How to Function as a Christian in a Shifting Culture

Part 2 of 3: Importance of Tone in Cultural Confrontations
with Darrell L. Bock, Jenny McGill, D. Jeffrey Bingham, and Mark L. Bailey
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*Mark Bailey:* Let me move on to another question. In light of that, in light of the way our culture is perceived, and then to multiply that by a Christian orientation in a non-Christian-dominated culture, which is a rapidly changing environment for us within our own country here in the U.S. – why is tone so important? Why have we lost the voice in the public square, and what can we do to be salt and light? Obviously, our desire to engage the culture has multiple motives, not the least of which is to influence it for righteousness, obviously, and for Christ. But what are the hurdles that we need to think about that keep us from effectively doing that? Darrell, let me start with you. And then, Jeff, if you would chime in and then Jenny, maybe in that order so you can have your thoughts prepared as we walk around the table. But why is tone and approach so critical?

*Darrell Bock:* Well, I think the New Testament's actually pretty clear from the beginning that if you stand up for God and represent him, there is going to be rejection. So I think the expectation of – if I can say this – popularity is not something that the New Testament tells us to expect. It is, again, another tension in the Christian life that we reach out to the world, we stretch out a hand to the world, we say, "God cares for you and loves you," and yet there is a rejection that often comes with that. But Jesus said, "If they rejected me, they're going to reject you."

But you don't reach out and you don't evaluate what you do on the basis of whether what you do is popular or not, or even how much power you possess. Your assessment of the quality of your engagement – if I can say it that way – is rooted in being faithful to the living God and in representing him in a way that at least attempts to be honoring to him and to have an integrity about it in a way in which he is represented by the way you interact and live.

So that means that your tone has this other tension that's built into it in the face of the possibility of rejection, which you understand is going to likely come with the territory. And that is, you're extending a hand of love on the one hand, but you also understand that that's going to be, and sometimes require, a challenge of the person that you're extending a hand to. Because the person who is not a part of the Christian background, who is living independently of God in one way or another or sees spirituality in very individualized kinds of ways, may or may not be open to the need, put simply, to be submissive to God and to his revelation.
And so that introduces a tension in the walk. But the tone is always one of engagement and challenge simultaneously. I like the Acts 17 passage. And the reason I like the Acts 17 passage is that on the one hand you see Paul extending a hand to a culture that he has been provoked by. I mean before he even speaks, the text tells us he saw the idols and he was provoked. And yet when he addresses them, the sense is he's saying, "I sense you are people grappling to come to grips with the unknown god."

Of all the myriad of ways he could have entered into his challenge, that is not the one I would have thought of. And then he engages them, and then he slowly draws them into the rebuke that is built into the speech. But in the midst of the rebuke he’s also beginning to extend the hand. He never gets through the speech, but he begins to extend the hand about the hope of resurrection.

And so you see him with fighting this tension, fighting with this tension – a better way to say that – engaging with this tension of a hand extended on the one hand, but there is a challenge that's wrapped up in it, and you watch him wrestle with the skill. And the tone of it is engaging. I don't know what other word to say. He's trying to draw them in, to have them consider what it is that he's putting on the table.

It's a very different tone, interestingly enough, from Romans 1 when he talks about the culture. There, it's very direct. It's hard hitting. In fact, it's so hard hitting that when people read it, particularly people who don't identify with the Christian culture, they think Paul is just rude, hateful, whatever word you want to put. That's a very honest confrontation of what the culture is. And, yet, when he engages, that's not how he engages.

And so I think that gives us a spectrum of what we're dealing with here. Someone who's sensitive to the tension between the challenge that is inherent in the Christian faith in terms of where all people are in their walk with God if they don't know him, and the invitation that they're trying to extend that says to the person, "God really desires the best for you. And the best for you is to get reconnected with him."

**Jeff Bingham:** I think tone has, in culture, historical precedence. And so American Evangelicals are a culture unto themselves, and they can't be disconnected, nor can their tone be disconnected, from their history. So in the 19th century, with the dawn of the scientific revolution, American Evangelicals went through a very painful period in this country, whereas before the scientific revolution, they were largely respected. The larger American culture at least endured, if not invited, their particular theological perspectives.
But with the rise of the scientific revolution, the larger culture departs from the supernaturalism of the American Evangelical. And as the American Evangelical sees the larger culture depart from and, in fact, reject the American Evangelical, the American Evangelical becomes hurt, the American Evangelical feels rejected, unloved.

