

IS PHILOSOPHY AT ODDS WITH CHRISTIANITY?

MHI WHITE PAPER

WP-020

by

Jonathan K. Bennett, PE, D.GE

January 2022



The Mars Hill Institute

Discipleship | Apologetics | Fellowship

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Introduction

Philosophy is almost universally frowned upon in the Christian church, especially in more fundamental leaning congregations. Many within the Christian church consider philosophy to be completely at odds with Christianity or Christian doctrine. There are certainly many unsound philosophes that are directly in opposition to Christianity or Christian teaching.

The apostle Paul warns Christians to “beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit.” (Colossians 2:8, KJV)¹ Others view philosophy as simply being man’s wisdom as opposed to God’s wisdom, and, as such, to be avoided if one is to avoid error. Still others view philosophy as inaccessible to the average person and therefore unnecessary or irrelevant to the practicing Christian.

This apparent opposition and tension between philosophy and Christianity causes many within the Christian church to avoid philosophy altogether, regardless of its form. Is it possible that avoiding philosophy is more harmful than beneficial in relation to Christianity? Further, is it impossible to delve deeply into Christian theology without the tools of philosophy? Is philosophy really at odds with Christianity, or is it essential to Christian theology?

This research paper will examine the above topics and will make the argument that philosophy itself, while not necessarily essential to the practicing Christian, is not at odds with Christianity. To the contrary, the tools of philosophy can do much to aid in the study and development Christian theology and, in fact, are essential to that. Philosophy, in the individual sense, is unavoidable in that we all develop our own philosophies about the world around us. The key is to be able to ascertain and discern between sound and unsound philosophy so that unsound

¹ All Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, King James Version.

ideas can be rejected. Additionally, the Christian should be mindful not to elevate philosophical assumptions or opinions above clear special revelation.

What is Philosophy?

In our treatment of philosophy in relation to Christianity, it is important to introduce some terms and definitions. In discussing philosophy, we may find that there are different views and opinions of what exactly philosophy is. Voluminous discussions of what exactly philosophy is or is not can be found from various sources. For the purposes of this discussion, we will endeavor to identify a fairly concise definition without stepping into a history of the development of philosophy.

The word “philosophy” comes from two Greek words meaning the love [philo] of wisdom [sophia]. The following is a wonderful description of wisdom, in relation to philosophy, from the perspective of the 17th century mathematician and philosopher, Rene Descartes:

‘[T]he word “philosophy” means the study [or love – philo] of wisdom, and by “wisdom” is meant not only prudence in our everyday affairs but also a perfect knowledge of all things that mankind is capable of knowing, both for the conduct of life and for the preservation of health and the discovery of all manner of skills.’²

The Oxford Languages dictionary defines philosophy as:

The study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, especially when considered as an academic discipline.

The Christian philosopher Norman L. Geisler, in his analysis of philosophy from a Christian perspective, defines it in the following manner:

Philosophy is, then, the critical analysis of fundamental concepts of human inquiry, and the normative discussion of how human thought and action ought to function, as well as the description of the nature of reality.³

² Joll, Nicholas, *Metaphilosophy*, The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ISSN 2161-0002, <https://iep.utm.edu/>, 2017

³ Geisler, Norman L. and Feinburg, Paul L., *Introduction to Philosophy – A Christian Perspective*, Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Books, 1980, page 17

Clearly, philosophy is a quest for understanding and truth.

It is also common to hear philosophy referenced in the individual sense, such as to say that a person has a certain philosophy regarding some subject. This is different from the study or academic discipline of philosophy and is generally more akin to an opinion, although individual philosophies do tend to vary in their soundness or grounding in reality.

Defining Terms Regarding Christianity

This question may seem absurd at the outset; but it is important, for the purposes of this discussion, to properly frame what we mean by Christianity in contrasting or discussing if or how philosophy may or may not be at odds with it. It is also important, for this discussion to distinguish between the practice of Christianity, Christian theology, and Christian doctrine itself.

Christianity is an Abrahamic monotheistic religion that is based on the teachings of Jesus Christ. These teaching are typically presented in the various versions of the Holy Bible, or the scriptures, for our purposes. When we speak of “practicing” Christianity, we are generally referring to the application of Biblical principles in the life of the believer or follower of Christ.

