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The Danger of Apologetics

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Transcript

The following are a few rough thoughts on the place of apologetics that I've been pondering over the last few days, which I thought I'd share here. My concern is not to give a full account of my thoughts on apologetics, but merely to register a few specific concerns I have, as someone who believes that apologetics have a very important role to play, yet sees dangers in many of the ways that they can function in practice. While some of my concerns relate to certain widespread approaches to apologetics, much of my concern is not first and foremost related to apologetics considered in and of themselves, but more properly relates to the excessive role that apologetics can play in the intellectual, theological, and spiritual formation of many young Christians.

I think that these problems can lead to problems within apologetics and its culture itself, but the source of these problems is not within apologetics as such. In many respects, the prominence of apologetics in the earliest formation of many young Christian minds is entirely understandable. While many young Christians are thinking rigorously about the faith for themselves for the first time, they are also being propelled out from the relative safety of the realms of their upbringings, where they are being exposed to hostile forms of thought, opposing values, and anti-Christian life worlds.

Their thinking about Christian faith is not merely an exploration of the faith on its own terms, but also a negotiation of their stance relative to these new worlds that are opening up to them, the new ideas to which they are being exposed, and the new ways

of life that they are encountering. Apologetics can play a key role in shoring up many young people's faith in such circumstances, especially in hostile academic and social environments. However, there are some very significant dangers in the ways that apologetics can form people.

When apologetics are fundamental to people's intellectual formation in the faith, the problems that can potentially follow can be very serious ones, and if the habits of thought inculcated by apologetics are allowed to become foundational, these can be pervasive and long-lasting. My concern here chiefly relates to the ways in which apologetics tends to establish and foreground the unbeliever or the opponent or critic as a mediating foil for people's exploration and consideration of truth and of the faith more generally. It should be borne in mind that forms of apologetics also function within Christian circles, not just between Christians and non-Christians, but between Christians.

Much of what I'm saying here, for instance, applies to Christian thinking on matters such as what it means to be male and female, which can be no less framed by such mediating foils. We can be concerned to have the arguments with opposing Christians, and not think carefully about the biblical teaching on its own terms. People struggle to think broadly beyond the focal issues and the frames of contemporary debates, or to recognise the importance and the extent of biblical and traditional teaching that does not immediately answer to the demands of the debates, and might not seem serviceable for their narrower ends.

In literature, a foil is a character who can contrast with another character, can often be a means by which a certain character has their characteristics accentuated. You begin to see the intelligence of one character against the foil of a simpleton who goes with them. In the sense that I'm using the term here, a foil is a position or a person, in terms of which someone is presenting their own position.

In an argument, the foil of an opponent helps to accentuate certain features of your own position. As a debater tries to highlight the errors and the faults of their opponents, they can hope thereby to accentuate the truth of their own position. Foils can also function in a more psychological way within discourses.

For instance, two people can be arguing against an opposing position, but while one adopts the hostile positioning of their opponent as the foil, another might position themselves relative to the calm observer of the debate. While they are speaking to the hostile opponent, the person who's in the forefront of their mind is the person who's listening calmly, who might be on the fence. They do not share the hostility of their opponent, they're not concerned primarily with defeating or destroying them, rather they're concerned with the fair-minded observer.

The role played by such foils is generally most immediately apparent in more antagonistic discursive environments. In such environments, parties, ideologies or

positions that are deemed to be wrong can so dominate their opponents' horizons that thought can generally proceed in terms of them. Rather than thinking about issues on their own terms, people are more concerned to demonstrate why their opponents are wrong about them.

However, when such a framing of the task of inquiry takes hold, everything can rapidly become distorted. In effect, the shift that occurs in such cases is akin to the mistaken belief that a morbid preoccupation with medicating a child against and protecting them from any sort of illness secures their healthy development. Despite its occasional necessity, one doesn't raise healthy children principally on medicine, but on a balanced diet, an extensive exposure to nature and a loving and living society.

Likewise, prioritising apologetics can confuse the combating or addressing of error with the pursuit of truth. The quest to identify and combat error is quite different from the quest for truth, and where the priority of the direct pursuit of truth, unmediated by the foil of error, is forgotten, a sort of misshapen Christianity can easily develop. When the threats posed by error and by our opponents are foregrounded in our engagement with the biblical text, for instance, the criteria by which we draw insight from it can narrow in marked and significant ways.

