

Does the Church Need Apologies More Than Apologetics?

A recent Barna study found that while a majority of Americans “want to grow spiritually,” many experience significant times of doubt. Specifically, the study found that the top reasons U.S. adults gave for experiencing doubt were “past experiences with a religious institution” and the “hypocrisy of religious people.”

It is no secret that the church has been rocked with numerous scandals and allegations in recent years. And of course, these public disgraces do not even include the private mistreatment by professing Christians that many individuals have experienced, which simply never made the news cycle.

Because of this, some well-meaning and respected believers have said the church needs “apologies more than apologetics.” It reminds me of a message from the 1995 DC Talk album “Jesus Freak” that said, “The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians, who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, walk out the door, but they don’t by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.”

Does the church really need apologies more than apologetics arguments? There is no question that apologies are in order in many different situations. It should also go without saying that professing Christians are called to be doers of the Word and not hearers only (James 1:22). Respectfully, however, I am not convinced that apologies are the answer to the issue of doubt.

If we are honest with ourselves, the truth is that most people are lazy when it comes to critical thinking. We believe things for any number of misguided or sometimes nonsensical reasons.

Why should we vote a certain way? Because that is what our family has always done.

Why do we not believe some truth claims? Because social media “fact-checkers” said they were false. Why do we believe other truth claims? Because they make us feel good and work for our preferred lifestyles.

Why do we think a particular way about a controversial issue? Because we watched a Hollywood-produced movie or YouTube video about it one time. In the U.S. culture especially, there is a never-ending stream of celebrities, movies, books and music making authoritative pronouncements, sometimes subtly, on any number of issues that influence the way we think about reality.

To be sure, we all believe things on the basis of some authority all the time. This is in fact part of what biblical faith actually means. None of us can investigate all truth claims or have the expertise in all relevant subjects such that we can make authoritative judgments about everything by ourselves. We all need help.

The question is whether we have good reasons to believe the things we do and trust the authorities to whom we pledge our allegiance. More importantly for the current question at hand, are the personal actions of professing Christians, whether good or bad, valid reasons to make a judgment about the validity of Christianity?

In John 13:35, Jesus told His disciples, “By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” Believers should seek the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to live this out each day. But notice what Jesus did not say. He did not say they will know Christianity is actually true, that Jesus actually rose from the dead and that the gospel is our only hope of salvation because we love people.

If being loved and receiving apologies when wronged are the reasons someone believes a particular truth claim, then on what basis can we distinguish contradictory truth claims? For example, you will be hard pressed to find people more loving and committed to family values than many Mormons. Does this mean we should believe the truth claims about Mormonism?

Likewise, many atheists will claim they do not need God in order to be a moral and loving person. This is true to a certain extent. I know several atheists who are more loving and giving than many professing Christians. Does this mean atheism is true? Of course not!

Moreover, despite all the sinful scandals and atrocities committed by professing Christians, there are many more believers daily attempting to live out their faith by loving their neighbor as themselves. Why are these Christians not considered counterexamples for those appealing to hypocrisy as the reason they do not follow Christ?

In no way do I wish to minimize the pain and trauma experienced by those wronged inside the church. My point here is simply that while love and apologies may be necessary conditions for demonstrating that someone is a true follower of Christ, they are not sufficient conditions for demonstrating that Christianity is in fact true. It is logically possible that every person professing Jesus as their Savior could be a liar and that Jesus still rose from the dead.

The only reason anyone should believe anything is because they have reason to believe it is true (i.e., it corresponds to reality). That is the sole reason anyone should become a Christian. We see this echoed all throughout the pages of Scripture.

From Jesus and the apostles performing miracles (especially the resurrection) to Paul constantly arguing with, reasoning

with and persuading unbelievers, people were given reason to believe the gospel is actually true. Paul goes so far as to say that if the resurrection is not true, nothing else matters (1 Cor. 15). No apology for sinful behavior can overcome this fact.

The stark reality is that the problem of churches and professing believers not acting like Christians is nothing new. Just read Paul's epistles and most of the book of Revelation. If more social media apologies and public displays of repentance were necessary for the gospel to change lives, then Christianity would have never gotten off the ground. The truth of Christianity stands or falls on its own, regardless of its professed followers. As Southern Evangelical Seminary (SES) graduate Dr. Frank Turek has said, if people claim that hypocrisy is the reason they do not go to church, then let them know there is always room for one more hypocrite. None of us are innocent in that regard.

What the Barna study actually shows is that people often base their beliefs on very shaky foundations. These insufficient building blocks can crumble when tested and often lead to very poor judgments. My prayer is that those struggling with the waves of doubt because of the sinful actions of professing Christians would find the solid foundations that show the truthfulness of Christianity which can withstand the turbulence of personal circumstances. This is one of the many values of Christian apologetics.

 Yes, the church needs to act like the church, but in reality, it also needs more apologetics, not less. Yes, we need to weep with those who weep and do what is possible to seek biblical justice and restoration, but in reality, our culture needs a revival of critical thinking.

These are not either/or propositions where we must seek love and justice or do apologetics. Instead, we need to do both while helping unbelievers understand why the gospel matters

despite what some professing Christians have done.

Christianity's hope is in the truth of the Gospel not the actions of individuals. Indeed, "God must be true, even if everyone is a liar ..." (Rom. 3:4). {eo}

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