

Avoiding Foolish and Unlearned Questions

by
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"But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes."

2 Timothy 2:23

Our subject text indicates some questions are best avoided, which is to say left unasked, some issues left out of discussions. The text is part of the advice the Apostle Paul gave Timothy in his second letter to the young preacher. The author and recipient of the advice suggests it applies to issues that might otherwise be brought into churches, either by formal action or informally by private conversation among church members. The reason given to avoid these type questions and issues is they are known to excite disagreements. Paul's advice doesn't mention whether support or opposition by one side or the other might be valid. He simply states foolish and unlearned questions DO gender strifes and therefore should be avoided. This being so it is important to understand what Paul meant when he labeled some questions foolish and unlearned.

Before examining Paul's instruction to Timothy it should be noted he made a similar statement to Titus, another of his sons in the ministry. **"But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain."** Titus 3:9 The fact Paul similarly charged both young preachers concerning types of questions they should avoid suggests: 1. They likely would be confronted with foolish and unlearned questions; 2. Far from any benefit to the cause of Christ, entertaining foolish and unlearned questions disrupts peace and spiritual unity among the saints by producing strife. We also can infer Paul's instruction generally applies to all preachers from the fact it is mentioned in pastoral letters to both of the young preachers Paul is known to have mentored. Furthermore, church members should avoid engaging preachers with questions and issues that are foolish and unlearned because preachers are instructed to avoid them.

To begin, the meanings of several words and phrases Paul used in the text are considered in order to better understand his intended meaning. They include:

Questions: The meaning of this word in both Greek and English applies to more than queries specifically formed to get information in response. Thayer's Greek/English Lexicon of the New Testament indicates Paul's use of this word in 2 Timothy 2:23 and in Titus 3:9 is: *"A subject of questioning or debate, matter of controversy."* Based on this definition we understand Paul's use of question includes discussions of subjects for which there are differences of opinion in addition to interrogatory queries that likewise mar peace and promote disunity.

Strife: Thayer's meanings for this word include: *Combat, fights, of persons at variance.* Definitions of strife and striving in The Oxford English Dictionary include: *Intense quarrel, mutual hostility, to carry on a conflict.* From this we understand foolish and unlearned questions produce conflicts that are not quickly nor easily overcome. This is particularly so when they are carried on (pridefully doted upon). This occurs when foolish and unlearned questions are repeatedly raised, whether to register support or opposition, without concern for the conflicts they cause. (See 1 Timothy 6:3-4)

Gender: *"To engender, cause to arise, excite, be delivered of."* Thayer. Paul's choice of gender

indicates these type questions naturally spawn controversy. An inherent, touchstone relationship exists between the two: Foolish and unlearned questions naturally give rise to disagreement and conflict between God's children. This characteristic indicates questions that are known to disrupt peace and spiritual unity, or be reasonably predicted to do so are foolish and unlearned and should be avoided.

There are subjects and issues having to do with faith and religion upon which people do reasonably differ in their opinions of which they can "agreeably disagree." Paul's warning does not apply to these. It applies only to those which gender strifes, controversial issues that inevitably produce ongoing conflict. By using the phrase "**they do gender strifes**" the Apostle indicates foolish and unlearned questions perform the action of exciting strifes; they do gender strifes. According to context they produce battles, mutual hostilities that disrupt peace and spiritual unity.

Foolish: Webster's American Dictionary of the English Language, 1828 uses 2 Timothy 2:23 as an example of the meaning and use of foolish. It defines foolish as: "*1. Void of understanding or sound judgment; applied to general character, weak in intellect. 2. Unwise, imprudent, acting without judgment or discretion in particular things. 3. Proceeding from folly, or marked with folly; silly; vain; trifling.*" Thayer defines foolish as: "*Imprudent; without forethought or wisdom, empty, useless.*"

Thayer and Strong's Greek/English Dictionary indicate the Greek word for foolish, μωρός moros, is derived from μυστήριον musterion from which we have the English word mystery. This connection suggests foolish questions can sometimes include hidden motives or intentions. Hiding true intentions or motives is a form of duplicity, which is a logical fallacy which in some instances is referred to as the fallacy of unstated or suppressed major premise. Duplicitous questions are also logically fallacious because concealing information or else supplying misinformation to gain compliance is a tactic of coercion. Duplicity also indicates poor or faulty judgment because it is dishonest: Disguising motives by withholding a major premise in order to conceal unstated goals is a form of false witnessing, lying.

