Living the Christian Life as a Cultural Minority

Part 1 of 2: Generosity, Truth and Beauty in Spiritual Conversations with
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Darrell Bock

Well welcome and I want to thank you all for coming out on Monday night to hear a discussion about life as a Christian in the context of a cultural minority. We're going to do several things tonight. First off I'm going introduce John a little bit in terms of his background and let him set the context in Australia. I'm going to let him talk about his ministry at the Centre for Public Christianity. That is spelled C-E-N-T-R-E. I have no idea why we do that. Why do we reverse the letters in the alphabet? I have no idea. Maybe it just takes it than long to make it around the earth. So and he's going to share some stuff, we're going to share some stuff that the Centre is producing, you can get a feel for that, introduce you to their website. And then we're going to talk a little bit about sharing the Gospel in the context of being a cultural minority and then after that there will be some time for question and answers from the floor and then if you aren't exhausted by then we're going to move from table to table.

So this is going to have the same format as we had when Ed Stetzer was here in November. And I'm pleased to announce to you that our plan is to do one of these dinners every semester. So you all have shown that there is an interest and so you didn't know that there was a test of the emergency broadcast system tonight and you all passed. So you can pat yourselves on the back when the next one comes and be sure and attend then as well. So John let's dive in. John is my host, when I got to Australia I usually do some taping and various gigs with him when I'm up there. I never know what they're going to ask me until I get there but the exciting thing is that he takes me out for a cultural jaunts. We've done Aussie Rules football together, gone to see the Sydney Swans, which is my team of choice in Australia. No one knows what that means right? So anyway but you didn't know who the Green Bay Packers were right?

John Dickson

Not until 2012.

Darrell Bock

Not 2012. I'll let you tell that story. Tell the story about how you discovered who the Green Bay Packers were.

John Dickson

I get an email one day and it has a signature down at the bottom, Green Bay Packers, and it was an invitation to go and speak to this football team.
Yeah. But the thing is I honestly had no idea. I had never heard that name and I really didn't know if they were an amateur team and this was like a nice sweet invitation to come and speak to a local football club. Seriously. So I text my son who knows all things sporting and I said, "I've just been invited to speak to this Green Bay Packers team are they any good?"

And I still have the text. Within about three seconds he replies, "What. No. No. They just won the Super Bowl last year. Can I come?" So he came. He came with me but when I went to the Packers and I spoke to them on a Saturday evening before the Sunday game, I'm in a room with them and they just looked like fit, young boys to me.

Darrell Bock: Very fit and very big.

John Dickson: Big. Before they all came in, the seats for them were really wide apart and it just looked weird but when they came in it looked appropriate.

Darrell Bock: Normal.

John Dickson: But the thing is I had no idea who any of them were. I kept on calling Aaron Rodgers Andrew but of course Josh, he knew all the names but - how did we get there?

Darrell Bock: Because we were trying to demonstrate just how committed you are to scholarship.

John Dickson: Now I have become a Green Bay Packers fan because the next day I'm at Lambo field and each time I come to the US now I go to the Packers.

Darrell Bock: Makes pilgrimage. So he's almost American. Well let's talk about what you do. You grew up as an academic studying classics at Macquarie University but then you ended up in this Centre for Public Christianity. Explain what that is.
It's a group of scholars who are passionate about communication with a world that doesn't believe and thinks there are reasons not to. So we got together about eight years ago, although our vision was many years ago, we always wanted to do something like this but the funding opportunity came eight years ago. And so we just immediately started, a group of scholar communicators and thought we wanted to produce a website that answers people's questions. We want to produce books and DVD's and so on. And we want to engage the public media, the mainstream media and we really didn't know whether this would work as an idea because there hadn't been many Christian attempts to engage the media as in write full articles and submit them to the newspapers and it worked it a treat. We were amazed. Our mainstream media is quite left leaning. Our mainstream media is very much like CNN. We don't have a Fox in -

There's no Fox in Australia.

There's no Fox in Australia, in terms of like - am I in trouble now?

I'm just watching you go so just go for it. [Laughs]

My observation is that Fox is conservative and reasonably positive towards Christian things and CNN isn't. Am I right?

It's close enough.

