

A New Attack on “Human Reason”

Dub McClish

When the brethren opposed to congregational cooperation and orphan homes ran out of scriptural positions several years ago, they attacked “human reason.” Tom Warren’s devastating unanswerable syllogisms were ridiculed as “sillygisms,” but they remain unanswered to this day. Now we are seeing a reemergence of the ridicule of logic from the other end of the spectrum. The brethren who are passionately trying to renovate the church are using the tactic. In one of the self-styled avant-garde monthlies, “Integrity,” an editorial writer attacks our usual method of Biblical interpretation. The writer apologizes for ever having taught such “garbage” as the distinction between generic and specific commands, the “mythical” necessary inference (as he views it) and that some examples are binding, and others are not.

His conclusion is that anything which must be established through the mind’s reasoning processes cannot be made a matter of fellowship (March 1970, p. 151). At least the author is consistent in one respect in the expression of his convictions: by whatever method he arrived at his conclusions, he did not over-tax his reasoning processes!

Recently I was in a gathering of a few families who had met to discuss the “Holy Spirit.” After an elder had presented a fine, scriptural summary of the teaching of the New Testament on the subject, discussion was invited. One contributor (a former preacher) said that he probably agreed with most of the conclusions expressed by the elder, but that he wasn’t sure that the scriptures were as certain as the elder had indicated on some points, such as cessation of spiritual gifts. He went on to say that he felt that these conclusions were arrived at through “human reason” rather than through the teaching of scripture. His clear indication was that any conclusion arrived at through the application of principles of logic and reason is suspect. It is my opinion that the two cases cited above are not isolated but are rather representative of a wave of thinking(?) in some of the brethren that we shall hear more and more of. This is especially common to those on the Pentecostal kick. Scripture and reason have never been very important to the “Holy Roller1”; if they were, he wouldn’t be one.

I offer the following observations on this attitude:

1. One cannot attack human reasoning without attacking himself. The conclusion that human reasoning is faulty cannot be arrived at without using human reasoning, although a faulty use of it in this case.

2. Why would anyone attack the proper function of human reasoning to arrive at logical conclusions? Some persons would do so because they are not intelligent enough to appreciate this function, perhaps. But those in the church who are casting reflection on reason nowadays are not the uneducated. Could it be that the force of logical and reasonable conclusions is against the message they are seeking to get across? It would not put them in a good light to directly attack a logical scriptural conclusion which they have abandoned, so they attack the process by which the conclusion is arrived at, instead.
3. Failure to use our logical processes in arriving at truthful conclusions results in chaos, absurdity and false conclusions, or rather no conclusions at all. One of the greatest contributions ever made to the world by the likes of Campbell, Lipscomb, Lard, McGarvey, etc., came in the form of a logical, consistent, reasonable approach to scripture study and understanding. Unless one is convinced of the necessity of using valid rules of interpretation, he will never be able to arrive at the truth. In fact, this is the key to being able to grasp the one way of the Lord as opposed to the many ways of men. I believe that division and sectarianism within and without, continue to owe their existence to a failure to apply consistent principles of reason to the inspired text. If such sound principles are not used, then "truth" is ever in a fluid state. As in Paul's day, so in ours there are those who are "ever learning and never able to come to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. 3:7). Granted, there are some subjects that we must continue to search out, but I am suspicious of a brother who occupies a "suspended" position on every subject. He is getting to be more and more in vogue, however. Strangely, those who are so strongly urging that Christians lay aside all doubt about the absolute certainty of their salvation, seem to be the very ones who have the most difficulty in being certain about any doctrinal position anymore.
4. God gave us all of our abilities, including our minds (Acts 17:28-29). It is chiefly because of God's gift to the human animal of reason and thought power that he is fitted to exercise dominion over all creation (Ps. 8:4-8). It is through the mind that God's law can be grasped and obeyed (Heb. 8:10). The Word instructs us to use our minds; Man is exhorted to love God with "all thy mind" (Mat. 22:37). The transformed life is accomplished through "renewing of your mind" and it is through the right exercise of mind that one may discern what is good and acceptable, even the perfect will of God (Rom. 12:2). Jehovah challenges men to reason with him (Isa. 1:18). Paul "reasoned" with the Jews in Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus (Acts 17:2; 18:4, 19). Paul "reasoned" on the subjects of righteousness, temperance and Judgment before Felix and Drusilla (Acts 24:25). Paul emphasizes the necessity of mature thinking (1 Cor. 13:11; 14:20). Even if we did not have such direct references in scripture to the application of thought processes to the written Word, it would still be the natural thing to do. God addresses His written Word, not to the ear, eye, tongue, nose, or touch, but primarily to the human mind through these senses. It is only by use of the abilities of human reason that anyone can obey the command to "handle aright the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).
5. The proper application to the scriptures of human reason and deduction results in scriptural truth just as surely as if God had stated the deduction in so many words. Luke does not say

