



Christian Thinking

John H. Armstrong

Christianity is an intellectual religion. If Christians bypass the intellect they will distort the truth of the Bible immediately. Christianity simply cannot survive in a nonthinking environment, no matter how much zeal is sprinkled on its practice by well-meaning adherents.

Christianity is not a faith simply for the formally educated, or even for those philosophers who consider that they alone engage in genuine intellectual activity and profound thought. It is not a faith just for the university or the academy. It is a faith for the man who sweeps streets and the woman who cleans and mends. It is a faith for the keenest mind and the school dropout.

The word intellectual, often an antonym for the word spiritual, has come to mean something quite negative for many Western Christians at the end of the twentieth century. In reality, the word intellectual refers, simply, to engaging the mind, especially as over against the emotions.

R. C. Sproul wrote some years ago in *Christianity Today*, "We live in what may be the most anti-intellectual period in the history of Western civilization." I believe he is correct in his observation. We still desire the status of academic approval, we are highly technological, yet not in a helpful sense, and we have a continual love affair for scientism and the scientific method, so-called. Yet in all of this, as Sproul observes, "The accent is against the intellect itself. Secular culture has embraced a kind of impressionism that threatens to turn all our brains into mush, and the evangelical world has followed suit, developing an allergy to things intellectual."

Allan Bloom's best-selling work, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), set forth the thesis, quite amazingly from within the ivory towers of academia (the highly regarded University of Chicago), that a massive upheaval has occurred in the American worldview itself. We have trained a whole generation against real thinking, argues Professor Bloom. The result will be the destruction of imagination, serious philosophical thought, and genuine good. Our era's one absolute doctrine is that nothing is absolute! This is relativism, and as Dr. Bloom shows it is the dominant philosophical direction of the modern university.

The contemporary evangelical Christian church has not escaped these trends. Indeed, we are a major contributor to the problem. We hear popular Christian writers and ministers urging people to think less and feel more. *Experience is in, the mind is out*. The thinking person with an argument is almost always perceived as being in an inferior position to the nonthinking person who has had an experience, especially if the experience is a powerful one which can be communicated movingly to others in the form of a testimony.

John R. W. Stott has written, "Many [modern Christians] have zeal without knowledge, enthusiasm without enlightenment. In more modern jargon, they are keen but clueless." ¹

The existentialist philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, wrote of the church of his time, which was nineteenth-century Europe, "My complaint is not that this age is wicked, but that it is paltry: It lacks passion." Surely this could not be intelligently said of our age. We have lots of passion, often of a sentimental and crassly narcissistic sort, but little thinking. Mindlessness is virtually equated with godliness in the modern church. The video age has swamped us, and the result is the loss of clear thinking with more sound bites, i.e., little bits of information (we even have longer "infomercials" now) which move the will almost directly, without prompting serious reflection and thought. Preaching, if we can still even call it that, is aimed at being short, relevant (I almost despise that word these days), and moving. Modern worshipers (?) do not want to think; they want to feel something, and to take away something which will help them cope with fast-paced, busy, modern life.

What is needed is reformation—a reformation that is deep and radical. A reformation that not only changes how people think about God, the authority of Scripture, and salvation, but a reformation that begins by teaching them to think, period! How can we hope to be a part of a modern reformation unless people, pastors and congregations alike, learn to think again? How can we pray for a powerful visitation of God upon a Christian people who will not think God's thoughts and meditate upon the truth claims of His Word day and night?

We have made a false dichotomy in our time between the "head" and the "heart." Most seem to reject doctrine and rational thought as appealing only to the "head," while what is needed, they insist, is direct appeal to the "heart." This is simply a false antithesis created by shallow and unscriptural teaching. The Apostle Paul writes: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—*think* about such things" (Phil. 4:8). The same highly intellectual apostle writes in Romans 12:1–2, after eleven chapters of massive, highly theological argument:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing, and perfect will.

It is my conviction that we face a major crisis in both the West and in the Western church, precisely at this point. We no longer think. We are, in the words of Neil Postman's provocative title, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. We who are called to be leaders must understand the times in which we live and serve. We must come to an understanding of the counsel of Harry Blamires, who writes in the book from which the theme of this issue was taken:

There is no longer a Christian mind. There is still, of course, a Christian ethic, a Christian practice, and a Christian spirituality. As a moral being, the modern Christian subscribes to a code other than that of the non-Christian. As a member of the Church, he undertakes obligations and observations ignored by the non-Christian. As a spiritual being, in prayer and meditation, he strives to cultivate a dimension of life unexplored by the non-Christian. But as a thinking being, the modern Christian has succumbed to secularization. He accepts religion—its morality, its worship, its spiritual culture; but he rejects the religious view of life, the view which sees all earthly issues within the context of the eternal, the view which relates all human problems—social, political, cultural—to the doctrinal foundations of the Christian Faith, the view

which sees all things here below in terms of God's supremacy and earth's transitoriness, in terms of Heaven and Hell.

