

Dialogue I

Response to “God is Infinitely WISE: We Have Access to His Wisdom”

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As expected, Chewning offers a thoughtful and challenging essay developing the hierarchy of knowledge preceding understanding and understanding preceding wisdom. It is always evident, in Chewning’s writings, that he is a sincere and godly man of faith who endeavors to disciple others.

This response will extend Chewning’s proposition that, in our world, we are rarely motivated by godly reasons. An empirical application to business will be given. Further, this response will challenge Chewning’s premise that one has access to God’s wisdom. It will be argued that one seldom has perfect knowledge of God’s wisdom and that it is dangerous to espouse that one is capable of accessing God’s wisdom.

Integration of God’s Reasons in Business

Chewning’s extensive discussion of wisdom is especially interesting and often

poignant. For example, Chewning (p. 47) writes that the essential question when seeking the right reasons is “Will this action glorify God?” Chewning follows this with the penetrating question, “When was the last time a strong desire to glorify God motivated me?” (p. 47). According to Chewning (p. 48), “In our fallen world, right reasons are generally crowded from our mind by my reasons, with little if any regard for God’s reasons.” This astute observation is not only true in society, but the business environment.

Unfortunately, even among businesspeople of faith, it is rare to find one that is committed to God’s reasons as the primary factor. According to *Business Through the Eyes of Faith*, the most popular reason for being in business is to make a profit. Even the authors of this seminal book discussing faith integration of business do not completely disparage this notion. Rather, the authors stress that profit making

should be balanced with other goals that extend God's shalom in business (Chewning, et al., 1990, pp. 199-122). Consequently, a commonly accepted concept among many businesspeople of faith is that profit is a prerequisite, or at least a co-requisite, to doing God's will.

Rare is the businessperson that seeks God's reasons, regardless. However, it is interesting to examine two such individuals (Aaron Feuerstein and Dennis Bakke) that have attempted to do so and the ramifications of their actions. The elderly Feuerstein achieved iconic status when Malden Mills, his textile company, was destroyed by fire. Rather than collecting the insurance money and retiring, Feuerstein continued to employ his workers and rebuild the mill. Feuerstein unabashedly cites his faith as a justification for his extraordinary actions (Rae & Wong, 1996, p. 16). Bakke, the former president and CEO of AES, was so intent that social responsibility should trump profits that the Security and Exchange Commission required AES to provide a disclaimer in its initial prospectus that the company subordinates profits to values (Hill, 2001, p. 75).

Unfortunately, the market system is not receptive to such altruistic actions. Feuerstein's and Bakke's admirable commitment to God's reasons have proven economically detrimental. In June 2002, with AES \$28 billion in debt, Bakke resigned as CEO (Orr, 2002). Malden Mills is presently so mired in debt that Feuerstein will probably lose control of his company and will be forced to resign as CEO (Pacelle, 2003, p. A1). It is understandable why few businesspeople, even those of faith, choose the difficult and narrow gate of God's reason. Sadly, the Gospel of Matthew prophetically warns that it is only those that do choose this narrow gate that have also chosen the road that leads to life (Matthew 7:13-14).

God's Wisdom Is Rarely Knowable

Chewning astutely observes that, for Christians, wisdom and responsibility go beyond practicality.

Much of the wisdom that pertains to our personal relationships with temporal objects is obtainable through natural observations and common sense that are accompanied by a

desire to live in harmony with our circumstances in life. ... But Christians have a far deeper and more fundamental responsibility before God than just "worldly-wise," prudential behavior ... wisdom for the individual Christian regarding decisions about housing, cars, work locations, and hundreds of other matters are to be settled before Christ on the basis of the individual's faith in Christ's leading (p. 45-46).

Indeed, Christian wisdom, in all matters, is much more profound than merely common sense. However, implementing Chewning's premise of knowing Christ's leading is not as simple as Chewning suggests. Chewning writes that there is great comfort in James 1:5 — "... if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him." Further, a preeminent thesis of Chewning is that one is greatly capable of knowing God and God's will. The word *know*, or its permutations (known, knows, knowing, known), appear at least 38 times in his essay, often in the context of one ascertaining, as a fact, the wisdom and will of God.

