

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

HE'S NOT THE BOSS OF ME

Dear Professor Theophilus:

You say that God is good, but what makes Him good? You say that we have been ruined by trying to be good without God, but by whose standard? God's? Of *course* if we break away from Him we will be ruined by *His* standard, but what makes His standard better than yours, mine, or my cat's? All I really want to know is what makes this Being better and more morally right.

Reply

Your mistake is thinking of God as something separate from Good. He may be in accord with it, He may not. That's not how it is. God and Good aren't two things; they are one. He simply *is* the Good, and good things short of Him are good because He made them. It's His goodness that these thousand goods reflect, as white light refracted through a prism gleams in a thousand brilliant colors -- love, joy, wisdom, beauty, strength, and all the rest. Now God cannot be at odds with Himself. It is because He *is* the Good, and with infinite wisdom knows Himself, that He knows what Good is. To think that you, or I, or your cat might know Good better than Good knows Himself is pretty silly.

Another way to answer was suggested by C.S. Lewis. God is the source of our ability to know about Good. He gave us our minds; He gave us our conscience; it was He who gave us the knowledge that evil and good are *different*, He who polarized our souls to fear the one and long for the other. The very power to ask questions and form judgments about the matter comes from Him and depends on Him. So to set this power *against* Him is like sawing off the branch that we are sitting on.

That answers your question; in fact it answers it twice. But here is something else to think about. God has been called the Desire of Nations. The reason for this title is that if He Himself is the Good, then whether or not we know it, to long for the Good is ultimately to long for Him. Turning the same thought around, to seek good things *apart* from the One from whom their goodness comes is ultimately to stuff our mouths with dust and ashes. There will come a day when you wonder why you can't swallow. Come to the Fountain instead.

Peace be with you,
PROFESSOR THEOPHILUS

SHOULD I GIVE UP MY CALLING IN ORDER TO FOLLOW GOD?

Dear Professor Theophilus:

I am a writer. I've enjoyed writing stories since third grade, and have embraced the word "writer" as my label. Lately I've been feeling out of touch with God. I know that we shouldn't rely totally on feelings, but I do believe they are there for a reason. I wonder if I have this feeling because I've been focusing too much on writing instead of Him. I really want to follow His will, but there are two problems: I don't know what His will is, and I'm afraid that it might require me to give up writing. I don't know if I'd be able to do that. I love writing too much. I'm trying to convince myself that God's will for my life is to write many short stories to my heart's content, and that He'd use them for His will even though they aren't Christian in nature (not to say that they're bad, or offensive, they're just secular, pure and simple).

I guess what I'm really trying to ask is this: Would God require us to give up talents, skills, and likes that He created us with for His overall plan for humanity? I worry that by telling myself "No," I'm just giving myself the answer that I want to hear -- but is it true?

Reply

It's hard to imagine God telling you not to write, since it seems that His calling is "Write!" To endow a person with talents, skills, and likings that direct him strongly toward an honorable kind of work *is* a way of calling him. Why else would He give you these things? Unless there is something you're not telling me, why agonize?

So often people expect God's "call" to be an audible voice, perhaps from a convenient burning bush. Could that be your problem? Not that He has never used such methods! But He seems to reserve them for extraordinary callings that require extraordinary methods of announcement. There is no particular reason to think that He would create and adorn you with temperament and talents that pushed you so strongly toward writing, then tell you "Now be an accountant." Besides, there isn't any

rule that says that an audible voice is more likely to be God's than the "voice" of the skills He has given you. You'll always need discernment. Even if an audible voice did tell you to be an accountant, you'd have to ask whether it was God or just your iPod.

Or could your worry be that your stories are "secular," as you call them? Let's talk about that, because the term can mean a lot of different things. Sometimes when people call something secular, they mean that it reflects an alienated view of the world according to which there is no God, no meaning, and no hope. I don't think that's what you have in mind -- at least I hope not. I think you mean only that your stories don't have explicitly religious themes -- that they aren't about things like worship, conversion, or being Left Behind. My response is: Don't worry about it. Suppose you were a painter. Would God tell you to stop painting because your canvasses showed starry skies instead of scenes from the Bible? Or suppose you were an architect. Would He tell you to give up your profession because you happened to build ordinary homes instead of churches? Don't the heavens proclaim His glory? Didn't He live for 30 years in an ordinary home?

I think it's the same with the writing of stories. Everything that is good and well done ultimately points to Him; by faithfully reflecting the realities of the human heart, you honor the Creator of the heart. Many a story that doesn't mention Christ is implicitly more Christian than many a story that does. Laughter pleases Him too; we don't always have to be serious, like beasts of burden. I cannot believe that hilarity wasn't one of His creations, and I revel in the comedies of P.G. Wodehouse. My advice is that if your stories are dull, shoddy, careless, corrupting, or ordained for dishonorable purposes, then you should doubt your calling. Not otherwise.