that Philip mentioned baptism when he “preached Jesus” to the Eunuch (Acts 8:34). But can anyone avoid the conclusion that he did preach baptism when one reads in the next verse that the Eunuch requested to be baptized? It is nowhere stated (to my knowledge) what was the purpose of the baptism with the Holy Spirit of Cornelius. However, note that Peter’s racial prejudice is emphasized prior to his going to Cornelius’ house (Acts 10: 9–16, 28) and that the prejudice of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem is recorded (Acts 11:2–3), but, when the Holy Spirit fell on them, Peter immediately recognized them to be as worthy recipients of the Gospel as were the Jews (Acts 10:47–48) and when the skeptical Jewish brethren heard the report, they too responded by accepting the Gentiles (Acts 11:18). It is only logical to conclude that God caused this spectacular phenomenon for the purpose of breaking down that prejudice that had prevented the Gentiles from hearing the Gospel. Note another example: The scriptures do not give an organized summary of the measures of the Spirit and what accompanies each measure in a “reference table” form. However, one is making right use of reason to conclude that the “gift of the Holy Spirit” in Acts 2:38 is not the same measure as the “gift of the Holy Spirit” in Acts 10:45. One notes that the former is as universal as baptism and remission of sins and is not associated with miraculous accompaniment. The latter had not occurred since Pentecost (on the apostles) (Acts 11:15), is definitely related to miracles (Acts 10:46) and is identified with Holy Spirit baptism (Acts 11:16). The illustrations of the necessity of using one’s reasoning power to arrive at logical conclusions are almost endless. I cannot believe that anyone who loves the Lord, and His Word would consciously seek to undermine it.

6. A few words are in order about commands, examples, and inferences since they have specifically come under attack. The distinction between generic and specific commands is not a human contrivance. It is God’s Word that gives the two different kinds of commands. Man, if he is wise enough to approach God’s Word with reason, discerns which are general commands (allowing some liberty in fulfillment) and which are specific (requiring strict adherence to the details contained in the command). Failure to honor this distinction brings hopeless doctrinal and practical chaos. If no distinction is to be made between “binding examples” and “non-binding examples” then one is forced into one of two hopeless alternatives: either no examples are binding, robbing all exemplary scriptural conduct of any authority (could this be what such individuals seek?); or all examples are binding, which is as absurd to comprehend as it is impossible to keep. What I have said about arriving at logical scriptural conclusions in item 5 also relates to the correct conclusions arrived at through true inferences, since an inference is a form of logical deduction.
7. I do not believe that those who are attacking the logical process are really opposed to the logical process. They seem to be opposed to it only when applied to scriptural conclusions within whose boundaries they are no longer content to abide. This is one of the trademarks of a “better-felt-than-told,” emotional-sensational, approach to religion. Those who have lost their reverence for God’s written Word as an objective standard seem to end up either with the infidels, denying God altogether, or with the Pentecostals, honoring only their own personal, narrow, subjectivisms, called “experiences.” Presently the trend among our brethren is in the latter direction. The inquiry, “Do you feel it?”, the hollow “Hallelujahs”

and "Praise the Lords," the darkened room, the sensitivity groups, the obsession with the Holy Spirit, the de-emphasis of the Word are all a part of the scene of the super-emotional, mystical aura that some are seeking to super-impose on the Lord's church. James Bales is right as he says, "The distrust of the mind is an essential step into Pentecostalism wherein emotions sweep aside reason and scripture" (Pat Boone and the Gift of Tongues, p. 40). Such individuals distrust the right use of the mind only up to a point, however. That point is where the searchlight of unalterable, unanswerable truth is made to focus on their unwillingness to abide "in the words of the faith, and of the good doctrine" (1 Tim. 4:6).

8. Undoubtedly, these folk who think they have some spiritual optional equipment which the rest of their behind-the-times brethren do not have, are sincere. They apparently believe sincerely that they have found the answers to all of the problems in the church that even Paul, Peter and John never completely solved. One of these fellows remarked in my presence a few months ago that we had to "put some new life in these old bones," referring to the church. He had come home on furlough from the mission field a few months earlier, praising "Mission" magazine and the new "spirit of free thinking in the brotherhood" as he put it, so I think I understood what he meant. He meant that he considered the church to be dead and in need of resurrecting. (Strangely, this same man does not mind accepting support from several of these "dead" churches to go back to his field of work, where it seems certain a very productive work will be severely damaged.) He thinks that he has the answer in seeking to get everybody all excited about what the Holy Spirit can do for them directly, if they will just let him. However, such influences will not enliven the church, they will destroy much of it. The church can maintain her identity only through adherence to God's pattern (Heb. 8:5-8). I get the impression that these emotionalists do not even believe in a pattern concept anymore. Their emphasis leads to each man's operating on the authenticity of his feelings instead of on the authority of his faith. Give them one generation's time and most of the church will not be distinguishable from the "Assembly of God" sect. Already, some are so bold as to suggest such a merger ("Integrity," September 1971, pp. 52-53). Sincerity of purpose is not a good enough excuse to wreck the church.
9. In my insistence upon the proper use of human reason, let it be understood that I am not advocating independent human reason. All our reasoning must be centered in and checked and counter-checked by that one great well of spiritual truth, God's Word. I am simply insisting that we continue to apply logic and reason to the text in order to be able to arrive at truthful conclusions.

I believe Paul's lament over an indictment of Israel strikes a fitting parallel to the attitudes addressed in this article: "Brethren, my heart's desire and my supplication to God is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God." (Rom. 10:1-3).

[Note: I wrote this article for and it was published in the June 13, 1972 *Firm Foundation*, ed. Reuel Lemmons, Austin, TX.]

Attribution: From *thescripturecache.com*; Dub McClish, owner and administrator.