

To Answer A Fool—or Not

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"Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes." —Proverbs 26:4-5

A recent Google search on the topic, "Contradictions in the Bible," yielded over a 1,360,000 hits. On one side of the debate appeared the strange bedfellows of Islamic fundamentalists and secular-progressive atheists proclaiming Christian fundamentalists "brain-dead" for not accepting their carefully studied positions. On the other side, Christian fundamentalists and apologists systematically countered each alleged discrepancy with a reasonable and scholarly explanation.

One "point-counterpoint" standoff rages between *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy*, edited by Dennis McKinsey and the *Tektronikon Encyclopedia Apologetica*, edited by James Patrick Holding. The latter not only offers chapter-by-chapter rebuttals to McKinsey's massive tome, but also for many other less ambitious works such as *101 Clear Bible Errors*, plagiarized under many different names on the Internet. In his article, "Is Proverbs in Contradiction on Answering Fools?" Holding feels that the alleged contradiction between Proverbs 26:4-5

wins a major award for silliness. What we have here is not contradiction, but *dilemma*—an indication that when it comes to answering fools, you cannot win—because they are fools, and there is no practical cure for foolery (as this citation demonstrates). So: It is unwise to argue with a fool at his own level and recognize his own foolish suppositions, but it is good sometimes to refute him soundly, lest his foolishness seem to be confirmed by your silence.

Reasonable Expectations

In his *Alleged Contradictions in the Bible*, B. J. Clarke points out that the close proximity of these verses (back to back) would rule out the idea of discrepancy even for the most sophomoric of scholars. James Jackson, in his article, "Answering the Fool," suggests that "such close proximity reflects design, not disorder."

Dr. E. W. Bullinger suggests that the connection between these verses can be explained by an *ellipsis* (something deliberately left out to grab the reader's attention) beginning in verse 3, which compares reasoning with a fool to reasoning with a donkey. Rather than considering these proverbs as absolute commands, the reader finds cause-and-effect cautions: If you answer a fool, you will be like him, but if you do not answer a fool, he will assume you are like him. Either way, we would lose.

Along with ellipsis, the technique of *parallelism* (repeated similarities used for rhetorical effect) is used throughout Proverbs to amplify meaning. Consider Proverbs 28:1: "The wicked flee when no one pursues; but the righteous are as bold as a lion." In this light, Proverbs 26:4-5 can be read: "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him. [But on the other hand,] answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes."

Paradox provides another explanation for the alleged "contradiction." Lynn Anderson, in his article "The Case for Mystery," asserts that the Bible embraces paradoxes throughout. The apostle Paul, for example, in the same chapter (Galatians 6:2, 5), urges, "Bear one another's burdens," and three verses later suggests, "Each one shall bear his own load." Similarly, Paul warns Christians not to be "burdened again by a yoke of bondage" (Galatians 5:1), while teaching elsewhere that we are to become "slaves to righteousness" (Romans 6:18). Jesus Christ provides the most sterling example of paradox when he warns His disciples that whoever desires to lead must become a servant (Luke 22:26) and whoever would save his life must be willing to lose it (Luke 17:33).

A special instance of paradox is the *conundrum* or riddle. Stephen Tecklenberg, in his article "No Matter What You Do," maintains that the "Answer not a fool . . . Answer a fool" juxtaposition is just that, a conundrum focusing more on the "readiness" to answer rather than on the answering. He adds, "If appropriate, give answers. If not, withhold."

Thomas Henry Reardon, in his article "Folly to Be Wise?" points out that while much of Scripture demands making right choices, certain decisions, especially in the Wisdom literature (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, etc.), demand discernment, prudence, and choosing wisely between alternatives.

