

Commentary: Engaging critics with redemptive truth

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Republication of this Daily Article by Jim Denison concludes the publication agreement between Denison Forum and the Baptist Standard.

What ship is longer than the Eiffel Tower's height and, when loaded, weighs more than 22 Eiffel Towers?

A week ago, most of us would have had no idea. Today, you likely know the answer: the [Ever Given](#), the massive vessel that ran aground in the Suez Canal Mar. 23.

In the days since, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, more than 360 vessels [waited](#) to pass through the canal. Since 13 percent of all maritime trade and 10 percent of seaborne oil shipments transit through the canal, this has been a [global problem](#). On Mar. 29, salvage teams finally were able to [free](#) and refloat the megaship, allowing traffic to resume.

As they worked over the last week, if you had been standing on the banks of the canal, you probably would have felt impotent in your own strength to solve such a massive problem.

That's the way many of us feel about the culture we are called to engage with the gospel today. For example, the rapper Lil Nas X has been making [headlines](#) with his Satan-themed sneakers. Christian cakemaker Jack Phillips is back in court, this time [facing](#) a lawsuit from a transgender lawyer who requested a gender-transition cake.

An article in the *Wall Street Journal* [reports](#) religious groups and figures

have been silenced by tech companies at the rate of about one a week. The writer states: "It seems likely that religious groups and individuals will face mounting threats from tech companies. Their views on marriage, sexuality, life and other moral issues are unpopular among the Silicon Valley set."

However, he concludes: "Religious groups should refuse to silence themselves, change their views, or otherwise back down. Censorship is a symptom of a national collapse in civic culture. Curing the deeper disease will take all the courage and conviction we can muster."

Where do we find such "courage and conviction"?

'When they heard it, they marveled'

Today is Tuesday of Holy Week. On this day, Jesus faced his critics in a daylong series of debates (cf. Matthew 21-23). Perhaps their most famous exchange came when his opponents asked our Lord, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" (Matthew 22:17). This was a hot cultural button in the day.

The taxes to which they referred were the poll-tax or "census" tax paid by all males over age 14 and all females over age 12. It was paid directly to the Roman emperor. And it required the use of a coin despised by the Jewish people.

This was the "denarius," a silver coin minted by the emperor himself. It was the only Roman coin that claimed divine status for the Caesar. One side pictured the head of Emperor Tiberius with the Latin inscription, "Tiberius Caesar son of the divine Augustus." The other side pictured Pax, the Roman goddess of peace, with the Latin inscription "high priest."

This coin was idolatrous in the extreme. The tax it paid led to a Jewish revolt in A.D. 6 that established the Zealot movement. This movement

eventually resulted in the destruction of the temple and the Jewish nation in A.D. 70. In Jesus' day, the Zealots were growing in power and influence.

As a result, Jesus' critics were challenging him to take a position on the most inflammatory issue of the time. If he said it was right to pay this tax, the Jewish public would turn from him and his movement would end. If he said it was wrong to pay the tax, he would be considered a traitor to Rome, and the authorities would arrest and execute him. Either way, the hands of his enemies would be clean, and yet they would be rid of their enemy. Or so they thought.

You know Jesus' timeless response. He asked for "the coin for the tax" (v. 19) and then asked, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" (v. 20). They said it was Caesar's. Jesus replied, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (v. 21). With this response: "When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away" (v. 22).

Three lessons on Holy Tuesday

How can this Holy Tuesday exchange guide us in responding to those who oppose our faith? Let's consider three principles.

One: Engage our critics.

In the face of such vociferous opposition, Jesus could have retreated to the safety of Galilee or deferred on this controversial subject. Instead, he spoke directly to the question at hand, refusing to keep the salt of God's word in the saltshaker or his light under a basket (Matthew 5:13-16). Like him, we are called to respond to those who reject our Lord, knowing the greater their opposition to the truth, the more they need the truth.

Two: Use reason to defend revelation.

Jesus was wiser than the wisest man who ever lived (Matthew 12:42). Now “we have the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16) and are indwelt by the Spirit who “will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). By submitting to the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18) and loving God with our minds (Matthew 22:37) through excellent scholarship (cf. Luke 1:3) and continued study (cf. 2 Timothy 4:13), we can stay “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15).

Three: Stay faithful whatever the outcome.

Jesus’ critics were defeated on this occasion, but they were undeterred. On Maundy Thursday, they arranged for Jesus’ arrest and illegal trial. On Good Friday, they incited the crowds to turn against him, leading to his torture and murder.

But the writer Susan Coolidge was [right](#): “Earth’s saddest day and gladdest day were just three days apart!” Because of Easter, Paul could testify, “We walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Can you say the same today?

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