Thinking Biblically About

Address to the Diet of Worms

by Martin Luther

A Discussion Guide by Jeff Baldwin

The edition of this speech that we recommend is in William Safire, ed., *Lend Me Your Ears: Great Speeches in History* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1992). All page numbers in this guide refer to that edition.

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How to Use this Guide

TheGreatBooks.com guides are designed specifically for leading group discussions. Although individual students might benefit from reading this guide, its purpose is to help the discussion leader draw out what students have self-learned, and to help them adopt a biblical mindset about the reading.

Self-learning is crucial as students enter the teenage years. Although it's appropriate for students to passively receive information when they are younger, as they grow up the only things they will really incorporate into their lives and *own* are those things which they learn for themselves. Dorothy Sayers, one of the champions of classical education, says that older students need to "be encouraged to go and forage for their own information, and so guided towards the proper use of libraries and books for reference, and shown how to tell which sources are authoritative and which are not."[1]

In the interest of *foraging*, then, it is our hope that this guide not fall into the hands of students, especially prior to the students reading the work in question. As heartless as it sounds, students need to earn their understanding of a great work "by the sweat of their brows." Just as you never appreciate the car that is given to you as much as the car you had to save four years to buy, the student never appreciates the truth that is handed to him as much as the truth he had to grub for himself. It's human nature.

With this in mind, the discussion leader will find six sections in this guide. The first two, the Biography and the Connecting Threads sections, provide historical background for understanding the reading. You should always ask the same two questions when initiating a discussion: What do you know about the author?[2] What is the author's place in history? Students need to have discovered much of this information for themselves beforehand. If they haven't, don't spoon-feed it to them! Demand that they find out more before the next class. Though it may seem kind to provide students with answers here, it is really only fostering laziness—a most unkind thing to do.

Your discussion of the author's life and historical context can take anywhere from ten to twenty minutes. Sometimes it's tempting to extend this discussion, but this is almost always a mistake because it takes precious time away from discussing the reading itself.

The next section, the Q&A, provides the questions you should ask the students about the reading and the author, as well as target answers. Don't read the answers to your students! The students need to be led to reach these conclusions themselves—and if that takes a lot of time, so be it. We only own the truths we discover for ourselves.

Of course, you may disagree with some of the target answers, which is fine when they only represent personal opinion. The only non-negotiable target answers are those that rest on the bedrock of scripture. Students may disagree with aesthetic analysis or literary comparisons, but they need to understand the issues to which God's Word speaks authoritatively.

Two other sections, Key Quotes and Key Scriptures, are useful primarily for quick reference. For example, if a student challenges the idea that Luther championed justification by faith, you can easily refer to the Key Quotes to find several statements by Luther articulating his belief in justification by faith. Likewise, the Key Scriptures section contains the Bible passages most relevant to the issues raised by the reading. These sections should save valuable time otherwise spent rifling through the reading to find a quote, or digging through a concordance to find that crucial Bible verse. In addition, Key Quotes usually contains other memorable statements by the author that occur outside of the reading—and these may be used to spark further discussion.

The final section deals with the theme of the work. This is not definitive—we don't claim to have the last word on every theme of every great book—but it should help crystallize your own views about the reading in question. Don't read the theme to the students. Instead, take time to brainstorm with your students about the theme, leading them to articulate for themselves what the central message of the reading was. As you brainstorm, guard against subjectivity. Although some elements of a theme may be debatable, this doesn't mean that any reading can mean anything any student wants it to mean. Authors intend a certain meaning; great authors convey their intentions clearly; ergo good readers will clearly grasp that meaning.

Herman Melville intended something very specific when he wrote *Moby Dick*, and no amount of Freudian pulpit-thumping or Sunday School spin can make that book mean something else.

In addition, most discussion guides include bonus sections that deal with the Big Picture. We know that not every discussion leader will feel completely competent to discuss concepts as far-ranging as worldview and Lex Rex, so where relevant we step back and discuss the big picture to provide vision for the direction of the discussion. Read these bonus sections before you begin the discussion, so you have a clear idea of the central concepts with which your students should be wrestling.

As you lead the discussion, there are some guidelines to keep in mind. Don't let gregarious students dominate the conversation. Draw out quieter students so they can be involved. Write down key ideas on the board, so visual learners can make connections easier. And don't give in when students ask you to provide the answers!

For more specific recommendations about leading a great books discussion, visit www.TheGreatBooks.com and read the essay entitled "Iron Sharpening Iron: Why the Socratic Method Matters So Much."

Finally, take a deep breath! Leading discussions can feel like working without a net—that's okay. God doesn't wait for us to become infallible before He will use us—He delights to use our best efforts *right now*, when we are broken and totally dependent on Him to bring good out of a scary situation. In my experience, the best discussions are tinged with a little bit of fear. It seems appropriate to me that students and teachers should feel a degree of awe that they can seek to put on the mind of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5). If you feel comfortable, you're probably doing something wrong.

