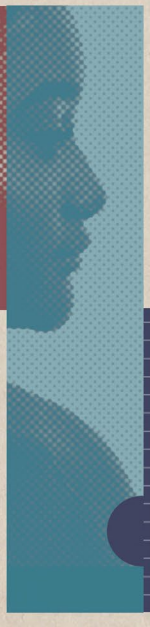
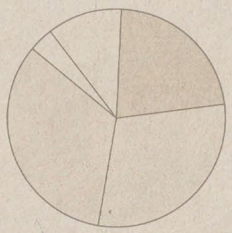


the CHRISTIAN MIND:

Its Necessity to Christian Relevance and Renewal

Do not conform 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. Romans 12:2



by **S. MICHAEL CRAVEN**

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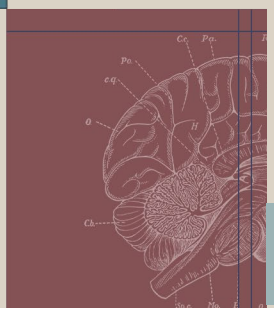

A notorious tyrant once said, "It is the luck of rulers when men do not think," and Proverbs 2:12 underscores this very truth: "Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men, from men whose words are perverse." This begs the question: What role does the intellect and scholarship have in our faith?

What the Bible says about WISDOM AND UNDERSTANDING

Scripture makes it quite clear that God places a high value on knowledge, wisdom, and understanding and by implication, the processes necessary to obtaining them. Proverbs 4:4–7 says:

> Lay hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands, and you will live. Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words or swerve from them. Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. Wisdom is supreme; therefore, get wisdom. Though it cost you all you have, get understanding.

Earlier in Proverbs, the Lord affirms that "blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding" (3:13). The Bible also prescribes understanding as a protection against sin: "The woman Folly is loud; she is undisciplined and without knowledge. She sits at the door of her house … calling out to those who pass by … 'Let all who are *simple* come in here!' she says to those who lack *judgment*. (Emphasis added.) 'Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!'" (Prov. 9:13–17). Proverbs 9:6 admonishes us, "Leave your simple ways, and you will live; walk in the way of understanding."

The prophet Hosea delivered this charge against apostate Israel: "My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. 'Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests'" (Hosea 4:6). Hosea later issues a general warning that "a people without understanding will come to ruin!" (4:14).

In 1 Peter 1:13 we are told, "Therefore, prepare your minds for action …" James 1:5 states rather directly that "if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him." Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians, "Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise" (5:15). In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul prays that their "love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight" (Phil. 1:9).

Lastly, Romans 12:2 tells us, "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." (Emphasis added.)

The mind should GUIDE OUR PASSIONS

God has made mankind in His image, meaning we are endowed with certain attributes that are characteristic of God. God has gifted us, in varying degrees, with the capacity for creativity; we are also capable of mercy, compassion, and empathy. We have been created with an emotional aspect, which translates our thoughts into feelings and makes us capable of expressing and experiencing love, joy, anger, and grief. Unfortunately, this emotional aspect is, all too often, the only characteristic with which many today relate to God. But God has also endowed us with intellect, the ability to analyze information, facts, experience, and even our feelings. In other words, God has given us the ability to reason and to think. In fact, it is the mind that is designed to rule the flesh; reason should guide our passions.

The apostle Paul refers to this concept in Romans 12:2. He speaks to the fact that we, being saved, must no longer conform to the ways of this world, meaning the way the world acts and *thinks*. Paul emphasizes that our thinking should determine our actions. Earlier in verse 1 (ESV), Paul challenges Christians to "present [their] bodies as living sacrifices," meaning the total surrender of our life and activities as expressed through our physical form, the entirety of our being. Paul then explains that the key to *being* a living sacrifice is our *mind*. This is the control center of our attitudes, thoughts, feelings, and actions. However, be reminded: our minds were born corrupted by sin, and our thinking is also in need of redemption or renewal. I fear this is an aspect of our redemption we often neglect.

Understanding the GOOD NEWS

In our zeal to spread the Gospel and to make it easier to convey, we have reduced the Gospel to something less than it is. As a result, many today, particularly in our highly individualized culture, have come to view the Gospel as simply the personal plan of salvation—their "ticket to heaven," so to speak. The modern emphasis tends toward "fixing the sin problem" in terms that are exclusively personal. However, the Scriptures speak in a more comprehensive way that goes far beyond the private version of the Gospel that has come to dominate the United States.