Everywhere one meets examples of the Church's abdication of intellectual authority which lies at the back of the modern Christian's easy descent into mental secularism. A few weeks ago, in the chapel of a Church training college, I heard a bishop impress upon his congregation that Church colleges do not exist to give Church teaching [i.e., intellectual thought, or specifically, Christian doctrine] but rather to provide opportunities for communal worship. This false antithesis, with all its dangerous implications, was pressed home. The duty of common worship was urged with all the force of episcopal authority. With the same authority the significance of doctrinal teaching was deprecated. A passing reference to the evil materialistic idolatries prevalent today completed a neat circuit of error and illogicality. ²

Where thinking Christianity does exist, as Blamires suggests, one finds himself out of step with much of the practice and thought of modern Christianity. When this was first written in 1963 he might have had in mind something less than the evangelical traditions many conservative American Christians are familiar with, but the same could plainly be said in our day for evangelical Christianity as a whole. This, indeed, is the thesis of Professor David Wells' impressive book, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993). The subtitle of Wells' work is, "Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?" He shows, convincingly I might add, that evangelical Christianity has given up the pursuit of truth, and this because it no longer places a premium on thinking Christianly in our age. The result is seen in our preoccupation with a therapy model of ministry which strives for being helpful to men, rather than being truthful and God-centered, the results of which will bring help to man as fruit relates to root. We are interested more in answering the question, "What works?" rather than "What is true?"

What does a modern Christian do? If he is a thinker he perceives problems in the larger sphere of thought (and non-thought) and reads the critics with much appreciation. Finally, he realizes he is reading profound criticism of the modern age by unbelieving minds. He then turns to the church for response, only to find the church asking all the wrong questions. Blamires puts it well:

What, then, is the position of the thinking Christian, face to face with the cultural situation which I have described? As he reads the things worth reading, whether imaginative or polemical, he is continually meeting with accounts of the human situation or with critical analysis of man's current lot, which make him to sit up and say: This is profound and penetrating. This represents a deep and wholly human response to present-day life. It is so crucial, fundamental, and illuminating that it cannot be overlooked. It touches me pre-eminently *as a Christian*. Yet this writer is not a Christian. I share his vision for a moment over this issue or that, and the next minute I am jerked back into awareness that he and I are poles apart, separated by a chasm, by a contradiction in our most basic presuppositions. But (and this is the tragedy) the only way I can pursue this vital current of thought further is by more reading non-Christian literature written by sceptics, and by discussion of it within the intellectual frame of reference which these sceptics have manufactured. In short, there is no current Christian dialogue on this topic. There is no Christian conversation which I can enter, bringing this topic or this vision with me. ³

Somehow we have arrived at a time when we act as if God had not made us both thinking and feeling individuals. We have forgotten that God sovereignly superintended a Book in which all that we need for life and godliness is contained. This book must be read, understood, and carefully studied. Its fundamental truths are perspicuous ("clear, plain") but its treasures are inexhaustible. Passion is needed, but it must be focused, or channeled in the right direction. No contributor to this issue believes that we can have godliness without passion, but all believe that this passion must be vitally linked to the mind or the negative results will be catastrophic.

How did we get to this point in the history of evangelicalism? We were not always so anti-intellectual in our practice of the faith.

In America the changes came after the Revolutionary War in the eighteenth century. A battle of ideas had been waged for some time—a battle between self-confident rationalism and self-confident emotionalism. As Arminian theology became increasingly popular with evangelical churches deism took up its tenets in stressing rationalism, while the growing frontier embraced the radical individualism and man-centered temper of the Arminian system. Reformation theology finally lost the day.

In this religious scene American Christianity became increasingly anti-intellectual. Richard Hofstadter writes:

The Puritan ideal of the minister as an intellectual and educational leader was steadily weakened in the face of the evangelical ideal of the minister as a popular...exhorter. Theological education itself became more instrumental. Simple dogmatic formulations were considered sufficient. The church withdrew from intellectual encounters with the secular world, gave up the idea that religion is a part of the whole life of intellectual experience, and often abandoned the field of rational studies on the assumption that they were the natural province of science alone.

