Antithesis and Culture Wars: A Response to Chris Oldfield

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My Twitter-friend Chris Oldfield wrote an interesting blog piece called "Apologetics and Authorities 2: Presenting the Gospel." You can find it here: [1] He asked me to respond. I was toying with just writing an uber-long comment on his blog, but since I'm such a horrible blog-lord and so rarely update content, I thought I'd respond here. Besides, who reads uber-long comments (tl;dr)?

First, let me say that there's much I agree with in Chris' position. But I do differ at certain points as well.

The structure of the piece seems to follow the formula Christian epistemology x leads to political stance y. Presuppositional/Kuyperian apologetics, which insists on tracing all human thought back to its ultimate authorities leads to a triumphalist, activist, "culture-war" mentality. That is, if dwell too much on ultimate authority, we end up as cultural vigilantes without love.

On the other hand, emergent-type folks, who are all about embracing diversity (and therefore are allergic to ultimate authority), tend to embrace an "exilic" stance, which leads to political quietism. Dwell too little on the Kingdom of God, and you end up directionless, without a mission.

In typical dialectical fashion, Chris presents a third way: We Christians ought to eschew both extremes and see ourselves as caught in the tension between the already/not-yet between this age and the age to come, and be committed to the saeculum. Settle down, work together, and wait for God to bring the promised fulfillment.

I differ with Chris on a few points of diagnosis. First, a lot of folks who self-identify as "emergent," though they *are* allergic to authority (seeing the Bible as a resource to draw upon rather than an inerrant, normative rule for faith and practice), are definitely *not* quietist in their politics. Emergent guru Brian McLaren characterizes the "conversation" (remember: it's not a movement) as "post-liberal." Nonsense. The emergent folks I've run across tend to be cast very much in the Sojourner mold. They tilt towards the political left, and are proud of it. So I think Chris' formula needs adjustment at that point.

Now, regarding the position that is nearer and dearer to my heart: presuppositional apologetics and the Kuyperian tradition. I also think that Chris' diagnosis is skewed. I believe thinking in terms of ultimate authorities is biblically unavoidable, but does not necessarily lead to a "culture-war" stance. He quotes John 5:31 to show that "the gospel of triune love ‘breaks the circle’ of ultimate authorities – Jesus says “if I testify to myself my testimony is not valid.” But surely this overlooks the fact that Jesus is not denying an ultimate authority, namely, God his Father. And in the light of *that* authority, his words are absolutely valid and binding:

John 5:23-24, the Father entrusts all judgment to the Son "that all may honor the Son just as they

honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

Combine that passage with other gems such as Col. 1:16-17 and Heb. 1:3, and you can see where Kuyper gets his "There is not one square inch of creation over which Jesus Christ who is Lord of all does not say, This is mine." Chris recognizes this is true, but doesn't like the epistemological consequences that presuppositionalists draw: that there is absolute antithesis that runs through ALL human knowledge between those who recognize and are consistent with the creational lordship of Christ, and those who do not recognize it. Doesn't this belief in antithesis lead to an aggressive and defensive stance vis-a-vis unbelieving culture? That is what I perceive to be Chris' objection to dwelling too much upon the ultimate authority of Christ. It ranges too wide (applying to anything from "epistemology to meteorology"), and leaves a chasm too deep for love to bridge.

Here's why I think Chris (and others - I've heard this objection to antithesis before) are wrong, and why antithesis need not lead to a "culture-wars" mentality:

1) Common grace. One of the oft' overlooked aspects of presuppositional apologetics is its insistence on common grace. God, in his outrageous generosity even to those who will never come to love and serve him, has given a whole panoply of gifts. Some theologians center this on the "distorted but not erased image of God in man." Others see it as a parallel endowment with the natural gifts of God to humans, like sun, rain and crops (see Matt. 5:43-48 and Acts 14:17, though the "fills your hearts with joy" seems to point beyond simply natural gifts to cultural gifts as well). But however you come to it, the idea remains: God has endowed the unregenerate with a whole host of blessings that are revealed in human culture as beauty, truth, goodness, a hunger for justice and the flourishing of all humanity, etc.

How does that fit with antithesis, and how does that help us avoid a bitter, unloving "culture-wars" mentality? It is incumbent upon Christians to recognize God's gifts to unbelievers and to celebrate them. This means that there are many times when we can celebrate common cause with them (after all, we want justice and beauty and goodness to happen on earth as well). But this does NOT eradicate the absolute nature of the antithesis. In fact, apologetically, it is common grace that is our starting point, our point of contact, with the non-believer. You can embrace certain aspects of the non-Christian's perspective because they are "borrowed capital." These "shards of grace" that exist within the non-Christian's belief system find no natural home there, given their anti-Christian presuppositions. The job of the apologist is to gently, persuasively lead them through the implications of their own God-denying presuppositions to show them that they also undermine these gracious gifts from God. These shards of grace fit only within the Christian worldview they've been broken off from.

That means that I can celebrate and enjoy non-Christian science and art as gifts of God, and I can appreciate the creative souls who allow me to enjoy these gifts. But I know that these gifts exist in tension with the ultimate beliefs of these non-Christians. But I need not launch a culture war against them. Rather, I want to connect with them in our common humanity, engage them in conversation, and reflect God's love to them.

2) **The antithesis runs through every human heart.** That's what Dutch Neo-Calvinist

philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd said. And I have yet to hear a Reformed apologist disagree. A useful compliment to the understanding that non-Christian hearts house truth, beauty and goodness, is the understanding that Christian hearts house deception, ugliness and evil. Therefore, I must be hesitant in launching cultural crusades, for I do not want to allow my own pride to betray Christian love. I need accountability. I need humility. But I cannot simply refuse to act either, because God has called me into the world to spread his healing into the hearts and social structures that surround me. In this area, I find Glenn Tinder's "hesitant radicalism" (from "Can We Be Good Without God") and Andy Crouch's posture of cultural servants, where we are looking for ways to serve those around us, open to what God is doing in culture, but wary of unintended cultural consequences (from his book "Culture Making").

3) **The content of the authority to which we appeal.** Finally, presuppositional apologists do not make a bare appeal to authority. Rather, they appeal (or *should* appeal) to an authority that is distinctively cross-shaped, one that embraces brokenness and the darkness within rebellious human hearts. We never for a second forget that Jesus reigns and demands absolute allegiance, but we remain mindful of the manner and goal towards which Jesus exercised his authority. Whenever Jesus was confronted by someone who wanted Jesus to bow to their authority, to jump through their hoops to provide some authentication of his messianic role, Jesus absolutely cut them off (Mark 8:11-13). Whenever Jesus is confronted with brokenness that seeks his help, he never seeks to embrace it, be it leprous or full of doubt (Mark 1:40-45, 9:14-32). He embraces authority, but brooks no challenges to his authority. Why? Is he being unloving? No - it is because Jesus knows that only by submitting to his authority that life and healing can be found. In the same way, Christian apologists need to make Christ's authority clear, but in a way that also makes clear that here, and only here, can true healing be found.

OK, I've rambled enough, and I have to get back to work. But I hope that this is enough to show that authority, antithesis, and being lovers of those who are different than us (and indeed oppose us), that these concepts are both biblical and must go hand-in-hand.

Peace,

Ted

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