Matthew records the beginning of Jesus' ministry and message with these words: "Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for *the kingdom of heaven* is at hand'" (Matt. 4:17 ESV). In Matthew 24:14, Jesus Himself describes the Gospel in relation to the Kingdom when He says, "And this *gospel of the kingdom* will be preached in the whole world …" Matthew describes Jesus' ministry as follows: "And Jesus went about in all Galilee … preaching *the gospel of the kingdom* …" (4:23 ASV). Matthew reiterates this theme again in chapter 9, verse 35, when he writes, "Jesus went through all the towns and villages … preaching *the good*

news of the kingdom …" Jesus instructed the disciples to go to the lost and "tell them that *the kingdom* is here" (Matt. 10:7 MSG). (All emphases added.)

Mark's Gospel records, "After John [the Baptist] had been arrested, Jesus went to Galilee and proclaimed the gospel about *the kingdom of God*" (1:14 ISV). Philip "preached the good news of *the kingdom of God* and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12). Paul and Barnabas encouraged new believers to "continue in the faith … saying that through many tribulations we must enter *the kingdom of God*" (14:22 ESV). Paul appeared in the synagogue in Ephesus "arguing persuasively about *the kingdom of God*" (19:8). Paul, writing about his own ministry said, "I have gone about preaching *the kingdom* …" (20:25). While under house arrest, Paul received many visitors to whom he "[testified] *the kingdom of God*, persuading them concerning Jesus …" (28:23 ASV). (All emphases added.)

> The central aspect of the teaching of Jesus was that concerning the Kingdom of God. Of this there can be no doubt. … Jesus appeared as one who proclaimed the Kingdom; all else in his message and ministry serves a function in relation to that proclamation and derives its meaning from it.[1]

Clearly, by His own words and the testimony of the apostles, Jesus was preaching the good news that through Him, God's rule and reign has come, and the renewal of creation has begun. The Gospel, or "good news," is the fact that in Christ the reign of God is at hand and is now breaking into the world. His Kingdom, which has come and continues to come forth, will be fully consummated on the day of Christ's return. This is the good news that offers both a present and future Hope to all of God's creation! God's ongoing creation project has entered that stage in which Jesus, through his death, resurrection, and ascension has initiated the process whereby he is making all things new, setting right what sin has broken. God has called His Church to be the instrument of renewal and to bear witness to what life looks like under the rule and reign of King Jesus, to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has already been given!

Intellectual Weakness Promotes SPIRITUAL WEAKNESS

It is often the modern Church's theological illiteracy that inhibits her from understanding and subsequently participating in God's comprehensive, redemptive purpose in the world (i.e., the Gospel).

In essence, we have reduced the Gospel to a few facts about Jesus that we then invite people to agree with—pray a prayer and tell them they are saved! Many may ask Jesus into their hearts on an emotional level. Why not? The proposition we often offer is simply "believe these things and you will go to heaven when you die." Frankly, this may be nothing more than an appeal to self-interest. Such reductionism may fail to mention repentance or emphasize our offense against a Holy God. Neither does this fulfill the Great Commission to "make disciples." Disciple-making involves the mind and the reordering of our thinking in the ways of the Lord so that we live and think like Jesus. This is the witness-bearing role of the Church, which demonstrates a distinctly different way of living, individually and corporately, under the reign of God.

Despite our ignorance, we, by God's grace, may very well be saved, but we can remain in an arrested state

of spiritual immaturity, never "working out our salvation." In doing so, we may embrace a little Christianity, start listening to Christian music, start going to church regularly, change some of our behaviors, and so on. But we may never come to develop deep convictions in our faith that are based upon critical inquiry, which affirm the objective truth claims of Christianity and provide us with a more thorough knowledge of God, self, others, and creation. I am convinced that only through such convictions working in concert with the Holy Spirit that men and women are then compelled to literally give their lives to the cause of Christ. It is precisely this level of commitment that is desperately needed in a culture so committed to radical secularization and the destruction of Christianity.

