

A Mind in Love With God

Adapted from "Let My People Think: Restoring the Christian Mind" by Os Guinness

One of the most celebrated personalities of the Middle East is Nasreddin Hodja, the endearing holy- man- cum- scholar of Turkish folklore. His famed wisdom is often threatened by his equally famed stupidity.

One day, so a particular story goes, the Hodja dropped his ring inside his house. Not finding it there, he went outside and began to look around the doorway. His neighbor passed and asked him what he was looking for.

"I have lost my ring," said the Hodja.

"Where did you lose it?" asked the neighbor.

"In my bedroom," said the Hodja.

"Then why are you looking for it out here?"

"There's more light out here," the Hodja said.

Perhaps the Hodja, in his frankly acknowledged folly, is wiser than most of us in the concealed stupidity of our pretended wisdom. It is surely the easiest thing to look for what we lost where we lost it, except that humans characteristically either forget what we lost or look for it anywhere except where it can be found.

This is certainly true of the Christian mind, or, more simply, just of wisdom. Exactly what it is, where we lost it, and how we can find it again are urgent but basic questions. We therefore turn to sketching the rudiments of the needed reformation in evangelical thinking. The word "sketched" should be underscored. What is outlined briefly here deserves a book by itself. But an introductory sketch is important to spell out what is meant by "thinking Christianly" and equally important-what is not meant by it.

Back to Our Right Minds

The first step in reformation is repentance. We evangelicals need to confess individually and collectively that we have betrayed the Great Commandment, to love God with our minds. We need to confess that we have given ourselves up to countless forms of unutterable folly. God has given us minds, but many of us have left them underdeveloped or undeveloped.

- God has given us education, beyond that of most people in human history, but we have used it for other ends.
- God has given us great exemplars of thinking in Christian history, but we have ignored them or admired them for other virtues.
- God has given us opportunities, but we have failed to grasp them because we have refused to think them through before him.

As we think of not only our individual lives but our evangelical heritage, community as a whole, reputation in the wider world, and prospects-and as we survey the old and new influences that have shaped us, whether the eight earlier influences or the eight modern pressures-we must ask some key questions:

- Are we as truly biblical as we think?
- Have we not been more shaped by the world than we realize?

- Would we see it more clearly if brothers and sisters of other traditions, such as Catholics, pointed it out to us? Or former evangelicals who have dropped out from the faith altogether?
- Can we deny that American evangelicals have a long and unbroken history of pervasive and systematic anti-intellectualism?
- In short, who can disagree with the sorry fact that our evangelical anti-intellectualism confronts us today as a monumental scandal and a sin?

But repentance at this point has to be as serious and far-reaching as repentance at any other point. Like Nebuchadnezzar who had to be reduced to eating grass, or the prodigal son who only saw his situation in the mirror that was the pigsty, we may have to be jolted by the shame of our present sorry state into returning to our right minds. For it is certain that the community of faith in America that identifies itself as evangelical has been out of its mind for two hundred years.

Minds in Love

The second step in reformation is to define what we actually mean by "a Christian mind" or by "thinking Christianly." Obviously, for example, the term "thinking Christianly" has two parts that require serious attention. Thus we must first ask what we mean by "thinking." For as Dorothy L. Sayers laments in her celebrated essay, *The Lost Tools of Learning*: *"Is not the great defect of our education today ... that although we often succeed in teaching our pupils 'subjects,' we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think: they learn everything, except the art of learning."*

First, thinking Christianly is not thinking by Christians. As a moment's thought will show, it is perfectly possible to be a Christian and yet to think in a sub-Christian or even an anti-Christian way. Jesus said bluntly to his disciple Peter, "Away with you, Satan. You think as men think, not as God thinks."

