

# Common Sense: Why We Don't Have It

Steve Spencer

Has a teacher or a parent ever said to you, “why don’t you just use your common sense,” or have you ever said, “if he would just use his common sense . . .?” In our everyday language we often invoke the notion of common sense. Yet when you use this term have you ever thought about what it really means?

The idea of common sense implies that people have the ability to figure things out, to understand what is going on in a situation, and to discern a proper course of action. After all, the first part of this term is “common” implying that this ability is something that everyone has; it is common to all. The second part of this term is “sense” which suggests that this ability allows people to perceive or understand. Together these two terms imply that all people have a common ability to perceive and understand our world. When one breaks down this concept, it is plain, the idea of common sense is unbiblical, worldly, and dangerous.

The Bible teaches us that we are totally depraved, that all our thoughts are vain and unprofitable. Psalm 94:11 says, “The Lord knows the thoughts of man, that they are vanity.” In Job 5:13-14 we read, “He taketh the wise in their own craftiness: and the counsel of the froward is carried headlong. They meet with darkness in the daytime, and grope in the noonday as in the night.” The Apostle Paul summarizes these passages in I Corinthians 3:19-20 “For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness. And again, The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain.” The Belgic Confession summarizes this teaching by saying when man fell into sin he had “thus become wicked, perverse, and corrupt in all his ways, . . . for all the light which is in us is changed to darkness. . . Who can speak of his knowledge, since the natural man receiveth not the spirit of God? In short, who dare suggest any thought, since he knows that we are not sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves . . .” Likewise the Canons of Dordt teach us that after the Fall, man has “entailed on himself blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity and perverseness of judgement . . .” This biblical notion stands in striking contrast to the worldly notion of common sense. God teaches us there is no ability in man, certainly no ability that is common to man, to perceive and understand our world. Worldly wisdom tells us that there are some things that everyone just knows. God tells us man knows nothing apart from what He reveals in scripture.

Why do I say this is a worldly concept? This concept shows its worldly character in that it elevates man and claims for man something that belongs to God. In I Corinthian 1:20 we read that “Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?” When people claim that they have common sense that allows them to perceive and understand the world they make a claim for themselves that God establishes as foolishness. Indeed, social psychology, which I teach, has numerous example of the foolish and self-serving nature of common sense. If you ask people, “Do opposites attract?” they will say, “certainly that is common sense.” However, if you ask them, “Do birds of a feather flock together?” they are equally likely to say that this statement is common sense. Clearly only one of these statements can be true. If you ask a married couple who work together on a task, let’s say washing the windows, how much they each put into the task, both the husband and the wife are likely to claim that they did more than half. And Lake Wobegon, Minnesota isn’t the only place where people believe all the children are above average. Almost all of us when asked how nice or smart we are will say that we are above average. Sinful human nature, time and again, makes the claim that it knows more than it does and that it is better than it is.

Because common sense has this worldly, unbiblical character it is a dangerous concept. We are tempted to try to use our common sense; after all, we put more faith in our ability to perceive things than is justified. I have heard people make the claim that on issues where the Bible does not provide

clear mandates then people should rely on common sense. Although at first this may seem to be a reasonable position, on further reflection it can lead one astray. Although the Bible does not give us clear instructions for all the minute details of our lives, for example whether we should eat at a restaurant for dinner or eat at home, it does provide basic principles for all our actions. We must never turn to our own knowledge and perceptions to guide our actions. Our whole life must be an attempt to live according to God's law. This is true wisdom. As in Proverbs 3:5 God tells us that we must "trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding." For the Christian, dependence on common sense is forbidden. We must walk in the God's way not our own.

Originally Published in:  
Vol. 54 No. 12 December 1995