

In Intellectual Neutral

William Lane Craig

SUMMARY

A challenge to Christians to intellectual engagement.

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A number of years ago, two books appeared that sent shock waves through the American educational community. The first of these, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, by E.D. Hirsch, documented the fact that large numbers of American college students do not have the basic background knowledge to understand the front page of a newspaper or to act responsibly as a citizen. For example, a quarter of the students in a recent survey thought Franklin D. Roosevelt was president during the Vietnam War. Two-thirds did not know when the Civil War occurred. One-third thought Columbus discovered the New World sometime after 1750. In a recent survey at California State University at Fullerton, over half the students could not identify Chaucer or Dante. Ninety percent did not know who Alexander Hamilton was, despite the fact that his picture is on every ten dollar bill.

These statistics would be funny if they weren't so alarming. What has happened to our schools that they should be producing such dreadfully ignorant people? Alan Bloom, who was an eminent educator at the University of Chicago and the author of the second book I referred to above, argued in his *The Closing of the American Mind* that behind the current educational malaise lies the universal conviction of students that all truth is relative and, therefore, that truth is not worth pursuing. Bloom writes,

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. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students' reaction: they will be uncomprehending. That anyone should regard the proposition as not self-evident astonishes them, as though he were calling into question $2 + 2 = 4$. These are things you don't think about. . . . That it is a moral issue for students is revealed by the character of their response when challenged—a combination of disbelief and indignation: "Are you an absolutist?," the only alternative they know, uttered in the same tone as . . . "Do you really believe in witches?" This latter leads into the indignation, for someone who believes in witches might well be a witch-hunter or a Salem judge. 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. Openness—and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and various ways of life and kinds of human beings—is the great insight of our times. . . . The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not

to think you are right at all. [1]

Since there is no absolute truth, since everything is relative, the purpose of an education is not to learn truth or master facts—rather it is merely to acquire a skill so that one can go out and obtain wealth, power, and fame. Truth has become irrelevant.

Now, of course, this sort of relativistic attitude toward truth is antithetical to the Christian worldview. For as Christians we believe that all truth is God's truth, that God has revealed to us the truth, both in His Word and in Him who said, "I am the Truth." The Christian, therefore, can never look on the truth with apathy or disdain. Rather, he cherishes and treasures the truth as a reflection of God Himself. Nor does his commitment to truth make the Christian intolerant, as Bloom's students erroneously inferred; on the contrary, the very concept of tolerance entails that one does not agree with that which one tolerates. The Christian is committed to both truth and tolerance, for he believes in Him who said not only, "I am the Truth," but also, "Love your enemies."

Now at the time that these books were released, I was teaching in the Religious Studies department at a Christian liberal arts college. So I began to wonder: how much have Christian students been infected with the attitude that Bloom describes? How would my own students fare on one of E.D. Hirsch's tests? *Well, how would they?* I thought. *Why not give them such a quiz?* So I did.

I drew up a brief, general knowledge quiz about famous people, places, and things and administered it to two classes of about fifty sophomores. What I found was that although they did better than the general student population, still there were sizable portions of the group who could not identify—even with a phrase—some important names and events. For example, forty-nine percent could not identify Leo Tolstoy, the author of perhaps the world's greatest novel, *War and Peace*. To my surprise, 16 percent did not know who Winston Churchill was. One student thought he was one of the founding Fathers of our nation! Another identified him as a great revival preacher of a few hundred years ago! Twenty-two percent did not know what Afghanistan is, and 22 percent could not identify Nicaragua. Twenty percent did not know where the Amazon River is. Imagine!

They fared even worse with things and events. I was amazed that a whopping 67 percent could not identify the Battle of the Bulge. Several identified it as a dieter's problem. Twenty-four percent did not know what the Special Theory of Relativity is (mind you, just to *identify* it—even as, say; "a theory of Einstein"—not to *explain* it). Forty-five percent couldn't identify Custer's Last Stand—it was variously classed as a battle in the Revolutionary War or as a battle in the Civil War. And I wasn't really surprised that 73 percent did not know what the expression "Manifest Destiny" referred to.

So it became clear to me that Christian students have not been able to rise above the dark undertow in our educational system at the primary and secondary levels. This level of ignorance

presents a real crisis for Christian colleges and seminaries.

But then an even more terrible fear began to dawn on me as I contemplated these statistics. *If Christian students are this ignorant of the general facts of history and geography, I thought, then the chances are that they, and Christians in general, are equally or even more ignorant of the facts of our own Christian heritage and doctrine.* Our culture in general has sunk to the level of biblical and theological illiteracy. A great many, if not most, people cannot even name the four Gospels—in a recent survey one person identified them as Matthew, Mark, and Luther! In another survey, Joan of Arc was identified by some as Noah's wife! The suspicion arose in my mind that the evangelical church is probably also caught somewhere higher up in this same downward spiral.

