Hindrances of the Mind: The Scandal of Evangelical Thinking

Sometimes our presuppositions skew our understanding of Scripture and even how to use it. Rick Wade looks at some ideas and attitudes from our past that create hindrances to sound thinking.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

In our efforts to engage our society for Christ, we need to understand that people often don't see the world aright because of problems with the way they think. Their beliefs or attitudes—or even what they think about *thinking*—create stumbling blocks. But lest we get too puffed up, we need to recognize that we aren't immune to that ourselves; Christians don't always think well, either.

Before we can effectively engage our society on this level we need to engage ourselves. We wonder why, with so many people professing faith today, we aren't able to have a greater impact on our society. It's often said that we aren't *doing* enough. Another reason is that we aren't *thinking* enough.

Some time ago evangelicals lost significance in the intellectual centers of the country. Historian Mark Noll notes that "on any given Sunday in the United States and Canada, a majority of those who attend church hold evangelical beliefs and follow norms of evangelical practice, yet in neither country do these great numbers of practicing evangelicals appear to play significant roles in either nation's intellectual life."{1} Apart from concerns about Christians in academia, however, the rest of us should consider our own habits of thinking. I'm not speaking about the simple

attainment of knowledge; I'm talking about how certain attitudes and assumptions affect how we think.

This article is a brief examination of the evangelical mind today. What are some weaknesses in evangelical thinking that stunt our influence in society? How did we get to this place?

Noll names four characteristics of American evangelicals, our legacy from the nineteenth century: *populism*, *activism*, *biblicism*, and *intuitionism*. By *populism,* he means that evangelical Christians see the strength of the church (on the human level, of course) as residing in the people in the pews rather than those in the pulpits. By *activism,* he refers to the lack of patience for extended contemplation and the desire to be about the work of the Lord. *Biblicism* refers to the belief that truth is only found in Scripture. *Intuitionism* refers to the tendency to go with gut-level responses rather than studying matters with any thoroughness.

For all the possibilities this form of Christianity offers, insofar as this description is accurate, it leaves little room for the life of the mind. Yes, it's important that we *do* things for the Lord. But don't we need to *think* before we *do*? Could one of the things we need to *do* be to *think*? The Bible is indeed our final authority, but is knowledge obtainable elsewhere? And is intuition sufficient for understanding what the Bible writers meant given the fact that they wrote in another time and cultural context? Or for understanding the complex issues of our day—or even the perennial issues of the human experience?

Someone might still be wondering if this is really an important issue. As long as we're doing God's work, why do we need to waste time worrying over a lot of ivory tower speculation? Read what Noll says as he summarizes the importance of the life of the mind for the church:

> *Where Christian faith is securely rooted, where it penetrates*

> *deeply into a culture to change individual lives and redirect institutions, where it continues for more than a generation as a living testimony to the grace of God—in these situations, we almost invariably find Christians ardently cultivating the intellect for the glory of God.*

He continues: "The links between deep Christian life, long-lasting Christian influence, and dedicated Christian thought characterize virtually all of the high moments in the history of the church." What results when serious thinking isn't a characteristic of the church? "The path to danger is not always the same," he says, "but the results of neglecting the mind are uniform: Christian faith degenerates, lapses into gross error, or simply passes out of existence."{2}

Did you catch that? This is no minor issue. To say that what is eternal is all that's important, that we needn't waste a lot of time on the things of this world which is destined to burn up anyway, might seem to reflect biblical teaching, but it doesn't. We aren't here suggesting that the things of the earth in themselves are more important than the things of heaven. Neither are we saying everyone has to be a scholar. What we're saying is that we need to think, we need to learn, we need to understand the world we live in if we want to be taken seriously and in turn more strongly influence the world around us. Some of us *should* be scholars, however, and scholars who can command the respect of peers both inside and outside the church. But all of us need to learn to think well on whatever level we live. We should learn *about* the world, and we should learn *from* the world. There is value in this world because it was created by God, because it is the arena in which redemption was accomplished, because it is where we live out our Christianity each day, and because it is where we meet unbelievers and seek to reach them for Christ. Our investment is in heaven, but it is here where we work out our salvation.