They experience a fall from a premier seat in the American culture to now, one of disdain in the larger culture. And so they decide in the 19th century to retreat out of the larger culture into fortresses and into cities and into worlds and into cultures of their own making, where they can feel a part of the majority again, where they can control the items and details of their culture.

That changed the tone of American Evangelicalism in its engagement with culture. It became desperate. It became the tone of a person who sees that an investment in a stock is quickly dropping as the price of the stock drops. And, all of a sudden, he is on the phone to his broker, and his tone is completely different than the tone the day that he bought the stock. "Get me out now."

And so the tone of the American Evangelical changed. The tone of the American Evangelical in relationship to culture changed again after World War II, when American Evangelicals known as the neo-Evangelicals or the new Evangelicals attempted to re-enter culture and began to imitate culture, began to welcome aspects of culture into their lives. And the tone changed again. It was more civil, it was less desperate, but it was also more accommodating.

And so American Evangelicalism has gone from different ends of the spectrum: to a desperate tone, to sometimes a more civil, but in some cases, to an accommodating, less critical tone. And so tone is historically impacted and historically determined.

And so, yes, tone is extremely important. I might disagree with Darrell just a tiny bit here. I would see, actually, what's happening in Romans 1 as engagement, and I would see that sometimes the tone of engagement has to be different. I would also see the tone in Acts 17 as sensitive, as a desire to enter and to dialog, but also a tone, which in the end, ends up being absolutely absolutist, and which disregards the original intent of the idol maker.

The idol maker of the unknown god had just positioned this idol as one among many gods. Paul doesn't even allow for that interpretation. He immediately removes the identity of the unknown god from the pantheon and immediately declares, "This is the only God who exists, and he has a son, Jesus Christ, who was raised from the dead."
So I think Christian tone can have a variety of tones to it. It can be harsh; it can be loud; it can be soft; it can be gentle; it can be condemning on the basis of the divine revelation; it can be welcoming on the basis of the divine revelation. And so I think the trick is to call upon the Spirit of God about whom Jesus made the promise that at times of testing and at times of trial, he would teach them what to say.

I think there is a way in which we need to return to that Gospel promise that was given specifically to the disciples and ask that, in relationship to us, the Lord be merciful enough to return that to us, so that the Spirit would give us, as he gave the early disciples, the right tone at the right place. And I believe that tone can be diverse as we find the tone of Jesus, the tone of the prophets, the tone of the lawgivers, to change with different circumstances.

**Darrell Bock:** So the point that you're making, Jeff, just to underline because I think it's an important point, is in the midst of the process of engagement, your own tone, even though you're the same person in one sense, may shift. I agree with you about Acts 17. Acts 17 is an entirely – if I can say it – subversive speech. His goal is to take them where they are and, by the time you get to the end, bring them to a place where they certainly are not.

**Jeff Bingham:** Absolutely.

**Darrell Bock:** And in the midst of doing that, he does all kinds of things. He identifies with their cultural artifacts to start off with. But then he uses their own poets in the midst of making his point. But then he turns that in a direction, I think in a way to get them to think – at least the attempt is, I think – to get them to think about the way they have viewed certain things, in a completely fresh and new way that undercut the way they thought about it before. At least that's where he's trying to go. And so I think that's one style. It's the same person. Paul's the same person in Romans 1 that he is in Acts 17.

**Jeff Bingham:** Right.

**Darrell Bock:** And so I think that one of the difficulties that we have in talking about tone is we think, "Well, we should always be this." Well in fact, you don't see that in Scripture anywhere.

**Mark Bailey:** And you especially don't see it with Jesus.
Darrell Bock: Exactly right. You see him. He can be harsh; he can be sensitive. What's interesting about Jesus is sometimes he's harsh with the people you might not expect him to be harsh with at one level, and he's soft with the people who you might have expected him to be harsh with. So there's a little bit of that going on too. But it is the same person reacting in different ways. Because the issue, in one sense, isn't the tone, the issue is the goal of where you're trying to go. Engaging.