From these definitions we understand foolish questions are not well reasoned. Sometimes this is due to a false premise that is simply erroneous. No deceit is intended. For instance, in Mark chapter 9 the Apostles engaged in a foolish query based on a false premise that one day one of them would be the greatest in the kingdom. Jesus rebuked their pride and boasting and rejected the underlying premise that one of them would necessarily be the greatest. He did so by pointing out God uses virtues such as meekness and humility to define greatness in His kingdom, which were absent in the Apostles' dispute.

Unlearned: Paul's use of "unlearned" suggests questions can sometimes be a result of ignorance, ill-manners, or lack of self-restraint. Thayer provides this meaning: "*Without instruction and discipline, uneducated, ignorant, rude, stupid questions.*" It should be noted the meaning of stupid is not limited to lack of mental acuity or intelligence. Its meaning includes "*dullness, lacking in common sense, carelessness, and lack of good judgment.*" These significations suggest unlearned questions may be ignorantly formed and proposed and/or hastily proposed. They are uneducated when submitted without careful study and consideration of the subject they address. They are rash when submitted without giving proper thought to the controversy and potential negative consequences they might spawn. They are products of dull thinking by those who by simple ignorance or naivety lack the ability to think through potential negative consequences of the issues they promote. Dullness also can apply to lack of empathy, uncaring whether a question might cause strifes. Unlearned questions are rude when their sponsors ignore or rationalize as acceptable their potential to cause harm.

Scriptural context indicates there are two categories of foolish and unlearned questions. They are: 1. Divisive issues that directly impact sound faith and practice; and, 2. Issues that are not essential to maintaining sound faith and practice but nevertheless are prone to cause schism. Paul provided examples of the two categories in his letters to Timothy and Titus.

His example of a divisive issue that questioned essential salvation doctrine is the false assertion by Hymeneus and Philetus that the resurrection had already occurred. Characterizing their arguments as "**profane and vain babblings**" infers the content and authority of their teaching did not come from God. The issue is seen to be divisive in the statement; "**Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past; and overthrow the faith of some.**" (See 2 Timothy 2:16-18) From this example we understand questions which undermine settled salvation doctrines are foolish and unlearned.

The letter to Titus mentions foolish questions that are not essential to maintaining sound faith and practice. "**But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain.**" (Titus 3:9) By including contentions as an example we understand questions known to produce debate and strife are foolish and should be avoided.

Avoid: Paul's instruction we should avoid foolish and unlearned questions is clear. According to Thayer avoidance is polite withdrawal or diversion: "*To avert by entreaty or seek to avert, to deprecate, to beg pardon, crave indulgence.*" This definition suggests some form of deflection is the best way to avoid foolish and unlearned questions. Furthermore, deflective tactics are to be done with gentleness and kindness in an effort to help the sponsors of foolish and unlearned questions recover themselves from Satan's divisive snare. (See 2 Timothy 2:24-26)

The earliest example in scripture of a foolish and unlearned question is the Serpent's question to Eve. "**Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?**" **Genesis 3:1** On its face this question appears to indicate concern for Eve's well being. But, it was a ploy, a product of duplicity crafted by Satan to hide his true motive and intention; which was to oppose God and harm man by coaxing Adam and Eve to disobey God. It's duplicity alone qualifies the question as foolish. But it also has other features of foolish and unlearned questions. For instance, it promoted an unwise course of action that produced disaster for man and did nothing to improve Satan's lot. The question was unlearned because it was rude and stupid. It was stupid in that it indicates Satan's utter dullness of unfeeling disregard for the well being of others. It was rude in that it insulted God by challenging an issue He had already settled and questioning His honesty. It was rash in that far from giving an advantage to Satan its consequence provided God another way to manifest His wisdom and authority of justice and mercy to forgive sins. Finally, the question is proven to be foolish and unlearned by the fact it gendered strifes: Adam's and Eve's reaction to Satan's question laid the foundation for all the conflict mankind has and will endure.

