

Ep. 97 | Douglas Groothuis: The Church, Apologetics, and the Hiddenness of God

Intro Welcome to engage360, Denver Seminary's Podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the Gospel and the life changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.

Don Payne Hello friends. Welcome again to engage 360 from Denver Seminary. My name is Don Payne, your host. We are grateful that you have once again or maybe for the first time chosen to spend a little time with us. We try to work out in podcast format our mission statement here at Denver Seminary, which is to train people to engage the needs of the world with the redemptive power of the gospel and the life changing truth of Scripture. So we have all manner of interesting guests and interesting conversations along those lines. For this episode, let's think about apologetics. We can use the categories of things that change and things that remain the same to think about problems people have of Christianity. Because in one sense, there are always new challenges, new objections, new misgivings, or at least new iterations, new packaging of those misgivings. And yet some of them remain the same, even because it's the same kinds of concerns just getting articulated in different form. Well, the field of apologetics is devoted to addressing a wide range of issues that trip people up when they think about Christianity. And our longtime colleague, Dr. Doug Groothuis, has given his life to that field, apologetics, and to offering reasonable responses to objections and questions that people have about the Christian faith. Doug has been with us before, but Doug, welcome back. Good to have you here again.

Douglas Groothuis Thank you. Happy to be here.

Don Payne Some of you may know that Doug is a very accomplished author, has lots of books out, and perhaps what he would call his magnum opus is the book Christian Apologetics that was released in its first edition, when Doug?

Douglas Groothuis 2011.

Don Payne Okay. And just recently he has released a second edition of Christian Apologetics with some new material. Eight chapters, though he corrected me just before we get started. He thought it was seven, in fact, you said it says in the book seven, right, but it's actually eight.

Douglas Groothuis Yeah, I lost track. So, in the introduction it says seven new chapters. And a few weeks ago, I went back and highlighted all the new chapters and found out it was eight. So please don't hold that against me when you read the book if anyone notices.

Don Payne Well, first of all, congratulations, because I'm sure this was not nearly as much work as writing the first edition, but no small amount of work in doing these revisions in these additions.

Douglas Groothuis Well, the first one was about 750 pages, and I thought that was a little too thin. So, this one is about 840 pages, but the print is smaller.

Don Payne Well that's good news.

Douglas Groothuis Yeah, that's right. So, get your magnifying glasses out. But really, it's almost like an entire new book added to the previous book.

Don Payne Okay. Tell us a little bit about what you've added and what's been revised.

Douglas Groothuis Yeah, the first one I added was I've been teaching my book for years here at Denver Seminary and other places. And after a while I realized that I needed to defend the institution of the church. And this is one of the problems with a lot of people who consider themselves spiritual or maybe even Christian. They don't feel any affiliation or allegiance to the church. So, I added a chapter called In Defense of the Church, and I went from Christology to ecclesiology. Jesus said that the gates of hell would not prevail against the church. So, if Jesus is the Divine Savior, if He died on the cross to atone for our sins and rose from the dead, ascended to heaven, and he's at the right hand of the father, then I think we need to take very seriously the institution he came to create. So, I found that most Protestant apologetics books don't have a chapter defending the church. So, I do that in this one.

Don Payne Yeah, good. And that's really part of what I wanted to talk with you about knowing that that was a key aspect of the revised material. You also talk a little bit, maybe not a little bit, you talk about the problems involved in the hidden-ness of God. And I want to loop back to that and write have some conversation with you about that. And when I opened with remarks about things that change and things that stay the same, I really had in mind that issue of the church, the question of the church, because the church has probably been one of the ongoing problems spots for people throughout generations, maybe centuries. And yet the particular misgivings, the particular tangles and questions people have about the church might change from era to era, I suspect. So, I want to get into some of that. First, maybe tell us just a little bit about how any of these concerns, whether it's the church or the hiddenness of God. How does that relate to your own story?

