

## CRUCIAL BIBLICAL PASSAGES FOR CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS

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The construction of a system of apologetics that is distinctively Christian should be founded on the testimony of Scripture to the nature of reality in its divine, its human, and its cosmic aspects. It should, moreover, be founded on the biblical testimony in its entirety, for the teaching concerning God, man, and the universe is plain and consistent throughout the whole of Scripture and is not dependent on the selection of a few isolated proof texts. But, as with all biblical doctrines, there are certain passages which bring a subject into a sharply defined focus and which therefore merit careful and detailed consideration. The purpose of this chapter is to examine a number of passages which are of particular importance for the theme of Christian apologetics, though, because of limitations of space, the attention it is possible to give them will be much less full than they deserve.

### **I. Genesis 1:1-31**

Of absolutely radical importance for the development of Christian apologetics is the biblical doctrine of creation. Indeed, so much is this the root of the matter that apart from it no effective apologetic is possible; for the doctrine of creation is the indispensable foundation of our understanding of all existence. This doctrine affirms, first of all, the absolute primacy or priority of Almighty God, and thus the eternity and total independence of his existence. "In the beginning God. . . ." : these words with which Holy Scripture opens sound a theme which is dominant throughout the whole of the biblical revelation. God is *at* the beginning, and therefore he is *before* the be-ginning, and he *is* the beginning of all things. The scope of his work of creation is comprehensive: heaven and earth, the universe in its totality; and the bringing of all things into existence was effected by the utterance of his dynamic word : "God said, Let there be . . . and it was so" (cf. John 1:1 ff.). The Word of God is the expression of the mind and will of God and consequently the whole created order bears the imprint of the mind and will of God. The biblical doctrine of creation means unambiguously that the being of God is the ground and principle of all other being, and thus that all other being is, unlike God, not self-subsistent but is completely dependent on God both for the origin and for the continuance of its existence.

The biblical doctrine of creation means, moreover, that the knowledge of God is

the ground and principle of all other knowledge, both because it is eternally prior to all other knowledge and also because it is comprehensively exhaustive, whereas all other knowledge, being that of finite creatures, is at best partial and fragmentary. There is, in other words, only one authentic knowledge of reality, and that is God's knowledge. God's knowledge, which is absolute and uncaused, is the sole source of the knowledge which is available to man. Man's knowledge, which is an aspect of his being (no being, no knowledge!), is derived and can only be derived from the knowledge of the Creator to the extent that it is revealed in his works and words.

The knowledge accessible to man from God's works (general or natural revelation) and words (special revelation) comes, so to speak, from without—though the fact must not be overlooked that man too belongs to the works of God and therefore may not adopt an attitude of independence or superiority. There is, however, a third center of knowledge which is *within* man and belongs to the essence of his constitution as man. This becomes apparent in the account of creation when it is said that God created man "in his own image." The wealth of meaning implicit in this phrase cannot be discussed here, highly important though the subject undoubtedly is, especially with regard to man's inherent faculties of personality, rationality, morality, sovereignty, and creativity, which contribute to the uniqueness of his humanity and place him apart from all other creatures. All that can be said now is that man, constituted in the image of God, cannot possibly isolate himself from God; he cannot possibly be ignorant of God; he cannot possibly usurp the place of God. The image of God is the most intimate and distinctive feature of man's constitution as man, and he cannot possibly cease to be what he is. The image of God is stamped upon his creature man, at the very heart of his being.

This means not only that no man can divorce himself from the knowledge of God but also that every man is answerable to God. Man's responsibility is an important aspect of man's dignity, of the uniqueness of his humanity. Man is answerable to God for the life that has been given to him. He cannot contract out of this answerability, simply because he is what he is, namely, man. The Creator-creature relationship is essential to his existence and the image of God is constitutive of his humanity. The fulfilment of his being is dependent on these two fundamental factors. To deny them is to cut the life line which alone gives meaning and purpose to his being; in doing so he inevitably cuts himself adrift and experiences alienation and disintegration at the very heart of his being.

## **II. Genesis 3:1-24**

If the doctrine of creation is indispensable to our understanding of the constitution of man, the doctrine of the fall is no less indispensable to a proper

