The Media, the Press, and the Church

Part 4 of 4: Effects of the “Culture Wars”
with Darrell L. Bock and J. Kerby Anderson
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Well, let’s turn to the last subject that I want to cover, and that is the whole issue – and I don't know how to even ask this question so I’m just going to throw it out there and see what happens. And that is, we’ve kind of been engaged in what’s often been called “the cultural wars,” and there’s almost been this confrontational battle. There’s a lot of war imagery that gets used and that kind of thing. Do you think, thinking about our conversations that we engage in in the public square or in the media when we’re doing cultural engagement, do you think the cultural wars metaphor helps us, hurts us or does it depend? And really what I’m trying to raise here is the issue of tone. How do we have the conversation? And are there things that we do that hurt us and are there things that we can do that help us?

Well said. Let’s just recognize that if you take a controversial issue – and let’s take one of the most controversial issues over the last few decades, and that would be abortion – even when you’re on television or on radio or you’re writing about that, you have to understand that you’ve got a variety of people that are watching or listening to what you say. And sometimes programs are intentionally controversial. The programmer wants that so they’ll have somebody from Planned Parenthood, and then maybe they’ll try to find somebody, say, from Operation Rescue.

Now, Darrell you know as well as I do that the mass of America is in the middle looking at both sides say, “I’m not sure I agree with either of them,” and so they see these kind of missiles launched from one side to the other. And the people in the middle are like, “Neither of those views represent me.” I have maybe a little bit of concern about that, and 50 percent of Americans refer to themselves as “pro-life”. What that means we’ll leave at the moment, but they’re saying, “I don’t really necessarily agree with some of the strident things I’m hearing from the guy that’s pro-life. I certainly don’t agree with the people of Planned Parenthood.” But even the other 50 percent of Americans who don’t call themselves pro-life, they still think maybe we should have some restrictions on abortion. They say, “I can’t really relate to that either.”
And so it brings you back to the issue of tone. If you can come in there and be gracious, have facts but not be making statements, finger-pointing, making strident kinds of comments, you’re going to win the middle because maybe there’s 10 percent on one side and 20 percent on the other side or whatever, but there’s a mass of people in the middle that find themselves oftentimes when they see these confrontational programs or they see these really strident things being said back and forth, they don’t really agree with it. And I think they’re looking for people with a more moderate, loving, gracious kind of tone.

Think of it a different way. How many people am I going to talk out of going to an abortion clinic if I’ve got sort of a white knuckle grasp on my Bible and I’m pointing my finger instead of saying, “Could I just talk to you for just a minute before you make a very important decision that you’re about ready to make that could affect your life forever?” There are just different ways, and I think it just brings us back to the issue of tone. Some people try to make things controversial. Sometimes for ratings’ sake you will see these point-counterpoints. But I’ll tell you, Darrell, I’m seeing more and more people that say, “You know what? I see a lot of these talking head confrontational shows on cable television. I just turn them off because I don’t even want to hear it anymore.”

Well, I think that’s a very, very important point, and it brings me back to the thought of, again, I’ll use my own experience. When I do debates with someone on the Jesus Seminar, the question I often get asked is something like – and usually this is coming from a conservative person who says, “Have you ever convinced anyone on the Jesus Seminar of your point of view?” I’m going, "Gee, thanks for asking the question." And my response is inevitably, "They’re not my audience."

Good point.

They’re not my audience. I’m not trying to convince John Dominic Crossan, who’s invested 45 years of his professional life in forming the position that he has. He has his reasons. My audience is the people who are listening to us talk …
Well said.

*Kerby Anderson:*

… and they’re trying to figure out “Where am I on this spectrum and where am I going to land?” And so I’m not trying to convince him. I’m trying to convince them.

*Darrell Bock:*

Well said, well said.

*Kerby Anderson:*

And that is a very, very important part of what engagement is about. Engagement is not about winning the person that you’re often paired against, if I can say it that way, when the media does these kinds of events. Your audience is who you are both speaking to and doing your best to make and put forward the best case possible in the best tone possible in gaining that audience. I know of conservative speakers who I’ve heard where I say they really had it better on the facts, but their tone was so off they won the battle and lost the war.

