

What is “Critical Thinking”?

This month’s question deals with something I would categorize as a “lost art.”

Most of you have a general idea of what critical thinking is, but for those who don’t, I want to make sure you know what it is **not**. It has nothing to do with the aspects of being critical in a mean-spirited manner. The Oxford Dictionary states that it is, “the objective analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form a judgement.”



I am not convinced our school systems (public or private) are doing a good job teaching youth these basic skills. (There are some exceptions.) I believe this training has been absent for years, meaning even many adults lack these skills. This deficiency is especially concerning when we add to it the general level of biblical illiteracy within Christianity. It becomes a huge detriment when trying to properly discern the myriad of issues that come our way every day.

Our society is throwing us more and more challenges, in a sense, “overwhelming the system!” Critical thinking is needed more than ever if we are to be an effective witness and also mentor our own children.

Critical thinking is not something you read an article about and then are “good-to-go.” It is something that takes time to develop. It is an extremely useful skill to have when evangelizing and will greatly increase your effectiveness.

Here’s an example of where “critical thinking” comes into play. I heard a skeptic make a very dogmatic claim. I want you to imagine you are in a somewhat heated conversation with this person, and they tell you, “Science is the only way of determining truth!” (In other words, you can’t turn to the Bible for truth.) How would you respond? Many Christians, if they were honest with themselves, would be stumped by this statement. We often respond by ignoring it altogether, trying to take the conversation down a different path. When this happens, we can be indirectly or subconsciously telling the skeptic, “I can’t argue with your point, but I have other things I want to say.” So, what would your response be?

If we train ourselves to be better listeners, paying very close attention to what the skeptic is saying, and add some critical thinking skills, it could result in this response. “So, you believe science is the only way of determining truth? How did you determine that? Did you use science to do so? If so, that is circular reasoning. You can’t use science to prove science. I would also like to know what experiments you conducted. I can’t even imagine what they would be. On the other hand, if you did not use science, then I guess there are other ways of determining truth because you allegedly used one of those ways yourself to verify your initial statement in which you claimed, science is the only

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way of determining truth. However, that is self-contradictory! If science really is the only way of determining truth, then you could not have used another method to come to that conclusion!" Is your head spinning yet? Maybe?

I've shared this response with various audiences and invariably, I see smiles and shaking heads indicating they felt it was a great response, but also indicating they could never think of a response like that themselves. People in these types of situations often think, "I wish I could have this speaker with me when I'm talking to my brother-in-law, or neighbor or co-worker, etc.". I completely understand that sentiment. I have been in that same situation many times in the past. It is my desire, however, that individual Christians be able to learn these kinds of responses themselves.

I recently had an atheist tell me, "You can never know what's true!" I asked him if that statement was true and how he actually knows it's true. If he thinks he knows it's true, it's a self-refuting statement because he's claiming it's true that you can't know truth! On the other hand, if he doesn't know it's true, then his statement carries no weight, and there's no reason to pay any attention to it.

As another example, the same atheist told me there is no meaning in life. This pronouncement was well into a lengthy discussion of philosophy, during which time he told me about all the worldviews he was exploring. I said, "I don't mean to be sarcastic or condescending in any way, but if life is meaningless, why are you spending so much time and effort checking out and evaluating all these belief systems? To me, though he may say it, he doesn't truly believe life is meaningless. I see it as his attempt to fulfill a natural God-given desire for a true spiritual connection with his Creator (i.e., the God of the Bible), with a generic pseudo-spiritual connection driven by his spiritually-darkened thinking and reasoning (Romans 1:16-32).

Here's one of my favorites that I learned from Ravi Zacharias (a very famous Christian apologist who unfortunately passed away this year – 2020). Ravi was retelling the story of another Christian speaker who was addressing a very large (mainly secular) body of students at an Ivy League university. In the middle of his speech, one student very rudely interrupted by standing up and forcefully asking, "How do I even know I exist?" The speaker tilted his head, lowered his glasses and calmly replied with, "And whom shall I say is asking?" Brilliant! Just brilliant! If I was the one speaking that day, and it was quite a few years ago, I would have launched into an extensive, complex defense in an attempt to address the question directly. I know better now! And so do you! See, it's not that hard.

One way of improving your critical thinking skills is to note the "stumpers" the skeptic sends your way and tell them you'll get back to them. You can then take your time to think through the issue instead of feeling pressured to be "brilliant on-the-spot." You can also seek help from your pastor or our ministry or a number of other places regarding the best response. Just be resolved in your mind to work at it and you'll get better and better over time. I can help you a certain amount, but thankfully the Holy Spirit is a much, much better teacher than I am!

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Isaiah 1:18 states, “Come now, let us reason together says the LORD.” Gaining critical thinking skills would certainly be consistent with this admonition.

If you have any questions about this or any other issue, please don't hesitate to [contact us!](#)