The distinction between the practice of Christianity, in general, and Christian theology or doctrine (teachings) is important because there are those that would assert that nothing is required to practice Christianity beyond simple belief and obedience to the scriptures. Whereas Christian theology delves deeper into the study of God, specific religious beliefs, and analysis of the scriptures. Christian theology is primarily concerned with discovering, communicating, and defending the truth about God. When we reference Christian doctrine, we are talking about the specific religious beliefs or teachings of Christianity.

It is worth mentioning that all Christian believers are, of necessity, theologians to some degree. Whatever beliefs that the individual holds are based on some understanding of God and

Christianity that has been obtained by some method of inquiry, whether formal or personal. In reality, it is a matter of degrees to which one is a “Theologian”, whether they have formally studied theology or not.

Preliminary Considerations

It is important to note at the outset that this paper is not making an argument for the displacement of Christian theology with philosophy. Rather, this paper will make the observation and argument that philosophy is, by its nature, a critical component of theology (and human understanding) itself. The practice of philosophy cannot be separated from careful inquiry in any discipline. One observation of this paper is that the objection to philosophy, in general, is largely a matter of semantics.

Secondly, it is important to note that this paper does not take the position of elevating philosophy to the same level as or above special revelation. Special revelation is that revelation that is given by God that is not obvious through nature. An example of special revelation are teachings transmitted through the Word of God (the Bible) that cannot be discerned through nature or the natural world. God gives his general revelation in that we are able to ascertain certain things about God through His creation. Through general revelation and the tools of reasoning and philosophy, we can ascertain certain characteristics and truths about God based on what we observe in His creation. It is probably fair to say that most aspects of philosophy relate to human knowledge, wisdom, and understanding as opposed to God’s infinite and perfect knowledge. Having said that, there are certain philosophical ideas such as the laws of logic that are largely thought to be transcendent.

This paper will assert that it is incorrect to outright reject philosophy (or human reason), in a general sense, based on the objections outlined herein. Those objections are, for the most

part, referring to specific unsound philosophies. Additionally, some of the objections incorrectly characterize philosophy, as a whole, as being necessarily at odds with the practice of Christianity. Rather, sound philosophy and sound reasoning are essential in proper human understanding of any subject matter and should not be rejected outright as long as they are properly applied. The proper use of reason and philosophy can be of great help in rightly dividing (interpreting) the Word of God and assisting the Christian in living in a way that is pleasing and acceptable to God.

In the end, one must be diligent in properly reconciling human reasoning and God's special revelation. God has graciously created and maintains a world that is ordered such that we are able to know certain truths about it and Himself. It is consistent with His character that He has ordered His creation such that we can have a basic understanding of the things that we need to know in order to fulfill His purposes for us. There certainly are things that we are unable to know without God's direct revelation of them.

What are the Christian Objections to Philosophy?

The church father, Tertullian (among others) contrast (Greek) philosophy with the church in Jerusalem and condemn it by asking:

What indeed has hath Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?⁴

Numerous other church fathers, early church leaders, and current church leaders make statements generally against philosophy and frame it as being in direct contrast with church doctrines. Martin Luther makes the following statement regarding philosophy:

⁴ Tertullian, *On Prescription Against Heretics*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1951-1957, p.7

Reason is the devil's prostitute and can do nothing else but slander and dishonor what God does and says.⁵

Probably the most common Christian objection to philosophy, in general, is based on the apostle Paul's writings to the church in Colosse where he warned them:

Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. (Colossians 2:8, KJV)

Another argument against philosophy relevant to Christianity is that philosophy is perceived simply as man's wisdom versus God's wisdom and, as such, is to be avoided if one is to avoid error. This concept seems very common in presuppositional apologetics discussions in comparing man's imperfect thoughts to the perfect Word of God.

Another related argument against philosophy relative to Christianity is that philosophy is inaccessible to the average person and therefore unnecessary or irrelevant to the practicing Christian. We will discuss the inaccessibility and irrelevance topics separately in the later responses to this argument.

Another related argument against philosophy relative to Christianity is that philosophy (and possibly theology) overcomplicates Christian living and is therefore unnecessary or irrelevant. This is very closely related to the concept of inaccessibility but is a slightly different objection. We will briefly discuss this in relation to the inaccessibility assertion.

