

Reformation
& Revival



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Everyone in the Western world knows “The Thinker.” The statue has become one of the great mental images of the twentieth century. It is arguably the most famous piece of sculpture in the whole history of Western art.

“*The Thinker.*” Naked, muscular, sitting, elbow on knee, head slightly bowed, brow knitted, eyes narrowed. “*The Thinker.*”

We can know, at least in part, what Auguste Rodin was saying in this bronze, silent, lonely figure. First, he is naked. Now, while Rodin gloried in naked flesh (particularly female flesh), he is using the age-old device of the nude to point us to man, generic man, humanity. Second, the man is deep in thought. As they used to say in the South, “He is studying something.” Rodin is saying to us: Man as man is a thinking creature, a thinking animal.

Christians are thinkers as well. C. S. Lewis once remarked that it is not a question as to whether men will read; they will. The question is, rather, whether they will read what is worthwhile, or trash. The same principle can be applied to the Christian as a thinking man or woman. They *will* think. Whether they will think well or carefully, or even Christianly, is another thing entirely. This is where the pastor as a Christian thinker comes in. By definition, the pastor is a leader, a teacher, a thought-shaper. In the lives of most evangelicals, there are few influences as powerful as the pastor of the local church they attend. The responsibility to use this influence in ways that will cultivate thinking that is distinctively Christian is a very real part of his role as a pastor-teacher. In order to ensure this, he must himself possess a Christian mind.

But, at this point a disclaimer and an explanation are necessary. I am not for a moment suggesting that Christian pastors are to be “intellectuals” or philosophers. Nor are they responsible to shape the members of their congregations into intellectuals or philosophers or aesthetes. No.

The goal we are seeking to achieve ourselves and to bring our people towards by the Word and Spirit of God is Christian maturity. In Paul's words, we are seeking to "present every one perfect in Christ" (Col. 1:28).

While this involves the mind, it involves more than a merely intellectual approach to life. The "mind" in biblical thought includes the affections and the will. The concern we pastors have is to teach our charges in such a way as to promote and produce under the influence of the Holy Spirit a genuine Christian life. Many Christians simply do not have the intellectual advantages to pursue erudite and recondite issues of theology and philosophy. Others do not have the temperament for such things. Unlike the pastors who serve them, most do not have the time and leisure for such pursuits. Our purpose lies in a different direction. The goal of our ministries is to lead men and women to love the Lord with all their hearts, minds, souls and strength, and to love their neighbors as themselves.

Abraham Kuyper set the parameters and goals of this responsibility when he said, "There is not a single square inch of human existence of which the Risen Christ, who alone is sovereign, does not say, 'That is Mine!'" This vision is basic to all thinking that is Christian. The scope of this vision is universal: "not a single square inch of human existence." Its goal is the practical recognition of the universal sovereignty of the crucified, risen Christ. In the vernacular of today's teenagers, this vision is nothing less than "awesome!" In light of this awesome perspective, are there principles or guidelines that will enable us to think in a thoroughly Christian manner about life? I would like to suggest several such principles.

To Possess a Christian Mind, We Must Think *Biblically*.

Second Timothy 3:16-17 is frequently quoted as a defense of a high view of Scripture, and it certainly is that. But what

is not as frequently stressed is the purpose of such a view of Scripture. This passage of apostolic writing is addressed to a man engaged in shaping people as Christians. It is addressed to pastors, "men of God." The ultimate goal of God's giving to us an inspired collection of writings is that we "may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Christian thinking is inextricably linked to biblical thinking.

And biblical thinking is thinking that reflects at every point an implicit trust and submission to the message of the Bible. This distinguishes the Christian pastor-teacher from experts in other fields of knowledge. We are not authorities or gurus. We are men captive to the Word of God. And this perspective is concerned with the authority of the Bible as much as its inspiration. "The Bible says" and "the Bible tells me so" are the undergirding of all that we believe and do. The Bible is the supreme judge of all doctrine, tradition, practice, and theory.

Nor is this a declaration of our adequacy before the biblical text. To understand the meaning of the biblical text, to communicate that meaning, to apply that message to the contemporary lives of our people is work—hard work. We are always challenged by it and, not infrequently, defeated by it. But such challenge and frustration take place in the context of our humble and thankful confidence in the authority of the biblical text. "Thy Word is truth" is the motto of genuine Christian thinking.

Biblical thinking is also thinking that grasps the unfolding progression of biblical and theological themes from Genesis to Revelation. It is the progressive revelation of God's saving acts in history: the history of Israel, the history of Jesus Christ, and the history of the Christian church. This field of knowledge is known in theological study as "Biblical Theology." Such an approach to the Bible necessitates a thorough knowledge of the Bible, a growing understanding of the message of the Bible as it focuses on Jesus Christ, and

an awareness of both the unity and the diversity we are confronted with in the Bible. Men familiar with the program and development of biblical themes will not be tempted to dichotomize the Old and New Testaments, nor posit too strong a distinction between law and grace, nor be seduced by the Marcionite idea of a wrathful Old Testament God and a loving New Testament God.

