

Apologetics in a Digital Age: Incarnating the Gospel for Africa's Next Gens

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Abstract

This article explores how digital media culture affects young people in African cities in three major areas. First, it leads to a shift in the area of knowledge and certainty; second, it leads to isolation and attendant mental health issues; third, it provides a bridge for engaging popular culture's philosophical and religious ideas that are propagated by new media. This article proposes that, to counter digital isolation or assimilation, Christian leaders are called to "wise-engagement" modelled after Paul's apologetic in Acts 17. The article offers practical considerations for engaging in the apologetic task among Africa's next gens (generations).

Key Words: apologetics, digital media, next gens, practical theology, youth ministry.

Laying the Groundwork

The African continent plays a prominent role in God's mission to the world today (Sanneh and Carpenter 2005). Since 77% of her population are young and diverse, Christians must negotiate a plurality of worldviews and religions in engaging this critical demographic (Hajjar 2020). Apologetics must therefore be a critical component of any meaningful engagement in the continent.

The task of apologetics is an intellectual engagement of questions posed to Christian faith and takes either an offensive or defensive approach (Craig 2008, 15; Frame 1994, 1-2). In its traditional approach, apologetics has used different methodologies in handling a variety of questions, including offering a philosophical foundation for the existence of God, assessing the evidential claims surrounding Jesus Christ's Resurrection, and exploring the intersection of science and religion (Cowan and Gundry 2010; Craig 1991, 2018; Habermas 2012).

Though different apologetic schools emphasize particular aspects of the apologetic task, in general to engage in apologetics is a biblical command for all Christians. First, apologetics is part of ordinary Christian discipleship. *Apologia* is the Greek word for making a case for something (1 Pet 3:15). Peter is writing to dispersed Christians in the early Christian communities, instructing them, and us, that *apologia* is something with which every Christian should be conversant. Given the context of suffering and persecution that defines his letter, Peter shows us how "giving a reason for the hope that you have" is part of everyday Christian witnessing. Second, apologetics is not an "unspiritual" intellectual diatribe but a spiritual task of Christian formation. Paul writes, "For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds" (2 Cor 10:3-4 ESV). Intellectual strongholds are barriers that present themselves up against a worshipful knowledge of Christ. The task of apologetics is therefore to offer credible reasons for believing in Christ, while also critiquing faulty arguments against Christian belief (Frame 1994). Third, transformative apologetic engagement may make use of extra-biblical evidence such as theistic proofs and archaeological findings, but these are grounded in God's revelation in Scripture. It is precisely because God has made an intelligible world in the first place that we can engage in logical argument and scientific development (Frame 1994, 21-25). In other words, reason, arguments, and evidence are subordinate to Scripture. God has provided the evidence all people need. The problematic issue is people's "suppression of the truth" (Rom 1:18-20, Acts 17:31).

How exactly the apologetic task should be practiced in missional engagement with Africa's young people is the central question this article addresses.

An Insider's Perspective

My own pilgrimage is that I am a fourth generation Kenyan Christian and was nurtured in a Christian home. Having made a profession of faith at 16 years old, during my campus years I came across international students from other philosophical and religious backgrounds—including some students with no particular commitments. My prominent question at this time concerned the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in light of other religions. Some would merely retort, “just believe.” However, this response was not sufficient for my theological and philosophical issues surrounding the exclusivist view of truth.

My initial encounter with Christian apologetics was interacting with the works of William Lane Craig, Hugh Ross, and C. S. Lewis on digital platforms. Here was a stream of Christianity that appealed to both faith and reason. In my early twenties, upon reading the letter of First John, I had a deeper spiritual experience of the reality of sin and the offer of the grace of God in the gospel, and eventually I yielded my life to Christ. My intellectual barriers were really cushioned in spiritual antagonism to the claims of Christ. In other words, unbelief is usually a holistic issue that not only affects the head (thinking), but also involves the heart (affections) and the hands (volition) (Eph 4:17-19). Many emerging Africans have these tensions of Christian faith and the critical questions being asked.

