

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

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## Don't Be Mindless!

We are experiencing in our society the complete triumph of the sensate over the cognitive. This is evident, not only in our culture at large, but painfully obvious within the ranks of Evangelicals. In fact, what we see happening in Evangelicalism on a large scale is a drift away from a Biblical world view, not only in theory, but also in practice. Evangelicals are guided less and less by theological conviction and more and more by contemporary assumptions derived exclusively from the culture. This *slide* into modernity by many Evangelicals was actually hastened by an anti-theological, anti-intellectual mindset that has plagued the church for centuries. When once asked about his theology, the noted 19<sup>th</sup> century Evangelist D.L. Moody responded: "My theology! I didn't know I had any!"<sup>1</sup> Sam Jones was another well-known Evangelist of the same period who declared: "If I had a creed I would sell it to a museum!"<sup>2</sup> The baseball player turned Evangelist, Billy Sunday, boasted that he did not "know any more about theology than a jackrabbit knew about ping pong!"<sup>3</sup> Is this something to actually brag about? These remarks, no doubt, were made in dramatic flair and perhaps off the cuff, but they reveal some appalling assumptions about how Christianity is perceived. This mentality has prompted Os Guinness to write: "We [Evangelicals] are people with a true, sometimes a deep, experience of God. But we are no longer people of truth. Only rarely are we serious about theology at a popular level. We are still suspicious of thinking and scholarship. We are still attracted to movements that replace thinking and theology by other emphases – relational, therapeutic, charismatic, and managerial (as in church growth)."<sup>4</sup>

Is there such a thing as a Christian mind? How should a Christian think? Note the language of Romans 12:2 – "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Note also Paul's language in Ephesians 2:3 – "All of us also lived among them [the disobedient] at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and *thoughts*." The word translated *thoughts* is DIANOIA. The word is used to express the whole of one's inner life, particularly of a person's disposition or mindset. Our cultural mindlessness<sup>5</sup> is an aspect of "the pattern of this world" and Christians are to recognize it as such and overcome it. "We have to contend with the modern mind, with its complete lack of interest in truth – especially the truth of God. And none of the other questions that now engage the Church will find any lasting resolution until this is understood and confronted."<sup>6</sup> We have so far examined the various aspects of secular humanism (No. 2) and the ways in which worldliness has invaded the Church (No. 3). This week we want to look at *how* the Church has fallen prey to mindlessness.

### I. THE DECAY OF THE CHRISTIAN MIND

This is directly traceable to a neglect of Christian theology, and it did not happen overnight. It is most obvious today and is seen in the alarming tendency to accommodate the Church to the modern culture, something that is taking place on a large scale.<sup>7</sup> How did the decay take place?

#### A. Heart Over Mind

The tension between intellect and emotion is, notes Guinness, "a recurring theme in Christian history."<sup>8</sup> This false antagonism, a sort of either/or mindset, has produced polarized thinking within Evangelicalism. This attitude was repudiated by B.B. Warfield

who wrote: “Sometimes we hear it said that ten minutes on your knees will give you a truer, deeper, more operative knowledge of God than ten hours over your books. ‘What!’ is the appropriate response, ‘than ten hours over your books, on your knees?’ Why should you turn from God when you turn to your books, or feel that you must turn from your books in order to turn to God? If learning and devotion are as antagonistic as that, then the intellectual life is in itself accursed, and there can be no question of a religious life for a student, even of theology. The mere fact that he is a student inhibits religion for him. That I am asked to speak to you on the religious life of the student of theology proceeds on the recognition of the absurdity of such antithesis. You are students of theology; and, just because you are students of theology, it is understood that you are religious men – especially religious men, to whom the cultivation of your religious life is a matter of the profoundest concern – of such concern that you will wish above all things to be warned of the dangers that may assail your religious life, and be pointed to the means by which you may strengthen and enlarge it. In your case there can be no “either-or” here – either a student or a man of God. You must be both.”<sup>9</sup>

