

The Areopagus

The Call to “Love God With All Your Mind...”

The Problem of Christian Anti-Intellectualism

Jefrey D. Breshears

Several years ago I received a call from the minister of education in a church where I was teaching a course. He was interested to know how things were going, and I responded that everything appeared to be fine – there seemed to be quite a lot of interest, we were having good discussions, etc. After a minute or so he mentioned that the church staff had heard several comments about the class, but one person in particular had caught their attention when she remarked, “Dr. Breshears talks to us like we’re intelligent!” The minister went on to say, “Now we [the staff] are all wondering what she meant by that. What’s that supposed to say about us?” I just smiled and casually changed the subject. It seemed rather imprudent to point out any obvious implications.

If I had to choose between a clean heart or a sharp mind, I’d opt for the former without a doubt. After all, Jesus did say, “Blessed are the pure of heart” – not “Blessed are the mentally acute.” But of course this is a false dilemma and a choice that we need not make. The example of Jesus himself provides ample evidence that one does not exclude the other. Nevertheless, many Christians seem to think it’s one or the other and that a fideistic (purely intuitive) faith is somehow more “spiritual” than a belief system based on study and reflection. This orientation persists despite the clear warning of scripture that “It is not good to have zeal without knowledge” (Prov. 19:2) and Paul’s instruction to his young protege, Timothy, to study diligently in order to acquire the necessary knowledge and wisdom for effective ministry (II Tim. 2:15).

No one should think that the goal of the Christian life is to become a Christian intellectual (whatever that means). Many of the most sincere and devout Christians I know are not particularly intellectual by orientation. But it’s one thing to be *un*intellectual by nature – there’s no shame in that – but quite another thing to be *anti*-intellectual by

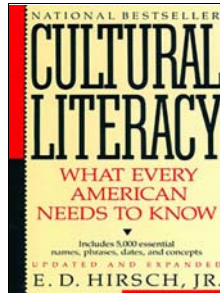
choice. *Anti*-intellectualism – intellectual laziness or an aversion to anything that requires mental effort – is not only unimpressive but contrary to what Jesus declared to be the greatest of all commandments: To love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Does anyone seriously believe that we can honor God while living mindlessly, or practice wholistic discipleship without thinking deeply about our faith and relating it to every area of life?

Although America is blessed with many great thinkers, American culture in general is appallingly anti-intellectual. Generally speaking, knowledge is not highly valued – or at least, knowledge of things that truly matter. (On the other hand, millions apparently have an insatiable curiosity when it comes to the private lives of celebrities.) In a culture that values entertainment over most everything else, Socrates’ dictum that “The unexamined life is not worth living” has been replaced by the notion that “The unstimulated life is not worth living.” This is the realization of Aldous Huxley’s eery prophecy in *Brave New World* and the theme of Neil Postman’s modern classic, *Amusing Ourselves To Death*.

Cultural Illiteracy

Over the past generation, due in part to a misguided devotion to egalitarianism, America has become an LCD (Lowest Common Denominator) culture in which standards have plummeted in virtually every area of life. We see this not only in our educational, political and legal systems but also in the media, popular culture, and public and private morality. Regrettably, we also see it in the church where, under the guise of “relevancy,” worship services are transformed into pop entertainment spectacles, homiletics (the art of preaching) degenerates into feel-good motivational rhetoric, and Christian education is reduced to fun-and-games activities for youth and mind-numbingly superficial “Bible study” for adults.

Twenty-five years ago E. D. Hirsch published a book that temporarily sent the American education establishment into convulsions. *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1986) exposed the utter bankruptcy of decades of educational experimentation that had rendered most Americans abysmally ignorant of the basic core knowledge on which our culture is founded. Hirsch cited surveys that indicated that most American college students and adults lack the basic knowledge to understand current events or function responsibly as citizens. He attributed the problem to John Dewey and other “Progressive Education” reformers in the early 20th century who abandoned content-based learning in favor of a skills-based approach that de-emphasized the accumulation of facts and knowledge in favor of “values clarification” and (so-called) “critical thinking.”*



* Predictably, the education establishment generally dismissed Hirsch’s book as rightwing reactionary paranoia and “academic fundamentalism.”