ENDNOTES

[1] Dorothy Sayers, *The Lost Tools of Learning* (McLean, VA: The Trinity Forum, 2004), p. 31.
[2] In rare cases, this question will have to be slightly modified. For example, when students read a biography about William Wilberforce entitled *God's Politician*, they need to know about the famous person in question, Wilberforce, rather than the author.

Biography: Martin Luther (1483-1546)

- Born November 10, 1483 in Prussian Saxony.
- Suffered from depression throughout his life.
- Luther's father worked for a copper mine, and later owned some mines and smelting furnaces.
- Studied jurisprudence at the University of Erfurt (Germany's most prestigious school at the time).
- Upon receiving his M.A. in 1505, he entered law school (as per his father's wishes), but he only attended for a few weeks before a lightning storm scared him and he vowed that if God would protect him he would enter a monastery. He survived the storm and kept his vow, entering an Augustinian monastery in 1505. His father was furious.
- Two years later, Luther was ordained a Catholic priest. His father came to watch him celebrate his first mass, and then ridiculed Luther for being a priest at the banquet following the mass.
- Traveled to Rome in 1510 and was shocked by the licentiousness he encountered in the papal city.
- Received his doctorate in theology in 1512, and was assigned by the Augustinian monks to be the chair of biblical theology at the recently-founded University of Wittenberg. He held this position until his death.
- On October 31, 1517, he posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the door of Wittenberg Church (excerpts from these Theses can be found in the "Key Quotes" section of this discussion guide). Thanks to the invention of a moveable type printing press in 1440, his Theses were circulating throughout Europe just a month after he posted them. In addition, Luther defended his Theses in debates at various universities, which attracted the attention of Rome.

- Published *On Christian Liberty* in 1520, addressing it to Pope Leo X.
- That same year, Pope Leo X issued a papal bull condemning 41 errors in Luther's writings and notifying Luther that he had 60 days to renounce his errors or else he would be excommunicated. Luther publicly burned the bull December 20th, and he was excommunicated early in 1521.
- Also in 1521, he was summoned to appear before Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms. Here he made his famous speech refusing to recant unless church leaders showed him where his writings contradicted scripture. This led to his condemnation by Charles, which caused concern for Luther's life. To protect him, the elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony orchestrated a fake "kidnapping," hiding Luther at Wartburg Castle. During this time of hiding, Luther began translating the New Testament into German. Luther's complete translation of the Bible, issued in 1534, would sell over one million copies before he died, and would do much to unify Germany, which previously did not have a common tongue.
- Married a former nun, Katharina von Bora, in 1525, and they had six children and a generally happy marriage.
- His most popular book, the *Small Catechism*, was published in 1529; it was intended to teach children basic doctrine.
- Thanks to Luther's influence and the work of his friend Philipp Melanchthon, the Lutheran princes adopted a statement of faith known as the Augsburg Confession in 1530. This event is generally viewed as the birth of Lutheranism.
- Later in life he wrote polemics against Jews and Anabaptists.
- Wrote 23 hymns, including "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."
- In spite of poor health, Luther traveled to Mansfeld in 1546 to settle a dispute between two counts. After reconciling the two, he died on February 18th.

Connecting Threads: Martin Luther in Historical Context

426: Augustine completes *The City of God,* which clearly articulates the belief that the Bible must be the foundation for any certain knowledge.

1388: John Wycliffe's English translation of the Bible is distributed posthumously. Wycliffe, "The Morning Star of the Reformation," understood the need for scripture to be in the common tongue.

1415: John Huss martyred, in spite of the fact that he had been promised safe conduct. Among Huss's "heretical" beliefs: his claim that Christ is the only head of the Church; his belief that neither popes nor cardinals could create doctrine that contradicted scripture.

1492: Columbus lands on one of the islands of the Bahamas; later favorable reports by Columbus trigger massive interest in colonizing the New World.

1516: Erasmus, often described as the man "who laid the egg that Luther hatched," publishes the first printed edition of the Greek New Testament. The same year, his friend Thomas More publishes his landmark *Utopia*. Erasmus and Luther would never view each other as allies; Luther vehemently attacked Erasmus in later years.

1522: Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan dies en route, but one of the ships in his fleet becomes the first to circumnavigate the globe.

1523: Ulrich Zwingli's First Disputation marks the start of the Reformation in Switzerland.

1527: Marburg University, the first Protestant university, is founded.

1530: Foundation for the Lutheran denomination established via the Augsburg Confession.

1534: The Act of Supremacy officially makes the king the head of the English church.

1536: John Calvin publishes the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. William Tyndale, who also worked to provide his countrymen with the Bible in their native tongue, is martyred this same year.

c. **1624**: Francis Bacon writes his utopian vision *New Atlantis*. A strong case can be made for Bacon initiating the Enlightenment.