So, how did we get to our present state? Let's look at the development of this mentality in our nation's short history.

Pietism

Two factors from our past, which had and still have ramifications for the evangelical mind, were Pietism and populism.

Pietism had its roots in the late seventeenth century in Europe as a reaction to the cold, formalistic ritualism so prevalent in the church. Christianity seemed more a topic of philosophical speculation and argument than a living religion. Philipp Jakob Spener, a German pastor, sought reform in the lives of the people in the pews. He "instituted [pious assemblies] to meet on Wednesdays and Sundays to pray, to discuss the previous week's sermon, and to apply passages from Scripture and devotional writings to individual lives."{3} In 1675, Spener wrote *Pia Desideria (*or, *Pious Wishes)* in which he outlined his ideas for reform. They included a renewed emphasis on the Bible, the revival of the priesthood of the believer, an emphasis on Christian practice, and the preaching of understandable sermons.

Pietism spread in several directions as the years passed. The Moravians, who significantly influenced John Wesley, "carried the pietistic concern for personal spirituality almost literally around the world." Pietism was influential among Mennonites, Brethren, and Dutch Reformed Christians. Its ideas can be seen in the teachings of Cotton Mather and William Law, and in the preaching of the American Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century.

Pietism had the effect of shifting the locus of authority away from tradition and the established church leadership to the individual Christian. Not everyone was in favor of this. Some church leaders opposed the movement for selfish reasons, but some were genuinely concerned about the possibility of

“rampant subjectivity and anti-intellectualism.” Separationism was another problem. Although Spener never called for it, some people did separate from the established churches.

On the positive side, one finds in Pietism a strong commitment to Scripture, the rejection of cold orthodoxy, and an emphasis on authentic personal experience. Says Noll, “It was, in one sense, the Christian answer to what has been called the discovery of the individual’ by providing a Christian form to the individualism and practical-mindedness of a Europe in transition to modern times.” Pietism has been a source of renewal in cold churches, an encouragement to lay people to get involved in ministry, and an impulse for individuals to always be seeking after God.

On the negative side, however, Pietism led to subjectivism and emotionalism. It provided an excuse for anti-intellectualism and for the neglect of careful scholarship. Lessons learned by Christians in previous centuries no longer needed to be considered since one’s present experience with God was the most important thing. Lastly, it inclined some people to establish rather legalistic codes of morality as they sought evidence of spirituality in others’ lives.

A surprising result of Pietism—given its primary goal of bringing Christians more into the light of truth—was the way it led *away* from truth. Noll notes that

> Unchecked Pietism . . . played a role in the development of theological liberalism with liberalism’s fascination for the forms of religious experience. It played a part in developing the humanistic romanticism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where a vague nature mysticism replaced a more orthodox understanding of God and the world. And for more orthodox believers, Pietism sometimes led to a morbid fixation upon the Christian’s personal state at the expense of evangelism, study, or social outreach. . . . The Pietist attack on self-conscious Christian thinking . . . meant the

> weakening of the faith toward sentimentality, its captivity by alien philosophies, or its decline to dangerous modernisms.{4}

While Pietism had (and has) its positive aspects, with respect to the life of the mind, it has had a detrimental effect. The emphasis on the individual makes the rest of the world less important, and it provides no incentive to be open to anything but the individual's own spirituality.

Populism

The second factor which continues to affect the way we think is America's populist mentality. *Populism* is a concern for "the perceived interests of ordinary people, as opposed to those of a privileged elite."{5} Although populism didn't form into a political movement until the late nineteenth century, it characterized the mentality of Americans from the early days of our country's history.

