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FEATURE

Nurturing the Mind of the Christian Professional

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The Christian professional must be a thinking being, whose thoughts are grounded in the conception of eternity and an understanding of God. Some secular authors suggest that Christians aren't good at thinking. This paper argues that Christians need to think more clearly than ever, with their thoughts based on biblical principles, and to act as leaders in their community, promoting such things as faith, creativity, life, service and generosity, and avoiding pitfalls such as mental dualism and over-analysis. The agenda for Christian professionals in the new millennium should include fostering human hope, promoting life, and engaging in scholarship based on biblical values.

In his now classic book, *The Christian Mind: How Should A Christian Think?*, Harry Blamires stated bluntly, “There is no longer a Christian mind.... There is still, of course, a Christian ethic, a Christian practice, and a Christian spirituality.... But as a *thinking* being, the modern Christian has succumbed to secularization.” After surveying the cultural and intellectual landscape of Western Europe in 1963, this British author concluded that there were few, if any, contemporary thinkers “reflecting Christianly on the modern world and modern man” (1978, p. 7).

Blamires assessed literature, journalism, the arts, commerce, politics, and saw the vanishing presence of “the Christian mind—a mind trained, informed, equipped to handle data of secular controversy within a framework of reference which is constructed of Christian presuppositions” (1978, p. 43). In his view, this was a tragic turn of events because “the Christian mind is the prerequisite of Christian thinking. And Christian thinking is the prerequisite of Christian action” (p. 43). To highlight his concern, he elaborated further: “To think secularly is to think within a frame of reference bounded by the limits of our life on earth: it is to keep one’s calculations rooted in this-worldly criteria.” In contrast, “to think Christianly is to accept all things with the mind as related,

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directly or indirectly, to man's eternal destiny as the redeemed and chosen child of God" (p.44).

One generation later, U.S. Christian historian Mark Noll (1994) evaluated the status of evangelicalism in his country and wrote: "The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind.... American evangelicals are not exemplary for their thinking, and they have not been so for generations.... Evangelicalism has little intellectual muscle" (p. 3).

In this brief essay we will summarize the biblical view of human rationality and its implications for Christian professionals, review the indicators of a mature faith, outline the qualities of a thoughtful Christian, consider the temptations that Christian professionals face, and suggest an agenda for the committed Christian professional.

Defining the terms

Professionals, one of the key words of our title, are persons who have acquired solid knowledge and special skills in a particular field through advanced studies, who utilize them to earn their livelihood, and who are recognized for their expertise and experience. A *Christian* professional, then, is a person who has made a commitment to integrate faith and knowledge in his or her chosen career or vocation. *Faith*, in turn, can be defined as trust in God and in His promises, believing that His character is merciful and just as portrayed in the Bible and personified in Jesus; it is the conviction that He knows us personally and wishes the best for us.

The apostle Paul, one of the greatest thinkers of early Christianity, stated that in the Christian life, faith and knowledge must interact and grow together: "We have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please Him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God" (Colossians 1: 9, 10, NIV). It is worth noting the three steps that the apostle outlined for the Christian: First, to know God and His will; second, to gain wisdom and understanding; and third, to live an obedient, fruitful life.

Four foundational concepts

The Bible outlines four foundational concepts for the thoughtful Christian professional:

Creation - According to the book of Genesis, God created the first human couple in His image, with the capacity to think, to communicate, to choose freely, and to act. In Eden, He entrusted to them the keeping of their habitat and asked them to discriminate rationally between what is permitted and what is prohibited. God also asked Adam to observe, identify, and name the animals,

according to their characteristics. When Adam saw Woman for the first time, he broke into the first love poem ever composed (Genesis 2:23).

In spite of the Fall, God continues to be willing to guide us; hence His promise and appeal: “I will instruct you (says the Lord) and guide you along the best pathway for your life; I will advise you and watch your progress. Don’t be like a senseless horse or mule that has to have a bit in its mouth to keep it in line!” (Psalm 32: 8, 9 TLB). Through the use of our understanding, enlightened by the Scripture and prayer, God is ready to guide our thoughts and actions.

Revelation – God has chosen to make Himself known to us rationally. In general revelation, we understand Him through the created universe, both the microcosm and the macrocosm (Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:20). In special revelation, we comprehend God’s character, plans, and actions through the Scriptures and especially through the life of Jesus Christ, God-man.