Much that the scripture teaches is readily contestable by those who don't want to accept it. What the scripture teaches to those who are attentive, submissive to and formed in it greatly exceeds that which can be incontrovertibly demonstrated or even strongly argued from it to those who resist such a posture. Those who are overly preoccupied with apologetics when reading scripture can miss the fact that, while the scripture most definitely strengthens the faith and deepens the understanding of those who attentively submit themselves to it, it was not generally written for the sake of the persuasion or the confutation of those who lack such a posture.

The result can be instinctive resistance to things such as the literary, typological and symbolic subtlety of the text, all of which can be seen to weaken or to compromise the straightforward apologetic force and usefulness of the text. When concern about or even fear of error and opposition starts to drive us, several unhealthy habits of thought are near at hand, many of which are amply in evidence in people and contexts that are deeply driven by apologetics. Concern not to give an inch to error or opposition can produce a scrupulosity of thought, a sort of immune reaction to anything that isn't ideologically sterile or pure.

Opponents and critics will often be demonised and dismissed rather than carefully engaged and understood. As people driven by such a way of thinking are hyper-vigilant about the dangers of close exposure to error, they can try to inoculate people against genuine receptive consideration of opposing positions by broad-brush dismissals, straw men, other distorted forms of second-hand exposure or by a fixation upon weak and

easily caricatured opponents. Apologists can be especially prone to projecting extreme overconfidence, to encouraging fundamental distrust of institutions, scholars, parties or persons who criticise or fail to align with them.

They can be prone to aggressive and polarising posturing and positioning, and to an insecure and tribal defensiveness. On account of their fear of error and opposition, apologists will frequently seek to discredit whole fields, contexts and institutions from which they face strong criticism. They might have a small stable of trustworthy and reliable scholars, but encourage distrust or dismissal or discrediting of all those who fall outside of it, thinking of them as foolish, corrupt, untrustworthy, deluded or vicious.

If they were to grant that many of their critics were rigorous scholars, raising some genuine questions, perhaps with far more relevant expertise and study than their own in certain areas, their position might be significantly weakened, and their confidence would need to be somewhat chastened. This narrowing of trust networks can lead to a focus upon a few people who act as if they have all of the answers. Why read or think broadly when you have some brilliant universal expert in your midst? This can select for overconfident, unteachable and proud people, and for the traits of overconfidence, unteachableness and pride within people.

Look behind the facade, however, and one will soon see the shoddiness characteristic of scholarship that is hostile to criticism, inattentive to opposing viewpoints, and narrow in its realms of receptive discourse and engagement, which compensates for its lack of substance with bluster and belligerence. To this point, I've focused especially upon antagonistic modes of apologetics. But modes of apologetics that are intent on being persuasive, winning and seeming reasonable can have many problems of their own.

These problems share the same underlying issue of the privileging of the mediating foil of the non-believer in our Christian thought. Such apologists are concerned to present the faith in a manner that is attractive to the non-believer, in a manner that shows that all the good values that they affirm are most truly and fully expressed in Christianity. There is, of course, much that could be laudable in such a concern, much as in the concern of those who want to protect the faith from error and the threats of its opponents.

However, advocates and exemplars of both these approaches frequently distort the faith to serve their discursive ends. In the name of being winning, relevant and persuasive, many apologists end up with a faith that is contorted into the shape of contemporary liberal mores. It is also easy to forget, when trying to seem reasonable to non-believers, that many of the things that we might be tempted to grant for the persuasive purposes of argument are not, in fact, things we should grant, and that dominant cultural or academic opinions are, in a very great many cases, profoundly unreasonable.

While one might carefully operate on such narrow grounds in certain arguments, we

must not grant the legitimacy of such narrow grounds more generally in our thinking. Although few seem to be aware of it, thinking that proceeds in ways dominated by such mediating foils is often compromised from the very outset. Rather than studying the scriptures attentively on their own terms, our thinking can approach the text obliquely, in a manner driven more by the pressing demands of our philosophical, ethical, ideological, political or theological debates.

The more that we approach the text looking for support for our positions and our debates, or for ammunition against opponents, the harder it can be to hear the scriptures own witness, which can speak in very different terms from the prevailing ones of our contexts and debates. This dulls us to the surprising voice of the scriptures, as we are listening for useful things within it that answer to the demands of our debates and attempts at persuasion. The difference between a sort of hearing that is truly listening to, and a hearing that is principally listening for, can be immense.

I'm sure we've all been at the receiving end of this at some point in our lives. There are some people who, when hearing us, are clearly listening to us, truly wanting to understand our perspectives and what we're trying to convey. They will ask genuine questions.

They will seek clarification. They might attempt to express our viewpoints in their own words, in order to confirm that they have adequately grasped our meaning. They will readily revise their judgments when they have misunderstood us.

