



The Christian Mind

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"A fundamental part of our calling is to demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the true knowledge of God, and to take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

Many of you have probably heard statements like, "Don't ask questions, just believe"; "People don't need to think about God, they just need to respond to him; "Ignore the mind and strike for the heart." Now these kind of statements, which unfortunately we often hear among Christians, point to the tradition which we have of a neglect of the mind, a tradition which is particularly obvious among evangelical Christians, unfortunately. Christianity has been seen by many of us as an affair of the heart only - something like marriage. Do I love God or don't I? Will I humble myself before him and acknowledge I am a sinner or won't I? Will I accept the good news of Christ's death and resurrection or not? Now, of course, these questions are very important, and a personal response to the gospel is absolutely essential, for there is nothing more ugly than a dead orthodoxy, a mouthing of the right answers without any reality of life, without any humility of heart, without a life of prayer and personal commitment to Christ. But what I want to speak about is this other problem - the neglect of the mind: the refusal and inability of Christians, very often, to answer the questions that people give to them about their Christian faith; the failure that we have to acknowledge as Christians, the failure to really think as Christians about our lives and about the societies in which we live; and the failure to really think as Christians about our work, our study and our play. Now I want to approach this issue by asking a series of questions and attempting to answer them.

1. Why the Neglect of the Mind Among Christians?

This is the first question:

Why is this? Why has there been this neglect of the mind among Christians?

and I want to suggest the following reasons.

a. The influence of our Culture

First of all, the influence of our culture - it's an obvious thing to say that we live in a society which is materialistic, which is devoted to the pursuit of pleasure. In every hoarding we see, every advertisement that we see on television and that we hear on the radio, we are encouraged to pursue our own needs and our wants, and not just our needs and our wants, but to become aware all the time of more and more ideas of need and want that aren't really areas of need and want at all. We are encouraged by our society to get more money and things, to get more space for ourselves, more freedom for leisure and more pleasure.

The consequence of this pursuit of self-satisfaction in our society is a great apathy. An apathy about issues which confront our culture, an apathy about ideas, an apathy which says nothing is really important enough to get worked up about except my own fulfillment, my own pay, my working hours, my play time, my home. Manning Clark said in 1978:

We are entering an era where a great dullness, so deep that no one can fathom it, is going to descend on us like a cloud.¹

I'm afraid that's a very true description of the culture in which we all live. Now as Christians we can't fail to be influenced by this pervasive attitude. Nothing can seem so important to us as our own welfare. As Christians we may include our spiritual welfare along with our material welfare, but we can become deeply self-centered, deeply materialistic, contemplating our own well-being, if you like, contemplating our spiritual and material navel.

Now this is one reason why I think there has been a neglect of real thinking about our Christian faith.

b. The Move of Our Culture from a Biblical Understanding of Reality

Our whole culture over the last 130 years or so has been moving further and further away from a Biblical understanding of reality. Whether we think of Darwin in the middle of the 19th century and the rise of evolutionary thought in our society - the way science is said over and over again in our culture to completely contradict the Christian faith - whether we think of the criticisms that have been made of the Bible historically, we are living in a culture which largely dismisses Christianity as irrelevant and irrational. Christianity is considered by many in our society to be the refuge of the weak who can't cope with the problems of life - they believe that you have to commit intellectual suicide if you are going to become a Christian.

Now the fact that we have this attitude toward Christianity in our culture has caused many Christians to develop a kind of defensive response. The enemy seems so big. Wherever we look in our culture, there are people who say that Christianity is unnecessary and you really can't believe what the Bible says. It's just a load of fairy tales. And for many Christians, their response to this has been simply: well don't bother with all those questions, just believe. They don't really matter anyway, Christianity is just an affair of the heart, and all these things are just red herrings. We can just get on, and we can believe, we can pray and we can read our Bibles. The society can go to the dogs with its ideas. So there's been this very defensive attitude, and that's led all of us as Christians into a kind of ghetto where we have become separated from the culture in which we live. We have very little to say to it and very little comment to make about it. We have adopted a defensive position - we've dug our trenches and we've got into them.

c. A Non-Christian Can't Think about the Christian Faith?

A third reason is that some people have understood or have felt that the fact that all human beings are sinners means that a non-Christian can't really think about the Christian faith, that just because he isn't a Christian, his eyes are so blinded to the truth of the gospel that it's pointless to discuss whether Christianity is true. To get involved in apologetics (the defense of Christianity) is considered a waste of time because people say, "Well, the non-Christian can't really think about it anyway. How can he respond, his mind is darkened?"

d. Conversion - A Matter for the Spirit Only?

