

Defending the Handmaid: How Theology Needs Philosophy

Richard G. Howe, Ph.D.

Preliminaries

On Nov. 19, 1998 in Orlando, FL, our founder, Norman Geisler, gave his presidential address at the 50th annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. His address, later published in JETS¹, was titled "Beware of Philosophy: A Warning to Biblical Scholars."² In it, Geisler warns of the "alien systems of thought that have invaded Christianity down through the centuries" since Paul's warning in Col. 2:8. These alien systems include naturalism, agnosticism, evolutionism, progressivism, existentialism, phenomenology, conventionalism, Processism, Platonic allegorism, Ockhamistic nominalism, anthropological monism, and historical criticism. The list even includes Aristotelianism. I say 'even' to emphasize that though Geisler is a Thomist (with Thomas Aquinas himself being an Aristotelian) Geisler nevertheless recognizes the anti-Christian elements in Aristotle's philosophy.

Like someone who has just watched a documentary on the ubiquity of dangerous bacteria and concludes that the only course left for survival is to confine oneself in the highest biocontainment level available, one might, after reading Geisler's article conclude that a Christian would do well to avoid philosophy at all costs. Alas! This not only is not Geisler's

¹ Norman L. Geisler, "Beware of Philosophy: A Warning to Biblical Scholars. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42 (1) (March 1999): 3-19. A pdf of this article is available for download from http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/42/42-1/42-1-pp003-019_JETS.pdf. If one is interesting in supporting Bastion books, a resource "to provide inexpensive electronic copies of Dr. Geisler's books" the article is available for a very modest price at <http://bastionbooks.com/shop/beware-of-philosophy-a-warning-to-biblical-scholars/>.

² Interestingly, the printed program for the ETS meeting changed the subtitle (over Geisler's objection) to "A Caution to Biblical Exegetes." For JETS, the title reverted to Geisler's original.

prescription, but his warning actually extends in the opposite direction. In his conclusion Geisler wisely observes "We cannot properly beware of philosophy unless we be aware of philosophy."³

It was through having been intellectually stumbled in my faith in college that I encountered Christian apologetics. Indeed, it was apologetics that brought me back intellectually to my walk with God. What is more, through my study of apologetics, I came to see how essential sound philosophy is. This is where I learned experientially the gravity of Geisler's point in his ETS Presidential Address. Raising such awareness of philosophy is exactly what Geisler's article does.

In my last address to his august body, I hitch-hiked on a theme raised by another article by Geisler some decades ago titled "The Concept of Truth in the Inerrancy Debate" and presented "The Concept of Truth in the Inerrancy Debate—Revisited." Keeping with that methodology, I should like today to re-address this issue of philosophy. But instead of merely extending Geisler's theme of how it is that philosophy can pose dangers to Christian thinking and how an awareness of philosophy is precisely what is called for in recognizing those dangers, here I want to give "the rest of the story" or "the other side of the coin" or whatever cliché might fit.

My aim in this paper is to argue that there is a very real sense in which sound philosophy is also *necessary* for sound Christian thinking. In other words, I contend that the task for the Christian vis-à-vis philosophy is not only a negative one (being aware of and avoiding unsound philosophy with its erroneous theological implications), but also a positive one (advancing sound philosophical arguments as a prerequisite to sound theology). It is not only the case that there are elements of philosophy to be avoided for Christian theology (using the phrase 'Christian

³ Geisler, "Warning," p. 18.

theology' here as a synecdoche for 'Christian thinking'), but that there are also elements of sound philosophy that are essential for Christian thinking.

Isn't Philosophy an Enemy?

Perhaps many do not see any value in earning a philosophy degree or even any value for philosophy itself. Some might regard philosophy as potentially dangerous. I sometimes encounter such attitudes when the topic of philosophy comes up with my fellow Christians. Common are the blank stares from those who are not exactly sure what philosophy is, or the looks of either indifference or bewilderment as to what philosophy might have to do with anything important for the Christian.

In addition, there are those looks of suspicion arising from what is perceived as something that not only has nothing to offer the healthy Christian life, but is almost certainly the cause many of the very problems with which Christians have to contend with all the time in our culture. They regard philosophy as the enemy of faith. After all (they might argue), is this not exactly what Paul was warning in Col. 2:8? He tells us to "beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ."⁴ What else might one make of Paul's admonition?

