

THE TABLE BRIEFING: TRUTH AND TONE IN CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

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OVER THE PAST FEW DECADES, some evangelicals have seen cultural engagement as fighting a culture war for Christ. But the landscape has changed in a way that most people who graduated from seminary forty years ago might never have imagined. Today, we as Christians find ourselves in the position of a cultural minority in the United States. How should we engage with a society that is increasingly hostile to the Christian faith?

This Table briefing explores what the New Testament teaches about honoring God through our message—and our tone—as we minister in a world that often pushes back against the gospel. This ethos of balancing invitation and challenge has been a key emphasis since the beginning of the Table Podcasts. First we consider how the example of the early church should inform our cultural engagement as a church today. Then we examine how the Apostle Paul’s example should inform our interpersonal interactions with unbelieving friends and neighbors.

THE EARLY CHURCH’S EXAMPLE

While some believers may be surprised at the kind of hostility and vitriol they encounter when sharing the gospel today, this situation is not new. The early church got its start immediately immersed in a skeptical context. How did the earliest Christians respond to persecution? What kind of example did they leave?

In Acts 4, Luke records how Peter and John were imprisoned and threatened by the Jewish elders and chief priests after healing a lame man and preaching in Jesus’s name. Interestingly, the church was not surprised by this level of persecution. The believers

knew that Jesus had predicted it. Their prayer in response to persecution begins by highlighting God's sovereignty over all things:

Master of all, you who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and everything that is in them, . . . both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, assembled together in this city against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do as much as your power and your plan had decided beforehand would happen. And now, Lord, pay attention to their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your message with great courage, while you extend your hand to heal, and to bring about miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus (Acts 4:24–30, NET).

Rather than take an aggressive stance against those who opposed the gospel, they sought to live as a contrastive community that blessed the culture through service. In fact, they prayed that they, as a church, would all share God's message with boldness and continue to minister to the very people who were opposing them. Their humble prayer seems to have pleased God, who immediately answered with tangible results: "When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God courageously" (v. 31).

At a recent Leader Board event, Darrell Bock noted that when our message comes alongside compassionate ministry, its credibility is enhanced. He explains:

Bock: The strategy of the early church was to be faithful in proclamation of Jesus and to be faithful in display of the grace of God through Jesus; to continue to serve the community around them; to continue to speak to how God cares for the people around them; and to engage in a ministry of word and deed. . . . When you share the gospel and say things like "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life," the next question that a person might ask is "Well, how do I know that God loves me?" And service demonstrates the idea that God cares.

Unfortunately, I think, in the church, it's been all too easy in the midst of thinking about the metaphor of culture war to allow a divorce to take place between what our message is and what our ministry is. Our message and our ministry need to be wedded together. God has joined together the word and the deeds of ministry of the church in such a way that there is a marriage. And somehow we have allowed to be put asunder that which God had joined together.

Bock demonstrates that this marriage of message and ministry can be traced to Jesus's own example:

Bock: If you look at a text like Luke 4, where Jesus marches into the synagogue and declares the Word of God out of Isaiah 61 and Isaiah 58, “The Lord has anointed me to release the captives,” there’s a wonderful message about what he’s all about. And then you look at the very next scene where he’s in Capernaum and all he’s doing is ministering and meeting the needs of people. You see this wedding [of message and ministry].

Somehow, I think, because of the tensions of the fundamentalist/modernist controversy, which predates the [idea of] culture wars, we’ve allowed this idea of ministry that shows compassion to the world to be identified as a kind of social gospel that’s separate from the Word of God, and we’ve allowed that divorce to occur out of a real concern that some people who minister . . . in service never talk about the gospel. But the solution isn’t to shy away from ministry. The solution is to engage in a combination—in speaking the Word with boldness and in ministering [to people].

