

On Vain Disputing

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Being an excerpt from Sermon 2 and the whole of Sermon 51
from his *Spiritual Refining*

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Spiritual Refining

Excerpt

From Sermon 2, p. 7-8

Secondly, by this practical knowledge and exercise you will be taken off from all needless and vain disputations in matters of religion, and will be more solicitous at home in your own heart. In former times when the people of God were busy about the touchstone and trial of grace in themselves, they did not launch out into such deep and unprofitable questions, but now of late since believers have busied themselves in disputes and controversies, and new opinions, this practical knowledge of grace is much neglected. You shall find men sooner disputing about faith than living by faith, talking of heavenly-mindedness than being so indeed. Thus the trees in God's garden sprout up into suckers and barren boughs, and bear little fruit upon them, 1 Tim. 6:4.¹

The apostle does excellently describe such a temper, he calls it 'doting about questions', or as it is in the Greek, 'sick and languishing'; Even as much fretting and vexation consumes the flesh of the body, so do proud and vain affectations of new opinions pine away the soul. What is this but to think that a stone may become bread, and a serpent fish? As it is a minister's duty to preach only those things that are profitable, the sower went out to sow good seed, not poison, or empty chaff; so it is also required of private Christians, that they do think, confer of, and study those things only that may edify and practically build up their souls.

I would not hereby discourage an endeavor in Christians to grow in knowledge. The apostle reproveth some for being babes, and that he could not speak unto them as spiritual but as carnal, only they must know, that faith has efficacious purifying acts as well as knowing acts, and therefore our increase must be equal both *quoad notitiam*, and *efficaciam*, [being translated:] in respect of knowledge and efficacy also. A Christian may grow either *quoad amplitudinem scientiae* or *efficaciam scientiae*, [being

¹ [1 Tim. 6:4, "He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings,"]

explained] the enlargement of his knowledge both in respect of the matter, he may know more things than he did, as also in the manner, more clearly, evidently and firmly than he did, or else in the efficacy of his knowledge, though he do not more things than he did, yet he knows them more practically, they have a greater influence upon his heart and affections, they move and inflame him more then ever they did; now though the former way of increase be necessary and pleasing to God, yet this is much more.

Take heed then that we be not like Pharaoh's lean kine, that devour many questions, but yet are as starved and ill-favored as before. When one came with a curious question to our Savior, asking Him, 'Whether many should be saved?' How pertinently does our Savior answer him, 'Strive to enter in at the strait gate'. This therefore discovers the necessity of importunate pressing and urging practical knowledge upon people in these days, *Ubi malunt homines disputare quàm vivere*, [being paraphrased:] they had rather argue than live. As little boys in sport strive who shall strike most sparks out of their iron, not intending to kindle thereby for their use, so do Christians strive who shall strike out the most subtle and finest spun notions, not intending the profit of their souls therein.

Sermon 51

Showing why grace in the heart is better than unnecessary disputes in the head, together with rules on how to manage disputes and controversies without prejudice to grace

“For it is good to have the heart established with grace, and not with meats...”

Heb. 13:9

This text has already informed us of this necessary truth (in these times especially) wherein men desire to dispute subtly more than to live exactly, namely: that it is better to have the heart established with grace than the head with unnecessary disputes in religion. Having therefore manifested what it is for grace to establish the heart, let us proceed to give the reasons of this doctrine.

The Corinthians were very zealous of those gifts and abilities which brought them applause and esteem among others, but negligent about love to God and men’s souls, which is an effect of sanctifying grace. Therefore says the apostle, ‘I will show you a more excellent way’ (1 Cor. 12:5). And certainly, though it be laudable to inquire and try all things in the matter of religion, yet there is a more excellent way, which is ‘to hold fast that which is good’ (1 Thess. 5:21). These and the like ensuing particulars are the grounds and reasons of the doctrine.

First, because the proper end and use of all doctrinal principles is to lead and guide the heart into a practical exercise of grace. Therefore, all the while a man does employ his head and his heart is not sanctified, he falls short of the end of all religious principles. ‘If you know these things’, says our Savior, ‘happy are you if you do them’ (John 13:17). Happiness lies not in the knowing of them, but doing of them.

Divinity is practical, even as the art of medicine. For a man does not attain health by reading Galen, or knowing Hippocrates' aphorisms, but by the practical application of them to remove his diseases. Hence you have that notable expression, 'the acknowledgement of the truth which is after godliness' (Tit. 1:1). If you do not acknowledge God, Christ, and all other matters of religion after godliness, you miss the mark. But yet we see this vanity upon men, that they know only to know, as it is said of one people that they had money only to tell it, they made no other use of it. To eat meat and not to digest it is like getting knowledge and not following it into practice. Knowledge is so ordained for (and related to) practice, that all wicked men are said not to know God because though they have a general knowledge, yet they improve it not in a particular application.

