will create a communication climate in which we can fulfill our deepest longing – engaging others in a respectful, civil way that allows us to share a perspective that has changed our lives.¹⁶

To me, this is at the heart of practicing apologetics both here and abroad.

ENDNOTES:

1. Ebenezer Afolabi, *Doing Apologetics with an African Mindset: Equipping Africans to Defend the Christian Faith* (Independently published, 2019).
2. Ibid., 113.
3. Ibid., 13-14.
4. Ibid., 115.
5. Ibid., 117.
6. Ibid., 118.
7. Ibid., 123-24.
8. Ibid., 124.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Michael O. Fape, *Powers in Encounter with Power: Spiritual Warfare in Pagan Cultures* (Geanies House, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2003).
12. Afolabi, 125-26.
13. Ibid., 18.
14. Sean McDowell, Gen. Ed. *Apologetics for a New Generation* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2009).
15. Ibid., 10.
16. Sean McDowell, Gen. Ed. *A New Kind of Apologist* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2016), 28.



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