1642: Rene Descartes publishes his *Meditations on First Philosophy*; many consider Descartes the forerunner of the Enlightenment, although some historians point to Luther as the catalyst for that movement.

1654: Oliver Cromwell tells Parliament that freedom of religion is a fundamental right. This concept was unthinkable before the Reformation.

1789: The French Revolution, the logical consequence of the Enlightenment, begins.

1945: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who sought to maintain a true Lutheran church by organizing underground seminaries when Adolf Hitler took over the state seminaries, is martyred in a Nazi concentration camp.

Q&A

What was the Diet of Worms, and when did it convene?
Charles V, the young German Emperor, was caught between the Catholics of Spain (where his power was strongest) and the growing unrest in Germany. In 1521, he summoned the Imperial Diet at Worms and found that most of the German nobles were in support of Luther. After much discussion, it was decided that Luther should be offered safe-conduct to come and attend the Diet and defend himself. Many urged Luther not to go, because John Huss, one of the catalysts for the Reformation, had been offered safe-conduct before and in spite of this been martyred in 1415. Luther replied, "Though there were as many devils in Worms as there are tiles on the roofs, I will go there." When he arrived in the city, a band of knights escorted him to the Diet.

How did events unfold at the Diet?
On the first day, Luther was asked if he would recant all the heresies in his books, and he asked for time to consider. He was given 24 hours. When he reappeared and was asked to recant, he began by saying that his criticisms of church abuses were considered fair by most people, and was interrupted by Charles's shouted "No!". Luther maintained that he could not recant unless scripture demonstrated that he was wrong. To this, Johann Eck,

his accuser, said, "Martin, your plea to be heard from Scripture is the one always made by heretics. You do nothing but renew the errors of Wyclif and Huss. . . . How can you assume that you are the only one to understand the sense of Scripture? Would you put your judgment above that of so many famous men and claim that you know more than all of them?"

How would you respond to Eck's contentions?
First, notice that humility does demand that we carefully weigh the opinions of thoughtful men; we should refrain from depending solely on our own intellect. Every Christian should feel the force of this part of Eck's argument. But Eck's other contention, that it's very difficult if not impossible for an average man to understand scripture, is flatly contradicted by scripture. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 makes it clear that all men should rely on scripture for our teaching and our training in righteousness. 1 Timothy 6:3-4 says, "If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing." This clearly indicates that we must compare the words of Christ in scripture to the teachings of any man, and if the man contradicts Christ he understands nothing. In other words, the standard for truth is not the majority, or an elite consensus—it is the Word of God, which may be plainly understood.

Luther basically says he wrote three kinds of books. What are they?
Page 303: devotional books that teach good doctrine, books that attack "poperies," and books where he attacks certain individuals who attack the Christian faith.

What does Luther mean by "poperies"?
Luther describes elements of the contemporary Catholic church like false doctrines, bad behavior (including greed and a vain love of pomp), and extra laws burdening Christians.

Luther also says that if he recants before the Emperor, it would seem as though the abuses of Catholicism "receive confirmation from Your Most Serene Majesty and all the states of the empire." Why is this a clever response?
Because it implicates Charles V and forces him to choose. Luther shows Charles that by calling him to the Diet, he has forced himself to take a stand either for or against reform.

What mistake does Luther admit to in his books attacking anti-Christian individuals? Is he really sorry for this?
He admits he was more heated and forceful than befits a monk. It's hard to say whether or not he's really sorry. Luther's personality seems to be such that he wouldn't feel terribly bad about hurting feelings.

So does Luther proudly assert that he is never wrong?
No. On page 304 he admits to being a fallible human, but he humbly asks that he be shown where he teaches bad doctrine.

What proof will Luther accept that he has articulated bad doctrine?
He needs to be shown from scripture.

Why does Luther say on p. 304 that "I rejoice exceedingly

to see the Gospel this day, as of old, a cause of disturbance and disagreement"?
He means that Christ's words will bring division, as Christ said in Matthew 10:34-39. Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 4:3-4, "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths." Naturally, someone teaching sound doctrine will rile up people with itching ears.

Why is it really gutsy for Luther to say on p. 304, "I might cite examples drawn from the oracles of God. I might speak of pharaohs, of kings of Babylon, or of Israel, who were never more contributing to their own ruin than when, by measures in appearances most prudent, they thought to establish their own authority"?
Because he is basically warning Charles that his efforts to compromise between the Word of God and Catholicism put him in a category with bad rulers who were undercut by their own unwillingness to trust God and His Word.

Why might it be unsettling to hear Luther say that "it cannot be right for a Christian to speak against his conscience"?
Because it seems to open the door to subjectivity—allowing each person to determine the truth for himself. Christianity assumes that truth is fixed and unchanging, which would not be correct if truth depends upon changeable human consciences.

Is Luther arguing for subjectivity?
No—Luther wants each person to let the Bible determine truth—that is, to find objective truth in the Word of God. He says clearly that he will change his mind if given sufficient "proof from Holy Scripture." His basis for knowing is not his own conscience; it is the Word of God.