In the absence of rational convictions, we may tend to think of our faith in purely emotional and abstract terms or assume that it only applies to our unseen soul, our "spiritual side," when in fact salvation is offered to the whole person—an entirely redeemed creation—emotionally, spiritually, physically, and intellectually.

Joining FAITH AND REASON

There are also many who believe the intellect has no place in matters of faith. This is anti-intellectualism, and unfortunately it has plagued the American church since the late nineteenth century. It is perhaps this condition—more so than any other—that has contributed to the growing irrelevance of Christianity in American life and culture.

Every culture is shaped by ideas, philosophies, and values—what we refer to as a belief system or worldview. Everyone has a worldview whether they know it or not. You have heard it said that ideas have consequences, but as we say at the Colson Center, "Bad ideas have victims!" This in and of itself should compel every Christian to develop a deliberately biblical worldview. By doing so, you may not only strengthen your own protection against sin but also rescue those who succumb to false ideologies and philosophies.

The fact is, culture is shaped by the belief systems of those who control key cultural institutions like the media, government, education, the arts, business, and so on. Control will generally always go to the most "educated" in our society. These worldviews form the basis for our approach to life and reality, and how to explain these questions: Where do we come from? What is our purpose? How do we deal with the problem of suffering and evil? What is the solution? What is the future of humanity and the creation itself? How a person thinks about these questions will influence every area of his or her life and actions. Thus, those who hold that brute naturalistic causes account for our creation and that the problem of suffering and evil are merely the result of ignorance will deny the biblical concepts of sin and, subsequently, dismiss the need for a Savior. This worldview contrasts radically with the biblical worldview. And when those who hold to anti-biblical assumptions control society's cultural institutions, they will naturally integrate these assumptions into every facet of their thinking and actions. Such has been the progression of ideas throughout the twentieth century in the Western world.

While Christianity is not reducible to a set of ideas, it has produced ideas about everything in life. Christianity offers a serious (and the only true) interpretation of reality. It is this extensive interpretation that most Christians fail to apprehend and apply to their own lives and the world around them.

The Historic Christian Commitment to INTELLECTUALISM

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was the Christian interpretation of reality (or worldview) that dominated almost every social and cultural institution in America. That is not to say that everyone was consciously Christian any more than you can say that everyone today is consciously irreligious. However, almost every aspect of our society and culture was influenced to some degree by Christianity, and our institutions were largely led by Christians, due in large part, to the educational systems of that day, which were overwhelmingly Christian in their worldview. Every university established within the first century of American independence was done so by the various Protestant denominations or the Catholic Church. The Congregational Church founded Yale in 1701 and Harvard as far back as 1636. The Baptists founded Colgate, George Washington University, and Wake Forest, to name a few. This commitment to intellectualism, scholarship, and academia was a fundamental part of the Church and central to the religious culture. The fact is "in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, religious thought and institutions in America were dominated by an austere, learned, and intellectual form of discourse that is largely absent from religious life today."[2] Simply contrast the philosophical and theological arguments and representation of the Christian faith by men such as Jonathan Edwards with some of our more popular preachers today.

In New England in the seventeenth century, the literacy rate was between 89 and 95 percent, while in England it was only 40 percent.[3] Laws were passed in almost every village requiring the maintenance of a reading and writing school, which was almost always operated by the local church. "In all such laws, reference was made to Satan, whose evil designs; it was supposed could be thwarted at every turn by education."[4] This commitment to education in colonial America was driven largely by the Church, being regarded as one of its principal ministries.

This was not an unintentional act by a culture that happened to be religious. This generation of believers understood and fulfilled their biblical mandate to exercise dominion, and they did so with a determined and, I might add, competent effort. They understood that Christians had a duty in a literate world to be among the learned and that by being educated they would shape the culture. However, when we as Christians cease to integrate this commitment to communicate and advance the biblical perspective in an intelligent, reasonable, and persuasive way, we inevitably surrender the territory, which Christ has been given authority, over to his enemies (powers and principalities). This, I fear, is what has taken place over the last century in America.