The early church set an example of bold faithfulness in both what they said about God and what they showed about God. They proclaimed the gospel of God and displayed the grace of God by serving the community. In the same way, today’s local congregations should intentionally embrace the ethos of this ancient corporate prayer and show our neighbors that God cares about them—even in the midst of the skepticism or outright rejection. When our message comes alongside service, it tends to give people pause and enhance the gospel’s credibility. Beyond this example for the local church, the Apostle Paul also gives us an example for individual believers to follow.

THE APOSTLE PAUL’S EXAMPLE

Paul’s example offers three lessons on how an individual believer should live the Christian life as a cultural minority. First, Paul uses the image of an ambassador in 2 Corinthians 5:20: “Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making His plea through us. We plead with you on Christ’s behalf, ‘Be reconciled to God!’” Just like ambassadors travel the world and represent their home country to those they meet, believers should not be shut off from the world or expect unbelievers to make the first move toward understanding the gospel, but should intentionally engage the culture as representatives of Jesus.

In a cultural engagement chapel on spiritual renewal in a post-Christian society, Bock and J. R. Vassar discussed the practical

importance of this image for effective ministry:

Vassar: [The image of an ambassador] is extremely important, I think, especially when it comes to effectively communicating to the culture. The danger of the picture of exile is one of withdrawal, . . . but the ambassador is saying, “I have a sense of identity, I know to whom I belong, but I also know from whom I’ve been sent and the purpose for which I’ve been sent.” And so being able to interact with the culture, engage with the culture, understand its hopes, its aspirations, . . . its language, and then being able to communicate the gospel in a way that connects right with where they live . . . is an extremely important thing. It means being well-versed in the poets of the day, whether that’s media, whether that’s music, whether that’s popular bloggers, being able to listen to those cultural voices so that as an ambassador you’re able to speak intelligently [about them].

Bock: So how often when you preach do you end up using contemporary examples and evaluating them, either for the kind of hope that they’re searching for in what’s being expressed or the frustration that they sense with life? What often happens with preaching that I hear is the culture gets cited—but it always gets cited [with] critique.

Vassar: Right. . . . I probably don’t do it enough, but whether it’s a novel or whether it’s an article in a magazine or whether it’s a movie, I’m more inclined to talk about the aspirations that are revealed in those moments, the ache of the human heart that’s revealed, the universal longing that is seen here, or universal fear . . . that only the gospel can address or only the gospel can assuage. And you know, [in] some contexts that’s a little easier to do. I know there have been times where I’ve come back to visit and I may have quoted a movie and I’ve gotten accosted by people—“How could you promote a movie like that here in church?” And so I guess you have to be culturally sensitive about some of those things. But I find in those, again, cultural poets, if you will, a real revelation of the human heart. I think we need to capitalize on those things.

While Vassar rightly cautions believers against the danger of withdrawing from the culture as an exile, it is also important to nuance the image of an ambassador. If believers are not careful, many outside the church may detect an air of triumphalism or entitlement in our personal interactions. During a Table series called “Christianity as a Cultural Minority,” John Dickson joined Bock to

make this point:

Bock: To me, the value of the ambassador picture is, I'm a stranger in a strange land and I represent someone and something to other people who may or may not appreciate what I represent. So I have to think about how to do that well and with the intention and the hope—and this is the mission part of it—of inviting them into the experience that believers share with God.

Dickson: That's almost certainly what the biblical picture of ambassador means, but I think Christians can take it as "my authority over the world," because ambassadors are people we bow and scrape to. So, yeah, . . . it's a fantastic image viewed from that perspective.

Bock: So the hard thing to deal with [is that] our message does say, "You're a creature accountable to a creator, and you have responsibilities before God whether you recognize it or not." But then the flip side of it is, How do you get the person to take that frame of view or that world view seriously? And I like to say when I talk about this theme with people, "What would you prefer if someone were to put in front of you? The response that says, 'Well you're blind and in the darkness and just can't get it,' or the response that says, 'You know that's a good question; now let's talk about the answer' "? There is this tension [between] where people are theologically on the one hand and . . . the relational part of how to get there on the other. And sometimes I think our theology washes out the relational dimensions of how we think about mission.

