

ARISTOTLE'S DICTUM

Jerry McDonald

John Montgomery, in his book *History and Christianity* wrote the following words: “the benefit of the doubt is to be given to the document itself, not arrogated by the critic to himself” (p. 29). This is what he, and others have called Aristotle’s dictum. McDowell wrote: “On this test John Warwick Montgomery writes that literary critics still follow Aristotle’s dictum” (*Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, pp. 60, 61).

Now for the most part Montgomery’s statement has gone unchallenged and has been taken, by faith, as a matter of fact. I have used it in every debate that I have ever had on the inspiration of the Bible. In 1990 Farrell Till and I began a written debate that took six years to complete. I used it in that debate and during the debate he didn’t challenge it. However, about three years ago, he did challenge it and demanded proof that Aristotle ever made such a statement. I got my copy of *History of Christianity* down and looked at the bibliography to see where Montgomery got it. His quotation came from Aristotle on Poetics. So I downloaded Aristotle’s article on poetics. I also purchased two books on Aristotle, *Aristotle I* and *Aristotle II*. There was so much to read in and Aristotle is not an easy person to understand anyway. I did find where Plato had mentioned something about this teaching of Aristotle and I wrote to Mr. Till informing him that although I had not found what Aristotle actually said, I did find what Plato said. However, I have always felt if you are going to quote what someone says you need to get it straight from the horse’s mouth. Since that time I have cautioned Christians about using Montgomery’s statement, but I have continued my study, and my continued study finally paid off. Below is word for word, from Aristotle himself:

“(3) The contradictions found in the poet’s language one should first test as one does an opponent’s confutation in a dialectal argument, so as to see whether he means the same thing, in the same relation, and in the same sense, before admitting that he has contradicted either something he has said himself or what a man of sound sense assumes as true. But there is no possible apology for improbability of Plot or depravity of character, [20] when they are not necessary, and no use is made of them, like the improbability of Aegeus in *Medea*² and the baseness of Menelaus in *Orestes*.

The objections, then, of critics start with faults of five kinds: the allegation is always that something is either (1) impossible, (2) improbable, (3) corrupting, (4) contradictory, (5) against technical correctness. The answers to these objections must be sought under one or other of the above-mentioned heads [25] which are twelve in number” (*Aristotle II on Poetics*, pp 698,699).

Now it is clear that Aristotle, though he was talking about criticizing poetry, stated that unless a document under consideration could be found to be either

impossible, improbable, corrupting, contradictory, or against technical correctness, that it was to be given the benefit of the doubt and that the critic was not to arrogate this to himself. Montgomery wasn't saying that Aristotle said this about the Bible, but he said that "literary critics still follow Aristotle's dictum" which was to give the benefit of the doubt to the document unless there is clear evidence that it is not what it claims to be.

The problem with the evangelical atheists today is that they don't follow this dictum, they claim that the Bible is faulty and that they are correct. Though they brag about having the latest data to prove that the Bible isn't inspired, they really have no data at all. What they do have are warmed over arguments that have been answered and re-answered dozens of times. All the while they automatically claim that the Bible is not the word of God, and that they, the critics, are the ones who are telling the truth.

I have had people tell me that the Bible treats the woman as a second class citizen and that it never allows her to teach or do anything. When I guide them to Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, "*and I intreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellowlabourers, whose names are in the book of life*" (Php 4:3). Now Paul doesn't specify what these women did, but he did specify that they were laborers with him in the gospel. Usually when I bring that up to some atheist, I usually get one of two responses: (1) "I didn't know that was there," and (2) "But in the Old Testament if a woman was falsely accused of committing adultery by her husband nothing happened to the husband after she was made to drink the concoction made by the priests from the dirt on the floor. Again, they don't know their Bible because the husband doesn't go free by any means, he has to take her back. Notice: "*And if the woman be not defiled, but be clean; then she shall be free, and shall conceive seed*" (Num 5:28). He can't divorce her, he must take her back and have relations with her until she conceives. Now, some say God doesn't have a sense of humor. Not me! Can you imagine a man falsely accusing his wife of committing adultery and then having to take her back and treating her as though nothing had happened. I don't know, but it seems to me that women have a way of making life very difficult for men at times.

I have said all of that to say this: The Bible should be allowed to be considered innocent until proven guilty. I have been debating the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible for 20 years, and I have had them throw their best at me. I have a bold challenge on my *Challenge2* website: "Find "ONE" bona fide, actual, absolute or objective contradiction (in the logical sense of the word "contradiction") in the Bible and I (Jerry D. McDonald) will lay my Bible down and never preach from it again. I will in fact become an atheist and defend the atheistic view. Just find ONE!" (http://www.challenge2.org/standing_challenge).

Now I have had some ask me what I mean by objective, absolute and actual, and I gave them the dictionary definition of the words. I never heard from them again. One person told me that I was safe in making that challenge because such things

didn't exist in the Bible (to which I heartily agreed), but he said that such things didn't exist anywhere. I then asked why we even had the definitions of them if they didn't, and I never heard from him again. Others have taken up the gauntlet and have tried to show me, but it wasn't long until they decided it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than to find one of those things in the Bible.

In our criminal courts we consider the defendant innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. However, when it comes to the Bible evangelical atheists hold it guilty until proven innocent beyond all doubt. They do not want to, and will not follow Aristotle's Dictum when it comes to dealing with God's word.

However, now after finding out what Aristotle did say I feel that it is essential to encourage all Bible believers to continue to quote John Warwick Montgomery's *History of Christianity*.

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