There may be other Christian objections to philosophy, in general, but these are the primary and most common ones in the author's experience.

These objections, in all their forms, are pervasive throughout Christian church culture. We will examine these objections in some detail and attempt to evaluate their validity in the discussion that follows.

⁵ Luther, Martin, *Luther's Works: Church and Ministry II*, ed. Conrad Bergendoff, Philadelphia, PA, Muhlenberg Press, 1958, 40:175

Philosophy Condemned but Used Liberally

While philosophy and reason are condemned broadly, many of those condemning their use have also made and make wide use of their tools. It is also worth mentioning some statements made by those condemning philosophy or reason relative to Christianity may not be truly representative of their overall position regarding them. In fact, upon further examination, they would appear not to be.

In response to Tertullian's earlier statement, the Christian theologian and philosopher Norman L. Geisler observes that while Tertullian exalted revelation over reason, he also was one who spoke of the need for the "rule of reason" and spoke against those who were "content with having simply believed, without full examination of the grounds of the traditions" they believed. Tertullian was especially outspoken toward certain "philosophers" and did not believe in "revelation within the limits of reason", but rather "reason within revelation".⁶

Steve Wilkens points out in his book, *Faith and Reason, Three Views*; that while certain prominent Christians offer a dim assessment of rationality's value, there is more to the story than select quotes reveal. In the case of Tertullian, he notes that his legal training, which was highly philosophical in nature, was very apparent in his work. Additionally, he noted that Martin Luther was well versed in philosophy and was majorly influenced by the Franciscan philosopher William of Occam in his insistence that salvation was by "faith alone."⁷

It is fairly apparent that some application of philosophy, critical analysis, or reason is involved in any serious evaluation or discussion of Christian theology, especially in the classical sense. While many may condemn human reason and philosophy in select quotes, the presence of those in their works are obvious.

⁶ Geisler, and Feinburg, pages 262-263

⁷ Wilkens, Steve, *Faith and Reason: Three Views*, Downers Grove, IL, IVP Academic, 2014, page 13

An Analysis and Discussion of Corinthians 2:8

With Colossians 2:8 and similar arguments being a major basis for an outright rejection of philosophy within the Christian church, an examination and discussion of that passage is warranted in order to assess the validity of that argument.

What did the apostle Paul mean when he warned his readers to “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.”? Was he saying that philosophy itself is bad and should be avoided; was he warning his readers to beware of bad philosophies that were at odds with the message of Christ, or did he mean something else? This is the only use of the word “philosophy” in the entire New Testament.

Based on the context of earlier passages of the book of Colossians and what is said therein, it appears that Paul is talking about a specific heresy, belief or teaching that those in Colossae would be familiar with. It is highly probable that he is referring to a specific erroneous philosophy (belief or teaching) and not to philosophy in general. The use of the word philosophy in this passage does not equate to the broad discipline of philosophy (in general) as it is used today. He is not necessarily condemning the use of reason or the general study of philosophy in this passage. He is referring to a specific unsound teaching (philosophy) that is at odds with the believer’s hope in Christ.

It is hard to say exactly what that erroneous teaching was because the apostle Paul doesn’t name it directly. He does, however, say quite a bit that might shed some light on what he was getting at. Paul says some things in his introduction to the letter (Chapter 1) to the Colossians that sets the stage for what he would later expound upon and gives us some clues as to what he is trying to communicate.

Paul is clearly desiring that the believers in Colossae might be filled with the Lord's knowledge and understanding and that they might also grow in that understanding. He is clearly interested in their discernment in light of the pagan culture of that city and region that is diametrically opposed to that of Christianity.

For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; (Colossians 1:9-10 KJV)

He goes on to speak of the background of some believers there and to describe their regenerated lives qualified by their continued grounding in the hope of the Gospel.

And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled. In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight: If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister. (Colossians 1:21-23 KJV)

Paul goes on later in Chapter 2, especially verses 16-23 and subsequent, to lay out several stumbling blocks that might get in the way of living fully in Christ by an incorrect or corrupt understanding of Christian doctrine. Understanding corrupted by unsound teachings, understandings, or philosophies; not philosophy in general. Clearly, when we examine the scripture in detail and in context, Paul is not referring generally to the study of philosophy or the application of philosophical principals; he is speaking of unsound teachings or philosophies.