Historian Richard Hofstadter notes that, "In the original American populistic dream, the omnicompetence of the common man was fundamental and indispensable."{6} Class differences were rejected; egalitarianism was the new order of things. Hofstadter says that early exponents of popular democracy "meant . . . to subordinate educated as well as propertied leadership. . . . [popular democracy] reinforced the widespread belief in the superiority of inborn, intuitive, folkish wisdom over the cultivated, oversophisticated, and self-interested knowledge of the literati and the well-to-do."{7} In fact, there developed a real bias against and a distrust of the elite, such as churchmen who were part of the hereditary structure of church leadership, and academicians.

Anti-Intellectualism

In the early days of America's founding, there was an attitude of sticking to the basic things of life. According to this way

of thinking, “there is a persistent preference of the ‘wisdom’ of intuition, which is deemed to be natural or God-given, over rationality, which is cultivated and artificial.”{8}

This confidence in the intuitive wisdom of the common man, together with the distrust of the educated elite, produced in America a distinct anti-intellectualism. “Anti-intellectualism,” in Hofstadter’s use, does not necessarily mean “unintelligent.” He defines it as “a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life.”{9} Intelligence *per se* isn’t a problem . . . as long as it is being put to practical use. But the contemplation of ideas which have no immediately discernible practical use is thought to be a waste of time.

Still today, the word “intellectual” usually carries negative connotations. “Intellectual” and “ivory tower” are two terms often heard together, and they aren’t complimentary descriptions! Noll notes that the activistic, pragmatic, and utilitarian “ethos” of America “allows little space for br oader or deeper intellectual effort because it is dominated by the urgencies of the moment.”{10} A problem with this mentality is that it demands the distilling of ideas into immediately usable information. Speaking of evangelicals specifically, Canadian scholar N. K. Clifford states the problem bluntly: “The Evangelical Protestant mind has never relished complexity. Indeed its crusading genius, whether in religion or politics, has always tended toward an over-simplification of issues and the substitution of inspiration and zeal for critical analysis and serious reflection. The limitations of such a mind-set were less apparent in the relative simplicity of a rural frontier society.” {11} Our world is much more complex today, and it requires more focused, deep, and sustained thinking.

Someone might object that evangelicals have done some serious thinking and writing in some areas of study, and that is

certainly true. Apologetics is one area in which that is the case. But as Noll says, "In our past we have much more eagerly leaped to defend the faith than to explore its implications for the intellectual life."{12} It is one thing to shore up one's own defenses (a worthy project in itself), but quite another to seek to understand the world for its own sake—or even for the sake of enlarging our understanding of God. For those who *are* out in the secular marketplace and in academia, are distinctively Christian beliefs informing their work? Or are they having to leave them at home to make life easier on the job (or to be able to stay in their positions at all)?

Antitraditionalism

In an article on the era of the Enlightenment, I wrote this:

> Enlightenment philosophers taught us to see the world as a collection of scientific facts, to look forward instead of back to the wisdom of the past, and to see the individual as the final authority for what is true. The ideal is the individual who examines the raw data of experience with no prior value commitments, with a view to discovering something new. Unfortunately, knowledge was pursued at the expense of wisdom. The past now had little relevance. What could those who lived in the past tell us that would be relevant for today? Besides, people in the past were dominated by the church. Such superstition was no longer to be allowed to rule our lives.{13}

We were now able to look at the facts for ourselves; we had no need for anyone else to teach us anything. Change was in the air; what was new was what was important, not what happened in the past. Thus was formed the characteristic of *antitraditionalism*.

We assume that, since the world is so much different today, those who've gone on before us have little to say to us since they couldn't imagine a world like ours. We forget that human

nature hasn't changed, and that wisdom isn't bound by time or by technological advancement. Nor has God changed through time in keeping with our advancement! We can learn from those who've gone on before us about what the Scriptures mean, what God is like, how we can best live lives marked by wisdom, and more.

Evangelism and preaching

What significance did these ideas and attitudes have for the proclamation of the Gospel?