As for emphases on “values clarification” and “critical thinking,” it should be pointed out that no systematic and generally-accepted process has yet been established for realizing these ideals. Certainly, there has been no effort to offer mandatory (or even elective) courses on either Natural Law theory or the principles of logic. On the contrary, logic is often disparaged by liberal academic elites as “Western thinking” or by radical feminists as “male thinking.”

[NOTE: More recently, comedian Jay Leno’s “Jaywalking” segments, in which he interviews random people on the streets of Hollywood and elsewhere, confirm Hirsch’s thesis, only in a considerably less scientific and more humorous vein. Some examples:

Leno: “Can you name two of the founding fathers?”

Interviewee: “Founding fathers of what?”

Leno: “Can you name any of the Ten Commandments?”

Interviewee: “Uhhh... freedom of speech....”

Leno: “Who fiddled while Rome burned?”

Interviewee: “Who fiddled? Fiddled with what?”

Leno: “What was the Gettysburg Address?... Have you heard of it?”

Interviewee (dressed in a cap and gown at her college graduation ceremony): “Uh, yeah, I’ve heard of it, but I don’t know the exact address.”

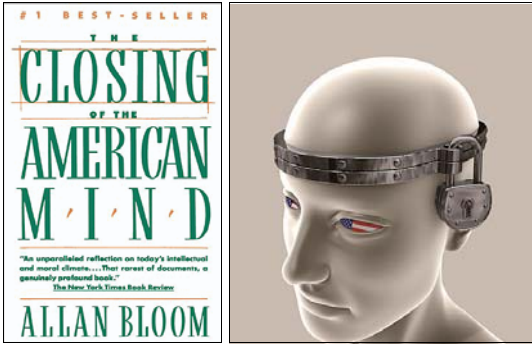
Leno: “What is the opening line of the Bible?”

Interviewee: “Long ago in a galaxy far far away....”]

A year after Hirsch’s book was released, University of Chicago educator Allan Bloom published *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), in which he analyzed the philosophy behind the shift away from knowledge-based education. According to Bloom, the major reason why modern education has been reduced to skill development and job training is because it is permeated with relativistic values. In the Introduction he noted that relativism is the cornerstone “virtue” on which all modern education is built:

There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative....

[Contemporary students] are unified only in their relativism and in their allegiance to equality.... The danger they have been taught to fear from absolutism is not error but intolerance. Relativism is necessary to openness, and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to inculcating. [Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, pp. 25-26.]



In a similar vein, philosopher J. Budziszewski recounts his first faculty job interview (prior to his conversion to Christianity) and how his confident commitment to relativism landed him the position:

Twenty-four years ago I stood before the [political science] department at the University of Texas to give my 'here's-why-you-should-hire-me' lecture. Fresh out of grad school, I wanted to teach about ethics and politics, so I was showing the faculty my stuff. What did I tell them? First, that we human beings just make up our own definitions of what's good and what's evil; and second, that we aren't responsible for what we do, anyway. For that I was hired to teach." [J. Budziszewski, *How To Stay Christian in College*, p. 18.]

To say the least, such a mentality poses a serious problem for education because if everything is subjective, why bother subjecting students to the rigor of learning facts when, as Nietzsche declared, "truth" is no more than "a mobile army of metaphors." In other words, there is no truth and there are no facts – only opinions and interpretations. Or as the philosopher John Caputo writes in *Radical Hermeneutics*, "The truth is that there is no truth."

Inspired by Hirsch's and Bloom's books and troubled by my own students' apparent lack of cultural literacy, I administered a 50-question exam to several hundred students at Georgia State University in the mid-1980s that covered a wide span of common names, terms, events, etc., including mind-benders such as...