Jesus was asked many foolish and unlearned questions. One example is recorded in Luke 20. "**Is it lawful for us to give tribute unto Caesar, or no? But he perceived their craftiness, and said unto them, Why tempt ye me? Shew me a penny. Whose image and superscription hath it? They answered and said, Caesar's. And he said unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's, and unto God the things which be God's.**" **Luke 20:22-25** This question was a pretense. The true motive of the chief priests and scribes was not to settle an issue pertaining to Mosaic Law. It was to entangle the Savior in order to deliver him to Roman authorities for punishment and thereby end His teaching and influence. (See Luke 20:17) This hidden motive shows the question was

duplicitous and thereby foolish. The question was born of strife in that those who asked it opposed Jesus and sought to cause him harm. Also, the motive behind the question was to further produce strife by raising a controversy between the Savior and the Roman government. The inability of the chief priests and scribes to take issue with Jesus' response proves the question was unlearned. It was ignorantly crafted and rashly submitted. It was rude, which is a characteristic of unlearned questions, because it was intended to harm Jesus.

Another example of a foolish and unlearned question is the hypothetical question Jewish leaders asked Jesus concerning the woman whose husband died. In sequence she married each of his brothers who also died. Their question was, "**In the resurrection therefore, when they shall rise, whose wife shall she be of them? for the seven had her to wife.**" **Mark 12:23** Jesus' response reveals the question was foolish and unlearned. "**And Jesus answering said unto them, Do ye not therefore err, because ye know not the scriptures, neither the power of God?**" **Mark 12:24** The question was foolish because it was "void of understanding" in that Sadducees denied the resurrection. This fact also suggests their motive for asking the question was duplicitous. Since they rejected the existence of spirits, angels and resurrection of the the dead they were not seeking to resolve a seeming inconsistency between the teachings of Moses Law and the doctrine of the resurrection. It is more likely their intent was to undermine Jesus influence by asking a question they believed he could not answer without stirring controversy among his disciples. It was also rash since the Sadducees could have found an answer to their question by studying scripture and submitting to its truth and authority. It was unlearned in that it was rashly submitted and showed lack of honest, disciplined study.

The Apostle Paul was also confronted by foolish and unlearned questions. An example of this is the question raised by Hymenaeus and Philetus concerning the resurrection; of whom Paul wrote: "**And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some.**" **2 Timothy 2:17** The two claimed to know the resurrection had already occurred. Their questioning was foolish in that it challenged settled doctrine. It also sought to undermine the Apostles' teachings which were consistent with the plain language of the Savior, who indicated the resurrection will be an unmistakable event; and, that its timing cannot be accurately predicted. (See Matthew 24, I Corinthians 15, 1 Thessalonians 5, and 2 Peter 3) Paul plainly indicates their questioning produced harm and caused strife in that it overthrew the faith of some believers and if tolerated would have had a perverting effect on church doctrine.

Paul's reaction to the false teaching does not indicate he engaged these blasphemers in debate. Neither does it suggest he went church to church drawing attention to them and the controversy. Doing so would have exposed a broader audience to the blasphemers false teaching. It is more likely he followed his own advice to Timothy. "**But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness.**" **2 Timothy 2:16** The phrase, "**for they will increase unto more ungodliness.**" implies engaging foolish and unlearned questions, even in opposition, can serve to spread whatever cause they address by bringing them into broader attention.