First, with respect to evangelism, the revivalism of the nineteenth century set the tone for popular evangelical thought. *Revivalism* was a movement in Christianity that emphasized the whole-hearted acceptance of the Gospel message *now.* It developed in the eighteenth century and came to full flower in the nineteenth. Revivalism was very populist in tone; the message of salvation was aimed at the broadest audience. Preaching was kept simple and "aimed at an emotional response."{14} The choice was plain: repent and believe the Gospel *today*. Don't wait until tomorrow. There was no need to give sustained thought to the matter, no need to look to others—either contemporaries or those who lived in the past—for insight and understanding about the faith. Salvation was individual and the call to decide was immediate.{15}

As revivalism moved into the South and West, "it became more primitive, more emotional, more given to ecstatic' manifestations."{16} Preachers often adopted the anti-intellectual prejudices of the populace. Adding to the already populist mentality was the fact that pioneers moved west much faster than institutions could follow (including schools). Missionaries "would have been ineffective in converting their moving flocks if they had not been able to develop a vernacular style in preaching, and if they had failed to share or to simulate in some degree the sensibilities and prejudices of their audiences—anti-authority, anti-aristocracy, anti-

Eastern, anti-learning."{17}

This prejudice against learning began to harden among both laity and clergy. Hofstadter explains the characteristic understanding of the relation of faith and learning this way: "One begins with the hardly contestable proposition that religious faith is not, in the main, propagated by logic or learning. One moves on from this to the idea that it is best propagated . . . by men who have been [*sic*] unlearned and ignorant. It seems to follow from this that the kind of wisdom and truth possessed by such men is superior to what learned and cultivated minds have. In fact, learning and cultivation appear to be handicaps in the propagation of faith."{18}

A New Way of Knowing Truth

Pietism and populism served to foster a mentality of subjectivism, antitraditionalism, and anti-intellectualism. To this was added a framework of thought drawing from science and philosophy which significantly affected the way evangelicals thought about their faith and the world.

Within the church, there was a need to find a way to prevent Christian doctrine from becoming a purely individualistic affair following the separation from the Roman Church. If there were ways to prove doctrine objectively true, Christians would have to give assent to it. With respect to society in general, now that science was the source of knowledge, evangelicals felt the need to show that Christianity could stand up to rigorous scientific verification so the church would remain a respected institution. The issue was how we know truth, and how this understanding was to be applied to the interpretation of the Bible.

Although romantic tendencies were becoming more visible in Protestantism during this period, the orientation of conservatives was primarily in the direction of fact rather than feeling. In the eighteenth century a new framework of

thought began developing which seemed to answer these needs, and which has strongly influenced the character of evangelical Christianity ever since. This framework had two primary elements: Scottish Common Sense philosophy, and Baconian science.

Scottish Common Sense philosophy

Although evangelicals rejected the skeptical aspects of the Enlightenment,{19} they accepted with open arms one type of Enlightenment thought known as Scottish Common Sense Realism. Common Sense philosophers believed that everyone has mental faculties that produce beliefs which we rely upon in everyday life, such as the existence of the external world, the reality of other minds, the reliability of our senses, our abilities to reason, our memories, etc. These faculties enable everyone to "grasp the basic realities of nature and morality."{20} These beliefs weren't considered culture-derived or culture-bound; they were the shared experience of all mankind, including the Bible writers.{21}

Historian George Marsden notes that "Common Sense had a special appeal in America because it purported to be an anti-philosophy."{22} It pitted the common person against the speculative philosophers. Evangelicals took to it easily because of its populist appeal, because "it was so intuitive, so instinctual, so much a part of second nature."{23} In fact, this philosophy was so widely embraced in Protestantism that, as one man said, "by most persons [Protestantism and Common Sense] are considered as necessary parts of the same system."{24} "So basic did this reasoning become," says Noll, "that even self-consciously orthodox evangelicals had no qualms about resting the entire edifice of the faith on the principles of the Scottish Enlightenment."{25}

Baconian science

The other component of the framework of thought was the

scientific method of Francis Bacon. Bacon advocated a rigorous empiricism, "an inductive method of discovering truth, founded upon empirical observation, analysis of observed data, inference resulting in hypotheses, and verification of hypotheses through continued observation and experiment."{26} The goal was "objective, disinterested, unbiased, and neutral science."{27} George Marsden says that Scottish Common Sense philosophy provided a basis for faith in this scientific method. On the foundation of common sense we can understand the laws of nature by employing the Baconian method of examining the evidences and classifying the facts.