But if we do not preserve the truth of our own Christian heritage and doctrine, who will learn it for us? Non-Christians? That hardly seems likely. If the Church does not treasure her own Christian truth, then it will be lost to her forever. So how, I wondered, would Christians fare on a quiz over general facts of Christian history and doctrine?

Well, how would they? I now invite you to get out a pen and paper and take the following quiz yourself. (Go on, it'll only take a minute!) The following are items I think any mature Christian in our society ought to be able to identify. Simply provide some identifying phrase that indicates that you know what the item is. For example, if I say, "John Wesley," you might write: "the founder of Methodism" or "an eighteenth-century English revivalist." A number of years ago, two books appeared that sent shock waves through the American educational community. The first of these, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, by E.D. Hirsch, documented the fact that large numbers of American college students do not have the basic background knowledge to understand the front page of a newspaper or to act responsibly as a citizen. For example, a quarter of the students in a recent survey thought Franklin D. Roosevelt was president during the Vietnam War. Two-thirds did not know when the Civil War occurred. One-third thought Columbus discovered the New World sometime after 1750. In a recent survey at California State University at Fullerton, over half the students could not identify Chaucer or Dante. Ninety percent did not know who Alexander Hamilton was, despite the fact that his picture is on every ten dollar bill.

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Quiz

1. Augustine
2. Council of Nicea
3. Trinity
4. Two natures united in one person
5. Pantheism
6. Thomas Aquinas
7. Reformation
8. Martin Luther
9. Substitutionary atonement
10. Enlightenment

How did you do? If you're typical of the audiences to whom I've given this quiz, probably not too well. If that is the case, you might be tempted to react to this quiz defensively: "Who needs to

know all this stuff anyway? This junk isn't important. All that really counts is my walk with Christ and my sharing Him with others. Who cares about all this other trivia?"

I truly hope that will not be your reaction, for that will close you off to self-improvement. This little exercise will have been of no profit to you. You will have learned nothing from it.

But there's a second, more positive reaction. You may see, perhaps for the first time in your life, that here is a need in your life for you to become intellectually engaged as a Christian, and you may resolve to do something about it. This is a momentous decision. You will be taking a step which millions of American Christians need to take.

No one has issued a more forceful challenge to Christians to become intellectually engaged than did Charles Malik, former Lebanese ambassador to the United States, in his address at the dedication of the Billy Graham Center in Wheaton, Illinois. Malik emphasized that as Christians we face two tasks in our evangelism: saving the soul and saving the mind, that is to say, not only converting people spiritually, but converting them intellectually as well. And the Church is lagging dangerously behind with regard to this second task. Our churches are filled with people who are spiritually born again, but who still think like non-Christians. Mark his words well:

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. People who are in a hurry to get out of the university and start earning money or serving the church or preaching the gospel have no idea of the infinite value of spending years of leisure conversing with the greatest minds and souls of the past, ripening and sharpening and enlarging their powers of thinking. The result is that the arena of creative thinking is vacated and abdicated to the enemy. [2]

Malik went on to say:

It will take a different spirit altogether to overcome this great danger of anti-intellectualism. For example, I say this different spirit, so far as philosophy alone—the most important domain for thought and intellect—is concerned, must see the tremendous value of spending an entire year doing nothing but poring intensely over the *Republic* or the *Sophist* of Plato, or two years over the *Metaphysics* or the *Ethics* of Aristotle, or three years over the *City of God* of Augustine. But if a start is made now on a crash program in this and other domains, it will take at least a century to catch up with the Harvards and Tübingens and the Sorbonnes—and by then where will these universities be? [3]

What Malik clearly saw is the strategic position occupied by the university in shaping Western thought and culture. Indeed, the single most important institution shaping Western society is the university. It is at the university that our future political leaders, our journalists, our lawyers, our teachers, our scientists, our business executives, our artists, will be trained. It is at the university that they will formulate or, more likely, simply absorb the worldview that will shape their lives. And since these are the opinion-makers and leaders who shape our culture, the worldview that they imbibe at the university will be the one that shapes our culture.

Why is this important? Simply because the gospel is never heard in isolation. It is always heard against the background of the cultural milieu in which one lives. A person raised in a cultural milieu in which Christianity is still seen as an intellectually viable option will display an openness to the Gospel which a person who is secularized will not. For the secular person you may as well tell him to believe in fairies or leprechauns as in Jesus Christ! Or, to give a more realistic illustration, it is like a devotee of the Hare Krishna movement approaching you on the street and inviting you to believe in Krishna. Such an invitation strikes us as bizarre, freakish, even amusing. But to a person on the streets of Delhi, such an invitation would, I assume, appear quite reasonable and cause for reflection. I fear that evangelicals appear almost as weird to persons on the streets of Bonn, Stockholm, or Toronto as do the devotees of Krishna.

