The Christian Mind

The Need for a Christian Mind

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matt. 4:17)(1) This familiar admonition was first spoken by John the Baptist and soon after it was echoed by Jesus. The phrase is certainly worthy of a great deal of attention; it provides a lot of food for thought. For the moment, though, let's concentrate on the first word: *Repent*. This expression is a central portion of the doctrines concerning sin and salvation. Literally it refers to a *change of mind*. It does not mean that one is to be sorry for some action. Thus, the first hearers were admonished to realize that they were in need of radical change before a holy God, beginning with their minds. They were to turn from sin to God by changing their thinking. Certainly the same holds true for us. Most of us are in need of reminders that lead us back to one of the crucial aspects of our salvation: repentance, or a change in our thinking. In addition, we should couple such memories with the realization that our changed minds should always be alive to God. To paraphrase Kepler's famous phrase, we are to "think God's thoughts after Him." Since the Christian life is all-inclusive, the mind is included.

But, some may ask, do we actually have a mind? Current research and thought in the fields of neuroscience and evolutionary psychology concludes that we are much too free with the word *mind*. Perhaps we should get used to making reference to the brain, rather than the mind.
"Some neuroscientists are beginning to suspect that everything

that makes people human is no more than an interaction of chemicals and electricity inside the labyrinthine folds of the brain."(2) E.O. Wilson, the father of what is called sociobiology, proposes that we can determine an ethical system based on scientifically observable evidence. He writes, "The empiricist argument holds that if we explore the biological roots of moral behavior, and explain their material origins and biases, we should be able to fashion a wise and enduring ethical consensus."(3) Thus, ethics are not to be found external to physical reality; there is no mind through which we can respond ethically. It seems that Wilson and those who are like-minded believe "the mind is headed for an ignoble fate. Just as the twinkle of stars was reduced to nuclear explosions, and life itself to biochemical reactions, so the brain may one day be explained by the same forces that run the rest of the universe."(4)

Such perspectives should come as no surprise if we are aware of the permeation of a naturalistic worldview in both the physical and social sciences. The Christian, though, is not relegated to this type of reduction. A biblical worldview makes it clear that we are more than physical beings; we are also non-physical beings made in God's image. As a popular joke from the nineteenth century says:

> *What's the matter?*
> *Never mind.*
> *What is mind?*
> *No matter.(5)*

The truth of the joke should not be lost on those of us who

claim to be followers of Christ. We should realize the importance of cultivating Christian minds. As the great statesman Charles Malik stated, “As Christ is the Light of the World, his light must shine and be brought to bear upon the problem of the formation of the mind.”(6)

The Scriptures and the Mind (Part 1)

“Come now, and let us reason together, says the LORD” (Isa. 1:18). Imagine you are in a courtroom. You are the defense attorney; the prosecutor is God Himself. He has just invited you, Judah’s attorney, to engage in debate concerning the case at hand which happens to focus on the crimes of your client. Indeed, He wants the two of you to *reason together*. That is the scenario presented in this famous passage from the first chapter of Isaiah. God was inviting Judah to debate a case in court.(7) What a remarkable idea! And what a stunning statement concerning the importance of the mind. God was calling upon His people to use their minds to see if they could engage Him in debate concerning their sins.

In a time when the mind appears to be denigrated at every hand, such a passage should serve to reawaken us to the importance of using the minds God has given us. After all, the Bible, which most Christians claim to be the very word of God, calls the mind to attention throughout its pages. As J.P. Moreland states, “If we are going to be wise, spiritual people prepared to meet the crises of our age, we must be a studying, learning community that values the life of the mind.”(8) Let’s begin such studying and learning by considering some of what the Bible says about the ungodly and rebellious

mind, and then the godly mind.