And most of our media is more like CNN and maybe even more left with some of them. Anyway we thought, "Oh no maybe this isn't going to work." But it has worked so well. We are published regularly, we are invited onto radio and TV, reasonably, regularly, it seems to us that the media is mainly ignorant, not out to get Christians.

I mean they do so well that when I came to Australia the last time I did a gig for them on Australia broadcasting company with Australian broadcasting company and the topic was Hell so it was a great topic.

We deliberately gave it to Darrell.
That's exactly right. Let's let the burning American take care of that one. Anyway.

Didn't we also give you a radio gig at like 4:00 in the morning our time.

Yeah. That was for Christmas, "Yeah we're going to be up opening presents but you can do it at 4:00 in the morning from Dallas." So it's been fun. Let's talk a little bit about the situation in Australia. Where does Christianity reside culturally in terms of demographics in Australia?

Well more than have the country ticks Christian on their census box. So there's a real cultural memory that Christianity is the religion Australia has got most association with but the church attendance is 15 percent in the regular category. And regular category is once a month.

And that's everybody.

That includes Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Liberal Anglicans and so on. So 15 percent once a month, it's pretty low. The Evangelicals would be a very small portion of that.

So you definitely are function as a cultural minority in Australia.

Yeah.

And the tone of what you do, let's talk about, you used the word - we just did a podcast - you used the word "generous," which isn't a normal word we would associate with apologetics and engagement, not necessarily all the time. So what do you mean by generous engagement?
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**John Dickson**  I guess it means firstly just listening. It's an act of generosity to listen to what someone's complaint is before you answer it. It's a generous thing to do and feel the problem. Nearly always in what CPX does whether in the media or the stuff on our own website, you'll hear us conceding the problem before we try and offer any contribution. And that's not a strategy, we don't see that as a kind of trick, it wouldn't be cool if we concede and then get them with the right hook. We sympathize with skeptical people. So I think out of that sympathy, which is a kind of generosity, we really do feel when people put the questions to us.

So we do want to acknowledge always that most people aren't idiots. Most people who aren't Christians, they're not idiots. So they've got complaints or bad experiences so you've got to engage with that but the other part of generous is when you give your perspective it's from a non-defensive posture and doesn't speak with any error of entitlement as in, "This is a Christian country and you better listen to me because I'm the church after all." Which really puts peoples backs up in Australia. I mean maybe it goes down a treat here with the non-Christian world but not in Australia. So that error of entitlement we try and shoot all the time. So all of that means generous, is what I mean by generous.

**Darrell Bock**  Okay. Now what we're going to do is I want to show two clips. I'm going to go ahead and show them back-to-back. The first is going to tell you a little bit about the Centre for Public Christianity. You can get a feel for what they do. It's an encouragement to you to go to PublicChristianity.org, which is the website in which there are ton of resources that are available and then I'm going to give you a sample of one of those resources that deals with a particular piece that went viral on the net called Zeitgeist, many of you may be familiar with that. It's an assessment of the Zeitgeist video. That's going to Chris Forbes who also teaches at Macquarie and teaches classics at Macquarie. And we're going to do those back to back. So if the video team will gear up with video, we’ll do the

**Darrell Bock**  That's how you kill Zeitgeist in about seven minutes. There's no geist in that zeit. So that's a sample of the type of thing that you all do at CP - do you call it CPX as an abbreviation?

**John Dickson**  Yeah so X is the Greek Chi for Christianity.
And that's a sample of what we're talking about. The site is literally loaded with resources like that covering all kinds of topics. There very much is a mirroring of what John is doing in Australia with what we are trying to do here in terms of the production of resources. The one difference is they do a lot of what we call short form in media. Very short, crisp, five, seven, ten minutes types of things. They do some documentaries as well. We've opted for a longer forum in our podcast that we split up but the basic approach is very, very similar as is the tone. And that's what I want to spend the rest of our time talking about it talking about the tone of engagement. And wrestling through that.