If then Solomon observed it as a great vanity in the world that God gave some men riches, and yet they had no power to use them (Eccl. 5:19), how much more is it to have great intellectual abilities and continual exercises of the understanding, and in the meanwhile to have no power to make use of them for the good of their souls: to be often eating of the tree of knowledge, but never to taste of the tree of life. The very heathens, though they had but some few sparks of a true knowledge about God, having no other book but that of nature to learn by, yet in how grievous a measure are they punished by God because they did not live according to their knowledge, neither did they glorify God as they knew Him (Rom. 1). So then, though you show yourself a rational man and not a beast in that you search into the grounds and reasons of your divine hope, yet it is but labor in vain if these eyes to see be not also accompanied with feet to walk in the commandments of God.

Secondly, it is far better to establish the heart with grace than reason with disputes, because the more quick and apprehensive a man's understanding is (if his heart be not ballasted with godliness), it's the greater enemy and froward adversary unto God. The apostle calls the wisdom of the flesh 'enmity to God' (Rom. 8:7), such as is not, or cannot be, subject to the will or truths of God. Thus the wise of this world have the mysteries of religion hid from them and they are revealed to babes.

A working head without a working heart and hand in the ways of God is like a sword in a mad man's hand. The greatest opposition to Christianity was from philosophers, which made Tertullian call philosophers the patriarchs of heretics. Therefore the first thing the Gospel does is to captivate the understanding and to bring down every high

thing that exalts itself against God (2 Cor. 10:5). Oh then, you do not choose the better part in religion when your intellectuals are continually exercised and whetted, but your heart and life is barren of all goodness. It's true, nothing revealed in scripture is contrary to right reason (though it be much above it), but corrupt and carnal reason can no more receive the things of God than a dwarf can measure the pyramids.

So all the while you are increasing knowledge (if grace be not accompanying), you are but nourishing an enemy against God. Corrupt understandings have prejudiced men's salvations as much as loose and dissolute lives. Therefore says John Baptist to the Pharisees, 'Think not to say in your hearts...' Their reasonings and disputes within kept off the power of God's word upon them. What brought in all that angel worship and desertion of Christ as the Head, but that men were puffed up in their filthy minds? (Col. 2:18)

Thirdly therefore, it's better to get grace in the heart than notions in the head *because all brain-knowledge and disputes may be perverted to an ill and ungodly end. Only Grace in the heart cannot be abused.* It's true: the profession of grace and the outward appearance of it may be abused to ungodly designs. The name and reputation of piety may be a color for iniquity, but real piety itself can never be overruled for any sinful end because it's the nature of grace to make a man refer all things to God. Jehu had but the outward body of religion, not the soul. Therefore his intentions were carnal and earthly while his pretensions were spiritual and heavenly. But where true grace is, there is not diverse seeds sown together, but his inward and outward man are both alike.

But it is not thus with knowledge, opinions and disputes in religion. This light may be like that of a blazing star, which is nourished only by slimy and loathsome exhalations. Several ways, and to several corrupt ends, may all this disputing be abused. As:

First, *to gain applause and esteem, to be admired by some followers.* Thus the Pharisees. They did all to be seen of men. This the apostle calls puffing up in their filthy minds. This the apostle expresses when he says, 'Knowledge puffs up, but charity edifies' (1 Cor. 8:7). It's a very hard thing if God has given a man golden talents, not to fall down and worship them. If therefore these opinions

and disputes are fit fuel to beget pride and vain glory and to make men look after victory over others more than the truth, how much better had it been for you to be exercising yourself in godliness and to walk humbly with God! The pride of parts and opinions is far greater than that of clothes or beauty or any other earthly thing, because we judge those excellencies of the mind above any temporal excellency.

Therefore consider with yourself what is the issue of all your inquisitions and debates into religious truths. Is it to make you more self-conceited, more boasting, and confident in yourself? The ignorance of a simple man will not be so great a damnation as the pride of a knowing man. Labor then for that which will keep you low, humble and self-debased. And this, grace only in the heart will accomplish. Worms do not sooner breed in ripe and sweet fruit than pride and self-confidence does in knowledge and intellectual abilities.