Why do some people say that the Enlightenment, which was basically an atheistic movement, began with Luther?
Because they interpret his words as a call to subjectivity—allowing every man to trust to his own reason. But Luther would never argue for this. He is specifically arguing that every man must submit his reason to scripture, rather than that every man should trust his own instincts.

What words did not appear in the initial transcript of Luther's speech, but are written on his tomb? What scripture does this quote echo?
"Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise." This quote reminds me of Peter's words when Christ asks His disciples if they will desert Him, too: "Lord, to whom shall we go?" (John 6:66-69). The Christian does not become unyielding because he is stubborn; he is unyielding because he knows he is lost without Christ, so he must follow Him even when the direction this leads is unpopular.

After listening to Luther defend himself, Charles wrote, "A single friar who goes counter to all Christianity for a thousand years must be wrong." What is wrong with this conclusion?

In the first place, Luther was not the only person calling for reform. John Huss and John Wycliffe said many of the same things, as did their followers. Even men like Erasmus and William Langland echoed some of Luther's unpopular sentiments. More importantly, truth is not decided by majority opinion. Although Luther was certainly in the minority, this does not ensure that he was mistaken (abolitionists were in the minority for a long time prior to the Emancipation Proclamation, and pro-life Americans are in the minority today). The standard for truth resides not in changeable man—it resides in the character of God, and is revealed to men in the Bible. Thus, one man relying on scripture may be right when the entire world opposes him.

What happened immediately after Luther was escorted away from the Diet?

Frederick of Saxony, an Elector, had him ambushed and "kidnapped" to be taken to his castle at Wartburg, so that he would be protected. While there, Luther began translating the New Testament into German.

Address to the Diet of Worms: The Central Theme

If anyone can convince me that what I've written contradicts scripture, I will "be the first to seize my writings and commit them to the flames," but if I'm not convinced, it would be wrong for me as a Christian to recant beliefs that are biblical.

The Big Picture:

Epistemology

When I was just beginning to wrestle with the concept of epistemology, philosophy-buff and director of Summit Ministries David Noebel emphasized its importance by telling me that epistemology was one-half of all philosophy. Though this doesn't seem to leave much room for ontology, cosmology, aesthetics and ethics, in hindsight it seems like he may have understated the case.

The technical term *epistemology* refers to the branch of philosophy that deals with how we can know things. The word sounds formidable, but it refers to something that concerns (or at least, it should concern) all men: How do you know that what you "know" is true?

How do you know, for example, that the seed you just planted will grow into a sunflower? One person might answer that he knows because the packet from which he shook the seed is labeled "sunflowers." Another person might say he knows because the man at the store told him so. A third might argue that he knows because he has eaten sunflower seeds all his life, and they look just the same.

But problems arise. Are the packagers of seeds incapable of mistakes? Is the man at the greenhouse similarly infallible? Have your own observations never been proved wrong before? On another level: what guarantee do you have that this particular sunflower seed will produce a sunflower? Isn't it possible the seed is barren? Or that a squirrel might steal it? Or that a late frost might kill it? And on still another level: Can you be certain that sunflower seeds always produce their own kind? Why do you expect the universe to behave according to historic patterns? Might the universe not deviate from its usual course in this particular case?

Okay, most people don't worry about those last questions. But a moment's reflection makes it clear that we can't know for certain that any one particular seed planted will result in a sunflower. When faced with all these questions, we tend to shrug and acknowledge that life is uncertain—which

is a fine attitude toward gardening.

But there are deeper questions for which the casual "life is uncertain" shrug is inadequate. What's your purpose? Do you end at death? Should you try to help others? Can you trust reality to behave in a generally predictable way?

Such questions tend to make people adamant. I *know* there's a heaven! I *know* it's better to love than to hate! But often the vehemence of their response partially results from the uncertainty of their knowing. Here's an interesting experiment: see how many people you can find who can actually explain how they know that it's better to love than to hate. Everyone says they know it—the question is, How do they know?

This is the question that plagued Rene Descartes, the 17th century mathematician and philosopher described by many as the father of modern philosophy. Descartes was acutely aware of the fact that his senses deceived him, and that even his friends and trusted authorities could make mistakes. As he puts it in his first *Meditation*, "[I]t is a mark of prudence never to trust wholly in those things which have once deceived us."[1] But if that's the case, what or whom can Descartes trust? Where's the foundation for certain knowing?

To discover this, Descartes performed a famous experiment. He decided that he must "raze everything in my life, down to the very bottom, so as to begin again from the first foundations, if I wanted to establish anything firm and lasting . . ."[2]

The way I think of this experiment is "cleaning out the attic." Descartes wanted to get rid of all his unfounded and uncertain assumptions, and because he couldn't be sure which ones may have at one time been predicated upon another uncertain assumption, he had to make a clean sweep. Only after getting rid of every assumption could he then allow into the attic the things he knew for certain.

