

Killer Question

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October 8, 2013

The best critical thinking “power tool” I’ve ever discovered is a set of [four “Killer Questions.”](#) They’ve been around since Socrates, but after my friend Dr. Jeff Myers of [Summit Ministries](#) introduced them to me a few years ago, they have totally changed the way I process everything I hear:

1. What do you mean by that?
2. Where do you get your information?
3. How do you know it’s true?
4. What if you’re wrong?

I use the #1 question the most. “What do you mean by that?” is a clarifying question that invites the other person to define their terms and make sure you’re both talking about the same thing. This is a helpful question to keep in mind even when reading the newspaper, a website, or people’s Facebook posts—especially political and religious statements—because our society seems to be getting less and less able to articulate what we really mean. Or think.

For example, if someone tells me, “I don’t believe in God,” it’s good to gently probe about the kind of God they claim they don’t believe in: “What do you mean by ‘God’?” Often what people reject is actually an untrue caricature of God, a harsh, condemning, unloving and unreasonable deity who just might remind them of all the things they don’t like about their earthly fathers! In that case, I can assure them that I don’t believe in that god either—and then I might get a chance to talk about the true God of the Bible who reveals Himself as an eternally loving Father, Son and Spirit who invites us into the divine life of light, love and goodness.

The question "What do you mean by that?" is powerful for preventing misunderstandings. A friend of mine who was on the pastoral staff of a church had a number of conversations with a new attender. When the woman told him about how her life was falling apart, he shared the good news of Jesus with her, and invited her to put her trust in Him. She asked a number of questions about what it meant to become a Christian. Afterwards, she called the church to lodge a complaint that he had been inappropriate with her.

The church leadership immediately suspended him. He knew that something was very, very wrong with the situation but couldn't get traction with the complaint. It finally turned out that when the woman had asked what would happen if she refused to trust Christ, he regretfully told her that she would spend eternity separated from Him, which the Bible calls hell. Offended, she considered his answer inappropriate and called to complain. But no one had asked her, "What do you mean by 'inappropriate'?" The church leadership had assumed the worst instead of simply asking for clarification. If they'd asked, they would have discovered that my friend had merely shared the gospel.

Another friend of mine, at nineteen years old, told her pastor that she was pregnant. His first response was to fire her from working in the nursery, which she loved, because they wouldn't want visitors thinking the church condoned sexual sin and teenage pregnancy. He never asked a single question. If he had just asked, "Wow—what do you want to tell me about this?" she would have told him that she'd been acquaintance-raped. But because of her dysfunctional family patterns, she had been robbed of her voice to speak up against injustice. Over twelve years later, she's still suffering the emotional wounds of his judgmental punishment.

Recently, a high school nurse told me that one of her girl students said she was a lesbian. The nurse asked her own version of "What do you mean by that," and inquired how she'd

come to that conclusion. The student said, “I didn’t have a boyfriend in sixth, seventh or eighth grade, so that makes me a lesbian.” My friend was able to speak truth to this confused young girl because of asking good questions.

Where might you find a good place to use this powerful Killer Question this week?

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/killer_question

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Can Western-style Education Transform the Middle East?

Dear Probe reader,

A highlight of my recent tour of Jordan—a land teeming with biblical history—was visiting King’s Academy. Jordan’s new prep school emphasizes critical thinking over rote learning, teaching students not *what* to think but *how* to think. Could it become a model to train a new generation of Middle Eastern leaders to shake hands with each other and the West?

As you analyze your world through biblical lenses, it’s important to be aware of significant global developments. King’s Academy has garnered considerable attention among US and international media:

“Rather revolutionary” (TIME)

“What could be more important in the Middle East than educating open-minded future leaders?” (The Sunday Times)

[London] op-ed)

*"Bringing the best of western education to the Middle East."
(NPR)*

*"There is a crisis in Arab education. This school [is] about
the future—trying to pull an education system into the 21st
Century—to build bridges between clashing cultures." (CBS-TV
News)*

Biblical worldview, of course, promotes careful, critical thinking. Many westerners are unaware of how lack of critical thinking permeates Middle Eastern education and, hence, influences international relations. This piece aims to expand readers' geopolitical understanding. And, alas, too many western readers lack critical thinking themselves, so this uses current news to help focus attention on that biblical value, a crucial one if we are to communicate cross culturally.