- List the last four American presidents.
- What river forms the boundary between Texas and Mexico?
- What is the connotation of the term, "Wall Street" (i.e., what does it symbolize)?
- What issue was decided in the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision of 1973? and

- Who wrote the songs "Blowin' In the Wind," "The Times They Are A-changin'," and "Like a Rolling Stone?"



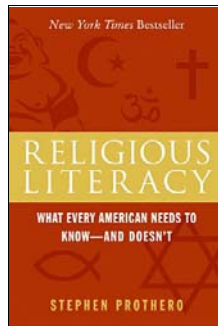
On a negative scale, the results exceeded my expectations. On a standard grading scale of 0 to 100, with 60 being the cut-off mark for a passing grade, over 90% of these students failed the test, and less than a fourth scored above the 50% mark. While nearly half could name the four former members of the Beatles, only about three in a hundred could list four current members of the U. S. Supreme Court. Almost two-thirds could identify Mikhail Gorbachev as the leader of the Soviet Union, but less than a third knew the names of Georgia's two senators. Only eight percent came reasonably close to approximating the population of the United States, with fully one-fourth estimating that it exceeds a billion. (One student was quite precise: 18.25 bazillion.) Even more troubling, 87% could not identify *Roe v. Wade* as the landmark court decision legalizing abortion.

In an article published in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, I commented...

Much has been written and discussed lately lamenting the apparent lack of knowledge of fundamental core principles, institutions and traditions upon which Western civilization in general and American culture in particular are based. In 1985 Congress required the National Endowment for the Humanities to prepare a status report on humanities education as part of the NEH's reauthorization legislation. In "American Memory: A Report on the Humanities in the Nation's Public Schools," the NEH concluded that the current history and literature curriculum offered in public schools is largely inadequate, that too much emphasis is placed on mastering skills to the detriment of subject content. Among its findings, "American Memory" revealed that over two-thirds of American high school graduates were unable to place the Civil War within the correct half-century. [Jeffrey D. Breshears, "Our Students' Minds Are a Cultural Disaster." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Jan. 10, 1988), 6C.]

This situation would be alarming enough if it were limited only to “secular” issues, but of course that’s far from true. More recently, and more to the point of Christian anti-intellectualism, Stephen Prothero, a religion professor at Boston University, has focused on the crisis state of religious illiteracy in his 2007 book, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn’t*. In the Introduction Prothero relates a comment by a visiting professor from Austria that Americans are “very religious, but they know next to nothing about religion.” Prothero observes that America, “one of the most religious countries on earth, is also a nation of religious illiterates,” and confesses that early on in his academic career he unwittingly contributed to this knowledge deficit:

When I finished graduate school and became a professor myself, I told students that I didn’t care about facts. I cared about having challenging conversations, and I offered my quiz-free classrooms as places to do just that. I soon found, however, that the challenging conversations I coveted were not possible without some common knowledge – common knowledge my students plainly lacked. And so, quite against my prior inclinations, I began testing them [Eventually] I became, like Hirsch, a traditionalist about content. [Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn’t*, p. 4.]



In his book, Prothero points out that ignorance of Christianity and the Bible is not just a problem for non-Christians and secularists, and that self-described “born-again Christians” score only slightly better than other Americans on religious literacy surveys. Other studies tend to support this assessment. For instance, drawing upon voluminous research over the past 25 years, George Barna has concluded that less than 10% of Americans have a consistent biblical worldview, including the majority of professing Christians.

There is, of course, an inextricable connection between cultural literacy in general and religious knowledge in particular that Christians should especially value. Neither the Bible nor Christian history and theology can be understood outside their broader historical context – just as everything that happens in Christianity today is

influenced by the events of our time and the culture in which we live. This means that those with little or no historical consciousness will always have at best a superficial understanding of Scripture, Christian history and the present state of the church. Nothing that happens in history, including the life and ministry of Jesus, occurs in an historical vacuum, and it is impossible to adequately understand either the narrative or the meaning of Christ’s life without some measure of historical and cultural literacy. This awareness alone should prompt Christians to value and pursue knowledge if for no other reason than to understand the Bible, the Christian faith and tradition, and the current role of the church in our society today.