First, the ungodly mind is described in terms that are sobering. When we apply these phrases to the culture around us, we can better understand why what we see and hear disturbs us. For example, Romans 1:18-28 describes what one scholar called “The Night.” Here are some of the ways unbelievers’ minds are depicted in this dark passage:

- Suppressing the truth
- Rejecting God
- Foolish speculations
- Foolish hearts
- Professing wisdom
- Exchanging God for a counterfeit
- Lusting hearts
- Exchanging truth for a lie
- Worshipping the creature
- Degrading passions
- Exchanging the natural for the unnatural
- Committing indecent acts
- Depraved minds

Another somber statement about the ungodly way of thinking is found in 2 Corinthians 4:4: “The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” Perhaps you have had conversations with unbelievers that were characteristic of such “blindness.” The person with whom you were talking just didn’t see it as you attempted to share the truth of Christ. Such responses should not surprise us.

A foolish mind also is described frequently in Scripture. Jeremiah 4:22 is a strong indictment of those who know the things of God, but foolishly reject them:

For My people are foolish,
They know Me not;
They are stupid children,
And they have no understanding.
They are shrewd to do evil,
But to do good they do not know.

Hosea 4:6 shows the result of God's reaction when His people reject the truth:

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.
Because you have rejected knowledge,
I also will reject you from being My priest.

These ancient proclamations could not be more contemporary. May we heed their warnings!

The Scriptures and the Mind (Part 2)

"We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and
we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). When the apostle
Paul wrote these words, he was very aware of the need for a Christian mind. Philosophical
speculations abounded in his time, just as in our time. Thus he described the Christian's mental
responsibility in terms of warfare. The Christian mind is active—it enters the battle; it is filled with
the knowledge of God—it is prepared for battle; it puts all things under the lordship of Christ—it
follows the only true commander into battle. And that battle has been won innumerable times, even
in the minds of brilliant people. "One of the most astonishing and undeniable arguments for the
truth of [Christianity] . . . is the fact that . . . some of the most subtle of human intellects have been

led to render submission to the Saviour."(9) The Bible contains many such insights into the nature of a Christian mind. We will consider two of these.

Reason is a term that is descriptive of the Christian mind. This does not mean that a Christian is to be a rationalist, but rather he is to use reason based on the reason of God found in Scripture. For example, on one of several occasions Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus to test Him by asking for a sign from heaven. Jesus responded by referring to their ability to discern signs of certain kinds of weather. Then He said, "Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times" (Matt. 16:3)? Obviously He was noting how people use reason to arrive at conclusions, but the Christian mind would conclude the things of God. The book of Acts indicates that the apostle Paul used reason consistently to persuade his hearers of the truth of his message. Acts 17:2-3 states that "according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths *reasoned* [emphasis added] with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead." For two years in Ephesus Paul was "reasoning [emphasis added] daily in the school of Tyrannus" (Acts 19:9). In light of the fact that our contemporary world attempts to reject reason, such examples should spur us to hold out for the possibility of reasonable dialogue with those around us. After all, those who reject reason must use reason to reject reason.

If the Christian mind is characterized by reason, such reason must be founded upon knowledge from God. Upon reflection of their conversation with Jesus on the

road to Emmaus, two of the disciples said, “Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us” (Luke 24:32)? The word *hearts* in this passage refers to both moral and mental perception. In his letter to the Colossians Paul wrote, “we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ” (Col. 1:28). And in his Ephesian letter he wrote, “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened” (Eph. 1:18-19). May this beautiful prayer apply to us as we consider how to use our God-given minds!

Mandates for the Mind

“AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH” (Mark 12:30). These words have echoed for thousands of years, beginning with Moses and leading to Jesus. They contain the first of what I call *Mandates for the Mind*: Strive to Know God. To love someone we must know him or her. In the case of my wife, for instance, it would have been absurd to declare that I loved her before ever meeting her. My love for her implies an intimate knowledge *about* and knowledge *of* her. In the same manner we are to strive both to know *about* God and to *know* Him intimately. Our minds are crucial to this mandate. It is my contention that one of the major problems in contemporary Christianity is that too many of us are attempting know God without using our minds to investigate what He has told us of Himself in Scripture.

The second mandate is that the Christian mind should strive for truth. “Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free’” (John 8:31-32). Abiding in His word implies a continual dedication to using the mind to search the Scriptures, the place where His truth is written.

