

Beware Of Philosophy

by Mike Ford

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Paul warns Christians in Colossae, "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men" (Colossians 2:8, KJV). James Moffatt renders the same verse as, "Beware of anyone getting hold of you by means of a theosophy [a branch of philosophy] which is specious make believe, on the lines of human tradition."

This verse is the only place where the biblical writers use the word "philosophy." The word has survived the years with its meaning unchanged: the love and pursuit of wisdom by intellectual means. It is translated from the Greek *philosophia*, which can be broken into its individual parts: *philos* (fond or friendly) and *sophos* (clever or wise).

Strong's Concordance writes that Paul was speaking of sophistry, that is, plausible but misleading argumentation or fallacious reasoning. Our word "sophisticate" derives from *sophos*. To sophisticate someone causes him to become less natural or simple; he becomes corrupted or perverted. A sophisticated person has acquired worldly knowledge and lacks natural simplicity.

Philosophy, the love and pursuit of wisdom by intellectual means, is not wisdom from God but wisdom as defined by man. It is man's attempt to be wise. God says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 9:10). Since man cannot see God, he concludes, "There is no God." Because man's philosophy does not consider God, its very foundation is faulty.

Some have said that philosophy is "the quest for an understanding of the world and man's place in it, and for ways to apply this understanding to the right conduct of life." This sounds very lofty, yet any converted person knows that the Bible answers these basic questions and many more. Philosophers ask, "Is there a God?" and "How can we distinguish good from bad?" A study of God's Word gives full and satisfying responses to these queries. There is no need for a "quest" through the labyrinth of man's mind to find the answers to his questions.

God Is Not in Their Knowledge

Philosophy is essentially a Western practice, with ancient Greece as its originator. In Eastern countries, including ancient Israel and Judah, the search for wisdom was connected with religious practice. In Israel, thought went from God to life. In Greece, though, thought proceeded from life to God.

For instance, God reveals that life is in the blood (Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 17:11), which is true both physically and spiritually. A Christian would use this fact as his foundation and proceed to understand related things like observing the presence of oxygen in the blood, how the lungs work to inhale oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide, circulation of the blood to deliver nutrients to all parts of the body, etc. He would see that God's Word is the foundation of all knowledge.

Conversely, the Greek philosopher, starting without the benefit of God's knowledge, would use trial and error to arrive at conclusions. Thales, an early Greek philosopher, determined that water was the source of life. People listened and said, "Wow!" Then another one came along, concluding that air was the source of life. People again said, "Wow!" and dropped ignorant Thales.

Then Diogenes, a seeker of truth, rocked the Greek world with his deductions. Legend says that during the day he wandered the streets of Athens with a lantern. When asked why, he said he was searching for an honest man. Since he and his father had been expelled from Asia Minor for counterfeiting, no doubt he needed help finding an honest man! Nevertheless, Diogenes came to the conclusion that air had intelligence. And, as you might expect, everyone said, "Wow!"

One thing stands out in studying the history of philosophy: Each new generation brought new schools of thought. No truth was fixed or permanent; the only constant was change. Thus, there are dozens of contradictory branches of philosophy: existentialism, gnosticism, metaphysics, Platonism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, pantheism, pragmatism, sophistry, stoicism, theosophy and many more.

This in no way implies that thinking is bad. Meditation, for instance, is a necessary part of a Christian's life (Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:2; Malachi 3:16; Philippians 4:8). But our thoughts have to start from the right place. If we begin with the foundation of God's truth and continually check the Bible to verify that our thoughts and ideas are still grounded, it is difficult to get into trouble.

But extrapolating truth from the Bible is not philosophy. In fact, "Christian philosophy" may be a contradiction in terms. Solomon's wisdom excelled that of all people (I Kings 4:30), and he was famous in all the surrounding nations for his wisdom (verses 31-34). But was he a philosopher? Did he pursue wisdom by intellectual means, inquiring into the nature of things based on man's "logical" reasoning rather than on observing or experimenting? Look again at verse 33: "He spoke of trees, . . . of animals, of birds, of creeping things, and of fish." Solomon observed, experimented and learned from the creation, and God gave him understanding (I Kings 3:9, 12), making him wise. Solomon says his words were spoken in righteousness and are plain to those that understand (Proverbs 8:8-9). "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10). He started from the proper foundation.

The Philosophy of Psychology

God and His creation do not change. Truth is truth. However, for 6000 years, mankind has had shifting loyalties; he is always quick to fall for the "new kid in town." Among philosophies, psychology is among the most recent. René Descartes (AD 1596-1650), known as the "greatest philosopher of his time," saw the need for a new science of the mind. Ironically, he suffered from demonic nightmares and was considered to be "mentally disturbed." One of his biographers described Descartes, a man admired by the intellectuals of Europe, as "schizophrenic" and "disloyal," yet his ideas dominated Western thinking about the mind and body for centuries.

Descartes' influence is still felt in the thinking of recent educators like George Herbert Mead, Edward Thorndike and John B. Watson. Because of modern education and technologies, the influence of ancient philosophers has been multiplied exponentially by these teachers through their students, many of whom became teachers themselves. If ten people each teach this philosophy to ten others, who then teach ten more and so on, its influence expands quickly.