As are most of my shorter articles on the Probe Ministries website, this is an op-ed written for secular newspapers. I'm honored that you might read it and hope you find it useful.

Warm regards,

Rusty Wright

If you only learn to repeat what you've been taught—and not to think for yourself—you may be ill prepared to vote.

That's the lesson the Jerusalem-born librarian conveyed as we sat in her office in a brand new boarding school near Madaba, Jordan. When Afaf Kazimi moved to Jordan many years ago and could vote for the first time, she simply cast her ballot on another's recommendation without knowing much about the candidate. I voted for the wrong person, she concluded in

hindsight.

Much of her early school education had involved rote memorization—learning facts for tests, as is common in the Middle East—and had lacked training in critical thinking, skills she developed later. Now she's excited to be part of a new experiment that blends Western analytical emphases with traditional Arab culture, helping students avoid the educational path she and others had to take.

Arab Preppies

Jordan's King's Academy opened in 2007 with goals of helping students from many nations and different religious backgrounds learn not *what* to think but *how* to think. Patterned after Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts, King Abdullah's alma mater, King's looks much like a New England prep school. Think *Dead Poets Society* or *The Emperors Club*, coed and transplanted to a desert oasis.

Students wear preppie blue blazers and ties, khaki trousers. Many live in dormitories, with faculty house parents. They have service responsibilities in the dining hall and community.

Sports aim to cultivate teamwork and discipline. An honor code is being developed. Course offerings involve the humanities, social sciences and hard sciences and include studies in Islam, Christianity, world religions, communication, rhetoric and ethics. Financial aid aims for socioeconomic diversity. Courses are taught in English and Arabic.

King Abdulla's Deerfield experience was formative in his young life. It developed lasting relationships. He's a friend of the West. Jordan has led efforts to renounce religious extremism and help religions coexist peacefully. King's Academy hopes its multinational faculty will train future leaders for the Middle East and beyond.

Critical Thinking

Since I attended Choate, Deerfield's peer (and, my classmates would want me to emphasize, chief rival), I'm especially interested in this Jordanian experiment. I'm grateful that I learned early to think critically and to ask lots of questions. King's appears eager to cultivate inquisitive minds.

A poster of William Shakespeare hung in the King's library along with promotion for J.R.R. Tolkien and the *International Herald Tribune*. Broad reading—especially of writers with whom you disagree—can facilitate learning and enhance communication. Intelligent people are always ready to learn, affirms an ancient proverb. Their ears are open for knowledge ([Proverbs 18:15](#) NLT). How much better to get wisdom than gold, and good judgment than silver! claims another ([Proverbs 16:16](#) NLT).

Logical, analytical thinking is, of course, crucial for healthy societies. Sloppy logic can be amusing or devastating: All fish swim. I swim. Therefore, I am a fish. Somewhat similar illogic appears in numerous aberrations: Muslim extremists threaten Western society. Omar is a Muslim. So Omar is a threat to me. Or, American foreign policy undermines my country. You're an American. Thus, you're my enemy. Shallow thinkers can turn illogic into dogma and breed fanaticism.

Of course, no school will produce perfect students. George W. Bush's critics might sometimes wonder if his Andover education taught him to think clearly. And if Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had attended Andover, would he and Bush get along? Well, maybe. But please, don't expect miracles.

King Abdullah's promising educational venture deserves close scrutiny. Could it become a model to train a new generation of Middle Eastern leaders to shake hands with each other and the West?

Why We Shouldn't Hate Philosophy: A Biblical Perspective

Michael Gleghorn examines the role of philosophy in a Christian worldview. Does philosophy help us flesh out our biblical perspective or does it just confuse our understanding?