*Darrell Bock:*

Well, while we’re talking about debates, one of the other things I’ve done over the years is moderate a lot of debates, one that you and William Lang Craig did around that issue at the Jesus Seminar.

*Kerby Anderson:*

That’s right.

*Darrell Bock:*

I’ve done others with William Lang Craig, ones with Ravi Zacharias. Also Norm Geisler and I have done debates, so I’ve been both a moderator and a participant, and again, I recognize that you’re not going to convince a Marcus Borg. You’re not going to convince, as you said, some of the people in the Jesus Seminar. You’re certainly not going to convince Richard Dawkins or when he was alive Christopher Hitchens, but you are in a forum that really allows you to surface those kinds of discussions. And for many years we actually would not only speak in the college classrooms; we would do debates. And I recognize that I always had a little concern about debates because oftentimes you generate a lot more heat than light.
That’s right. I don’t like them for that reason.

But at the same time, I recognize that you would bring people into an audience that would never listen to you before.

That’s correct.

A good example was when I was at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, we did a debate with the leading abortionist there, a Dr. Harrison and myself. And when I walked in that night, I thought, Who’s going to come to a discussion or even a debate about abortion? And I walked in, Darrell, and it was jam-packed. I mean it was probably too many people, but the fire marshal wasn’t there. And the reason is that some of the professors said they were going to show up and give the Christian dummy a bad time. Well, I realized that most of the people in this audience did not agree with me, so I began to talk about medical arguments against abortion. Then Dr. Harrison got up there and talked about Christians that presume to know the will of God and wrench scripture out of context. Then I got up there and I talked about legal arguments against abortion. He got up there and talked about the danger of the Christian Right and wanting to impose a theocracy and really trying to subjugate women’s bodies. Then I got up there and talked about philosophical arguments against abortion. At this point, he was taking his prepared text and throwing it on the floor because he was assuming I was going to come from a biblical point of view.

Right.

But instead I was reasoning to my biblical conclusion, so I used some Bible verses at the end, but I didn’t start there. And the same point, this was an environment where after a few minutes a lot of people said, “Okay, I didn’t realize there were really good arguments for abortion.” And afterwards I had a student come up and say, “When I walked in here tonight, I really didn’t know how I thought about abortion. After I heard you talk, I knew exactly how I thought about it.”
Well and you’ve said that very nicely. It actually loops back around to where we started, which is this: that knowing your audience and knowing what kinds of arguments to use that are persuasive to your audience is important.

I like to say to people I believe the Bible is true, but the Bible is true because of the way it addresses the topics. It speaks truthfully. So that means that when I think about that, I don’t just say it because the Bible says it. I want to say it because I think the Bible is saying something is true that I can unpack, and those are not the same things.

And so your idea of reasoning my way to the Bible as opposed to simply citing the Bible, then that’s part of what a seminary education, that’s part of what we’re about is we’re trying to share with people the rest of the story. What’s underneath the text that allows the text to speak and resonate in a particular way that’s effective?

And another example of the type of thing we’re talking about, the very North Texas debate that you were talking about that you moderated when Marcus Borg and Daryl Schmidt were representing the Jesus Seminar and William Lang Craig and myself were representing orthodox Christianity and we were debating the resurrection, whether it really happened. I’ll never forget the news report that was in the student newspaper that came out the next day, and it basically went this way. It went, “I went to this debate expecting to hear the icons of liberal Christianity express themselves and I was disappointed.”

Wow.

And I thought that’s the point. The point is I’m not trying to win Marcus Borg to change what he’s written over 40 years of his life. The point is to get someone who’s listening to the two of us talk and say, "You know what? I think that position’s more reasonable than that position," and open them up to it.
Sure and, again, you’ve got all sorts of people right now that they listen to Bart Airman. Sounds reasonable. They read *The Da Vinci Code*. This sounds like it could be possible. And what you’re doing is interrupting the filibuster, if you will …

That’s right.

… and saying wait a minute. There’s another viewpoint. And listen to this for a few minutes and you realize that what was given a lot of prominence maybe in the newspapers or in a bestselling book or in some kind of television program, there is another side of that story. And when you hear it, you realize maybe you were accepting it too uncritically.