One must ask whether Paul is even using the term 'philosophy' in the same way we use it today as a formal discipline of study. Was Paul warning the Colossians about Plato, Aristotle, and by extension other philosophers since his day? It does not seem likely that he was. Before I say why I think this, let us assume for the sake of argument that he was. Let us assume that Paul was trying to warn the Colossians that philosophy posed a grave danger of potentially driving a wedge between them (and, by extension, us) and Christ; between them and a healthy Christian

4. All Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version*, 1982.

experience. If such a danger exists (as I think that it certainly does with respect to some philosophy), does this mean that Christians should have nothing to do with philosophy? Perhaps the Tertullian's famous "what has Athens to do with Jerusalem" adage comes to mind.⁵

I take a cue from a physician friend of mine back home. As a specialist in infectious diseases sounds the alarm about the dangers of such diseases. Some of them being quite dangerous to health and even life itself, they are not to be trifled with. Instead, they should be avoided at all costs. But notice that my physician friend did not himself avoid such diseases at all costs. Indeed, he spent quite a bit of time, effort, and resources in mastering the knowledge of these diseases. He did this for two important reasons. He wanted to be able to help others from getting infected by these diseases and he wanted to help cure those who were already infected. As such, the thing that would put others of us in the greatest danger is if no one ever sought to understand and combat these diseases. Ignorance is not bliss when it comes to these kinds of dangers.

By analogy, even if Paul was warning us that philosophy posed a great danger to our Christian life and spiritual health, it does not follow that Christians should avoid trying to

5. The Church Father Tertullian said "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from 'the porch of Solomon,' who had himself taught that 'the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart.' Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides." (Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, 443).

His famous synecdoche is taken by most as a repudiation of philosophy as such. Such an interpretation is common even if possibly mistaken. Historian David C. Lindberg comments, "[Tertullian's] often-quoted warning against curiosity ... is regularly interpreted as an expression of the opinion that the Christian requires no knowledge beyond that which biblical revelation furnishes. Not only is this a caricature of Tertullian's true position, but it is also not representative of patristic attitudes (although this has proved no obstacle to its wide dissemination)." (Lindberg, "The Medieval Church," 11) Taken at face value, Tertullian's comment seems to prove too much. Given that the distinction between philosophy and science is a fairly modern one, to take his words as a repudiation of philosophy (as understood in Tertullian's day) is to take him rejecting all of science as well. I have found few Christians, even among those who are suspicious of philosophy (in its contemporary definition) who advocate a rejection of science broadly considered.

understand philosophy. At the very least, it would seem that some Christians need to understand philosophy enough either to help other Christians avoid being "infected" or, having already been infected, to help them be "cured." As C. S. Lewis observed, "Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered."⁶ Thus, even if Paul's words are to be taken as an admonition to avoid philosophy, there remains the need for some to delve into its subject matter.

But such a reason for studying philosophy hardly comes up to the level that interests me here. I shall not be arguing merely that philosophy is something that certain Christians are allowed to study as a means of "protecting" others in the Body of Christ. I certainly think that such a task is necessary and important. But I also think that philosophy not only has something good to offer, but that it has something necessary for the doing of theology in the first place. This being my aim, I need to deal with Paul's words more carefully to see if my agenda is compatible with Paul's.

I think it is unlikely that Paul was thinking of philosophy as the discipline we understand it to be today. After all, the distinction between philosophy and other academic disciplines (like science, for example) is a relatively modern one. In ancient Greece, as in Paul's day, knowledge was knowledge. To be sure, thinkers understood that different subject-matters contained different content and required different methods of inquiry and tools of analysis. An inquiry into and analysis of ethics was different from an inquiry into and an analysis of mathematics.⁷ But all such inquiries yielded knowledge in the general sense of the term. As such, it is unlikely that

6. Lewis, "Learning in War Time," 473.

7. Regarding ethics, Aristotle said that his discussion "will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of; for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions . . . for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits: it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician demonstrative proofs." (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 3, 1094^b12, 24, p. 364.