A Walk on the Slippery Rocks

For many people in our culture today, Edie Brickell and the New Bohemians got it right: "Philosophy is a walk on the slippery rocks." But for some in the Christian community, they didn't go far enough. Philosophy, they say, is far more dangerous than a walk on slippery rocks. It's an enemy of orthodoxy and a friend of heresy. It's typically a product of wild, rash, and uncontrolled human speculation. Its doctrines are empty and deceptive. Worse still, they may even come from demons!

Such attitudes are hardly new. The early church father Tertullian famously wrote:

What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic? . . . I have no use for a Stoic or a Platonic . . . Christianity. After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel no need of research. [\[1\]](#)

Should Christians, then, hate and reject all philosophy? Should we shun it, despise it, and trample it underfoot? Doesn't the Bible warn us about the dangers of philosophy and urge us to avoid it? In thinking through such questions, it's important that we be careful. Before we possibly injure ourselves with any violent, knee-jerk reactions, we may first want to settle down a bit and ask ourselves a few questions. First, what exactly is philosophy anyway? What, if anything, does the Bible have to say about it? Might it have any value for the Christian faith? Could it possibly help strengthen or support the ministry of the church? Are there any potential benefits that Christians might gain from studying philosophy? And if so, what are they? These are just a few of the questions that we want to consider.

But let's begin with that first question: Just what *is* philosophy anyway? Defining this term can be difficult. It gets tossed around by different people in a variety of ways. But we can get a rough idea of its meaning by observing that it comes from two Greek words: *philein*, which means "to love," and *sophia*, which means "wisdom." So at one level, *philosophy* is just the love of wisdom. There's nothing wrong with that!

But let's go further. Socrates claimed that the unexamined life was not worth living. And throughout its history, philosophy has gained a reputation for the careful, rational, and critical examination of life's biggest questions. "Accordingly," write Christian philosophers J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, "philosophy may be defined as the attempt to think rationally and critically about life's most important questions in order to obtain knowledge and wisdom about them."[\[2\]](#) So while philosophy may *sometimes* be a walk on slippery rocks, it may also be a potentially powerful resource for thinking through some of life's most important issues.

Beware of Hollow and Deceptive Philosophy

In their recent philosophy textbook, Moreland and Craig make the following statement:

For many years we have each been involved, not just in scholarly work, but in speaking evangelistically on university campuses with groups like . . . Campus Crusade for Christ . . . Again and again, we have seen the practical value of philosophical studies in reaching students for Christ. . . The fact is that there is tremendous interest among unbelieving students in hearing a rational presentation and defense of the gospel, and some will be ready to respond with trust in Christ. To speak frankly, we do not know how one could minister effectively in a public way on our university campuses without training in philosophy.[\[3\]](#)

This is a strong endorsement of the value of philosophy in doing university evangelism on today's campuses. But some might be thinking, "What a minute! Doesn't the Bible warn us about the dangers of philosophy? And aren't we urged to avoid such dangers?"

In Colossians 2:8 (NIV), the apostle Paul wrote, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ." What does this verse mean? Is Paul saying that Christians shouldn't study philosophy? Let's take a closer look.

First, "the Greek grammar indicates that 'hollow and deceptive' go together with 'philosophy.'" [\[4\]](#) So Paul is not condemning *all* philosophy here. Instead, he's warning the Colossians about being taken captive by a particular "hollow and deceptive" philosophy that was making inroads into their church. Many scholars believe that the philosophy Paul had in mind was a Gnostic-like philosophy that promoted legalism,

mysticism, and asceticism.[{5}](#)

Second, Paul doesn't forbid the *study* of philosophy in this verse. Rather, he warns the Colossian believers not to be *taken captive* by empty and deceptive human speculation. This distinction is important. One can *study* philosophy, even "empty and deceptive" philosophy, without being *taken captive* by it.