Secondly, another corrupt end of parts and disputes in religion *is to be self-willed and stiff-necked, not willing to yield to any*: like the motto upon the Roman god Terminus,² *Cedo nulli* ['I yield to no one']. And this is that which makes a man a heretic, when a man after several admonitions does obstinately and willfully adhere to that opinion which he has chosen, and will not (as religion which is from above, would incline) 'be pure, peaceable, and easily to be entreated' (James 3:17). The Pharisees, they were frequent in disputes with Christ and despised the people as those that knew not the Law. When they had nothing to say and their mouths were stopped, yet they would adhere to their former way.

It's true indeed, constancy and steadfastness in the truths of God is necessary. Herein (says Luther) we ought to be more pertinacious than Stoics. And it was a proverbial speech in Galen, when men would express a difficulty, 'You may sooner change a Christian from Christ', they were such holdfast men. But this does in no way excuse erroneous pertinacity, or self-willed obstinacy in false ways or in doubtful disputations. It's like removing a mountain out of its place when we would persuade a man against that tenet or opinion he is engaged in.

² [Terminus was the Roman god of boundaries and boundary markers.]

Thirdly. *Those disputations and opinions may be carried on for carnal and temporal advantages, for covetousness and filthy lucre,* as we may see it was in the Pharisees. And the apostle discovers the ends of the false apostles that they thought gain was godliness (1 Tim. 5:6), and the love of money made many suffer shipwreck in their faith. How then can that be best which may be prostituted to the worst and most ignoble respects? It was Paul's comfortable protestation that he had not used 'a cloak of covetousness' (1 Thess. 2:5). The reason why the false apostles vented their vain opinions was that they might not suffer persecution for the Gospel of Christ. And thus Austin defined a heretic as one that took up any false way, *alicujus temporalis commodi gratiâ*, [being translated:] for any temporal advantage and profit. How then can the quintessence and safety of religion be laid in that which may be subservient to such sinful lusts of the soul?

Fourthly, it's better to get grace than to be exercised in these disputes *because many times head-disputations are used to make parties and schisms in the Church, to draw many disciples after them and so to stand a divided body from others.* The apostle, how careful was he to prevent schisms and divisions? Therefore he daily pressed love and to think the same thing, and to speak the same thing, commanding all things to be done in charity and nothing through contention and vain glory. It would be a sad story to tell you what rents [tearings] the leaders of any false opinions have made which could not be cured in some hundreds of years afterwards. And which is the greater wonder, while the apostles were alive who were infallible judges and could have determined any doubt of religion, yet in their days weeds did come up in Christ's garden and the Envious One did sow tares amongst the good wheat.

Fifthly, therefore it is better to exercise ourselves in grace than in parts, *because a man may take a great deal of delight in his opinions and notions and be as inordinately in love with them as the adulterer is with his unlawful object.* The scripture many times uses this expression, 'To go a whoring after the imaginations of their own hearts'. When the false prophets and seduced people

committed any idolatry they took a great deal of pleasure and content in their imaginations and carnal reasonings, so that there may be contemplative fornication as well as real. Men may fall into inordinate love with the conceits of their own brain, as unclean men with a beautiful face, or as Pygmalion,³ grow enamored with his own face, so that a man may think he preaches for God, lives and dies for God, when all the while it's but for the apprehension of his own mind, which is like a Delilah to him. A fearful thing it's thus to be deluded, but it's a judgment foretold that shall befall those who receive not the truth in the love of it, that they shall be delivered up to believe a lie (2 Thess. 2:11).

Fourthly, a fourth general ground why it's better to mind godliness than disputes *is because at the Day of Judgement God will proceed according to our works we have done, not so much the knowledge and parts we have had.* It will not be: 'What have you known?' chiefly, but: 'How have you lived?' Thus the scripture says, we must be all manifested at the tribunal, to give an account for what has been done in the flesh (2 Cor. 5:11). Oh then, how should you spend your time most about that wherein the great question will be at the Day of Judgement? God will then make inquiry how fruitful your life has been, of love, humility, temperance, sobriety, and other good fruits of the Spirit. Would it not be a vain thing in a servant who expects his master's coming daily, that will call him to give an account of his stewardship, and he should all the while employ himself in babbles and unnecessary employments, not at all tending to that work which his master does most expect? What stripes may he justly look for? Seeing then [that] the end of your calling is holiness and you are created to a godly life, oh look to have this oil (besides [having] the lamp of knowledge), lest you are surprised by horrible confusion when the Bridegroom comes [Matt 25:1-13].