Douglas Groothuis Hmm. Well, it all does, I think, one way or another with the church. Ever since I became a Christian, with the exception of one summer, I don't know how this happened, but the summer of 1977, I had been a Christian for a year, and I did not attend a church during that time. I don't really know why. I wasn't having struggles with doubt or anything like that. But besides that about four month period, I've always been involved in an evangelical church of one kind or another, whether it's charismatic or Baptist or evangelical covenant, even Pentecostal, went to a Foursquare church for a time, and I'm a very happy Anglican right now, but I've always realized that the church is not optional for a follower of Jesus. We need to be involved with the church. We need to worship together, pray together, understand the Scripture, exhort one another, so there's a strong apologetic for the church as the Body of Christ, the Temple of God. There's so many images there, the household of faith and so on. And then the church itself is also an apologetic for the truth of Christ. Paul says that if people are worshiping God rightly and the Spirit is in their midst, then unbelievers will realize that God is among his people during these worship services. He speaks of that and first Corinthians. So, I have been a person very involved in one kind of evangelical church or another for now, I guess, 46 years. Just last week was the 46th anniversary of my being baptized after I converted. And so, I realized that all the apologetics in the world is not very good if people think, okay, now, I believe certain things about the Bible and Christ and I'm good now. I'm fine. No, you need to be involved with the church. You need to worship with other believers. You need to realize you are a sibling to other men and women in Christ. And that's not a small thing. That's crucial to Christian obedience and also to the whole task of apologetics.

Don Payne You know, as a theologian, I have noticed what you mentioned just a moment ago, that in many evangelical circles or theologies, what we call ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church gets short shrift. It's often the caboose. It's a tag along in the list of doctrines that we study which itself is rather telling. Because if you look in some other Christian traditions like Eastern orthodoxy, for example, there's a very different understanding of the centrality of the church. And in many evangelical circles, as you and I would know them, the church is certainly considered important, but not nearly as theologically central in the same sense as other doctrines may be. And I wonder what between the first edition and second edition of the book, what were some of the triggers that made you realize that you needed to give more attention to that?

Douglas Groothuis Well, I think part of it is the movement from being a rather low church evangelical to a higher church evangelical. And that has to do with beginning to attend an Anglican church in about 2007 and never going back. And I think I developed a strong appreciation for the liturgy, especially the Eucharist and so on, and realized that the church, although I always knew this, but as I got more involved in a liturgical church, that the church is extremely formative in who we are as believers. It's not something that should ever be optional and that the form of the liturgy tells us the gospel every week. So, we know the gospel and we actually perform in a way the gospel through our actions, through the confession of sin, the confession of the creed, and so on. We are participating in this objectively true, rational, and existentially pertinent account of reality. So, I guess I started to see the church as more central in the whole task of apologetics. And it's interesting, Don, you and I have been doing doctrinal interviews now for longer than either one of us would like to admit.

Don Payne Not interviewing each other?

Douglas Groothuis No, but interviewing students. I'm sorry. I'm using in-group language here. Although we do interview each other once in a while. I worry about you sometimes.

Don Payne Well, you should.

Douglas Groothuis But we interview students as they're summative experience at Denver Seminary to get the Master of Divinity degree. And I have found now for almost 30 years that typically, not always, the least developed part of their theology is ecclesiology. I don't know if you've noticed that, but I've noticed that over the years.

Don Payne Yeah, I think that's true. My experience would bear that out. I know you're familiar with a lot of the kind of social science research that has gone on among skeptics or people who've turned their back on the church and why they do so. It does seem to me, anyway, that some of that research is demonstrating that the church is one of the leading reasons why people either reject Christianity or won't come to it in the first place. What have your conversations borne out along that line?

Douglas Groothuis Well, I think people are reluctant to engage institutions, especially, I think if I can overgeneralize millennials and Gen Z, people are very, very skeptical of institutions. So, people will say things like, well, I'm distrusting of organized religion and there's been so many abuses. And my response is, would you rather have disorganized religion? So, we need structures for our lives, right? We need patterns and structures and traditions of authority in our lives. And every institution on earth has its flaws and has its failures, certainly. But the difference with the church, it's not merely a human institution. It's instituted by God himself. And we are warned in Scripture about the kind of failures that

