

A MORON BY ANY OTHER NAME

Vincent Cheung

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PO Box 15662, Boston, MA 02215, USA
<http://www.vincentcheung.com>

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INTRODUCTION

Someone recently wrote me and asked about the harsh language that I sometimes use when referring to non-Christians. Specifically, he questions the propriety of addressing the unbeliever with biblical invectives. Although I have already addressed this topic in several places in my writings, I thought that it would be helpful to share my answer to this inquirer with my readers.

Since my purpose is to aid understanding and not to preserve the question and answer in their original form, I have edited the question and expanded the answer.¹ The question serves to provide a context with which the answer can interact. And since the question and answer are no longer in their original form, note that the "you" in the answer portion no longer addresses the original inquirer.

QUESTION

I have read a few of your works and I have to say, I had never really considered apologetics and the mind of Christ in that manner – that the "wisdom" of unbelievers is utterly moronic and foolish, and completely irrational. I totally agree with all your conclusions.

However, is it the best thing to tell them this, with words like "moron," "intellectual feces," and so forth? I want to understand how you interpret 1 Peter 3:15 and Colossians 4:5-6 in light of the way you debate non-believers.

ANSWER

First, we should consider whether the descriptions are biblical. You say that you already agree with me on this, so I do not need to spend time establishing it here, although I will still give some attention to several specific words below.

Then, your question becomes whether we should *tell* the unbelievers what the Bible says about them. But the more appropriate question is whether we have any biblical justification to say that we must *hide* certain truths from the unbelievers. My position is that rather than hiding any biblical truth from the unbelievers, we should thoroughly disclose, expound, and *apply* to them all that the Scripture teaches.

Consider the prophets, the apostles, and Christ himself. They all used very strong and even scathing words to criticize hardened sinners. Probably the only counter-argument

¹ Nevertheless, the answer does not represent a complete biblical exposition on the topic. For more information, see Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology, Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, Apologetics in Conversation, Commentary on Ephesians*, and "Professional Morons"; Douglas Wilson, *The Serrated Edge: A Brief Defense of Biblical Satire and Trinitarian Skylarking* (Canon Press, 2003); Robert A. Morey, "And God Mocked Them" (audio); and James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons From the Imprecatory Psalms* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1991).

that I have heard on this point is that they were the infallible *exceptions*. Well! This is certainly convenient. But why were they the exceptions in *this* area? Why does it require infallibility to use harsh words? And why were they the exceptions only when it comes to using harsh words and not when it comes to using kind words? No, I refuse to accept mere opinion or speculation on this, but I demand a biblical, exegetical response.

Their principle seems to be that whenever you find certain things in the Bible that you do not approve, or that you do not want to practice, just call them "exceptions." The blatantly anti-Christian element in their use of Scripture is that, not only do they say that the prophets, the apostles, and Christ were the exceptions in the sense that I have no right to *originate* these invectives, but that I do not even have the right to *apply* or *repeat* the same invectives that they used to the same type of people to whom they used them.

1 Peter 3:15

Of course, 1 Peter 3:15 is frequently used to assert that we must be "nice" when doing apologetics. The verse says, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this *with gentleness and respect*..." But what does it mean to do apologetics with "gentleness and respect"? Does it mean what the *unbelievers* tell us it means? Does it mean to be non-offensive, non-confrontational, non-threatening, and to be soft-spoken and sheepish? Or is it *infallibly* explained and demonstrated by the words and examples of the prophets, the apostles, and Christ himself? We should not assume that the apostle is referring to what the *unbelievers* consider to be gentleness and respect; rather, we must pay close attention to the context of the verse.

The context of this verse is mainly about Christians who are facing persecution and interrogation *from the authorities* (government officials, masters, etc.); it does *not* directly address public preaching or ordinary discourse among peers. Matthew Henry writes that the verse is referring to "the fear *of God*" and "reverence to *our superiors*."²

Indeed, when we read the Acts of the Apostles, we see that the disciples were *usually* more polite when defending themselves before government officials. Even then, Jesus called Herod "that fox" (Luke 13:32). There is a more detailed example from Paul in Acts 23:

(3) Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!"

(4) Those who were standing near Paul said, "You dare to insult God's high priest?"

(5) Paul replied, "Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: 'Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.'"

² Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1991).