What does it mean to be "taken captive"? When men are taken captive in war, they are forced to go where their captors lead them. They may only be permitted to see and hear certain things, or to eat and sleep at certain times. In short, captives are under the *control* of their captors. This is what Paul is warning the Colossians about. He's urging them to not let their beliefs and attitudes be *controlled* by an alien, non-Christian philosophy. He's not saying that philosophy in general is bad or that it's wrong to study philosophy as an academic discipline.

But doesn't Paul also say that God has made foolish the wisdom of the world? And doesn't *this* count against the study of philosophy?

Is Worldly Wisdom Worthless?

In 1 Corinthians 1:20 (NIV) the apostle Paul wrote, "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" Some Christians think this passage teaches that the study of philosophy and human wisdom is both foolish and a waste of time. But is this correct? Is that really what Paul was saying in this passage? I personally don't think so.

We must remember that Paul himself had at least some knowledge of both pagan philosophy and literature – and he made much use of reasoning in personal evangelism. In Acts 17 we learn that while Paul was in Athens "he *reasoned* in the synagogue with

the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there" (v. 17; NIV). On one occasion he spent time conversing and disputing with some of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers (v. 18). Further, when it suited his purposes, Paul could quote freely (and accurately) from the writings of pagan poets. In Acts 17:28 he cites with approval both the Cretan poet Epimenides and the Cilician poet Aratus, using them to make a *valid theological point about the nature of God and man* to the educated members of the Athenian Areopagus. Thus, we should at least be cautious before asserting that Paul was opposed to *all* philosophy and human wisdom. He obviously wasn't.

But if this is so, then in what sense has God made foolish the wisdom of the world? What did Paul mean when he wrote this? The answer, I think, can be found (at least in part) in the very next verse: "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not *come to know God*, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21; NASB). In other words, as Craig and Moreland observe, "the gospel of salvation could never have been discovered by philosophy, but had to be revealed by the biblical God who acts in history."[\[6\]](#) This clearly indicates the *limitations* of philosophy and human wisdom. But the fact that these disciplines have very real *limitations* in no way implies that they are utterly *worthless*. We need to appreciate something for what it is, recognizing its limitations, but appreciating its value all the same. Philosophy by itself could never have discovered the gospel. But this doesn't mean that it's not still a valuable ally in the search for truth and a valuable resource for carefully thinking through some of life's greatest mysteries.

In the remainder of this article, we'll explore some of the ways in which philosophy *is* valuable, both for the individual Christian and for the ministry of the church.

The Value of Philosophy (Part 1)

Moreland and Craig observe that “throughout the history of Christianity, philosophy has played an important role in the life of the church and the spread and defense of the gospel of Christ.”[\[7\]](#)

John Wesley, the famous revivalist and theologian, seemed well-aware of this fact. In 1756 he delivered “An Address to the Clergy”. Among the various qualifications that Wesley thought a good minister should have, one was a basic knowledge of philosophy. He challenged his fellow clergymen with these questions: “Am I a tolerable master of the sciences? Have I gone through the very gate of them, logic? . . . Do I understand metaphysics; if not the . . . subtleties of . . . Aquinas, yet the first rudiments, the general principles, of that useful science?”[\[8\]](#) It’s interesting to note that Wesley’s passion for preaching and evangelism didn’t cause him to denigrate the importance of basic philosophical knowledge. Indeed, he rather insists on its importance for anyone involved in the teaching and preaching ministries of the church.

But *why* is philosophy valuable? What practical benefits does it offer those involved in regular Christian service? And how has it contributed to the health and well-being of the church throughout history? Drs. Moreland and Craig list many reasons why philosophy is (and has been) such an important part of a thriving Christian community.[\[9\]](#)

In the first place, philosophy is of tremendous value in the tasks of Christian apologetics and polemics. Whereas the goal of apologetics is to provide a reasoned defense of the truth of Christianity, “polemics is the task of criticizing and refuting alternative views of the world.”[\[10\]](#) Both tasks are important, and both are biblical. The apostle Peter tells us to always be ready “to make a defense” for the hope that we have in Christ (1 Pet. 3:15; NASB). Jude exhorts us to

“contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (v. 3; NASB). And Paul says that elders in the church should “be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Tit. 1:9; NASB). The proper use of philosophy can be a great help in fulfilling each of these biblical injunctions.