#### B. Faith Without Theology

Devotionalism, in which religious sentimentalism is the prominent feature, is most often seen in Christian hymns. The stress is on personal bliss and inward tranquility. Experience and subjectivity are accented. “Whenever evangelicals have an experience of direct, personal access to God, we are tempted to think or act as if we can dispense with doctrine, sacraments, history, and all the other *superfluous paraphernalia* of the church – and make our experience the sum and soul of our faith.”<sup>10</sup> The danger, as C.S. Lewis pointed out, is that “religious experience can be made to yield almost any sort of God.”<sup>11</sup>

#### C. Contemporary Versus Traditional

One of the dominant features of modernity is its open hostility to any expression of tradition. “It is the conceit of modernity that the past is nothing more than a dead weight, that constant innovation is the only key to a better life and richer truth.”<sup>12</sup> Evangelicals, for the most part, are decidedly ahistorical. The issues that often attract the attention of Evangelicals are rarely examined with a historical perspective. *Relevance* is the only issue that concerns us. This simplistic attitude is impatient, and even intolerant, when it comes to the subject of what happened in the past, e.g., church history. This mentality jumps from the church of the Apostles to the present day, presuming that the intervening history was nothing but corruption and decline, or at best, perhaps, sees church history as informative and interesting, but having no bearing on present day concerns.

#### D. The Intuitive Over Against the Intellect

Theology and seminary training carry a stigma, especially the older, more traditional models. This was rooted in forms of anti-intellectualism that were highly suspect of all forms of traditional learning. The rally cry (still heard today) is *No Creed but the Bible!* – which, of course, means that every person is free to interpret the Bible as they see fit without any constraints. In the 19th century this mindset gave rise to groups like the Mormons, the Jehovah Witnesses, and Christian Science. This old theme is still with us. It is manifested in the church growth-megachurch groups that denounce traditional seminary curriculum so that more attention is devoted to *practical* subjects and less emphasis is placed on theology, languages, and exegesis.

#### E. The Sensational Over Against the Standard

We have witnessed over the last few decades what I would have to call *prophetic lunacy* – people claiming, either direct revelation from God (June 9, God was going to “rip the evil out of the world.”), or claiming that they had *deciphered* the Bible to the point that they

could predict the Second Coming of Christ (remember Harold Camping?). On *Christian* television the sensational is the norm. There is the widespread habit – not only among Charismatics, but broadly throughout the evangelical world, and not only on the conservative end of Protestantism, but at its theologically liberal end, too – of announcing what God is supposedly *doing* in the world today. Everybody is convinced that God is *doing* this or that, sometimes what He is *doing* here is entirely different from what He is doing somewhere else! We need to be reminded of the Biblical doctrine of God's providence which declares that the work of God is hidden in the world and as Christians we are called to walk by faith and not by sight. Sin is so pervasively present and our hearts are so deceitful that we should recognize how susceptible we are to reading our plans and purposes as if they were God's. Wells cautions, "Unless God specifically grants an individual the power to declare what he is *doing* in the world (as in the case of the biblical prophets), the attempt to name such things is nothing more or less than an attempt at such control. More than that, it actually detracts from Christ's cross, which is the one thing the church today is called to declare with assurance and conviction what God has done."<sup>13</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Has the church lost its mind? Let us ask a more personal question – have we lost our minds? I want to dispel from anyone's thinking two misconceptions. First, when I use the word *mind* I am *not* referring to being intellectual, as if only people with tons of education or high I.Q.s can really be thinking Christians. Look at the Apostles. Acts 4:13 states that Peter and John were "unschooled, ordinary men." The Apostle Paul on the other hand was a highly educated man (Acts 22:3, 4; 26:24). Yet they all thought like Christians. Peter, as much as Paul, urges Christians to think like Christians (I Peter 1:13; 4:1, 7; II Peter 1:5-15; 3:14-18). Second, the widespread notion that we can focus on practical issues without concern for theology. This attitude dismisses an attempt to discover *how* the world influences our minds and lives as an ivory tower exercise that has no direct impact on the church. We are witnessing the slow disintegration of the family in Western society. Our children are gathering their values from a culture that is openly hostile to Biblical and historical Christianity. It is their peer groups, the mass media, and the secular education system that are shaping their minds and their values. If all that our churches do is cater to the culture and actually reinforce it (directly or indirectly), our children will suffer for the church's failure. We need to change our minds and our worldly way of thinking. We need to recognize the ways the world is seeking to conform our lives by molding our minds. We need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cited in S.N. Gundry, *Love Them In: The Proclamation Theology of D.L. Moody* (Chicago: Moody, 1976), p. 66. One Unitarian minister claimed that Moody's preaching was agreeable to Unitarians. "The secret of the Evangelist's power," he wrote, "is the fact there is so *little* theology and so much morality in his preaching" (p. 63).

