

## Re-Imagining Apologetics

This session will seek to look at the role of the imagination, image and story in the attempt to engage and win hearts and minds for the Gospel. Do we tend at times to be too rational or too limited in some of our approaches to witnessing? The goal in this session will be to explore vital contributors (imagination and creativity) to a broader apologetic and consider the works of Lewis, Chesterton, Sayers and others for potential insight.

**Stuart McAllister** was born in Scotland and saw his life changed by Christ at the early age of twenty. His hunger to learn more and deepen his understanding of the faith led him to join Operation Mobilization in 1978. He worked with the organization for 20 years in Vienna, Austria, and his service took him to Yugoslavia, where he was imprisoned for forty days for distributing Christian literature. Upon his release, he continued to preach in communist countries, resulting in more imprisonments. With a rich history of service, Stuart has acted as general secretary of the European Evangelical Alliance (1992-1998) and been involved with the European Lausanne Committee. Stuart joined Ravi Zacharias International Ministries in 1998 as the International Director and today serves as Regional Director, Americas. He has contributed chapters in the books *Beyond Opinion* (Thomas Nelson, 2007) and *Global Missiology for the 21st Century* (World Evangelical Fellowship, 2000).

### **2 Corinthians 5: 17-21**

#### **A. A called out people.**

#### **B. Occupied territory.**

As Eugene Peterson said, *“The world is no friend to grace.”*

#### **C. The clash of worldviews.**

*“Though argument does not create conviction, the lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend, is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“Two key realities sum up an effective apologetic: how to relate to the questioner and how to make sure that the answers are couched in a relevant context. If we miss these two converging lines, we miss the opportunity.”<sup>2</sup>*

### **I. The Meaning Quest**

#### **A. Who cares?**

*“The Church today is confronted more by indifference and practical unbelief than with atheism. Atheism is in decline throughout the world, but indifference and unbelief develop in cultural milieus marked by secularism. It is no longer a question of a public*

*affirmation of atheism, with the exception of a few countries, but of a diffuse presence, almost omnipresent, in the culture.”<sup>3</sup>*

**B. An inescapable demand.**

Victor Frankl has described the hunger for meaning in the human heart. Milan Kundera speaks of the “*unbearable lightness of being.*”

**C. The wisdom of C.S. Lewis.**

*“Apologetics is usually defined as a ‘reasoned defense.’ In Lewis’s view, reason could only operate if it was first supplied with materials to reason about, and it was imagination’s task to supply these materials. Therefore, apologetics was necessarily and foundationally imaginative.”<sup>4</sup>*

*“To summarize his definitions: reason is ‘the natural organ of truth; imagination is ‘the organ of meaning’ and meaning itself is ‘the antecedent condition of both truth and falsehood.’ Imagination is therefore, for Lewis, ‘the prius of truth’: before something can be either true or false, it must mean.”<sup>5</sup>*

**II. The Communication Issue**

**2 Corinthians 5:18-19**

**A. Apologetics and definitions.**

*“Apologetics is best thought of as a principled attempt to defend and commend the Christian faith, both meeting objections that might be raised against it, and attempting to explore and explain its potential attraction to those who have yet to discover it.”<sup>6</sup>*

*“Apology as narrative, argument, confession and imaginative witness by the human person in the name of the divine personality against the hitherto impersonality of the city – that is the very heart of Christian theology.”<sup>7</sup>*

**B. The necessity of translation (Acts 17:22-23).**

Lewis wrote, “*You must translate every bit of your theology into the vernacular. This is very troublesome, and it means that you can say very little in half an hour, but it is essential. It is also the greatest service to your own thought. I have come to the conviction that if you cannot translate your thoughts into uneducated language, then your thoughts are confused. Power to translate is the test of having really understood one’s own meaning.*”

*“What is required is a ‘cultural translation’ which attempts to express ideas from one language, embedded in its social context, to another language, embedded in a different social context. Translation is a cultural, not simply a linguistic matter.”<sup>8</sup>*

**C. The creative enterprise (See Acts 17:24-31).**

*“Lewis did not content himself with translating words into other words. He proved adept at interweaving and transposing words, images, and narratives.”<sup>9</sup>*

**III. Actively Seeking Connections**

**Acts 17:22**

**A. A place for us.**

*“We need estranging techniques if we are to shock people into engagement with reality, so that they may appreciate the religious sense and we can begin to explain the Christian faith at all.”<sup>10</sup>*

**B. Imagination’s role and appeal.**

*“Conveying the quality of religious experience to someone who has yet to discover it, requires an appeal to the imagination. The very essence of our life as conscious beings, all day and everyday, consists of something which cannot be communicated except by hints, smiles, metaphors, and the use of emotions (themselves not very important) which are pointers to it.”*