Paul was even talking about philosophy as it is narrowly considered today. Instead the context suggest that Paul was warning the Colossians about an insidious legalism that threatened their liberty in Christ; "the philosophy which is vain deceit."⁸ In the context, Paul was warning that such a legalism had an outward form of piety but was useless in developing an inward character and righteousness.⁹

As such, not only would I deny that Jerusalem has nothing to do with Athens (to revert to Tertullian's synecdoche), I contend that Jerusalem has much indeed to do with Athens (as does Athens with Jerusalem). In fact, Jerusalem and Athens are inseparably bound together. This is not to say that they are co-extensive or that there is no distinction at all to be made. Nor is it to say that Athens is necessarily more important than Jerusalem. It is to say that one cannot do theology well without utilizing tools and data that are philosophical at the core.¹⁰

8. Regarding the grammar of Col. 2:8, Henry Alford notes, "The absence of the article before *κενῆς* shews the *καί* to be epexegetical, and the same thing to be meant by the two." This suggests the translation as I have it above, viz., "the philosophy which is vain deceit." Alford continues, "This being so, it may be better to give the *τῆς* the possessive sense, the better to mark that it is not all philosophy which the Apostle is here blaming." (Henry Alford, *Alford's Greek Testament*, 218) Alford goes on to observe, "The *φιλοσοφ.* is not necessarily *Greek* . . . As De W. observes, Josephus calls the doctrine of the Jewish sects philosophy: Antt. xviii, 2, 1." (Alford, 218) The citation to Josephus is incorrect. It should be 1, 2 instead of 2, 1. Josephus says, "The Jews had for a great while three sects of philosophy peculiar to themselves; the sect of the Essens [sic], and the sect of the Sadducees, and the third sort of opinions called Pharisees." (*Josephus*, "Antiquities of the Jews," XVIII, 1, 1, p. 376) The De W. mentioned is Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette (1780–1849). Alford's reference is to de Wette's *Exegetisches Handbuch: Eph., Phil., Col., Philem.*

9. A. S. Peake makes the same argument that Paul is not repudiating philosophy. He argues, "The second noun [deceit] is explanatory of the first, as is shown by the absence of the article and preposition before it and the lack of any indication that Paul had two evils to attack. The meaning is 'his philosophy, which is vain deceit.' The word has, of course, no reference to Greek philosophy, and probably none to the allegorical method of Scripture exegesis that the false teachers may have employed. Philo uses it of the law of Judaism, and Josephus of the three Jewish sects. Here, no doubt, it means just the false teaching that threatened to undermine the faith of the Church. There is no condemnation of philosophy in itself, but simply of the empty but plausible sham that went by that name at Colossae." (A. S. Peake, "The Epistle to the Colossians," 521–522)

10. I cannot resist pointing out that the very argument about whether and how theology and philosophy relate is itself a philosophical discussion. To claim that philosophy has nothing to do with theology (as some might take Paul and Tertullian to be saying) or to say that philosophy and theology are intimately related (as I shall be arguing) is to say something philosophical.

Isn't Philosophy Elitist?

Once during a panel discussion where I was defending the indispensable role that philosophy must play in doing apologetics (and by extension, its necessity for theology), I was accused of being elitist. If philosophy was necessary and, further, if philosophy was surely out the reach of many Christians, then it would follow (so my accuser contended) that apologetics would be out of reach of many Christians. It could only be done by the expert philosophers. While I might appreciate the concern, it stems from a misunderstanding of exactly what I hold that relationship to be. To illustrate what I am (and am not) saying about how philosophy figures into the picture of theology, consider a child whose mother has asked to go pick a flower and bring it her. The child knows what a flower is. She knows that there is a difference between the flower and the person of her mother. However, to delve deeper into the physical nature of a flower, one would need to understand botany (which would certainly be out of reach of the child). To delve deeper still into various aspects of the flower (and the plant on which it blooms), one would need to understand chemistry, to understand, for example the photosynthesis within the plant. Finally, to delve deeper still, one would need to understand physics to grasp the workings of the plant at the atomic and sub-atomic levels.

Now suppose we wanted to account for a number of other aspects of the flower and the person. What makes a flower a flower and a person a person are their respective natures (or essences). This would take us into the philosophical discipline of metaphysics (the study of the nature of reality). We can know by the senses that one is a flower and the other is a person. This would take us into the philosophical discipline of epistemology (the study of the nature of knowledge of reality). We value the person over the flower because of the different kinds of things they are. This would take us into the philosophical discipline of ethics. We can know that

both the flower and the person cannot account for their own existence but are created by God. This would take us into the philosophical discipline of philosophy of religion.

What my critic needs to see here is this. I do not claim that apologetics and theology are reserved only for the elite (or, if you will, the scholars) any more than picking flowers for you mother is. But it remains that to do the deeper investigation into the physical nature of that flower will limit the number of those who have the tools and capacity to do that deeper investigation. Likewise, to do the deeper investigation into the metaphysical nature of theology might also limit the number of those who have the tools and capacity or the time to do that deeper philosophical investigation. My critic (who was himself a theologian) should have already been familiar with the various levels of such inquiries as the same thing certainly happens within theology. Any Christian has the opportunity to share his faith with others. But if in doing so, the questions came up in conversation about the differences between imputed and infused righteousness, or about the arguments for and against the reformed doctrine of the *ordo salutis*, or about the contours of the controversies surrounding the Remonstrants and the Dortian Calvinists, I suspect a young Christian might find himself confronted with things beyond his reach. If one insists that such deeper theological issues are essential (as a certain level) when dealing with such matters, it would not be fair (or true) to accuse him of making evangelism elitist. Any Christian is welcome to evangelize. But deeper issues will require the deeper discipline of theology. Any Christian is welcome to do apologetics or theology. But the deeper issues will require (at certain points) philosophy. How this is so remains to be seen.

Isn't Philosophy Irrelevant

Illustrating the Need: A Case Study of *The Dake Annotated Reference Bible*

Whenever I visit a Christian bookstore for the first time, I immediately go to the Bible department to see if the store sells *The Dake Annotated Reference Bible* by Finis Jennings

Defending the Handmaid: How Theology Needs Philosophy (ISCA 2016)

Richard G. Howe, Ph.D.

Dake.¹¹ I have been amazed at how often I have found it. I am amazed that a store that is ostensibly Christian would sell a Bible with study notes and commentary that departs so far from an historic, orthodox understanding of the nature of God. For example, Dake teaches that "God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are all present where there are beings with whom they have dealings; but they are not omnibody, that is, their bodies are not omnipresent. All three go from place to place bodily as other beings in the universe do."¹² All three "persons" of the Trinity have bodies with which they move around the universe. As such, God cannot be omnipresent. More startling is Dake's teaching that

God has a personal spirit body (Dan. 7:9-14; 10:5-19); shape (Jn. 5:37); form (Phil. 2:5-7); image and likeness of a man (Gen. 1:26; 9:6; Ezek. 1:26-28; 1 Cor. 11:7; Jas. 3:9). He has bodily parts such as, back parts (Ex. 33:23), heart (Gen. 6:6; 8:21), hands and fingers (Ps. 8:3-6; Heb. 1:10; Rev. 5:1-7), mouth (Num. 12:8), lips and tongue (Isa. 30:27), feet (Ezek. 1:27; Ex. 24:10), eyes (Ps. 11:4; 18:24; 33:18), ears (Ps. 18:6), hair, head, face, arms (Dan. 7:9-14; 10:5-19; Rev. 5:1-7; 22:4-6), and other bodily parts.¹³

When I speak on this subject and show a slide with this quote, I ask my audience what else is startling about this quote. I then transition to a slide where Dake's words are removed, leaving behind the numerous Bible citations. A look at the verses will show that, indeed, the verses seem to say (taken *prima facie*) what Dake quotes them to say. The texts indeed describe God with these bodily parts. I suspect that if Dake himself were in the audience, he would protest that I was the one who was failing to take these verses seriously. If the text says that God has eyes or strong arms (Dake might argue), then it means that God has eyes and strong arms. To be sure, Dake does not take these bodily parts to be physical, claiming, instead, that they are spiritual. I will leave it up to you to judge exactly what spiritual hair is. Whatever one concludes,

¹¹ Finis Jennings Dake, *The Dake Annotated Reference Bible* (Lawrenceville: Dake Bible Sales, 1991).

¹² Dake, *Annotated*, 81.

¹³ Ibid, 97.

such a judgment cannot be made without doing philosophy. This is so because to try to distinguish the metaphysical makeup of things and to try to distinguish between material and immaterial substances, is to do philosophy.

No doubt most would laugh that something as simple as a figure of speech would escape Dake's notice. After all, surely even he does not believe that God has wings (Ruth 2:12) or feathers (Ps. 91:4) or that Jesus is literally bread (John 6:32) or is literally a vine (John 15:1). Perhaps Dake is an extreme case. But I submit that adjudicating literal descriptions of God from figures of speech is not as straightforward as it might appear.

When discussing this topic with a friend of mine, I appealed to Genesis 3 to set up my concerns. The text tells us that Adam and Eve "heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day." (v. 8) I asked my friend (knowing his answer already) if he believed that God had legs, since it was impossible for God to walk without them.¹⁴ He responded that he did not. I asked him why and he said that he believed that God was a spirit. I pressed him how he knew this. He appealed to John 4:24 where Jesus told the woman at the well that "God is Spirit." I then asked him what he did with the Genesis passage. He said that he understood that as a figure of speech.