The culture that confronts us today is not merely the result of growing immorality; it is, rather, the inevitable and predictable consequence of the withdrawal or lackluster demonstration of Christianity in a formerly Christian culture. By failing to maintain a comprehensive understanding of biblical truth and its application to *all* of life and society, the captains of culture changed and along with them the social and moral philosophy that now shapes American society.

By unwittingly withdrawing Christian principles from public life, we surrendered control of the culture to secular fundamentalists who are now determined to remove all remnants of Christianity from society. This is why the Ten Commandments have been removed from public buildings, why public schools now have a winter holiday instead of Christmas break, and why our courts can legitimize abortion, same-sex marriage, and euthanasia, to name just a few. This should not surprise us. What else should we expect from those with a worldview antithetical to God's truth? It is this same condition that accounts for the obvious demise of sexual morality, gender confusion, conflict over right-to-life issues, the breakdown of family and marriage

as socially esteemed institutions, and the erosion of corporate and civil ethics.

Christians must understand that by neglecting the intellectual aspect of Christian life, the mind remains to some degree in captivity to the world. We may *feel* like Christians, but we think, and therefore act, like the world. How can such people transform the culture for Christ when they themselves look and act so comfortable in a godless culture? More importantly, how can we live in accordance with biblical principles if we don't know them? In our ignorance we often end up conforming Christ to *our* lives and not conforming our lives to Christ.

The Intellectual State of the AMERICAN CHURCH

To demonstrate the deplorable intellectual state of the Church in America and the overwhelming dearth of doctrinal knowledge, simply consider the following research results from as far back as Barna's 2003 study: "Only 4 percent of [American] adults have a biblical worldview as the basis of their decision-making."[5]

George Barna, a leading researcher on American spiritual life, said this in describing the results:

> Sadly, few people consistently demonstrate the love, obedience and priorities of Jesus. The primary reason that people do not act like Jesus is because they do not think like Jesus. Behavior stems from what we think—our attitudes, beliefs, values and opinions. Although most people own a Bible and know some of its content, our research found that most Americans have little idea how to integrate core biblical principles to form a unified and meaningful response to the challenges and opportunities of life. We're often more concerned with survival amidst chaos than with experiencing truth and significance.[6]

In addition, Barna reports that only 51 percent of the country's Protestant pastors have a biblical worldview.[7] What's even more disturbing is how basic was the criteria used to define a "biblical worldview" in each of these surveys. Here are the seven criteria used in Barna's very simplistic evaluation:[8]

1. Believing that absolute moral truth exists and that such truth is defined by the Bible.
2. Jesus Christ lived a sinless life.
3. God is the all-powerful and all-knowing Creator of the universe and He stills rules it today.
4. Salvation is a gift from God and cannot be earned.
5. Satan is real.
6. A Christian has a responsibility to share his or her faith in Christ with other people.
7. The Bible is accurate in all of its teachings.

Remember, only 4 percent of American adults and 51 percent of Protestant pastors agreed with these seven statements—in a nation where 85 percent of the people at the time claimed to be Christian.[9] Unfortunately, all indicators relative to the Church have continued to go in the wrong direction.

This is basic Christian orthodoxy and essential tenets, not a robust Christian worldview in the proper

sense of the term. A Christian worldview could be better understood as a comprehensive life system, in which people understand all of reality and nature in connection to the revealed Word of God. A Christian worldview properly understood is when people interpret the universe and everything in it under the authority and direction of the Creator; our ideas of truth, beauty, and goodness should all originate in God.

The Fall: CORRUPTION OF THE MIND

When mankind fell, we chose to do without God in every respect. Humanity sought—and continues to seek—its own ideas about truth, beauty, and goodness somewhere beyond God. We seek Him either directly within ourselves or indirectly within the universe about us. This is the condition of every Christian mind prior to regeneration. Again, this is why Romans 12:2 tells us to "not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Your mind is an essential instrument in the lifelong process of sanctification.

In other words, instead of continuing to interpret the universe and everything in it from our point of reference, now, as new creations, we seek to reinterpret everything we have previously understood under the direction and authority of God from *His* perspective exclusively.

I would argue that one of the principal causes for the loss of Christian influence in Western civilization has been and continues to be a lack of commitment to a renewed mind operating under the direction of God. This would explain in large part why our salt has become tasteless and our light is hidden under a bushel. We are no longer a transforming force in culture; the result has been an ideological shift away from biblical revelation as the guiding source of ultimate truth to one in which "man is the measure of all things," as the Greek philosopher Protagoras once proclaimed.