John MacArthur, Pastor of Grace Community Church in Panorama City, California, characterizes the use of the word philosophy at that time as follows:

One writer says, "Everything that had to do with theories about God and the world and the meaning of human life was called philosophy at that time, not only in pagan schools but also in the Jewish schools of the Greek cities." Now that historian, Schlatter is his name, says that the term philosophy was used of every single theory about God and the world whether Jewish or Greek in that era. That was the common term. So anybody

coming along with any new theory about God or new theory about the world, its origins, its meanings and its destiny constituted a philosopher with a philosophy. Josephus, the historian of that day, has shown that any elaborate system of thought, and he says, “any moral or disciplinary thought pattern,” was called a philosophy.⁸

Is Philosophy Fundamentally Human Wisdom Versus God’s Wisdom?

Is philosophy fundamentally human wisdom versus God’s wisdom or is philosophy a tool for greater understanding in general?

God’s wisdom is certainly perfect and vastly more reliable than man’s wisdom. The all-knowing creator of the universe has a perfect knowledge and understanding of all things. Man’s knowledge and wisdom are limited by his ability to properly comprehend and make sense of the reality that he exists within. Man’s wisdom is certainly limited and falls vastly short of God’s.

We, as humans, can’t know everything about anything. We do the best we can and that is the best we can do. This is true with any field of inquiry. However, to say that we can’t know everything about God, does not mean that we can’t have meaningful knowledge. Enough has been revealed so that we can know what God intends for us to know about Him as we will see later in the discussion.

God is a god who reveals. He has revealed Himself through creation and through special revelation. Richard G. Howe defines General and Special Revelation as follows:

General Revelation is God revealing Himself through creation, while Special Revelation is God revealing Himself through the Bible.⁹

It can be said that “all truth is God’s truth” because “...if something is true, it is because it is something that has been revealed by God, or because it is an accurate understanding of the nature of something created by God, or because it is an accurate description of something

⁸ MacArthur, John F., *Philosophy or Christ?*, Grace to You, Grace Community Church, Panorama City, CA, 1976, url= <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/2141/philosophy-or-christ>

⁹ Howe, Richard G., *Intro to God’s Revelation, 6 Week Curriculum Workbook*, American Family Association, Tupelo, Mississippi, 2018, p.10

decreed by God. In other words, a God-centered view of truth demands that we affirm that all truth is God's truth. That which is true is true because God said it, created it, or decreed it."¹⁰

Considering this perspective, we can observe that "Since all truth is God's truth, and since philosophy is a quest for truth, then philosophy will contribute to our understanding of God and His world."¹¹ This perspective seems to settle the man's wisdom versus God's wisdom debate. There is only one reality. There is only one truth, that which corresponds to reality. Philosophy, properly applied, can help us in discovering truths about God and the reality that He has created and that we exist within.

Where problems arise is in the improper application of philosophical tools, assumptions, or worldviews that result in propositions or understandings that do not align with reality. This illustrates the distinction between sound and unsound philosophy, which we will discuss in a later section.

Both in Christian theology and sound philosophy, we are interested in discovering, communicating, and defending truth. Truth is best defined by Aristotle where he speaks of it as:

To say of what is, that it is not, or of what is not, that it is, is false, while to say of what is, that it is and of what is not, that it is not, is true.¹²

There are a number of theories of truth in existence today by which people attempt to define truth and what is true. The correspondence theory of truth is the best one because it most correctly identifies truth as what it actually is.¹³ The correspondence theory of truth is the view that truth is that which corresponds to reality. Reality is the state of things as they actually exist.

¹⁰ Keith Matheson, *All Truth is God's Truth - A Reformed Approach to Science and Scripture*, Ligonier Ministries 2012, URL=<https://www.ligonier.org/blog/all-truth-gods-truth-reformed-approach-science-and-scripture/>

¹¹ Geisler, page 22

¹² Aristotle, *Metaphysics* bk. 4, chap.7.

¹³ Joseph M. Holden, *The Harvest Handbook of Apologetics*, Harvest House Publishers, Eugene, Oregon, 2018, p. 57

To tell the truth about something is to tell it like it is. To say that a red shirt is red is true, while to say that a red shirt is blue is false. To say that it is raining outside is true if, in fact, it is raining outside.