My question to him was how he knew that the Genesis passage was a figure of speech and that the John passage was literal. Perhaps God was figuratively a spirit and literally had legs.

14. Some may suggest that this event was a theophany, i.e., an appearance of Christ before his incarnation in the New Testament. Without delving into whether such events occurred in the Old Testament (and, if so, without discussing whether this event in Genesis 3 could be an example) it remains that an appeal to a theophany cannot account for every physical description of God in the Old Testament. This would certainly be the case with the above cited verses describing God's wings and feathers.

My point was that it is not always obvious what is and what is not a figure of speech and that sometimes further appeals to scriptural texts cannot settle the matter.¹⁵

No doubt at this point you are expecting me to launch into my argument that only philosophy can settle the matter. I am reminded of the joke about the children's Sunday School class where the teacher asks the children what is gray, has a furry tail, and hides acorns for the winter. The children, realizing that they are in Sunday School and remembering to what the discussion always comes back, decides that the answer must be "Jesus." I have had a similar experience in my graduate courses. Having queried my students about how we know certain things to be true, they enthusiastically exclaim "Philosophy!" Since seemingly (in their eyes) the point of the discussion was philosophy and how critical it was to theology, then the answer I must be looking for is "philosophy." This is not my position. I am not arguing that all such thinking can only be settled if and when one works the thinking back to something philosophical. Instead, what I will argue is this. Consider what Isa. 55:12 tells us. "For you shall go out with joy, and be led out with peace; the mountains and the hills shall break forth into singing before you, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." If the prophet tells us that trees shall clap their hands, we know that he is speaking poetically; employing the figure of speech known as metaphor. We know this because we know that trees do not literally have hands. We know that trees do not literally have hands because of our experience with trees. We know that trees have a specific nature such that hands are not part of what it is to be a tree. It does not take any study of philosophy to know this. Even a child can understand that trees do not literally have hands. What it is we can know metaphysically about the essences of things and how it is we can know it, is to do philosophy.

15. One often hears the expression that "Scripture interprets Scripture" sometimes incorrectly labeled as the "analogy of faith." For a brief but helpful discussion of the principle, see Howe, "The Analogy of Faith," 50–51.

How Does Theology Need Philosophy?

In the book I am working on, so far I have three broad categories, each with three or more specific areas where I believe philosophy is necessary for sound theology. Those categories are:

- how philosophy can establish the foundation for theology
- how philosophy can clarify the meanings in theology, and
- how philosophy can safeguard the doctrines of theology.

The foundation includes issue such as:

- truth
- logic
- knowledge
- morality
- life (specifically, the sanctity of life), and
- God (specifically, the existence of God).

Issues in need of clarity for the sake of sound theology include:

- the meaning of 'nature'
- the meaning of 'flesh vs. spirit' and
- the meaning of inerrancy.

Specific doctrines whose integrity necessarily includes sound philosophy include:

- the attributes of God
- the doctrine of miracles, and
- the doctrine of faith, particularly in regard to the heresies of the Word of Faith Movement.

While I certainly do not have time to deal with all (or even most) of these, I should like at least to give a sentence or two about each one to give you an idea of what my thinking is and

Defending the Handmaid: How Theology Needs Philosophy (ISCA 2016)

Richard G. Howe, Ph.D.

perhaps spend a little time on a select few. I am hopeful that the little that I am able to say in this regard will suffice to show how crucial, indeed essential, sound philosophical thinking is to cherished evangelical theology.

Foundation: Philosophy Can Establish the Foundation for Theology

The Foundation of Truth

Here I distinguish a theory of truth (how truth is defined) from a test for truth (how truth is discovered). I then explore the various philosophical options for one's theory of truth opting for the correspondence theory of truth as the only viable theory of truth there is.

As for tests for truth, I defend the fact that different aspects of reality require different methods of inquiry and tools of analysis. While all tests for truth will share in common the laws of logic and language, they nevertheless will differ according to the kind of thing (i.e., the aspect of reality) that is being known. Thus, how questions of history are settled is different than how questions of mathematics are settled. This is especially relevant in exposing the bankruptcy of writers like Richard Dawkins who erroneously think that the question of God's existence, which is a philosophical question, can and must be assailed by the methods and tools of the natural sciences.

Last, taking a lesson from the historian of philosophy Etienne Gilson in his extremely important book *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*,¹⁶ I explore how two great mistakes have plagued philosophical thinking throughout Western history: first, the mistake of taking the methods of inquiry and tools of analysis from one aspect of reality and illicitly applying them to different aspect of reality, and second, the mistake of taking the methods of inquiry and tools of analysis from one aspect of reality and illicitly applying them to reality as such.