Additionally, philosophy serves as the handmaid of theology by bringing clarity and precision to the formulation of Christian doctrine. “For example, philosophers help to clarify the different attributes of God; they can show that the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are not contradictory; they can shed light on the nature of human freedom, and so on.”[{11}](#) In other words, the task of the theologian is made easier with the help of his friends in the philosophy department!

The Value of Philosophy (Part 2)

Let’s consider a few more ways in which philosophy can help strengthen and support both the individual believer and the universal church.

First, careful philosophical reflection is one of the ways in which human beings uniquely express that they are made in the image and likeness of God. As Drs. Craig and Moreland observe, “God . . . is a rational being, and humans are made like him in this respect.”[{12}](#) One of the ways in which we can honor God’s commandment to love him with our minds (Matt. 22:37) is to give serious philosophical consideration to what God has revealed about himself in creation, conscience, history, and the Bible. As we reverently reflect on the attributes of God, or His work in creation and redemption, we aren’t merely engaged in a useless academic exercise. On the contrary, we are loving God with our minds—and our hearts are often led to worship and adore the One “who alone is immortal and . . . lives in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16; NIV).

But philosophy isn't only of value for the individual believer; it's also of value for the universal church. Commenting on John Gager's book, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity*, Drs. Moreland and Craig write:

The early church faced intellectual and cultural ridicule from Romans and Greeks. This ridicule threatened internal cohesion within the church and its evangelistic boldness toward unbelievers. Gager argues that it was primarily the presence of philosophers and apologists within the church that enhanced the self-image of the Christian community because these early scholars showed that the Christian community was just as rich intellectually and culturally as was the pagan culture surrounding it.[{13}](#)

Christian philosophers and apologists in our own day continue to serve a similar function. By carefully explaining and defending the Christian faith, they help enhance the self-image of the church, increase the confidence and boldness of believers in evangelism, and help keep Christianity a viable option among sincere seekers in the intellectual marketplace of ideas.

Of course, not all philosophy is friendly to Christianity. Indeed, some of it is downright hostile. But this shouldn't cause Christians to abandon the task and (for some) even calling of philosophy. The church has always needed, and still needs today, talented men and women who can use philosophy to rationally declare and defend the Christian faith to everyone who asks for a reason for the hope that we have in Christ (1 Pet. 3:15). As C.S. Lewis once said, "Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered."[{14}](#) These are just a few of the reasons why we shouldn't hate philosophy.

Notes

1. Tertullian, "The Prescriptions Against the Heretics," trans. S.L. Greenslade, in *Early Latin Theology* (Vol. V in "The Library of Christian Classics"; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 31-32; cited in Hugh T. Kerr, ed., *Readings in Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 39.
2. William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 13.
3. Ibid., 4-5.
4. Ibid., 18.
5. Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 487.
6. Craig and Moreland, 19.
7. Ibid., 12.
8. John Wesley, "An Address to the Clergy," delivered February 6, 1756. Reprinted in *The Works of John Wesley*, 3d ed., 7 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1996), 6:217-31; cited in Craig and Moreland, 4.
9. See Craig and Moreland, 14-17. I have relied heavily on their observations in this, and the following, section of this article.
10. Ibid., 15.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 16.
14. C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1949), 50; cited in Craig and Moreland, 17.

“How Do We Use Critical Thinking with the Bible?”

I was involved in a religious cult for a number of years and am still seeking. I've done lots of bible reading and have shared thoughts with many, many people. After reading some info on your site, I was left wondering: If a person takes the bible as the written word, how can it be that critical thinking would have to be applied? Does it not say “My sheep know my voice?”

My chief concern is that it would seem the most simple-minded person should be able to hear the truth and recognize it. Otherwise, truth is only for the intelligent. Does it really need to be that complicated?