When we utilize the correspondence theory of truth; truth is defined as that which corresponds to reality. We would therefore expect a sound philosophy to be in alignment with reality as opposed to being at odds with it. An unsound philosophy, therefore, would be one that is at odds with reality (or truth about reality). An unsound philosophy would be equated with an unsound, or false, understanding of reality.

Does Philosophy Corrupt Christian Doctrine or Theology?

The assertion that philosophy corrupts Christian doctrine or theology comes up from time to time. Is there some way that philosophy, in and of itself, corrupts Christian doctrine? To corrupt, in this sense, is to change something such that its original meaning or value is lost or subverted in some negative way.

In the context that we have discussed where both philosophy and theology are quests for truth and that all truth is God's truth, in a sense; it is hard to imagine a scenario where sound philosophical principles would result in a corruption of Christianity. However, it is not hard at all to imagine some unsound philosophy being directly in conflict with Christian teachings.

This is really the crux of whether a philosophy would be at odds with Christianity, is whether the particular (or general study of) philosophy is sound or unsound.

Does Philosophy in Christian Thinking Make Christianity Inaccessible?

In answer to one of the objections to philosophy; would the use of philosophy make Christianity inaccessible? There are those who would assert that the use of philosophy to

properly understand Christian doctrine would make Christianity inaccessible to the average person.

The argument is essentially that the average person does not have the necessary understanding of philosophy to properly apply it. Therefore, if the use of philosophy is necessary to properly understand or interpret Christian doctrine, then the majority of people would be unable to do it. Christianity would therefore be inaccessible to those who do not have the necessary understanding of philosophy.

One consideration that is relevant to this particular discussion is that everyone employs the tools of philosophy to some degree in their assessment of various worldviews presented to them, whether they realize it or not. It is a matter of degrees as to how much philosophy or reasoning an individual is capable of. Christianity makes truth claims that have to, of necessity, be analyzed by the individual in order to come to a conclusion regarding the truth of the matter and the degree of confidence that can be placed in the truth claims made.

The truth of Christianity is a question of fact. It is either true or false. The decision as to whether Christianity is true or false is of the utmost importance. The Christian philosopher C.S. Lewis says in his book, *God in the Dock*:

Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance, the only thing it cannot be is moderately important.¹⁴

The world is full of competing truth claims, many of which are false. Many truth claims revolve around religious contexts and worldviews. One's ability to reason and discern true claims from false ones can determine one's life or death and even eternal destiny. Truth often is exclusive in that a true statement conflicts with competing false statements. Reason and discernment are critical in determining truth from falsehood. Our degree of success in any

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970, p. 101

endeavor is often tied to our ability to discern truth from falsehood. This applies particularly to Christianity in that Christian truth claims stand in stark opposition to the claims of other world religions and ideologies. Ravi Zacharias, in his book *Jesus Among Other Gods*, says:

Historians, poets, philosopher – and a host of others – have regarded Him [Jesus] as the centerpiece of history. He himself made a statement that was very dramatic and daring when He said to the apostle Thomas, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Every word of that statement challenges the fundamental beliefs of Indian culture from which I come, and in reality, actually stands against an entire world today.¹⁵

He goes on to say:

All religions, plainly and simply, cannot be true. Some beliefs are false, and we know them to be false. So it does no good to put a halo on the notion of tolerance as if everything could be equally true. To deem all beliefs equally true is sheer nonsense for the simple reason that to deny that statement would also, then, be true. But if the denial of the statement is also true, then all religions are not true.

While Jesus does not require a degree in philosophy or theology in order for one to follow Him, the argument can be made, that the more one has understanding of His commands and doctrine, the better follower they may be. This is no different than what can be said of any discipline. One who wants to excel in any endeavor must apply themselves and learn in order to master the subject. Christianity is no different in this regard.

There are a number of biblical mandates that extoll the virtues of wisdom and would have us apply ourselves with discernment and vigor in pursuit of mastery in the Christian life.

