

THE TABLE BRIEFING: DIALOGICAL APOLOGETICS AND DIFFICULT SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS, PART 3

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SOMEONE WHO UNEXPECTEDLY TOSSES YOU A BALL might call out, “Think fast!” It’s unlikely, however, that anyone has ever told you to “think slow.” In *The Three Languages of Politics*, Arnold Kling uses the terms “slow political thinking” and “fast political thinking.”¹ The latter refers to a kind of knee-jerk reaction, much like the automatic impulse to avoid a baseball that’s about to hit you. Here people see an issue from only one angle and quickly react to assertions without much reflection. The former refers to a slower, methodical kind of reasoning—the kind one might use to solve a geometry problem. Here people work to see an issue from more than one angle and respond after some reflection.²

While Kling’s observations focus on difficult political conversations, it can be just as easy to immediately react without much re-

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¹ Arnold S. Kling, *The Three Languages of Politics* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2017), 22.

² Kling writes, “I encourage readers to adopt slow political thinking, which means seeing an issue from a number of angles rather than along just one axis. In contrast, fast political thinking means settling on a single axis to frame an issue. Readers familiar with psychologist Daniel Kahneman’s 2011 book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* will notice that I am borrowing from his terminology.” Kling, 10.

flection in the midst of difficult spiritual conversations. This is one reason we have discussed his work with our staff at the Hendricks Center, and some of his ideas have come up on episodes of the Table Podcast with Dallas Theological Seminary faculty, including Adjunct Professor of World Missions and Intercultural Studies Jenny McGill, Professor of Theological Studies Glenn Kreider, Professor of Biblical Counseling Gary Barnes, and Assistant Professor of Biblical Counseling Michelle Woody. We also saw how these ideas can be applied to apologetics in the church while talking with DTS alumni and Watermark Community Church Director of Equipping and Apologetics Nathan Wagnon.

In this third installment of our series on dialogical apologetics, we share three key elements of practicing “slow thinking” that emerged from conversations with these guests. These are (1) detachment, (2) decentering, and (3) empathy. We share how incorporating these things can slow us down enough to see beyond the negative in someone else’s view.

DETACHMENT

While maintaining biblical convictions at all times, we can practice detachment in order to understand those who think differently about Christianity. Kling notes how detachment can provide insight when assessing one’s own views and the views of others. He writes, “Detachment can help us to see the merit in other points of view and avoid taking our own views to erroneous extremes. Detachment can lead us to take a charitable view of others’ disagreement, rather than retreating into demonization.”³

The first step is to be open to thinking in a different way, seeking to understand how others view their identity and personal story. McGill calls this “compassionate imaging.” On an episode called “People on the Move,” Jenny McGill and Darrell Bock discuss this, focusing on the concept of identity.

McGill: Sociologically, we’re prone to in-group bias. . . . Compassionate imagining is when you are challenged beyond what you’re comfortable thinking. You begin to identify with the other person . . . but are also challenged to evaluate, “OK. What’s biblical? What’s cultural?”

Bock: It pulls you out of your own in-group . . . and produces a

³ Kling, 31

sense of empathy with the way different people live, and sometimes why.

McGill: Yes. You'd never anticipate someone else's need [in the same] the way you would know the needs in [the group you identify with] . . . I got really interested in a narrative view of identity . . . and how we view ourselves as part of a narrative adventure. . . . [It's] how you tell your story of life.

Bock: Christians are very familiar with that because, obviously, the giving of a testimony is a prime example of that kind of exercise.

In the same way that we would like others to listen to our story and our ideas, we must be willing to listen to their story and their ideas. Approaching difficult spiritual conversations with a kind of detachment can be a helpful way to enter into their experience. This helps us at least begin with a charitable view of our conversation partners and consider the merits of their perspective.

Next, what does it mean to practice decentering in the midst of uncovering the reasons people hold their views?

DECENTERING

Practicing decentering means seeking to discover why a person is reacting to his or her perception of Christianity in a certain way. Rather than dismissing or refuting a skeptic's argument, believers must first seek to understand the personal reasons for an individual's objection to Christianity. Unfortunately, some Christians are concerned that hesitating to address a challenge may suggest that they fully agree with the skeptic's perspective. However, it's important to distinguish understanding from agreement. Indeed, listening for the purpose of understanding is essential to dialogical apologetics. On an episode called "Responding to the New Atheism," Darrell Bock and Glenn Kreider discuss this.

Kreider: A stereotype of Christian apologetics and engagement with culture . . . is often very quick to condemn the question and to provide a simplistic answer to a complex question.

There is the relativistic worldview . . . that often dismisses truth claims by [saying], "Well, that's your view. It works for you and not for me." In the midst of that, listening is the first and most important thing, in order to understand, to the de-

gree that we can, the context for and the content of the objection and the claim. Most times, these are not theoretical and ivory tower objections that people have to Christianity. They are rooted in experiences.

