

# FAITH AND MODERN KNOWLEDGE

by Ray C. Stedman

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This message is in the nature of an addendum, a postscript, to the series we concluded together last week [Spiritual Warfare, Catalog Numbers 98-107] on Paul's great passage in Ephesians 6 concerning the struggle of Christians against "the world rulers of present darkness" {Eph 6:12 RSV} and the Christian answer to the confusing and conflicting ideologies of our day. That series was a sermonish dish which had long been cooking on the back burner. It was originally designed for seven servings, but in the course of it stretched out to ten. And still I find some scrapings in the bottom of the pot. Certain implications developed in that series need clarifying. One of them is the relationship of faith (i.e., faith in the revelation of God) and modern knowledge, the discoveries of science, the phenomenal increase of information as a result of scientific thinking. I would like to introduce this theme by reading a passage from Paul's letter to the Colossians, in Chapter 2, beginning with Verse 6:

**As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.**

**See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. {Col 2:6-10 RSV}**

You will recognize that Paul is concerned in this letter to the Colossian church with the same problem he faced in the letter to the Ephesian church. Paul is anxious that these Colossian Christians, having found that Jesus Christ is the ground of truth, the secret of life, the key to living, the *mystery*, if you like, of human life, the fulfillment of human endeavor -- having found all this in him, and having come to new life and liberty in Jesus Christ, as they experienced him personally in the confrontation of faith -- the apostle is anxious that they remain stable and firm in their faith. For in Christ, he says, there is no limit to their growth. In him dwells all the fullness of deity. All that God is, is discoverable through Jesus Christ. And he is the head of all authority. Outside of Christ, therefore, there can be nothing but uncertainty and futility and death. He is very concerned that these Colossian Christians not be driven away from the ground of faith and of personal experience they have had in Jesus Christ.

The Colossians were facing a rather peculiar peril: Colossi was a Greek city and, like all Grecians, they were exposed to what was a particularly Grecian danger -- what Paul calls "philosophy and empty deceit." The Greeks, of course, were the great philosophers of the ancient world. The greatest period of philosophy the world has ever known was in the days of the flowering of the great Greek thinkers -- Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, and others. As a result of this emphasis, these Greek Christians were exposed to extreme danger to their faith. They were lovers of wisdom. The word *philosophy* literally means "the love of wisdom" -- particularly and specifically, the love of human wisdom, human knowledge. Paul suggests to these Colossian Christians that they are exposed to great peril from this angle, that there is nothing more dangerous to Christian faith and truth than philosophy. He points out that the more intelligent you are, the more intellectual you are, the more you are exposed to attacks from this source.

You can see immediately the relevancy of this to our situation. As you well know, we in Palo Alto live in what is regarded as a highly intelligent, intellectual community. And without doubt, the supreme peril to Christian faith in this immediate area is philosophy. It is a peril to faith and therefore to truth. These words of the Apostle Paul therefore have particular significance to us who are living under the shadow of great universities and colleges, where we are continually exposed to the knowledge which has come to men through scientific endeavor and intellectual attainment.

It is noteworthy that Paul not only warns about this danger in the letter to the Colossians, but also in other places. In fact, this theme -- the danger of philosophy -- runs through large sections of the epistles of the New Testament. You will find it in the Corinthian letters. A large section of the first two chapters of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is devoted to this subject -- warning against the wisdom of the world, and contrasting the wisdom of God with the wisdom of the world, pointing out the shallowness and inadequacy of the world's wisdom to solve the basic problems of human existence. "The world by wisdom knows not God" {cf, 1 Cor 1:21}, he declares. Further, in writing to his own son in the faith, Timothy, the apostle takes particular pains to point out this same danger. He concludes his first letter to Timothy with these words:

**O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge, for by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith. {1 Tim 6:20a RSV}**