George Herbert Mead taught at the University of Chicago for decades. He developed a pragmatic, functionalist theory of value in which the appeal was not to fixed codes external to the individual, but rather to the "actual problem" out of which the functional values might be wrought. That is fancy language for, "Forget the Ten Commandments and lie like a dog when it suits your purpose." This philosophy that the truth is relative has come to be known as "situation ethics."

Edward Thorndike is America's most influential educational psychologist. Here is what he wrote in a fictional conversation with a minister:

My god is all the good in all men. . . . Your God is in heaven. My god is on earth. Your God made us; but we ourselves make my god. He is as great and wise and good as we choose to make him. My god does not hear prayers. Work for him.

For almost 50 years, Thorndike taught at Columbia University, teaching thousands of teachers and administrators, and publishing 50 books and 450 articles. Thorndike was instrumental in structuring and developing the mainstream of thinking and practice in American public education. He believed that "outside our field of expertise, the intelligent procedure for most of us is to refuse to think, spending our energy rather in finding the expert in the case and learning from him." So our modern educational system follows this philosophy.

John B. Watson, a professor at Johns Hopkins University from 1909-20, was the founder of behaviorism. Though his frequent and public adulteries finally caused his dismissal from the school, he later became a successful advertising executive on Madison Avenue. Among his other achievements, he is credited with inventing the American "coffee break." Considered an expert on child development, Watson wrote several books on the subject, but his conclusions cause one to wonder. He advocated toilet training at 2-3 weeks of age. He believed showing affection to children created weak adults, so he advised parents never to coddle or to hug a child. Do not kiss him good night, he advised, and if you must, you may shake hands with him in the morning. And people said, "Wow!"

When looking at the ideas of these men, we see them for the crackpots they were. But their ideas influenced thousands of students and teachers. Undoubtedly, they have in some ways influenced us! Modern-day psychologists are no different than early philosophers. Like their predecessors, they are still starting from the wrong end, away from God, but now they are reaching more people!

It is interesting that so many leaders of God's church—now and in the recent past—have pursued degrees in psychology. The result: Heresy entered the church. What happens when men begin to believe that they are wise, that truth is relative and that there are no absolutes? What happens when members leave the solid rock of God's truth for the shifting sands of men's minds? We are seeing the answer now in the church: division, confusion and spiritual degeneration.

Philosophy in the Church

We need to return to the apostle Paul and his letter to the Colossians. The church at Colossae was under intense pressure from the society around it. Heresy was making inroads into the church. Forms of gnosticism, asceticism and sophistry were popular in the city.

» Gnosticism combined ideas from Greek philosophy, oriental mysticism and Christianity—a classic example of syncretism, combining elements of different

religions. Some of the "new" doctrines in the church have followed this philosophy.

» Asceticism taught a person to lead a life of contemplation and rigorous self-denial and abstinence. As the church taught a proper enjoyment of life, the Christians at Colossae stood out as being different. Some members still desired to be accepted by the world around them. Elements of an attitude of wanting outside acceptance have been evident recently in the church.

» Sophistry concluded that there is no such thing as objective truth and the highest act of man was "civic excellence." Both of these ideas, moral relativity and civic duty, have been present in certain churches of God today, as well as in Paul's time.

So what is Paul's advice?

For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask *that you might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.* (Colossians 1:9)

He tells them to "continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast" (verse 23). To them has been revealed a mystery hidden from the ages—and from the philosophers (verses 26-28). This is precious truth, and Paul worries for the Colossians (and interestingly, the Laodiceans; Colossians 2:1; see 4:16) that their minds might turn away to worthless ideas. In God the Father and Jesus Christ are contained "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge," and Paul warns them not to be taken in by any man speaking enticing words (verses 2-4). In effect, he is saying, "When others are saying, 'Wow!' beware! We have a way to check it out. If we compare it to what Christ teaches us, we can judge its worth."

In verse 18 he speaks of men "vainly puffed up by [their] fleshly mind," or as the Lamsa translation reads, "intellectual powers." Lying among the members was a problem in the church at that time (Colossians 3:9). It seems that bending the truth or telling outright falsehoods to convince others to accept one's philosophy was normal in Colossae. Such a one gained a reputation for "wisdom" and became proud.

Once God has opened our minds, His truth is simple and clear (II Corinthians 11:3). But those whom the world considers brilliant have not been able to understand the Bible. God says that we cannot know Him through human "wisdom." He is not working with the wise—He has chosen the weak and the foolish, purposely to confound the wise (I Corinthians 1:21-31)!

"[Our] faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (I Corinthians 2:5). The truth is not a snake, sliding here and there. What once was proven, clear and understandable is still so. The truth of God is not popular, and it never will be as long as man is ruled by a nature held in thrall by "that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world" (Revelation 12:9, KJV).

This is not the first time that God's church has fought through a period of false doctrine and deceptive, seemingly "logical" changes. The first-century church waged a long, spiritual war against the forces of ungodly philosophy. We would do well to heed the words of Paul to Timothy, from one warrior to another in this war of truth versus error:

O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and vain babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge—by professing it, some have strayed concerning the faith. (I Timothy 6:20-21)