

Humility and Civility in Apologetics

Today, a lack of civility and humility often characterizes public discourse due to a functionalistic view of humanity and an epistemological arrogance. Unfortunately, at times this is true even among those doing apologetics and especially so when it comes to the science-theology debate. Many in both disciplines think that they have absolute certainty concerning their knowledge claims. Often this involves confusion between confidence and arrogance leading to uncivilized discourse. Unfortunately, this regularly leads to fractured relationships among those holding different views and/or the absence of civility in discourse. This is especially regrettable where truth is on the line. Francis Schaeffer and C. S. Lewis are models of doing apologetics with confidence, but with humility; with conviction, but with civility. The goal of this talk is to underscore the importance of civility and explain critical realism as a way to avoid epistemological arrogance. In a word, it is to promote both personal humility and public civility in the defense and presentation of truth – virtue apologetics.

“Since we nowadays think that all a man needs for acquisition of truth is to exert his brain more or less vigorously, and since we consider an ascetic approach to knowledge hardly sensible, we have lost the awareness of the close bond that links the knowing of truth to the condition of purity. Thomas says that unchastity’s first-born daughter is blindness of the spirit.” (Joseph Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas* (19-20))

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I. Two concerns facing apologetics

A. One of *image*, not *identity*

1. Absence of attitudinal civility
 - a. How one treats the other – the *humanness* of the other
2. Absence of epistemological humanity
 - a. How one views his own *humanness*

B. Commitment to a virtue apologetic

1. Civility and humility

II. Civility

A. Civility: courteousness, politeness, good manners, considerate, and respectful

1. Contributes to or supports social order

B. General lack of civility in western societies

1. The outworking of the Big Me (David Brooks)
 - a. No appeal to the past to understand the present – the past and the present come into conflict
2. The loss of the universal – the loss of the grand narrative
 - a. Relativism rules – function determines worth, significance
 - i. Conflict over values
 - b. The loss of the general welfare or common good
 - i. Clashes arise between my good and the good of the community
3. Rights replace responsibility
 - a. Everybody has a right to happiness as defined as having an equal share of this world's goods
 - b. The fight is over what I am due
4. Social media is a ready vehicle used to corrupt social manners
 - a. Anonymity leads to a lack of restraint

C. The Bible requires civility

1. Respect the unbeliever – 1 Peter 3:15
2. No quarrelsome, but gentle – Titus 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:24
3. Embarrassing the opponent is wrong

D. The Christian is a medium for the message – combativeness is inconsistent with the Gospel

1. The medium influences how the message is received
2. Christian humanness must be evident in the communication of the Gospel

III. Humility

A. Definition

1. Humility: “humility is having an accurate assessment of your own nature and your own place in the cosmos. Humility reminds you that you are an underdog in the struggle against your own weakness...Humility reminds you that you are not the center of the universe, but you serve a larger order.”¹
2. Social media feeds the narcissism in all of us

¹ David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, 263.

B. The Bible requires humility

1. God opposes the proud – James 4:6
2. We are not to boast of what we have – 1 Cor. 4:7
3. Christ is our example – Phil. 2:5-8
4. Put on humility – Col. 3:12
5. Pride is a sign of error – 2 Tim. 3:1-5

C. Humility puts life in proper order by:

1. Recognizing the complexity of life and our limitations

D. Epistemological Humility

1. Attitudinal dogmatism and epistemological overreach betrays our finiteness
 - a. We are fallen and finite
2. We see dimly through the glass – 1 Cor. 13:12a
 - a. We speak with humility, but with confidence that the claim is true
 - b. This requires we are virtuous in our search for Truth

IV. Virtue apologetics in summary

- A. “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” (Col. 4:5-6 ESV)
 1. We speak to individuals as individuals – what we have in common
 - a. We are of one blood (Acts 17:26-27)
- B. Our tone and language must match our message
- C. Our message is about the truth of things and this includes humanity
- D. Civil in tone for the sake of humanity
 1. Speak with respect, not argumentativeness
- E. Humble in claim for the sake of Truth
 1. Speak with confidence, not arrogance

Suggested Readings: