Apologists who are Unkind [1]

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The Christian is (or, rather, should be) a completely strange and alien being in the world. They must banish the impulses in which the world indulges. Perhaps one of the starkest things which we can do is, as our Lord Jesus Christ commanded, to "*love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you*" (Matthew 5:44). This does not always happen, but nevertheless, this is the command which has been given us.

So what does this love look like? How does this dictate how we should treat other people? What place is there for anger and being snide, if any?

The Example of Jesus

Of course, Jesus Himself did get angry with people. In particular, in Matthew 13–36 and Luke 11:37–54, He launches into a tirade against the scribes and the Pharisees: the very ones who were responsible for instructing the people in the way of God and should have been living examples of faithfulness. Jesus chastises them, because they had the learning and the opportunity to help the ordinary, everyday person live the way which God desired. But what they did, was lay burdens on the people and occupied them with trivialities. It was from this injustice and misuse of God's word that Jesus's anger flowed. Then there was also, of course, the memorable event of when Jesus overturned tables of the money-changers and merchants in the Temple, and even chasing them out with a whip (Matthew 21:12–13, Mark 11:15–18, John 2:13–17). This He did because people—Jews¶were not showing proper respect to the Temple, and were using God's statutes and commandments for profiteering1.

But when Jesus was treated unkindly or threatened, He did not condone violence as an appropriate response (Luke 9:51–56; Matthew 26:47–56, Luke 22:47–53, John 18:1–11).

Many people will have long arguments over how exactly to interpret these passages. They want to understand exactly how broadly or narrowly these passages should be interpreted for application in our own lives. The Pharisees were argumentative and learned Jews, so can we get cross with anyone who argues with us? Or the Pharisees were not Christians, so can our wrath flare against any non-Christian? These are some of the questions that might be asked to try and justify any indulgence in the unkind treatment of others.

I believe, however, that a cursory overview confirms that the Christian should always be kind to those who are not in the faith. However, those who profess to be in the faith, but act or speak deceitfully, should still be loved, but open themselves to rebuke and chastisement.

The Internet's Empowerment

In the West, we no longer live under physical persecution for our beliefs. Christian nations instituted freedoms of speech and religion, which allows Christianity to be practised after these nations' Christian heritage had become merely a cultural veneer

But there is one place where battles are fought and tempers flare on a daily basis: the Internet. All sorts of people converge on the Internet and face off in chat rooms, on message boards and across social media networks. And Christians and their opponents are not exceptions.

The Internet is a strange phenomenon. Even when one is not acting anonymously, because there is no face-to-face interaction, I believe people feel more bravado when engaging with others. And what is more, apart from a written rebuttal, there usually is no consequence for spouting all manners of meanness in rapid succession. Behind a screen and a keyboard, one is safe. Even if one is not writing under anonymity, there feels to be enough layers between people for there to be no real, physical consequences (although this is not always the case). It is no wonder, then, that the hacktivist group, Anonymous, had adopted the Guy Fawkes mask: behind a mask—especially one in a sea of other masks—one is safe from identification and, thus, persecution. Without the fear of persecution, one has the courage to act and say whatever one wants, even to the detriment of social inhibitions.

Lamentable Christian Attitudes

People do not always have a favourable view of apologists. Apologetics is perhaps now becoming less obscure, so more people recognise it. But with it comes a stigma: apologists are argumentative and presumptive; they really only are interested in winning arguments and not people. I have seen people make posts saying that they were in the mood for an argument, so they decided to troll for that particular evening to argue with people of other viewpoints.

And I cannot present myself as being completely blameless of similar behaviour, believing that pressing the argument is more important the person to whom I am speaking. As they say, "you are not wrong, just and arsehole".

A competent apologetics resource is the Tekton TV YouTube channel [2]. It is run by J.P. Holding, who does good research and can deliver powerful arguments. However, my conscience now prevents me from supporting that channel and those affiliated with it. The videos, generally aimed against atheists and sceptics, nearly all have an air of disdain for his opponents. While providing good and well researched apologetics arguments, the videos also mock, belittle and demean those to whom they are directed. The videos transcend the humorous and caricature, and crosses over into the mean, unkind and indifferent; qualities far removed from what Jesus expected of His followers.

Another example is that of James McConnell. This preacher was recently investigated for hate speech for a sermon which he gave in which he said that Islam is "heathen", "satanic" and "spawned in hell". As Archbishop Cranmer pointed out [3]:

> It is no crime to preach the gospel... but it is a perversion of the gospel (if not an abuse of the pulpit) to denigrate all Muslims, as Pastor James McConnell does. Can you hear Jesus ever preaching: "People say there are good Samaritans in Israel—that may be so—but I don't trust them.." Not trusting any Muslim anywhere is a particularly facile understanding of human nature which
> plays to negative stereotypes.
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> Perhaps Pastor James McConnell might consider a better way.
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> Instead of setting out to antagonise, denigrate, insult and offend, why not adopt the model of mission demonstrated by the Apostle Paul at the Areopagus (Acts 17:16–34)? Why not seize