Note that Paul said, "God will strike you" and "you whitewashed wall." He essentially cursed the person in the name of God and called him a hypocrite and law-breaker to his face. But then, in relation to what I said about the context of 1 Peter 3:15, when Paul discovered that he was speaking to the high priest, he implied that he would not have said what he said if he had known (v. 5).

Thus, verse 3 illustrates that my approach to the unbelievers is similar to Paul's, and verses 4-5 illustrate that my understanding of 1 Peter 3:15 makes Peter and Paul consistent. The way my critics and many other believers distort 1 Peter 3:15 would make Peter condemn Paul on verse 3, unless Paul is somehow an "exception," and thus excused from obeying 1 Peter 3:15. On the other hand, my understanding of 1 Peter 3:15 means that Paul did not necessarily contradict 1 Peter 3:15 in verse 3 (since he did not know that he was speaking to the high priest), and he even indicated his agreement with 1 Peter 3:15 in verses 4 and 5.

Now, I am guessing that my critics would disapprove if I am the one saying something like what Paul said in verse 3. Yet, here it is – Paul did it himself. But of course, Paul was the exception, right? But the exception to what? The exception to "gentleness and respect"? If my critics were to use 1 Peter 3:15 against me, and then call the prophets, the apostles, and Christ the exceptions, then they must also affirm that the prophets, the apostles, and Christ himself were exceptions *to gentleness and respect* in numerous instances, and that in those cases, they showed *no gentleness* and *no respect*.

Colossians 4:5-6

As for Colossians 4:5-6, there is nothing about these verses that contradicts my approach. The verses read as follows: "*Be wise* in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always *full of grace, seasoned with salt*, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

My critics falsely apply these verses against my approach. They assume that to use invectives against unbelievers is to not act wisely toward outsiders, and to speak without grace and without salt. But what is the "wisdom" referred to here? What is "grace" and what is "salt"? Why do these things mean what my critics say they mean – that is, to be "nice," soft-spoken, polite, non-insulting, non-offensive, non-critical, and so forth? What does the Bible mean by these words, and in this context?

Matthew Henry writes, "Grace is the salt which seasons our discourse, makes it savoury, and *keeps it from corrupting*."³ He seems to think that the passage is emphasizing the moral quality or the purity of our conversation, even if other things are implied. So rather than just assuming that Paul is here saying what they want him to say, my critics should offer at least a basic exegetical argument before making accusations.

In any case, if the instruction to "be wise" and to speak with "grace" and "salt" contradicts my approach, then it also contradicts the prophets, the apostles, and Christ

³ Ibid.

himself. Of course, my critics will say that they were the exceptions. But the exceptions to what? The exceptions to "grace" and "salt"? The exceptions to "be wise"? So are they saying that Christ at times spoke with *no grace* and *no salt*? And are they calling Christ *stupid*, that at times he behaved foolishly toward outsiders? I demand that they look up to heaven and repeat this blasphemy to God's face before applying these verses against me.

In contrast, I dare not and wish not blaspheme. I affirm that Christ was consistently wise in his conduct and conversation, and that he always spoke with grace and salt, and that he always maintained an attitude that was pleasing to God. And I submit that my critics have imposed upon Scripture their own anti-biblical definitions of these words and concepts, and thus at least indirectly blasphemed Christ and directly slandered me.⁴ For this, I charge them with sin and urge their repentance. I plead with them to stop defying the Word of God, and condemning those who follow it, but instead to adopt the biblical method and tone in proclaiming and defending the gospel against unbelievers.

Morons and Feces

As for "moron" and "feces," even these are biblical words. The word "moron" is derived from the Greek *moros*. Paul uses it in Romans 1:22. There it is translated "fools," but of course that means the same thing as "morons," and indeed could have been just as easily and correctly translated as such. As for "feces," Paul uses a word that is translated "dung" or "refuse" to refer to his former life as an unbeliever in Philippians 3:8. Thayer's Lexicon explains that the word can refer to "any refuse, as the excrement of animals." Both the meanings of these words and the contexts in which they appear agree with the way I use them against the unbelievers.

In addition, if "moron" and "feces" are so bad, why do we call unbelievers "sinners," and call them "sinful" or "wicked"? Even my critics use these words when preaching the gospel and when speaking to unbelievers. Do the biblical passages 1 Peter 3:15 and Colossians 4:5-6 suddenly cease to apply? Are my critics infallible exceptions too? How about the words "depravity" and "adultery"? Are these words full of "grace" and "salt"? How about telling someone that abortion is "murder"? Does that make someone feel all cozy from your "gentleness and respect"? Do you think that *these* words are not offensive to unbelievers? Do you think that *they* would prefer to be called "murderers" rather than "morons"?