What should we make of this? Does this mean that Christians are anti-intellectual, as is often charged? Are Christians obscurantists, refusing to face the facts of life which science has discovered for us? Are we suggesting that a well-trained mind, honed and sharpened by the resources of human knowledge, is being asked to commit a form of intellectual suicide when the person possessing it becomes a Christian? The answer, of course, is: Obviously not! We must remember that the man who wrote these very letters possessed what is widely regarded as one of the finest minds of all time. The keenness of his intellect is everywhere evident through his writings. And, furthermore, the self-disclosure of God that we call *the Bible*, the revelation of God, makes its appeal to human reason, as in that well known passage from the prophet Isaiah:

**"Come now, let us reason together,  
says the Lord:  
though your sins are like scarlet,  
they shall be as white as snow;  
though they are red like crimson,  
they shall become like wool," {Isa 1:18 RSV}**

The emphasis again and again is laid upon the necessity of using the mind, the intelligence, to grasp and explore the revelation of God.

We read in several places in the New Testament that the Apostle Paul opened the Scriptures and reasoned with his hearers out of them. The writers of Scriptures everywhere address themselves to normal logic and rationality in the giving of the revelation of God.

Now, it is true that the facts which are incorporated in this magnificent disclosure of God are sometimes difficult for us to grasp. Sometimes they seem incredible to human minds. But the problem is not with the revelation. The problem is what we are going to be examining in this message -- the faulty reasoning of men. The problem is the weakness of human reason. Once the experiment of faith is performed, the venture of faith which accepts revelation as a perfectly proper subject of human comprehension and study, then the whole matter of revelation is discovered to be utterly reasonable. And for the Christian there is nothing more confirmatory of the divine origination of this revelation than the constant discovery he experiences of the reasonableness of what Scripture says. As he puts it to the test of life he discovers it is utterly reasonable.

Well then, what is wrong? Why does the apostle warn us against human wisdom and human knowledge? Note exactly what it is that Paul says in this letter to the Colossians. His warning is addressed against philosophy -- not knowledge, not wisdom in itself -- but the love of wisdom. It is that particular aspect of wisdom which he is warning against; in other words, the supreme confidence in human wisdom or knowledge as an infallible or utterly reliable means of discovering truth. It is this love of wisdom which is the danger.

If you know your Bible, you will recognize immediately that there are other, similar warnings in Scripture. We are warned against the love of money: The apostle says, "The love of money is the root of all evil," {1 Tim 6:10a}. This has often been misquoted as "Money is the root of all evil." No, there is nothing wrong with money. Money is the perfectly legitimate possession of a Christian, as well as anyone else. It is not money that is the problem; it is the love of money. It is not knowledge that is the problem; it is the love of knowledge --

the supreme confidence, the arrogant assurance, that the human mind is all it takes to discover all we need to know about life. This is the problem.

You see, this is the basic assumption of philosophy. It is true that human knowledge is a remarkable means of discovering truth. Who would deny that? All we need as witness to that is the phenomenal scientific discoveries of our day, and the vast numbers of gadgets and gimmicks and creature comforts which have come to us as a result of the explorations and probings of science into the universe. But what the apostle is saying is that human knowledge, in any form, is never a completely reliable, or even remotely adequate, way of comprehending and encompassing truth. It is right here that philosophy makes a very definite claim in the opposite direction. The basic assumption of philosophers is that by using a process of inductive reasoning, approaching life as it is, no matter what field of life is in view, they are confident that they can meditate on the relationship of one fact to another and arrive at an explanation of the purpose of life and the process of human fulfillment.

The Bible cuts exactly across that and says it is impossible. We need to make this very, very clear. The whole of the revelation of God, from beginning to end, cuts exactly across that and says it can never be done by the human mind in its fallen condition. The reason that it can never be accomplished is that the mind of man is fallen, is sinful, and therefore is completely inadequate and often unreliable. And to suggest that we can comprehend all the truth of the universe around us with the distorted and twisted instruments that we call our human minds is like trying to suggest we can repair a very fine watch with a broken monkey wrench. It is a totally inadequate tool.

