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CONTENTS

Editorial: Answering the Fool	1
Our Covenant God: Friend, Husband and Father (3)	11
Martin Luther and God's Saving Righteousness (2)	21
God's Universal Church: A Report on the 2018 BRF Conference	45

EDITORIAL: ANSWERING THE FOOL

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Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit (Prov. 26:4-5).

The Speaking Fool

The book of Proverbs contrasts the wise man with the fool. The Bible warns us about the fool: do not be like the fool but avoid the example of the fool. A fool in the Scriptures is not an unintelligent person. In fact, he could be highly educated. He might even be a genius in the estimation of his peers. It is not improbable that he has a university degree or even a doctorate; he might even teach in a prestigious university. A fool is not even necessarily an irreligious person. He might identify as an atheist or an agnostic but fools are also found in the church. One does not have to look very far to find a fool.

A fool is a morally deficient person, for the fool described in the book of Proverbs is a specific kind of sinner. A fool knows the truth to one degree or another but he does not live according to it. In his folly, he refuses to adapt his behaviour and his life to reality, to the ultimate reality, which is God. If wisdom is the ability to apply knowledge to the glory of God, then folly is the inability or the refusal to apply knowledge to the glory of God. Therefore, a fool leads a God-dishonouring life.

The book of Proverbs includes various Hebrew words for “fool,” each of them with a slightly different shade of meaning. We should also point out that “fool” in the Bible is not an insult. In Matthew 5:22, Jesus warns, “whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.” Nevertheless, Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees “fools” in Matthew 23:17, and He calls two disciples “fools” in Luke 24:25. Paul calls one who doubts the bodily resurrection a “fool” in I Corinthians 15:36. To call someone a “fool” is permissible, if the intention is to warn that person, but it is sinful, if the motive is hatred and a desire to vilify.

There are five main kinds of fools in the Bible. First, there is the simple fool. He lacks discernment and is easily deceived. He makes decisions without thinking of the consequences. “A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished” (Prov. 22:3). Second, there is the silly fool: he is arrogant and determined to follow his own way. Rarely does he listen to advice, which gets him into trouble. “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise” (Prov. 12:15). Third, there is the unreasonable or sensual fool: he lives for pleasure and does not listen to warnings from others, so that often he brings ruin upon himself by his foolish words and actions. “A fool’s lips enter into contention, and his mouth calleth for strokes. A fool’s mouth is his destruction, and his lips are the snare of his soul” (Prov. 18:6-7). Fourth, there is the scorning fool or the scorner: he scoffs against parents, authorities and God. He wilfully persists in sin despite rebukes and punishments. “A scorner loveth not one that reproveth him: neither will he go unto the wise” (Prov. 15:12). Fifth, and finally, there is the stubborn fool: he rejects God completely and entirely, and none can reprove or correct him. “He that begetteth a fool doeth it to his sorrow: and the father of a fool hath no joy” (Prov. 17:21).

The book of Proverbs describes the fool in many different situations, giving us an insight into how the fool acts, thinks and even speaks. In the text at the head of this article, Solomon presents the speaking fool. We know this because the question concerns whether, when and how to answer the fool. An answer is in view when another person speaks. Solomon presupposes that we will encounter fools and he wants us to be able to answer them, whether we meet them in the family, in our circle of friends and acquaintances, at work, at school, in the church and even on-line. Some fools will be fully fools, that is, they are wholly characterised by folly. Other fools will be occasional fools, that is, they will do and say foolish things from time to time. We too have the tendency to be occasional fools: “Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour: so doth a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom and honour” (Ecc. 10:1). We will often find folly in our children, for it is bound up in their hearts (Prov. 22:15). Encountering fools, therefore, is by no means uncommon in this life.