And just to be sure that we’re not just speaking theoretically here, that actually translates into an important message to make to people in the church, and that is how do you actually interact with and how do you get prepared to be that voice? In other words, this assumes an ability to be able to understand these areas and to engage in these areas and to get the help that you need for some of these areas. And some people will say, just the average person out there will say, “Well, I’m not an expert in the New Testament and I’m not an expert in the Old Testament. I’m not a Jesus scholar. I don’t know much about creation. I don’t know much about biology.” They may know about one area because it’s related to their vocation. So what do you say to the average Christian who wants to culturally engage and knows these conversations are going on but feels I’m really not adequately prepared? In fact sometimes I think our churches don’t do a very good job of preparing people in these areas. I mean, you spent your life trying to do this, so what do you say to the average person who’s saying, “I want to get prepared”?
Well, the good news is that what we are talking about here, and this is really kind of the theme of what we talked about, is lifelong learning. So just because you don’t know doesn’t mean that you can’t learn. Sometimes I’ll have young students and after I’ve answered half a dozen different questions on topics all over the map, they’ll go, “How do you know that?” and I said, "You know when I was your age, I couldn’t have done what I’m doing now." So dedicate yourself to lifelong learning. No. 2, recognize that, okay, you may not be an expert but you can quote an expert. It’s back to questions. I encourage a lot of students when they go off to college look, you are talking about if you’re going to challenge your professor, somebody’s who’s been in this profession, has his PhD or her PhD …

Exactly right.

… has been there for 40 years and you’re an 18-year-old. Okay but there are still some things you can do. You can say, “You know, Professor Smith, today I was reading this and he’s got academic credentials similar to yours and he says da, da, da, da. What do you think about that?” So again, that’s the part of asking questions, whether it’s in a college classroom, whether it’s asking questions or citing somebody in a letter to the editor, whether it’s pulling together some of those pieces of information. You can in a sense really learn how to present that, and the good news is because of YouTube now you can watch some of the best debates. I mentioned William Lang Craig. If you want to know how to do a debate, William Lang Craig or Norm Geisler or I’ve done some things with Ravi Zacharias. We can mention a lot of names of individuals that will show you how they did it, and you can learn vicariously from them as well.

So first of all, study. Second of all, recognize no, you may not be an expert, but you don’t have to be an expert to quote an expert. And third, if you don’t have an answer to a question, it’s okay to say, “I don't know.” You have said that. I say that.

That’s right.
Everybody listening and watching this probably will say that from time to time. Be honest enough and say, “You know, I don’t have an answer, but the truthfulness of Christianity is not dependent upon me being able to give you a quick answer to that question. Because I can come back, I can do some research and maybe give you an answer or even put you in contact with somebody that can give you an answer.” But be honest enough sometimes to say “I don't know.” There’s nothing wrong with that either.

No, again, the whole style of engagement. There’s even a way to frame the question when you’re in a classroom situation like this, and the way I like to frame these kinds of conversations, particularly when you are dealing with a professor that has a lot more expertise than usually the student asking the question. My advice to the student is don’t say, “Oh, Professor, you’ve got that wrong and blah, blah, blah, blah …”

No, don’t do that.

… or anything like that but, “What do you say about …” and almost tell it as if here’s another piece of the puzzle that needs to be put on the table that everyone needs to reflect on and you just put it out there and say, “You said this” but -- I like the way you said it -- “This person who has the credentials that you have says it this way or puts this piece on the table. Now what are you going to do with it?” And that’s engagement. That’s cultural engagement. That’s cultural engagement in a tone and in a manner that, hopefully, causes everyone in the class who hears that question to reflect even as you ask it. And that oftentimes is the most helpful way to do it.

Well, unfortunately, our time is up, but we really appreciate your coming in today, Kerby, and being a part of The Table and talking with us and talking about how to sit at the table and have engagement. We really appreciate your ministry and your time with us and thank you very much.

Well, thank you also for the stand that you take. It’s always fun to watch you on television, read you in the newspapers, and may your tribe increase because of this broadcast.
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Thank you.

Darrell Bock: