Outline and Chapter Questions for 8-Week Study

I. Introduction and Faulty Secular Systems

1. Faulty Secular Foundations Enthroning the Individual

   What sort of self-constructed “Sheilaisms” or cafeteria value systems are popular today?

   Many speak of a “therapeutic culture,” where the most important thing is that people feel good – and good about themselves. To what extent has that perspective infiltrated the church?

   Some claim that the greatest problem for Christian apologetics is not its failure to persuade with rational arguments but the non-believer’s unwillingness to submit to the Lord; it’s not so much a matter of the mind as the will. Is this a fair assessment?

2. Faulty Secular Systems with External Reference: Altruism to Natural Order

   How do you sort things out when the consciences of Christians differ? What if one has “a hitch in his spirit” about something and the other does not?

   As over-the-top as they may be, are some labels useful in criticizing extremism (e.g., “environmental wacko,” “feminazi,” “tree hugger,” “bleeding heart,” “chauvinist pig,” “witch hunter,”).

   In Matthew 11:30, Jesus said his yoke was easy and his burden light. What of the rival yokes offered by alternative ethics? Can their advocates say, “Come unto hedonism (or aestheticism, or utopianism, etc.), and it will give you rest.”

3. Faulty Secular Systems with External Reference: Reason to Virtue

   How often do people grant themselves moral exemptions because they feel their case is so special that the ordinary rules don’t apply to them?

   Have you ever witnessed an instance where a group put up with ridiculous or evil things because they thought they had to do so in order to prosper or survive?

   Is personal holiness a good indicator of wisdom in matters of public policy? Is the most godly person in the congregation the best guide to how to vote, how to raise children, etc.?

II. Religious Systems

4. Faulty or Inadequate Religious Systems

   As Hitchens observes, Buddhists are impatient with one’s “critical faculties.” What does Christianity make of these faculties?
What if we took military prison conditions to be a moral indicator of the religious roots of a nation? For instance, allied POWs in WWII were much more likely to die in Japanese camps than were their counterparts in German camps? Why might this be so? We’ve heard a lot about Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo? How might these compare to the prisons that coalition troops would have faced had Saddam and the Taliban prevailed?

“New Age” has been called the “oldest lie,” in that it tracks with Satan’s promise to Eve that, if she would eat the forbidden fruit, she would be like God (partake of divinity) and would never die (which reincarnation satisfies). What do you make of this observation?

Would you rather live in a nation dominated by Buddhists, Muslims, or Hindus?

5. The Irreducible Complexity and Splendor of the Christian Ethic

Walk through the features of a biblical ethic given in this chapter. Think of ways in which Christians neglect (or put exaggerated emphasis on) one or more of them.

Some like to call themselves “Red Letter Christians,” building their ethic largely, if not exclusively, on the spoken words of Jesus recorded in the gospels (often printed in red). Is this a good approach?

Since ethically, the Bible answers to so many concerns – conscience, natural law, reason, etc. – its moral precepts often overlap with other systems of duty and value. Where are some places it does this? How does this play into Christian cooperation with people of other faiths or of non-faith?

III. Immoral Ethicists

6. Immoral Ethicists: Ideologues, Social Scientists, and Activists

Do you think the media overlooks or excuses the misdeeds of those they like, while seeking to discover, magnify, and celebrate the missteps of those they dislike?

Do you know of cases where the onset of secret sin in a person’s private life first showed itself in a surprising and disappointing shift in commitments or a collapse of reliability in that person’s public life?

How is it that people who don’t believe in God can still do admirable things?

7. Immoral Ethicists: Philosophers, Theologians, and Artists

The psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud famously argued that religion is a projection out of man’s insecurities, a sort of wishful thinking. Try your hand at psychoanalyzing Freud. What might have caused him to say such a thing?
Philosophy is, by definition, the “love of wisdom.” Is it fair then to critique philosophers on how much wisdom they show in their own personal lives?

Name some other “artistic prophets” whose lives are a mess but whose words in the form of lyrics, screenplays, etc. are taken to be insightful and edifying.

**IV. The Moral Authority of Christian Teachers**

8. The Moral Authority of Christian Teachers: Biblical Characters

The Sermon on the Mount is deeply demanding? What evidence is there that the moral teacher who delivered it, namely Jesus, lived up to its standards?

Did Paul live up to the Love Chapter, 1 Corinthians 13? Compare the moral teaching of other biblical characters to the lives they lived.