The fool might speak to us in different ways. He might ask a question to

Editorial: Answering the Fool

which he demands a response. Should you reply to his question and if so how should you reply? The fool might raise an objection; should you answer him? The fool might mock, curse, blaspheme or verbally assault you or others. How should you respond? The answer of wisdom is surprising: yes and no. Proverbs 26:5 says, “Answer a fool,” while verse 4 says, “Answer *not* a fool.” Both answers are correct; there is no contradiction. Sometimes an answer is appropriate and even necessary; at other times, an answer is unwise and out of place. Wisdom will enable you to determine the appropriate response.

When the fool speaks, he does so “according to his folly” (vv. 4, 5). He speaks in folly or foolishly, for folly is in his heart, and folly determines his actions and his speech. Jesus warned, “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” and “an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things” (Matt. 12:34, 35). Folly is the rebellion, sin and evil of one who will not conform to the truth of God’s Word.

To speak “according to his folly” has two main ideas. First, the reference is to the content of the fool’s speech: he says foolish things; he makes foolish suggestions; he asks foolish questions; he makes foolish demands; and he mocks or curses with foolish words. Second, the reference is to the manner of the fool’s speech: he speaks angrily, aggressively or in a sneering tone; he lacks respect or decorum. He speaks according to his folly. “Let a bear robbed of her whelps meet a man, rather than a fool in his folly” (Prov. 17:12).

The Appropriate Responses

There are appropriate and inappropriate responses to the fool.

Sometimes the best response is that of Proverbs 26:4: “Answer not a fool.” In that case, the best response is no response, that is, silence. Do not respond to his question. Ignore his objection. Turn away from his insults and reproaches. First, do not answer the content of his speech. This requires discernment and wisdom: What is he saying? Why is he saying it, that is, what is his motivation? What purpose would a response have? Take, for example, a foolish question. Paul writes in Titus 3:9, “But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain.” Paul gives a similar admonition, also to a pastor, in I Timothy 6:3-5:

If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself.

A foolish question usually comes not from the motivation to learn, and certainly not from a sincere desire to live according to the truth that is learned, but from idle curiosity, a desire to argue and a desire to be right, so that one can proudly boast. Others ask foolish questions out of pride, a desire for self-promotion or a desire to mock. Augustine is reputed to have been asked, “What was God doing before He made the world?” The wise church father’s response, or rather rebuke, was, “He was constructing hell for the curious.” A good rule of thumb is to ask, “Why do you want to know? How will an answer to this question enable you to grow in grace and help you serve the Lord?” If there is no discernible benefit in answering the question, it is better not to answer the fool. Do not give fools publicity, on-line or elsewhere. Do not give them credence or time. As one slogan expresses it, “Do not feed the trolls!”

A striking example of a man refusing to answer a fool is Hezekiah’s command to his officials with respect to Rabshakeh, the Assyrian general who had given a foolish, taunting speech to the people of Jerusalem on behalf of his king, Sennacherib. The response of Jerusalem is found in Isaiah 36:21, “But they held their peace, and answered him not a word: for the king’s commandment was, saying, Answer him not.” Hezekiah had learned, “Answer not a fool according to his folly.” “Go from the presence of a foolish man, when thou perceivest not in him the lips of knowledge” (Prov. 14:7).

Second, with respect to not answering a fool, do not answer in the manner of the fool. If you intend to answer the fool, which might be appropriate, do not do so “according to his folly.” If the fool mocks, do not respond in scorn. If the fool rages, do not respond in anger. If the fool insults you or your family or your God, do not respond *in kind*. Do not permit the fool to provoke you to a foolish and sinful response. Instead, “bless them that curse you” (Matt. 5:44). Jesus Christ “when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered,

Editorial: Answering the Fool

he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously” (I Pet. 2:23). Peter adds,

Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing, knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing (I Pet. 3:8-9).

This applies also in our homes, for there are times when our spouse, parents, children or siblings behave and speak foolishly. Sometimes we should ignore them, for love covers a multitude of sins (Prov. 10:12; I Pet. 4:8); sometimes a response is necessary but we must never respond in kind. We must answer folly with wisdom. Remember the words of Proverbs 15:1: “A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger.”