It is part of the broader task of Christian scholarship to help create and sustain a cultural milieu in which the Gospel can be heard as an intellectually viable option for thinking men and women. Therefore, the Church has a vital stake in raising up Christian scholars who will help to create a place at the university for Christian ideas. The average Christian does not realize that there is an intellectual war going on in the universities and in the professional journals and scholarly societies. Christianity is being attacked as irrational or obsolete, and millions of students, our future generation of leaders, have absorbed that viewpoint.

This is a war we cannot afford to lose. The great Princeton theologian J. Gresham Machen warned on the eve of the Fundamentalist Controversy that if the Church loses the intellectual battle in one generation, then evangelism would become immeasurably more difficult in the next:

False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and 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, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion. Under such circumstances, what God desires us to do is to destroy the obstacle at its root. [4]

The root of the obstacle is to be found in the university, and it is there that it must be attacked. Unfortunately, Machen's warning went unheeded, and biblical Christianity retreated into the intellectual closets of Fundamentalism, from which it has only recently begun to re-emerge. The war is not yet lost, and it is one which we must not lose: souls of men and women hang in the balance.

So what are evangelicals doing to win this war? Until recently, very little indeed. Malik asked pointedly,

Who among evangelicals can stand up to the great secular or naturalistic or atheistic scholars on their own terms of scholarship? Who among evangelical scholars is quoted as a normative source by the greatest secular authorities on history or philosophy or psychology or sociology or politics? Does the evangelical mode of thinking have the slightest chance of becoming the dominant mode in the great universities of Europe and America that stamp our entire civilization with their spirit and ideas?

. . . 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. [5]

These words hit like a hammer. Evangelicals really have been living on the periphery of responsible intellectual existence. Most prominent evangelical scholars tend to be very big fish in a very small pond. Our influence extends little beyond the evangelical subculture. We tend to publish exclusively with evangelical presses, and therefore our books are likely to go unread by non-evangelical scholars; and instead of participating in the standard professional societies, we are active instead in the evangelical professional societies. As a result, we effectively put our light under a bushel and have little leavening effect for the gospel in our professional fields. In turn, the intellectual drift of the culture at large continues to slide, unchecked, deeper into secularism.

We desperately need Christian scholars who can, as Malik said, compete with non-Christian thinkers in their fields of expertise on their own terms of scholarship. It can be done. There is, for example, a revolution going on right now in the field of philosophy, which, as Malik noted, is the most important domain for thought and intellect, since it is foundational to every other discipline at the university. Christian philosophers have been coming out of the closet and defending the truth of the Christian worldview with philosophically sophisticated arguments in the finest secular journals and professional societies. The face of American philosophy has been changed as a result.

Fifty years ago philosophers widely regarded talk about God as literally meaningless, as mere gibberish, but today no informed philosopher could take such a viewpoint. In fact, many of America's finest philosophers today are outspoken Christians. To give you some feel for the impact of this revolution, let me quote an article which appeared in the fall of 2001 in the journal *Philo* lamenting what the author called "the desecularization of academia that evolved in philosophy departments since the late 1960s." The author, himself a prominent atheist philosopher, writes,

Naturalists passively watched as realist versions of theism . . . began to sweep through the philosophical community, until today perhaps one-quarter or one-third of philosophy professors are theists, with most being orthodox Christians.

. . . in philosophy, it became, almost overnight, "academically respectable" to argue for theism, making philosophy a favored field of entry for the most intelligent and talented theists entering academia today. . . .

God is not "dead" in academia; he returned to life in the late 1960s and is now alive and well in his last academic stronghold, philosophy departments. [6]

This is the testimony of a prominent atheist philosopher to the change that has taken place before his eyes in American philosophy. I think that he is probably exaggerating when he estimates that one-quarter to one-third of American philosophers are theists, but what his estimates do reveal is the *perceived impact* of Christian philosophers upon this field. Like Gideon's army, a committed minority of activists can have an impact far out of proportion to their numbers. The principal error that he makes is calling philosophy departments God's "last stronghold" at the university.

On the contrary, philosophy departments are a beachhead, from which operations can be launched to impact other disciplines at the university for Christ.

The point is that the task of desecularization is not hopeless or impossible, nor need significant changes take as long to achieve as one might think. It is this sort of Christian scholarship which represents the best hope for the transformation of culture that Malik and Machen envisioned, and its true impact for the cause of Christ will only be felt in the next generation, as it filters down into popular culture.