Moreover, biblical thinking pursues an understanding of the biblical text from a reverent but critical (scientific) approach to its literary form, its language, its historical and cultural setting, and, thus, its original message. Biblical thinking is exegetical thinking—thinking based upon a careful and prayerful exegesis of the biblical text. If it is the Word of God that we are subject to, if it is God's message that we believe and seek to obey, we must understand it, and to understand it, we must seek to uncover it with the tools available to us for this work. Without such a reverent, careful, scientific approach, one man's interpretation of the Bible is as good as the next. The directions given for the pursuit of wisdom in Proverbs 2 are relevant here. We must treasure the biblical text, be attentive to it, pray for understanding of it, and "mine" its contents, which means hard, but rewarding, work. Only then can we hope to understand its message and be ready to communicate it to those who look to us week by week to give them the Word of God.

To Attain a Thoroughly Christian Mind We Must Think

Theologically.

Ours is a non-theological age. It is even an anti-theological age. People who are today interested, passionately interested, in theology can be likened to a small herd of dinosaurs making one last trip to the tar pits in hopes of a final meal together. Our times are also characterized by unclear, imprecise, and addled thinking on a variety of issues. Could there be a connection between the two things?

The nineteenth-century Congregationalist, Austin Phelps, argued cogently that the reason the ideology of the American revolution was clearly understood by the working classes of the American colonies was because they had been trained to think logically and analytically by the sermons they had heard all their lives in local Episcopal, Congregational, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches—sermons steeped in the theology of Luther, Calvin and Hooker, and the logic of Aristotle. No historian of the twentieth century is likely to suggest even faintly that theology played any role in American society in our century. So, to assert that Christian thinking is theological thinking is to run amok of most of what passes for thinking, even Christian thinking, in our day.

But, the fact remains: all authentically Christian thinking is by definition theological, because Christian thinking is theocentric; it is thinking about God. Now, what can aid us in clarifying and sharpening our thinking at this point?

Let me urge pastors to study the history of Christian doctrine. This is vital, it is life-giving and life-enhancing. The great Baptist theologian A. H. Strong once remarked, "The canon of heresy closed soon after the canon of Scripture." The heresies which we are facing in the churches in the last decade of the twentieth century are really "old hat." But, we will not recognize them as such, if we recognize them at all, unless we are knowledgeable of the history of Christian doctrine. This means that not only must we be aware of those doctrinal developments discernible in the New Testament, but we must become familiar with the development of Christian doctrine throughout the Christian centuries. At minimum this means we must become acquainted with church history from the Post-Apostolic Fathers to the Post-Nicene Fathers, that is, the events of A.D. 90-451, from the apostle John to the Council of Chalcedon. Furthermore, we should have some knowledge of the Medieval Scholastics,

especially such giants as Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas. And we ought to be acquainted with the great evangelical giants of the Reformation and their heirs. Finally, we need to be aware of the theological developments of our own century. Resistance to such learning is, simply put, obscurantism, which is just a five-dollar word for chronic head-in-the-sand disease. Such study will give us sense and direction for what we face today, whether we are in Chicago or Gotebo, Oklahoma. Furthermore, such study will serve to humble us. The truth did not originate with us. Our battles for it are not the only battles that have raged (nor are they necessarily the most important ones), and we do not have all the answers.

Theological thinking means a study of dogmatics or systematic theology. It is only at this point that I stress the important role of systematics. Only when we have done our work in biblical, exegetical and historical theology are we really ready to labor wisely and profitably in this discipline. Without a grounding in the biblical and historical disciplines discussed earlier, dogmatics too easily degenerate into an ugly dogmatism. But, while God's truth is more complex than any human attempt at systematization, the fact is, this truth is communicated to us in human language and thought, and this, along with the unity of the truth, gives us the basis for attempting to order and structure it for a clearer understanding. To put it another way, because we are thinkers, we do with the revelation of God that which we do with everything else in His creation: we handle it logically. In light of the witness of Scripture and the consensus of the historic church, we must attempt to understand God's truth in the relationship which its various facets have to one another. The question is not whether we shall have a systematic theology or not. By nature, we shall have one. The real issue is whether our system reflects God's revelation carefully and truthfully, and whether we are in basic

accord with the witness of the church through the centuries.

The Christian Mind Is an Evangelical Mind.

This should go without saying, but at the same time it must ever be said. The perspective which the Christian has about everything (every "single square inch of human existence," in Kuyper's word) is founded upon the reality of Jesus Christ in the Gospel. Even the "Word of God" has become the "Word of Christ" because of His coming into the world (cf. Rom. 10:17; Luke 24:25-27, 44-49). The Christian pastor, of all men, sees life not in abstract terms, but in light of the concrete event of Jesus Christ. To possess this Christocentric vision is our duty and privilege; to communicate it to others is our greatest joy and burden.

Emphasis on this point is necessary because the tendency of our minds is ever toward the Galatian heresy: to remove from Him who called us by the grace of Christ to another gospel, which is not another. We must resist this tendency by keeping Christ central in our proclamation, in our presentation of doctrine, and in our formulation and insistence upon an ethics that is Christ-centered.