Fifthly, *in knowledge and parts there is not a true satisfying and filling of the heart with spiritual content, but grace only brings Christ into the heart and makes God our portion and inheritance, in having of whom there is only happiness.* 'He that drinks of Me', says Christ, 'shall never thirst more' (John 4:14). Eating and drinking of Christ is more than

³ [Pygmalion was of Greek mythology fame for falling in love with a statue he carved, the work of his own hands.]

to dispute about Him, to make controversies in religion about Him. It's by saving grace to be incorporated into Him and to receive vivifical [enlivening] influence from Him.

Solomon does not only discover vanity in riches and temporal advantages, that they give no true content to the soul, but also in knowledge and learning. That has a greater vexation with it. Therefore he concludes: 'of making books there is no end'. The sum or perfection of all is, 'Fear God, and keep his commandments' (Eccl. 12:13). Of controversies and disputes there is no end, there comes jars and contentions endless about them. But the sum of all is: to get the fear of God in our hearts and to keep ourselves unspotted from the sins of the world.

This has made even some Papists, who have employed their whole time in controversial divinity to cry out of it as [under] a heavy burden, thinking they have lost the sweetness of religion thereby. As Suarez,⁴ who wrote so many tomes of disputes, yet said, he prized that time which was set apart for the searching and examination of his conscience in relation towards God above all the other time he spent. It was a witty allusion of Isidore of Pelusium:⁵ as the Israelites who did gather manna were to go out of the camp (where war was), for the manna did not fall within the camp, so those that would gather the manna and sweetness of religion must go out of the camp where spiritual war is by religious disputes. As in eating of the paschal lambs, they took the flesh and feasted on that, but threw away the bones. So you are to take that in religion which will feed and nourish your soul, but cast away hard, unprofitable controversies.

But you will say: Is it unlawful to inquire and dispute in matters of religion? Is not this to plead with the Papists for ignorance and to make that the Mother of Devotion? Does not the apostle bid us 'Try all things'? Are we not to search the scriptures? Are we not forbid to believe every spirit, but to try it? (1 John 4:1) Must we not grow in knowledge as well as grace? If the heathen make no search, how can he turn Christian? If the Papist do not enquire, how can he become Protestant? Why are reformations so much magnified if so be we must lie down in an old ignorance, or take all things upon trust? Is not this to make blind men lead blind, and so both to fall into the ditch?

⁴ [Francisco Suárez (1548–1617) was a Roman Catholic, Spanish, Jesuit priest, philosopher and prominent scholastic theologian.]

⁵ [Isidore (death circa 450) was an early church, Egyptian ascetic.]

I shall therefore handle this case only and so [then] make application. And first, it cannot be denied but that it's a duty not only upon ministers and learned men, but all Christians (men and women) to read and search the scriptures, and not to take any doctrine upon the authority of men or because the state is of that religion, or because our ancestors and forefathers did so, and believed so. '*Qui decedit... propter auctoritatem humanum, incidit in insipientiam bestialem*' ['He who falls on one side of a theological argument or the other... on the basis of human authority, falls into terrible madness.'],⁶ said Durand. This must be acknowledged, and the ignorance, laziness and sottishness of most people is to be sharply reprov'd who see with other men's eyes, believe with men's faith, and do not rest assured in matters of religion because God says so, the word delivers so, but because men say so. Are not those Bereans said to be more notable than others (Acts 17:11), because they examined the apostles' doctrine and looked whether it was consonant to the scripture or not? And yet this is the general ignorance and stupidity of the whole body of Christianity: if they should be required to give an account of their faith or their worship of God they could give no better answer than that ignorant woman did to Christ, 'Our fathers worshipped here, and are you better than they?' (John 4). Our fathers believed thus, and are we wiser and holier than they? This is not faith, for faith is a gift of God wrought by his Spirit in our hearts whereby we believe matters of religion for a divine motive and authority even because God has revealed it in his word. But woe be to us because of that supine and damnable ignorance which is in most men.

This therefore must be granted: that it's our duty to grow more in knowledge and not to rest as babes in the principles of religion as the apostle presses, but to grow and be strong men and to have our senses exercised to discern between good and evil (Heb. 6). But here is the difficulty and the great wisdom required: how to use our parts in finding out truth so as not to prejudice grace in our hearts. For the apostle, when he says in the text, 'Its good or better to have the heart established with grace than with doctrines about meats', he does not absolutely forbid the disputes about them. For we know this controversy [about meats] was much disputed about. And even in the council at Jerusalem [Acts 15], after there was much dispute, there was a determination of it for all churches.