The Causes

So who (or what) is responsible for the current deficiency in religious and cultural knowledge in our society, particularly among Christians? I think there are four sources of the problem:

(1) One obvious source is the failure of parents to impart at least a rudimentary level of religious literacy to their children. The home should provide a rich pedagogical environment for the transmission of true knowledge, manners and morals, but regrettably many parents fail to maximize the opportunities that these precious years afford. When a child can grow up and live in a home for at least 18 years (that’s more than 157,000 hours) without ever learning anything substantive about the Bible and the Christian faith (or other religions, for that matter), the fundamental responsibility for the failure certainly rests on the parents.

(2) For its part, public education (and much of private education) contributes significantly to the problem by excluding religion from the curriculum under the misguided notion that it otherwise would violate the principle of separation of church and state. Not only is religionless education seriously deficient, but it actually promotes a secularistic worldview that is innately anti-Christian.

(3) Popular culture – including TV, movies and music – is a pervasive influence in American life, yet it rarely presents anything but a critical or satirical view of Christianity. The anti-Christian bias in contemporary popular culture is stunning, to say the least, but in fact this has been the case throughout most of the 20th century. Even in the conventional 1950s, TV, movies and music rarely

acknowledged religious issues or even hinted that the Christian faith is a significant factor in American life. (How often was God ever mentioned in *Leave It To Beaver* or *Father Knows Best*, or how many times were Ricky Ricardo and Lucy or Ozzie and Harriet ever shown in church?) While not as explicitly hostile to Christian values as contemporary pop culture, TV, movies and music in the '50s nonetheless marginalized Christianity to the point of irrelevancy.

(4)The fourth factor, and in many respects the most troubling, is the current state of church-based Christian education. Several of the questions on my "Cultural Literacy Quiz" were religious-based or had religious connotations, including...

- What is the name of the current pope, and what nationality is he?
- What is the largest Christian denomination in the U.S.?
- What issue was decided in the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision of 1973?
- Who wrote most of the books of the New Testament? (Less than 20% answered "the apostle Paul" or "St. Paul," and other responses ranged from Moses, John the Baptist and Jesus to "King James" and "Nobody knows.")

Considering my students' lack of religious literacy in general and Bible knowledge in particular, I occasionally ruminated on the implications. Assuming that children can begin learning Bible stories and retaining basic Bible knowledge at about age four, and supposing that about half of my students grew up attending church at least half of the time, they would have logged nearly 400 hours in church (or 800 hours if they attended both church and Sunday School) by the time they entered college. Now if students were exposed to arithmetic or English grammar or U.S. history for several hundred hours, we might reasonably expect them to know something about the subject by the time they got to college. Yet very few of my students seemed to know much of anything when it came to the Bible and Christianity. (Of course, most didn't seem to know anything about history, either.)

The troubling fact is that Christian parents aren't the only ones to blame for their children's ignorance of the Christian faith. Churches also share much of the responsibility. When such

things aren't discussed informally and as a matter of course at home and around the dinner table, the message to children is that "religion" is merely a Sunday obligation rather than a lifestyle. Then, when children and youth aren't challenged at church to think about their faith and relate it to the issues of life, it becomes merely a tedious ritual with little relation to the "real" world.

Most evangelical churches, at least to some extent, emphasize theology – i.e., *what* we are supposed to believe about God and morality – but very few emphasize apologetics – i.e., *why* we should believe these things. In the vast majority of churches, neither adults nor young people are challenged to explore in any real depth the factual and rational bases for the Christian faith.