*“Where some apologists offer a defense of individual Christian ideas—such as the existence of God, the incarnation, or the Trinity—and then argue for the truth of the Christian faith as a whole, Lewis inverts this procedure. The fundamental appeal of the Christian faith is imaginative, and is grasped through an apprehension of the panorama of reality that it offers. Where some look at snapshots, defended by reason, then paste them together to yield the ‘big picture’, Lewis argues that Christianity sets out a bold and brilliant illumination of the intellectual landscape, grasped through the imagination, which leads to reflection on its individual components.”<sup>11</sup>*

**C. Telling the story.**

*“The business of the church is to tell and to embody a story, the story of God’s mighty acts in creation and redemption and of God’s promises concerning what will be in the end. The church affirms the truth of this story by celebrating it, interpreting it, and enacting it in the life of the contemporary world.”*

*“If it supposes that its truth can be authenticated by reference, to some allegedly more reliable truth claim, such as those offered by the philosophy of religion, then it has implicitly denied the truth by which it lives.”<sup>12</sup>*

**IV. Keeping Real Persons In Sight**

Stephen Covey wrote, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”

**A. Know your audience.**

*“The effective apologist must be able to identify with and enter into the experiential world of his or her audience.”<sup>13</sup>*

**B. Needs to be felt as well as understood.**

*“During the 1930’s, Lewis become aware that reasoned argument on its own lacked existential force; it required rhetorical embellishment to secure both acceptance and transformation. In his ‘Preface to Paradise Lost,’ Lewis argued that the ‘proper use’ of rhetoric that shapes the human emotions was both ...lawful and necessary because, as Aristotle points out, intellect of itself ‘moves nothing.’ The transition from thinking to doing, in nearly all men at nearly all moments, needs to be assisted by states of feeling.”<sup>14</sup>*

**C. Intimations of transcendence.**

*“It is a platitude, and none the less true for that, that we need to have an ideal in our minds with which to test all realities. But it is equally true, and less noted, that we need a reality with which to test ideals.”<sup>15</sup>*

**V. The Coherence of Faith**

*“I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else.”<sup>16</sup>*

**A. The pull of transcendence.**

*“Lewis suggests that everyone has some sense of there being something ‘higher’ than us—an objective norm to which people appeal, and which they expect others to observe; a real law which they did not invent, and which we know we ought to obey.”<sup>17</sup>*

**B. The appeal to “fit” or best sense.**

*“For Lewis, the kind of ‘sense-making’ offered by the Christian vision of reality is about discerning a resource between its theory and the way the world seems to be. His theoretical spectacles seem to bring reality into sharp focus, just as a false theory prevents us from seeing what is really there.”<sup>18</sup>*

**C. Making sense of it all.**

*“The essential point to appreciate is that Lewis’s approach to apologetics allows the integration of an appeal to human longing – for example based on the beauty of the world, or memories of one’s childhood—within a thick ‘rational’ approach to the Christian faith. Lewis’s argument is that the Christian ‘map’ of reality adequately accommodates such longings, offering an explanation of their origins, accounting for their significance, and indication how they may be fulfilled.”<sup>19</sup>*

In conclusion, the words of the Apostle Paul to the Colossians in *Colossians 4:5-6* (NASB):

*“Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.”*

***Suggested Readings:***

C. S. Lewis, *Light Bearer in the Shadow Lands* (Edited by Angus J. L. Menuge).  
Alister E. McGrath, *Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers and Skeptics Find Faith*.  
David C. Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics: A Person-Centered Approach to Christian Defense*.  
Sean McDowell, ed. *Apologetics for a New Generation*  
Donald T. Williams, *Reflections from Plato’s Cave: Essays in Evangelical Philosophy*.

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- <sup>1</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C.S. Lewis* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 134.  
<sup>2</sup> Ravi Zacharias (author and general editor), *Beyond Opinion: Living The Faith We Defend* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), intro, xiii.  
<sup>3</sup> Andrew Davison (Editor), *Imaginative Apologetics* (London: SCM Press, 2011), 95.  
<sup>4</sup> Michael Ward, cited in Davison, 60-61.  
<sup>5</sup> Davison, 62.  
<sup>6</sup> McGrath, 129.  
<sup>7</sup> John Milbank cited in Davison, intro xvi.  
<sup>8</sup> McGrath, 132.  
<sup>9</sup> McGrath, 133.  
<sup>10</sup> Davison, 33.  
<sup>11</sup> McGrath, 139 & 140.  
<sup>12</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence* (London: SPCK, 1995), 76.  
<sup>13</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Bridge-Building* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 256.  
<sup>14</sup> McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C.S. Lewis*, 135.  
<sup>15</sup> Kevin Belmonte, *The Quotable Chesterton* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 117.  
<sup>16</sup> McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis*, 83.  
<sup>17</sup> McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis*, 136.  
<sup>18</sup> McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis*, 136.  
<sup>19</sup> McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis*, 136.