Evangelicals began to use this method to interpret Scripture. The Bible was seen as a collection of facts which could be understood by anyone of reasonable intelligence just by knowing what the words meant. Across the denominations, Marsden tells us, "there prevailed a faith in immutable truth seen clearly by inductive scientific reasoning in Scripture and nature alike."{28}

Significance for Evangelicals

What was the significance of all this for evangelicals? "By and large, mid-nineteenth-century American theologians were champions of scientific reasoning and scientific advance," says Marsden. "They had full confidence in the capacities of the scientific method for discovering truth exactly and objectively." Conservative Christians took the scientific principles used for studying nature and applied them to the Bible. "To Protestants it seemed evident that the principle for knowing truth in one area of God's revelation should parallel those of another area." This broad acceptance was found across the spectrum of denominations, including Unitarians, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists among others. Understanding the Bible became a matter of the commonsensical study of the facts of Scripture. The important question was, What do the words mean? Once that was determined, the Bible could be understood as clearly as could

nature.{29}

Here we must pause, however, and ask an important question. How was it that Christians who took seriously the negative effects of sin on the mind, who tended to emphasize human incapacities and a lack of confidence in human reason, could put so much confidence in a philosophy which depended so highly on reason? The answer is that American society outside the church was repudiating revelation, tradition, and social hierarchy. Baconian Common Sense thought provided a means of defending and promoting traditional values without appealing to such authorities.{30} The desire to make Christianity seem credible in such an environment made it easy to overlook the effects of sin on the mind.

Problems with Common Sense Thought

There were problems with Common Sense thought, however. First, Common Sense was dependent upon a belief in the commonness of our humanity, which, of course, would extend back to the Bible writers. Once the original meaning of the text was understood, the truth was settled. But this created a dilemma, for this understanding of truth as unchanging clashed with the new air of progress and change in the mid-nineteenth century. Shouldn't progress in knowledge affect our interpretation of the Bible, too? {31}

Second, it was supposed that philosophy and science were purely objective disciplines. As one writer notes, however, "The impediments to the use of this method are preconceptions and prejudices."{32} Marsden points out that "science and philosophy operate on various premises—often hidden premises. From a Christian perspective the crucial question is whether these premises reflect a strictly naturalistic outlook or one that may be shaped and guided by data derived from biblical revelation."{33}

It is now widely understood that the scientific method used to

study both nature and Scripture isn't neutral; its use doesn't lead everyone to the same conclusions. Why? Because we filter the data through beliefs already held. Regarding the Bible, we have to understand that it is not simply a book of facts. It is a body of inspired literature written in cultures quite different from ours. What did the authors intend us to understand? How are the various genre of Scripture to be properly interpreted? As already suggested, we have to consider also the preconceptions we bring to the text which influence and are influenced by our reading of it.

The adoption of Baconian Common Sense philosophy for the interpretation of Scripture began to cause evangelicals special problems, primarily in the area of science. The "plain, literal" reading of the text of Genesis 1 and 2 indicated a universe created in six, 24-hour days. It was easy to think, in a time when Christian beliefs were so prevalent, that an honest look at the scientific data would confirm this view. When the data seemed to show otherwise, however, evangelicals had a problem. Should they capitulate and say Genesis was myth? Should they hold fast to their interpretation regardless of the findings of scientists? Should they acknowledge a misinterpretation of the text?