How do the fruit of the Spirit allow Christians to live moral lives? Connect specific gifts with specific issues.

9. The Moral Authority of Christian Teachers: Church History

It’s been said, “Don’t attribute to malice what can be explained in terms of ignorance.” Where do Christians behave badly because of blind spots or ignorance?

What motivates believers to give moral advice?

Were the Crusaders who slaughtered people in 13th-century Constantinople actually Christians? What about the Inquisitors who tortured people to death in Spain in the 15th century?

**V. The Fruit of False Systems**

10. The Fruit of False Systems: Islam

If the U.S. were to put religious figures on postage stamps for making a contribution to the culture, prosperity, and honor of the nation, who would be prime candidates for this recognition? Would any of them be Muslim?

Can you name from memory two-dozen acts of terrorism (murderous attacks meant to kill civilians) committed or attempted by Muslims in the last few decades. Can you name any by Christians?

Non-believers have made a strong contribution to America since the days of its founding. Can you name some of those figures and their impact for good? Consider what loss Muslim-majority countries have suffered because they have marginalized or persecuted non-Muslims in their midst.

11. The Fruit of False Systems: Animism, Eastern Thought, and Irreligion
How does the culture glamorize or normalize false faith, anti-faith, or non-faith (as in *Dharma and Greg* or the sale of Che Guevara T-shirts). Think of some examples.

Americans have the general impression that Eastern religions are gentle and tolerant. Would evangelicals in Asia agree?

Though church attendance is way down in Europe, refugees still stream there? Why is this so?

**VI. The Cultural Fruit of Christianity**

12. The Cultural Fruit of Christianity: Confession, Correction, and Commendation

Are press reports on Christian denominations, churches, and leaders fair, or do they magnify conflict and misbehavior?

Can you name movies or television series that feature the goodness and sensibility of Christians? What about films that mock, demean, or utterly ignore Christian teachings and values?

What are the dangers of seeking approval from the world, of shying away from what the culture would criticize? Shouldn’t the culture distrust and reject us, as it did Christ?

13. The Cultural Fruit of Christianity: Celebration

Do Christians, simply by the goodness of their lives, make others uncomfortably self-conscious in their presence? Should they?

What moral impact do our country’s churches have on the nation today? What if revival came to our nation? What social, political, and economic changes might come of it?

Can you name some modern day Good Samaritans, people who try to rescue their enemies from ruin?

**VII. Irresponsible of Infelicitous Argument**

14. Irresponsible or Infelicitous Argument: The Church

Have you ever embarrassed yourself by the content or manner of your defense of the faith?

What does it mean to say your speech should be “seasoned with salt” as well as “full of grace” (Col. 4:6)?

What cautionary lessons can Christian apologists learn from watching politicians? When do they dishonor their causes by tricky rhetoric, cheap shots, “stone-walling,” equivocation, and such?
15. Irresponsible or Infelicitous Argument: The Culture (Ad Hominem to Mackerels in Moonlight)

It’s been said that the best way to become skeptical of the newspaper is to read an article about something you know a lot about. Is this true?

What expressions does the culture use to demean Christians, their convictions and activities (e.g., “button holing,” “Bible thumping,” “fire and brimstone preaching,” “homophobic,” “patriarchal,” “Puritanical”).

What is the difference, if any, between apologetics and PR?

16. Irresponsible or Infelicitous Argument: The Culture (“Moral Equivalence” to Wishful Thinking)

Why is it that people are so eager to dismiss things they know relatively little about?

Is it fair to say that contempt tends to make one careless in thought?

To what extent are those who throw up bad arguments and foolish declarations simply victims or products of the culture rather than treacherous foes of the faith?

VIII. Virtuous Apologetics

17. Virtuous Apologetics: Logic and Substance

Do we waste our time dignifying lame criticisms with responses? Or should we try to answer virtually everyone and everything as best we can?

What books or articles might you recommend in the course of apologetics? Can you report any gratifying results from this approach?

Have you ever heard apologetical material in a sermon? How did the preacher defend the faith against its critics?

18. Virtuous Apologetics: Manners and Character

Can you recall a time when you were mistaken about something important and someone corrected you both gently and effectively? Both bluntly and effectively?

Do you think the church believes that apologetics is Christlike?

In Luke 12:11-12, Jesus tells his disciples, “When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.” How does that apply to the apologetic enterprise today? What role does the Holy Spirit play in our defense of the faith?