However, the questions of young Africans regarding the Christian faith are more nuanced than Western apologetic approaches can address. While traditional apologetics methods have engaged Westerners' typical questions about God's existence and the problem of evil and suffering, apologetics engagement in interreligious contexts such as in African cities raises different questions (Netland 2012, 11). As practical ministry experience shows, young Africans are raising questions surrounding Christianity's acquiescence to the hostile colonial enterprise, the place of the Bible in shaping Africa's socio-economic challenges, and the reality of God in the presence of widespread suffering. In addition, the author's initial engagement in corporate life as an engineer, present pastoral ministry in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, postgraduate theological education at the University of South Africa, and experience as a lecturer at the Pan Africa Christian University inform this article's awareness of questions that young Africans are asking.

African Youth Are Not Monolithic

The “youth bulge” that is characteristic of the continent is varied in its definition. Young Africans are not monolithic but can be viewed through many different lenses. Rural and urban, traditional and postmodern, economically marginalized and privileged, plus religious and non-religious are just some of the categories taken up by the censuses of different countries. Further, there are rising communities of atheists in different parts of Africa, including the author's own city and country, Nairobi (Kenya), and other cities and countries like Lagos (Nigeria) and Cape Town (South Africa), among other prominent African cities. My practical ministry experience shows there is a rising generation of young Africans who demystify the “Africans are religious” tagline commonly proposed by religious scholars (Mbiti 1990). Given these varied cultural identifications and worldviews, how might apologetics engagement be a handmaid of transformative ministry to young Africans?

The COVID pandemic has raised the salience of digital technology in our everyday life as well as in Christian ministry. An oft-repeated statement in ministry engagement during the past year has been that “the world is online, but the Church is offline” or that “the Church's

evangelists must not answer the questions that they are asking but the questions that the next generation is asking.” Clearly there is a role that digital culture is playing in popular youth culture, with attendant consequences for apologetic engagement.

Employing an Empirical Methodology

Apologetics ministries in Africa include Ratio Christi South Africa, The Africa Center for Apologetics Research (Uganda), the Institute of Christian Apologetics Studies (Ghana), and Apologetics Kenya, among others. Ratio Christi is based on integrating a philosophical approach to the articulation of Christian faith and focused on campus students and professors. In Africa, the local chapters can be found in universities such as Potchefstroom and Pretoria (Ratio Christi South Africa n.d.). The Centers for Apologetics Research can be found in many countries worldwide, with the African office located in Uganda and engaged particularly in counter-cult research and evangelistic engagement in Africa (The Africa Center of Apologetics Research 2021). The Institute of Christian Apologetics Studies (ICAS) engages in evangelism and training for the apologetics task in Ghana, West Africa (Institute of Christian Apologies Studies (ICAS) 2021). Apologetics Kenya is a national ministry whose purpose is “to engage skeptics and to equip believers” to respond to questions asked within a postmodern and postcolonial African context. They have a vibrant digital ministry and host annual conferences (Apologetics Kenya 2021).

The research gap relative to African youth is that, while apologetics ministries in Africa are doing a commendable work in creating apologetic content, there is more that can be done in engaging digital natives in Africa. The digital age has shaped youth cultures deeply and in various ways, and apologetic engagement has not approached the unique issues raised by the changes in new media—especially within African contexts.

What follows comes from research the author has conducted into digital cultures and next generations (“gens”) within the fields of youth studies and youth ministry (Ndereba 2021a). Part of the research studies how young people are engaging with new media, how that engagement shapes youth cultures, and implications for discipleship. The research was a qualitative study among 15 young people in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), a Kenyan denomination, among its urban congregations in Nairobi. The article also includes other studies among young people within the fields of digital culture, youth studies, and adolescent development in order to broaden the approach. The following section unpacks arising themes and exegetes Acts 17 as a model of practical apologetic engagement.