Now, you notice that the apostle does not say that it is wrong for Christians to read philosophy. He never suggests that. There may be very adequate and legitimate reasons for the study of philosophy. But what he is saying is, "Do not be deceived by philosophy." That is, do not give yourselves to agreement with the underlying, basic presupposition of philosophy, which I have already outlined. "Beware lest any man spoil you," for you cannot, at one and the same time, believe that the human mind is capable of amassing and properly evaluating truth and arriving at justifiable and legitimate conclusions, and also believe the revelation of God throughout the Scriptures that the mind of man is in such a condition that it is unable to operate properly. You cannot hold those positions simultaneously.

This is a very basic challenge. It is one or the other. It is not a "both/and" but an "either/or" proposition. And that is why Paul makes it so very clear to these Greek Christians that they must make a choice. Are they to stand on the revelation which they have found in Jesus Christ, who presents the only credentials which have ever adequately supported a claim to be the great revelation of God? Or are they to choose to rest upon the flimsy, unsupported, and, if the Bible be true, unreliable conclusions of faulty and finite human minds? That is always where the choice lies. Ultimate authority is the final question in life. And here is where the apostle throws down the gauntlet.

Here are two areas where this weakness of human intellect is especially noticeable:

- In man's thinking about God, and
- In man's thinking about himself.

In the letter to the Corinthians, the apostle makes very clear that it is impossible to arrive at a knowledge of God by human thinking: "The world by wisdom knows not God," {cf, 1 Cor 1:21}. It cannot know because it does not have the equipment to know. For, as Paul goes on to argue, the things of God are only known through the Spirit of God. God is such a completely different and greater being than we -- vast aspects of his character and nature lying outside of our experience -- that we cannot possibly understand him except as he chooses to disclose himself to us. Therefore the world by wisdom knows not God, except as man is given the equipment to understand -- by the simplicity of faith in the revelation of Jesus Christ. "The natural man receives not the things of God, neither can he know them, because they are made known by the Spirit," {cf, 1 Cor 2:14}. Therefore there must be a spiritual rebirth. This is why Jesus laid it on the line so carefully with that great leader of the Jews, Nicodemus. He said, "Except a man be born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of God," {cf, John 3:3}. There is no other way.

But, not only is this weakness noticeable in man's thinking about God, but also in man's thinking about man -- for the great mystery of life is ourselves.

Someone said to me just recently, "The greatest problem in my life is me!" We all identify with that, do we not? The greatest mystery to us is ourselves. We do not know how we operate, we do not know how we think, we do not understand ourselves. We are continually doing those things which amaze us, and sometimes confuse and appall us. We all understand the apostle when he says in Romans 7, "The things that I would not, those are the things that I do. And the things that I would do, I find myself unable to do," {cf, Rom 7:19}. This is a common experience of life, because man does not understand himself. So in these two areas the weakness of human intellect is very, very noticeable.

Now, human knowledge works reasonably well in other fields. The further you get from man and God toward the periphery of knowledge, the more accurately human brains are able to understand and evaluate facts and put things together. This is why in the realm of machinery and technology, etc., we do reasonably well. But the fatal defect is still observable from time to time -- as witness the great blackout which spread throughout the northeastern states when man, confident that he had set up adequate safeguards to keep the electrical system going, suddenly discovered that it all backfired on him.

I wonder if there is not something in the nature of a parable in that incident? Man, thinking he has made it possible to live in light, suddenly, unexpectedly, finds himself plunged into darkness! This is the story of human history, again and again. Even in the realm of programming an organized approach to life, again human wisdom is seen to be very faulty -- as witness the repeated instances when we heap up piles of produce -- wheat and other staples of life -- and burn them while people are starving to death all around us. We know what programs like this mean in the realm of politics.

