

Reflections on

Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?

James W. Sire

Apologetics

CP 511

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**Sire, James W. Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All? Downers Grove, IL:
InterVarsity Press, 1994.**

I. Introduction

Through the reading of this text this writer was repeatedly brought to a group within the church that I have found I love to minister to; the college student. Recently I was brought on staff of a church as the Minister to Singles and one of my greatest joys was that this entails working with both the college age and the singles over thirty groups in our church.

Throughout Part I of this text I repeatedly found myself brought into Sire's discussion as more than just a casual observer. In fact, many of the notes that I made in the margins of this text will relate to upcoming teaching and preaching moments with this group in the college ministry.

Throughout this brief reflection, I will examine aspects of the first six chapters of this book that I believe are helpful in understanding where many in our culture are at and ways that ministry can begin to advance for kingdom growth and expansion in these areas. This advance for the kingdom is built solidly on an apologetic strategy to reach and win the lost for Christ, through Christ and with Christ.

The second part of this book delivers the apologetic of the gospel message while the first six chapters lay the underpinning of how, when and where apologetic tools are developed, fostered and utilized. My other reflection paper deals with issues of apologetics, while this paper will deal with how, where and when the tool of apologetics are utilized especially as they impact the lives of college students.

II. Necessity of Belief: Why People Believe and the Social Context

"The fact of belief is a subtle matter" (Sire, 18). This statement made clear to me the importance of listening to those we minister to as an apologetic tool; not simply in their words, but in their actions and attitudes. The layers of family history, personal experience, cultural heritage and personal assumption can lead to a belief that correctly or incorrectly is

guiding the individual's life. The inability of some to stretch past or test the layers of their beliefs may prevent them from ever noticing what subtle beliefs are in fact guiding their lives'. This is a large part of what Pastoral ministry entails. When people realize it is impossible to believe in nothing at all, they must begin to do what Timothy urged the early church to be about.

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

This scripture came to mind when I read Sire's quote from Aristotle, “All men by nature desire to know” (Sire, 20). This inner yearning is sometimes hidden by layers of pain, confusion or disbelief, but is crucial to the duties of Pastoral ministry to bring those who are doubtful and vague to the certain and specific teachings of God's word (Sire, 22).

Sire speaks of two college students who had the opportunity to test and alter beliefs that had been fostered in their younger years as they joined and accepted the various world views of those around them. This example reminded me of a young girl who came into my office at the church several years ago and began to cry. She said that during the last month she had been coming regularly to youth group and church and had begun reading her Bible; her sobs deepened. I asked what was wrong; it sounded like she had been growing spiritually and I knew that she had prayed to receive Christ and had even been Baptized during our morning worship. Her life in many ways had begun to transform and she was an encouraging leader in the group. Her answer was simply that the more she read scripture and listened to the sermons, the more she realized she had done wrong in her young life; the more she wanted to change her actions, attitudes and even that of her family's way of living. This anguished despair had come at the price of leaving behind “happy hedonism” (Sire, 24). This is the task of true transformation in the Christian life if we believe that we are corrupted by sin and

aspire to be made into the image of Christ. I was reminded here of the following passage from Luke 19:

“Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples! "I tell you," He replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." As He approached Jerusalem and saw the city, He wept over it and said, "If you, even you, Had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you"” (Luke 19:39-44).

This passage clearly illustrates what knowledge of the truth can do to burden even Jesus with pain and anguish over what He saw happening around Him. If truth comes with the price of awareness of danger and peril, then truth such as the truth Jesus’ disciples were proclaiming must not be silenced. The life of Jesus served a purpose for us and our lives serve a purpose as well; when we realize that purpose, we become accountable to a standard outside of ourselves. No longer do we simply follow what parents, friends, culture, experience or understanding have directed us to assume. Truth becomes a standard that no longer can succumb to the high stress, high mobility of our culture, but rather truth becomes a standard that comes with us from wherever our home was to Jerusalem with Jesus. We may weep along the way, but it is a journey worth joining and to this end world views and general beliefs must be discussed, taught, challenged and impacted for God’s kingdom. Any ministry that does not bring the individual to truth or the truth to the individual is not making the kind of impact for God’s kingdom that it should.

III. The Personal Context: Religious and Philosophical Dimension

“Belief must be personal. I must be the one to decide” (Sire, 51). This is one of the most difficult truths in ministry life to face. As a Pastor, I can provide the necessary conditions and sufficient reasons for others to see my beliefs and views, but there is no ability

to change the way they may want or choose to see situations. The need for autonomy within each of us needs to be respected by the pastor and as truth is shared it needs to be packaged in ways that invite those listening to open the package for themselves and make their own decisions.

Sire correctly states, “students know that the answers to the tough questions of life do not come easily, nor are they certain” (Sire, 55). One of the greatest tools for making ministry personal for others has come as I have learned to see God at work in my own life and have encouraged others to look for Him to be at work in theirs. This personalization along with reflection on scriptural truths begins to create the intimate atmosphere needed for world views to be impacted and truth to be shared.

“What we believe must be true, not just convenient” (Sire, 59). This becomes a part of the wrestling match over the tough personal questions of life. Our own experiences and the experiences of others shape our view of truth and must be compelling for us to accept a new set of truths or change our worldview.

The Bible is not viewed by most college students in our society as the primary resource for religious belief. Sire sites the University for being at fault for this; my view would be to also include the negligence of many parents and churches to read the Bible regularly and make it accessible to children as a spiritual rule and guide for life. The difficulty of understanding or comprehending God’s word without a PHD is often an excuse rendered for this type of view.

Sire raises many good points regarding the value that we place on scripture and encourages us to wield some of the apologetic tools for truth that we have been provided as a way to offer valid defenses of our faith in ministry. “How accurate to human nature as we understand it is what is said in the Bible, for example” (Sire, 65)? “Is there any reason to

think that some religious figures have an insight into who God is and what He wants” (Sire, 66)? These are two of the questions I found appealing for the minister to contemplate. When students begin to ask these types of questions, the pastor has been granted the ability to assist others in finding the truth for them. The atmosphere now exists where seekers can accept the reliable authority of the scriptural texts and those people whom they believe are telling them the truth regarding these texts.

The Pastor can only be engaged in the use of apologetics when they are trusted and their words are believed by those they are speaking to. With this context in mind, the life and spiritual journey of the Pastor become of first and foremost importance to the reasoned arguments that are utilized in the defense of scripture and the arguments used to confront others. This is not to say the use of apologetics should be used in a secondary fashion. I agree with Sire who makes it plain that the use of the tool must be preceded by acts and actions that show the person utilizing the tool can be trusted and the materials he or she is using is trustworthy as well.

“The experience itself does not guarantee its truthfulness” (Sire, 87). Many in our culture look to these events and to this end truth seems to become relative to how we feel and what we have done; our experiences. The apologetic tool can be utilized by both sides experientially, however, there is value in being transformed into the image of Christ and the remainder of his book is centered on this view. It is a view that is worthy to be followed by all.