understanding of the realities of the human situation. All the elements of the human predicament are present in the account of the fall given in Genesis 3, and the combination of the biblical doctrine of creation with biblical doctrine of the fall makes it absolutely plain that it is not in his finiteness but in his fallenness that the critical problem of man resides. In the garden, man freely realized the fulfilment of his being by living in accordance with the Word of his gracious Creator and thus gratefully glorifying God and honoring the relationship which alone could give meaning and purpose to his existence. The satanic strategem which effected man's fall involved an assault on the Word and thus on the authority of the Creator. This took place in two stages : firstly, by calling in question the Word of God ("Yeah, hath God said . . .?"), and, secondly, by actually contradicting the Word of God ("Ye shall not surely die!") . The explanation is then added that God is threatened by man's existence and is concerned to protect his own selfish interests; a unilateral declaration of independence therefore, through the rejection of the Creator's Word, will result in man being as God and lord of all he surveys. This is the essence of the fallen state of man, that in rebellion against the sovereign authority of the Creator he madly at-tempts to make God in the image of man and at the same time to overthrow the Word and the will of God. Of course, the ontological situation is not altered by one iota: God is still God, supreme over all as Creator and now also as Judge; man is still man, totally subject and dependent in his creaturely being. But the epistemological situation becomes one of disastrous upheaval, for sinful man, by making himself instead of God the center and key to the understanding of the reality both of himself and of the universe, severs the life line of the Creator-creature relationship so essential to the right knowledge of things and drifts off in to the ocean of alienation, where the fulfilment he desperately seeks will always elude him.

### **III. Romans 1:18-32**

Nowhere is the gravity of the human predicament more incisively described than in this passage written by the Apostle Paul. All men know the truth about the existence of the divine Creator, but in their unrighteousness they hold it down, they suppress it (vs. 18). It is futile, however, to imagine that they can do away with the knowledge of God and, by the same token, with their answerability to him who is their Creator, "since what can be known about God (το γνωστον του θεου) is plain (φανερών) within them (εν αυτοις) because God made it plain to them (αυτοις εφανέρωσεν)." There is no question, in other words, of men having to grope about tentatively for the truth about God or of their having somehow and in innocence missed the message; for the knowledge is there *within* them. The inwardness of this knowledge may be understood in two respects; firstly, in a general sense, inasmuch as all knowing and knowledge, even when derived from external data, is internal to man; secondly, in the specific sense that this knowledge of God is within men because, as creatures made in the image of God, it is stamped upon their inmost being, and, as we have observed, no man can separate himself from the reality of his own constitution.

But equally inescapable is the testimony to the existence of God by which man is surrounded on all sides. The invisibility of God and his attributes provides no excuse for ignorance concerning his being; "for his invisible nature (τα αόρατα αυτου, in particular his eternal power and deity, is clearly perceived (καθοραται) from the created order of the universe (απο κτίσεως κόσμου), being intellectually apprehended from the things that have been made (τοις ποιήμασιν νοουμενα)." The whole cosmic system points incontestably to the truth that there exists a Creator of all who is unique in the eternity of his sovereign divinity. This knowledge is obvious to man as a rational creature. The rationality of the whole, itself a witness to the rationality of the Creator, is a truth from which man cannot rationally dissociate himself; he can only irrationally seek to suppress it; but in doing so he is "without excuse" (αναπολόγητος); he has no defense to offer; he is acting contrary to the integrity and dignity of his own being.

Furthermore, while man has the faculty, denied to non-rational creatures, of viewing the cosmos as it were from a position of detachment, yet he cannot possibly disengage himself from the universe which he contemplates as though it were something entirely separate from himself; for he too belongs to this same universe; he himself is an integral component of the cosmic whole which points so unmistakably to the truth about God. He *belongs* and, once again, he can-not escape from himself; he cannot contract out of the environment which is the setting of his whole existence. Indeed, of all the wonders of the created order none is more to be marvelled at than man him-self, the crown of God's creative work. Hence the adoration of the psalmist: "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth!" (Ps. 8:1, 9) ; "Wonderful are thy works!" (Ps. 139:14) ; and the recognition that, of all that exists, it is man who has been crowned with glory and honor and who has been given dominion over all the works of God's hands (Ps. 8: 5ff.) : Especially dramatic is the opening paragraph (vss. 1-4) of Psalm 19:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.

In other words, the message comes through loud and clear, that all things are created and sustained by God. It cannot be missed. This is genuine knowledge, and essential knowledge, and it "shouts at us" whichever way we turn. At the same time, however :

There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
Yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.

This loud testimony is also a silent testimony. It is inescapable because it is

universal; and the testimony is all the more eloquent because of its majestic silence.

The life of man is, in fact, based on the presupposition (instinctive and subconscious though it may be) that the whole of reality is a coherent unity, that it makes sense, that it is a universe and not a jumble, a cosmos and not a chaos. The scientist, for example, takes it for granted, by a right instinct, that all facts are interrelated, and therefore that every fact has meaning and one fact leads on to another, and, further, that there can be no such thing as a bare or unrelated fact, which in itself would be meaningless and, indeed, unimaginable. If the consistency of the universe were not a datum of reality, not only would scientific research and discovery be impossible but the whole of existence would be stultified by a chaotic lack of meaning. Nothing would make sense. The logical faculties of thought and speech would be unknown and unattainable. The making and execution of plans would be inconceivable, as would conceivability itself. As things are, however, the logic of reality is such that rational thought, communication, planning, and investigation belong to the normal pattern of human existence. We live, instinctively, as rational beings in a rational world. The whole, which includes ourselves, bears the stamp of the rationality of him who designed it and brought it into existence.