Let's talk a little bit about terminology. And now we spent a lot of time on the podcast going through several examples. For you all tonight I just want to talk about one. And that is talking about truth and beauty. And one of the things that we have talked about amongst ourselves and that we're trying to do is thinking about how do you translate, terms particularly problematic terms or difficult terms into discourse that you have someone who is a doubter or a believer on not a believer, or asking questions, a skeptic that kind of thing. How do you translate theology into the language that a person might be able to hear and one of the interesting terms I think that CPX has played with is the term "beauty." And in particular thinking about beauty in relationship to the concept of truth. Truth as you all know living in the shifting times that we're in and particularly in association with post-modernism is coming up for a hard time. So the idea of a truth from above or a comprehensive truth struggles to gain merit. Well one of the ways that CPX has tried to get at truth without dropping the idea of conviction and that there are things that the bible says is to talk about the concept of beauty. And John why don't you elaborate on how that works.
John Dickson

For us beauty if very broad concept we don't just mean pretty. We mean the goodness, the attractiveness, the wholeness of an idea. And of course it's the bible's first theme really once you get past that there's a God. That sevenfold repetition after every creative act it was good, it was good, it was good and down it goes seven times and the seventh time it was very good. And this seems to be well of course it's deliberate. And it's deliberately saying that this creation has come from an orderly mind. It is good. You could have had the word beautiful in the sense that we mean it. That the order and the purposefulness that one observes or intuits about the universe is real, says Genesis 1. Now the interesting thing is the new atheist have very recently spotted that they have a beauty problem. I don't mean that Richard Dawkins isn't a very pleasant looking gentlemen, it really has dawned on them that the rational, the sort of perceived cold rational approach that they're famous for isn't cutting it with people and that they've given the impression that science and rationalism kills the aesthetic of life, kills the goodness that we intuit, the beauty that we intuit.

And so you have seen just in the very last few years, Dawkins, Sam Harris, Lawrence Crouse who I was on TV with here talk about the wonder and beauty that science gives you. I think it's a bit of a sham because they've got to the point where they're basically saying that the sum total of beauty, the sum total of the experience of wonder that you have from science is a mammalian chemical instinct responding to external stimuli. So they want to say you can look at a sunset and understand a sunset and that's wonder. No. That is no different in status from the chemical reaction that occurs when a rock drops on my toe. There is no way of distinguishing them. They're both mammalian chemical reactions to extremal stimuli.

Where I’m going with this is that only a world view like the Judea Christian world view can ground beauty, the intuitions we have for the orderliness and purposefulness of existence in reality, the reality that all of this stuff is intended so that instinct you have for the good and the beautiful is not just an instinct it is actually grounded in the fact that this universe reflects the divine mind and so I think Christianity is at a serious advantage in describing for people how goodness and beauty are there and they're intended to be there and they're grounded in ultimate reality. This is something of course C.S. Lewis and before him G.K. Chesterton, were all about. They wanted to convince you that Christianity was not only logos true, but that it was also pathos and ethos. That is was also attractive and good.
So this is a way in to having a conversation to get people to think about truth but to do it through a different kind of lens that gives them pause and where there's instinctive reaction when you see a beautiful sunset or you go to the beautiful landscapes really mark out both of our countries and you stare and you go, "That's amazing." That there's something about it that's there.

Yeah because if you're really a consistent Richard Dawkins, you've got to look at the sunset, feel the feeling and then remind yourself that really it's just a mammalian chemical reaction to an external stimuli. It kind of takes something out of it. Whereas someone with a personal theistic worldview goes, "That's intended. And these instincts have come from the hand of an artist." We were talking earlier today about the famous atheist, a British intellectual, A. N. Wilson, who wrote scathing things about C.S. Lewis and Jesus, very, very much in the center of the intelligence here in Britain, has recently become a Christian, well an Anglican.

Don't go there.

I am an Anglican. And when he wrote his story of conversion, he describes, it's really interesting actually because he describes how difficult it was for him to give up his status in that intelligence set by becoming a weird God believer and more than that a Jesus God believer who attended church but he says in this New Statesmen article where he describes his conversion, that it was music that in the end convinced him he had a problem because he says, "It's analogy to the moral argument." He wanted to believe that his humanitarian instincts were grounded but he couldn't think of any way to ground them as an atheist and then he was listening to some Mozart I think it was one day, and he thought, "My goodness not only can I not ground my moral instincts, I can't ground my instinct for beauty either." And he thought that that's impossible, "I have to believe that this musical experience is grounded in a reality that it is intended, that my experience of this music cannot just be a mammalian stimuli. And so that lead him to theism and then to Jesus.