Isolation, Assimilation, or Wise-Engagement?

In terms of the assumptions that underlie various analyses of digital media among young people, two extreme approaches can be taken. Both are based on critical approaches to digital media. Topf, for example, critiques the modern technological reality as a form of the Tower of Babel in how social media companies have become disproportionately wealthy and how the cyber-world negatively impacts human anthropology (Topf 2021). Although he does not then propose that we should be techno-phobic, Topf’s approach to digital culture and social media exemplifies an isolationist perspective. In addition to the just-described issues, this perspective considers the rising research in the area of how digital media has led to the increase in sexual deviant behavior or negatively affected mental health issues (Tamburrino et al. 2020), for example, and proposes that digital media should be abandoned. The second perspective gives rise to what can be called an assimilative approach. This approach considers the benefits of digital media in communication, learning, and entertainment and proposes that we should uncritically assimilate new media in all that we do. This article proposes a middle approach of

“wise-engagement” of digital culture if we are to use it for the purposes of Christian ministry—and, more specifically, for apologetics engagement (Ononogbu and Chiroma 2018).

Three Effects of Digital Culture among African Next Generations

The need for “wise-engagement” arises from the fact that digital media culture has shaped Africa’s next gens in three important ways. First, it has affected them in the area of knowledge and certainty. With the ubiquitous nature and availability of technological adaptation, young people have access to a barrage of information and knowledge. The reality of “influencers” challenges the traditional notions of experts and institutions of learning, for instance. Fake or merely fascinating news has created a reality that conflicts with balanced, creative, and critical thinking. On the other hand, technology has been a handmaid of globalization and the attendant multi-lateral flows of ideas. The rising phenomenon of atheist societies in Africa’s major cities can be correlated to access to the New Atheist movement through the digital content of such proponents as Dawkins and Hitchens. A similar argument on the universality of digital media can be made for the rise of Christian apologetics in the country as a result of digital access to the ministries of William Lane Craig and John Njoroge, among other influential apologists. One effect of these changes in knowledge production and movement is that young people have a lower level of trust for “traditional institutions” as well as experts and may innocently imbibe hostile ideologies, especially in an age of “keyboard experts.” Another effect is that young people are now more acquainted with conflicting arguments, so it takes greater effort to engage them, especially given the digital context of postmodernity.

Second, whereas digital culture has connected young people, it has also isolated them. Fascinating research by the psychologist Jean Twenge explores how digital media has affected the healthy transitions of young people into adulthood (Twenge 2017). She expands on work done in the area of emerging adulthood, which reveals how adolescence is extending into the mid-twenties (Arnett 2011). For instance, Twenge correlates how more screen time means more isolation and eventually more loneliness (Twenge 2017, 98). She unpacks a study conducted between 1991-2015 and reveals that “31% more 8th and 10th graders felt lonely in 2015 than 2011, along with 22% more 12th graders” (Twenge 2017, 97). Although some analysts critique the correlation of increased screen time with mental health challenges (Alonzo et al. 2020), similar negative consequences have been shown in the African context, including issues to do with addiction and cyber-crime (Ephraim 2013). The negative impact of social media on young people in Nigeria, such as loss of identity, self-esteem, and interpersonal skills, has also been noted (Ononogbu and Chiroma 2018, 52). Apologetics must therefore also take an affective approach in addition to the cognitive approach that characterizes much of traditional apologetics (Ndereba (2021b).

Third, digital media creates an opportunity for engagement with secular and with religious ideas. Rather than withdrawing from digital media, Christian apologists must take the Pauline approach of Acts 17 to create meaningful engagement with pop cultural ideas—whether those have to do with African traditional ideas, the question of identity, or the question of truth. The South African practical theologian Anita Cloete has engaged with youth issues at the intersection of digital media and religion. From her research with young people, she reveals that they utilize religious and philosophical ideas in digital film and other media in worldview construction (Cloete 2019, 65). Thus, meaningful missional engagement with young people necessitates the appropriation of films, TV series, music, and other media so as to unpack worldview issues at play and how to engage them with the biblical worldview and gospel.