As you'll read in his *First Meditation*, Descartes approaches this experiment in stages—but to summarize here, he finally concludes that the only way to make a completely clean sweep is to assume, for the moment, that there exists "an evil genius, as clever and deceitful as he is powerful, who has directed his entire effort to misleading me."[3] This assumption is, so to speak, the broom with which Descartes cleans out the attic, because it

forces him to view all his sense perceptions and even all his thoughts as the distortions of an all-powerful demon bent on deceiving him.

(Tread lightly here: Descartes doesn't really believe in such a demon, and it doesn't mean that his assumption about the demon is the one assumption untouched in his mind. He knows that idea is preposterous—it is just the means to the end, which is getting rid of all assumptions.)

You can imagine how Descartes felt in the midst of this experiment. At this point, he is cast into the philosophical position known as "radical skepticism." He must doubt that he can know anything at all. He describes himself as feeling "as if I had suddenly fallen into a deep whirlpool, I am so disturbed that I can neither touch my foot to the bottom, nor swim up to the top."[4] To put it in modern terms: he feels like you feel after you try to body-surf a giant wave.

It is at this point that Descartes fights through to his famous maxim: *cogito ergo sum*—I think; therefore, I am. Actually, he arrives at it a little differently than the maxim suggests—he notices that his deceiving demon can always distort his thoughts so that he thinks the wrong thing, but it doesn't change the fact that he has thoughts. Who has the thoughts? I do (he thinks). Thus he concludes, "the statement 'I am, I exist' is necessarily true every time it is uttered by me or conceived in my mind."[5] Because I think, I must necessarily exist.

Sounds fairly straightforward, right? And for Descartes it gets better and better: after arriving at this certain knowledge, he is able (he believes) to use it as a foundation to arrive at more and more necessary conclusions that are also then certain. Descartes believes, as many philosophers who followed him believed, that he can begin with himself and arrive at certain knowledge.

The Bible doesn't seem to concur. Proverbs 14:12 says that "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." This holds true experientially; we know many men who claim to have certain knowledge who seem to be headed in the wrong direction. Jeremiah 17:9 indicates that this knowing problem is endemic for humanity: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" Scripture seems to clearly indicate that man is fallen both in will and in intellect—which means that an individual cannot know anything with certainty if he begins with

himself.

But didn't Descartes just disprove that idea? He began with himself and still escaped the prison of radical skepticism—or did he?

In truth, Descartes does not sufficiently clean out the attic. He claims to have jettisoned all assumptions before embracing the one certain thing, "I think." But one assumption has escaped the broom.

Ironically, it is Buddhism that highlights the flaw in Descartes' elegant reasoning, because it is this worldview that calls into question the existence of self. People in the West naturally assume that the individual exists as a continuous, growing, changing, self—but the Buddhist sees man as merely an aggregate of the senses. One Buddhist puts it this way: "Nirvana is definitely no annihilation of self, because there is no self to annihilate. If at all, it is the annihilation of the illusion, of the false idea of self."[6]

Therein lies Descartes' unexamined assumption: he believes that he is an individual, an "I." To his assertion that he thinks and therefore he exists, the Buddhist would respond, How can you be certain that your "thought" is anything more than the convergence of various sensory experiences? And if this is the case, then there is no "you" thinking—there is only a bundle of senses converging and creating the illusion of self.

Is what the Buddhist saying true? Not if the Bible is true. But Descartes cannot fall back on scripture to shore up his argument. He is committed to emptying out the attic and relying on himself to discover certain knowledge. By smuggling in the concept of "I," Descartes is able to make the assertion "I think." But if the Buddhist helps him to make a clean sweep of his attic, he loses his first principle and finds himself drowning again in the whirlpool of radical skepticism.

Descartes' experiment is brilliant because it dissects a crucial problem. But Descartes' solution is ultimately unsatisfactory, and his failure leaves a desperate question in the air: Can man know anything for certain?

This is the problem of epistemology! And it is a problem that scripture answers eloquently and directly: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."[7] We can know nothing if we begin with ourselves, but we can know many things for certain if a good and loving God reveals them to us.

Many people suggest that epistemology wasn't even a concern for

philosophers until Descartes. But for Christians, epistemology has always been central. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."[8] Christ is the Word—the communication—that makes God known to us, and through Him we may know about His creation as well. John 1:18 makes this explicit: "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only [Christ], who is at the Father's side, *has made him known*" (italics mine).

Man is fallible and apart from God's grace can know nothing for certain. But if Christ is Who He says He is, then man can depend upon Him to know things for certain. Christ, according to Colossians 2:2-3, is the "mystery of God . . . in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Scripture could not be more explicit: the only way you can know for certain is to know the One Who is the source.

Throughout the great conversation, many philosophers posit many methods for arriving at certain knowledge. Some depend primarily on reason, or experience, or sense perception. All of these methods rely too heavily on man. If we begin with a finite foundation who is capable of error, we cast into doubt all possible knowledge.