Dickson: Or we interpret that authority that we do have in Christ in institutional, structural terms. The main point I'd make on this question is that [some people] hear any tone of authority as institutional and structural authority, like you think your institution ought to be running the show. . . . You and I might simply mean, "We've heard the message of God and that is an inherently authoritative message, so that when we speak the words of God, everyone is under it." Sure. But that's not how it's heard. It's heard as, "My organization is better than your organization."

Bock: They see it as almost a power grab in some sense?

Dickson: They associate it with political and legislative and social power instead of persuasional power and relational power. So it's complicated because you can pluck out of the Scriptures

all sorts of references to authority, but it would be wrong to interpret that as an authority in any structural way and it would be wrong for us to use language that [leaves the impression we] think that we have structural authority.

Bock: It's interesting because when you think about the example of Jesus and how he went about doing his ministry, there's no doubt that he challenged people to think about how they're related to God. And [he] did so in ways that could be considered . . . off-putting. And yet at the same time the nature of his ministry and relational engagement with people was such that it seems to have negated an aspect of the edge of that challenge. It was having the two things together, side-by-side, functioning together that allowed people to say, "He may be challenging me, but there's no doubt he cares about me while he's issuing the challenge."

Dickson: And this is key, isn't it? The genius of Jesus [was] to be able to flex two muscles at the same time: The muscle of conviction and the muscle of compassion. So he can thunder in public about the coming judgment and then sit down at a dinner table with those under judgment. It's an extraordinary thing. Once more they flock to him, they surround him, they want to hear him, they want to be near him. Through the history of the church, of course, there have been moments where the church has been able to flex the muscle of conviction—moral conviction, theological conviction, political conviction—really well but the muscle of compassion has atrophied. Equally, there have been periods of church history, particularly nowadays, when the church is good at flexing the muscle of compassion and has given up conviction. Well, neither represents Jesus, who was able to do both at the same time.

This leads into a second lesson to learn from Paul's example: We need the wisdom to engage from a position of humility—even when the broader culture has rejected God's law. While many believers may resonate with Paul's frustration at the depravity of humankind detailed in Romans 1:18–26, it is important to note that verse 27 points back to the diverse list of sins, ultimately implicating all of humanity in moral evil. At a recent DTS Houston chapel, Bock explained:

Bock: The point that Paul is making here, as he sets up why the Gentile world falls short and needs the gospel, is [that it's] not because of one thing that he mentions in this passage, but

because of *the list* that he mentions in this passage. Because he's setting up the argument . . . that extends itself into chapter 2, to the Jewish people . . . and by the time we get to chapter 3, we've got "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We are all in the same boat. We all fall short in one way or another.

This inspires the kind of humility that should mark ambassadors of Christ. While some believers today are quick to critique popular culture and lament the apparent relativism of morality in the public square, the early church grew up in a context that was not radically different. As a representative of Christ, Paul often found himself engaging with people who shared his Jewish background and those who understood spirituality in an entirely differently way. His interactions with both audiences are instructive in terms of balancing challenge with invitation.

On a classic episode of the Table, "DTS's New Initiative on Cultural Engagement," Mark Bailey and Darrell Bock summarized well the contrast in Paul's tone as he addressed believers on the one hand and unbelievers on the other:

Bock: If you think about when Paul writes in Romans 1 about the culture that he addresses in Acts 17, it's pretty harsh. It's pretty hard-nosed. It's pretty direct. There's a challenge.

But when he gets up to address the culture [in Athens], there is a communication of a respect and an engagement and an invitation for them to walk into an open consideration of what God is doing and what God is about that has a completely different feel and tone to it. So that, in one sense, the in-house conversation has a certain element and feel to it, but that's not just directly transferred to what's being said to people on the outside.