¹⁶ Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999).

The Foundation of Logic

Here I deal with the laws of logic, respond to objections to the use of logic in Christian thinking, explore the issue of presuppositions, and deal with the specter of self-refuting statements.

The Foundation of Knowledge

Here I respond to the growing animus towards empiricism and try to argue that empiricism, as understood in its classical form, not only does not yield the logical positivism of the early twentieth century or the scientism that plagues us today, but actually can yield not only truths about the physical world, but also truths about logic, metaphysics, morality, and God.

The Foundation of Morality

Here I lobby for a return to Natural Law Theory as not only the basis of how to understand the concepts of goodness and human morality, but also as the best polemic for public policy disputes with our fellow citizens over moral issues.

The Foundation of Life

Here I explain the difference between a functional understanding of a thing (like, for example, a spoon) and an essential understanding of a thing (like, for example, a human being). Understanding this difference can go a long way of advancing the debate that continues to rage over abortion. And as an added dividend, this distinction can help explain how it is that our proclamation of the truth of Christianity is completely misunderstood by many in our pluralistic culture who regard religion in a functional way.

The Foundation of God

I deal with the issue of God in two places. As a foundational issue, I deal with the existence of God. We know from revealed truth that such an endeavor is warranted. General Revelation are those truths about Himself that God has revealed through His creation. Rom. 1:20

Defending the Handmaid: How Theology Needs Philosophy (ISCA 2016)

Richard G. Howe, Ph.D.

tells us "since the creation of the world His invisible attributes (lit. the invisible things, τὰ ἄορατα) are clearly seen (καθορᾶται), being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse." Note that those attributes of God are in themselves invisible, but are nevertheless knowable by things that are made (i.e., visible). From our knowledge of effects (creation) we can gain an analogous knowledge of the cause (Creator). We can do this by our direct apprehension of the sensible world even if we (at the start) do not realize that the sensible world is created by God.

I have not decided which arguments for God's existence to treat, but I know that, if I treat no other, I will propound an argument from Aquinas arising from his understanding of the structure of existence and his understanding of the essence/existence distinction. While any Thomist can easily see that Aquinas used these notions as an argument for God's simplicity (and, further, for other of God's attributes as, I will touch on in a moment) it is (or, at least it used to be) somewhat controversial as to whether these was ever employed by Aquinas specifically as an argument for God's existence,¹⁷ Joseph Owens has demonstrated to my satisfaction that, indeed, Aquinas did explicitly use this argument for God's existence.¹⁸

Let me take just a few minutes to briefly summarize the argument. In our assessment of the sensible world, we can understand that anything that is true about an object is true about it either because of its essence (i.e., because it is the kind of thing it is) or not. For example, the fact that I have reason is caused by my human nature or essence. I have reason by virtue of being human. Other things might be true of me, but not because of my human nature. For example, the

¹⁷ For a comment about the disagreement among some Thomists, see the Armand Maurer translation of *On Being and Essence in Medieval Sources in Translation I*, reprinted (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1983), 19-20, and n. 33.

¹⁸ Joseph Owens, "Aquinas and the Five Ways" *Monist* 58 (Jan. 1974): 16-35, p. 31, n. 36.

fact that I live in the Atlanta area is not by virtue of being human, otherwise, no one living outside the Atlanta area would be human. Thus, living in the Atlanta area is not caused by my human essence. But I can explain how it is that I live in the Atlanta area. I live in the Atlanta area because I caused myself to live in the Atlanta area. Further, there might be things that are true of me, but are not caused by my essence or by me. For example, I might have a black eye that I was given by someone else in a fight. Neither living in the Atlanta area (caused by me) nor having a black eye (cause by someone else) is caused by my essence.

With all this, consider the fact that I exist. I do not exist by virtue of being a human being. It is not my human nature that makes me exist. Existence is not part of my essence. It follows, therefore, that my essence is distinct from my existence. It would further seem that this essence/existence distinction holds for everything in the sensible world. There is nothing in the sensible world that exists by virtue of its essence. How, then, can I account for my existence or the existence of anything else?

