

**HOW TO RESIST UNNECESSARY DOGMATISM AND UNHEALTHY DOUBT:
Understanding one's finitude in relation to the God of the Bible.**

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**"The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me."
~ Blaise Pascal**

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Over the years I have repeatedly and regularly observed among some of my students a *poor* understanding of *their own* finitude in relation to the God of the Bible, who is both infinite and personal. This deficiency generally finds its development from two sources: unnecessary dogmatism and unhealthy doubt.

Dogmatists. On one hand I have students who claim to unequivocally understand God's activities and or His ways with such certainty that they not merely make, but cast judgments against those who hold competing and reasonable views within the range of biblical orthodoxy. When pressed many will admit they are not able to justify their claims from an Archimedean viewpoint, that is, a vantage point that overlooks all of Bible and theology from its totality, yet they still readily dismiss all other competing and reasonable views without taking seriously, that is, substantively examining their "*opponents*" arguments, evidences, and implications. Rather than becoming lovers of truth they have developed bad habits, that is, vices, of situating themselves against others and their views even without carefully considering their own person and position in the universe. Either intentionally or unintentionally their dogmatism is an act of rebellion against their created position in God's universe.

Dogmatism finds expression when one commits the fallacy of reductionism. Reductionism is a methodological approach of reducing explanations to the smallest possible entities. For example, when one states, "Sin is only missing the mark," one has committed a reductionistic fallacy. Why? Because sin is much more than simply "missing the mark." Scripture includes other characteristics such as rebellion against God, a state within humanity, transgression of the law of God, and wrongful acts towards both God and other human beings. Reductionism is a fallacious method because it ignores the multiplicity of information that still remains.

Students commit reductionism when they cling to a particular truth while ignoring all other relevant truths. Some take this particular notion into all passages of Scripture. Committing *isegesis*, that is, reading into a particular passage their preconceived notion, they are unwilling to take other portions of Scripture as they are and see how they might relate to one another. When they fail to relate one truth to the other established truths, they neglect theological coherence. As a result, they not only isolate their understanding of a particular truth from the rest of Scripture, but they also overlook their own human condition. How is this possible? By

committing themselves to reductionism they postulate a presumptuous disposition against what knowable remains and what is yet to be discovered. Moreover, they over-extend themselves, ignoring their own limitations as finite beings; they forget who they are in view of who He is.

What is the upshot? Like a clanging symbol, they continually affirm and restate their one reductionistic truth. Like a string of beads they may even string several reductionistic truths together. Sadly, their worldview becomes deficiently creedal and unsystematic. How? First, not only do they judge all other views against their own point of view, but some will even go so far as to eventually organize their lives around this mindset against the backdrop of what they willfully or/and unwillingly ignore. And second, they encircle themselves with friends who share this same mindset where they collectively affirm and mock those who do not understand what they claim to intimately discover and know.

Doubters. On the other hand, I have students who claim one can never know any truth-claim whatsoever. Since (a) we are biased and influenced participants in culture or (b) because of the noetic effects of sin, that is, the impact sin has made upon the mind, or (c) because of both, namely, our presupposed situation in culture and in sin, even as redeemed children of God, we are confronted with a "*knowledge barrier*" that cannot be overcome; the wall is too tall, too steep, and too thick. In essence, they contend, that we lack the capability and skills to know "*true truth.*" As a result, doubters are overwhelmed by their human condition as participants in culture.

Students who possess this type of a doubting mindset tend to react to truth-claims with either cynicism or silence. For those who are cynical, they mock every truth-claim made. Just as a dogmatic student ridicules those who hold differing or competing views, the cynical student mocks any person who asserts they know what is true. For those who remain silent we can only speculate. Notwithstanding, some have later admitted to me that they are experiencing a deep-seated "*angst*", that is, they are trying to come to terms with the notion that they "*can never truly know what is true*" and what this means in terms of their own behavior, identity, pursuits, and values. The upshot is that in either case, while they do not deny the existence of absolute truth, they hold any and every truth-claim (and their bearers) with suspicion.

While I contend using doubt is a necessary and healthy tool in discovering what is true, the ever-present danger is the temptation to make doubt normative for all truth-claims whereby doubt is perversely identified with truth itself. When this occurs the doubter's worldview degenerates into skepticism. Said differently, a doubter may take the good tool of questioning truth-claims with doubt, for nothing can be proven without it first being doubted, and replaces proper reasoning with a skeptical worldview, a habituated way of seeing. Thus, to them, *all* biblical, moral, and theological judgments are pretentious. Once healthy questioning takes an

unhealthy turn, it does not take much for cynicism or angst to deteriorate one into a worldview of skepticism.