For many Christians, theirs is essentially a subjective, emotion-driven and/or merely inherited faith devoid of any intellectual substance. Relatively few demonstrate anything other than a superficial understanding of the Bible, and even fewer are well-versed in Christian theology, church history and apologetics. The result, inevitably, is that most cannot adequately defend what they purport to believe – even when trying to share their faith with their children. This explains why, as Barna's research reveals, more than three-quarters of young adult Christians lose their faith when they go off to college. It also explains, at least in part, the reluctance of most Christian adults to stand up for their beliefs publicly or at work.

I'm always dismayed when I hear pastors or other Christians repeat the fideistic mantra that "We just have to believe" some theological or moral proposition with no explanation as to *why* such a belief is warranted. If there is one problem that the church doesn't have today, it is that too many Christians think too much. On the contrary, one of the reasons why Christianity has been on the defensive for 150 years is that Christians haven't been thinking enough. For the most part, we've conceded the great intellectual battles of the last century-and-a-half to secularists and other anti-Christian skeptics, and then we wonder why we're losing the culture war. As mentioned at the outset, the sad fact is that much of the church today is not merely *unintellectual* but defiantly *anti-intellectual*. As Christian philosopher William Lane Craig has written:

Churches are filled with Christians who are idling in intellectual neutral. As Christians, their minds are going to waste. One result of this is an immature, superficial faith....

The church is perishing today through a lack of thinking, not an excess of it.

[William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith* (1984, 1994), pp. xiv, xv.]



The Consequences

We are often reminded that we live in a post-Christian culture, but many Christians fail to understand that we are losing the culture war (at least in part) because we have essentially forfeited the intellectual war. Ideas have consequences, and history has shown that what is intellectually respectable becomes, over time, socially acceptable and culturally normative.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a few Christian leaders understood that the church, in order to uphold the credibility of the gospel, must stand up to the challenges posed by theological liberalism, scientism, Darwinism, Marxism, Freudianism and other threats to the faith. In 1913, in an article in the *Princeton Theological Review* entitled “Christianity and Culture,” John Gresham Machen, a renowned Princeton theologian, warned that if Christians failed to adequately address the intellectual challenges of the day, the gospel would be put on the defensive and evangelism would be seriously hampered. Machen wrote that “False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel,” and that passionate evangelism would experience only sporadic success “if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation” [i.e., the *Zeitgeist* – the “spirit of the times”] to fall under the influence of anti-Christian philosophies. In such a culture, Christianity would become privatized, excluded from the public square, and generally dismissed as little more than “a harmless delusion.” The solution, according to Machen, was for Christians to become actively engaged in the great

intellectual controversies of the day and take the battle to the enemy on their own ground in the universities and seminaries.

Unfortunately, Machen’s warning went largely unheeded. Christians generally failed to respond to the intellectual challenges of the 20th century, and today we are reaping the consequences. As a result, a general lack of intellectual preparation has left many Christians confused, vulnerable and timid when it comes to standing for truth. As Dinesh D’Souza observes in *What’s So Great About Christianity*, “Instead of engaging [the] secular world, most Christians have taken the easy way out” and “retreated into a Christian subculture.” But it is a generally weak subculture that lacks the necessary countercultural values to withstand the constant pressures and temptations of mainstream culture.

In a *Christianity Today* article in 1980 entitled “The Other Side of Evangelism,” Charles Malik, a former Lebanese ambassador to the U.S., labeled anti-intellectualism the greatest weakness in evangelical Christianity because it undermines the credibility of our testimony. With great eloquence, Malik challenged Christians – particularly Christian young people – to take their education seriously and, regardless of their chosen vocation, prepare for a lifetime of effective ministry.

I must be frank with you: the greatest danger confronting American evangelical Christianity is the danger of anti-intellectualism. The mind in its greatest and deepest reaches is not cared for enough. But intellectual nurture cannot take place apart from profound immersion for a period of years in the history of thought and the spirit....

It will take a different spirit altogether to overcome this great danger of anti-intellectualism....