will occur, think of Paul's letters to Corinth, the horrible things that are going on there. So it's not like corruption or misdeeds in the church are anything new. But what distinguishes the church from any other human gathering is the truth of a gospel that should be proclaimed and the presence of the Holy Spirit which should be there. Now there are sadly apostate churches, so we've got to make that distinction. And that's something I mentioned in the book, is when I talk about the church, I'm talking about churches that affirm the full authority of Scripture and preach the gospel and have the ability to reform themselves on the basis of Scripture, and they have not gone the way of the world in doctrines or ethics or things like that. But, you know, there's a kind of minimalism I think a lot of Americans have about spirituality, which is, yes, I believe there's a higher power or a spiritual force and the church can do some good, but it's really optional for the religious or for the spiritual life. People still tend to use the word religion in a negative sense. So, what I think we need is to be extremely involved in a Bible believing church and evangelize people, do apologetics, and invite them to the church. I was recently talking to a young man actually, I won't say who it is, who graduated from our school many years ago, who has not been involved in the church for years and years. And I have no indication he fails to consider himself a Christian, but somehow, he just lost traction with the local church. So, I let him have it and he listened to me and I gave him a copy of the new edition of Christian Apologetics, and I said, now, please read that chapter in defense of the church because we need you back.

Don Payne You know, it occurs to me that when we think about apologetic conversations broadly and the many kinds of questions, misgivings that people have about the Christian faith, quite often people seem to be rejecting or pushing back against a version of Christianity that is distorted. In other words, they're rejecting a Christianity that you and I might reject.

Douglas Groothuis Right.

Don Payne Or they're rejecting things they think Christians believe that they don't actually believe. And I wonder whether the same thing, or whether you think the same thing might be true with people's rejection or misgivings of the church. Are they rejecting a distortion, or are they rejecting something that yeah, in fact is messed up, but it's still only game in town.

Douglas Groothuis Yeah, I think some of the rejection might be based on ignorance. Some of it is based on caricature, can be based on images of the church and Christianity you see in popular media or films or things like that. But really, the best way to discover what is happening in a particular church is to attend and to be involved and maybe meet with the leadership or learn something about what the church is all about and not take it second hand. But the church is a whipping boy, you know, for everybody. And there have been scandals in various churches over many things. And it's very distressing when we see that. But the entire institution is not discredited by the failure or the foibles of many of its followers. And I always go back to Scripture itself. I said this earlier, but the Scripture itself tells us there will be false teachers, there will be frauds, people will misbehave, and they'll need to repent or maybe even be disciplined by the church. You know, I've got my Bible open right here. It's all here. So, if you take the Bible seriously, you get the resources to handle the kind of problems that occur within the church. But I remember telling a friend of mine years ago who was always criticizing the church but was a Christian. I said, Well, if you're going to be a critic, be a loving critic, but be a critic within the church, not outside carping, throwing rocks at it, be part you know, to use an old language, be part of the solution or be part of a positive force for good within the church instead of pulling out and

saying, well, it's got this problem and that problem. I have been blessed to be involved in many different, very Bible centered, very loving churches over the years of different denominations, different traditions, all evangelical Protestants, but some people haven't. So, people been terribly abused, even sexually abused and so on. But again, as you said, this the only game in town. Jesus said on this rock, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. So, we have a divinely sanctioned institution and we need to be a part of it.

Don Payne This may take us too far off into the weeds, since neither one of us are therapists, and that's probably a good thing. But you mentioned those who've had abusive experiences, sometimes egregious and toxic, abusive experiences in the context of the church. Sometimes an experience with actual pastors or other church leaders. I'd love to hear your thoughts on what it's like to navigate all of that when that is one's viscerally and deeply embedded experience of what the church is.

Douglas Groothuis Right.

Don Payne How do we move through the that?

Douglas Groothuis Yeah, recovery from abusive church situations. Well, I have a friend who's been a student here who came out of a cult. Her cult was basically her family, her extended family. And it was a polygamous cult. So, she has many brothers and sisters and half-brothers and half-sisters. And when she came to study at the seminary, she was still working some of that out, you know, because she had a kind of a PTSD response to being in churches sometimes because of her background. So, for her, she has to go back to Scripture and say, well, what really is biblical, what is not biblical? And then how do I get over some of these triggering circumstances and realize that I'm not in the cult that I was brought up with, and this is what true Christianity is, and this is a distortion of it. So, it's certainly cognitive and rational. And that's where I tend to have my chops is in those areas, not so much the therapeutic and relational, but people that come out of very abusive situations need to know what the Bible really teaches. But then they also need some help to desensitize themselves to triggering situations and need to work through a lot of difficulties, certainly. And I've known a number of people in that situation.