The main point here isn't really the question of the age of the earth. I've used science as an example because it is often the focus of conflict between evangelicals and society. The main point is that evangelicals who based their understanding of the world on an uncritical use of a shaky method of interpretation found themselves at odds with their culture. Earlier I spoke of *biblicism,* the idea that we can only have any confidence in knowledge obtained from Scripture. Evangelicals effectively shut themselves off from any correction that might come from "the book of nature," as it has been called. They made themselves vulnerable by relying on a method which apparently failed them. Says George Marsden:

> Christian apologists . . . were placing themselves in a

> highly vulnerable position by endorsing the Baconian ideal that the sciences should be completely neutral and freed from religious review at their starting points. . . . Almost without warning one wall of their apologetic edifice was removed and within a generation the place of biblical authority in American intellectual life was in a complete shambles.{34}

Because of an unwillingness to allow their interpretation of Scripture to be informed from things learned from nature, evangelicals became separated from the intellectual life of the nation, and effectively removed an orthodox biblical perspective from learning in general.

Evangelicals and the "Book of Nature"

Because of the place of Scripture in the Protestant tradition, the "book of nature" typically takes a subordinate role among evangelicals. Although Scripture should remain supreme as far as our knowledge goes, some problems arise if we become too rigid in our thinking.

One problem is our response when presented with ideas we believe go against Scripture. In our desire to uphold the full truthfulness of the Bible, we reject any ideas outright which seem to contradict it. This determination creates tension in a variety of areas of learning. When people in any field of endeavor make claims we believe conflict with the Bible, we reject them. And rightly so . . . *if* such ideas really *do* conflict with Scripture. Is it Scripture they contradict, or our interpretation of it?

When ideas seem to conflict with the Bible, we need to be sure our interpretation is correct. Centuries ago Christians believed the Bible supported the view that the earth was at the center of the universe.{35} Scientific studies showed that their interpretation of Scripture was incorrect. This wasn't a matter of choosing science over the Bible; it was a matter of

allowing the study of nature to correct their wrong interpretation of it.

We hold that the Bible is true in everything it affirms. We need to keep in mind, however, that the primary purpose of Scripture is to tell about God and His ways and will. There is truth the Bible *doesn't* tell; not truth of a redemptive sort, but truth about this world. In the Bible, one will find nothing about the cause and cure of cancer. When we prepare soldiers for duty, we give them more than what one can find in the Bible. These things are obvious, of course. But what about the possibility of learning more about God from studying the things of this earth? Even if we cannot go beyond Scriptural teaching about the nature of God (for most Protestants still reject the natural theology of the Roman Catholic Church), can we get a bigger and clearer picture of the truths of Scripture from learning about this world? From nature and from the brush of artists we can understand more fully what beauty is. From looking at a chart of the genetic structure of a DNA molecule we stand amazed at the wonder of the natural order. From the study of mankind in anthropology we see more clearly how people exhibit the knowledge of the law "written on our hearts," and how because of sin people come to worship the creature rather than the Creator.

Another problem for the life of the mind with respect to the world is the view that the world really isn't very important. It's all going to burn up one day anyway, isn't it? This attitude overlooks some important facts. Scripture tells us that God created the natural order; Jesus accomplished His work of redemption within the natural order; and one day the natural order itself will be restored (cf. Gen. 1:1; Rom. 8:21; and 2 Pet. 3:13). It is God's handiwork, and it is wonderful in spite of its fallenness just for what it contains. It also is the setting within which we work out our salvation every day, and it is where we seek to reach people for Christ. The fact that the world is fallen doesn't mean

there is little value in knowing it.

Secular Influences

Evangelicals not only have been influenced by the history of thought in the church over the last couple of centuries, but we're also influenced by secular thought.{36} Major secularizing social forces of the modern era such as social pluralization and the practical demands of industry significantly altered the way we think. With the rise of industry, America developed into a mobile, uprooted society, where production (and therefore efficiency) was of utmost importance. God became less relevant; to many, belief in God was a hindrance. What counted was what worked. A result of this was the privatization of belief. We either lost the nerve or simply lost interest in letting our beliefs significantly influence our daily lives.

I will forego discussion of these matters, however,{37} and briefly mention two significant philosophical influences of the twentieth century, pragmatism and existentialism.