Fourth, and related to that, people have said that conversion is a matter for the Holy Spirit

only. Our task is simply to present the gospel to people and pray, but to get involved in discussion and answering the questions is a red herring. As, I said the beginning, ignore the mind and strike for the heart. That is a very widespread attitude -- "Who do you think you are," people say, "to think that you can persuade somebody that Christianity is true? That is the Holy Spirit's work" Could I remind you of quotation from an American theologian earlier this century, when he said:

It is the Holy Spirit's work to open the heart. It is ours to present the evidence.²

e. The Use of Paul to Support this Teaching

Fifth, some people have even used Paul's teaching in the New Testament to support this kind of approach to Christianity, to support the approach saying, "Well, it's pointless discussing with people it is pointless reasoning with them because in fact Paul says that the gospel is literally foolish." They quote Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians and Colossians and use these passages to say that Christianity really is folly and it is pointless talking to somebody and trying to prove that it's true because the natural mind is folly

1 Corinthians 1:18

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who have been saved it is the power of God. For it is written "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know Him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believed. (NIV)

Now many Christians have looked at that passage, and they have drawn the conclusion that the Christian faith really is intellectual folly, foolishness and that to get involved in discussion is a waste of time Or take Paul's statement in Colossians 2:8:

See to it that no-one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world, rather than on Christ. (NIV)

So this kind of Scripture is quote to support a neglect of the Christian Mind

2. What are the Unfortunate Effects of this Teaching?

Now I want to ask another question, and that is this: What are the unfortunate effects? What are the effects of this teaching which says that Christian thinking is unimportant? These, I suggest are some of the effects:

a. A Loss of Emphasis on the Fact of the Truth of Christianity

First of all, because we have not used our minds to think about the Christian faith, there has consequently been a loss of emphasis on the fact that Christianity really is true, that it really is the truth about the world in which we live, that God actually exists, that He has made the world, that He has made us, that these statements are actually true. As Christians we have retreated into holding onto our Christian faith as a religion which we believe, but we don't really think in our heart of hearts that it is the truth about reality that can actually stand up against the world in which we live. Because we have neglected a Christian mind, we have developed increasingly a view that Christianity is simply a refuge when we're in trouble. And, of course, Christianity is a refuge when we're in trouble, but it's a refuge when we're in trouble because it's true.

b. A Failure to Answer the Questions of Non-Christians

Secondly, because of this failure to think as Christians, we have failed to answer adequately the questions of non-Christians. Even though Peter says in 1 Peter 3:15 - "Always be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in you," many non-Christians have gone away from us thinking that our attitude means that you have to lose your mind to come to Christ.

I remember the first Christians I met at university were like that. When I tried to ask them questions, they didn't want to know. They just said, "Well, put those aside; don't think about those kinds of things. Just listen to the gospel." This is a very serious failure, and we're disobedient to the Word of God if that is what we have done.

c. A Failure to Answer our Own Children's Questions

This is something which is very sad, because we have neglected a Christian mind; we have failed to answer the questions of our own children adequately. So often we have said to our children, "Don't ask these questions, just believe," that when they get out into the world, (when they get to college or university, or even into high school. when they get to work, when they read the magazines and watch television), they have no means whatsoever of resisting the pressure of a culture whose ideas are totally opposed to a Biblical understanding. A point I want to make here is this: some of you may think that what I am talking about is something which applies only to intellectuals. Nothing could be further from the truth. My own children, who are 5, 8 and 9, ask me the most difficult questions that anyone ever asks me. All small children ask questions. They ask questions about death, about suffering and about evil in the world; they ask questions about the Trinity ("How can Jesus be God and man?"). They ask questions like, "If God knew it was going to be so awful, why did he create the world?" They ask questions about evolution and Adam and Eve because they get taught evolution at school, even in primary school. When you read the Bible to them, they say, "Did that really happen?" when you read an account of a miracle. It is not at all an issue of being an intellectual. These are the questions that all people ask.

Now what do we say when our children ask us these questions? Do we say if they ask us about suffering and death, "You're only five, you're much too young to worry about such things. You must leave these big things to God. He'll take care of them"? Or, when they get a bit older, do we say, "Well, what you need to do is read your Bible some more, and to pray some more, and then these things will fall into place, and they won't seem so pressing"? Now if we do that to our children, we build up an unconscious attitude in them and later a conscious attitude, that it isn't worth asking questions, because there aren't any answers to the questions, and they grow up thinking Christianity really can't deal with the questions at all, and it's no wonder when they go out and leave home, that they just turn away from the Christian faith in droves. They grow up with an enormous divide between what they're taught to think in school and from the television, and what we teach them to believe. It's no wonder that a split comes at some point, and what they often give up is their Christian faith.