For the sake of greater effectiveness in witnessing to Jesus Christ himself, as well as for their own sakes, evangelicals cannot afford to keep on living on the periphery of responsible intellectual existence. [Charles Malik, “The Other Side of Evangelism.” *Christianity Today* (Nov. 7, 1980), p. 40.]

In his book, *Love Your God with All Your Mind*, philosopher J. P. Moreland asks the reader to imagine a church filled with people who are self-absorbed, intellectually shallow and easily manipulated by the latest pop culture fads. As Moreland describes it, such a church would lack the theological depth, the strength of character

and the necessary faith to stand against the grinding pressures and seductive temptations of contemporary life. He asks, “What would be the theological understanding, the evangelistic courage, [and] the cultural penetration of such a church?” The following points summarize his conclusions:

- It all comes down to priorities: If the cultivation of one’s interior life is not a priority, there is inadequate motivation to spend the necessary time and effort developing an intellectually- and spiritually-mature life.
- Those who are intellectually passive and lazy lack the motivation to read and study, preferring instead to be entertained.
- If one is overly sensate in orientation, music and visual media will be more appealing than words on a page or abstract thoughts that require mental effort to process.
- If one is over-stimulated, cannot focus and is constantly hurried and distracted, he/she will have little patience for theoretical knowledge and too short an attention span to stay with an idea that is being carefully developed.
- If they read at all, self-absorbed people who are emotionally and intellectually immature will most likely gravitate toward books about Christian celebrities, the latest Christian pop fiction, or self-help books filled with simplistic moralizing and a superficial treatment of complex issues that place no demands on the reader.
- Christians who are emotionally and intellectually immature avoid substantive books that challenged readers to think deeply about the Christian faith or call them to a deeper level of commitment.
- Such a church filled with such people would be impotent in terms of standing against the powerful forces of narcissism, secularism, materialism and hedonism that dominate our contemporary culture.
- Furthermore, such a church, thoroughly coopted by the value system of modern American culture, would offer no countercultural or prophetic message.
- Such a church would measure her success primarily in terms of numbers – numbers that would be achieved primarily by watering-down and dumbing-down the

gospel message and by catering to shallow and self-absorbed Christians.

- Eventually, such a church would become “her own grave digger,” and her means of short-term success would turn out to be the very thing that would render her irrelevant in the long run. [J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind* (1997), pp. 93-94.]

Of course, what makes Moreland’s hypothetical scenario so troubling is that it’s not hypothetical at all. Unfortunately, we don’t have to imagine such a church filled with such people because, in reality, this pretty much characterizes most churches and, frankly, too many church leaders. With such a mentality so prevalent in contemporary Christianity, is it any wonder why Christians are having so little impact on our society and culture? Is it any mystery why we are losing the culture war and why, with each passing decade, our society is growing increasingly rude, crude and lewd? We aren’t losing the culture war because the Christian belief system lacks truth and integrity. Essentially, we are losing the culture war by default. Having been co-opted by the values of our culture – not the least of which is a narcissistic, undisciplined and anti-intellectual approach to life – we have little to offer in terms of any convincing countercultural witness.

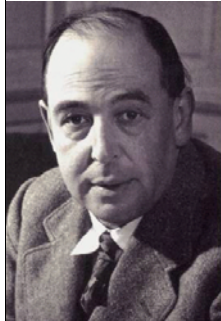
As with all religions, people identify with Christianity for a variety of reasons. Many find great psychological comfort in their faith as a source of peace, joy and fulfillment in this life, along with the belief that a loving and benevolent God will preserve their souls for all of eternity. Others take a purely pragmatic approach and hope that if there is an afterlife, their religious faith will save them from eternal hellfire and damnation. For others, it’s mostly about the satisfaction they attain from the social relationships they develop in church. And of course there are always those who are motivated primarily by economic and business considerations, or even by the political advantages that church membership can offer.