Dear _____,

First of all, praise God for bringing you out of the cult! A dear friend of mine is still working through the lies that marked her life because of a cult's influence on her entire family. I am so glad you have supernatural assistance available to you for working through the differences between the lies and the truth, the deception and the light, just for the asking!

I think of critical thinking as a filter through which we examine truth claims. We ask questions of people and writings to find out if they are reliable—questions like,

- *What do you mean by that? (Defining terms)*
- *Where do you get your information?*
- *How do you know this is true?*
- *What if you're wrong?*

When it comes to the Bible, which claims to be the very word

of God, these questions are still helpful. “What do you mean by that?” is an important question to ask when we come to the text. We need to discern whether something is literal or figurative, historical or poetic or prophetic. That’s why it’s so important to read and study the WHOLE Bible and not just verses here and there. The writers (and God inspiring the writers) had a definite meaning in mind when they wrote down the biblical text, and it’s important for us to bring our understanding in line with their intent. For instance, when Jesus said, “I am the vine,” did He mean He was green and stringy? Or was He speaking in figurative language? When we read the rest of John and see that He drew analogies a lot to help us understand spiritual truth, we can see that He wasn’t speaking literally at this point.

The answer to the question, “Where do you get your information?” is that the Bible is revelation. God speaks to us from “outside the box,” so to speak, from His throne in heaven to us down on earth, giving us perspective and understanding we could never figure out on our own. The Bible claims to be God’s own thought, feelings and words, and the worldview that results from reading the Bible is more consistent with reality than any other worldview.

When we look at the reliability of the biblical documents, we can see that we can trust that the Bible we have today has been reliably handed down from the original documents (or very very close). The support for the Bible being the actual word of God is so strong that it answers the question “How do you know this is true?” We have several articles on the issue of biblical reliability that I invite you to read and enjoy:

[Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?](#)

[Authority of the Bible](#)

[How I Know Christianity is True](#)

I think you make an excellent point about even the most

simple-minded person being able to recognize truth and respond to it. That's one of the things I personally love about a relationship with Christ and reading and studying the Bible: God has communicated to us very clearly on the most important issues, while still tantalizing us with the unfathomable depths of His mind and spirit to keep us interested for all eternity.

The fact that mentally retarded children can understand that Jesus is God's Son, He loves them and came to die on the cross in their place, and then choose to trust Him as Savior and Lord, shows me that the most basic and essential truths are accessible to everyone.

Thanks for writing!

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

Tuning Up Your Baloney Detector

Critical thinking skills are necessary for thinking biblically and in a way that glorifies God. Sue Bohlin explores some of the ways to develop those skills.

This article is also available in [Spanish](#).



The Need to Think Critically

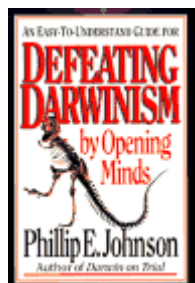
One of our main objectives here at Probe Ministries is to help people learn to love God with their minds. You really can't do that without learning to think biblically, and think

critically. In our television-saturated culture, we have discovered that more Christians are conformed to the philosophies and deceptions of the world than the teachings and truths of the Bible. So in this essay I offer some suggestions on how to sharpen our thinking skills. The apostle Paul exhorts us in Colossians 2:8, "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ." The way to prevent ourselves from being taken captive to unbiblical, ungodly thinking is to build a kind of mental grid through which we filter what we see, hear, and read.

The first element of the grid is to know what the Bible says, so we can compare the ideas that permeate our culture to the absolute truth of what God has revealed. There is no room for shortcuts here; it takes time in God's Word, reading and meditating on what we read. And in order to understand the context for what we read, we need to work our way through the Bible one book at a time rather than opening it up at random and reading in a hit-or-miss fashion. We know that not everyone is a reader; God made some people auditory learners, and they need to hear the Word rather than read it. That is fine—the Scripture says, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). It doesn't say "reading"! It is now possible to hear the Bible on cassette or CD or even on the Internet.[\[1\]](#) Whatever it takes for you, get the Bible into your head and heart.

