

## Should We Quote Non-Christians? *by Dr. Laurel Hicks*

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Many of the greatest Christian educators in history have faced this question: is it proper for Christians to study the works of non-Christians and to quote from secular writers? Most have come to the same conclusion as the reformer John Calvin:

Those are superstitious who never venture to quote anything from profane authors. Since all truth is from God, if anything has been said aptly and truly even by impious men, it ought not to be rejected, because it proceeded from God. And since all things are of God, why is it not lawful to turn to His glory whatever may be aptly applied to this use?

Martin Luther, John Wesley, Charles Spurgeon, and other great Christian leaders followed this philosophy in their own personal study and also in determining the curriculum for the Christian schools that they established. They understood that some truth can be discovered and expressed well by non-Christians as well as by Christians.

Our Lord Himself said that “the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light” (Luke 16:8). To illustrate this truth, He gave the parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16: 1–13). He was not telling us to emulate the unjust steward; He was simply trying to help us understand an important truth. Christ commended the Pharisees for being able to discern the weather but condemned them for not discerning the signs of the times (Matthew 16: 1–3).

A natural man can understand natural things, and we can get much natural understanding from him. He cannot understand spiritual things, however, and we should never go to him for spiritual guidance. We may and should quote the unsaved, but we must be careful that in our own minds we evaluate their sayings in the light of God’s Word. We must never evaluate God’s Word in the light of man’s sayings, be he sinner or saint.

The Apostle Paul quoted the pagan Greek poets and philosophers to help his listeners understand his point (see Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12, 13). This practice did not mean that he agreed with everything those pagans said. He simply used some true things that they said for the purpose of edification. He evidently did not even feel it was necessary to qualify his quotations by explaining that the men quoted were ungodly and should not be emulated. There is a time for pointing out error, but there is also a time for simply stating truth.

Generally speaking, the less mature a reader or listener is, the less need there is to go into long explanations of the philosophy of the person quoted. We should exercise great care in selecting the material that we present to young children, but the selections can be made from a wide range of ancient and modern classics. We do not usually need to concern ourselves with pointing out to young children an author’s bad connections or sinful life. They are not really interested in the author; they want to hear the story! Ralph Waldo Emerson had an anti-Christian philosophy, but his little fable “The Mountain and the Squirrel” can teach children in a delightful way the folly of pride. Why spoil it for them by telling them all the bad things about Emerson? That can and should come later, preferably in the last years of high school, when such teaching will be edifying.

If we are not careful, we could easily turn our young people into cynics who go about looking for evil. We must remember that there is a time to condemn wrong and also a time to simply enjoy the

things that are right. Children are sinners, but they are far more innocent of the ways of the world than adults. To them, a thing is either good or bad. They see the hero as very, very good and the villain as very, very bad, and they are not interested in the subtleties that worldly-wise adults can detect. Nor should they be. They need to be allowed to retain their innocence and enjoy the good as long as possible. What better way is there to prepare them to fasten their minds on things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report (Phil. 4:8)?

As students mature, error should be pointed out to them and refuted. Even with mature students, however, much more time should be spent teaching truth than pointing out error.

When an error is so strong and pervasive that it is all around us, however, we have an obligation to speak out against it clearly and firmly. The manner in which we do so will depend on the maturity of those in our charge. It is wise to try to keep little children from any contact with the error as long as possible. When contact becomes inevitable, the time to speak out has arrived, and we must use all the powers that God gives us to save our young people from the devastating errors of this sinful generation. In such times, it often becomes necessary to quote even some untrue statements of godless men in order to show the students just how bad their philosophy is. This, like everything we do, must be carried out with great discretion, earnest prayer, and an understanding that “we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph. 6:12).

In summary, we may quote from the unsaved if we do it with discretion and do not rely on them for spiritual understanding. The reason we may do this is that all men are creatures of God and, no matter how fallen, are capable, by God’s mercy, of discerning some natural truth. We should point out the errors of those we quote, but not indiscriminately. We should consider the maturity of the student, the nature of the quotation, and whether exposure would be edifying. Finally, there are times when we will be obliged to quote error in order to refute it and to equip our students to be faithful witnesses of Jesus Christ.

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*Beginning in 1972 as A Beka Book’s first writer and editor, Dr. Laurel Hicks was key in the development of A Beka Book. She managed the growing editorial staff for 25 years.*

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