But in questions of the ultimate meaning of existence, such as philosophy attempts to solve, human knowledge is a complete and abysmal failure. This is what the Bible declares and interestingly enough, what thinkers themselves are coming to conclude today. I was interested to listening to Dr. Francis S. Schaeffer when he was here recently from Switzerland. He has given himself to the study of philosophy from the Christian point of view. He made the very significant statement: "There are no more philosophies today; there are only anti-philosophies" -- by which he meant that philosophers have exhausted their resources. They have discovered they are bankrupt; they have no more ideas to explore. Now all the thinkers of the world can do is to write at great length about that bankruptcy and point out how there is nothing to discover any longer, no areas yet unexplored, and thus to create what Schaeffer calls "anti-philosophy." In other words, one by one, the clever proposals of men, seeking to find underlying explanations of life, have been proven to be, have been exposed to be, empty and false.

Interestingly enough, this is exactly what the Apostle Paul says. Look at the passage in Colossians: "See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition." Life itself demolishes all these theories as they are tried out in the implacable reality of living. As someone has well put it,

"There is no murder quite as tragic as that of a beautiful theory being done to death by a band of brutal facts."

Perhaps we might hope at last to run out of these ideas, but the pattern has proved otherwise. The satanic pattern has been that the devil from time to time rejuvenates an old and almost forgotten theory, dusts it off and polishes it up, and runs it out as a "new and dramatic breakthrough" in human thought. And the masses listen to it with awe and wonder, and say, "At last we have discovered the answer!" That again has been the repeated story of human living.

What is needed? Well, exactly what the apostle calls us back to -- the recognition of the divinely intended order of learning. In the *Spiritual Warfare* series we have just concluded, we touched upon this. There is what we might call a *biblical epistemology* -- will you forgive my using a word like that? I had to look it up to see what it meant! It is the science of knowledge, of how we learn things. The Bible tells us how man is intended by God to learn. The order is that truth is intended to touch first the mind. That is why God's revelation is addressed to the mind, to the rational capacity of human life -- so that we hear it, and analyze it, and explore it, and evaluate it. Then it is designed to seize upon the emotions, to motivate our desire, to rouse our interest, to

galvanize us into action. This moving of the emotions results finally in the choice of the will -- in acting, moving out into some appropriate activity based upon truth.

But in fallen man this whole process has been reversed, twisted. Motivation in fallen man begins with the emotions and not with the mind. It begins with what psychologists call the strong, underlying "basic drives" of our nature, the desires we have lying deep in our subconscious. And as man, motivated by these strong and passionate desires -- which he is not purely conscious of but which nevertheless are highly controlling of his thinking -- comes to the facts of life, then the mind is engaged and brought into play. But what does it do? Well, instead of being rational, it rationalizes. It twists facts to adjust them to conformity with the underlying desire which is the deep-seated, motivating factor. So we spend most of our time trying to find mental excuses for doing what we have already determined to do. This is the problem in human life. On this twisted basis the will of man acts. And this is why we are continually doing foolish, mad, utterly stupid things -- all of us.

You see, deep in fallen man there has been implanted what the Bible calls *the lie* of Satan, the conviction that man can act as a god -- independently -- that he need recognize no authority except himself, that he has adequate equipment with which to face life. The mind, then, driven by this underlying assumption, when it is confronted with certain observable facts of the world and the universe in which we live, begins to rationalize in order to relate them to this basic drive of life. Therefore all philosophy, without exception, is egocentric, man exalting, and therefore indifferent to the claims of God. This is why the apostle draws such a clear-cut line, and warns against this basic assumption of human philosophy.