There are two complications. Here is the first. In the strictest sense of the term, a calling is something permanent. The calling to marriage is like that; God never calls a husband to abandon his wife. Writing isn't *that* kind of calling. He really might call upon you to take up another kind of work some day, just as He called upon Moses to stop herding his father-in-law's sheep. I can't tell you that won't happen. What I can tell you is that if it does happen, it won't happen in the way that you fear. God won't give you contradictory guidance, He won't put the temperament and talents He has given you to waste, and He is not displeased for you to follow the guidance He is giving you *now*. You can't do tomorrow's duty today; you can only do today's.

Second, as I mentioned, there may be something you're not telling me. Perhaps you don't really like writing, but just like the idea of writing. Perhaps you aren't really talented at it, but just like the idea of being talented. Perhaps your stories aren't as innocent as you say they are. I'm not particularly worried, mind you. Good writers

are often filled with unnecessary self-doubts; nothing in your letter suggests that you aren't being honest with yourself. Just be sure that you are!

The first step in doing *that* is to get to the bottom of the other problem you mention. You say you feel "out of touch" with God, and you wonder whether your writing is to blame. It shouldn't be, and yet it could. The reason is this: It isn't the obviously bad things in life that we're tempted to turn into idols, but the good and godly ones. I mentioned before that you should write "as unto the Lord." The question is: Is that the way that you do it? So much depends on the rest of your life. Worship often; pray constantly; practice charity; and avoid what you know to be sin. Yes, love and enjoy your craft! But if you love working with words, that is all the more reason to love Him even more: The Word in whom all Story has its source.

Peace be with you,
PROFESSOR THEOPHILUS

IS HISTORY ALL IN OUR HEADS?

Dear Professor Theophilus:

I'm a senior at a small secular state university, and as I've advanced in my coursework, I've come to know my fellow students more closely. I have learned how to defend my Christian faith on many points, but one point continues to stump me.

Most of my fellow students accept without a shadow of a doubt the saying "history is nothing more than a lie agreed upon." They think that no accurate historical account has ever existed or could ever exist, because history is "only written by the winners." In their view, the only history that matters is each person's subjective experiences. Since *The Da Vinci Code* came out, I've run across this idea more and more.

This view stymies me any time I try to discuss the reliability of the Bible and the events of Jesus' life. How can I logically and reasonably defend the fact that some history *can* be known with confidence? How can I make the Bible seem relevant to those who see all historical documents as biased texts written by "the winners"?

Reply

Your problem with your classmates is ridiculously easy in one way, but terribly difficult in another. Let's take the easy way first. Their proposition is that no historical claim has ever been accurate, and that no historical claim can ever be made with reasonable confidence. But wait! To say something about what has or hasn't "ever been" *is* to make a historical claim. So their own claim is historical too! Now if it's true that no historical claim has ever been accurate, then their claim that no historical claim has ever been accurate is inaccurate too. But in that case some historical claims *may* be accurate, which means that their view is *wrong*. Their opinion is self-refuting.

Here's another way to refute it. Their reason for thinking that no historical account can ever be trusted is that "history is written by the winners," and winners can never be trusted. But if it's true that the majority of the students at your school accept this view, then for the time being, *they* are the winners there. Their own premises prove that they can't be trusted. Who's left? Well, people like you, who say that reasonable confidence *can* be placed in some historical claims.

Still another way to demonstrate the absurdity of their position is to show that they don't believe it themselves. If they did, they would never place confidence in any historical account whatsoever. But they do. How do we know that? Because, as you said, they do place confidence in their own subjective accounts of the things that have happened. According to them, no other histories "matter," but these histories do. This is a good time to ask them what that means. When they say that their subjective histories "matter," do they mean that these histories can be reasonably accepted as true? If they answer "No," then they're claiming that it's reasonable to act on premises that it isn't reasonable to believe. That doesn't make sense. But if they answer "Yes," then they are admitting that we can place reasonable confidence in some historical claims after all.

The final way to undercut their position is more constructive. A lot of history really is unreliable, and we might as well admit it. But *how did we find out* that it was unreliable? We found out by examining the historical evidence. But if that's what we did, then not all historical reasoning is worthless after all. One has to proceed with caution, of course, scrutinizing the evidence and keeping a lookout for distortions, but that's not the same as utter skepticism. The moral of the story isn't that history is impossible, but that history is difficult. That shouldn't surprise us, because everything worthwhile is difficult. Patience is difficult, love is difficult, plumbing is difficult -- they all require sweat.

The same goes for talking with your classmates. The arguments I've offered may seem pretty obvious, but as I said at the beginning, your problem is easy in one way, but fiendishly hard in another. Since the view that reality can't be known refutes itself, no one can swallow it just by making a mistake; anyone sharp enough to understand it is sharp enough to see through it too. But this implies that anyone who does swallow it must want to very badly. Now ask yourself: What sort of motive could be strong enough to make someone *want* to shut out the claims of reality? I know of only two: Suffering so extreme that it produces insanity, and sin so impenitent that it produces insane ideologies. You're not just dealing with an intellectual problem, my dear. You're dealing with a spiritual one. So reason, reason, reason with your friends -- but pray, pray, pray for them as well.

One last thing. (Why am I always saying "one last thing"?) I'm glad that you want to evangelize, but I hope that isn't your *only* reason for defending the knowability of the past. All truth belongs to God; it's worth knowing for that reason alone.

Peace be with you,
PROFESSOR THEOPHILUS

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