



Learn to discern

For Christian believers, the term "critical thinking" usually has bad connotations. It makes them think of arrogant philosophers or unbelieving Bible scholars who exalt human reason above the truth of God. After all, so-called "higher criticism" of Scripture, which regards the Bible as just another example of purely human literature, has led many folks away from the faith.

Rightly then, believers fear the worldly idea of critical thinking. However, there is another type of critical thinking which ought to be normal for Christians. There is a need for a critical, Christian mind. Such a mind examines and evaluates everything it meets in the world according to the standard of Scripture. In every generation, there is an urgent need for young people who learn to discern.

If people do not learn to be critical thinkers, they will become gullible Christians, easy to deceive. If believers don't learn to discern, they will be duped by every fad of modern thought and life.

Believing everything

The book of Proverbs has a great deal to say about people who are "simple." Sometimes, Scripture uses the term "simple" in a positive way to describe those who are innocent or guileless. Also today, the word can mean a person who lives naturally, without pretension or affectation. More often, however, "simple" means something negative. The term is used of people who could and should have known better than to get sucked in by some ungodly idea or practice.

For example, Proverbs 14, verse 15, states that, *"The simple believes everything, but the prudent looks where he is going."* Here the word "simple" means a person who fails to discern. He lives with surface impressions, never stopping to consider the validity of his thoughts and actions. He lives the unexamined life. Mostly, he believes what everybody else believes. He buys into the cultural assumptions and values of the world around him without a second thought. Quickly and readily, he says his Amen to the prevailing world view of his time.

In this connection, we may recall that G.K. Chesterton somewhere said that when people cease to believe in the God of Christianity, they believe in anything. They imagine they believe in nothing, while, in reality, they believe virtually anything. In the same way, the simple person of Proverbs 14:15 puts his faith in anything that happens along his mental, moral and spiritual path. He does not discern the background and the implications of the ideas in which he naively puts his trust.

Led astray

Obviously, the results of being simple in this negative sense can be destructive. Those who lack discretion and discernment can walk straight into moral trouble (compare Proverbs 9:4, 16). Because they don't stop to think and consider in the light of God's Word, they are led astray. What is more important, the simple are prone to mental deviation. Their thoughts become corrupted. Without realizing what's happening, they start thinking like pagans, with the same assumptions and values.

Another result of being "simple" is vulnerability to heresy. The simple have no protection against anti-scriptural ideas. We need to realize that heretics rarely announce themselves. They don't tell the church that they are repudiating the Gospel. They never say: "Listen to me, I'm a heretic, and

"I'll lead you away from the Faith." Instead, wrong-thinking teachers usually claim to be orthodox. They claim that their opinions are within the boundaries of Scripture and Confession. In many cases, they genuinely believe themselves to be orthodox.

Before heresy becomes publicly visible and audible, there can be a long process of diluted Christian thinking. Under the surface of church life, the bond of faith to all that God has said to us in His Word is weakened. It can happen that the thinking of a whole generation in the church is no longer shaped by Scripture. Sometimes, the issue is not so much what a certain teacher or thinker or writer says that is wrong as what he doesn't say that is right. His silence about key issues of the day can be an indication of emerging deviance. The Bible even warns us of people who bring in heresies secretly (2 Peter 2:1). The destructive work of the heretic is aided by our natural preference for error. Heresy sounds good to our ears (compare 2 Timothy 4:3).

For a long time, church life can go on quite calmly, but then suddenly the wrong thinking of the false teachers comes to the fore. All of a sudden, the church has to deal with people who deny the historicity of Genesis one or of the miracles of Christ. All of a sudden, there are people in the church who say that while God's Word is infallible, it isn't inerrant. In other times and places, there are folks who sever the bond between justification and sanctification or who challenge the doctrine of the Trinity or the position of women in the congregation or the traditional teaching of the church about homosexuality.