<sup>2</sup> Cited in S.E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University, 1973), p. 746.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in D.W. Frank, *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 181. Sunday liked to say that a knowledge of theology had nothing to do with the fate of a person's soul. "I don't care if you're ten miles off in theology if you're right in your heart. Nobody was ever kept out of heaven because he didn't know theology." The fact that Sunday was ordained in the Presbyterian Church in 1903 (despite the fact that he refused to answer many of the theological questions) is an indication of the state of the Presbyterian Church at the time. Within two decades the Modernist-Fundamentalist struggle would erupt and the Liberals would capture the denomination, mainly because so many ministers in the denomination had adopted attitudes about theology similar to Sunday's.

<sup>4</sup> Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> Allan Bloom, in his monumental work *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1987) and Neil Postman in his equally masterful *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985) have documented the mindlessness of our culture. Bloom writes, "Western rationalism has culminated in a rejection of reason" (p. 240). He argues, most convincingly, that the "inner-directed" stress of the 1960's led to the collapse of the American education structure in our universities (p. 321). Postman, a Professor of Education and Communication at Columbia University, traces much of the decline to television and the whole nature of multi-media entertainment. He

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contends that we live in an age where people are not trained to think – indeed are kept from thinking – because they are being entertained continuously (pp. 27-29).

<sup>6</sup> D.F. Wells, *God In the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> In the article, “Reaching the First Post-Christian Generation,” *Christianity Today*, Sept. 12, 1994, one of the leaders of a nationally known Christian ministry stated, “Yes, we watch a lot of TV [including MTV]. Yes, we listen to a lot of music. But I’m not afraid of it. It’s our culture, and I’m always asking myself, ‘How can I use this culture to reach my generation?’” (p. 22). Another Christian youth leader declared, “I would rather go to a U2 concert than at church singing hymns... U2 might not be doing their spiritual yearning the right way, but neither am I... I like my music passionate and honest” (p. 22). This kind of gullibility produces conformity to the pattern of this world. Allan Bloom complained that “though students do not have books, they most emphatically do have music. Nothing is more singular about this generation than its addiction to music” (*The Closing of the American Mind*, p. 68). Leonard Payton, author of *Facing the Music: Aesthetics and Worship in a Post-Christian Culture* (Chicago: Moody) observes: “We are more likely to find ourselves humming the songs of this past Sunday than contemplating what the pastor said. The more a person is inclined to subjective thinking, the stronger music’s influence will be on that person. As a culture, we are progressively devaluing objective reasoning while giving subjectivity higher and higher priority.” *Modern Reformation*, Jan/Feb 1994, p. 21. This kind of thing has not abated in the least since this was trending in the 1990s.

<sup>8</sup> Guinness, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield I*, ed. J.E. Meeter (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), p. 412.

<sup>10</sup> Guinness, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 141.

<sup>12</sup> Wells, op. cit., p. 146.

<sup>13</sup> Wells, op. cit., pp. 182-183.