As you learn what the Bible says, you will be able to recognize counterfeits to God's truth. For instance, over the past several years the definition of truth has shifted. It used to be that everyone assumed that there was such a thing as absolute truth: things which are true for all people, at all times, in all places. Today, many people believe that contradictory beliefs, such as the different world religions, can all be true at the same time and that murder, lying, and

adultery can be acceptable under certain conditions. The belief that truth is relative is a worldly philosophy that has taken many captive, and Christians should filter this out of our thinking because God has revealed unchanging truth to us in His Word.



In his book *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds*, Phillip Johnson has a great chapter called “Tuning Up Your Baloney Detector.” He lists a number of critical thinking tools that originally came from Carl Sagan, the late astronomer who made science understandable to us lay people. (Unfortunately, Dr. Sagan failed to point his baloney detector at himself as he ferociously insisted that true science was the same as a purely naturalistic worldview.)

A well-tuned baloney detector will be able to filter out several kinds of baloney that would take Christians captive when we swallow the thinking that comes from the surrounding culture.

Vague Terms and Shifting Definitions

One kind of baloney we need to be alert for is the use of vague terms. People with a non-Christian worldview can start off using language that we think we understand and then suddenly veer off into a new meaning. Once when I was a brand-new believer, people collecting money to care for underprivileged kids approached me on the street. I asked, “Do you teach them about Jesus?” and they said, “Yes. . . .” After I gave them money and took their brochure, I discovered that they taught that Jesus and Satan were brothers! We also see this deliberate vagueness happening in the abortion debate. It is much easier to justify getting rid of a glob of unwanted cells if you do not call it “shredding and mutilating an unborn baby.”

We also need to be on the lookout for shifting definitions. In the evolution debate, many people will start out defining evolution as “change over time.” Who can argue with that? But then we find out that the true working definition of evolution is unguided, purposeless change.

Believing What We Want to Believe

We also need to be on the lookout for what Phillip Johnson calls the “original sin” of believing what we want to believe, even if there is evidence to the contrary. It is intellectually dishonest to deny facts that contradict our pet beliefs so that we can stay in our comfort zone. We get critical e-mail at Probe complaining about the fact that we do not take a position on the age of the earth. It comes from people who believe what they want to believe regardless of the fact that there is good evidence for another position. One of the wisest prayers we can pray is “Lord, show me where I’m being deceived.” Whether we are talking about our emotional, spiritual, or intellectual life, we need to move from the darkness of believing what we want to believe, into the light of truth as God shows it to us.

Selective Use of Evidence

Another critical thinking skill is to be watchful of the selective use of evidence. We need to be careful not to jump on bandwagons of all kinds before checking out any evidence that would provide a different conclusion. The creation-evolution debate is a great example of this principle, because it’s awfully hard to find any biology textbooks that provide students with the evidence against evolution. They do not learn that evolutionists cannot account for things like flight, or the eye, or the explosion of fully formed animals in the Cambrian layers of rock.

I know of several women who deeply regret having had abortions

based on the selective use of evidence. They were told that this would solve their problem, that it was simply removing unwanted fetal tissue, that it was really no big deal. They were not given a sonogram where they could have seen their babies moving around inside them, or told about how the Bible declares the personhood of even the tiniest unborn human being. They also weren't told about the horrendous burden of guilt and shame they would carry for years afterwards. We need to know both sides of an argument in order to avoid being held in captivity to the world's philosophies.

Appeal to Authority

Another critical thinking skill is to be wary of is the appeal to authority. "Nothing is true just because some big shot says it is true."^[2] In our culture, we practically worship experts (especially scientific experts), and willingly set aside our own beliefs and instincts if somebody with a white lab coat or letters after their name tells us something is true or right or good. That is how we got millions of students who are poor readers in the U.S.: educational experts decided to throw out phonics, which works very well, and substitute the whole-word approach to reading, which fails miserably.