How to avoid foolish and unlearned questions has always posed a significant challenge. This is particularly so at present because we live in a culture which seems to have a penchant for everything foolish and unlearned. Today, we struggle against the impact of a change in what is considered critical thinking. Sometime ago a shift occurred in how we process information to form opinions and arrive at conclusions. (I believe the shift began in earnest in the 1960s when Existential Philosophy began to

expand from academia into pop culture.) Classic methods of critical thinking based on proven rules of logic, fact and situation (context) gradually began to be replaced with a model for decision making that is based primarily on emotional stimulation, feelings. This model asserts ideas are correct if they promote self-esteem and/or make one's self and others feel good. Added to this is a sense of entitlement that is fostered by the existentialism principle of humanism. At the same time cultural restraints have eroded. Today any topic from the frivolously absurd to the obscenely vulgar is open for public discourse.

This shift in how people process information created a fertile environment for producing foolish and unlearned "feel good" questions. It also convinces people they are entitled to have their opinions be given serious hearing if some presently-in-vogue "feel good" threshold is met. On top of this, social media has provided the means to immediately announce to the world whatever comes to mind; and get the immediate gratification of receiving attention. So today, foolish and unlearned questions abound and are repeatedly and endlessly discussed on forums, blogs, tweets, and the list goes on.

Sadly, Christians in both the pew and the pulpit are not immune from the phenomenon of "feel good" thinking accompanied by a sense of entitlement that we have a right to be heard on any question. The result is there is no shortage of foolish and unlearned questions that originate in both the pew and the pulpit. Furthermore, preachers who are unaware of how to identify and deal with foolish and unlearned questions fail to avoid them; and either by support or in opposition ignorantly spread the strifes they gender.

How then can we avoid foolish and unlearned questions? It would be great if we could handle them like Jesus. He did not avoid foolish and unlearned questions because He is God. He silenced them with responses so obviously true and powerful that His challengers were forced to silence. With perfect knowledge of all issues and all-powerful intellect Jesus answered foolish and unlearned questions so completely no comeback could withstand scrutiny. His detractors had no followup questions, assertions or excuses they could fall back on. Scriptural examples of Jesus' answers to foolish and unlearned question forcing his critics to silence include Mark 12:23-34, John 8:1-10, Matthew 22:24-34, 22:46, Mark 11:28-33. It must be stressed: Although Jesus answered foolish and unlearned questions, His answers silenced them. Jesus avoided foolish and unlearned questions with answers that put a stop to people asking Him foolish and unlearned questions.

The Apostle Paul sometimes responded to foolish and unlearned questions. However, his was a special circumstance. His answers were by Divine revelation. Furthermore, as an Apostle, Paul was obliged to provide explanations of the doctrines of salvation and church polity to Christ's disciples. This included what is true doctrine, examples of challenges to true doctrine and how disciples are to respond to challenges to true doctrine. Nevertheless, the narrative of Paul's work together with his teachings in the epistles indicate he ultimately did avoid foolish and unlearned questions. For instance, he avoided the foolish and unlearned questions of Hymeneus and Alexander, (and helped the churches to likewise avoid them) by turning the two over to Satan **"that they may learn not to blaspheme." (1 Timothy 1:20)**

The methods used by Jesus and Paul to handle foolish and unlearned questions had at least one thing in common. They both minimized strife by curtailing discussion in some way. Jesus' responses silenced his critics and so lessened their ability to stir up strife against him. Paul addressed the errors and false teachings implied in foolish and unlearned questions and then terminated further discourse with foolish inquisitors. This tactic served as a silent indicator of his opposition to false teachings promoted by the

likes of Alexander, Hymeneus, Philetus and others. The tactics of Jesus and Paul indicate it is wrong to promote foolish and unlearned questions because they gender strifes and for the same reason it is also wrong to directly engage or otherwise entertain them.