And how can we possibly do this unless we ourselves are enamored with the Lord Jesus Christ? Unless we are growing in our personal knowledge of Him and love toward Him? Unless we are men who daily worship Him, consider Him, study Him, consult Him, in a word, men who are intoxicated with Jesus Christ?

Nothing is more likely to promote this evangelical spirit of mind than a constant consideration of Jesus as He is set forth in the four Gospels. Here we see Him. Here we are acquainted with Him in the mystery and wonder and unpredictability of His wondrous person. Here we behold Him, "flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone," becoming like us in every way, sin excepted, and able to feel with us and

for us. Here the secret of God is revealed and we are transformed by that revelation to our hearts. Let us be always reading the Gospels, preaching from the Gospels, and directing our congregation to the Christ of the Gospels.

The Christian Mind Is a *Spiritual* Mind.

"I believe in the Holy Spirit" are not just the wonderful words from an ancient creed and glorious confession. They are our life. As the ministry of the Holy Spirit in this era is to focus upon Jesus, He is "the Spirit of Christ," He is "the Spirit of Jesus." All true knowledge of Jesus and all true moral likeness to Jesus are communicated to us by the Holy Spirit. This is at the heart of the New Testament's meaning of the word "spiritual."

The spiritual mind, then, is the mind of Christ. Theologically, this means that our perspective on truth is a biblical and theological perspective that sees God's revelation in Christ as foundational, formative, and preventive. We build upon Him, we grow into Him, we are kept by Him in all our formulations and articulations of truth. Ethically, this means that Jesus crucified and raised is the ground and essence of our living. We are not interested in codes, but in a life force generated and directed by Christ and His Word. The results of such spirituality are so many and so manifold as to battle every attempt to codify them. And all this is communicated to the living body of Christ from its Head, Christ Himself, through the person of the Holy Spirit.

"Spiritual" is thus the presence of a person, Christ, by the Spirit. It is a vital experience of truth, the truth of God, by the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the reality of a life, a new Christlike life, conveyed, assisted, and vitalized by the Holy Spirit. It is an ethics, focused not on laws nor codes per se, but on the person, words, and works of Jesus, in the directive presence of the Holy Spirit. In this way our minds are transformed and renewed and made truly and pro-

foundly Christian. Such spirituality will pervade the life of the Christian so that "every bush becomes a burning bush, and all ground holy ground."

There is one more thing I would like to emphasize.

The Christian Mind Is a *Human* Mind.

In saying this, I am returning to an earlier theme. The call to a Christian Mind is not a call to "intellectualism." There is always a danger here, especially for pastors, and more especially for those who read and study and attempt to wrestle with ideas. The tendency of such a lifestyle is to over-intellectualize life, people, and behavior. The result often is that, rather than becoming Christian thinkers, we become a travesty of the same: Christian intellectuals. The result is pride, arrogance, contempt for others, inability to relate and minister to real people in real churches.

We must be men of the people, rather than simply men of the books. We must seek and derive pleasure from personal contact. We must seek the knowledge and wisdom which even unlearned and formally uneducated people can give to us. There are books, and all preachers love books, but there are other sources of knowledge, there are other "books." Life is more than books, more than ideas. The mind that is truly Christian appreciates this fact. Even our reading should be broader than the scope of the disciplines suggested in this article. Indeed, our exposure to life and culture ("high" and "popular") should be as broad and as sensitive as possible. And our personal contacts should reflect this breadth as well. We need to have friends and contacts who are not just other preachers, other readers, other thinkers. One of my most cherished friends is, in his words, "just a plumber," but how much wisdom and sensitivity he has conveyed to me. It will be good for us to remember that the most evil regimes of this bloody century were perpetrated by "intellectuals" who, like birds of a feather, flocked to-

gether. There is a very real danger here to be carefully avoided.

When asked about the motivation behind his many adventures and exploits, the eighteenth-century pathfinder, hunter, and Indian fighter, Daniel Boone, responded, "Well, I was always gripped by an amazing curiosity." This is yet another way of saying what was said in the opening paragraphs of this article: Man as man is a thinker. The true estimate of the Christian mind appreciates this, and one of the marvelous things about the Gospel is that it enables us to recover our true humanity in an imperfect, but substantial, way. It enables us to look at life, all of life in a fashion that glorifies the true and living God and satisfies the human spirit. This is because the Christian Mind enables us to "see." And this seeing is not limited to the things that are seen, but also the things which are not seen, for this sight is the gift of grace and the fruit of faith in the God who is there.

The Christian Mind is a biblical, theological, evangelical, spiritual and human way of seeing the world and all that is in it. To possess minds stabilized, directed, controlled, and enhanced by these things will make us better human beings, better pastors and preachers, and better able to shape the thinking of our people in ways that will enable them to live, cope, and enjoy God and all good things.

What does this mean? Well, it means the whole world is ours. We are not ascetics nor obscurantists. It means that we have nothing in the world to fear. Did I say, "nothing in the world to fear?" Let me qualify this. We have nothing in the world to fear but our remaining, indwelling sin. Therefore, perhaps the best closing word is the concluding admonition of the aged apostle John: "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols."

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