

Prolegomena To Apologetics

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The following is an excerpt from a personal letter by the author to a Christian student facing numerous dilemmas as a graduate student in philosophy at a major university. Before entering into a lengthy discussion of the particular problems being posed to this student, the author attempted to briefly set the stage or outline a framework in which answers could be given. This preface is reproduced below.

I must say that I appreciate the intellectual straightforwardness of your letter; too often those of us with fundamentalistic persuasions give credence to Marx's dictum that religion is the opiate of the people by sliding over serious philosophical questions about our faith and settle for the good feeling it gives us. I can sympathize with the dilemmas facing you and feel somewhat like a "fellow-traveler" in them. In my philosophical work I have come to see the concrete truth of Col. 2:3 -- in Christ (who Himself is the Truth, John 14:6) are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Without beginning and ending our intellectual efforts with Him all basis for history, logic, and science are destroyed. The man who fights against the gospel, then, is working at ruining the very tools of destruction he uses. Paul knew this to be the case. In 1 Cor. 1:18ff he tells us that those who foolishly portend the wisdom of the world see the preaching of the cross (and I might add, all the necessary theological presuppositions which accompany that preaching) as foolishness while in fact it is the power of God unto salvation (of mind as well as all else). "The foolishness of God is wiser than men," and God "shall destroy the wisdom of the wise and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent." Therefore, "where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?", I say a firm "amen" to Paul's question. Just look about you, and look at the history of philosophy, and consider the personal lives of Christianity's cultured despisers, and you can see how foolish the world's wisdom is! So we have scriptural warrant for a humble boldness about philosophical theology, as I see it, for we can come to any question knowing that its solution is found truthfully in Christ. Paul does not tell us to hide our heads in the sand when facing worldly philosophy, but to "reprove the unfruitful works of darkness" (Eph. 5:11). And he gives us direction as to how we are to do this as philosophers: "beware lest any man rob you through philosophy, even vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the fundamental principles of the world, and not after Christ" (Co. 2:8). Paul's warning is not against philosophy, but against humanistic philosophy, i.e. philosophical thinking which begins with man-made assumptions and axioms, rather than beginning with the sure truths of Christ and His word. Begin with what rebellious and sinful man calls "self-evident" and you end up with foolishness, or chaos, or misery; but begin with the Word of God and all of life makes sense, every question has an answer (by which I do not mean a "pat" answer!), and intellectual credence can be maintained.

Paul tells Timothy in his second letter (2:23-25), "Avoid foolish and undisciplined questions, knowing that they produce quarrels, and a servant of the Lord must not quarrel, but must be gentle toward all, skillful in teaching, patient, one who courteously instructs those who oppose themselves, if perhaps God may grant them conversion unto a genuine knowledge of truth." The man who attacks the truth of God's word is opposing himself -- like a child who slaps his father's face while sitting on his lap. If it were not for the father's gracious support, no one could insult Him! To oppose the outlook of God's revelation is to work against everything that you are as a creature of God. Men know the truth about God -- not a god, but the living and true God with all His divine attributes but attempt to suppress it (Rom. 1:18ff.). Paul says that God has revealed it to them (all of them!), and not left it up to natural theology or philosophic argumentation; they know the truth about God inherently and confront it everywhere they look around their environment: natural, social, psychological. The Almighty God is able to speak without stuttering, without ambiguity, without confusion, and Paul declares that He has spoken. God (even outside the written word) has made his word plain to all creatures made in His image. And because of their sin (which to recognize would entail too much emotional trauma and changing of one's ways of life and thinking) they push down that revelation, putting a pseudo-god in the Creator's place (e.g. self-reliance, finances, intellectual prowess, etc.). Yet without that revelation from God there would be no connection between the particulars of experience and the principles of logic, no uniformity to be discerned in nature, no harmony between the one and the many (unity and diversity), etc., etc. So when men who work from humanistic assumptions come to refute the gospel, they oppose themselves and are prevented from finding the truth. Our reply must be from a different foundation, from the foundation graciously planted under us by God in His saving mercy: His Word. Although our task may not be reciting memory verses (!), it is to represent the teaching of scripture in the most clear and forcible way, showing its internal strength in contrast to the foolishness of humanism. We never go over to our opponent's foundation except to do an internal critique of it; our weapons are not forged by the enemies of God but by the Spirit of God. These alone can meet the onslaughts against our faith without wavering. "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds; casting down reasonings, and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to obedience to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

In 2 Timothy Paul said that attacks on our faith come from fools (a word which did not have the belligerent tone that it does in English), and scripture has a lot to tell us as to the nature of a fool's thinking: it rejects Christ's words, building rather upon the sand (Matt. 7:26), it says there is not God (Ps. 53:1), it does not understand the depth and greatness of the Lord's thoughts (Ps. 92:6), it levels charges against God (Prov. 1:22), it trusts in itself (Pr. 28:26), its way is right in its own eyes (Pr. 12:15), it is self-confident (Pr. 14:16), its vision is bound to the earth (Prov. 12:24), it delights in discovering itself (Pr. 18:2), it utters its own mind (Pr. 29:11), it despises wisdom and instruction (Pr. 1:7) it refuses to know God and glories in man (1 Cor. 1-3), it suppresses the perspicuous revelation of God and honors a formation of the creature instead (Rom. 1:22). Note Paul's words in 1 Tim. 6:3-5, "If any man does not consent to wholesome

words, the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness, he is puffed-up, understanding nothing, but diseased with respect to questions and word-quibbles, out of whom comes envy, strife, blasphemies, evil surmising, perverse disputings of men with corrupted minds and destitute of truth."

So the type of philosophy which we as Christians are to avoid is rather clearly defined: that which begins with the autonomous truths of men rebelling against God's truthful revelation about and within them, rather than presupposing the axiomatic truth of scripture. When defending the faith we use the foundation God has provided, not the alleged intellectual tools of autonomy. "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou be like unto him and he be wise in his own conceit" (Pr. 26:4). For the Christian saved by the grace of God, scripture is logically primitive; it is his presupposition, his ultimate authority. Note that the charter verse of Christian apologetics (1 Peter 3:15) which says "always being ready to set forth a defense to every one who asks you for a reasoned account concerning the hope in you" *begins* by laying the foundation for such an effort in saying "Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts!" Jesus Christ must be given the pre-eminence (Col. 1:18) in our reasoning if we are to have an adequate and faithful apologetic. Christ must be Lord over our thinking; every thought must be made captive to Him. Then the wisdom of the world will become foolishness. A man's intellectual problems with the gospel are at base moral in character; that is why Paul says in 2 Tim. 2:25 that conversion is unto a genuine knowledge of the truth. Before a man is regenerated he has a knowledge of God but suppresses and distorts it (by mishandling it); after the Holy Spirit works a change in his heart he has a genuine knowledge of the truth -- he is no longer an intellectual schizophrenic. The "new man" is "renewed in knowledge after the image of his Creator" (Col. 3:10). So as Christian apologetes we have a humble boldness; boldness because our philosophical theology based on God's revelation is mighty to the casting down of every reasoning which opposes our Lord, yet humble because we did not work out the truth for ourselves but rather had our eyes opened to it by God's gracious Spirit. Our thoughts are not creatively constructive, but receptively reconstructive of God's -- that is, we "think God's thoughts after Him." On this basis we can find a proper solution to your dilemmas.