But ultimately, there is really only one reason why anyone should want to be a Christian: because it is *true*. The fundamental issue is not how our faith makes us feel or the benefits it offers, but does it correspond to reality? The Christian faith makes certain exclusive truth claims that, if false, render the Christian faith fraudulent and unimportant. However, if these truth claims are true, they elevate the Christian

faith to the level of infinite importance. And in order to be true, the Christian faith must be intellectually coherent, consistent and credible. In other words, it must be factual and rational. It cannot be based on subjective feelings, intuition and personal experience alone.

This is always a difficult concept to convey because people naturally want to identify with a religion in order to derive certain benefits from it. In his essay on “Christian Apologetics,” C.S. Lewis addressed this perennial problem:

One of the great difficulties [in sharing the gospel] is to keep before the audience’s mind the question of Truth. They always think you are recommending Christianity not because it is *true* but because it is good. And in the discussion they will constantly try to escape into stuff about the Spanish Inquisition [or the Crusades]... or anything whatever. You have to keep forcing them back... to the real point. Only thus will you be able to undermine ... their belief that a certain amount of ‘religion’ is desirable but one mustn’t carry it too far. One must keep on pointing out that Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important....



The great difficulty is to get modern audiences to realize that you are preaching Christianity solely because you think it is true; they always suppose you are preaching it because you like it or think it is good for society or something of that sort.... This immediately helps them to realize that what is being discussed is a question about objective fact – not about ideals and points view.... Do not water down Christianity.” [“Christian Apologetics,” in *Undeception: Essays on Theology and Ethics*.]

I’m often surprised by how entrenched fideism is in our churches and how much resistance there is to apologetics. One would think that for many Christians, a belief system based on facts and reason is somehow less spiritual than a factless and irrational leap of faith. As William Lane Craig notes in his book, *Passionate Conviction*, “Sometimes people try to justify their lack of intellectual engagement by asserting that they prefer having a ‘simple faith.’ But here I think we must distinguish between a childlike faith and a

childish faith.” This is a vital distinction.

A childlike faith is one that recognizes our total dependence upon our Heavenly Father.

A childish faith, on the other hand, is immature, self-centered, unreflective and purely emotion-driven. It’s all the difference between being “simple” rather than “simplistic” (or simple-minded). I heartily agree with the theme of the old Shaker hymn, “Tis a gift to be simple,” but I would add, “Tis a shame to be a simpleton.” Being created in the *imago Dei* – the image of God – we have been endowed with a mind capable of both creative and rational thought, and we should endeavor to honor God with all of our mental faculties.

Anti-intellectualism detracts from the credibility of our message and the attractability of our faith. On a personal level, people may like us and even respect us, but rightly or wrongly, they will take us and our beliefs far more seriously if they can respect us intellectually.

The Calling

We live in an LCD culture in which low standards and mediocrity are the norm in many areas of life. Unfortunately, this is as much of a problem in many Christian families and churches as it is in our culture in general. But scripture is clear that as followers of Jesus Christ we are called to a higher standard, and part of that high calling is to honor and serve God not only with our passion and our will, but also with our mind.

As Christians we are called to be apologists (or defenders) for the faith, just as we’re all called to be evangelists (or witnesses) for Christ. In fact, in our multi-cultural and pluralistic society today, evangelism without apologetics is mostly an exercise in futility. In I Peter 3:15 believers are exhorted to “sanctify (or “set apart”) Christ as Lord in your heart,” to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have,” and to “do this with gentleness and respect.” Like the Great Commission, the call to be an apologist is not optional. This requires that we study and reflect upon what we believe so as to broaden and deepen our faith, and this is a process that takes intentionality, commitment and mental effort. But those who take this calling seriously find that it becomes a labor of love and that the rewards – both for ourselves as well as for others – often exceed our imagination.

The goal of the Christian life is not to be an intellectual but to be like Jesus. Spiritual maturity, not intellectual brilliance, is what really matters. But in Jesus we find someone motivated not only by love and compassion but also by truth. In Jesus we find not only the world's greatest mystic and spiritual guru but the world's greatest philosopher and theologian. As our ideal, we find in him someone in perfect spiritual harmony with God the Father, and as our model, we find in him the perfect integration of passion, intellect and will.