Wisdom is referred to in the book of Proverbs over 50 times and appears in the entire Bible over 230 times. King Solomon implores the readers of his words:

Get wisdom, get understanding: forget it not; neither decline from the words of my mouth. Forsake her not, and she shall preserve thee: love her, and she shall keep thee. Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding. (Proverbs 4:5-7 KJV)

¹⁵ Zacharias, Ravi, *Jesus Among Other Gods, The Absolute Claims of the Christian Message*, W Publishing Group, Nashville, TN, 2000, Pages 4-5

In addition to pursuing wisdom and understanding, the Christian is admonished to be diligent in rightly interpreting (dividing) the scriptures so that they might be approved by God.

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15 KJV)

In the book of Acts, the Bereans are commended because they were of willing minds but were also diligent to search the scriptures and analyze them in order to determine if what they were being told was true.

These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so. (Acts 17:11 KJV)

The Christian is commanded to strive to properly interpret (rightly divide) God's special revelation to us and to apply it properly. God has given us the ability to think and to reason so that we might know right from wrong and good from evil. The emphasis above is on the word *rightly* (or properly). We rightly divide by careful study, reflection, consideration, and judgement. These are the tools of philosophy and reason.

On the other hand, Jesus says that those who will not receive the Kingdom of Heaven with the simplicity and humility of a child will not enter into it.

Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein. (Mark 10:15 KJV)

Clearly a deep understanding of theology and philosophy are not required in order to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. However, we do well to study and gain wisdom about the things of God in order to live in the way that we should.

Dr. Richard Howe, in his presentation *Defending the Handmaid: How Theology Needs Philosophy*¹⁶, provides an excellent illustration of this contrast by giving the example of a little

¹⁶ Howe, Richard G., *Defending the Handmaid: How Theology Needs Philosophy*, URL=<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJJPwdfJ3n0>

girl whose mother asks her to get a flower. The little girl doesn't need to have a PhD in botany in order to know what a flower is. However, someone who wants to have a higher knowledge of flowers may want to pursue higher knowledge of the principles of botany in order to have greater understanding.

The same applies to those who desire a deep understanding of any subject matter, including God and His word. The degree to which one has mastery of knowledge and understanding is partially a function of the degree to which they have pursued it. Someone who is gravely ill would hope that their doctor not only has a sincere desire to help them but also has a mastery of the art and science of medicine in the area where it is needed. In all fields of human study, a certain degree of study, analysis, reasoning, and judgement is required for deep understanding of the subject, including Theology.

There are those who would extoll faith as a virtue in and of itself. In fact, faith is only as good as its object. Our faith is only as good as what it is placed in. This applies to everything in reality and not just the physical things that we can see and touch. However, for many things, it is possible, through careful analysis, to know what the truth is. But for all things in reality, there is truth about them. Reasoning and judgement are required in order to determine what things are worthy of placing our faith in and which aren't.

Ideas have consequences. Our assumptions about reality matter. Truth matters. Our assumptions about reality and worldviews are foundational to our lives. Our views of reality will guide our decision-making. The decisions we make determine our ultimate outcome. Truth and the ability to know it are foundational to having successful or good outcomes. The consequences of having a flawed understanding of reality can be devastating. Wisdom and sound reasoning (i.e. sound philosophies) are critical to good outcomes in this life and the next. Not utilizing

wisdom and sound reasoning puts one at great risk of being deceived by false views or having less than optimal outcomes.

Do Philosophy and Theology Overcomplicate Following Christ?

In answer to one of the objections to philosophy; do philosophy and theology overcomplicate Christian living or following Christ? This argument is very similar to the previous argument related to inaccessibility. There are many who would argue that philosophy and even theology overcomplicate the simple understanding of Christian practice and therefore are irrelevant and unnecessary. There is a good amount of overlap between this objection and the previous one as they are closely related.

There are those within the Christian community who would take the position that “the Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it.” That is primarily the kind of mindset that would say that human reason and philosophy are irrelevant to Christian belief of living. That kind of mindset would, on the surface, be indicative of somewhat of a blind faith that can present some shortcomings both in Christian living and apologetics.

What amount of reasoning and philosophy is required to minimally become a Christian and live an acceptable Christian life? Can one be a Christian at all without coming to the table with at least some reasoning or philosophical disposition? While Jesus makes it clear that those who will not receive the Kingdom of Heaven as a child will not enter it, Christians are commanded to be able to give others a reason for the hope that they have in Christ.