Therefore take these rules:

⁶ [Translated by Bobby Phillips]

First, *labor to know and improve your parts, but still in reference to grace.* Let all knowledge tend to practice. Count all that knowledge and dispute barren and unprofitable which does not leave you in a better frame of heart, more godly, more humble, more zealous. When we know truths as they are in Jesus Christ, then they make us to put off the old man and so be renewed more and more in our spirits (Eph. 4:1). Do not then start questions, as children many times strike to see how the sparks fly out, but they make no fire to warm them with. You start questions, but they do not kindle a fire in your bosom.

2. *Begin in a right manner.* First possess yourself well, and be rightly instructed in the first principles and fundamental points of religion. The apostle to the Hebrews, though he would not have them stay in the first principles, yet he supposes they had not fully learned them. This has made many miscarry in their disputes about truth: they took upon them to teach others before they were well taught themselves. They never were well catechized and instructed in the fundamental points of religion, and so they build a house without a foundation. And therefore instruction in the rudiments and first principles of religion is very necessary for all. Do not then affect high and sublime things before you have attained to the main and necessary ones. And it's God's goodness that those points which are absolutely necessary to salvation be plainly and clearly revealed in the Word of God.

3. *When you are gone beyond principles and endeavor to improve your talents, then study not curious, sublime and impertinent questions, but such as tend to edification of yourself and others.* There came a man and propounded this question to Christ: 'Whether many should be saved?' (Luke 13:23) This was a curious question, for what was that to him (Lk. 13:23)? Let him look to his own salvation. Therefore our Savior did not directly answer him, nor directly repel him, but said, 'Strive to enter in at the straight gate, for many shall seek, and not be able to enter'. The soldiers showed their goodness, when they came to John Baptist, and instead of impenitent questions, asked this, 'What they should do in their particular calling to be saved'. So that instead of many general or sublime questions, be you inquiring what you are to do as a husband or a wife, or a servant in your relation to glorify God.

4. *While you try all things, labor to be humble and meek, and practice so far as you have attained unto.* The humble and meek He will teach his way. And he

that does my Father's will shall know whether the doctrine be of God or not (John 7:17). If therefore you do not love that truth which already you are convinced of, but keep it as a prisoner within your breast, fear, lest God give you up to blindness of mind and hardness of heart.

5. *Do not lean to your own understanding, but honor and esteem those helps and guides God has appointed in his Church.* It was Jerome's speech⁷, *Nunquam me ipsum habui magistrum*, [being translated:] I never taught my ownself. And the rabbis say, He that is a scholar to himself, has a fool for his master. The apostle gives many exhortations to this purpose and therefore bids them obey those guides and pastors God has appointed in his church, which He therefore dignifies with the title of 'Lights'. Although they are not infallible, yet God has appointed this method for our teaching and instruction, and therefore at the very same time when He gives a command 'to try all things', He says, 'despise not prophesying'.

Lastly, *consider your own strength.* If you are weak in faith and subject to mistakes, then do you of all men take heed of disputes. It's the apostle's advice (Rom. 14:1): 'him that is weak in faith, do not receive to doubtful disputations'. These things deserve a larger handling, but I press to the use [application].

Applications:

First, *it's of caution and admiration.* Do not you from hence (because grace is better than parts) sit down in your ignorance and never make inquiry and search into matters of religion. This is a universal disease. How few are asking about the principles of religion? Seeking for more knowledge, but as blind men, swallow flies. So they believe any doctrine propounded to them. This argues [that] many Christians have nothing but a human faith, for a divine faith has knowledge for one main act of it. Oh the ignorance that covers the face of the Christian world as the waters do the sea! Whereas the promise is that in times of the Gospel knowledge should abound.

⁷ [Jerome (347-420), *Epistle to the Ephesians*, Preface]

Use 2. *If grace be better than knowledge, then let this exhort you not to rest in your parts in being a Protestant (and you are able in some measure to defend the truth of it against the Papists), but see above all things how grace and godliness is in your life.* What if you can tell what sanctification and regeneration is, if you yourself are not regenerated? What if you can read many chapters in the Bible, but you do not live according to the commands therein? And certainly, if godliness be thus better than knowledge, how much rather is it better than wealth or outward honor and greatness? O then, seeing grace is the only necessary thing, why is it looked upon as the only superfluous thing? It's according to your godliness that you will find death and the Day of Judgement comfortable to you. Now you have your heart's desire, take content in worldly comforts, but this will not be always. You will have other thoughts when arraigned at God's tribunal.