Engaging Africa’s Next Gens Like Paul in Acts 17

Growing up with digital culture has contributed to rising generations of Africans' marked differences from older generations. In Africa, whereas postmodernity is definitive of global youth culture, there are certain cultural identities and practices unique to the next gens in Africa's cities. In practical ministry, these complexities can be seen in youth double denominational belonging (Okwuosa et al. 2020) or the dabbling in African traditional cultural practices (Sommers 2010, 324; Uwaegbute 2021). Those involved in youth ministry must therefore exegete African youth culture even as they seek to exegete the Word. Paul's various approaches in his defenses in the Book of Acts reveal how he uses different methodologies for different audiences. When engaging with a largely Jewish audience, Paul engages and confronts their Jewish understanding based on the common knowledge he has with them of the Old Testament and its ultimate fulfilment in Christ (See Paul in Salamis in Acts 13:5, in Thessalonica in Acts 17:1-3). When he engages with the Gentiles, particularly the Epicurean and Stoics in Acts 17:16-34, Paul uses their religious knowledge as a point of missional contact and moves forward to commend the gospel to them.

Compassion as the Starting Point of Engagement

Paul's model reveals Jesus's heart for engaging with people from a place of compassion (Mt 11:28-30, Lk 7:13, Jn 11:34-38). Unfortunately, apologetics has been caricatured as an enterprise of winning an argument rather than winning a person. Even more worrisome is a widespread distorted vision of young people. Older people can easily make value judgements on young people based on surface-level cultural issues rather than engaging the deep-level cultural issues involved (Mueller 2006). Rather than engaging the symbols of youth culture (for example, dreadlock hairstyles, contemporary fashion styles, hip-hop sub-cultural realities), ministry leaders often push young people away. Paul reveals how compassion is the starting point of engagement. After all, we who are followers of Jesus are called to apologetic engagement from a place of "gentleness and respect" (1 Pet 3:15b). Paul is "provoked"—literally stirred, stimulated, irritated (See also 2 Pet 2:8)—at the idol worship of the Athenians (Acts 17:16). It is compassion that drives him to engage them rather than to abandon them.

Connecting Point in the Culture

Apologetic engagement with youth culture, rather than being an uncritical dumping of information, is a sensitive engagement with the values behind popular cultural symbols and ideas. This is what it means to connect with what young people value, whether they do it knowingly and unknowingly, and engaging the assumptions behind their value systems. We who serve young people must be present in their lives. Paul reasons "in the synagogue with the Jews and devout persons, and in the marketplace every day..." (Acts 17:17). One-time evangelistic contacts may work in some circumstances, but with the contemporary cultural complexities there is need to make use of our relationships for the sake of missional engagement. Additionally, connecting with young people means noting their religious and cultural symbols. Paul observes the altar's inscription "to an unknown God" and uses it as a point of apologetic engagement (Acts 17:23). Paul uses the altar as a cultural bridge to move the Athenians from where they are to where they should be—that is, from an unknown God to the living God. Finally, Paul's knowledge of the culture's influencers—Epimenides (Acts 17:28a) and Aratus (Acts 17:28b)—is exemplary for how apologetic engagement must be aware of and engage with the influencers of Africa's next gens.