Pragmatism

I've spoken already about the orientation of evangelicalism toward the practical. That attitude, so prevalent among most Americans, developed as a school of philosophy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries called *pragmatism,* a philosophy which exerted great influence through our schools.

Pragmatism is concerned with how an idea works out in real life. Knowing the practical consequences of an idea tells us what the concept really *means*. And verifying it in concrete ways shows its *truth*. Pragmatism is concerned with the "cash value" of an idea.{38}

Pragmatism is seen in the evangelical church when Christians see the practical application of a doctrine as the measure of its importance, and when we look with scorn on intellectualism

because it’s practical usefulness isn’t readily apparent.

Existentialism

Another secular influence on evangelicals is the philosophy of *existentialism*.{39} The search for truth was turned inward in the Romantic era, and, as we noted previously, subjectivism was one of the negative results of Pietism. This subjectivity is a core belief of existentialism.

The existentialist chooses for himself what his values will be and hence what he will be. “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself,” said Jean-Paul Sartre. “That is the first principle of existentialism.”{40} Values are not imposed from the outside; they are chosen by the individual. To live by others’ values is to live in bad faith.

The influence of existentialism is seen among evangelicals when we become the final authority for our values, when we insist that we are responsible for what we are to become, or when we make our own experiences determine the meaning of Scripture. The individual’s experience overrides scriptural understanding and becomes authoritative over the teaching of the church past and present.

Reviving the Evangelical Mind

For all its good qualities, evangelicalism since the eighteenth century in America has not made notable contributions to the world of learning. Distinctly evangelical thinking plays little if any role in the intellectual life of our nation, and our knowledge of our own faith sometimes suffers from incorrect thinking about how to know what is true and what the Bible means.

The experiential subjectivism characteristic of extreme Pietism and of secular philosophies such as existentialism separates the individual from the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of the church through the ages. It is foolish to set

all that aside in favor of what each individual feels or can figure out himself. “I feel that such-and-such” is how we often begin stating our understanding of a passage of Scripture or of a doctrine. When pressed for reasons for holding that belief, Christians will often just say, “Well, that’s just what I feel it means.” This kind of subjectivism makes the individual his own final authority for truth. The resulting individualism{41} leads to a fragmentation of the church which limits it in presenting a united front in its interaction with the secular world.

Regarding the pragmatic attitude so prevalent in the church, a constant emphasis on workability inclines us away from consideration of deeper matters of the faith which can result in a grade-school level faith. Two problems come to mind. First, a pragmatic approach will never move us into a deep understanding of God. Frankly, there are things about God and His ways that may seem to have no direct practical bearing on us whatsoever. Imagine if my wife begins to tell me some story about her past, something that seems rather inconsequential, and I say, “I’m sorry, but I don’t see the practical significance of that for me or for us. Let’s stick to telling those things about ourselves that have practical application.” That’s no way to build a relationship! Someone might respond that with a little digging I might very well find a practical significance. Maybe I will, and maybe I won’t. Even if I do, the effort will take me further than one will typically go who has a pragmatic attitude. Pragmatism doesn’t incline one to search for meaning; mere instrumentality is usually all that is desired.

Second (building upon the first point), the issues of life are too complex for an elementary understanding of God and His ways and of this world. Hebrews 5:12 and 6:1 advise us to move on from the elementary things. This, of course, refers to biblical/theological truth. With a deeper understanding of God we can gain a better perspective on the world in which we

live, and develop a greater wisdom to know how to live in it. But we also have to understand our world well in order to be able to apply God's wisdom to it. For example, there should be expert Christian economists. Such people would understand God's view of the value of human life and productivity; they would have wisdom gained from reflection on biblical truths about such things as caring for each other, about personal responsibility, about national responsibilities, for that matter. They also would understand the way societies work and the social and political ramifications of particular ways of handing money. Clearly, workability is important here, but so are bigger issues such as the meaning of work, the responsibility of one person for another, and the care of the resources God has made available for us to make a living. A deep knowledge of God *and* of the world He created are necessary to do this.