But it's not just white lab coats; the appeal to authority exploits the way our culture values celebrity. Michael Jordan may be the world's best basketball player, but does that mean he is an authority on underwear too? We need to be skeptical of anybody who says, "Believe it because I say so."

***Ad Hominem* and Straw Man Arguments**

Two kinds of communication that ought to set our internal alarms off are the *ad hominem* argument and the straw man argument.

Ad hominem is Latin for "to the man." When people use this kind of argument, they are attacking the person instead of

what he is saying. My son experienced this on one occasion in his college class where he got into a spirited discussion with a girl who was not being too logical. She could not counter his arguments, got frustrated, and dismissed him with, "Oh, you're just too pretty to be a boy anyway." That's an *ad hominem* argument. It means someone is out of ammunition and defenses for their argument, so they attack the other person or the other side instead.

Now, there is a value to pointing out that someone has a bias, because it is going to impact their conclusions. That is not the same as attacking the person. When people e-mail us here at Probe and accuse us of being biased about Christianity, we freely admit we are very biased. But that does not change whether it is true or not. On the other hand, if a tobacco company releases a study showing that secondhand smoke is not dangerous, one can legitimately question the inherent bias without attacking the people making the argument.

Another critical thinking tool is to watch out for straw man arguments. This is where an opponent distorts someone's position to make it easier to attack. Recently I participated in a panel discussion on therapies and organizations that help people leave homosexuality. One of the students in the class pointed at me and said, "I just think you shouldn't try to make gays change against their will. That's not right." Well, I agree, and I do not know anyone who tries to change homosexuals against their will. He was using a straw man argument, because the truth is, I work with a ministry that offers help only to those who want it.[\[3\]](#) We do not even let anyone in the door unless they are willing to consider that change is possible, and they are the ones seeking us out. This student twisted my position to make it easier to attack.

Of course, nobody announces that they are using a straw man or *ad hominem* argument when they do it! But when you recognize it and call it what it is, you are thinking critically about what you are hearing.

Untestable Theories

When I was a young girl, my mind was a sponge—an avid learner, I soaked up everything with a total lack of discernment. There was a time when I was confused about whether the gods of Greek and Roman mythology were real or not!

In this article we have been looking at loving God with our minds by building a mental filter through which we examine what we see, hear, and read. A mental filter consisting of a Christian worldview allows us to keep what is true and right and good, and not swallow the rest like I did! One final baloney detector involves recognizing theories and ideas that cannot be proven either true or false. Many people believe things simply because they sound good, even though there is no way to find out if they are right or not. For example, Carl Sagan opened his famous Cosmos series with the worldview statement that “The Cosmos is all there is, or ever was, or ever will be.” How do you test such a statement to see if it is true or not? At Probe we get e-mail from people who have accepted such untestable theories. What test is there to prove or disprove reincarnation or the existence of the Goddess? How do you run an experiment to prove whether people who have died are sending messages to us when we come across pennies on the pavement?

On the other hand, testability is one of the things that makes Christianity so robust. If someone were able to come up with the bones of Jesus Christ, it would prove Christianity wrong and the millions of believers deluded. It’s a testable idea, not an unprovable, pie-in-the-sky concept. Remember what Paul says in Colossians 2:8, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.” In order to do that, we need to work to build a strong mental filter that constantly compares what we see and hear and read to the truth

of God's word. We need to interact with TV, movies, newspapers, and magazines, identifying those things that contradict the truth God has already given us. We should feel free to jot comments in the margins of books, especially when we find baloney in them. We need to remember that the world system and our adversary, the devil, are both continually working to tear down what is good and true, and erect false arguments and pretensions that set themselves up against the knowledge of God. So we can take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

To mix metaphors, we need to tune up our baloney detectors so we will not be sponges.

Notes

1. bible.gospelcom.net
2. Phillip Johnson, *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997], 39.
3. Living Hope Ministries. For more information, please see www.livehope.org.

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