

TRULY CHRISTIAN POLEMICS

In a time of controversy, the church of Jesus Christ often becomes immersed in something we call polemics. This might be a new word for some readers, so it's worth defining and explaining in some detail before we discuss how it fits into the Christian life. A polemic is a strong verbal or written attack on the position taken by another person. Like many of our English words, this one comes from the Greek language as a derivative of *polemikos*, which means "warlike" or "hostile." Polemics, therefore, are fighting words.

The work of polemical writing is a difficult thing for anyone to do well. As a kind of persuasive writing, polemics have the purpose of convincing others that they are wrong by exposing their error. Convincing someone else that they are wrong is always hard, but especially so when the method that one must use is essentially negative. No one likes to be contradicted when it comes to matters of doctrine or the Christian life. Fighting words about the Christian faith are hard words to bring and even harder to hear.

Nonetheless, polemical writing is a necessary tool for the church to combat error both inside and outside its walls. Anyone who doubts this is directed to an excellent series of articles by Prof. Gritters in volume 88 of the *Standard Bearer*, which lays out the necessity and challenge of polemics in significant detail. Here we will be brief, focusing simply on the principles that ought to direct the way in which polemical writing is conducted.

Anyone who engages in the use of polemical writing as a tool for exposing and condemning error within the church of Jesus Christ ought to be concerned about how to use it as effectively as possible for the good of those who are in error. The temptation is to use polemical writing as a club to beat others into submission. This is unbiblical and

usually leads to greater division rather than persuasion of a brother or sister in Christ. For a polemic of any sort to be an effective tool for exposing and condemning error in the church, it must meet all the necessary criteria outlined by the word of God in 2 Timothy 2:22–26.

Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart. But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes. And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.

Verses 25 and 26 of this chapter demonstrate that this passage is referring to polemics. The stated goal is for God to give repentance to "those that oppose themselves" to the truth, that they may be recovered "out of the snare of the devil." This is serious business. It is a matter of salvation, not simply a matter of "foolish and unlearned questions" (v. 23) that so often find their way into the body of Christ.

At the same time, the passage also makes clear that this exhortation is aimed at controversy *within* the church and not society in general. Verse 22 indicates that the subjects of its admonition are those "that call on the Lord out of a pure heart." This passage is not about polemics against unbelieving persons and practices in the world. These are brothers and sisters in the church, and thus, the *manner* in which a writer composes his polemic matters enormously! From this passage we can extract four key criteria for effective polemical speaking or writing against

erroneous doctrine or practices in the church.

First, polemical writing must be *truthful*. This means that the polemic must have an objective standard against which it can be compared, which can only be the word of God. In the opening verses of this chapter, Paul exhorts Timothy to “be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus...and the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses” (vv. 1–2). As an inspired apostle, Paul gave to Timothy the word of God concerning sound doctrine and Christian practice. The standard of Scripture is also implied by the exhortation to follow *faith* (v. 22), which includes both the certain knowledge and assured confidence of what God has revealed in his word (Lord’s Day 7). Scripture is the standard against which a polemic and its target must be judged as correct.

Being truthful, however, means more than simply that the position being defended is formally correct. It also requires that the verbal methods and arguments being used are *righteous* (v. 22). A righteous argument is one that is honest, transparent, and consistent. It does not misrepresent or overstate the error it seeks to combat, nor does it attack the person who holds to this error. This bar is higher for polemical writing than any other sort of persuasive writing because polemics, by nature, assume the moral high ground. To seek good ends by dirty means will upset the effectiveness and purpose of polemics.

Second, polemical writing must be *irenic*—that is, aimed at *peace* (v. 22). The word *irenic* is another one that might not be in our everyday vocabulary, but it has a long and noble history in the church of Jesus Christ as a description of those who seek peace and reconciliation between believers who are at odds with one another. That one who is writing “warlike” words (polemics) could be seeking peace seems at first to be contradictory. But polemics and peace are not opposite ideas because peace functions as a goal while polemics are a methodology.¹ It is therefore entirely possible to be seeking unity and peace while engaging in polemics—providing, of course, that the attitude and manner of a polemic are upright. In the context of the church, any polemic aimed at a target

within its midst *must* seek to be irenic. A purpose other than unity and peace inherently tends toward schism, which is sin.

Third, polemical writing must be *pastoral*. By this we mean that it ought to work by means of gentle and patient instruction rather than by contentious striving (v. 24). This is necessary because polemics serve as a correction to erroneous thinking or practice in the minds and hearts of living, breathing people. Assuming that the goal is to mediate peace and unity among people who hold opposite positions, this is best accomplished in a posture of *humility* and *meekness* (v. 25). Very few people will be persuaded by one who comes in arrogance and accusation or in a contentious spirit of strife. But one who teaches gently, showing what is wrong and demonstrating what is right according to God’s word, is more likely to be heard. Proper correction may still hurt, but any pain administered ought to be at the hand of God and not from the violent words or attitude of any man.

Fourth, polemical writing must be *loving*. We end with this criterion because charity is the chief characteristic that ought to flavor every written or verbal exchange among those “that call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (v. 22). It is also fitting here to remember that love may not be disconnected from truth at any point or used to overrule one who seeks to speak the truth of God’s word in correction to the church or its members. It is not loving to ignore fellow believers’ opposition to the truth of Scripture, or to allow them to flounder in the “snare of the devil” (v. 26). The call to charity, however, is the reminder to seek a fellow saint’s extraction from the snare by gently exposing and disassembling its mechanism—not ripping it free by brute force. The end might be the same, but at what cost to the body of Christ?

What true love looks like in the context of polemical discourse is beautifully illustrated by the following paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 13:4–7 with which we will end.

We could camp out here at length, using the criteria of love to illuminate what faithful Christian irenics, including polemical irenics, should look like. Loving critique takes time to understand its opponent, and has regard for his feelings; it is not motivated by a desire for one-ups-manship, to prove that one is just as smart as the opponent; it does not proceed from a conviction of one’s personal superiority,

1 Brad Littlejohn, “Speaking the Truth in Love: Rules of Engagement for the Polemically-Inclined,” *Mere Orthodoxy*, December 20, 2012, <https://mereorthodoxy.com/speaking-the-truth-in-love-rules-of-engagement-for-the-polemically-inclined/>.

or offend for the mere sake of being offensive. It does not insist that “it’s my way or the highway,” that everyone has to think exactly like oneself; it does not proceed from rankled personal feelings, a desire to get revenge for bruised pride; it does not take pleasure in discovering an error, so that one can look smart in comparison to the opponent’s folly, or have fun debunking it, but looks for truth wherever it is found, and is excited to reach agreement in the truth. It bears every insult, it takes the opponent at his word, it puts the best possible

construction on his intentions and holds out hope in the possibility of persuading him, it is willing to sacrifice time, credibility, perhaps even friendships in the task of winning the opponent over from error to truth. All of these characteristics of love could warrant close attention—for how often even the most conscientious of us fails to conform our discourse to this standard.²

2 Littlejohn, “Speaking the Truth in Love.”