On guard

The emergence of the error seems sudden. However, the particular error is only the manifestation of a wrong kind of thinking which has now come to a logical conclusion. What we need in the church is the ability to discern that wrong thinking in its very beginning. We need to detect the wrong thought processes before they come to the surface and bear fruit. We need to call people away from thinking which despises God's revelation or twists it to suit our own fancy. We need critical thinkers who evaluate every word and every thought and every opinion by the standard of Scripture itself. As we fill our minds continuously with the sound and good doctrine (compare 1 Timothy 4:6; 2 Timothy 4:3), we'll be able to discern.

If we don't learn to discern in these critical areas of doctrine and ethics, we will find that wrong will do a pernicious work in the churches (compare 2 Peter 2:1). Once these ideas gain a following, they eat their way like gangrene through the people of God (2 Timothy 2:17), eroding faith and corrupting morals.

Let's take careful note of the biblical warning to be on guard for false, deceptive teachers. We need to examine every teaching because the Holy Spirit is not the source of all of them (compare 1 John. 4:1). If we don't test constantly, we'll soon end up with a completely different Gospel (Galatians 1:1, 7; 2 Corinthians 11:14). The Scriptures inform us that Satan conceals his true intention. He is able to disguise himself as an "*angel of light*" (2 Corinthians 11:13). He is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). If we don't learn to discern, we'll be easy prey for people who love the lie more than the truth; we'll be tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles (Ephesians 4:14). In short, we'll be simpletons who listen to anybody and believe anything because we no longer firmly adhere to the living Word of God (compare here 2 Timothy 3:6).

Do you want to be exploited by wrong-thinking, false-hearted teachers and philosophers and theologians and writers of books and makers of culture? Do you want to be duped? Of course not. Then learn to discern! Learn to probe empty talk with hard questions. Learn to look under the surface of glittering ways of life. Search out the assumptions in arguments. Cast down every proud thought which exalts itself against the authority of our God and His Word (compare 2 Corinthians 10:5). Ask yourself: what is the starting point of this thought or this lifestyle choice? Does it show submission to God? Is it built on scriptural or on secular assumptions? We need to meet the danger of false teaching with spiritual discipline and doctrinal precision. We need Christian, critical thinkers who know God's Word and the Confessions of His church. Otherwise, we will be duped!

Critical thinkers will expose the futile thoughts and corrupt morals of unbelieving man. Their discerning investigation will reveal the terrible prejudice of modern thinking and living against God and His Anointed One, Jesus Christ. By means of their searching examinations, these eagle-eyed believers will demonstrate the pathetic futility of such rebellion against the Lord. They will show that thinking and living outside the framework of God's truth leads only to trouble and confusion, not to mention self-contradiction. In a word, critical Christian thought will expose the vanity of life without the Lord.

Critical thinkers are not proud. They are themselves humble children of the Lord who strive to submit all their thoughts and lifestyle choices to God's Word. They are teachable students of Jesus Christ. Day by day, they learn by God's Holy Spirit to deny themselves and follow their Master. Thus, being a critical thinker involves the constant discipline of worship, prayer, Bible study and obedience to the Lord's commandments. Without this firm basis, we'll run the risk of expressing what is merely our own opinion as absolute truth. Here the word of Proverbs 18, verse 2 comes to mind:

"A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion."

When our critical thinking is firmly based on divine truth, then we energetically can defend the faith and critique its enemies while maintaining a position of gentleness and reverence (1 Peter 3:15) and showing perfect courtesy toward all men (Titus 3:2).

Christian skeptic

What now does critical thinking mean in a very practical sense? It means being a doubter of every thought that emanates from the unregenerated mind and heart of man. Critical thinking means putting some distance between yourself and worldly ideas and lifestyles. It means not saying Amen so quickly to whatever catches your fancy. Critical thinking means reading slowly, watching for background ideas and presuppositions. Critical thinking means walking slowly, too, being careful where your feet lead you, lest you be tempted to sin. Being a critical thinker implies radical skepticism toward what we hear every day in the various media. It means questioning closely the origins of popular slogans and commonplace viewpoints.

In short, being a Christian, critical thinker means that we live in the reality of the antithesis established by God (Genesis 3:15). Recognizing that there is perpetual conflict between the truth of God and the lies of unbelief and sin, we guard our hearts with all vigilance (Proverb 4:23), lest we also be deceived.

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