Second, thinking Christianly is not simply thinking about Christian topics. Such topics as prayer, Bible study, and the spiritual disciplines all fall within the bounds of recognizable Christian themes. Thus they are surely candidates to be part of the Christian mind. But the trouble with that approach is that it leaves out the greater part of life. The nineteenth-century maxim applies not only to theology but to life as a whole: "If Jesus Christ is not Lord of all, he is not Lord at all."

Third, thinking Christianly should not be confused with adopting a "Christian line" on every issue. Even where a "Christian line" is desirable at all — and that is a good deal rarer than many Christians think — developing a Christian line is impossible without first developing a Christian mind.

Expressed positively, thinking Christianly is thinking by Christians about anything and everything in a consistently Christian way— in a manner that is shaped, directed, and restrained by the truth of God's Word and God's Spirit.

What matters is not the term but the substance and spirit of the truth. Is it not absurd to affirm that Jesus Christ is Lord of all, the Alpha and the Omega, our creator, redeemer, and judge, the source, guide, and goal of all there is, and yet not be decisive over our minds and thinking? Evangelicals who rightly glory in all the new things in the gospel—a new birth, a new people, new powers, and a new age—must reinsert the vital, missing component of "new minds."

Expressed differently by Ambassador Charles Malik, in all our thinking “the critic in the final analysis is Jesus Christ himself.” Thus ‘from the Christian point of view’ has no solid foundation unless the word Christian here means Jesus Christ himself. So from the very start I have put aside all such questionable phraseology as “from the Christian point of view,” “in terms of Christian principles,” “applying Christian principles or values” “from the standpoint of Christian culture,” etc. The only question that finally counts is, What does Jesus think? Aside from that standard, all our thinking is “an exercise in fuzziness, in wobbly human effort, in subjectivist rationalism, in futility.

What matters above all-whatever term we use-is that the idea and practice be kept simple, practical, and biblical. When all is said and done, the point is to love and obey God by loving him with our minds. For the Christian mind is a combination of intellectual light and spiritual ardor that, in Dorothy L. Sayers's term, is simply the “mind in love” with God. ...

No Autopilot

The (next) step in reformation is a commitment to thinking Christianly as a form of active obedience. Like every other part of the Christian life, thinking Christianly is active and demanding. It is neither easy nor automatic. St. Paul writes to the Corinthians that “we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” Thus thinking Christianly is inevitably moment by moment, question by question, issue by issue, point by point, and thought by thought. As Oswald Chambers wrote,

*God will not make me think like Jesus,
I have to do it myself,
I have to bring every thought into captivity
to the obedience of Christ.*

If Christ's own disciples were guilty of thinking “as men think, not as God thinks,” are we likely to do better? How do we know we are not thinking as Americans (or English, French, or Australians) think and not as God thinks? Have we checked that we are not closer to the twentieth-century (or sixteenth or first-century) mind than the mind of Christ? Is our agenda closer to a liberal or conservative agenda than to the agenda of the kingdom of God? Are we more like the profile of Washingtonians (or West Virginians, Marylanders, or Ohians) or of lawyers (or doctors and teachers) than of followers of Christ?

In each case the questions remind us that we are always worldlier and more culturally shortsighted than we realize. But the call of Jesus is radical. If our eyes offend us, pluck them out, he said. The same must be true of every intellectual assumption, authority, and conclusion that is closer to how humans think than the way God thinks. The search is on. The war has been declared. “All truth is God's truth,” so we can welcome truth wherever it is to be found, even among pagans. But equally, “all that is not of God is not of truth” and therefore not for us, even if it is we who believe in it devoutly.

Knowing Means Doing

A full exposition of Christian thought-style would require a book in itself. For example, we have already noted in passing two of the defining features of the Christian thought-style — collegiality and corrigibility. Other obvious ones include the certainty, humility, spirituality, rationality, mystery, and intensity of Christian knowing. But one of the most decisive features — and one directly opposed to modern styles of thinking — is the biblical insistence on the responsibility of knowing.