By 1853 an outstanding clergyman complained that there was "an impression, somewhat general, that an intellectual clergyman is deficient in piety and that an eminently pious minister is deficient in intellect."⁴

Because there is little distinctively Christian thought in our own generation the Christian, at least the Christian who begins to think seriously, is forced to wrestle with modern issues by reading mostly non-Christian authors, while at the same time he is becoming increasingly out of touch with most of his Christian peers. The loneliness this often produces is both unhealthy and spiritually dangerous. The individual tends to despair for his own church. He is increasingly cut off from living people and may even find himself alienated from the Word and the sacraments in a most unfortunate manner. What can the believer do, if he is committed to being properly intellectual, and at the same time deeply involved in the local church?

He must begin with the realization, humbly it is hoped, that it is the modern church which has cut itself off from the great historical doctrines and philosophies of the Christian mind. He must commit himself to the honest pursuit of the truth, in the spirit of the best intellectual Christian thinking of the ages, and then carefully use what he learns to serve others. In all of this he must remember that he is laboring for the genuine reformation of the church in a very dark age. He must learn to confess with saints of old that though barbarians are at the gates of our culture, and even swarming our secular cities, "the gates of Hades will not overcome" *the church of the Lord Jesus Christ*. He will not become

engaged in culture wars in a manner which leads him to a new kind of triumphalism, but rather he will seek a place of quiet confidence and assurance in the realization that Christ "will build (His) church" just as He promised. With a deep renewal of mind he can move boldly into the future, as dark as that future may be and may become, with biblical confidence that this moment is truly his own moment precisely because "all things are his (as a believer)" because he is Christ's. He can read, listen, interact, even write and speak (if these are gifts of God), and he can do so with integrity in the midst of a mindless age. He can fulfill his calling ("vocatio") to the glory of God, and he can do so as a thinking person in the fullest sense.

Man must think, or he will perish. God calls upon His rebellious people to "reason together" with the Lord (Isa. 1:18). Jesus, in effect, asks the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt. 16:1-4) why they would not use their brains and think as they ought. Indeed, to be saved, human beings must think. Though fallen in their darkened mind, the Gospel comes to mankind in words, conveying meaning to the intellect. As the Spirit of God is at work in the proclamation of the Gospel message a person's thinking is "opened," or "enlightened," by the Spirit of God so that now he hears and understands what he previously refused to hear and plainly misunderstood as foolishness. The message of the cross becomes, for such a person, "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."

All genuinely Christian truth comes to man in rational form. Rationalism, a system or philosophy of thought which treats man's fallen reason as sovereign over all truth, is antithetical to the Christian faith. Rationalism is unbelieving and anti-Christian. But rational thought is the very essence of Christianity. We must repudiate rationalism, but we must begin to decry the lack of rational thought in the modern church.

R. C. Sproul captures the sense of my counsel when he concludes his excellent article, referred to above, "Burning Hearts Are Not Nourished by Empty Heads," by writing:

We must have passion—indeed hearts on fire for the things of God. But that passion must resist with intensity the anti-intellectual spirit of the world. The entrance of that spirit into the house of God is like a Trojan horse, concealing within its belly the troops of the enemy who would beguile us with contentless religion, thoughtless action, and vacuous zeal—fire without light. Its only legacy will be a tomb for a forgotten deity inscribed with the epitaph, "To the Unknown God."

We who influence the church must labor for the recovery of a Christian Mind in our generation. For that purpose, in view of the ongoing reformation that is needed in our time, this issue of the journal is published.

Soli Deo Gloria!

The modern mind is no longer clearly a mind, but a temperament, a mood subject to frequent changes.

Carl F. H. Henry

We live in mindless times, days in which millions of people are drifting along through life, manipulated by the mass media, particularly television, hardly knowing it. Few give thought for their eternal souls, and most, even Christians, are unaware of any way of thinking or living other than that of the

secular culture that surrounds them. Fortunately, scattered here and there are people who yearn after God and want their lives to be different from the lives of mere humanists, materialists, and secularists. They want their lives to count for God.

James M. Boice

Notes:

¹ Stott, John R. W., *Your Mind Matters* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1972), 7.

² Blamires, Harry, *The Christian Mind* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Publications, 1963), 3-4.

³ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁴ Hofstadter, Richard, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 86-87.