Evangelicals can and should make significant contributions to the life of the mind in America. How can we expect to be taken seriously if the faith we confess is seen as "privately engaging, but publicly irrelevant"? Recall what Noll said: "The links between deep Christian life, long-lasting Christian influence, and dedicated Christian thought characterize virtually all of the high moments in the history of the church." Some Christians would insist that evangelism is our most important work. But even upon that view, why should we expect anyone to take the message we preach seriously if we come across as backwards in our thinking? Our emphasis on the practical, and our aversion to intellectual pursuits will continue to stunt our influence in academia and in society in general.

It's possible to be both "too earthly minded to be any heavenly good," and "too heavenly minded to be any earthly good." We need to be tuned in to both. In my emphasis on understanding our world, and on being aware that knowledge gained from this world can in some instances correct our

interpretation of Scripture, I'm not advocating a capitulation to the deliverances of intellectuals in any given field even if they contradict Scripture. I'm advocating a responsible use of the minds we've been given. We can engage the life of the mind, or we can continue to sink into obscurity. The first option is the more God-honoring one.

Notes

1. Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 10.

2. Noll, 43,44.

3. Walter, A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology,* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), s.v. "Pietism," by M.A. Noll. Unless noted otherwise, quotations in the next few paragraphs are all from this article.

4. Noll, *Scandal*, 49.

5. Encarta Online Dictionary, http://encarta.msn.com/encnet/features/dictionary/DictionaryHome.aspx.

6. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 34.

7. Hofstadter, 154.

8. Hofstadter, 48.

9. Hofstadter, 7. For an overview of the subject of anti-intellectualism from an evangelical view, see J.P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in The Life of the Soul* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), 19-40.

10. Noll, *Scandal,* 12.

11. N.K. Clifford, "His Dominion: A Vision in Crisis,"

Sciences Religieuses/Studies in Religion 2 (1973): 323; quoted in Noll, *Scandal,* 12-13.

12. Noll, *Scandal,* 5.

13. Rick Wade, "Scripture and Tradition in the Early Church," Probe Ministries, 2001.

14. Noll, *Scandal,* 61.

15. Cf. Noll, *Scandal,* 63.

16. Hofstadter, 74.

17. Hofstadter, 80.

18. Hofstadter, note 8, 48-49.

19. For an introduction to the Enlightenment, see Rick Wade, "The Enlightenment and Belief in God," Probe Ministries, 2002.

20. Noll, *Scandal,* 85.

21. George M. Marsden, "Everyone One's Own Interpreter? The Bible, Science, and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," in Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, eds., *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), 83.

22. Marsden, 82.

23. Noll, *Scandal,* 88.

24. James Marsh, in his introduction to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* (London, 1840), 40; quoted in Marsden, 82.

25. Noll, *Scandal,* 93.

26. Dagobert Runes, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), s.v., "Bacon, Francis."

27. Noll, 127.

28. Marsden, 82.

29. Marsden, 80-84.

30. Cf. Noll, *Scandal*, 87.

31. Cf. Marsden, 91-92.

32. Runes, ed., *Dictionary*, s.v., "Bacon, Francis."

33. Marsden, 94.

34. Ibid.

35. For a brief review of this conflict, see Rick Wade, "Modern Myths," Probe Ministries, 2001. For a longer treatment online, see George Sim Johnston, "The Galileo Affair," available on the Web at http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/history/world/wh0005.html.

36. That these two are so closely intertwined doesn't prevent us from separating them for purposes of understanding the way we think today.

37. Cf. David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

38. William James, *Essays in Pragmatism* (New York: Hafner Press, 1948), 160.

39. For a brief introduction to existentialism, see Rick Wade, Worldviews, Pt. 2, Probe Ministries, 2000, and Todd Kappelman, The Breakdown of Religious Knowledge, Probe Ministries, 1998. Note that here I am speaking of atheistic existentialism.

40. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York:

Meridian Books, 1972), 291.

41. For a discussion of individualism, see James W. Sire, *Chris Chrisman Goes to College* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 75-88.

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