The tyrant who said, "It is the luck of rulers when men do not think" was Adolf Hitler, demonstrating the profound dangers associated with ignorance. I believe it could also be stated another way: "It is fortunate for the rulers of darkness, the powers and principalities, and Satan when men do not think."

Lacking DISCERNMENT

I fear that many today who claim the name of Christ do so on strictly an emotional level. They seek to *experience* God but never relate to God intellectually through reason, seeking knowledge and true understanding. As a result, too many Christians lack discernment and therefore find themselves swept away by our godless culture. They "are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6). The dictionary defines discernment as "the power to see what is not evident to the average mind, stressing the power to distinguish and select what is true."[10]

As followers of Jesus Christ and recipients of God's grace, our minds are no longer average. We now have the mind of Christ (see 1 Cor. 2:16); unbelievers do not. Second Corinthians 4:4 says, "The god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers." They, in and of themselves, are unable to distinguish and select

what is true. However, the Holy Spirit can most certainly and often does use the believer to expose Satan's deception and *open* the minds of the lost, or at least begin to tear down those false beliefs that enslave them (see 2 Cor. 10:5).

This is what the maturation of the Christian mind is. It is the discipline of developing your mind to distinguish, select, and act upon what is true, so you may honor God with your mind. This in turn guides you into obedience. Willful ignorance of the world according to God does not honor Him. We look foolish when remaining ignorant of the totality of God's principles for every aspect of life; and worse, we make God—or at least His principles—look foolish and irrelevant.

The first step is to know thoroughly the foundation of truth, which is Scripture—God's revelation to man. God has spoken to humanity through the written word—not some unverifiable mystical experience—but through objective language rooted in verifiable history. The fact that God would exist in and through the written word is an unprecedented concept that requires the highest order of abstract thinking. The written word is accessed through our intellect and not our passions. It is an exclusively intellectual medium that demands analysis, reflection, and thought, which in turn produces understanding.

Practical and Social APPLICABILITY OF SCRIPTURE

The challenge in our ongoing study of Scripture is relevance. According to a dictionary, relevance is defined as, "the practical and social applicability."[11] We need to understand that the Bible speaks either directly or by implication to virtually every issue confronting humanity. The Bible can provide perspective on those issues that it may not directly address, such as poverty, abortion, cloning and political issues, governmental and economic systems, and even the creative arts.

The Bible also provides practical principles for how to live as individuals—how to spend our time and money, how to parent, how we should relate to our employer, friends and family, and so forth. The Bible provides comprehensive instructions designed to improve and protect the quality of our lives. This is what we mean by the Christian worldview: developing a biblically centered understanding of *all* reality followed by the practical application of biblical truth to living for both our personal lives and society as a whole.

However, let me clarify that God's Word is much more than simply a book of wisdom or principles for living. It is fundamentally the true Story of the World. Alasdair McIntyre wisely said, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question of 'What story or stories do I find myself a part?'" A biblical theology or Christian worldview helps us to understand the true and entire story of which we find ourselves a part. It is His-story revealed to humanity. It tells us about God and His character; about our alienation from Him and why; and about His redemptive plan, which He through Christ alone completes. If we only study God's Word looking for practical application to our lives and not for intimacy and understanding of the Author, we do not grow in our knowledge of God. Frankly, I think we often read the Bible as if it is ultimately about us when in fact it is *all* about Him! By knowing God, we will no doubt gain a better understanding of ourselves, but our anthropology must begin with a biblical theology.

The Danger of WILLFUL IGNORANCE

According to Romans 1:28, complacency toward learning about and truly knowing God exposes us to God's judgment: "since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the *knowledge* of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done." (Emphasis added.) Accordingly, it is a dangerous thing indeed to approach the Word of God seeking only how we may use it for our temporal gain.