Witness – The Christian professional must be clear regarding what he or she believes. Peter offers counsel regarding the readiness and the method in sharing those convictions with others: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:1, NIV).

Service – Christian professionals are invited to follow the model of Jesus, who “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28, NIV). Stott (1972) is specific: “God never intends knowledge to be an end in itself but always to be a means to some other end.... Knowledge is indispensable to Christian life and service. If we do not use the mind which God has given us, we condemn ourselves to spiritual superficiality.... Knowledge is given to be used, to lead us to higher worship, greater faith, deeper holiness, better service” (pp. 56, 60).

Understanding worldviews

In order to think Christianly, as Blamires recommends, we need to develop a personal worldview based on the Scriptures. A worldview has been defined as a “framework or set of fundamental beliefs through which we view the world and our calling and future in it” (Olthuis, 1985, p. 155). We can also define worldview as a mental structure with which we comprehend and interpret the world and life, and on which we anchor our values in order to make choices and chart our destiny. A robust worldview provides coherent answers to four key questions:

Where am I? – The nature and extent of reality.

Who am I? – The nature, meaning, purpose, and destiny of humans.

What is wrong? – The cause of evil, disorder, injustice, suffering, and death that we experience.

What is the solution? – Ways of overcoming the obstacles to human fulfillment.

Through the centuries, humans have answered those questions from three very different perspectives or worldviews:

Theism posits the existence of a personal God who is Creator and Sovereign of the universe. Reality consists of God plus the universe He created; He is prior to and separate from His creation, but acts historically in it.

Pantheism identifies the Deity with the forces and workings of nature. Reality consists of the universe plus God, mutually interacting.

Naturalism explains reality in terms of physical elements, forces, and processes. Reality consists of the material universe and energy plus nothing else.

Within the perspective of theism, biblical Christianity offers a rational and coherent answer to these questions in the form of a meta-narrative consisting of seven moments:

1. **Creation in heaven:** Some time in the remote past, God creates the cosmos and provides a perfect habitat for intelligent and free creatures.
2. **Rebellion in heaven:** An exalted created being rebels against God and is banished from heaven and then to Earth with his followers.
3. **Creation:** God organizes this planet, creates vegetal and animal life, and brings into existence the first pair of humans that reflected His image.
4. **Fall:** Tempted by the rebel, our first ancestors choose to disobey God and, as a result, the entire web of life suffers the consequences.
5. **Redemption:** Christ, the Creator Himself, comes to Earth to rescue fallen humans and to offer them free salvation and a future eternal life.
6. **Second coming:** Christ returns in glory and grants immortality to those who accept His gracious offer.
7. **Consummation:** God executes final judgment, eliminates evil, and restores the entire creation to its pristine condition.

Toward a mature faith

The Christian professional not only excels in his or her vocation and has developed a Bible-based worldview; they also are persons of faith. Such faith is anchored in a deep conviction that we are accepted by and secure in Someone worthy of absolute trust. Faith is knowing that God is both near and concerned, but also above and far beyond our human limitations (Psalm 139:7-10; Isaiah

57:15). Such faith involves our entire being—beliefs, worldview, convictions, values, choices, behavior. Our faith commitment becomes visible in actions motivated by the desire to fulfill the requests of the trustworthy Person (John 14:15; 1 John 5:2, 3). Our faith shapes and is shaped by our vertical and horizontal relationships: We hold tightly the hand that God extends to us while we extend a helping hand to our fellow human beings in need (James 2:14-18).

From 1988 to 1990 the Search Institute conducted a study among adults and youth in six Protestant denominations in the United States and identified eight core indicators of a mature Christian faith, which I have summarized in seven. A mature Christian:

1. *Trusts in God's saving and transforming grace* – Believes in the divinity and humanity of Christ. Has learned to reconcile God's love and human suffering. Accepts God's love as unconditional. Senses God's guidance in life.
2. *Experiences a sense of personal well-being, security, and peace in Christ* – Feels liberated by God's grace from the burden and power of sin. Delights in the assurance of salvation in Christ. Senses that life has meaning, purpose, and hope. Experiences self-acceptance.
3. *Integrates faith and life* – Sees lifestyle, family, work, social relationships, and political choices as part of one's religious life. Has made a commitment to Jesus and His values. This commitment dictates relationships, decisions, and actions.
4. *Looks for ways of experiencing spiritual growth* – This includes personal Bible study, reflection, prayer, and interaction with others. Sees faith as a journey that expands our understanding of God's character and will. This may require adjustments in our beliefs and practice.
5. *Seeks to be part of a community of believers* – In such a community people give witness to their faith and provide mutual support. Seeks to nurture the faith of other believers. Actively shares his/her faith with others.
6. *Holds and promotes life-affirming values* – Cultivates a healthy lifestyle. Accepts other people as God's creatures, with intrinsic dignity and value. Feels responsible for promoting social justice, personal freedom, human welfare, and stewardship of our earthly home.
7. *Serves others through acts of love and justice* – Responds to fellow humans with sensitivity and compassion. Devotes time and energy to help people who experience spiritual, physical, and emotional needs. (Adapted from Dudley, 1992, pp. 59-60)

Qualities of the Christian professional

Mature Christian professionals whose convictions are anchored in the Biblical-Christian worldview will exhibit certain characteristics. Among others, they will be:

Adventurous: Ready to explore, investigate, probe, learn, and discover new truths

Imaginative: Interested in seeing accepted ideas in new ways, or dreaming up new possibilities

Thorough: Accurate; not satisfied with superficial work or mediocre results

Honest: Recognized by their principles and integrity; giving others credit where due

Courageous: Willing to take risks for their convictions, even though they may be unpopular

Gracious: Listening and arguing courteously; not ridiculing those with whom they disagree

Modest: Aware of their limitations; recognizing others' qualities and contributions

Perseverant: Not giving up easily; for Ben Franklin this virtue is "the mother of good luck"

Generous: Sharing knowledge with others and mentoring younger professionals

Wise: Making discerning choices; using the best methods to achieve the best objectives

Facing risks

The Christian professional faces some specific risks:

Mental dualism: Maintaining in separate and unrelated existential compartments their religious observances and their professional activities. Pious in church, ruthless at work.

Intellectual pride: Feeling themselves self-sufficient, superior to others, and acceptable to God because of our knowledge, degrees, position or status. Paul reminds us that "knowledge puffs up" (1 Corinthians 8:1).

The paralysis of analysis: Living in an intellectual bubble, absorbed in study and research, always tentative and undecided, never ready to make a commitment and move to action. Inhabiting the proverbial ivory tower.

Indifference toward Christian mission: Pretending that the tasks of sharing the Gospel and helping those in need belong to the religious worker, while remaining engaged exclusively in professional routines.

Towards an agenda

At the beginning of the 21st century it is clear that the number of Christian professionals and their level of education is increasing around the world. This means that our responsibilities and influence also increase. As we face the future, it is important and helpful for us to outline a simple agenda for Christian professionals in the new century. From my point of view, this agenda must include the following:

Affirm life values and promote shalom

We will oppose and counteract ideas and practices that degrade or exploit humans. We will also launch or support initiatives that bring harmony between humans and God, among humans, and between humans and our habitat. In addition, we will respond practically to the wounds of humanity: strengthen family life and raise wholesome children, prevent or cure disease, educate, mentor, counsel, serve, help...

Engage in scholarship shaped by Bible-based commitments

This involves “the faithful and responsible use of our talents and skills in systematic investigation of God’s self-revelation, his creation, and expressions of human creativity, for the good of the church and humanity.”[5] Christian scholarship includes the dimensions of discovery, integration, application, teaching, and dissemination.

Foster human hope by living and sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ

The ultimate solution of the human predicament is in God’s hands and will be found when Christ returns to this earth as He promised. As we look forward to this epochal event, the words of Peter are significant: “Since everything will be destroyed..., what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming” (2 Peter 3:11, 12, NIV).

Conclusion

For the committed Christian professional, the wise words of Bernard de Clairvaux maintain their fresh relevance:

Some seek knowledge for

The sake of knowledge:

That is curiosity.

Others seek knowledge so that

They themselves may be known:

That is vanity.

But there are still others

Who seek knowledge

In order to serve and edify others:

That is charity.

- Bernard de Clairvaux (1090-1153)

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