This truth about God, known to each man by the testimony both of the created order and of his own constitution in the image of God, and therefore at the same time this truth about man, is the truth that must constantly be affirmed in Christian apologetics. The seat of all sin lies in the denial or suppression of this truth in man's arrogant claim to autonomy in defiance of the sovereign authority of his Creator.

The Christian apologete must insist on the *certainty* of the existence and the sovereignty of Almighty God. He should never take his stand, even with the best of intentions, on the same ground as that occupied by the unregenerate mind; for that ground, as we have said, involves the denial of the Creator and accordingly the denial by the unbeliever of his own creaturehood, that is, the denial of the very essence of his being and the disruption of his Creator-creature relationship which alone can give meaning to his existence. This is a position of untruth and unreason, and as such it cannot be adopted or condoned, even temporarily, by the Christian. God is the great fundamental and dynamic fact behind and above all other facts. There can be no uncertainty about God.

Nothing is more destructive of the dignity and integrity of man than to know the truth about God and yet to suppress it, and it is important that the Christian apologete should have a clear understanding of the evil consequences of the suppression of this fundamental truth. These are unequivocally described in the passage we are considering. But, before we enumerate them, it must be emphasized that it is not just a question of the *mental* rejection of the truth, for what is involved is nothing less than the rebellion of the whole man, man in the totality of his being,

mind, emotion, and will, against God. It is the refusal to give God the glory which is his due. It is the grossest ingratitude. "Although they knew God," says the Apostle, "they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him." This is the root of the plight of man which has produced the tragic harvest of human fallenness and alienation. The dire consequences of man's suppression of the truth about God may be summarized under the following heads:

(1) *Intellectual futility*: "all their thinking has ended in futility" (NEB) ; "they made nonsense out of logic" (Jerusalem Bible).

(2) *Spiritual darkness*: "their senseless minds were darkened" (RSV) ; "their misguided minds are plunged in darkness" (NEB).

(3) *Incredible stupidity*: "claiming to be wise, they became fools" (RSV); "the more they called themselves philosophers, the more stupid they grew" (Jerusalem Bible). Yet what else could be expected in those who have "exchanged the truth of God for a lie"?

(4) *False religion*: This is seen in the proliferation of idolatry in all its manifestations, whether crass (they "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles") or sophisticated (they "worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator") as displayed in the perspectives of egocentrism, humanism, hedonism, materialism, intellectualism, and so on.

(5) *Gross immorality*: The degrading effects of man's mutiny against God involve not only his mind and spirit but also his body. Indeed, nothing could be more eloquent of the depth of man's fallenness than the substitution of the lust of flesh for flesh in place of the love of the creature for his Creator. This depravity is exhibited in the pursuit not simply of fornication and adultery but also of all kinds of perversion and unnatural vice. Thus our passage asserts that "God gave them up to the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves. . . ."

(6) *Social depravity*: This rottenness inevitably infects human society in general and is destructive of those standards and structures which are essential to the maintenance of the decency and dignity of civilized existence. This, again, is graphically depicted by the Apostle:

Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them (Rom. 1:28-32).

So far is all this from being out of date and irrelevant that its applicability to our much-vaunted Western civilization (which, despite the brilliance of a multitude of technical achievements, is now face to face with disintegration from within) is so alarmingly obvious as to need no elaboration. This is true of our unhappy world as a whole: in our mutual nearness and awareness experienced through the wonders of modern means of transport and communication, the truth of the human situation as described in this passage is more starkly obvious than ever.

#### **IV. 1 Corinthians 2:14**

The plight of fallen man is further complicated, however, by the fact that he is incapacitated from seeing things as they really are. He is unable to discern the reality of the human situation, which also, of course, includes his own situation. But this incapacity is not an incapacity of constitution; it is an incapacity of choice. He has chosen a lie instead of the truth, darkness instead of light, death instead of life. Unlike a blind man who longs to see the sun but cannot because of his affliction, he is unable to see because he has wilfully closed his eyes to the source of life and light. He knows the truth about his Creator and therefore about himself, as we have already explained, but he does not *want* to know it and so he suppresses it; he shuts his eyes to it; he cuts the life line of his relationship to God and in consequence finds himself adrift in an ocean of unreality and alienation. It is he who has incapacitated himself. This is the tragedy of the "natural" man of this passage. It would be more appropriate to call him the unnatural man, and it is good that the rendering of the King James Version, despite its long currency as a virtually technical term of theology, has been abandoned by modern versions in favor of the expression "the unspiritual man"; for the adjective *ψυχικός*, admittedly difficult to translate here, describes man as fallen, degenerate, unregenerate, because he has preferred *ψυχή*, animal existence, to *πνεῦμα*, the Spirit of God, as the principle of his being.