It is this broader understanding of theological and doctrinal truths revealed in Scripture that we must develop to render the Bible relevant and applicable to those areas I have mentioned: morality, identity, purpose, education, and so on. However, these truths are more difficult to discover. To do so requires a more intensive and systematic approach. This approach requires that we not only simply read the pages of our Bibles, but that we also incorporate appropriate theological and doctrinal references into our study. We may draw from biblical commentaries by reputable theologians and gain a working knowledge of Christian doctrine and the various perspectives that have developed through the centuries—of course, testing all of these against Scripture.

In this age, so many denominations, churches, and individual Christians de-emphasize doctrine and theology, opting instead for experience and relevance to the point of compromise. Consequently, too many Christians are ill-equipped to give an answer for the hope they have (see 1 Pet. 3:15), much less engage the culture effectively.

In the absence of rational doctrinal and theological understanding, Christians often issue religious rhetoric and moralizing rants against the social and cultural challenges of the day rather than commend the truth. Furthermore, those Christians who lack theological and doctrinal knowledge are often left floundering in the world, uncertain and prone to doubt when confronted by serious challenge from skeptics and critics. These reactions, ambivalence, and doubts only serve to further marginalize the Christian perspective in a world that has already reduced Christianity to nothing more than wishful thinking by the unenlightened.

In addition to direct biblical resources, we should draw upon the many historical resources and authors, such as early Church fathers like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, who wrote the foundation for much of today's church doctrine. We can also look to Martin Luther and John Calvin, who gave birth to the Protestant Reformation and established the foundations of modern evangelical Christianity. These perspectives help us to better understand our own theology and how we as Christians should live.

Consider others in history, like William Wilberforce, author of *Practical Christianity* and the man credited with the abolition of slavery in England in the nineteenth century, or C. S. Lewis, who has written some of the greatest works addressing cultural issues facing us today. Reading these and many others can help us better understand the application of biblical truth to relevant areas of social and cultural conflict. The list of godly men and women who have gone before us is endless. The knowledge God has provided through their experience and lives is priceless and worthy of pursuit.

Called to GROW IN KNOWLEDGE

It is this deeper understanding of Scripture, doctrine, and theology, as well as its relevance to *all* of life that the writer of Hebrews is addressing when he says,

> So let us stop going over the basic teachings about Christ again and again. Let us go on instead and become mature in our understanding. Surely, we don't need to start again with the fundamental importance of repenting from evil deeds and placing our faith in God. You don't need further instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And so, God willing, we will move forward to further understanding. (Heb. 6:1–3 NLT)

The writer is stating that we are to continue to grow in our knowledge of God's revealed Word as well as His world and how to live in it. We must take our understanding of Scripture beyond the context of religion and apply it to all of reality; everything in the world falls under God's authority and everything is subject to God's rule.

When we understand and embrace these broader truths, we are able to move, from merely living subject to the fallen world and the secular fundamentalism that now controls it, to being transforming agents of restoration, who are salt and light. We become people whom God uses to transform the world; to bring truth, justice, and peace to all areas of God's creation, strengthening the Church and transforming the arenas of business, politics, science, education, and the arts. All of these areas are of concern to God, and our mandate given in Genesis to exercise dominion over all of God's creation still stands today.

Confronting FALSE IDEAS

The essential fact is this: the spiritual conflict is fought on the cultural battlefield in profoundly intellectual terms. It is a battle in which, on one level, our adversary the devil seeks control of God's creation, including society, for the purposes of deceiving men and leading humanity away from the truth. I am not suggesting that we can win someone into the Kingdom of God purely through reason and intellectual arguments, but 2 Corinthians 10:5 does tell us that *false* arguments or ideologies can keep people from knowing God; therefore, we are commanded to tear down those arguments, to utterly destroy these "false pretensions." This is not a physical effort but an intellectual effort, like Paul reasoning with the Greeks and the Jews. This is precisely the issue that confronts us when addressing the legitimization of homosexuality, the malleability of identity and gender, end-of-life issues or any other moral issue. However, beyond these "hot button" cultural issues, our individual evangelism efforts are often hindered by false conceptions or *ideologies* of the human person to which so many people today adhere. These, more so than anything else, tend to keep us from the knowledge of salvation because we think of ourselves as innocent: "I may not be perfect but

I'm certainly not wicked!" Our response to all of these must be rational, reasonable, and persuasive and less reliant upon religious rhetoric.