Sometimes, they're not even aware of the degree to which those experiences are formative and informative, but it's stunning to engage with somebody and . . . learn the kind of abuse or the kind of evil that has been behind [their objections to Christianity. We must] spend the time listening and understanding, with empathy, compassion, sympathy—those Christian virtues—in order to speak the truth in love.

Bock: When we talk about empathy and compassion, we're not necessarily equating that with agreement. But what we're saying is you're moving towards an understanding of why the person is coming from where they're coming.

My grandmother-in-law had a very low tolerance for Christianity, because she had a father who claimed to be a Christian, . . . but in the way he treated his wife and his daughter, he was awful. And so, underneath her view was, "If that's how Christians treat people, I don't want anything to do with it."

Understanding the context of a person's objection to Christianity is very important and includes being careful to avoid assuming that a person's struggle depends entirely on one argument, issue, or experience. Although most people use the term "empathizing" in the broadest sense of understanding someone's feelings or thoughts, Gary Klein makes a distinction between focusing on feelings and focusing on reasoning: "Decentering is not about empathy—intuiting how others might be feeling. Rather, it is about intuiting what others are thinking."⁴ This observation highlights two ways to put yourself in someone else's shoes, understanding both the feelings and reasoning of your conversation partner. Beyond decentering, however, Christians must never overlook the emotional component of difficult spiritual conversations.

EMPATHY

Operating in "debate mode" often undercuts healthy interpersonal

⁴ Gary Klein, "Decentering," in *2017: What Scientific Term or Concept Ought to Be More Widely Known?*, Edge.org, accessed December 30, 2019, <https://www.edge.org/response-detail/27119>.

communication. As Christian ambassadors, we must exhibit empathy and appreciation for life in a fallen world. This is part of obeying James’s command to be “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (James 1:19). Like decentering, empathy does not imply agreement with another person’s views. It can, however, help us guard against automatically seeing someone’s motives in a negative light. In an episode called “Beginning Difficult Conversations,” Darrell Bock, Gary Barnes, and Michelle Woody discuss:

Bock: If I’m constantly pushing back on the other person and in rebuttal mode, not only have my phaser shields gone up, but I’m going to produce phaser shields on the other side that will actually block the communication.

Barnes: We can get in the way of the hearing. . . . It is not true that understanding means I’ve compromised my convictions.

Bock: This is very important: Understanding is not the same as agreement. . . . You can divide up your conversations in terms of a process: First, getting to understanding. If you get to the point where you agree on what exactly you’re talking about and the nature of your differences, you’re in a better place to talk about those differences rather than talking past one another. . . . The ability to articulate what someone is saying to you is not saying you agree. It’s saying, “I’m hearing what you’re saying.”

Woody: “Empathy” is a good word because you have to put yourself in the other person’s shoes and get some sense of what their journey is. . . . It takes patience. Something else that most people don’t like . . . are moments of silence. . . . The natural tendency is to think, “I have to jump in.” But giving people a chance to process what’s being said is also important. So, a part of understanding is not just listening, but waiting for the person to respond and then take time to process that in a way that’s not forced or awkward.

Bock: Another thing that we tend to do that undercuts conversations is impute motive to why it is someone is saying something. They may not have given any indication that that’s what’s going on. And in fact, that may not be what’s motivating them, but we will read it through our filters in such a way that we will assume, “This is why you’re telling me this,” and respond at that level.

Barnes: One of the phrases that researchers use for that is “negative interpretation.” When I’m looking at something in the moment, I look through lenses that shape what I’m looking at. . . . That sets me up to attach a wrong meaning, understanding, interpretation, motivation, or conclusion.

Bock: If I make the effort to listen, . . . I give myself the chance of actually hearing what the other person is trying to say to me.

Empathy plays a key role in correctly identifying the contrast between your view and that of your skeptical neighbor. In an episode called “Leading with Courage and Compassion,” we highlight the idea that agreeing on the nature of the disagreement is essential for moving forward in a difficult spiritual conversation.

Bock: We’re talking about something that’s almost a requirement, relationally, in order to be able to interact well. And particularly in areas of conflict, it’s important to at least know what you’re disagreeing about. . . . If you can both say, “Yep. That’s exactly what we disagree about. Now let’s talk about it,” you’re in a much better place. What often happens in these conversations, particularly when they’re debates, [is] you end up talking past one another, and you aren’t touching the issue that you really disagree about.

Del Rosario: Yes, it’s so important to develop empathy, that understanding of the other person, rather than feeling like, “They said something I disagree with. Now I have to defend the entire contents of the Christian worldview, because they have a different view than me on this particular topic.”

Appreciating the life experience and personal reasons someone may object to Christianity is a key part of effective engagement. Doing this allows you to better assess how to proceed in the conversation. It also allows you to discover any common ground that might move the discussion forward or allow the other person to consider giving Christianity a fresh hearing. This ties into our mission of shaping leaders.