Jeff Bingham: Exactly.

Darrell Bock: And you're always trying to go in a direction that redirects people to reconnect with the Living God in a way that's faithful to what he desires is best for his creation and for him and for the people that he has created.

Jeff Bingham: But what we don't want to happen is, as American Evangelicals, to allow our history to determine our tone. We don't want our experience – we don't the wars of our fathers, of our American Evangelical fathers in the 19th century, to determine the volume or the tactics that we use in the 21st century. We have to be American Evangelicals in the 21st century that are looking to the Lord Jesus and to his prophets and apostles for our tone, not to the wars of our forefathers.

Mark Bailey: I think it's a great example – and Jenny, I'm going to come back to you. The Acts 17 is fascinating because you've got two groups of philosophers represented there. You've got the epicureans on the one side; you've got stoics on the other side. Both if those have mutually exclusive philosophies.

And I was thinking about that the other day. You have in the Life of Christ – welcome to the first century – you have the Herodians, who were pro-Herod – not just pro-Roman, but pro-Herod – and followers of a Roman-appointed ruler whose family history, especially whose father was a notorious megalomaniac and power monger; and you have Pharisees on the other end who are so pro-Israeli and pro-law. And those are mutually exclusive, but they become common bedfellows in contradicting Christ.

Paul rightly addresses both of the extremes in that message in Acts 17 and steers that message – as you said – from some common ground to some very uncommon ground, where he ends up – not only is there the goal that all men everywhere should repent, but he's fixed a day when he's going to appoint his Son as the judge to come and judge. There is salvation and judgment that are uncompromised realities that are on the table for option.
I think it's ironic in our own culture, in the U.S. and even beyond, that you have pluralism and you have very – I hate to use the word evangelical atheism – but very activist atheism. Those are mutually exclusive, but both are tolerated within our culture. Christianity, which, obviously, we believe has the answer, is not tolerated in our culture. So we're sitting here in between a vise grip that has some good New Testament teaching for us of how to articulate our faith in the midst of that.

Jenny, then we come back to you with that. What I think is part of our challenge in America that our foreign students help us understand, is that Christianity in many other countries has never been a majority view. It's never been a majority cultural expression. Even we would admit that true Christianity has probably never been our majority cultural expression either. But the perception is that we've been a, quote-unquote, "Christian country." They've come out of a minority situation. We're going into a more minority situation. Those students have a lot to share with us of how do you live the Christian faith in a contrary cultural environment.

*Jenny McGill:* And following up Dr. Bingham, it was excellent that he pointed us back to be led by Christ on how we should be engaging with our tone and in our words. So I would mention James here. I can only speak as an American, so I'm speaking to the Americans in the audience, that we'd better be very careful that before we're speaking, we have looked at ourselves and confessed in long, self-introspection with the community of faith around us, before we open our mouth.

And I think we might be led by Christ in that. So the burden I have for my American peers is sometimes we're not quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry. We're antagonistic without having asked Christ to give us the tone and words to speak that he would have us use. And that comes up, as you say, with students.

Some of the marginalization that Christians may experience in this country is not even our message as much as our delivery, our methodology, our tone. I don't mean that we can't use a harsh tone at times if it's appropriate. But I find that sometimes we may rush to speak without having done the due diligence that Dr. Bingham was mentioning.

So it strikes my students as strange, who are used to living in a minority atmosphere, to see Americans disgruntled that they don't have the cultural majority position any longer. I mean Christianity has always been a minority. Even Judaism has been a largely historical minority.
So part of what the challenge I think is for Americans, is to contemplate what it might be like if the culture changes – as it has and is and will – to how would I respond as a minority in this situation, not necessarily the majority power perceived culturally of us in the past.

So in relating tone to culture, and bringing in international perspectives, that confrontation isn't always verbal. And especially in Dallas or wherever we're living in the United States, different cultures are going to hear and respond to conflict differently, not just words, not just verbally. So we might think creatively if we have neighbors who are immigrants from a different country, how best would they respond and hear the truth of Christ that might not just be verbal.