d. Application of our Christian Life to Ever Smaller Areas of Life and Thought

If we neglect to think as Christians, what happens is simply that our Christian faith becomes applied to smaller and ever smaller areas of life and thought. For many of us, our Christian faith applies only to areas like reading the Bible and praying (which of course, are fundamentally important), going to church and some narrow aspects of personal morality. Our thinking hasn't gone beyond that in terms of what attitude we really ought to have toward the society in which we live. Why do we hold this particular morality? When our children say to us, "Well, why shouldn't I sleep around like everybody else?" do we just

say, "You don't, because God says so?" Or do we explain why? It's a very profound thing because our Christian thinking gets applied to smaller and smaller areas if we neglect a Christian mind.

e. Copying the Thought of the World

In fact, of course, we can't avoid thinking, and we think all the time. But if we don't think as Christians about the affairs of our life and the affairs of the society in which we live, we just copy the thought of the world. We really have no alternative: either we develop a Christian mind or we simply think the way the world thinks. (God has made us with minds, whether we like it or not.) What happens is, as we copy the ideas of the world, of the culture in which we live, we end up with a great division between our Christian thinking or our Christian faith and what we actually think about the things that make up the greater part of our life.

I am not exaggerating when I say this. When I speak at universities in England (to Christian Unions); it's very rare to find any students who have thought at all from a Christian perspective about the subjects which they are studying. They may be in psychology or politics or sociology, learning ideas which are completely opposed to a Biblical understanding of man and of human life and of the Christian's calling. They may simply accept these, because nobody has ever suggested that they think as a Christian about what they're hearing.

I went to a university in South Wales a couple of months ago, and the Student Union leader stood up at the beginning of the meeting and said, "I've just read something which says that 90% of Christian students, when they leave the university, either give up being Christians altogether or they just become pew warmers." And he said, "Now, what's the solution to that? The solution is that we might help each other to have better devotional times." But that is not the solution to the problem. It may be a partial solution, but the fundamental solution is giving people a really solid foundation for their Christian faith, and a really clear understanding of what they believe and why they believe it, so that when they go into the world they can stand up. They needn't be ashamed as Christians, and they needn't have this terrible division between their Christian faith and everything else that they think.

So what we're talking about is something which is a real tragedy - a tragedy which causes us to lose our children, to not present the gospel faithfully to people and to be a very poor witness in the world, because Jesus has called us to be the salt of the earth, and that means, among other things, to - in the area of thought in our culture - offer alternatives to the terrible ideas that exist in the society around us.

3. What is Paul Saying in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2?

What is Paul saying, in fact, in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2? He's talking in verses 18 and 19 about the message of the cross being foolishness to those who are perishing, and then he says in verse 20:

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know Him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believed. (NIV)

Now what is Paul saying here? Is Paul saying that the gospel is literally foolish? That to present it to the mind is a waste of time, that the mind must be bypassed? No, he's not saying that, and it's quite clear in the passage. What Paul is saying is this: That the world in its rebellion against God thinks that the gospel is foolish in contrast to its own ideas and

philosophy. That the world, the society in which we live, thinks that its own ideas are wisdom and that the gospel is folly.

i. Men Who Reject God think the Gospel is Folly

So, first of all, it is not that the gospel is folly but that men who reject God think that it is folly. The reason they think it is folly is because it says the very opposite of what they think, the very opposite of the philosophies that our society or Paul's society developed. But the Bible's ideas about the nature of the world and about the nature of man are completely opposed to the ideas of our culture. Therefore our culture thinks that the gospel is folly.

But what does Paul say in verse 20? He says, "God has made foolish the wisdom of the world." And verse 25? "The foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom." So what is Paul saying then? He's saying this: That, in fact, it is the non-Christian thinking which is foolishness; the gospel is not actually folly, but it is the thinking of the world which is in fact foolish. God has made it foolish, for the gospel is the only true wisdom. That is Paul's point in this passage - that the gospel is the power and wisdom of God as opposed to the foolishness of the thinking of the world.

Now, it's very helpful to compare this passage with Romans 1:18-25 because, there, Paul says something very similar. You will notice in this passage how Paul uses some of the same language about foolishness and wisdom that he uses in 1 Corinthians 1.

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

For although they know God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator - who is forever praised. Amen. (NIV)

There, again. Is Paul saying in these two passages that the gospel is folly, is foolish, and any attempt to approach the mind with it is doomed to failure? No! Paul's contrast is between the wisdom of the world (which is truly folly because it has rejected God's truth) and the truth of the gospel -- which is the only true wisdom, but which men in their foolishness say is folly.

