

Defending Christian Truth and Ethics in the Public Square

How can we develop and present Christian truth in a secular and pluralistic public square in a way which is both faithful and consistent with orthodox biblical theology and at the same time relevant and persuasive? The talk will develop and illustrate, three main lines of arguments which can be employed in the public square: a) because it's true - Christian truth-claims match with reality, b) because it works - there is empirical evidence that Christian practice leads to positive social and health outcomes, c) because it feels right - Christian truth and practice match with the deepest intuitions of the human heart.

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1. Understanding the nature of secularism and the public/private distinction

A. It's helpful to distinguish between "procedural secularism" which ensures that no faith position has a privileged status within the public square, and "programmatic secularism" which attempts to banish all religious voices from the public square, arguing that religion is for the private arena only.

2. Finding appropriate language for the public square

A. We need to find language which is accessible and comprehensible to modern secular people whilst being consistent with fundamental Christian theology. It's helpful to look at the example of Christ who frequently posed questions to those he met rather than present immediate truth claims.

a) Give some examples of language used by Christians in the public square which is either unhelpful or helpful. What principles should be used in deciding what language to use?

3. The role of paradox in presenting Christian truth

A. The biblical understanding of humanity is essentially paradoxical. We are both the most glorious, noble and wonderful beings on the planet and at the same time the most evil, twisted and depraved. “The glory and the shame of the universe” – Pascal. This fundamental reality is mysterious and incomprehensible to secular materialists. It is only comprehensible within a biblical framework of creation and fall. The paradox of the human condition is a “way in” into the secular mind.

4. Presenting arguments

A. Truth claims – “Because it’s true” – Christian truth claims match with reality

B. Empirical evidence – “Because it works” – Christian practice leads to positive outcomes

C. Human intuitions – “Because it feels right” – Christian thinking matches with the deepest intuitions of the human heart

5. Giving positive and practical alternatives

A. Whenever we say that something is wrong we must immediately say, “... and here is a better way..”

6. The manner in which we engage – gentleness and respect

A. “In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with *gentleness and respect*”

Discussion questions

- A) Give an example where Christians have made an effective intervention in the public square in your country. What principles can be learnt from this example? How might Christian influence in this area be enhanced in future?
- B) What arguments can be used to defend the right of Christian people to engage in evangelism in a religiously pluralistic society?
- C) How can we develop empirical evidence to support public policy based on Christian truth and practice? What kind of evidence is most persuasive in the public square?

D) Why is the use of paradox a helpful approach in the public square? Give examples of how Jesus used paradox in his conversation. Give examples of contemporary uses of paradox in Christian engagement.

E) What are the advantages and disadvantages of the three types of argument – truth claims, empirical evidence, human intuitions

Further reading

Matters of Life and Death – John Wyatt, IVP

Talking God – Jonathan Chaplin, Theos

Theos website - www.theosthinktank.co.uk