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: (I Peter 3:15 KJV)

What about choosing among competing worldviews and religious claims? The world is filled with competing truth claims, many being utterly false. What if one were to be presented

with the competing truth claims of Islam and Christianity, or Scientology and Christianity, or any other religion? Would that person be equally justified in choosing one over the other regardless of any evaluation of the truth of either claim? What if a person chooses a false truth claim to accept? Is that person justified in choosing that false claim because they did it by “faith”?

The truth of the matter is that most people don't make this critical decision. Many are born into cultural situations where they are predisposed to certain worldviews. That doesn't mean that the cultural worldview they are born into is true. Many “Christians” give the reason for their being Christian as cultural reasons such as being born in a Christian family or being brought up in a church going family. However, the best reason for being a Christian is because Christianity is true. Detective and apologist J. Warner Wallace speaks about this topic at length in his excellent book *Forensic Faith*.

There are many who dismiss reason in the role of becoming a Christian by saying something like “as long as you end up in the right place, that's good enough”. What if you end up in the wrong place? The truth of Christianity is certainly a question of fact. It is either true or false. It is not a matter of mere preference. Any person would do well to properly discern the truth from falsehood to the best of their ability. The apostle Paul says the following about the truth or falsehood of the resurrection of Christ:

And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. (1 Corinthians 15:14-19 KJV)

There is so much emphasis in the Bible, especially the New Testament, on rightly dividing the truth and proper understanding of Christian doctrine that it is inconceivable that an

intelligent analysis and synthesis of Christian teachings is of little or no importance. Some unscrupulous religious leaders would like to have a flock of undiscerning congregants so that they can push their agendas without being questioned. That's one reason why discernment is so important. So that people are not led astray by unsound teachings or doctrines.

Does everyone have the aptitude to engage in deep philosophical study and detailed understanding of various topics? No. I think there are a couple of observations that are relevant to the practicing Christians in this regard though. One is that we have all been endowed with various individual levels of gifts and abilities that are to be used within the body of Christ. Secondly, we are to be held accountable for the level of giftedness, or lack thereof, that we have been given and used effectively for God's work.

Good Philosophy is Necessary Because Bad Philosophy Exists

We have examined in detail some responses to objections to philosophy in relation to Christianity and hopefully have refuted them to at least some degree. Let's go beyond that and look at some ways in which philosophy actually helps or aids in Christian theology and Christian living. In the last section we had some discussion about the need for discernment in fending off unsound doctrines or unsound philosophies.

The Christian philosopher C.S. Lewis said:

Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered.¹⁷

There are multitudes of bad or unsound philosophies in the world today. Good or sound philosophies are needed today as much as or more than ever. Postmodernism is one of those bad philosophies. Postmodernism has so profoundly influenced the thinking of our culture that we

¹⁷ Lewis, C.S., *Learning in War-Time* in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, rev. and exp. ed., Orlando, FL, Macmillan, 1980, p. 28

can see a general shift away from the classical views of the past regarding truth and certainty about it. It is a dangerous creeping crud that threatens the very foundations of critical thinking and right action. David Limbaugh says, in his Foreward to the book *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist*:

Our postmodern culture has done a number on the idea of truth. It teaches that truth and morality are relative, that there is no such thing as absolute truth. To the intellectual elite dominating our universities and the mainstream media, these ideas are considered enlightened and progressive, even though we all intuitively understand that absolute truth exists, and more importantly, we all conduct our lives with that recognition.¹⁸

The assertion that there is no truth is one of, if not the, most destructive teachings that there is. Why? Because it is not true, for one thing. The absence of truth would make having any understanding of the true nature of things impossible. The tools of sound philosophy and reason are critical in defending truth in our society today. Both philosophy in general and Christian theology are interested in that objective.

How Does Philosophy Help Christian Theology?

St. Clement of Alexandria, a Christian Philosopher in the Middle ages said, “Philosophy is the Handmaid of Theology.” He said this to emphasize the importance of the mind or critical thinking in order to fathom the things divine. The principles and tools of philosophy and reason can be extremely helpful in the study of Christian doctrine or theology.

Dr. Richard Howe, in his paper *Defending the Handmaid: How Theology Needs Philosophy*, points out some fundamental ways in which he believes philosophy is necessary for sound theology:¹⁹

- philosophy can establish the foundation for theology

¹⁸ Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, 2004, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* (Kindle Edition), Wheaton Illinois, Crossway Books, p. 8

¹⁹ Howe, Richard G., *Defending the Handmaid: How Theology Needs Philosophy*, ISCA, 2016, p. 12

- philosophy can clarify the meanings in theology, and
- philosophy can safeguard the doctrines of theology

He expands on the three fundamental areas of contribution as follows. Foundational topics include:

- truth
- logic
- knowledge
- morality
- life (specifically, the sanctity of life), and
- God (specifically, the existence of God)

He identifies issues in need of clarity for the sake of sound theology to include:

- the meaning of ‘nature’
- the meaning of ‘flesh vs. spirit’, and
- the meaning of inerrancy

He identifies some specific doctrines whose integrity necessarily includes sound philosophy to include:

- the attributes of God
- the doctrine of miracles, and
- the doctrine of faith, particularly in regard to the heresies of the Word of Faith Movement

Philosophy and sound reason have been such an integral part of the development of theology over the years, that it may not be a stretch to say that it is not possible to have Christian theology, as we know it, without the tools of philosophy.

How Does Philosophy Help in Christian Living?

The application of reason and philosophy in the pursuit of a higher understanding of God and His Word are extremely valuable in Christian living as well as in sharing our faith in a coherent way with others. It is through understanding, as well as faith, that we are able to give a reason as we are commanded in I Peter 3:15. David Limbaugh also says:

But I believe there's another important reason for the scriptural mandate to "be prepared to give an answer." It's not just to help us effectively communicate the gospel. Being prepared will also arm us with the tools to resist certain nagging doubts that we encounter in moments of weakness. It will – because it marshals the evidence for Christianity – fortify our faith.²⁰

The stronger our understanding and confidence in the actual truth of the Word of God and the gospel, the stronger and more vibrant our individual Christian lives can be. If we are ourselves convinced of the truth, we can be vastly more confident than if we are just taking someone else's word for it.

What Are the Keys to Harmonizing Philosophy and Christian Doctrine?

In bringing together the previous discussions of various objections to philosophy and then the later discussions of ways that philosophy helps Christian theology and living, let us attempt to outline the keys to harmonizing philosophy and Christian doctrine.

Firstly, it is clear from previous discussion that a key consideration in determining if a philosophy would be at odds with Christianity is the question of its soundness. Does the philosophy align with truth? Does it correspond with reality? Sound philosophy not only does not conflict with Christianity, it can help our theology, apologetics and Christian living in a number of ways. Unsound philosophies wreak havoc on any search for true meaning and pursuit of right thought.

²⁰ Geisler and Turek, p. 7

Secondly, especially for the Christian, it is important to be mindful of the tremendous gulf between divine (God's) knowledge and man's knowledge. If God is God and is, in fact, the all-powerful, all-knowing creator of the universe; then his revelation is supreme and of the ultimate reliability. Man's wisdom, in relation to God's, is infinitesimally small. Our ability to know and to reason is a very gift of God. We can know and to reason because God has provided an orderly creation in which we can actually know certain (not all) truths about reality. We are also able to make mistakes in perception, reason, and judgement while God is not. Based on this realization, we have to be mindful and careful not to elevate our own reason and knowledge to the same level of God's.

If Christians can exercise sound reason and judgement with epistemic humility, then we can make great and effective use of the gift of intellect that the Lord has given us to be used in a right manner. Reason and philosophy can be utilized for better understanding of God, His Word, and the application thereof. It is wrong to outright dismiss reason and philosophy for this cause.

Conclusion

Based on the information that we have discussed in the preceding sections; philosophy itself, while not necessarily essential to the practicing Christian, is not at all at odds with Christianity. To the contrary, the tools of philosophy can do much to aid in the study and development Christian theology and, in fact, is essential to that. Philosophy, in the individual sense, is unavoidable in that we all develop our own philosophies about the world around us. The key is to be able to ascertain and discern between sound and unsound philosophy so that unsound ideas can be rejected. Additionally, the Christian should be mindful not to elevate philosophical assumptions or opinions above clear special revelation.

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