Don Payne I'm going to put together what may be a rather awkward segue, but when we're thinking about the church as the place where, well to use your language, this is your chapter title or your section titled the Church as an apologetic for Christianity, unbelievers or anybody should be able to sense the very real presence, the reality of God in and through the church. And yet, sadly, and for maybe a lot of different reasons, that is often not the case. That makes me think of this other new aspect you've dealt with in your revised edition, which is the hiddenness of God. Describe that problem. What's involved when we use that language, God's hiddenness.

Douglas Groothuis Yeah. The basic argument is that if God is all good and all powerful and he wants to be in a relationship with us, why hasn't he made himself more obvious to us? Why are there agnostics and atheists out there? Why do people lose their faith and they say there is no God when at some point they thought there was a God? And this has been a very lively topic in the philosophy of religion for a long time, but especially in the last 30 years. And my first edition did not directly address that, although I dealt with it to some extent through my engagement of Blaise Pascal because he dealt with this in his writings. And the basic approach that I take is that, it's very influenced by Pascal, that God has given us enough evidence and enough reasons to believe if our hearts are inclined in

that direction. But he has given enough ambiguity that if our hearts are not inclined in that direction, then we can just attend to other things. We don't have to recognize the reality of God if for one reason or another we would rather not.

Don Payne He's not going to just steamroll anybody.

Douglas Groothuis Exactly. Pascal is very helpful with that. Also, C. Stephen Evans has done some very good work on that. He talks about the wide availability of the knowledge of God from nature, from conscience, from Scripture. But then He also talks about the easy deniability of God. I don't like the word easy. I refined that a bit in my book, but God is widely available. If our hearts are open, our minds are open in the right way. But you can also set up a way of life that denies the reality of God. In fact, we're not in the dark about that. Romans One lays that out very clearly in verses 18 through 32 about God is present, God is knowable, but people do not give thanks and they suppressed the truth about God and create idols and end up worshiping those idols and debauching, debasing themselves. So, what I do is I look at the overall evidence for the existence of God. I do that throughout the book, and I say, Well, there's plenty of good reasons to believe in God. So why is it that some people don't? I don't think it's because the arguments are bad or because God is not there or God is not really present, but it's rather something within the person. So, I explore the idea of self-deception, which philosophers have worked on, and you see that in Romans one, you see it in other passages in Scripture. And I want to make sure to not beg the question and say, Well, there is a God. So, if you deny him, there's something wrong with you. That would be just presupposing Christianity's true. That would also be kind of an ad hominem against unbelievers. So, I have to develop the arguments for God and then try to explain unbelief on the basis of a very real problem we have as human beings. And that is self-deception. But my basic epistemological theological approach is there's enough evidence to believe, if you are so inclined, there's enough ambiguity to refuse to pursue God if you are so inclined. And I get really my basic insights from Blaise Pascal on that. So, I try to develop that in the chapter.

Don Payne You're making me think of some of the biblical imagery where God's acts of self-revealing are almost always accompanied by some limitations or some obscuring. I think particularly of the cloud that surrounded Mt. Sinai when Moses and even the people of Israel came to the foot of the mountain to meet with the Lord. And that proximity of God's self-revealing was accompanied by a cloud. In other words, God always both reveals and conceals at the same time. And that's probably at least in my understanding, that's probably a paradigm for the ongoing knowledge of God as well to the extent that we know God, there is always unknown about God and that plagues us.

Douglas Groothuis Right. Yeah. That's been very important for me, especially with the whole issue of the problem of evil and why do these horrible things happen. And for me, I think the most trying and difficult thing of my life was losing my first wife, Becky, to dementia. And I wrote a book about that. I think we talked about it on an earlier podcast, Walking Through Twilight. But one thing that I had been thinking about and meditating on for years and years, especially through the Book of Ecclesiastes, is that we can know enough about God to trust Him in the areas where we don't know what he's doing. So, there are a number of scriptures that speak to this. Deuteronomy 29:29 talks about the revelation of God and then the secret things of God, the things that He will not reveal. And you see that also in Ecclesiastes. You see it in Romans eight. After Paul has laid out the revelation of God so thoroughly and wonderfully. And then he ends with this doxology where he says, essentially, let me try to get to it here. I do not want to botch it. This is very comforting. He says this is the doxology, 11:33 through 36. I need to memorize it. Oh, the

depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. Knowledge of God. How unsearchable his judgments and his past beyond tracing out. Who has known the mind of a Lord or who has been his counselor, who has ever given to God that God should repay Him, for from Him and through Him and to Him are all things to him be the glory forever. So, this is a beautiful way of saying God has revealed who He is, how He's worked with us, the plan of salvation. Paul just talked about Israel and so on. And then as sort of finalizing that, he says, But there's still so much we don't know about God, but we can know enough about him to glorify him and to try to live in terms of what he has revealed to us. So, I like to put it in terms of our knowledge of God provides a framework of understanding. But within that framework, there are a lot of pockmarks of mystery.

Don Payne That's a good image.

Douglas Groothuis Yeah. So, my brilliant wife, who was in Mensa and wrote books and edited books and was such a brilliant woman, literally loses her mind. Well, who can understand that? I don't even try. But what I tried to do is find meaning in the midst of it. And then, given my Christian worldview, and Becky and I worked very hard to have a rational Christian worldview together for over 30 years, we looked forward to what was coming. And what was coming was back in her resurrected body, where her brain is working better than it ever has, and her body is without the effects of the curse or sin or anything else. And I would often read to her from Revelation 21, 22, first Corinthians 15, and it wasn't just wishful thinking. You know, we had good reason to believe that this will happen. And a lot of it is this big apologetics book. Becky helped me edit the first edition of the book, and that was the last thing she ever could edit. She lost her ability to edit after that, and once we were driving to go to Olive Garden to eat and she was lamenting her fate. I don't know, this might have been 2016. And I said, Becky, I know it's horrible, but one day we'll be in the new heavens and the new earth. And she looked at me and said, But Doug, is it really true? And this is someone who had believed in Christ her entire life and had really, as I said, worked hard to have a rational, critically aware faith. But dementia does horrible things to people and that kind of suffering can really jar a person's faith. And I said, Becky, do you remember that big apologetics book that you edited and, well, the first thing I said, this may sound weird, the first thing I said, Becky, do you think I'm smart? She said, yes, she had to. And then I said, you remember the big apologetics book you edited? Yes. I said, well, I assure you that the reasoning and facts back up what we believe. I assure you that there is good and sufficient reason to believe what we believe. So, in a way, I was kind of helping her believe I was almost vicariously believing for her.

Don Payne Yeah, kind of lending her faith in some ways.

Douglas Groothuis And reminding her of what she held very firmly, which was a bit elusive, going through the horrible suffering that she went through.

Don Payne Suffering can make it elusive. That was kind of a John the Baptist moment in some ways. You know, when John the Baptist who.

Douglas Groothuis Yeah, Matthew 11.

Don Payne Who knew the Messiah intimately, but when he's in prison and his life is on the line, he you know, he's asking that question. Are you really the one? And that's what Jesus tells him, you know. Hey, the blind are healed, the lame walk. Look at the evidence.

Douglas Groothuis Yeah, look at the evidence. I am the Messiah. So that's basically what I said to Becky and encouraged her. And I think that shows the existential power of apologetics, because when we were walking through that twilight of her decline, we didn't always feel the presence of God, the joy of the Lord, by no means. But even when we didn't feel it, we knew it. We knew God was there, even if we didn't feel a palpable presence of love and acceptance and embrace. But we knew too much to go back. So, I think apologetics is not only intellectually stimulating and fulfilling, is existentially pertinent to suffering and struggles in life.

Don Payne Well, I appreciate the text you read from Paul, especially about what knowledge of God is, and it is this knowledge, and frankly, this had never occurred to me quite this way until you just read it again, that Paul puts together knowledge and words like inscrutable. And he points to the limitations of knowledge. And yet it is knowledge. This is the kind of knowledge we have, a knowledge of a God who is knowable, and yet not fully knowable at the same time, but adequately knowable.

Douglas Groothuis Scrutable and inscrutable.

Don Payne At the same time. Yeah.