Paradoxically, if we begin by admitting that we can know nothing, and we must depend on Christ for all, we can know many things. Is this completely reasonable? Of course not. Christianity depends on faith, and faith is "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1). We must begin with the certainty that Christ is Who He says He is to know anything for certain; such certainty requires faith.

But everyone has faith. The problem is that most people put their faith in something that cannot yield certain knowledge. Can science form an adequate foundation for epistemology? One word: phrenology.[9] Science has been wrong before and will be wrong again—as an old physics professor I know likes to say, "Science is a sometimes thing." Can Buddha provide an adequate epistemology? It's ridiculous to even use the word "epistemology" in concert with Buddhism, since the Buddhist denies any knowing self exists. Can Allah provide an adequate epistemology? Things seem more hopeful here, since Allah purportedly reveals himself through the Koran—until we realize that Allah has allowed many of his revelations to be corrupted in the past.[10] Take your pick: religious authority, reason, experience, hallucinogenic

mushrooms—nothing else provides an adequate foundation for epistemology. It begins to look as though Christ really is the source of all wisdom and knowledge, and that our only hope is to trust Him.

This explains why Christians are often characterized as anti-rational. We do not grant reason the exalted status that men like Descartes or Thomas Jefferson do, because we know that human reason is faulty. It's another paradox: the only way reason can be dependable is if we submit it to God's Word. Reason isn't reasonable apart from God—unless there is a Source and Standard for rationality that does not change, then our very reason is unfounded.

Blaise Pascal said Descartes' meditations were "useless and uncertain" because they begin in the wrong place. Pascal writes, "Philosophers and all the religions and sects in the world have taken natural reason for their guide. Christians alone have been obliged to take their rules from outside themselves and to acquaint themselves with those which Christ left for us with those of old, to be handed down again to the faithful."[11] How can we know for certain? Only by trusting Christ.

Ultimately, then, there are only two consistent views of reality: Christianity and radical skepticism. Either certain knowledge is possible because Immanuel reveals it, or it isn't. But as Pascal says, the latter possibility is never manifested in anyone's life: "Is [man] to doubt everything, to doubt whether he is awake, whether he is being pinched or burned? Is he to doubt whether he is doubting, to doubt whether he exists? No one can go that far, and I maintain that a perfectly genuine skeptic has never existed."[12]

Notice, too, that a radical skeptic doesn't make a very good friend. If you found yourself being attacked by a thug and desperately in need of the radical skeptic's help, he would be too busy doubting the existence of you, the thug, the thug's brass knuckles, and himself. Action requires faith, not skepticism, as John Henry Newman says: "Life is for action. If we insist on proofs for everything, we shall never come to action: to act you must assume, and that assumption is faith."[13]

Oddly, this Christian idea comes close to the atheistic worldview known as existentialism. Both Christians and existentialists acknowledge the limits of human reason and say that action is only possible through faith, but the existentialist takes the position of despair: he believes that

life is absurd and that certain knowledge is unattainable. Thus, the faith of the existentialist is blind faith—a desperate exercise in wishful thinking. It doesn't matter in what or whom the existentialist chooses to place his faith, since all is absurd and there is no trustworthy foundation for his faith. Here, then, is the massive divide between existentialism and Christianity. The existentialist closes his eyes and leaps into the void, "knowing" that nothing will catch him; the Christian fixes his eyes on the Way, the Truth and the Life and follows, finding every day that his Way is good and true. The only adequate existentialism is the "existentialism" of Newman and Soren Kierkegaard, who understand the weaknesses of human reason but instead of despairing put their faith in Christ. Kierkegaard says, "The proofs which Scripture presents for Christ's divinity—His miracles, His Resurrection from the dead, His Ascension into heaven—are therefore only for faith, that is, they are not 'proofs,' they have no intention of proving that all this agrees perfectly with reason: on the contrary they would prove that it conflicts with reason and therefore is an object of faith. . . . the certitude of faith is something infinitely higher."[14]

This is the historic Christian position on epistemology. Pascal said it long before Kierkegaard, and Martin Luther said it long before Pascal. Listen to how Luther's argument at the Diet of Worms depends directly on the correct epistemology: "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God."[15]

Augustine said it long before Luther when he argued that the only way to know was to rely on "those Scriptures whose supremacy over every product of human genius does not depend on the chance impulses of the minds of men, but is manifestly due to the guiding power of God's supreme providence, and exercises sovereign authority over the literature of all mankind."[16] How can we know? Because God reveals His truth to us. If that faith is misplaced, then knowledge itself is beyond our grasp.

This may be the crux of the ideas expressed in 1 Corinthians 3:19 and 1:25—"The wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight," and "the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom." Any man-based system of

knowing breaks down, and our only hope of knowing anything begins with the "foolishness" of the cross (1 Corinthians 1:18). Epistemology is much more simple than Descartes makes it; it's as simple as seeing yourself as fallible and Christ as your only hope.

