

Struggling with Both-And Theology with the Early Church Fathers

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THEO3213 Systematic Theology I

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September 1, 2018

Right and wrong, good and evil, wise and foolish, real and false; these are the thoughts that plague the world today. Even Christians can be affected by twisted thinking; all it takes is one twisted or misguided idea to throw off one's whole theology. Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Augustine each wrote about the conflict between worldly wisdom and Godly wisdom, and what they have said can clarify this theological haze.

The first topic in common is that of the Christian ability to separate right from wrong in Augustine's and Martyr's writings. They both convey the same idea. Augustine's point was that every good thing said can be used by Christians for good things, because they know Christ and what is good. Martyr's point was that Christians have the ability and responsibility to separate the good from the evil and use the good teachings for Christ. He also adds that philosophers without Christ contradict themselves because they do not have such a connection to what is good and what is not. They are as vulnerable to worldly wisdom as the rest of the world, as they cannot differentiate between good and evil. This is a contrast to the Christian's ability to do so.

The other similarity I noticed was between Tertullian and Augustine when they discuss the harm philosophy can do. "Heresies themselves receive their weapons from philosophy" (Tertullian). Augustine stated that philosophers can use the good parts of their theology to make credible the rest of it. I fear philosophers do more harm than good to the world.

Overall, there is one common theme among these articles, even if it's only hinted: you cannot function in theology or philosophy properly without Christ. The fact that all the great philosophers denied the resurrection of Christ simply supports the thought that, without Christ, theology and philosophy are flawed and contradictory (Tertullian). Martyr touched on something that is relevant—and perhaps an elaboration on the previously mentioned contrast between Christians and the world. He hinted that philosophers pursue philosophy because they are trying

to fill a hole in their philosophy--and in their hearts. Sadly, they try to fill it with worldly wisdom and thought instead of Jesus Christ. It's ironic that the very thing they refuse to acknowledge is what would save them should they ask.

I am grateful for the definition of philosophy given: it is worldly wisdom (Tertullian). I had always assumed that philosophy was more about logic. I never understood why Christian college students always seem to clash with their philosophy professors.

It's not that I disagree with Christians gleaning truth from worldly wisdom, but rather that I agree with a warning: my mother always taught me to never consider any wisdom other than what's Bible-based. Thankfully, that practice gave me enough knowledge to discern between true and false, good and evil, in worldly wisdom. However, not everybody has had that experience. If you do not already know what is right, how are you to glean truth? People who do not know the Word will likely latch on to more than just what is right and good. They will take the tares with the wheat. Yes, it is a gift and a right for Christians to be able to glean wisdom, but only if they are already wise enough to glean properly. Those who do not know much of the Word should look to it and God for anything that confirms the wisdom statement. In fact, this should be a common practice for everyone.

From a Christian's point of view in concurrence with Tertullian, I can testify that--even for Christians--we do not need to know everything about theology. It is theoretically impossible to know too much. However, we know what questions are important for that moment and what must wait until we reach heaven, when all is revealed to us. I have my own mental list of questions for God. Perhaps the answers can be found in the Bible, perhaps not. Some are not important enough to warrant an answer right away; they are more like curiosities and do not have anything to do with salvation, which is God's priority. Tertullian said, "there is nothing else

which we are obliged to believe." Christians are content to simply believe, for that is what religion is in the first place.

The only thing that confuses me is that, "those who live according to the Logos are Christians, even though they may have been counted as atheists" (Martyr). I have had a difficult time trying to understand what Martyr meant by this. Obviously, those who "live according to the Logos" [Christ] are Christians. My concern is the comment about having been counted as atheists. Does this refer to those who converted from atheism to Christianity or to "gray" Christians? Is it referring to atheists that have been confused as Christians, or vice versa? Martyr uses philosophers such as Socrates as examples, but does not say anything further on the subject. Perhaps he used that comment to refer to those philosophers that the world looks up to—and may even refer to them as possible Christians because of their wisdom. Still, the only explanation that makes sense to me is that those who once had another theology and converted to Christianity and live according to God are Christians.

Many people these days are drawn to anything spiritual or philosophical. They tend to look in all the wrong places. Even Christians I know quote the philosophers and Buddha, etc. If it looks like candy, they eat it, without stopping to check if any part of it is spoiled. With the proper wisdom, it may help them. In the end, it matters not what wisdom in the world is true, because the truth in the Word is more than enough--and may even contain every good belief or statement that we could find in the world. Worldly wisdom is not necessary, even when it aligns with the Scripture. We have all we need in the Bible itself.

There is also the issue of "gray" Christians in the church. The only answer for Godly wisdom—the ability to differentiate from good and evil—is to have the Word and the Spirit in

you, and to seek both continuously. It is also necessary for Christians to have the will to be separate from the world—in it and not of it.

Only a Christian can have a “correct” theology because it can only be found through Christ, for his Word gives Christians the ability to differentiate from good and evil, from worldly wisdom and Godly wisdom. The world continues to search for and create theologies, seeking but never finding the one God that can fill their spiritual hole. The best way to show the world the way to God is for Christians to set the example of Godly wisdom by seeking God.

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