

WHAT IF GOD READ YOUR POSTS? CHRISTIAN CONDUCT ON THE INTERNET by C Michael Patton - posted by sermon

I believe that we are to defend the faith. I believe that we are to contend for the faith. One of my great loves in theology is the discipline of apologetics. But sometimes our zealotry for our faith can have the opposite effect and actually undermine our witness. We can shame God. What if God read your posts?

I often talk about how to engage people in theological issues in general, but this will have particular relevance to how we interact online, especially in blogs.

Before the internet, maybe things were a little more tame. I don't know. Maybe people expressed themselves with more caution, more gentleness, more respect. This is not so today. Not by a long shot. If I was a non-Christian and witnessed how Christians often treat each other in the blogosphere, I would have a natural reaction of disgust. A good case could be made for shutting down Christian blogs all-together.

Today your voice can be heard by an unheard of number of people . . . anyone's voice can. Set your light on a hill. Not only do we have a bigger hill to let the Gospel shine brightly, but through blogs, forums, emails, and many other forms of quasi-anonymous venues, we also have the chance to let our sinfulness shine brightly.

The other day I drove up to a stop sign. Another car, just to my left, was pulling up as well. It was one of those times where I was not sure who got there first. Since I was to the right of them, I went ahead and turned. As I went past their car to my left, I could plainly see the two young college boys were not too happy with my presumptuous decision. They were shouting and pointing and looking at me as if I had just crossed the line which kept their self-control at bay. I am not a lip reader, but I could tell that they were calling me names that would have given them time-out in Hell.

I thought about this and wondered whether they would have reacted the same way if we were not in our cars. What if we were just walking and I happened to cut in front of them. I am sure that the reaction would have been much different. Much more cordial and tame.

Why? What an odd people we are. Put up a safety barrier of a car and we will act in a way that dehumanizes one another. We will say things about another person created in the image of God that would never be said in most other contexts. Why not? We will never actually meet this person. It is not as if this person, were we to see them in line at McDonald's, would come up to us and say "Hey, I am the guy that cut you off at the stop sign. Now what is it you were saying?" Then we would be in trouble.

This is the same context that the internet provides. People say whatever they have on their mind relying on the virtual barrier of cyberspace to protect them.

We must exercise caution. The barrier of the internet does not provide us with a black megaphone named "Judge Dredd."

Here are some principles that I aspire to live by while interacting online, especially in this blog:

1. Never say anything to someone online that you would not say in face to face. (2 Cor. 10:10-11)
2. Don't take things too personally, but realize that some of the things we may need to hear. (Prov. 27:6)
3. Don't respond immediately. Give yourself some time. Rash reactions are like drops of blood. Once the shark smells it, he will attack for the kill. (Prov. 12:18)
4. Interact with great humility. Go out of your way to recognize the right things that are said before you respond to the attacks. (Prov. 15:1)
5. Recognize that while you are separated from the other person by cyber-space, there is no space that can separate you from God. (Ps. 139:7-9; Matt. 12:36)

6. Remember that virtual interactions have real people on the other end. These people are created in God's image. Whether believers or not, they are like God. Who are we to curse someone created in the image of God? (James 3:8-9)
7. Shower your response with biblical truth, but don't shove the Bible down people's throats. This can come across as arrogant and sloppy. Be tactful and sensitive to the context of the situation. Often, people do not avoid the Bible, they just avoid you with a Bible in your hands. (Eph. 4:29)

8. Don't be a people pleaser. You will never satisfy everyone all the time. Speak what needs to be said without fear of reprisal from some particular group that you are trying to please. This is particularly hard for me. Sometimes when I write, I write to the donors of Reclaiming the Mind Ministries. Sometimes I shape it for the legacy of Dallas Theological Seminary. Sometimes there are particular people (other bloggers) that I am fond of that I don't want to hurt or disappoint. There is a fine line between being sensitive to an audience and compromise to an agenda. (Gal. 1:10)

9. If you are going to take people to task, rarely do this in a public forum. Contact them personally and try to resolve the situation. Don't use people as a public punching bag. (Matt. 18:15)

10. Don't take things too personally. Understand that many people are insecure and will interact with violent resolve to shield their insecurity. (Prov. 16:18)

Our Attitude

Now I want to take this one step further in talking about our attitude. In my opinion, one cannot underestimate the importance of having the right attitude. Chuck Swindoll says that life is about one-percent what happens to you and ninety-nine percent how we respond—attitude.

I often talk about the importance of having an irenic approach to doing theology. It would seem that this term, "irenic" is suffering because of its overuse and misidentification with those who would choose to abuse it. To be irenic means that we are peaceful in our approach to issues. This does not involve compromise, but a willingness to engage issues fairly.

Here are some of the characteristics to being irenic in theological conversation and controversy:

You accurately represent all theological positions, even when you strongly oppose them.

Your tone of engagement comes from a humble respectful attitude.

Your primary goal is not to win an argument, but to contribute to understanding.