Accordingly, the unregenerate man finds "the things of the Spirit of God" unacceptable; he dismisses them as foolishness because they do not fit into his chosen frame of reference. "He is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." His spirit is the spirit of the world, but these great realities are known only to the Spirit of God and to those to whom he reveals them (vss. 10-13). Sin has rendered man degenerate and incapable of responding and returning to the light of the truth about God and himself; his great need is the experience of regeneration; his only hope is a transforming work of the Holy Spirit of God at the very center of his being.

## **V. Ephesians 2:1-10**

The incapacitation of man through sin is not just a matter of degree. It is total and ultimate. The effects of sin are lethal. The human predicament could not be more serious than it is. That is why this passage describes man in his fallenness as being "dead in trespasses and sins" (cf. Rom. 6:23). The dead man is totally incapacitated; there is absolutely nothing that he can do. So also the unregenerate man is dead towards God; there is nothing at all that he can do to bring about his regeneration. This is the proper background of the Gospel. Apart from it the incarnation and the cross of Christ make no sense. The incapacity of the sinner is overcome by the omnipotent love of God. In Christ the new birth is triumphant reality; the new man in Christ owes everything to grace, the free, undeserved, sovereign grace of God. Accordingly, the Apostle Paul reminds his Ephesian converts that, prior to their response to the Gospel they "had lived in the passions of the flesh, following the desires of body and mind," and "were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind," but that God, rich in mercy and moved by the greatness of his love for them, had made them, dead as they were through their sins, alive together with Christ. No wonder he speaks of "the immeasurable riches of God's grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus." The glory belongs entirely to God.

From first to last salvation is by grace through faith: "and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast." The Christian believer, accordingly, is God's workmanship, "created in Christ Jesus"; and in this new creation we see the restoration and fulfilment of all God's purposes in the original creation.

## **VI. Revelation 21:1-4**

In responding to the task of Christian apologetics it is important to see things in the full sweep of the biblical perspective. We must start with Genesis and we must end with Revelation. The doctrine of creation is essential if we are to understand the creaturehood of man and all that it implies. We must understand also the fallenness of man and the fatal consequences of his sin, and thus his desperate need for the regenerating grace of God in Christ Jesus. This understanding of the human situation must be related to the symptoms of man's sickness unto death as they manifest themselves in the world of our day. While at root the disease remains the same throughout the ages, its outward expression varies in accordance with the temper of the times, the shifting moods of society, and the prevalent fashions and factions of thought and philosophy. If we are to speak effectively to our age we must be sensitive to these things, and the announcement of our diagnosis should be marked by the compassion that befits those who are ambassadors entrusted with the message of the grace of God in Christ Jesus. But we must not stop with man as he is; we must go beyond this and see him as he will be. For each man is a man of destiny, and his destiny is either judgment or glory.

Apologetics is incomplete and inadequate without eschatology, and this dimension of eschatology, while it is present throughout the Scriptures, is brought into special

focus in the book of Revelation. The majestic scope of God's everlasting purposes extends from creation to consummation. It covers the whole of human history and provides a comprehensive perspective, past, present, and future, of the human situation.

This passage, from the concluding section of the Apocalypse, affords a preview of the consummation of all things. Satan and his followers have been judged and destroyed (20:10ff.) and the scene is that of "a new heaven and a new earth" in which righteousness prevails everlastingly (cf. 2 Pet. 3:13) and God dwells in the midst of his people. All the evil consequences of sin—sorrow, pain, death—are unknown, "for the former things have passed away." Thus the promises of God's covenant of grace receive their full fruition and God's creation, pronounced "very good" at the start, is, as the new or renewed creation, very good at the end. The indefectibility of his will, his Word, and his work is gloriously demonstrated and all his purposes are brought to fulfilment. Man, redeemed and glorified, is man at last as he was always intended to be: without interruption enjoying harmonious fellowship with his Creator, joy-fully governed by the Word of God, at peace with God and man and the whole of creation, ceaselessly serving and praising the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who has freely blessed him with life and truth and grace in a universe of inexhaustible wonder and beauty.

What a perspective this is! What an incentive to confident and full-ranging apologetics! To know God in Christ Jesus through the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit within, to be brought into the midstream of God's eternal purposes, to see man in his true perspective as he was, as he is, and as, by God's grace or by God's judgment, he will be—truly we have the key that unlocks the secret of the universe! We know and are sure, and in the field of apologetics, as in all other areas of experience and encounter, if we are true to what we have received, our knowledge and our assurance will never waver as we join battle with the forces of scorn and unbelief.