Before I give what I believe is the only answer to that question, let me say a brief word about existence by way of analogy. If you visit Venice, Italy, you will see at one of the vaporetto stops a giant illuminated glass ball. It will certainly grab your attention. If you ask "where did this glass ball come from?" you will discover that it was made in nearby Murano, which is famous for its glass factories. With this answer, you will probably be satisfied. However, if you were hearing music, you would not ask "Where did this music come from" but instead would ask "where is the music coming from?" This is so because you realize that music is music only while it is being caused to be music at every moment that it is music. As soon as the cause of the music stops causing the music, the music ceases to be. Music is an act. As an illustration, this is the way that medieval philosophers such as Aquinas understood existence—as an act.

Let us now return to my accounting for my own existence myself or for the existence of anything else. Since it is not of the essence of any sensible object to exist, then their existence must be being caused by something else. Remember, I am not thinking in terms of what caused the sensible object to come into existence. Rather, I am thinking in terms of what is causing the existence of the sensible object at every moment that it exists. The only explanation is that, if anything exists, then something must exist whose essence is its existence. If anything exists, then there must be something for which the essence/existence distinction does not hold. As Thomas Aquinas so succinctly put it, "All men know this to be God."

Meaning: Philosophy Can Clarify the Meaning of Theology

The Meaning of 'Nature'

Here I explain how the term 'nature' is used in various ways. It requires a careful understanding of 'nature' to faithfully expound the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. Further, nature as it pertains to human beings in general is critical in understanding human morality. (This point may end up being redundant from the earlier point about morality, so I will have to decide exactly where I will need to treat it.)

The Meaning of 'Flesh' vs. 'Spirit'

A proper understanding of how the Scriptures and theology use the terms 'flesh' and 'spirit' and their synonyms is essential to an orthodox understanding of the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus.

The Meaning of Inerrancy

Here I revisit the subject of the notion of truth as correspondence in defending a proper notion of inerrancy. To this end I discuss how a functional view of truth has plagued some evangelicals into a *de facto* (even if not a *de dicto*) denial of the doctrine. Further, I discuss how

a failure to properly apply the correspondence theory of truth plays into the controversy surrounding Mike Licona's work.

Doctrines: Philosophy Can Safeguard the Doctrines in Theology

Safeguarding the Doctrine of the Attributes of God: God Fading Away

I talked earlier how philosophy is necessary in the demonstration of God's existence. But it is not merely the existence of God that is being challenged, but also His attributes. I have a Power Point presentation titled "God Fading Away" the contents of which I will be incorporating into the book. In it, I contrast the historical Christian understanding of God's attributes with what we are increasingly finding today. I show how these "classical attributes" are, one by one, being discarded by contemporary evangelicals.

The heresies of the *Dake Annotated Reference Bible* might seem far removed from evangelicalism and, as such, might seem to pose little real threat. Closer to home a battle has been quietly (and sometimes not so quietly) raging over the issue of Open Theism. Sometimes known as Neo-Theism or Free-Will Theism, Open Theism maintains that the future is "open" to God such that He cannot possibly know what choices will be made by His creatures with free will. This is, in their view, because future contingencies are unknowable because they do not exist.¹⁹ This is how Open Theists explain certain verses in the biblical text. Gregory Boyd comments, "Scripture also frequently depicts God as experiencing regret ... disappointment, frustration, and unexpected outcomes ... suggesting that the future is to this extent composed of possibilities rather than certainties. It is, I submit, more difficult to conceive of God experiencing

¹⁹ Boyd says, "... the Bible depicts God as not knowing future free actions, on the one hand, while also depicting God as knowing all of reality, on the other. This entails that future free decisions do not exist (except as possibilities) for God to know until free agents make them." Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 120

such things if the future is exhaustively settled in his mind than if it is in part composed of possibilities."²⁰

What is worse is what one will find in what the classical theist Brian Davies calls "divine personalism" in which many of the classical attributes of God are denied, including simplicity, impassibility, and (in some instances) timelessness. It has even gotten to the point that now we have to contend with claims such as this from Clark Pinnock: "I would say that God transcends the world, while being able to indwell it. Perhaps God uses the created order as a kind of body and exercises top-down causation upon it."²¹

It should be clear that such views of God depart from the classical (and historically evangelical) view. But what can be said in response? In the same way regarding those verses that describe God as having bodily parts, these verses too should be taken as figures of speech. But how do we know that? Let me repeat the parallel I brought up earlier and then revisit the issue of the structure of existence. When the Scriptures talk about trees clapping their hands, we know that this is poetic (i.e., figurative) language. We know this because we know the nature of a tree is such that it does not have hands. We are able to know this nature because of our empirical experiences with trees.²² Obviously we cannot know God in exactly the same way. God is not an

²⁰ Gregory A. Boyd, "Neo-Molinism and the Infinite Intelligence of God," *Philosophia Christi* 5, No.1, (2003):192. For a critique of Open Theism see Norman L. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man? The New "Open" View of God—Neotheism's Dangerous Drift* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997) and Norman L. Geisler and H. Wayne House (with Max Herrera), *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001)

²¹ Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001), 34-35.