Your defense of your position recognizes the strengths of the opposing side.

You are gentle.

Here are two important Scripture references concerning how we are to engage in theological discussion irenically:

2 Timothy 2:24 "The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, 25 with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, 26 and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will."

Notice the key phrases:

"not be quarrelsome"

"kind to all"

"patient when wronged"

"with gentleness correcting"

This describes the irenic method of theological engagement.

1 Peter 3:15 "But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence."

Notice a few things about this passage:

The context has to do with a believer "suffering for righteousness"

We are to give an answer (apologetic) to those who ask

This is to be done with gentleness

This is to be done with respect

Many of us only hear the first part of the verse “give an defense,” and upon this we justify our apologetic polemic ready to destroy, slander, or misrepresent any who disagree with what we believe to be the truth. We fail to recognize that this defense, in this context, is to be given to people “who ask.” This is requested information based upon a life of integrity in the midst of our suffering. As well, this defense is to be done irenically—with gentleness and respect. I can hear the “what abouts” coming. And in the spirit of this post let me tell you how stupid you are for questioning my . . . ahem . . . Ok, let’s deal with them.

There seems to be examples in the Scripture where the prophets, apostles, and even Christ did not engage irenically. In other words, they often seemed to engage people with a fierce resolve, respecting the truth more than the person with whom there is conflict. I admit this is true. I also admit that there are times when such polemics are important. But we need to look at the context in which this type of polemic is brought about.

1. Should we defending the faith like Christ cleansed the temple?

We often think we should speak with the authority of Christ. In defense of our attitude we will appeal to Christ’s attitude toward the pharisees or his cleansing the temple. But to refer to the example of Christ in these instances can be problematic seeing as how Christ’s actions are not always intended to set examples for us. I know this sounds off, but think about it. He worked great miracles in order to demonstrate his unique authority, he engaged people with a divine introspection knowing their thoughts, motives, and intentions, and he was the ultimate divine judge who has every right to judge all people. As well, this was not the *modus operandi* of Christ. Do you ever notice that he was only polemic in such a way to the self-righteous who arrogantly believed they had all the answers and were a step above all the rest?

2. Defending the faith like Paul encountered the Galatians.

Many times we will appeal to Paul’s example. His polemics, especially to the Galatians, are used to defend our own less than gracious encounters. But this has problems as well.

First, Paul was an apostle who carried the authority of an apostle. Being such, he had both divine authority and the divine ability to speak to a situation with infallible guidance. This is something that most of us we cannot claim. Can we? Second, Paul primarily only spoke in such a way to those who were under his authority. He was their leader and had the right and obligation as their leader to engage them in a candid way. He was their pastor. Pastor’s can and sometimes should speak in such a manner to their flock.

Third, like Christ, Paul did not always engage people in such a way. In fact, as noted above, he encouraged his people to be gracious, humble, and respectful in all their dealing with those with whom there is disagreement. In 1 Thess 2:7 he describes his own ministry as one of gentleness, comparing it to a mother caring for her children.

Sadly, it often seems as if there are people out there who not only think they are an apostle, but also think that they are talking to their own congregation. Some even seem to enjoy polemical engagement in an unhealthy manner. In fact, I think that a lot of ministries would not know what to do if they did not have someone to fight.

Sadly, many times this attitude is found more in my own conservative Calvinistic circles than in any other. For this I am sorry and ashamed. Sometimes Calvinists often make the worst Calvinists. But, of course, it can be found in any group. Baptists have a knack for it. Even emergers can display the most angered, discounting, and arrogant spirit that I have ever seen. What about politics? Ahem . . .

Why do we sometimes act this way?
I am not sure.

Maybe its because we are so confident in the particulars of our faith that we feel we have the right to shout the loudest. We have the greatest message. We feel our polemic will force the truth into the mind of those who oppose.

Or . . .

Maybe we think that we have to set an example of the truth to those who are listening from the outside. Like in a debate, we don’t really think we are going to convert our opponent, but we hope to solidify our position among those who are listening.

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Or . . .

Maybe it is because we are so insecure in our position that we think the louder we are the more true our words are. As I tell students, if you are not confident about what you are saying, you can first speak deeper, second speak louder. And if both of these don't work, speak with a British accent!! In truth, I have found that the most fundamentally uninformed folk believers are often the most polemically militant because they, deep down, don't really know why they believe what they believe. Their only recourse is not a gentle engagement, but a raised voice.

What part of gentleness and respect don't we understand?

I am certainly not perfect with this issue. Believe me. This is self-therapy. Awww . . . aren't I humble? Let us all try to be more gentle, humble, and respectful when defending the faith. In earnestly contending for the faith, let us be irenic. For those of you who will respond to this by posting with a sawed off shot loaded with your favorite Scripture, take you proof-texting and shove them . . . Ahem . . . Please deal with the Scriptures in such a way that takes into account their context.

Remember, God does read your posts (and mine).

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