Karl Barth said it best. When asked by a Richmond Theological Seminary student what his "most momentous discovery" was, Barth replied, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."[17] Is this the foolishness of a simple children's song, or is it the wisdom found by trusting God to reveal His truth to us?

ENDNOTES

[1] Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981), p. 57.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid, p. 60.
[4] Ibid, p. 61.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1974), p. 37.
[7] Proverbs 9:10.
[8] John 1:1.
[9] Phrenology was a nineteenth century "science" developed by an anatomist named Franz Joseph Gall. Students of phrenology believed that you could tell about a person's character and intelligence by feeling the depressions and bumps on that person's head. The idea was that the shape of one's skull corresponded to the outer layer of one's brain—an idea that has since been thoroughly discredited. The problem for the scientist persists, however: for about 100 years "good science" included the ideas of phrenology. No one can claim that science results in certain knowledge, because the same thing that happened to phrenology can happen to any scientific theory tomorrow—careful testing may cause the theory to be modified or rejected.

[10] According to Islam, Allah revealed his truth to other prophets before Mohammed. In fact, Muslims consider Moses, David and Jesus to be prophets, and believe that they originally recorded divine revelation (in the Pentateuch, the Psalms, and the Gospels respectively). But Muslims do not now treat these books of the Bible as authoritative because they believe they have been corrupted as time passed. A sticky problem arises: If Allah could not preserve his revelation to the first prophets, why should we believe that he will preserve his revelation to Mohammed? This very problem has resulted in another worldview, the Baha'i faith, which began in 1844 when a man claimed to be the next prophet in the Muslim line of prophets extending from Adam to Mohammed. He claimed that the Koran was also corrupted over time, and that his revelation was now the only true revelation from Allah. A conundrum! Will Allah ever preserve his word, or will we always have uncertainty about whether or not his words have been corrupted?

[11] Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 260.

[12] Ibid, p. 64.

[13] John Henry Newman, "Secular Knowledge not a Principle of Action," *The Oxford Book of Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 168.

[14] Soren Kierkegaard, "Training in Christianity," in Robert Bretall, ed., *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 389-390.

[15] Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms, cited in Mark Noll, *Turning Points* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), p. 154. Notice that Luther is making his reason secondary to the scriptures. You may reason with Luther, but only in accord with God's Word—if your reason contradicts God's Word, it grows unreasonable.

[16] Augustine, *City of God* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 429.

[17] Karl Barth, *Fragments Grave and Gay* (Cleveland, OH: Fountain Books, 1976), p. 124.

Key Quotes

"They preach mad, who say that the soul flies out of purgatory as soon as the money thrown into the chest rattles."
--*The Ninety-five Theses*, in *Basic Luther* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1994), p. 12.

"Those who believe that, through letters of pardon, they are made sure of their won salvation, will be eternally damned along with their teachers."
--Ibid.

"To say that the cross set up among the insignia of the Papal arms is of equal power with the cross of Christ, is blasphemy."
--Ibid, p. 16.

"God will not endure that a good work should be begun trusting to our own strength and wisdom."
--*Address to the Nobility*, in *Basic Luther*, p. 21.

"If popes and Romanists have hitherto, with the devil's help, thrown kings into confusion, they may still do so, if we attempt things with our own strength and skill, without God's help."
--Ibid, p. 22.

"[I]f it were proposed to admonish [Romanists] with the Scriptures, they objected that no one may interpret the Scriptures but the Pope."
--Ibid, p. 23.

"We see, then, that just as those we call spiritual, or priests, bishops, or popes, do not differ from other Christians in any other or higher degree but in that they are to be concerned with the word of God and the sacraments—that being their work and office—in the same way the temporal authorities hold

the sword and the rod in their hands to punish the wicked and to protect the good. A cobbler, a smith, a peasant, every man, has the office and function of his calling, and yet all alike are consecrated priests and bishops, and every man should by his office or function be useful and beneficial to the rest, so that various kinds of work may all be united for the furtherance of body and soul, just as the members of the body all serve one another."
--Ibid, p. 26.

"Forasmuch as the temporal power has been ordained by God for the punishment of the bad and the protection of the good, therefore we must let it do its duty throughout the whole Christian body, without respect of persons, whether it strikes popes, bishops, priests, monks, nuns, or whoever it may be."
--Ibid, pp. 26-27

"It is, indeed, past bearing that the spiritual law should esteem so highly the liberty, life, and property of the clergy, as if laymen were not as good spiritual Christians, or not equally members of the Church. Why should your body, life, goods, and honour be free, and not mine, seeing that we are equal as Christians, and have received alike baptism, faith, spirit, and all things? If a priest is killed, the country is laid under an interdict: why not also if a peasant is killed? Whence comes this great difference among equal Christians?"
--Ibid, p. 28.