> the opportunity of a multi-faith milieu to tell Muslims that Jesus is not merely a prophet, but the Son of God and Saviour who died that they all may be free from the law of Allah which binds?
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> "*Men of Islam! 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 a billboard with this inscription: JESUS: A PROPHET OF ISLAM. Now what you worship as Isa the prophet I am going to proclaim to you..*"
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> This is a model for Christian proclamation. St Paul does not condemn the Athenians' idolatrous false religion: he begins by commending their conviction to their faith. By employing the language of reason and invitation rather than reproach and condemnation, he offers the Church a model for proclamation in a context of ethnic and religious pluralism. He quotes the Greek poets and sees the light within their philosophy, and he builds on this to articulate the name of the God who is the source and destination of their quest for salvation.
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> If Greek philosophy can be a legitimate discourse for evangelism, then so can Islamic theology, however perverted a particular interpretation may be. If St Paul were to preach today in Bradford, Leicester, Tower Hamlets or Belfast, he would not denigrate an entire community or condemn their beliefs as being "spawned in hell". But neither would he ignore the presence of idols and turn the other cheek. He would tell of the God of love who sent His own Son to die in order that we might live. He would begin by praising Muslims' loyalty and devotion to Isa their prophet, and then acknowledging the 'good' ones who are patriotic and law-abiding. And then he would tell them that their upper-case 'Prophet' was both preceded and surpassed by their lower-case prophet, who happens to be Prophet, Priest and King; the Word of God; the Spirit of God; Saviour and Redeemer of the world.
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> This is an opportunity for evangelism—to discuss who Jesus really is and examine why the Isa of the Qur'an is not the Jesus of the Bible.
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> Archbishop Cranmer

The Exemplary Christians

One of the most profound influences in Christian attitudes that I have is a lecture given by Jerram Barrs at Covenant Seminary. He taught the *Apologetics & Outreach* course and presented it a way which was very surprising to me, but incredibly refreshing and renewing. He emphasised the qualities of gentleness, respect (1 Peter 3:15) and graciousness (Colossians 4:6). These attitudes were held to be fundamental and should always be shown. The opposite attitudes would alienate and antagonise the audience, and that would be a stumbling block for the gospel. This would make one no more noble than the Pharisees of Jesus's day.

The reasons for having these attitudes are many. For one, even as Christians, we are no more deserving of God's grace than those who are not Christians. Even non-Christians are made in God's image, which means they deserve respect and dignity (Genesis 9:6). God desires for all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:1–4), and our words and actions towards them should invite them to the gospel, not threaten or ridicule them. And, of course, there is the example of Jesus Himself, who welcomed Pharisees, prostitutes, thieves and traitors alike and invited them into the Kingdom of God.

> What you wouldn't be prepared to do to somebody you love because you are close to them; is an indication of how to treat everyone else you will ever meet.
>
> Jerram Barrs

You cannot and should not engage with someone if you cannot recognise the beauty which God has put in that person; not only the inherent beauty of being an image bearer of God, but also whatever

there is in that person's life which truly is good and commendable.

> John Calvin was passionately committed to education. ... He wrote the rules of the school teachers himself. And one of the rules was this: ... The teachers were to have their students read the Greek and Roman pagan writers. And Calvin put this in his directions for the teachers: the teachers are not to criticise these writers, but are rather to help their students see what they can learn from them, even though they were not believers. And Calvin himself said elsewhere that it is a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit to deny that pagan writers like Plato had many helpful things to say which can teach us as believers.
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> ...
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> We need to recognise that whenever we look at any aspect of human culture, we need to be affirmative; we need to say where, first, does this reflect the image of God. Where do we see things here that teach us as believers? We must learn not to have some knee-jerk negative response to the culture in which we live. Human beings always manifest the image of God. And consequently there will always be aspects of wisdom from which we can learn in any cultural artefact, since, because, it is produced by a human being who is made in the image of God; who is constantly receiving God's good gifts every day of their lives.
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> ...
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> What can you affirm? What can you commend, what can you delight in in this person's life, and in what they believe? Where can you gladly say, "this is good", like what Calvin said about Plato. It would be a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit to deny that there are elements of truth, and things that are commendable and admirable in this person's life.
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> Jerram Barrs

Conclusion

Apologetics mostly should be a tool for evangelism. An apologist who does not evangelise should seriously think about what their motivations are. Apologists should not have a reputation for only ever wanting to argue. They should have an attitude, like evangelists, to reach non-believers and invite them into the truth of the gospel. There is a time and a place for righteous anger[2], but that is for the wolves, those masquerading as righteous Christians, yet who tear down at the church of Christ. Let us as Christians, apologists and evangelists, be known for our graciousness, gentleness and respect to anyone who still needs to come into the house of our Father.

- 1. Jesus also got angry at the death of Lazarus (John 11:35; the word commonly translated as "wept" can indicate an angry reaction), but this can be understood as His emotional reaction to the effects of the Fall on humans.
- 2. Of course, if anyone in the church does act maliciously, proper church discipline, as laid out in Matthew 18:15–20 should be followed.

Categories:

- Ministry [4]

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