By vocation I am an historian and an apologist, but by nature I am a contemplative Christian, and it is the cultivation of my soul and my communion with God through the internal presence of the Holy Spirit that I value the most. Nonetheless, I find that there is a symbiotic relationship between spiritual formation and an active mind, and I am convinced that the two are inseparable. If we truly desire to become more Christlike, we will progressively take on "the mind of Christ" as we deepen our communion with him. The apostle Paul clearly understood this connection as he declared in his exhortation to the Christians in Rome:

Therefore, I urge you... in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the thought-patterns and lifestyles of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve God's good and perfect will." [Rom. 12:1-2]

The Solution

In this article I've sought to draw attention to the problem of Christian anti-intellectualism, the sources of the problem, the consequences, and our calling as followers of Jesus Christ to transcend the mediocrity of contemporary status quo Christianity. It is beyond the scope of this article to offer solutions to the problem.

Fortunately, solutions do exist, and many excellent programs and resources are available for those who desire to broaden and deepen their commitment to Christ and their understanding of the Christian faith. For children, there are two programs that are particularly outstanding: the Montessori-based Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (www.cctheo.org) and the evangelical based AWANA program (www.awana.org).

For college students and adults there is a wealth of apologetical literature and resources –

probably 90% of which has been produced in just the past 20 years. At the Areopagus we offer a systematic seminary-level curriculum that includes a 6-semester sequence of courses in apologetics and a 6-semester series in Christian history in addition to numerous other seminars in contemporary cultural studies and other topics.

[NOTE: A list of Areopagus courses is posted on our website at www.TheAreopagus.org under "Areopagus Seminars." Also, the "Areopagus Articles" section features several articles that offer practical solutions to the problem of Christian anti-intellectualism. In addition, we have recommended reading lists in Christian History and Christian Apologetics (as well as Christian Spirituality) in our "Resources" section.]

Christians who aren't content with mediocrity in their own life shouldn't settle for it in their church. Most ministers and church staff are committed Christians who are sincerely dedicated to serving others. The tendency, however, is to think "inside the box" and merely follow the latest trends or the path of least resistance. In a spirit of love and service, Christian parents should insist that their church provide the highest quality Christian education possible for their children and become actively involved in it. We only have one opportunity to raise our children, and anything other than the best should be unacceptable.

Likewise, the quality of adult education in most of our churches needs to be seriously upgraded, which might require some radical changes in Sunday School and the Wednesday night schedule. Rather than the traditional Sunday School system of dividing members up into permanent self-contained classes based on age (and even sex), churches could offer creative and stimulating semester-length courses on a variety of topics related to Biblical studies, theology, church history, apologetics, comparative worldviews and religions, contemporary cultural issues, science and the Christian faith, Christianity in literature and the arts, and even philosophy.

If churches lack qualified teachers for such specialized courses, there are two options:

(1) Organize discussion groups around video productions;* or

* For a list of recommended films and videos conducive to small group discussions, please see the "Resources" section on our Areopagus website at www.TheAreopagus.org.

(2) Recruit gifted teachers in various subject fields from local universities, seminaries or even other churches. (If churches in a community began sharing their resources – including their human resources – it would be mutually beneficial to them all.) As a Christian education and resource ministry in the metro-Atlanta area, the Areopagus specializes in this kind of adult education, and in most cities there are gifted Christians who are knowledgeable in at least some of these fields of study.

What would be intolerable – not to mention totally unnecessary – would be to continue on as we have in the past. There is no reason to settle for mediocrity, and for the sake of the gospel the time has come to deal decisively with the problem of Christian anti-intellectualism. Of all people, Christians should be the most thoughtful, the most inquisitive, and the most creative as we seek to fulfill our calling to love and honor God with all our mind.

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