Modern knowledge is characteristically noncommittal. Much is known, but all is consequence-free. What we know and what we do about it are two different things. ... Never has more been known; never has less been required of what is known. From abstract mathematical formulas to anguishing international atrocities, the common reaction to modern knowledge is, So what? Who cares? What do you expect me to do?

We could argue that this response is philosophically unwarranted — that in fact responsibility is an inescapable assumption of all human knowing. But this point is stronger for the follower of Christ who is committed to thinking Christianly. For what is at best a small assumption of the better modern philosophy is a central assertion of Christian theology.

The Christian idea of the responsibility of knowledge is rooted in the notion that God is there and that he speaks. He is therefore the one with both the first decisive word on life — in creation — and the last decisive word —in judgment. Thus human life is essentially responsible, answerable, and accountable. Such responsibility of knowledge is the silent assumption in many basic doctrines. Sin, for example, is a deliberate violation of the responsibility of knowledge—human beings become responsible where they should not be (playing God) and refuse to be responsible where they should be (denying guilt)....

We can see the biblical understanding of the responsibility of knowledge supremely in Jesus. For where the first man, Adam, severed the link between knowledge and responsibility, the second Adam reunited them. Refusing the devil's temptations to make claims that had no consequences, Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem and the cross. The responsibility of his knowing who he was and what he had come to do marked his way to his death.

Needless to say, what matters for our thought-style is not simply doctrine but the Christian responsibility of knowledge exhibited in all our knowing. Possible applications are myriad in our attitudes to education, careers, specialization, elitism, cynicism, resistance to evil, and a score of different areas. But the recurring motif is the costly obedience of Christian knowing.

Knowledge for the Christian is never noncommittal nor consequence-free. Knowledge carries responsibility. Knowing means doing. What we do with what we know is what Christian knowing is all about—and the responsibility of knowledge is only one example of the importance of Christian thought-style.

For God's Sake

The immense project of going beyond the initial reformation of evangelical thinking to recapturing the great establishments of modern thought lies far beyond this slim volume. We have looked at only half, though perhaps the harder half, of what Charles Malik called the two tasks — "the twofold miracle of evangelizing the great universities and intellectualizing the great Evangelical movement." But our challenge is to begin. I would add one last spur.

One of the greatest sadnesses of a thinking evangelical is knowing the thousands who have left, and are still leaving, evangelicalism because evangelicals do not think. The writer Dorothy L. Sayers is (one) who self-consciously rejected evangelicalism because of its anti-intellectualism. Her time at the Godolphin School in Surrey, England, left her with a distaste for evangelical pietism. There were two kinds of Christian faith, she concluded. The pietistic and evangelical was sentimental and made her feel uncomfortable; the other appealed openly to the understanding. "The cultivation of religious emotion without philosophic basis," she explained,

"is thoroughly pernicious." Her evangelical schooling, she reflected later, was simply a period for "gawky young souls growing out of their spiritual clothing.

When we ponder such stories and the thousands of people whose feet they have had to shed their evangelical clothing, is it not time for anger or tears? This book is not meant to be an academic exercise. It is a cry from the heart for thought, debate, prayer, action, and reformation. One of the great legacies for those of us who knew the late Francis Schaeffer was that truth mattered to him. He took God seriously, he took people seriously, and he took truth seriously. Friedrich Nietzsche's aphorism could be applied to him, "All truths are bloody truths to me."

Perhaps as we ponder the length and breadth of our anti-intellectualism, as we survey its consequences, as we remember its casualties, and as we meditate on its core disloyalty to our Lord, it is time for us to stammer and hesitate — and seek God's help to change our minds and our ways of thinking.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you love God with all of your mind? In what ways have you failed in this area?
2. According to Os Guinness, what is the difference between thinking Christianly and thinking about Christ? Why is this distinction made?
3. In what areas are you tempted to think as man thinks? In what ways do you typically think as God thinks?
4. Os Guinness said that knowing means doing. What knowledge is moving you towards action this week?