The experience of being truly listened to could not be more different from the experience of interacting with people who, when hearing what we are saying, are primarily listening for things. An infamous example of such a known conversation is the Channel 4 interview of Jordan Peterson by Cathy Newman. Newman repeatedly responded to Peterson's remarks with the expression, So what you are saying is... followed by extreme misrepresentations of Peterson's actual points and positions.

To most viewers of that interview, it soon becomes embarrassingly obvious that Newman was not in fact listening to Peterson to understand him on his own terms, but was rather listening for ways to force him into her own ideological framework. And the result was, unsurprisingly, a complete caricature of his actual beliefs. It is by no means the case that all such instances of listening for are hostile in character.

Many people approach texts and voices listening for support for positions that they hold themselves, rather than listening to them in order to understand what the voices or the texts are saying on their own terms. Countless readers of scripture or historical theological texts are looking for proof texts and other such apparent support. They want to add weight to their own theological or philosophical opinions.

Often they are not respectfully and attentively seeking to learn from the scripture and

the tradition so much as they are ransacking them for things that are useful for them. However, many may believe that they submit to the scriptures and respect the tradition, but the ways that they handle them leaves much to be desired. Of course, not all forms of listening for are equally egregious.

Many who are principally listening for, when they approach the scriptures, genuinely wish to uphold the scriptures' authority in their lives and thought. They're not hostile listeners, nor are they actively resisting the text. However, as they are driven by a concern to uphold and defend the truth of the text to or against its critics or sceptics, they become somewhat careless as hearers.

Out of some sense of the urgency of defending some theological or ethical position against critics or persuading non-believers concerning it, it's easy for attention to the text on its own terms to fall by the wayside. Now, there are clearly appropriate, indeed necessary, occasions for apologetic encounter and for corresponding forms of engagement with the text. The problems here arise chiefly from the relative priority and occurrence of different modes of engagement with various texts.

Where our study of the scripture and the tradition largely occurs in a manner framed by the concerns of apologetic encounters and theological and other debates, the dangers of failure of attention to texts on their own terms is quite considerable. Early in my own Christian thinking, I learned this lesson a harder way, interacting with a cult group for a few months, arguing against them, while trying to sharpen my own theological thoughts so as better to counteract their arguments. I found myself attracted to some of their claims.

However, as I had become so narrowly focused on counteracting their arguments, they had become a dominating foil for my engagement with scripture. I was constantly listening for ammunition with which to attack their positions or material with which to defend my own. And in the process, I lost the ability to step back from the debate and to listen to the scriptures on their own terms.

It was only when I realised the unhealthy and fear-driven narrowing spiral I was getting into that I came to my senses. And at that point, I stepped back from the discussion completely and ceased engaging with their arguments. Away from their arguments, I tried to ground myself in the scriptures on their own terms.

And when I revisited their arguments a few months later, their appeal had completely evaporated. The scriptures had given me a different way of looking at things that presented a clear alternative both to the position of the cult and to my own original position. Much of the problem that we face in the current context is that we are constantly exposed to critics and sceptics.

So much of our thinking now takes place within discursive environments that are very

hostile. We're not thinking about the text on its own terms, but in order to have our arguments with people on social media, to show that someone on social media is wrong. As a result, it's very difficult to think about things on their own terms, to read texts on their own terms, to engage with reality on its own terms.

This is particularly the case in politically charged environments where everything becomes about owning the libs, for instance. Proving that the opponents are maximally wrong can become our chief end. We can also get trapped in a sort of siege mentality.

The result is careless and clumsy thought. And I would highly recommend that if people are going to be on social media, that they spend at least three or four times as much time off social media, reading texts on their own terms, thinking widely and deeply and broadly, before they ever think about getting in arguments with people. Apologetics will rot your mind if that is all that you are doing.

If you're not having time in the scripture, reading it for its own sake, thinking about it on its own terms, you are not equipped to have arguments with people to defend it. Apologetics are important, but not everyone is equipped to be an apologist. If you want to be a good apologist, you need to be someone who's pursuing truth on its own terms before you ever think of trying to confute and oppose error.

This requires spending most of your thinking time and your primary thinking time in contexts that are not antagonistic. In contexts where you are not thinking with the foil of the non-believer, the critic or the skeptic, but you just want to understand things on their own terms. As you do this, I believe that you'll find that truth, particularly as conveyed in scripture, is so much broader than that which apologetics would suggest.

And also, you will find that your apologetics themselves can become stronger. And apologetics, based in a firm and a joyful grasp upon reality on its own terms and scripture on its own terms, will always be more effective than one dominated by opposing foils.