



STATEMENT DC-970

VIEWPOINT

The Myth of the Counterfeit Money Analogy

by Mark D. Mathewson

Christians frequently challenge me when they learn that I am interested in studying non-Christian philosophies for the purpose of countering those doctrines with Christianity's truth-claims. They express concern that exposure to non-Christian thinking will lead to my accepting "secular" or "pagan" philosophy. They advise that I should not examine error, but only the truth. If I would study only the Bible, I could detect error without having to "dabble" in it.

Many of these Christians use the "counterfeit money analogy" (CMA) to prove their argument. Aren't bank personnel trained to detect counterfeit money by examining only authentic bills? After countless hours of saturating themselves with the feel and sight of authentic bills, they can detect counterfeits immediately. Likewise, they affirm, if I want to detect error, I should examine only the Scriptures. By saturating myself with the truth, I can spot error immediately while not exposing myself to the dangers of non-Christian thought.

CMA sounds spiritual. It can also instill guilt in the Christian apologist: perhaps I should study only the Bible; maybe I should avoid studying non-Christian thought for fear of capitulating to it. While CMA gives an impression of piety, I think it is misused. By exposing its limitations, I hope to dispel the myth of CMA that hampers intellectual growth and apologetic endeavors.

CMA is correct in one sense. The most effective way to detect error is to know the truth. Christians who study their Bibles are best equipped to spot theological errors. Knowing the genuine — whether a bank employee or a student of Scripture — is necessary for detecting counterfeits. Confined to applications where the issue is the *detection* of untruth, CMA succeeds. Beyond such contexts, however, the analogy unravels.

The misuse of CMA occurs when one attempts to use it for the *correction* of error. Were Christians solely entrusted with detecting error, CMA would win the day. Yet God also calls us to correct the problem. F. F. Bruce reminds us, "There are times when it is not enough to hold and expound the truth; the war must be carried into the enemy's lines so that the error may be attacked, exposed, and refuted" (F. F. Bruce, *The Defense of the Faith in the New Testament*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 80). If God requires Christians to offer correction for error, mere detection is insufficient. To correct the error, I need more than a knowledge of the truth; I need an understanding of the error.

Let's look again at the counterfeit money illustration. After the bank employees detect a counterfeit, what next? They summon law enforcement agents. It's imperative that these agents not only know the genuine (what authentic bills

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are like), but also have a thorough understanding of counterfeiters and counterfeiting. Knowing only what authentic money is like cannot correct the problem.

The responsibility of Christians to offer a corrective for error requires that they not only know the truth but also have some understanding of error. Scriptural precedent supports my conclusion. The apostle Paul's example in Athens (Acts 17:16–34) contradicts the thinking of those who misuse CMA. It's undeniable that Paul knew scriptural truth, yet he rigorously examined the philosophies of his day. He invested time in examining the philosophy of the Athenians. This included knowing Epicurean and Stoic writings (v. 28). Paul understood that *correcting* the Athenian false belief required *understanding* that belief.

The myth of CMA occurs when it is used to discourage Christians from studying non-Christian philosophy. Since CMA has limited application to those instances where only the detection of error is needed, and since correction of error requires more than knowledge of the truth, the analogy fails in that attempt. If Christians wish to succeed in fulfilling the biblical mandate to correct error (2 Tim. 2:24–26), they have responsibility to understand non-Christian thought.

Understanding the myth of CMA, the apologist can be confident that studying non-Christian philosophy is a worthwhile pursuit for God's people. As Christians, God calls us not only to know the truth, but also to correct untruth. Effectiveness in this second task demands a serious study of non-Christian thought. This is not only the job of the apologist, but also is a task no knowledgeable Christian ought to neglect.

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