Within the Kenyan context, ministering to young people may thus mean engaging with the ideas behind Sauti Sol's music or sensitively discerning Caroline Mutoko's lifestyle hacks among urban Kenyans. Sauti Sol's music articulates a combination of plural religious values, a contemporary and global appeal within the Afro-pop music subculture and an aesthetic of

postmodern African identity. These songs navigate both global youth culture as well as its localized elements of Kenyan youth cultures and sub-cultures, evident from the language to the turns of phrases in the lyrics. Such music presents an urban Kenyan contemporary culture which is conversant with a global youth culture, thereby revealing how seamlessly religion, popular culture, and postmodernity intertwine (Ntarangwi 2009). Caroline Mutoko is a popular radio host-cum-digital influencer who is the image of an articulate feminist voice, aware of the key dialogues happening in the culture and offering wisdom that is palatable to the working-class urban Kenyan (Gitau 2019, 411). Together, Sauti Sol and Mutoko unpack how postmodernity, new-age philosophical ideals, glocalised youth cultures and subcultures, and lived realities of young people in African cities can present common points of contact with the gospel. After all, the aspects of truth, identity, and multiculturalism find their nexus and fulfillment in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Conviction with the Gospel

Although some Christians drive a wedge between apologetics and evangelism, these approaches to people outside of Christ are always held in a symbiotic relationship within the biblical canon. Apologetics is a handmaid of evangelism, so that when the intellectual barriers are removed Christ can be presented with clarity. Paul takes this approach in his engagement with the people of Athens. After he shows Christ-like compassion and then connects with them, the Spirit convicts them with Paul's message of the gospel. Paul's progression is not an undirected presentation of the gospel, but he begins carefully with a deep engagement with their worldviews about divinity and reality. By beginning with the doctrine of God and making a case for his spiritual nature, his self-sufficiency, his sovereignty, and his immanence, Paul directly engages with the Greco-Roman conceptualizations of divinity—particularly their polytheism and Hellenistic philosophy (Jipp 2012, 579-581; Rothschild 2014). Once he clears the way, Paul then calls the people to “repentance,” the normative call of all the preachers of the New Testament, including Jesus and the other Apostles (Mk 1:15; Jn 1:12-14, 3:5; Acts 2:38-39; 2 Pet 3:9). At the end of the day, it is faith in the good news of Jesus Christ that is the heart of true transformation.

The gospel message is presented within particular cultural and inter-religious contexts. While postmodernity allows us to consider different cultural contexts from our own, thereby revealing our subjective interpretations of reality, it also creates a conflicting climate for the truth claims of Christ (Mueller 2006, 62). In today's digital age, tolerance is often confused with blind acceptance of contradictory truth claims. Entertainment is preferred to intellectual engagement. Ad-hominem are a favorite strategy for keyboard atheists and apologists rather than long-term conversations. We must seek to answer the age-old questions surrounding issues to do with justification in knowledge as well as objectivity in truth, as well as attendant theories such as the non-contradictory laws of logic, which are a hallmark of any reasonable defense of the Christian faith. Eventually, however, those discussions must only serve to offer Christ to Africa's next gens.

Holistic Apologetics in a Digital Age

With the now accepted COVID-shaped reality of our world, and with many transitions in the life milestones of young people, apologetic engagement must holistically consider youth contexts. The COVID context is a “low-hanging fruit” for engaging such classical questions of apologetics as the problem of pain, evil and suffering, or particular Christian doctrines, including eschatology. The author suggests that, as important as it is to engage in these conversations, how we go about them is just as crucial. Digital cultures are affecting young people in distinct ways. A holistic apologetic methodology must engage the head, the heart,

and the hands. Gould describes such a holistic approach as a “re-enchantment of the reason, the conscience, and the imagination” (Gould 2019, 32).

Digital cultures shift how we consume and critique knowledge claims. Without a careful consideration of how such claims shape the lives of young people, we who seek to serve them may be engaging in discourses that are detached from their lived realities. This article has considered how digital culture shapes young people in three key areas: knowledge, mental health, and popular culture. By exploring Paul’s engagement in the context of Athens in Acts 17, this article has proposed critical tools for incarnating the gospel for “iGens”, that is, African youth who are digitally native. First, we must engage digital cultures with compassion. Second, we must consider common points of popular cultural contact with young people. Third, we must offer Christ clearly in light of the apologetics task within the varied postmodern, modern, and traditional worldviews and interreligious climate of Africa’s key cities.

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