

## Beware of Philosophy!

By Greg L. Bahnsen

Newport Christian High School has something virtually unique among the various private, Christian schools around the country. It is an extraordinary feature of its required curriculum – a prerequisite for high school graduation which few other schools enforce. NCHS is unique in that it offers a *philosophy* course for its high school seniors.

There was a time when nearly every college and university required its students to take at least one introductory course in philosophy. Sadly, many colleges have lately altered such “old fashioned” notions about education and dropped their philosophy prerequisites for graduation. Not surprisingly, America’s colleges have been turning out graduates with little interest or proficiency in clear thinking, consistency, cogency, and depth of insight regarding a world-and-life-view. Those who graduate from Newport Christian High School are already a step ahead of many students from colleges which have amended their curriculum to suit the times.

But *are* they a step *ahead* with philosophy? An often abused test from the New Testament might suggest the opposite, at least upon first reading. In Colossians 2 Paul writes: “Beware lest there be anyone who robs you by means of his philosophy and vain deceit after the tradition of men, after the elementary principles of the world, and not after Christ” (v. 8) – robs you, that is, of “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” which are deposited in Christ (v. 3). With this kind of warning in the New Testament, why would a Christian school want to require the study of philosophy? It might seem that we should rather avoid philosophy!

A closer and fairer reading of Paul in Colossians 2 will correct our misunderstanding, however. We notice, first, that Paul does not prohibit the study of philosophy; rather, he *warns* us about it. Likewise, parents will warn their teenagers about the dangers of driving, *without* prohibiting the use of the family car. Philosophy, like cars, can be used in a constructive or in a destructive manner. Paul warns against the destructive potential of philosophy.

Secondly, we notice, upon re-reading, that Paul's warning is not directed against all philosophy, but instead against a *particular kind* of philosophy. Paul focuses attention on a certain kind of philosophy. Paul focuses attention on a certain kind of philosophy which is given an extended description: it is "vain deceit" (empty and misleading), follows "human tradition" (the accepted opinions of men), and is based on the "elementary principles of the world" (the presuppositions of those in rebellion against God). *This* is the kind of philosophy against which Paul warns the church. And well he should! Any philosophy which fits this description will indeed rob us of the treasures of knowledge in Christ.

So then, Paul *warns* us against *worldly* philosophy which he has just described is this: it is not a philosophy which he has just described is this: it is not a philosophy. We see, thirdly, that Paul refers to another kind of philosophy by contrast. Above all, what he objects about the worldly philosophy which he has just described is this: it is not a philosophy which is "after Christ." Christ was Paul's life and love, the starting point of his thinking and goal of his behavior. Christ was central for Paul. Naturally, then, Paul could have nothing to do with a philosophy which was not according to Christ nor submissive to His holy word.

Thus, we see that in addition to worldly philosophy there exists something which can be called "Christian philosophy"—philosophy which is "after Christ." Although Colossians 2 warns believers about the destructive potential of any philosophy which is not according to Christ, this scripture actually explains why we *must* study philosophy.

We study philosophy in order to fulfill Paul's command with greater efficiency and clarity. We study philosophy to make sure that our presuppositions regarding reality, knowledge, and ethics are truly Christ-honoring presuppositions. We study philosophy in order to see what kind of thinking we should not fall prey to in our culture. In short, we study philosophy to *beware* of misguided thinking and to *commit* ourselves to true thinking about man and the world.

So then, NCHS has a required course in philosophy. *Even if* there were no such course in philosophy, however, philosophy would still be taught at the school. Indeed, philosophy is being taught every day of the academic year at those schools which have no set philosophy course. Philosophy is always being taught, in *every* course in a school's curriculum. You see, whatever the textbook or teacher in history, science, literature, math, foreign language, etc. says is a reflection of some kind of philosophical view of man, the world, reality, knowledge, and life. These attitudes and outlooks are always coming through, always being relied upon, always informing what is said. Every book and teacher communicates a philosophy indirectly.

Thus, philosophy is taught everywhere that students take classes, and it would, accordingly, be taught at NCHS even if there were no course on the subject. The difference at Newport Christian High is that we stop and take the time to *reflect upon* the philosophy which is always being implicitly communicated to our students. We believe that unless students take time to reflect upon major issues in philosophy (its presuppositions and implications), they will make philosophical decisions by default – without adequate awareness or intellectual responsibility.

*Everyone does philosophy*, for everyone comes to views of reality, knowledge, and ethics. The difference between “the philosopher” and the ordinary man in the street is simply one of degree. Everyone does philosophy, but not everyone attempts to do it well. At NCHS we want to stop and reflect on what we should think and do as Christians. We want to be explicit about our philosophy, so that we can have greater assurance that we are doing philosophy well. Only then can we truly heed Paul’s warning to beware of worldly philosophy, for only then can we have a confidence that we have committed ourselves to a “Christian philosophy” instead.

Beware of philosophy! The best way to do so is to *study* it.