

CONFRONTATIONAL APOLOGETICS

You will catch more bees with honey than with vinegar

Many Christians give that advice. They mean that aggressive defences of the faith can be counter-productive. But they seem to forget that if they can be that it does not mean that they have to be ineffective. And they are often more confrontational than they would like to admit.

Jesus himself was confrontational.

In John 2 Jesus overturned the moneychangers tables and savagely reprimanded the Temple workers.

He told the Pharisees that they were religious fakes to their faces and ranted against them in Matthew 23.

It is said that Jesus did not tell us to act like that. It is said that in Matthew 11:29 he ordered us to be gentle and lowly in heart like he was.

But he said he was gentle and lowly in heart. But according to other parts of the gospels he was not gentle. Perhaps he was only saying that he was generally gentle but not when severity was called for. That is the correct understanding. Matthew 11:29 then does not prove Jesus said we must be always gentle because he set himself up as a model and he was not always gentle. It proves the opposite. And we must remember too where Jesus told the Jewish leaders off for breaking God's law that he who curses father and mother must be put to death.

Christians say Jesus was God and God is entitled to judge and condemn but not us so we cannot copy Jesus. But this overlooks the fact that if Jesus is fully man then he took on the same obligations as we took. Hebrews says he was ordinary in all things but sin. Paul said Jesus emptied himself which Christians take to mean that though he was God he was not taking any advantage to himself by being God. He was man.

Are there any examples from the New Testament which throw light on confrontational apologetics?

Peter confronted Ananias and Sapphira about their lies in Acts 5. He told them they would be carried out dead. Some say that he did not say that he wished they would die but that he was only telling them they would. They say their death was a result of their sin and not down to Peter. But this is hypocrisy. Not all liars die like that and as soon as they are caught out. And Peter can be read as wanting them dead. There is no warrant in the text for thinking different. Peter both confronted them and wished them dead.

Paul used confrontational language about the circumcising heretics in Galatians 5. Christians say that the letter was not for the heretics so he was not pummelling them. But it was a public letter not a private one! Of course, the letter was not written specifically for the heretics but that does not matter. A public letter is for Christians and heretics alike.

How does that fit Paul's famous saying, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor. 13:1-3). The New Testament is clear that angry opposition to false teaching and false teachers is tough love. Paul is not endorsing merely nice love.

The argument that 1 Peter 3:15-16 forbids always confrontation but urges polite and gentle defence of the faith is flawed. The believers had no choice but to be nice for the letter makes it clear they were in danger of being persecuted savagely and killed for their faith. They had to be nice in the hope of impressing their persecutors.

We conclude that Christians must claim the right to berate heretics and tell them off.