You can see this assumption in the way philosophers, thinkers who proceed from this point of view, regard God's own revelation of himself, the Bible. They look at the Bible and say, "This is not God, speaking to men, as the Bible itself claims to be. No, this is nothing but the product of man's reasoning about God." You can see the implication of this, can you not? Man created this book; man is the total author of it. This is the product of man's reasoning about creation and the Creator. Man, therefore, is superior to it. From this presumption comes the study of what is called "comparative religion." All religions are products of man's reasoning, Christianity included. Therefore it is perfectly proper to line them up, compare them one with another, pick out what looks like the good things of each, and throw away the rest. Man sits as judge over all. You can see this as the basic fault of man's thinking.

But the answer of the Bible to this is wholly different. Therefore it bears the mark that it does not come from this distorted thinking of man. For the Bible declares again and again throughout its pages, in one way or another, what Paul says so plainly in First Corinthians 1 and 2: "Who can know the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God," {cf, 1 Cor 2:11}. God is undiscoverable except as he reveals himself. "Who has known the mind of the Lord," says this mighty apostle, "or who has been his counselor?" {1 Cor 2:16a RSV}. Who has instructed God? Is he limited to man? God is greater by far than man. His thoughts, Isaiah says, are higher than man's thoughts; his ways, Paul says, past finding out. The Lord Jesus takes exactly the same position: "No man knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him," {Matt 11:27 RSV}. There is no other way.

On one occasion Jesus prayed, "I thank you, Father, that you have hidden these things from the wise and the prudent, but you have revealed them unto babes," {cf, Luke 10:21}. That is why the gospel's word is: "Except you be converted and become as little children, you cannot enter into the kingdom of God," {cf, Matt 18:3}.

In First Corinthians 3:18 the apostle says one of the greatest things on this very theme which has ever been spoken in the hearing of men: "Let no one deceive himself," {1 Cor 3:18a RSV}. This is the danger, is it not? It is so easy to deceive ourselves along this line. We are always so exposed to this desire for exaltation, for patting ourselves on the back. Human nature is built that way.

A doctor once told me, "The first thing I learned about human nature was that when you pat it on the back the head swells up!"

The apostle echoes that in First Corinthians 8, where he says, "Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies,"

{1 Cor 8:1b RSV}.

Here in Chapter 3 he says to the Corinthians, "Let no one deceive himself. If any one among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise," {1 Cor 3:18 RSV}. What does he mean by that? Why, if any one thinks he knows something, is an authority in any field of knowledge, let him stop being a philosopher, a lover of wisdom, and become a fool in order that he might really become wise. Let him accept as fact what the world holds to be essentially foolish -- the revelation of God, the "foolishness" of which Paul had preached among them. Perhaps this revelation is put most briefly in the opening words of the letter to the Hebrews:

**In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, {Heb 1:1-2a RSV}**

There it is: "by a Son." The great revelation of God is all contained in, and rests ultimately upon the basis of, the incarnation, the appearance in human life of the Son of God, Jesus Christ himself. And when a man believes that, when he casts aside his intellectual pride, when he humbles himself to the degree of accepting the offer of Jesus to reveal himself to him and to change his life, that man then discovers for the first time that he has gained the equipment by which he may receive the revelation of God -- a regenerated spirit. The revelation of God, then, comes to us as a complete whole, challenging our minds to study and grasp it, to explore it, and then to let it seize upon our emotions and move us, and then to act. This is why the gospel makes its appeal to the whole of man -- such a tremendous presentation is found in this Book!

I would like to point out what certain men of faith and science have recognized -- that the revelation of God given to us in the Bible is another revelation very much on a par with that in nature, in the universe around us. It is a mystery to be understood, and explored, and then obeyed. This is what it is given for. God has set his revelation in the world as an unfolding of truth about himself and about man. And man is invited to take it, and handle it, and see if it really is from God. There is nothing wrong with that. We are invited to explore it very much as the Lord Jesus invited his disciples after his resurrection: "Handle me and see," {Luke 24:39}. But, once we have seen that this is indeed from God, then we are to believe it. We are to give all our intellect to the task of understanding it, of probing it, of analyzing it, of seeing what is really said, in order that it might change our lives as dramatically as science has changed the world by exploring of the mysteries and secrets of the revelation in the universe:

