



## Why a Consistent Polemic Is Dangerous

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My mind tends to be quite logical. My thinking is critical and I really enjoy competition. I compete with myself when there is no one else to compete with. I would play solitaire with gusto, if I played cards. And I really get up for big games. I have my pre-game rituals, and even get a bit depressed when my team loses an important game. As long as I can recall, I have sought to win with all my might. I was schooled in the idea that "winning isn't everything but it beats whatever comes in second." I suppose you would also say I am a classic "Type A" personality. It all fits when I do self analysis.

By childhood training I was also taught to love the gospel. I was taught to treasure the Bible and all that it teaches. By my teen years I was also a pretty decent debater. At age sixteen I wrote my first letter to an editor. It was to the editorial offices of Broadman Press, the publishing house of the Southern Baptist Convention. I registered my keen disappointment about some matter of theology that I found troubling in a newly published Broadman book. I wish I had that letter, if for no other reason than that it would chronicle some changes in my journey over the past forty years.

So it is no surprise that I quickly and easily adapted to the debates of theology as a young man. I loved books. I read them and discussed them. I often drew strong conclusions. I was taught that you can know certain things for absolute certain and that when you knew something it was right to defend it, even to debate it. The pastoral letters are filled with one charge after another to ministers who must defend the faith and expose error. I liked this part of my calling a great deal. It fit me very nicely.

This spirit of argumentation grew in me even more when I came to appreciate the debates of the Protestant Reformation. I loved how Protestants and Catholics called it the way they saw it and spared no effort in exposing the damnable errors of their opponents. I had found my home, my field of thought. I was to be a Reformation theologian and I would learn the art of polemics for this subject, all out of faithfulness to Christ, I thought.

### **Polemics**

The word polemic comes from the Greek *polemikos* and means literally to make war. The base of the word carries the idea of shaking and trembling. A polemic is an argument, a dispute. A polemicist is a person skilled, or inclined, in the art or practice of controversy or disputation.

I loved polemical debate when I began to understand how it worked. And I enjoyed learning how to be a better polemicist. I defended my love for this by an appeal to the noble discipline of apologetics, a branch of historic theology that offers a reasonable defense for the Christian faith. (I formally teach apologetics at the graduate level now.) But apologetics is a discipline, the formal defense of an idea. It arose in the early church in the context of

providing answers to the pagan critics of the nascent Christian faith. It not only helped remove barriers to the faith for unbelievers but it strengthened believers in their intellectual understanding of the faith.

Polemics is different. It has its place for sure. Indeed, at times apologetics calls for good polemics. But polemical disputation is dangerous, a kind of third rail between sound doctrine (teaching) and apologetics (sound defense of doctrine). It will kill you if you grab it in the wrong way, especially without the other two rails. It often corrupts and destroys.

### **A Consistent Polemic Is Self Destructive**

I have come to believe, through both my study and observation of myself and others, that a consistent and regularly used polemic is generally harmful. This is true for at least two important reasons.

First, polemics derives its energy from an inner uncertainty. Faith is not certainty, at least in the Enlightenment modernist sense. But when you begin to think that certainty is what you and your hearers need, you often begin to embrace a permanent polemic. I did this for a season of about ten years in my late twenties and early thirties.

I came to embrace some truly wonderful doctrinal formulations I learned from the Protestant Reformers. These were truths about grace, faith and Christ. And my high view of Holy Scripture was strengthened in this rarified air. But when faith buys into truths formulated in this manner the danger will very often be theological imperialism. I believed, simply put, that I had come to possess a kind of mental and spiritual power over others because I *really knew* the truth. This is very subtle when you are the one buying into it. I sincerely *thought* I was doing the kingdom a real service. I was simply being faithful to my gifts. I wanted to correct the whole church and I was learning how to do it. In the words of a writer (I cannot presently remember who to give proper attribution), I began to engage in the "iconoclastic immaturity of a slippery apologetics." When I saw this for what it was I was ashamed and embarrassed. All I can tell you now is that I believe the great truths of the faith as much as I ever did then, but I hold to them very differently now.

You might be inclined to say that I grew out of my youthful ignorance. I hope this is true. What I rather believe is that I learned some things about myself, and about the nature of divine revelation, that humbled me and corrected my egregious errors. Even Oliver Cromwell, who was not given to admitting errors all too easily, once said to a person, "I beseech you in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken." I attempt to encourage the same regularly.

Second, a persistent polemic is defensive by nature. Don't get me wrong. A good defense is very important. But to be *on the defense* as a way of living is neither wise nor good. In the realm of spiritual maturity it leads one away from exercising grace through real faith. And it presents to the world a Christianity that is neither lovely nor truly faithful to the gospel that we encounter through knowing the living Christ.

So, a consistent and regular polemical approach to the Christian faith, and to sound doctrine, is self-destructive. It poisons the polemicist, making him feel self-important and overly aggressive in defending the work of the kingdom of Christ. Christ's kingdom is not built by these means.

But polemics also sells. It makes for books and conferences that work. It attracts people, often in significant ways. But it teaches people that knowing and arguing for the faith is the highest form of Christian life. It is nothing of the kind. The Pauline insight holds true: "Knowledge puffs up." Small minded and insecure Christians like to get into polemics. If they can't do it first hand they will support those who do and thus fill a need in their lives by association. It is done by Christians of all persuasions, Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox.

Personally, I am committed to defending the great truths of Christianity. As I said above, I teach apologetics and I engage in apologetics as a major part of my ministry. But I have to watch myself at every turn when it comes to polemics. I still find I can do it at the drop of the proverbial hat. I like it too much. God is teaching me when to use polemics and when to resist the method. I still have a great deal to learn.

I am also finding that the more one knows, the more they know what they *don't* know. My ignorance humbles me. I know that I love him and I know that he loves me. That matters a great deal more than winning a disputation these days. There are times to defend and explain the faith, and I will keep doing it by God's grace, but I intend to do it far differently so long as God gives me the grace.