The danger in answering the fool is that he might corrupt us: “Answer not a fool according to his folly, *lest thou also be like unto him*” (Prov. 26:4). If you answer a fool, either by giving credence to the foolish content of his speech or by encouraging him in his behaviour or by responding in the same manner, you will become like the fool. Do not, therefore, descend to the fool’s level. “He that reproveth a scorner getteth to himself shame: and he that rebuketh a wicked man getteth himself a blot” (Prov. 9:7).

Scripture gives several examples of this. Moses responded foolishly in Numbers 20. When the people criticized him in verses 3-5, which was folly on their part, Moses responded angrily in verse 10, which was folly on his part: “Hear now, ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock?” As a result of his sinful folly (to which he was provoked by the sinful folly of the people—he answered the fools according to their folly), Moses was not permitted to enter the land of Canaan.

David responded foolishly in I Samuel 25, when Nabal, whose name means “fool,” railed against him in verses 10-11. David did not respond in meekness; instead, he determined to requite Nabal’s foolishness with murder (vv. 13, 21-22). Only the wise and courageous intervention of Abigail (vv. 23-31) turned David from his folly (vv. 32-35).

However, David did not always react foolishly to folly. When his wife Michal railed against him in II Samuel 6, he responded wisely:

Then David returned to bless his household. And Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David, and said, How glorious was the king of Israel to day, who uncovered himself to day in the eyes of the handmaids of his servants, as one of the vain fellows shamelessly uncovereth himself! And David said unto Michal, It was before the LORD, which chose me before thy father, and before all his house, to appoint me ruler over the people of the LORD, over Israel: therefore will I play before the LORD. And I will yet be more vile than thus, and will be base in mine own sight: and of the maidservants which thou hast spoken of, of them shall I be had in honour. Therefore Michal the daughter of Saul had no child unto the day of her death (II Sam. 6:20-23).

An example of one who did not respond according to the folly of a fool was Jonathan, the son of Saul and friend of David. In I Samuel 20, Saul explodes with foul-mouthed, foolish rage against Jonathan because of Jonathan's covenantal loyalty to David:

Then Saul's anger was kindled against Jonathan, and he said unto him, Thou son of the perverse rebellious woman, do not I know that thou hast chosen the son of Jesse to thine own confusion, and unto the confusion of thy mother's nakedness? For as long as the son of Jesse liveth upon the ground, thou shalt not be established, nor thy kingdom. Wherefore now send and fetch him unto me, for he shall surely die (vv. 30-31).

Various responses were open to Jonathan but he chose not to respond to Saul according to the king's folly. Wisely, Jonathan discerned that his father was in a mood where reasoning would be futile. Therefore, rather than cause a scene and say something that he would later regret, he left the table and grieved over his father's foolish words. Wisdom does that; it notices social cues and responds accordingly. A fool is usually blind to the feelings of others and pushes his point inconsiderately when the time is not right. "So Jonathan arose from the table in fierce anger, and did eat no meat the second day of the month: for he was grieved for David, because his father had done him shame" (I Sam. 20:34). "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him" (Prov. 26:4).

Editorial: Answering the Fool

Nevertheless, it is not always appropriate to leave a fool unanswered. Therefore, Solomon adds, without any word of contradiction, “Answer a fool according to his folly” (Prov. 26:5). In some cases, if you fail to answer the fool, he will be wise in his own conceits. While in truth he remains a fool, in his own eyes he appears wise. Such an one is a great danger to himself and others. “Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? there is more hope of a fool than of him” (Prov. 26:12). Such a person will feel emboldened to promote his folly, for he will misinterpret your failure to answer him as a vindication of his position. Such a fool must be sharply and decisively confounded. However, this is not an invitation to begin a protracted and prolonged discussion or debate with the fool. The answer to the fool must be a rebuke. Thus you rebuke a foolish child; thus you rebuke a foolish family member; thus an elder rebukes a foolish church member. There may be time for further explanations later but a prating fool needs to be rebuked. A foolish person is not the object of negotiation; if he is teachable, you teach him; otherwise, you rebuke him.