- "But," someone says, "there is so much about the Bible that I can't understand." Of course there is! What made you think you would be able to understand all of God in his self-revelation?
- Someone says, "I don't understand the Trinity." Of course you don't! I don't, either, but I believe it. There are a lot of things I do not understand, but can still believe and act upon them.
- Someone says, "Well, I don't understand the mystery of the atonement -- how one person's death, 1900 years ago, can do something for me." Of course you do not understand it. These are what Paul calls "the deep things of God" {1 Cor 2:10 KJV}, "the mysteries of God," {1 Cor 4:1}. We must learn to be content with mystery. We must live on the edge of mystery all the time. There is much we can know, but the mysteries still remain. Paul speaks of "the mystery of godliness," {1 Tim 3:16 KJV}.
- Someone says, "I don't understand how Jesus Christ could have two natures -- both of man and of God." I do not understand that either. Who does understand it? How can we understand and grasp that fully? Imagine the arrogance of expecting to understand such a vast and remarkable concept.

Imagine pitting our puny human brains against the tremendous mystery of godliness, the basic secret of human life! The questions we need to ask ourselves before we challenge a concept like that are: Have I understood the universe? Do I understand myself? Do I understand how I act, and how I react, and what I am, where I came from, and what I am here for? You see, all these questions are basically unanswered. The truth is, the greater our knowledge, the more we are aware of mystery. The gospel, therefore, is not addressed to the scientist or to the philosopher or to the teacher; it is always addressed to the man behind the scientist, the man behind the philosopher, the man behind the teacher -- not the professional aspect of man, but the man himself, the basic, naked man.

We can take either revelation -- the revelation of God in the universe, or the revelation of God in the Scriptures, in the ultimate revelation of Jesus Christ -- and explore it with the mind: We can begin there to understand it, and then to obey it. We can receive it, remembering that the mind of man is finite and fallible, and that it needs constant correction and adjustment. Revelation is therefore always above reason; it is always greater than reason; it is always true. Revelation guides us in the exploration of life, and it is what we desperately need to keep things straight as we try to explore with our minds the life around us.

On the other hand, the discoveries of human knowledge illuminate and amplify the statements of revelation, and we can understand statements in our Bibles much better, sometimes, because science has found certain facts to be true. These statements come to life in a more vivid way. These two forms of revelation are not contrary one to another; they work together.

But the Christian -- notice this, now -- the Christian has no more right to challenge a statement in Scripture than the scientist would have the right to challenge the existence of a tree, or a rock, or a bird. Others than Christians can look at the Bible and challenge these statements, if they have not yet discovered the fundamental revelation in Jesus Christ upon whom it all rests, but one who has made this paramount discovery has no more right to challenge the statements of Scripture than he has to challenge the Lord Jesus himself. And when, with humility and belief, we come to these great revelations and explore them with the mind God has given to us, recognizing our constant need for correction and instruction from the mind and heart and Spirit of God, we shall find room for the exercise to the full of our minds, our emotions, and our will.

Therefore, learn all you can. Explore every path of life. As the apostle says, "Prove all things; hold fast to that which is good," {1 Th 5:21 KJV}. God has ordained that these two forms of revelation shall work together to bring man to the knowledge of himself. So we desperately must have this written revelation of God in order to understand life.

## Prayer

Our Father, we pray that the great themes which have occupied our attention today might challenge us to understand that life begins with the knowledge of Jesus Christ. We cannot begin anywhere else. He is indeed the One "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." And it is only to the believing heart, which lays aside its pride and stoops to drink of this great fountain of life, that there comes the clarifying of thought, the understanding of life, the deepening of human experience, the glorifying, according to thy mind and purpose, of the experiences of life. We pray that this may be the experience of all of us, that they may begin where the apostle began -- with Jesus Christ, and him crucified. We ask in his name, Amen.

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