Every semester, I propose a dilemma to my Advanced Composition classes when I ask them to explain the conundrum: "You can write a research paper in 20 hours, but you cannot write a research paper in 20 hours." When I assure them that there is no contradiction, they finally realize that it all depends on the distribution of the 20 hours. Clustering these 20 hours one week before the paper's due-date will lead to panic or plagiarism. On the other hand, intelligent spacing of these 20 hours (over the period of a month), with scheduled periods of rest, will provide the necessary energy and resources to complete the research paper.

A Turn of Phrase

Closely related to paradox and conundrum is the *turn of phrase* given to a group of words. Norman Geisler, in his book *When Critics Ask*, cites Andrew Fuller, who insists that the meaning is altered depending on the twist given to the words. For example, "according to his folly" in one sense implies "in a foolish manner" or "behaving like a fool." In another sense, it could imply "in the manner which his folly requires."

Another way of explaining this turn of phrase would be the *fallacy of accent*, in which the meaning changes depending on which part of the sentence is emphasized. Much Yiddish humor succeeds by accenting different parts of the sentence. Jewish humorist Leo Rosten provides this gem:

1. I **should** buy two tickets for her concert?—meaning: What, you're giving me a lesson in ethics?
2. I should **buy** two tickets for her concert?—meaning: I wouldn't go even if she were giving out free passes!
3. I should buy **two** tickets for her concert?—meaning: I'm having enough trouble deciding whether it's worth one.
4. I should buy two **tickets** for her concert?—meaning: She should be giving out free passes, or the hall will be empty.

5. I should buy two tickets for **her** concert?—meaning: Did she buy tickets to our daughter's recital?

6. I should buy two tickets for her **concert**?—meaning: You mean, they call what she does a "concert"?

Applying this formula to Proverbs 26, we accent the following parts of verses 4 and 5:

Do not answer a fool according to his *folly*, lest you also be like him. Answer a fool *according to* his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.

As in Fuller's turn of phrase, the first accent refers to behaving like a fool, and the second accent refers to the manner that his foolishness requires. David Jon Hill, in his article "Twelve Rules for Bible Study" (*Tomorrow's World*, July 1969), substantiates the turn of phrase and accent explanations, asserting that differing circumstances account for the so-called contradictions:

Actually, these two verses are not contradictory—but complementary!

The use of either verse—that is, its principle applied to a particular use—depends on the set of circumstances. Both these verses contain gems of wisdom that each one of us needs to learn to properly apply in answering other people's questions.

The last part of each verse holds the key which unlocks the meaning of these verses—and shows them to be practical, usable and wise principles.

Verse four reads, "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him." The last part of the verse holds the key: don't degrade yourself by descending to his level in an argument! Don't harangue—don't bite back—don't try to "argue back" with someone who is obviously trying to stir contention.

Robert Deffingbaugh, in his Bible study, "The Fool," says of Proverbs 26:5:

We should not allow the fool to drag us down to his level. The fool is exasperating; he is looking for trouble, and he often tempts us to oblige him. Since the fool will spout off and speak his mind, we are tempted to lose our temper with him as well. Proverbs instructs us not to allow him to get the best of us, lest we be lowered to his level.

When Donald Trump mistakenly got into a name-calling contest with Rosie O'Donnell, it gave her a fallacious, elevated estimation of her debating abilities, deluding her into a false sense of importance and wisdom, and at the same time, it artificially boosted the ratings of *The View*. Fred Thompson, on the other hand, when asked to debate the merits of "universal" health care with Michael Moore, who lauds Fidel Castro's system in Cuba, made it clear that he would not lower himself to Moore's foolishness.

Not Answering the Fool

Stephen Tecklenberg, reflecting on his protesting of the blasphemous movie, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, observes, "In those areas where the protests were the loudest, the film received the best attendance. It was as if our best efforts simply backfired. Perhaps it would have been better if we had done nothing!"