Though to know the perfect will of God is a beautiful proposition, Christians are seldom able to know what God's will is. Regardless of one's wisdom, it is impossible to discern, with certainty, what God desires (or if God even cares), concerning the hundreds of matters suggested by Chewning, such as housing, cars, and work location. A Christian can have faith and belief, but this is far different than knowing. For example, creeds of the Christian faith (the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed) profess what we believe, not what we know. Even the *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business (JBIB)* implicitly recognizes this inability to know. *JBIB's* statement of purpose is that "It is committed to the proposition that 'All Scripture is God-breathed ...'". According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (Mish, et al., 2001), *proposition* is defined as "something offered for consideration or acceptance." This is far different than knowing as an irrefutable fact.

One cannot be 100 percent certain of the proper interpretation of Jesus' and the Bible's teachings. This statement, to many, may be heretical and blasphemous. However, paradoxically, the idea that a

Christian's wisdom is too limited to know the will of God is biblical. Paul alludes to this in both the books of I Corinthians and Hebrews. Paul writes that "now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known" (I Corinthians 13:12). In Hebrews, Paul describes faith as "the assurance of things *hoped* for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1, emphasis mine).

The Dangers of Thinking That We Have Access to God's Wisdom

Chewning's proclamation that one can know God's will with certainty has at least two troubling and unbiblical consequences. First, when one believes one knows the perfect will of God, it may promote arrogance and dogmatism. An example is Chewning's condemnation of unnatural sexual relationships. Based on Chewning's other writings (e.g., Chewning, 1998, p. 81), it is assumed that unnatural sexual relationships include homosexual relationships. Under the assumption that he knows the mind of God, Chewning (2003, p. 50) writes,

"God has told us they are harmful," and it "and a host of other ungodly behaviors are to be avoided ...".

If indeed homosexuality is included in this reproach, Chewning is reckless in his fervor. Many learned Christians disagree with Chewning's interpretation of God's wisdom regarding homosexuality, and they contend that the authority of culture is what is at stake, not the authority of Scripture (Gomes, 1996, p. 162).

How Gay-Friendly Should Your Workplace Be? is a case study that demonstrates how an issue, such as this, may manifest itself in the workplace. One of two responses that accompany this case study concurs with Chewning's ideology of accessing God's wisdom. Roy Jaeger responds that "this truly isn't a 'hard issue.' ... Christianity is 'exclusive' and has a 'distinctive bias' ... endorsing homosexuality is no different from charging usurious interest or performing abortions ... they simply aren't an option for a servant to the Most High God." On the other hand, Debbie Gouletas offers a less doctrinal approach, responding that "we never know what God is going to do in our companies ... a Christian

approach requires making the work environment 'gay-friendly.'"

These two clearly different positions to the case study demonstrate the elusiveness of definitively accessing God's wisdom. In this, and other such situations, one should humbly recognize that no one has perfect knowledge of God's wisdom.

Are Chewning and Jaeger willing to accept that they may be wrong and Gomes and Gouletas are correct (and vice versa)?

What would be the reaction of Chewning and Jaeger if, in the final day, it is revealed that God does not condemn but delights in a monogamous, loving, homosexual relationship? Christian humility admits that faith is a belief and is not based on irrefutable evidence and admits that one might be wrong.

The second possible repercussion of espousing the notion that one can know God's wisdom is that it may encourage guilt, uncertainty, and eventual separation from the Christian faith. A Christian, who knows oneself and the elusiveness of knowing God's will, may be torn

and tormented by the simplistic idea that one should be able to access God's wisdom.

Consequently, one may feel guilty because one realizes one is incapable of ever knowing God's will regarding many issues, such as purchasing a car, purchasing a home, remaining silent, or becoming involved.

Even worse, one may become

uncertain of one's faith. If one doubts what is touted to be the rudiments of the Christian religion, one

might question one's own belief and faith in Jesus. For example, it is unsettling when Chewning writes, "The Christian *knows* that he or she does not face annihilation at the time of death" (p. 40, emphasis mine), and "we *know* that those who reject the truth concerning Christ 'are without excuse,' for deep within their hearts they *know* the truth" (p. 42, emphasis mine). Contrary to Chewning's claim, neither of these propositions can be known, and both require faith to believe. Consequently, propagating such axioms as absolute knowable truths of Christianity is dangerous. It may push some away and discourage many from

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even considering Christianity because of its apparent simplicity. Neither praying, fasting, or reading of the Bible can provide unequivocal access to God's wisdom.

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