Scripture teaches an effective way to avoid foolish and unlearned questions is to employ good manners by avoiding corrupt communications. Paul explicitly made this point to the Corinthians with regard to false teachings concerning the resurrection. **(See I Corinthians 15:33)** One way to avoid corrupt communications is to withdraw ourselves from the presence of those who insist on promoting foolish and unlearned questions. The extreme circumstance of someone insisting on sowing discord by doting **(see 1 Timothy 6:4)** on foolish and unlearned with other church members can require formal church action. However, in most cases withdrawing requires nothing more than some form of personal, polite censure.

Responding with silence is perhaps the most effective way to politely record objection while avoiding strife. This tactic is consistent with good manners, moral virtue, which prohibits even the mention of some things. Paul made precisely this point in the Letter to the Ephesians. He notes we are to **"have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them."** He then suggests even speaking of unfruitful works of darkness leads to wrong reactions. **"For it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret. But all things that are reprov'd are made manifest by the light: for whatsoever doth make manifest is light."** Paul concludes by admonishing the Ephesian church members to **"See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is."** **(Ephesians 5:12-17)** From Paul's instruction we understand it is unwise to entertain discussions of questions designed to rationalize values and behaviors that scripture plainly indicates are immoral. To do so opposes God by challenging His moral authority.

From the examples of Jesus and Paul we understand avoiding foolish and unlearned questions does not mean we ignore them altogether. Rather, they should be dealt with using meek and gentle tactics that deflect the issue and discourage additional discussion. Above all, we are to do so in ways that avoid quarreling and mutual hostility. Paul did this by reaffirming true doctrine among those he served. He then avoided those who insisted on continuing to promote false teachings until they ceased blaspheming. This is implied in his admonition concerning the unholy, empty teachings of Hymeneus and Philetus. **"But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness."** **(2 Timothy 2:16)** Likewise, he told the Roman church to **"mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them."** **(Romans 16:17)**

An effective method of deflecting foolish and unlearned questions is to refer their sponsors to scripture for further study. Jesus pointed out one of the reasons the Sadducees asked him foolish questions concerning the resurrection was because they were ignorant of the teachings of scripture; and, neither had they given reasonable thought to the scope of God's power. **"Jesus answered and said unto them, Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God."** **(Matthew 22:29)**

Paul instructed Timothy that diligent study of God's word would thoroughly prepare him for the challenges of every good work, including the good work of shunning the profane and vain babblings of foolish and unlearned questions. **"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness."** **(2 Timothy 2:15-16)**

He also admonished Timothy to flee from the impulsive immaturity of youthful lust which encourages engaging in foolish and unlearned questions. **"Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart. But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes."** (2 Timothy 2:22-23) This instruction teaches we should avoid indulging lustful feelings that can draw us into discussions of foolish and unlearned questions. We can do so by surrounding ourselves with those who **"call on the Lord out of a pure heart,"** those who manifest righteousness, faith, charity, and peace in their service to God.

Paul concludes this portion of instruction by teaching preachers they must not promote strife. **"And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will."** (2 Timothy 2:24-26) The context of this statement suggests preachers who entertain foolish and unlearned questions engage in strife. It characterizes preachers who avoid foolish and unlearned questions and thereby do not engage in strifes as meek and gentle. He encourages preachers to spend their time studying God's word; which in contrast to entertaining foolish and unlearned questions will thoroughly furnish them for every good work. Their assigned good work includes calling God's struggling, self-defeated children to repent and acknowledge the truth of His mercy and love; and to cultivate friendships and fellowship among those who call on God out of a pure heart.

While he was with us on earth Jesus taught loving God and one another is true obedience and the mark of genuine discipleship. (See **Matthew 22:37-40, John 15:8-12**) Paul teaches us doing this involves **"Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace "** with one another. (**Ephesians 4:3**) In contrast to the teachings of Jesus and Paul, we are not loving God and one another and neither do we maintain Spirit lead unity in a bond of peace when we promote foolish and unlearned questions. This is so whether we entertain them by sponsorship or else in opposition go about disputing them; because foolish and unlearned questions **"do gender strifes."**