The third mandate pertains to maturity. Romans 12:2 declares: “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” It is pertinent to note that the words *conformed*, *transformed*, and *prove* refer to continuous action. Thus, the Christian mind is to be characterized by continuous development toward maturity. Hebrews 5:14 refers to Scripture as “solid food” as the writer describes the mature mind. He then asserts that the Christian is to “press on [continually] to maturity” (Heb. 6:1). Such maturity is a strategic need in the contemporary church.

The fourth mandate involves proclaiming and defending the faith. The maturing Christian mind will actively engage the minds of those around him. For example, Paul modeled this while in Athens: “[H]e was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him” (Acts 17:17-18). Paul proclaimed and defended the truth of the gospel in the synagogue with his own people,

among the populace, and even with the intellectual elite of the time. Such encounters are easily duplicated in our day.

The fifth mandate refers to the need for study. Philippians 4:8 states: “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.” Note the final phrase: “let your mind dwell,” a clause indicative of the need for concentration, or study. The phrase also includes a command that such study is to be continuous. We are to ponder, or think on the things of God.

Applying the Christian Mind

“Prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (James 1:22). This exhortation from the book of James includes the last of our *Mandates for the Mind*. That is, the Christian mind should be applied; what is in the mind should flow to the feet.

It would be easy to state that such a mandate applies to all of life and let that suffice, but specific examples can help us focus on how this works. Thus we will focus on three contrived stories.

Our first story involves a fellow we will call Billy. Billy is an excellent softball player. Three nights per week he plays for his company team. He has a reputation as a fierce competitor who will do virtually anything to win. He also has a volatile temper that explodes in ways that embarrass his family and teammates. On some occasions he even has had shoving and cursing bouts with

opposing players. Each Sunday, and even on other occasions, he attends a well-known church in his city. One Sunday his pastor shared an exceptional sermon based on 1 Corinthians 3:16: “Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” Upon hearing this message, he suddenly realized that softball games could not be isolated from his commitment to Christ. Whether in his business, his family, or his softball games he needed to stop and think: if he is a temple of God, all of life is a sacred task. His life, including softball, was never the same.

The second story focuses on a woman named Sally. She is a teacher in a public elementary school who is also a young Christian. Her new life in Christ has invigorated her to the point that she is beginning to think of ways she can share her joy with her students. She decides that at every opportunity she will encourage the children to discover the wonder of life. As she guides them through science, she expresses awe as they investigate the simplest flower, or the profundity of the solar system. As she discusses arithmetic she encourages them to realize the beauty of logical order in numbers. As she reads stories to them she gently emphasizes the amazing concept of human imagination. In these ways and others Sally begins to realize the excitement of using her mind for God’s glory. In addition, she soon finds that she is having conversations with her students that give her opportunities to share the One who is guiding her.

Our third story concerns Steven, a businessman and father of an eight-year-old boy. Steven has come to the realization that his son, Jimmy, spends most of his time either watching television or

playing computer games. So he begins to consider ways to stimulate Jimmy's thinking. Since he also wants to see Jimmy come to faith in Christ, Steven suggests that they read C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* together. Soon, the two of them are delighting in these tales, and Steven finds ways to discuss the spiritual metaphors in Lewis' classic fantasies.

These stories may not apply directly to your life at this time. But, hopefully they will stimulate a broader understanding of how your mind can be used for God's glory within the routines of life.

Notes

1. All Scripture references are taken from the New American Standard Version.

2. Sharon Begley, John Carey, and Ray Sawhill, "How the Brain Works," *Newsweek* (7 February 1983), 40.

3. Edward O. Wilson, "The Biological Basis of Morality," *The Atlantic Monthly* (April 1998), 54.

4. Begley, 47.

5. Quoted in Begley.

6. Charles Habib Malik, "Your Mind Matters; Cultivate It," *Active Christians in Education* (January 1981), 1A.

7. R. Laird Harris, ed., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, Vol. 1* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 377.

8. J.P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1997),

39.

9. R.V.G. Tasker, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), 135.

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