"Has not the Pope often erred? Who could help Christianity, in case the Pope errs, if we do not rather believe another who has the Scriptures for him?"
--Ibid, p. 30.

Christians "should not let the spirit of liberty (as St. Paul has it) be frightened away by the inventions of the popes; we should boldly judge what they do and what they leave undone by our own believing understanding of the Scriptures, and force them to follow the better understanding, and not their own. . . . Therefore it behooves every Christian to aid the faith by understanding and defending it and by condemning all errors."
--Ibid, p. 31.

"It is a distressing and terrible thing to see that the head of Christendom, who boasts of being the vicar of Christ and the successor of St. Peter, lives in a worldly pomp that no king or emperor can equal, so that in him that calls himself most holy and most spiritual there is more worldliness than in the world itself."
--Ibid, p. 35.

"My advice is to restore liberty, and to leave every man free to marry or not to marry."
--Ibid, p. 65.

"Let this be a fixed rule for you: Whatever has to be bought of the Pope is neither good, nor of God."
--Ibid, p. 77.

"Now, my advice would be that the books of Aristotle, the *Physics*, the *Metaphysics*, *Of the Soul*, *Ethics*, which have hitherto been considered the best, be altogether abolished, with all others that profess to treat of nature, though nothing can be learned from them, either of natural or of spiritual things. Besides, no one has been able to understand his meaning, and much time has been wasted and many noble souls vexed with much useless labour, study, and expense. I venture to say that any potter has more knowledge of natural things than is to be found in these books."
--Ibid, p. 86.

"Christian faith has appeared to many an easy thing; nay, not a few even reckon it among the social virtues, as it were; and this they do because they have not made proof of it experimentally . . ."
--*On Christian Liberty*, in *Basic Luther*, p. 115.

"A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one."
--Ibid.

"To preach Christ is to feed the soul, to justify it, to set it free, and to save it, if it believes the preaching. For faith alone and the efficacious use of the word of God, bring salvation. . . . Hence it is clear that as the soul needs the word alone for life and justification, so it is justified by faith alone, and not by any works."
--Ibid, p. 118.

"Meanwhile it is to be noted that the whole Scripture of God is divided into two parts: precepts and promises. The precepts certainly teach us what is good, but what they teach is not forthwith done. For they show us what we ought to do, but do not give us the power to do it. They were ordained, however, for the purpose of showing man to himself, that through them he may lean his own impotence for good and may despair of his own strength."
--Ibid, p. 120.

"Christ, that rich and pious Husband, takes as a wife a needy and impious harlot, redeeming her from all her evils and supplying her with all His good things."
--Ibid, p. 125.

Christians "have made of Christ a taskmaster far more severe than Moses."
--Ibid, p. 143.

"If you wish to use your liberty . . . take care not to use it in the presence of the weak. On the other hand, in the presence of tyrants and obstinate opposers, use your liberty in their despite, and with the utmost pertinacity, that they too may understand that they are tyrants, and their laws useless for justification . . ."
--Ibid, p. 150.

"I cannot submit my faith either to the pope or to the council, because it is as clear as noonday that they have fallen into error and even into glaring inconsistency with themselves. If, then, I am not convinced by proof from

Holy Scripture, or by cogent reasons, if I am not satisfied by the very text I have cited, and if my judgment is not in this way brought into subjection to God's Word, I neither can nor will retract anything; for it cannot be right for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen."
--Martin Luther, addressing the 1521 Diet of Worms, in *Lend Me Your Ears: Great Speeches in History*, ed. William Safire (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1992), pp. 304-5.

"A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing.
Our helper he amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing."
--*Hymn, Ein' Feste Burg*, 1529

"One generation passes, another comes. If one heresy dies, another springs up, for the devil neither slumbers nor sleeps."
--*Commentary on Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1999), p. 15.

"The apples make not the tree, but the tree makes the apples. So faith first makes the person who afterwards brings forth works."
--Ibid, p. 163.

"Therefore, as many as trust to their own strength and righteousness serve a god they themselves have devised, and not the true God."
--Ibid, p. 263.

Key Scripture

"If I said something wrong, testify as to what is wrong."
--John 18:23. Luther cites this verse in his defense at the Diet of Worms, in effect asking that he be shown where his doctrine contradicts scripture.

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"
--Galatians 2:20-21

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."
--2 Timothy 3:16

"Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible."
--1 Corinthians 9:19

"Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?'"
--John 11:25-26

"'The days are coming,' declares the Sovereign Lord, 'when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.'"
--Amos 8:11

"That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."
--Romans 10:9-10.

"As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.'"
--Romans 3:10-12

"'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."
--1 Corinthians 15:55-57

"Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."
--1 Corinthians 9:26-27

"By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them."
--Matthew 7:16-20

"Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand."
--Romans 14:1-4

"Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall. So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves."
--Romans 14:20-22

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."
--Ephesians 2:8-9

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."
--John 15:5

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