J. Gresham Machen, the professor of New Testament theology at Princeton in the early 1900s and defender of the Christian faith who led in the founding of Westminster Theological Seminary, put it this way:

> False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which … prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion … So as Christians we should try to mold the thought of the world in such a way as to make the acceptance of Christianity something more than a logical absurdity ….
>
> What more pressing duty than for those who have received the mighty experience of regeneration, who, therefore, do not, like the world, neglect that whole series of vitally relevant facts which is embraced in Christian experience—what more pressing duty than for these men to make themselves masters of the thought of the world in order to make it an instrument of truth instead of error?[12]

This demands a rational and intelligent effort certainly guided by the Holy Spirit. However, a mind not surrendered to the Holy Spirit or committed to the intellectual disciplines of faith in Christ will not be effective in this holy work—a work to which we are *all* called. If we ignore this work, *we* permit these false ideas to become established. In doing so, because these ideas are alternatives to Christianity, Christianity becomes irrelevant. It is relegated to something for the weak-minded or non-thinking masses. Christianity may be tolerated for a time, but it most certainly will not be admitted into the public square to influence public policy and the moral consensus. What is worse is that this perceived irrelevance ultimately hinders the advance of the Gospel.

Perhaps nowhere are these false ideas more manifested than in the area of ethics and morality. It is the advance of false moral perspectives that has contributed significantly to a culture of unbelief in America. In other words, because the Church has been unable to articulate meaningful, rational, and compelling reasons for the preservation of biblical moral truth and authority, Christianity has become irrelevant in shaping the moral consensus. If it is irrelevant there, then it naturally follows that it will ultimately become irrelevant in offering *any* valid explanations of reality, meaning, and purpose.

Understanding the OPPOSING WORLDVIEW

If the first step toward developing a Christian mind and discernment is a comprehensive understanding of God's Word, then the second step involves understanding the opposition—powers and principalities. Colossians 2:8 says, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy …" The only way one can ensure one is not taken captive through deceptive philosophy is to possess a solid understanding of biblical truth and maintain a general understanding of how that truth relates to other false

worldviews or belief systems. As Christians we should understand the false worldviews present in the culture, or at least be able to recognize them and then be able to compare, contrast, and demonstrate through rational discourse the falsity of these worldviews.

This is one of the principal aims of the Colson Center for Christian Worldview. Through our commitment to equipping Christians with clarity, confidence, and courage, we seek to equip Christians with a thoughtful understanding of the social, cultural, and moral issues that confront the Church today so they can live faithfully and effectively for God. In doing this, Christians can then move out into the world and become a transforming force empowered by the Holy Spirit, effectively equipped for the task before them with the renewed mind of Christ. Instead of being overwhelmed by the world or, worse, conformed to it, we can be used like our forefathers to transform the world. These are the kind of Christians that are desperately needed in the twenty-first century: men and women who will love the Lord their God with all of their hearts, with all of their souls, and with all of their minds.

Practical Steps to Developing a CHRISTIAN MIND

First and foremost, please do not assume that what I am advocating can only derive from so-called higher education. This is simply not possible for everyone. If this is the case with you, do not be discouraged. I certainly value the benefits of a formal education, and I challenge the Church to recapture its commitment to education as a principal work. Nonetheless, I do not believe that universities and seminaries represent the exclusive and only legitimate sources of knowledge. In fact, given the current educational paradigms and the dominance of secular humanist thinking in American universities, I would urge prospective students to be both aware and adequately prepared for the antagonistic philosophical climate that is so prevalent.

Instead, I advocate for a rigorous self-discipline that is available to everyone with a desire to learn in order that they may grow in the knowledge of their Lord and present themselves as good and faithful servants. I do not hold advanced degrees; in fact, I never graduated from college, and yet the Lord has used me to teach at seminaries, universities, and churches around the country. Historically, I reached millions of readers worldwide through my weekly commentaries, and I now lead the largest Christian fellowship dedicated to Christian worldview formation in the world (the Colson Fellows program). This is not because I'm smart; it is because the Lord alone gives wisdom to those who seek it for His glory. The Christian's desire for wisdom is a desire for knowledge that seeks to honor God and not ourselves. If it is wisdom you seek, you have the assurance that the Lord will take your earnest motivations to acquire knowledge. Through them *He* will give wisdom and understanding.