Scripture provides numerous examples of biblical figures falling short of successfully following Proverbs 26:4. Consider the example of how Moses answered folly in a foolish manner:

And the people contended with Moses and spoke, saying: "If only we had died when our brethren died before the Lord! Why have you brought up the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, that we and our animals should die here?" . . . Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Take the rod; you and your brother Aaron gather the congregation together. Speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water; thus you shall bring water for them out of the rock, and give drink to the congregation and their animals." . . . And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock; and he said to them, "*Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?*" *Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod.* . . . (Numbers 20:3-4, 7-8, 10-11)

Jesus Christ used a better tactic. A group of gainsaying Pharisees tried to push His buttons, provoking an argument, but Jesus kept His cool, answering their question with one of His own. Using this strategy, He placed this pack of weasels on the horns of an untenable dilemma, successfully answering their foolishness *according to their folly*.

But He answered and said to them, "I also will ask you one thing, and answer Me: The baptism of John—was it from heaven or from men?" And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' all the people will stone us, for they are persuaded that John was a prophet." So they answered that they did not know where it was from. And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." (Luke 20:3-8)

In another instance, Jesus was confronted by Herod Antipas, who had been manipulated by his wife to murder John the Baptist. Jesus, realizing the man to be a compromised fool, held his peace (Luke 23:8-9).

Following His example, the apostle Paul twice cautions Timothy—and thus us—that there are times when a fool's comment does not warrant a reply:

II Timothy 2:23: But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife.

I Timothy 6:3-5: If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself.

Answering the Fool

Occasionally, silence is not golden but just plain yellow. When Job's wife urged him to curse God and die, he did not turn a deaf ear but gave her a cease-and-desist order:

Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die!" But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips. (Job 2:9-10)

The apostle Paul, despite his cautions to Timothy, realized at one point that if he did not challenge the foolish challenges of his enemies (concerning his apostolic authority and methods), naïve members of the Corinthian congregation might believe them. His lengthy answer spans II Corinthians 11 and 12. Notice, however, II Corinthians 12:11-13:

I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing. Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds. For what is it in which you were inferior to other churches, except that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong!

Obviously, Paul felt extremely uncomfortable about answering these allegations, as is evidenced by his self-effacing reference to himself as a fool, but he also realized that his silence would have tacitly endorsed the charges. Likewise, our Savior, when confronted about His identity and credentials, knew the timing was right to put the gainsaying Pharisees in their place:

Then the Jews said to Him, "Now we know that You have a demon! Abraham is dead, and the prophets; and You say, 'If anyone keeps My word he shall never taste death.' Are You greater than our father Abraham, who is dead? And the prophets are dead. Who do You make Yourself out to be?" Jesus answered, "If I honor Myself, My honor is nothing. It is My Father who honors Me, of whom you say that He is your God. Yet you have not known Him, but I know Him. And if I say, 'I do not know Him,' I shall be a liar like you; but I do know Him and keep His word. Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad." Then the Jews said to Him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." (John 8:52-58)

As one minister said, "If you are going to preach a warning message, you had better be mindful of your exit strategies, or be prepared to die on that hill of battle." There certainly are times when diplomacy fails and silence is no longer appropriate. Our society is replete with foolish teachings, ideas, theories, and misconceptions—both secular and religious—and under the right circumstances, they should be confronted and shown to be false, lest they be accepted as factual.

For instance, on a recent radio talk show an astute listener observed that Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., a guest, had concocted a bogus definition of *fascism*, referring to it as "corporate control of government," attributing this spurious definition to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, which says nothing of the sort. In another example, during a recent presidential debate, Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, after being questioned about his views on Creation versus evolution, gave a well thought-

out, reasoned, and impassionate defense of the Creationist position, effectively deflating the surreptitious anti-God position.

As maturing Christians, we must learn to discern when it is proper to answer a fool *according to his folly* (in the manner his foolishness deserves), and when it is a bad idea to answer a fool according to his *folly* (lowering ourselves to his undignified level). The right exercise of God's Spirit in us, which Paul calls "the mind of Christ" (I Corinthians 2:16), provides the potential to have and use this ability.