

Biblical truths and context

By [David Williams](#)

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The Bible, or so some folks who think they've discovered something profound will tell you, disagrees with itself. "Your holy book doesn't add up," they say.

Not being a [bibliolatrous](#) sort, I've never been particularly phased by that argument. Incongruities? Inconsistencies? Differences of opinion? In an ancient compilation of sacred books that spans multiple cultures and aeons of human history?

What a surprise. I'm so shocked. My faith is shaken to its core.

But as I prepared for a recent sermon, I encountered one of the most striking disagreements in all of scripture.

It's found in the book of Proverbs, that collection of wisdom poems, sayings and aphorisms. Ancient though it may be, its teachings about integrity, covenant fidelity, prudence, and diligence are still entirely applicable to the human condition. We're not nearly as different from the ancients as we might like to think.

In the 26th chapter, verse four, we hear the following bit of advice:

"Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself."

Which is, of course, completely true. If we listened to that wise advice in this era, we'd never ever ever again respond to a trollish comment on social media, or take umbrage at some bit of impossible idiocy we encounter in a blog. Such net wisdom, from twenty-five hundred years ago, back when all they had was MySpace.

Then, in the 26th chapter, verse five—*the very next*—we hear the following:

"Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes."

Which is, of course, also completely true. When you see someone who is totally sure about something utterly wrong, you're well within your rights to go all Snopesy on them. "Vaccines cause autism! The moon landing was a conspiracy! Printing money is a great way to grow an economy! Donald Trump is a viable presidential candidate!"

Bringing reason to bear on those misbegotten things is a way of countering the spread of such foolishness.

But these two verses give diametrically opposed advice. "Do not do Thing A!" "Do Thing A!" "Answer fools!" "Do not answer fools." Thesis and antithesis, right there, next to each other.

Sure, Proverbs is disagreeing with itself. But the ancients who compiled it were doing so *on purpose*, in a way that you couldn't miss if you tried. They were doing so to make a point.

That point, made from the Bible: truth is truth, but it is also contextual. What is wise and right and good in one circumstance can be utterly misapplied in another. [Because even if you give a fool a truth, they'll not know what to do with it.](#) They'll wave it around, brandishing it wildly, and in doing so will harm both others and the truth itself.

It is a peculiarity of our foolish era that we seem to have forgotten that.

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