However, skepticism is self-defeating. It is illogical because skeptics are making a truth-claim about skepticism, that is, one cannot arrive at any truth at all, which would necessarily include skepticism! In other words, the skeptic needs to doubt his or her own skepticism. Second, I have yet to meet a skeptic whose worldview was not fragmented. Though they habitually doubt biblical, moral, and theological truth-claims, in other areas of their lives, from their bank accounts to understanding warning labels, they do not question those truth-claims. And lastly, I have never met a skeptic who intimately displayed joy as a regular fruit of life. Once in a while I hear a confession that they miss God, godly fellowship found in Christ-centered churches, and those particular “*aha*” moments when Scripture would come alive to them.

In sum, the central problem for both dogmatic and doubter students are twofold: Dogmatists fail to recognize their own finiteness against the infinite by ignoring the proper use tool of doubt whereas doubters pervert the tool of doubt. And second, the presumptuous ignore their own situation, that is, their finiteness, against what is infinite, that is God, in contrast to doubters who are overwhelmed by their finiteness. Both positions are obstinate.

What I affirm, instead, is to properly recognize one’s situation against the backdrop of what is infinite by presupposing the existence of an infinite, personal God, one who is the sum-total of His infinite perfections. We are God’s representatives, His servants who are mandated to reflect Jesus Christ in our moment-by-moment living (Genesis 1:26-27; Philippians 2:5-11). This recognition includes (a) **affirming three presuppositions**: (1) God’s awareness of our human condition, (2) God’s acts of transcendence, and (3) the realization of our place in God’s presence; (b) **diligently practicing two maxims** as finite servants of an infinite God: (1) Say nothing more and nothing less than what the Bible says and (2) carefully adhere to proper exegesis and theological coherence.

First, the God of the Bible is absolutely aware of our human condition, both our frailties as persons and as participants in culture, no matter if we are the dogmatist or the doubter. God has spoken. As the sum-total of His infinite perfections, God know what and who we are and yet He still chose disclosed truth about Himself via creation (Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1; 2:14-16) and in the inspiration of Scripture (Psalm 19:7-11; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). Why speak truth to us if we are incapable of knowing what He wants us to know with any sense of determinancy?

Second, doubt and skepticism can be overcome when we recognize that God transcends our human condition. We see from Scripture and in history that God has transcended space and time in His historical acts of special revelation as evidenced with the creation of cosmos and human life, the deliverance of His chosen people from the oppression of Egyptian rulers, the giving of the Mosaic Law, and in the

perfect revelation of Jesus Christ, who pitched His tent within the Roman Empire. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to the apostles and writers of the New Testament to recall what was taught to them and in this age, no matter how terrible one's past is, at the moment any person places his or her trust in Jesus Christ, believing that He is God, and who died on the cross for their sins, and rose bodily from the dead, he or she is indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God. Grace is God's unmerited favor available to anyone who is willing to receive his love-gift of salvation (John 3:16; Ephesians 2:8-9). The only human condition for salvation is faith for we can never be good enough for salvation. We can also affirm by our existential experience that God created us with a mind that inherently hungers for and is satisfied when we discover "*true truth*." In other words, we would not be born with desire to know truth unless satisfaction for truth exists. Just like a baby feels hunger and food satisfies, we hunger to know what is true. Truth satisfies.

And third, dogmatism can be overcome by realizing one's place in the presence of the God of the Bible. To claim one knows from an Archimedean vantage point how God operates, for example, is foolish, illusory, and rebellious, for one is attempting to usurp one's finite standing over all others about Him who is infinite. Rather than simply reaffirming what one believes by means of articulation and re-articulation, and only seriously studying those persons with whom one already agrees, one must scrutinize one's justification for that belief, which in part, seriously involves considering the points of view made by others. The dogmatist needs to recognize that he or she is not the determiner, but the discoverer of doctrine; not the magistrate, but the minister of doctrine; not the regulator, but the recognizer of doctrine; not the judge, but the witness of doctrine; not the master, but the servant of doctrine. On the other hand, the doubter or skeptic who dismisses one's accessibility to intimately know God's revelation, is asserting that God failed in effectively informing us what He wants us to know; this too is an act of rebellion for one is attempting to usurp one's judgment over God and His activities. We must realize that all our judgments are under judgment by the Author of all truth.

Realizing that we too (and those in our sphere of influence) are susceptible to both dogmatism and unhealthy doubt, what can we practically do? Consider the following two applications. First, in order to faithfully resist both dogmatism and unhealthy doubt as a finite servant of an infinite God, say nothing more and nothing less than what the Bible says. By maintaining this maxim, this one rule of conduct, both humility and competence may be exercised. And second, instead of clinging to a particular insight of truth or a particular passage as the sum-total truth, once one properly exegetically determines textual meaning within its grammatical, historical, and literary context, one will take the lowered-level truth and relate it to intermediate-ordered truths, that is, truth that the whole Bible teaches on *that* particular subject. Once this is determined, one will take the intermediate-ordered truths and harmonize or systematize with all the other doctrines the whole Bible proclaims for what one believes one area will directly or indirectly impact all other areas. At this level historical theology, natural theology, and tests of livability are

helpful as one seeks to maintain to say nothing more and nothing less than what the whole Bible proclaims.

Resurrection Sunday, 12 April 2009.