Douglas Groothuis Yeah. You know, the unbelievers will say that there is meaningless evil in the world, so therefore there can't be a God if God is all good and all powerful. And I say, no, there's not meaningless evil, but there is inscrutable evil. But something that I can't understand is not necessarily meaningless. I think all evil has some final purpose. I don't have to know what it is. If I have a cogent, coherent, well thought out worldview that explains evil in general, in terms of creation for redemption consummation, then I can look at particular evils and have no clue as to what good they might serve or why God has allowed them. But given that I have a basis for believing in God, believing in the Bible, believing in Christ, that structure of existence that I hold to says it is not meaningless and the story is not over. And that's much better than trying to read the mind of God. Through my situation with Becky, a lot of people would try to find the good in our suffering, and sometimes that's helpful, other times you just want to say, shut up.

Don Payne Yeah, just let it be.

Douglas Groothuis Just suffer with me, and we'll be much happier in the new heavens and the new earth.

Don Payne Well, this reminds me of the significance of the word trust when the Lord invites us, calls us to trust him, that implicitly suggests that you know enough to trust me. But you will always have questions. Hence, you're going to have to trust me. It would not be trust, it would not be faith, if we knew the mind of God as God himself knows his own mind. You're going to have to trust me on this.

Douglas Groothuis Right. And I think it's a rational trust and a rational hope. As Paul says in Romans five, this hope does not disappoint us. And for Paul, hope in the gospel is actually knowledge, which is quite a different way of using that word that we typically do. I preached on this a few months ago. This hope does not disappoint us. We know that our hope's in Christ, the judgment and regeneration of the universe will happen. It's not just wouldn't it be nice if, but we know. We know that he will come again and restore our things as much as we know he died for our sins and rose from the dead. So, the down payment has been made. We're just now in that in-between time.

Don Payne Yeah, yeah. Doug, you've got a, if I could shift gears here as we close up. You have a forthcoming book, I think, with our mutual friend, Dr. Ike Shepherdson. Tell us just a little bit about that.

Douglas Groothuis Yes. Ike Shepherdson and I have co-written a book called *The Knowledge of God in the World and the Word: An Introduction to Classical Apologetics*. Long title. Very long title. But it's more of an introduction to apologetics and it's co-written. The way we did it, we didn't tell you who the principal author was for each chapter, but there is a principal author. But we signed off on what was done. So, it's an introduction to natural theology, how we can argue for God, from nature. It's also a defense of apologetics and a defense of natural theology because there are some people who think you're just wrongheaded to engage in that kind of thing at all. So, we spend a fair amount of time dealing with philosophical objections to apologetics, theological objections to apologetics and so on. And then we deal with the classic theistic arguments from design, the cosmological argument, the moral argument. And one thing I'm very jazzed about is that Ike was the principal author for the chapter on *The Ontological Argument*, and that is a very technical, abstract argument. And he made it first very compelling and also very readable. It's amazing. I couldn't have done that. I have a chapter on the ontological argument in my big book here. I think it's pretty good, but you've got to really be motivated to get through that. And Ike just kind of takes you by the hand and leads you through that so nicely. That's with Zondervan. That'll be out, Lord willing in December. I should say supply chain willing.

Don Payne Yeah, right.

Douglas Groothuis Yeah, I'm excited about that. But we're hoping that that book will be used as an undergrad textbook at various colleges.

Don Payne And congratulations on that. Well, Doug, you have given the Body of Christ great service with both editions of this. And we're excited about this, this new edition particularly. And I hope the Lord just makes good use of that and multiplies the use of that.

Douglas Groothuis Thank you. And it could also be used as a doorstop. It's a multipurpose book.

Don Payne If you can't make it to your local home improvement store and you have this around and you need a doorstop, there you go. Multipurpose.

Douglas Groothuis Indeed.

Don Payne Doug, thanks. Thanks for your time with us and for the work you've done on this. Friends, we'd love it if you'd visit our website, DenverSeminary.edu. You'll find a lot of other good resources there and you can email us if you have any questions or feedback. Our email address is podcast@DenverSeminary.edu. We'd love it also if you would be so kind as to give us a rating, a review on whatever podcast platform you use to access our conversations. That would be a great help and otherwise. Thanks again for listening to us and thanks to Christa Ebert for making these conversations happen, for recording them and editing them in such fine fashion. Friends, we hope to talk to you again soon. Take care.