Job is a good example of this, for his wife spoke very foolishly. Job could not leave such folly unanswered but neither did he enter into a long discussion about the sovereignty of God, which would have been out of place. He answered her according to her folly, lest she was wise in her own conceit:

Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die. But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips (Job 2:9-10).

In Romans 9, Paul answers a foolish objector to God’s double predestination with a rebuke to put the fool in his place in the dust before his Creator:

Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? (vv. 19-20).

In I Corinthians 15, Paul answers a foolish questioner about the resurrection body. He responds sharply, lest the objector be wise in his own conceits:

But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come? Thou fool, that which thou sowest

is not quickened, except it die: And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain: But God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him, and to every seed his own body (vv. 35-38).

The Necessary Wisdom

To answer a fool appropriately requires wisdom. Since the fool lacks wisdom, the believer must respond to the fool's folly with wisdom. To be wise requires discernment, therefore. First, the wise believer needs to discern the character of the fool. Is he a simple (gullible) fool? Is he a mocking fool (a scorner)? Is he an incorrigible fool? Is he a teachable fool? Be patient with the gullible or teachable fool; sharply rebuke or refuse to answer the scorner or the incorrigible fool. Second, the wise believer needs to discern the timing or the circumstances of the fool's speech. Is the fool acting out of character? Will he perhaps be more open to reason later? Ecclesiastes 3:7 reminds us that there is "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak." When a fool stands before you, ask yourself, "Is it a time to speak or not?" When a fool pours forth foolishness on-line, ask yourself, "Should I respond to him or not?" In many cases, the answer is no.

The primary question of wisdom is always this: "Will my answer or non-answer best serve the glory of God? Does God's glory require me to answer or to hold my peace?" That question must determine the believer's approach. Mark well: the question is not, "Will my answer or non-answer glorify *me*? Will I show by my answer how learned *I* am? Will I confound this fool so that others can admire *my* prowess in the arena of public debate? Will an answer here enable *me* to save face and avoid shame?" More often than not, those are our sinful motives in answering fools. If we are motivated by pride, we are not exercising godly wisdom. May God give us the self-restraint necessary to live to His glory and honour! "The heart of the righteous studieth to answer: but the mouth of the wicked poureth out evil things" (Prov. 15:28).

For this important calling, we need grace, the grace of the Holy Spirit, which grace flows to us from the cross of Jesus Christ. Wisdom is not a natural quality. While common sense is natural, wisdom is not. Our Lord Jesus, who

Editorial: Answering the Fool

is wisdom personified, knew when and how to answer fools. Sometimes, He confounded the enemies of God by His wise responses; sometimes, He refused to answer. Many fools tried to accuse Him but His answers left them ashamed, embarrassed and confused:

And when he was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching, and said, By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority? And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him? But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet. And they answered Jesus, and said, We cannot tell. And he said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things (Matt. 21:23-27).

At other times, Christ refused to answer:

And the high priest arose, and said unto him, Answerest thou nothing? what is it which these witness against thee? But Jesus held his peace. And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven (Matt. 26:62-64).

And when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceeding glad: for he was desirous to see him of a long season, because he had heard many things of him; and he hoped to have seen some miracle done by him. Then he questioned with him in many words; but he answered him nothing (Luke 23:8-9).

And [Pilate] went again into the judgment hall, and saith unto Jesus, Whence art thou? But Jesus gave him no answer.

British Reformed Journal

Then saith Pilate unto him, Speakest thou not unto me? knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee? Jesus answered, Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin (John 19:9-11).

Never, however, did our Lord become like the fools who confronted him. The people exclaimed, "From whence hath this man these things? and what wisdom is this which is given unto him, that even such mighty works are wrought by his hands?" (Mark 6:2).

If we want wisdom, therefore, we must be in Christ. We must believe in Him by forsaking our own wisdom and by trusting in His perfect atoning work on the cross. Wisdom is God's gift to us purchased at the cost of Christ's life. By it we will know how to answer fools to the glory of God's name.