And again, is Paul describing as simple a presentation of the gospel as possible, regardless of questions? No! He isn't! Paul insists here that we should persuade people, we should be involved in discussion, in showing them Christianity is really the truth, that it is the only true wisdom about the world in which we live. What Paul insists is this: when we proclaim the gospel, what we proclaim is the truth of God's Word. What we proclaim is God's wisdom rather than human ideas. That is the problem, of course, because it's very easy for us to think, "Well, I can make the gospel acceptable to people in the 20th century by making a synthesis of Christian ideas with the ideas of the society in which we live." So we

have a mixture of Christianity and Marxism, or we have a mixture of Christianity and eastern religions, or we have a mixture of Christianity and materialism (or whatever it happens to be). But it's this that Paul is absolutely rejecting, because he says that the ideas of our culture (of the world) are folly. They are folly because they reject God and in rejecting God, they reject what is true. He says the whole universe declares that God exists, that Christianity is true, that it's clearly to be seen by people. When they reject that, they are being foolish.

Now, if we try to present the gospel in the wisdom of the world, - that is, to mix it with the world's ideas - then we're doing something which is very dishonouring to God, because we're mixing his wisdom with the foolishness of man. So Paul again, here, as he does in Corinthians, contrasts the wisdom of God's truth with the folly of human ideas.

But it's clear from elsewhere in the New Testament also, that Paul never simply made what is called "a simple presentation of the gospel". Of course, he said it as simply as he could and as clearly as he could, but he says in Acts 20:27, "I didn't hesitate to proclaim to you the whole counsel of God." In other words, this is what I proclaim to you: God who exists and His creation of the world; the fall of man and the redemption of man from sin; and the second coming. In other words, he proclaimed the whole Christian Faith as the Truth.

As we look through the book of Acts we see Paul's own practice. How did he speak to people? Read Acts 17-19 in light of what I have said here. In that passage we see two different kinds of situations. When Paul went to a Jewish situation, to a synagogue - what does it say? It says Paul reasoned with them, he argued with them, and he sought to persuade them that Jesus was the Messiah. It says he stayed there three months, seeking to convince them that Jesus is the Christ. He reasoned and argued and persuaded. It says it over and over again in the book of Acts. Paul didn't hesitate to use his mind to appeal to the evidence to present the Christian faith. Those were the Jews who already believed in God! When he went to a Gentile situation (Acts 17), what did Paul do there? He started talking about the fact that God made the world, that it's foolish to worship idols when human beings are so much more than idols. In other words, Paul went to where the people were and he started from there to proclaim Christianity as the truth. He presented it and the evidence for it to the minds of his hearers, and he sought to convince them, to persuade them that it was true. And Paul wasn't working against the Holy Spirit - of course not! He prayed for the work of the Holy Spirit. But he saw as his calling to insure that there should be no stumbling block in the way of people believing.

ii. Our Response

So then our response has to be - if we have neglected the development of a Christian mind - a confession that this is wrong, that it's displeasing to God; that the effects it's had have been disastrous on ourselves, on our children and on the people whom we have tried to speak to. We must be prepared, first of all, to really try to answer the questions that people ask us. In the end, it's not a matter of being intellectual; it's simply a matter of compassion. If somebody comes to me and says, "Why is there so much evil in the world? Why do you believe in God?" and I refuse to answer that question, it shows a terrible lack of compassion. So out of compassion, we must be prepared to answer the questions that people bring to us. And if we can't answer them right away, because we haven't thought about them, then we must say to the person, "Well, I shall go away and think about it, and then I will try to answer your questions." We must be prepared to do some hard work to try to answer the questions that people have, because the answers to those questions are here in Scripture. It's God's truth, and it's laziness in the end not to answer either our children's questions or the questions of others.

And second, we must be prepared to develop a Christian mind, to really understand the society in which we live and to make il positive Christian contribution to it.

I want to finish by just looking at a couple of passages in the New Testament which speak about this necessity of getting to work where our minds are concerned. Remember, Jesus said, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." Now, for us as Christians in this materialistic culture, it's very easy just to live by bread alone. But Jesus calls us to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, to really think about what His word says to us and to understand it and apply it in our lives and present it to others.

There are three short passages which I will quote:

First, Romans 12:2

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (NIV)

That's what Paul calls us to. Not to conform to the society in which we live. But how can we not conform? He says we will only be transformed; we will only be changed when we renew our minds. Then we will be able to test and approve what God's will is, his good, pleasing and perfect will.

And then, in 1 Peter, Peter says this:

Prepare your minds for action. (1 Peter 1:13, NIV)

That should be our desire every day of our lives - to prepare our minds for action because we are surrounded by ideas which are hostile to our faith and which undermine our commitment to be obedient to God in our lives, practically. So we have to prepare our minds for action.

And third, in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5:

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. [Again, they're not the wisdom of the world.] On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (NIV)

And that is our calling as Christians. A fundamental part of our calling is to demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the true knowledge of God, and to take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

¹ See Jonathon King, *Waltzing Materialism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 30

² J. Gresham Machen, *Christian Faith in the Modern World* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936), p. 70