Bock: We seek to shape compassionate and courageous leaders . . . [and] that only happens through the power of the Spirit of God. When that happens, you have a person who can deal with

anything fresh that comes their way. . . . It isn't that they have a rote answer. In fact, the answer that they might have is the recognition that the answer in this particular situation is particularly complex. They know not only how they should deal with the situation, but also how to lead other people into and through the situation. And in the context of the shifting times that we've been talking about, that skill is essential. It requires boldness, it requires being prophetic, it requires a comfort zone with their own status before God that's willing to take the push back. And in the midst of all that, they're able to develop the skill to read and react to what's in front of them.

Del Rosario: This is an ambassador who's able to engage well with people who see Christianity differently [and] walk with them even before they get to the crossroads—before the gospel even becomes a challenge in their lives.

Understanding detachment, decentering, and empathy is key to practicing “slow thinking.” But what does it look like to employ these in practical evangelism and apologetics ministry?

PRACTICAL APPLICATION IN MINISTRY

In an episode called “Equipping and Apologetics Ministry,” Nathan Wagon describes how this kind of approach works in his ministry at Watermark Community Church in Dallas, Texas. He also shares what he describes as “one of the greatest mistakes” in apologetics and evangelism and the solution to this problem.

Wagon: We've had international students come in [for our Great Questions evenings] where this was their first encounter with Christianity. . . . So we really get into the relational space. We say, “We'd love to buy you coffee or lunch. . . . We want to hear your story.” This is because you can answer somebody's questions, but you're not actually answering a question, you're answering a person. The question is secondary. The primary deal is “Who are you? What's your story? What shapes the way that you think about the world and God?” And you can't know that in an initial meeting. So we try to cultivate relationships. . . . That's where the real work of apologetics is going on.

Del Rosario: We miss out on that sometimes if we're too quickly giving people answers to what we think they're asking. They

are giving us a window into their souls and where their heart is at when they share.

Wagnon: One of the greatest mistakes that a lot of evangelicals make is we think of evangelism as like closing the deal. You feel like a used car salesman, because you're trying to push people towards "Do you want to pray this prayer? Do you want to accept Jesus?" And unfortunately, Mikel, there are people who push toward that because of insecurities in their own lives. Their spiritual life, a lot of times, is deficient. And so they're trying to fill that void with ministry activism, so that they can raise their hand and go, "See how the Lord used me?" so that they can get this sense of self worth.

That expresses itself [often when Christians] don't listen. They're using the space, when someone else is talking, to formulate in their own minds how they're going to respond, instead of actually listening to what the person is saying. We don't get to do that. Jesus has called us to love people. And that looks like treating them with value and worth, because they are valuable, and they do matter to God.

When you do apologetics or evangelism, you're . . . talking to somebody who's made in the image of God, who's deeply loved by God, who deeply matters. Their story matters. Their views matter. And so, yeah, we don't get to just mow over people. We have to love them.

Del Rosario: People can sense right away if you're treating them like a project. And that just shuts down communication. In 1 Peter 3:15, the command is to be prepared always to give an answer to anyone who asks us about the hope that we have in Jesus, but we have to do it with gentleness and respect.

Wagnon: Yeah. That last part gets left out an awful lot.

Del Rosario: That's right. But the context of 1 Peter 3 [should make us consider], "What was God's attitude toward us before we had embraced him or his message?" and "Why can't we be like that with other people? That's how God was with us."

Wagnon: Well, it requires somebody to take their personal walk with Jesus really seriously. . . . When people ask, "How do you do evangelism and apologetics?" The first thing I say is, "You gotta get close to Jesus." I'm never asking myself, "How can I do evangelism today?" The question is "How can I walk

with Jesus today?” If you get close to Jesus, you will do evangelism and apologetics [not in your own strength but in the power of the Holy Spirit]. If you follow Jesus . . . that will spill over and you’ll be . . . co-laboring with him in the gospel.

CONCLUSION

A survey of comments made on social media and in the public square shows it is not easy to demonstrate compassion when engaging with those who see things differently. Unfortunately, some Christians seem to hold the most uncharitable view of skeptics possible. When this comes out in our engagement, we not only misrepresent the tone of a Christian ambassador, but we miss out on richness of authentic conversation.

Rather than “think fast,” let’s “think slow” when engaged in dialogical apologetics. Instead of immediately reacting, we can pay careful attention to what people are saying and calmly assess the situation. Whether the conversation takes place online or offline, take the time to respond in a thoughtful way. Let’s avoid seeing only the negative in our skeptical neighbors, and seek to understand the merits of their perspective as well. Most people will appreciate this and some may be struck by the respect you show them—especially if they have a negative Christian stereotype in mind. Practicing detachment, decentering, and exhibiting empathy can help us represent Christ and his message well even in the midst of difficult spiritual conversations.

To access the complete Table episodes in this article or other episodes on a variety of relevant religious, theological, and apologetics topics, visit <http://www.dts.edu/thetable>.

Suggested podcasts:

- People on the Move
- Responding to the New Atheism
- Beginning Difficult Conversations
- Leading with Courage and Compassion
- Equipping and Apologetics Ministry

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