> For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. (Prov. 2:6)

I do hope and pray that you will be both inspired and encouraged to take on the discipline of intentional biblical scholarship and philosophical study so you can "prepare your minds for action" (1 Pet. 1:13). I also

pray that in doing so you will become wise and gracious in your speech and conduct toward the lost, seeking every opportunity to take their questions seriously. We must realize that the task of taking every thought captive in a culture dominated by false ideas is overwhelming—but responsibility for the results is not ours. We are only called to guard the good deposit entrusted to us by the help of the Holy Spirit (see 2 Tim. 1:14). May this be our motivation as we endeavor to grow in wisdom, truth, and understanding.

Again, please be encouraged. While there may be some who would never think of themselves as scholars or intellectuals, I am convinced by Scripture that it is God alone who gives true wisdom and understanding. Our only responsibility is to do our part in acquiring the knowledge; and if you are a pastor or teacher, to transmit the knowledge. Every Christian, regardless of educational achievement or intellectual aptitude, can grow in truth and knowledge and thereby gain understanding.

> Tune your ears to the world of Wisdom; set your heart on a life of Understanding. That's right—if you make Insight your priority, and won't take no for an answer, searching for it like a prospector panning for gold, like an adventurer on a treasure hunt, believe me, before you know it Fear-of-GOD will be yours; you'll have come upon the knowledge of God. And here's why: God gives out Wisdom free, is plainspoken in Knowledge and Understanding. (Prov. 2:2–6 MSG)

We need to earnestly seek and teach *meaningful* knowledge and abandon exclusive commitments to superficial knowledge that only appeals to "itching" ears. Such knowledge rarely challenges us intellectually or spiritually. The goal of learning, wrote the great Christian poet Milton, "is to repair the ruins of our first parents." I challenge you to make this your goal as you pursue knowledge. Seek wisdom, to better understand the culture in which you live, and form a consciously Christian approach to life and reality so that you may serve and bear witness to God's redemptive purposes in the world. May the Lord bless you!

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ENDNOTES

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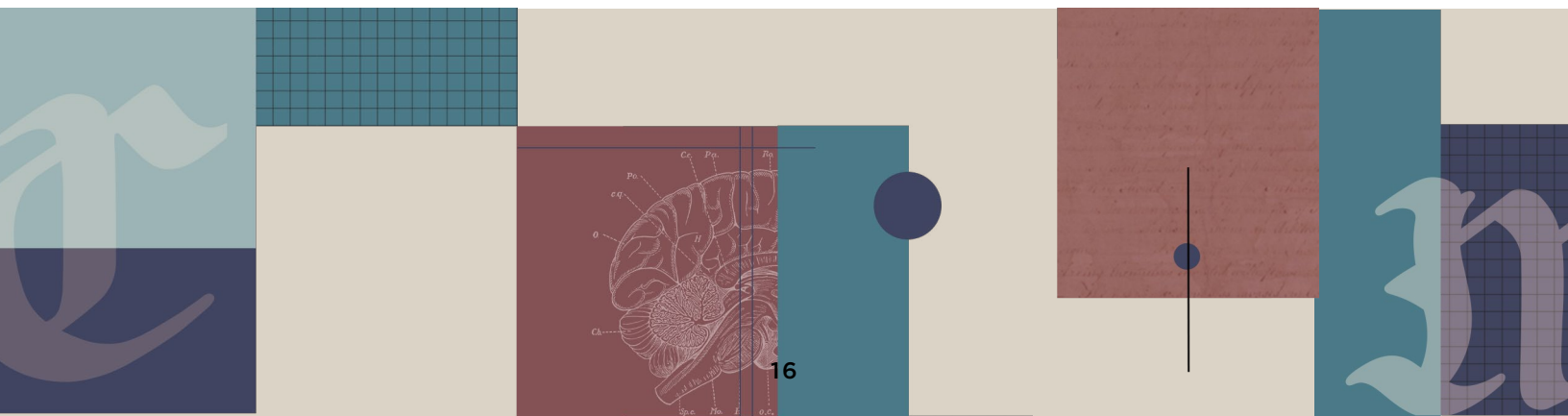
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