Here we have come to the real issue – some Christians disagree with my use of invectives mainly because it offends *them*, and not because they are unbiblical (I have shown that they are biblical) or even because they offend the unbelievers (all biblical teachings offend unbelievers anyway). And these Christians are offended because their minds have not been taught and renewed in this area, so that their standards are still very much like those of the unbelievers; therefore, they are offended by the same things that offend the

⁴ These critics have also slandered the Reformers, who in the service of God and the Church, so faithfully and effectively employed invectives against unbelievers and heretics. Do you think that they were ignorant of 1 Peter 3:15 and Colossians 4:5-6? No, they did know about them, and wrote sermons and expositions on these verses. But unlike my critics, they also knew the contexts and the proper applications of these verses, and they also knew the rest of the Bible.

unbelievers. Another possibility is that at least some of these critics are still unconverted themselves, and since their priority is still man's dignity and not God's glory, then of course they are offended.

Because my critics have imposed their own definitions of these words on Scripture, they have created for themselves numerous theological problems and contradictions, and we have already mentioned their slanders and blasphemies. On the other hand, I have enough reverence for God to let the Scripture interpret itself; therefore, I affirm that using these *biblical* words (morons, feces, sinners, adulterers, murderers, etc.) in contexts similar to those in which they appear in Scripture is in complete accord with 1 Peter 3:15, Colossians 4:5-6, and all other related passages.

According to Scripture, unbelievers are nothing but spiritual and intellectual fecal matter. Otherwise, why in the world do you think they need to convert? Why do you think that they are helpless apart from God's sovereign grace?

CONCLUSION

Under biblically-approved conditions, we are permitted, and at times even duty-bound, to use biblical invectives against unbelievers and heretics. We do not call them "morons" or "feces" out of personal vindictiveness, but to proclaim what Scripture says about them, and to declare to them that they are not the rational and decent people that they imagine themselves to be.

A moron by any other name is still an idiot, and there is really no reason to use other words and expressions unless it is to hide our true meaning and to reduce the offensiveness of the biblical message. But what perverse reason is there to obscure biblical teachings? The truth is that the critics of this approach are poor interpreters of Scripture, compromisers with the world, and traitors to Christ and his cause. They defy that which Christ approved and practiced. I dare not and wish not to defy my Lord, but I will crush his critics any day.

My critics select biblical passages containing words that *they think* agree with what they already consider as the right approach to apologetics (that is, non-offensive, socially polite discourse), rip them out of their original contexts, and try to bury me with them. Their teaching in this area is indeed very ingrained into the thinking of many believers, and it will take some deliberate effort for many to recover the biblical way of thinking and speaking. In a day when everything about Christianity is being diluted to nothing, I call upon all believers to recover the *proper* use of biblical invectives, and to learn how to integrate it into a faithful and effective system of biblical theology and apologetics.

I understand that my position on this issue is unpopular, but it is indeed biblical, and what is biblical is often unpopular. Although I am often criticized on this, I am not ashamed of biblical expressions and descriptions, and I will absolutely refuse to budge an inch on this issue. It is a believer's duty to carefully examine what he has been taught on this matter, and to reconsider the contexts of the verses traditionally used to oppose the invectives

employed by the prophets, the apostles, the Lord Jesus, the Reformers, and that I now use.

Moreover, it is important to note that I try to use harsh words and insults only under similar contexts in which Scripture uses them. But in accepting the non-Christian standard of social propriety and in distorting a number of biblical passages, many Christians have come to the conclusion that this approach should never be used under any context, and thus they indirectly (but just as certainly) condemn the prophets, the apostles, and Christ himself, and in doing so, they have really condemned themselves.

The truth is that when I call someone a moron, I have at least momentarily spared him from the worst insult of all, an insult that represents all that is stupid, evil, filthy, and vile, and that speaks of someone who has no hope of getting better and no chance of escaping everlasting hellfire except by the sovereign grace of God. I am, of course, referring to the name "non-Christian." And once we have already used the greatest of insults, the rest are almost compliments.