And it's not duplicitous. . . . It's just simply an awareness that the need of humanity is great. That's what Romans 1 is communicating. . . . But God, in his love and grace, transcends that so that when the gospel is offered in Acts 17, you can see the extending of a handshake and offer of a handshake with God to reconcile that which is broken. And so the tone is completely different.

Part of the skill is knowing when to do what—when a direct confrontation is called for—and when it is an opportunity to offer an invitation for someone to step into a way of looking at life that they may not have considered before.

Bailey: When Paul was in front of the Roman leadership, his method of engagement was very different, like you said. With

the Jewish audience, he could presume a knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures. [He used] a lot of Scripture references. Whereas in Acts, it was theology. It wasn't backed off of; it was fully frontal. But it was from a theological [approach], without a quotational aspect. . . . It's very instructive that God would give us a book like Acts that would help us look at those different methods, and I think we learn a lot from that.

This leads to a third lesson to learn from Paul's example: When it comes to effectively communicating truth as an ambassador of Christ, tone matters. Indeed, Paul's direct challenge to believers in Rome was very different from his inviting tone in Athens. He clearly understood the context in which he was ministering. Almost everyone in Athens accepted a supernatural worldview, as was evidenced by the vast amount of idols visible in the city. Though Paul was "greatly distressed" (Acts 17:16) by the spiritual state of the culture, he let their cultural context inform his approach. He began by expressing not outrage at idolatry but respect for their spiritual sensitivities, misguided though they were:

People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you" (vv. 22–23).

This introduction is striking, considering the strong convictions Paul expressed against ungodliness and idolatry in Romans 1. But this contrast communicates an important lesson to learn from Paul's cultural engagement strategy. Bock explains:

Bock: Paul is getting ready to engage in a spiritual conversation in which he's going to communicate respect for spiritual pursuit even when it's misdirected. . . . Then, he's going to challenge it. He doesn't do it as directly as he does in Romans 1 because he understands the listener that he has. And in understanding the listener he understands, "I've got to build a bridge into this conversation because the only way in which I can effectively challenge someone is if I communicate some level of respect in the midst of offering the challenge. Because if I do not communicate that I care while I challenge someone, then the person won't care about what I have to say."

He sees an opening and he seizes it. . . . He's going to say, "I want to give you pause about the way you think about spirituality." He doesn't cram it down their throats. He simply raises questions that he wants them to think about. . . .

The place to start is with their sense that life must have

something about it that's more than just being here and then being gone. He doesn't cite the Bible even though he's telling a biblical story. He cites their own poets.

This reveals one of Paul's strengths: Understanding his ministry context and capitalizing on whatever spiritual sensitivities he found already present in the culture. Still, he was not immediately concerned about clearly presenting the entire gospel message. Instead, he strategically placed biblical ideas in front of his audience in a way that connected with their own expressions.

Similarly, when we as believers take a cue from Paul's method, we prompt people to consider a different view of spirituality than the view they have absorbed from the popular culture. Paul's method lays the groundwork for this challenge with humility and an inviting tone. He does so not out of frustration with people enslaved to sin, but with a heart of compassion, knowing the answer to humanity's ultimate problem is the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is to this saving good news that we must humbly point while simultaneously extending a hand of invitation and service—even to those who oppose us.

CONCLUSION

In a society that is increasingly hostile to the Christian faith, may we never forget the examples set for us by the early church and the Apostle Paul. Let us proclaim the gospel of God and display his grace by ministering in the community. Let us intentionally engage the culture as ambassadors of Christ from a position of humility. In the end, people tend to be more open to the idea that God loves them when they see us loving them. The truth of the gospel and our tone in cultural engagement both matter. Instead of viewing engagement as fighting a culture war, let us focus on our diplomatic mission of reconciliation. May we minister with compassion, balancing invitation and challenge, even in a world that opposes us. After all, the battle we wage is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces (Eph. 6:12). Our goal is not to win a culture war or crush those who disagree or push back against the Christian message, but to lovingly win them to the Lord, freeing them from those spiritual forces, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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