²² Our experiences with sensible objects enable us to know their essences. This process is known as *abstraction*. Our knowledge of essences presupposes that essences are real constituents of natural objects. These essences, often referred to as substantial forms are in distinction to those of artificial objects whose essences are ultimately accidental forms. For a discussion of metaphysics, including essences, see Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1963) and George P. Klubertanz, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Being* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955). For a discussion specifically about essences, particularly aimed at analytic philosophers, see David S. Oderberg, *Real Essentialism* (New York: Taylor & Francis

Defending the Handmaid: How Theology Needs Philosophy (ISCA 2016)

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object perceptible by our empirical faculties. But we are able (as Rom. 1:20 says) to reason from effect (the things that are made which are clearly seen) to cause (the attributes of God which are invisible).

What is the relevance of the structure of existence to this question of the attributes of God? Only the briefest of treatments is possible here. For Aquinas, the perfection of a creature consists in the actualization of its potencies which are themselves determined by its essence. The actualization of its potencies carry the creature towards its proper end or telos. For a potency to be actualized is to say that it is brought into existence in the creature. As the creature realizes more and more of its potencies, it exemplifies more and more reality of its essence. It exemplifies more and more of being or existence. This points to the fact that, in Aquinas's understanding, existence as such contains all perfections of being. Existence is limited by essence. Like a balloon that limits and shapes the air that infuses it, the essence of the creature bounds the otherwise limitless fullness of the perfections of existence.²³ A human being contains all the perfections of existence up to and according to the limits and boundaries of human essence or nature. A tree contains all the perfections of existence up to and according to the limits and boundaries of the essence of tree. But since for God, His existence is His essence (which is to say, the essence/existence distinction does not hold for Him), He possesses all the perfections of existence without limit.

Group, Routledge, 2007). For a discussion of the classical view of how essences (and other aspects of reality) are known see Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, *Man's Knowledge of Reality: An Introduction to Thomistic Epistemology* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1956).

²³ I am grateful to philosopher Max Herrera for this metaphor.

This is where, for Aquinas and certain other philosophers, all the classical attributes of God are found. God is omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (all knowing), omnipresent (all present), as well as a host of other attributes such as all loving, all wise, all good, and more.

Knowing from philosophy that God must have all these attributes (because for Him there is no essence/existence distinction), we can know that when the Bible describes God in finite terms, it is speaking figuratively. The Bible does this because God is revealing Himself and His attributes in the only categories that we as finite human beings can understand. Because of this, we are not saying something less about God when we deny that God has eyes²⁴ than we are saying about ourselves that we affirm that we do have eyes. Instead, by denying that God has eyes, we are saying something greater about Him. What the Bible means by attributing eyes to God is analogous to what we know about ourselves regarding our own eyes. By them we know and understand reality. God knows and understands reality, but He does so analogously to the way we do, that is, infinitely. As I see it, sound metaphysics (which is to say, philosophy) is the only way to adequately stave off this erosion or "fading away" of God's attributes.

Safeguarding the Doctrine of Miracles

Here I deal with the primacy of theism in a proper understanding of miracles in what I call a theology and philosophy of miracles.

Safeguarding the Doctrine of Faith: Refuting the Heresies of the Word of Faith Movement

Here I deal with the heresies of the Word of Faith movement as exemplified by such figures as Kenneth Copeland, Creflo Dollar, and others. My contention is that the problem goes beyond the tool of exegesis to solve, but requires a philosophical understanding of how the

²⁴ God is described in numerous places in the Bible as having eyes such as Deut. 11:12; 2 Chron. 16:9; Ps. 34:15.

template of an occult worldview is corrupting both the exegesis and theology of the Word of Faith teachers.

Conclusion

In looking at how philosophy is necessary in demonstrating Gods existence and His attributes, in providing the tools and methods to deal with issues of theories of and tests for truth including with reference to the inerrancy of the Bible, I have only scratched the surface of how I believe theology needs philosophy. While I have known philosophers (even Christian philosophers) who seem to do philosophy for its own sake, I celebrate philosophy's role as the handmaid that services the queen of the sciences, theology.