So it can be done, if we are willing to put in the hard work. Machen observed that in his day "many would have the seminaries combat error by attacking it as it is taught by its popular exponents" instead of confusing students "with a lot of German names unknown outside the walls of the university." But to the contrary, Machen insisted, it is essential that Christian scholars be alert to the power of an idea before it has reached popular formulation. Scholarly procedure, he said,

is based simply upon a profound belief in the pervasiveness of ideas. What is today a matter of academic speculation begins tomorrow to move armies and pull down empires. In that second stage, it has gone too far to be combated; the time to stop it was when it was still a matter of impassionate debate. 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. [7]

Like Malik, Machen also believed that "the chief obstacle to the Christian religion today lies in the sphere of the intellect"[8] and that objections to Christianity must be attacked in that sphere. "The church is perishing to-day through the lack of thinking, not through an excess of it." [9]

What is ironic about the mentality which says that our seminaries should produce pastors, not scholars, is that it is precisely our future pastors, not just our future scholars, who need to be intellectually engaged and to receive this scholarly training. Machen's article was originally given as a speech entitled "The Scientific Preparation of the Minister." A model for us here ought to be a man like John Wesley, a Spirit-filled revivalist and at the same time an Oxford-educated scholar. [10] Wesley's vision of a pastor is remarkable: a gentleman, skilled in the Scriptures and conversant with history, philosophy, and the science of his day.

How do the pastors graduating from our seminaries compare to this model? Church historian and theologian David Wells has called our contemporary generation of pastors "the new disablers" because they have abandoned the traditional role of the pastor as a broker of truth to his congregation and replaced it with a new managerial model drawn from the professional world which emphasizes leadership abilities, marketing, and administration. As a result the Church has produced a generation of Christians for whom theology is irrelevant and whose lives outside the church do not differ practically from those of atheists. These new managerial pastors, complains Wells, "are failing the Church and even disabling it. They are leaving it vulnerable to all the seductions of modernity precisely because they have not provided the alternative, which is a view of life centered in God and his truth." [11] We need to recover the traditional model which men like Wesley exemplified.

But finally, it is not just Christian scholars and pastors who need to be intellectually engaged if the Church is to make an impact in our culture. Christian laymen, too, must become intellectually engaged. Our churches are filled with Christians who are idling in intellectual neutral. As Christians, their minds are going to waste. J. P. Moreland in his challenging book *Love Your God with All Your Mind* has called them "empty selves." An empty self is inordinately individualistic, infantile, and narcissistic. It is passive, sensate, busy and hurried, incapable of developing an interior life. In what is perhaps the most devastating passage in his book, Moreland asks us to envision a church filled with such people. He asks,

What would be the theological understanding, . . . the evangelistic courage, the . . . cultural penetration of such a church? . . . If the interior life does not really matter all that much, why spend the time . . . trying to develop an . . . intellectual, spiritually mature life? If someone is basically passive, he or she will just not make the effort to read, preferring instead to be entertained. If a person is sensate in orientation, music, magazines filled with pictures, and visual media in general will be more important than mere words on a page or abstract thoughts. If one is hurried and distracted, one will have little patience for theoretical knowledge and too short . . . an attention span to stay with an idea while it is being carefully developed. . .

And if someone is overly individualistic, infantile, and narcissistic, what *will* that person read, if he or she reads at all? . . . Christian self-help books that are filled with self-serving content, . . . slogans, simplistic moralizing, a lot of stories and pictures, and inadequate diagnosis of issues that place no demand on the reader. Books about Christian celebrities. . . what will not be read are books that equip people to . . . develop a well-reasoned, theological understanding of the Christian religion, and fill their role in the broader kingdom of God . . . [Such] a church . . . will become . . . impotent to stand against the powerful forces of secularism that threaten to bury Christian ideas under a veneer of soulless pluralism and misguided scientism. In such a context, the church will be tempted to measure her success largely in terms of numbers—numbers achieved by cultural accommodation to empty selves. In this way, . . . the church will become her own grave digger; her means of short-term "success" will turn out to be the very thing that marginalizes her in the long run. [12]

What makes this description so devastating is that we don't have to imagine such a church; rather this IS an apt description of far too many American evangelical churches today.

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. A childlike faith is a whole-souled trust in God as one's loving Heavenly Father, and Jesus commends such a faith to us. But a childish faith is an immature, unreflective faith, and such a faith is not commended to us. On the contrary, Paul says, "Do not be children in your thinking; be babes in evil, but in thinking be mature" (1 Cor. 14.20 RSV). If a "simple" faith means an unreflective, ignorant faith, then we should want none of it. In my own life, I can testify that, after many years of study, my worship of God is deeper precisely because of, and not in spite of, my philosophical and theological studies. In every area I have intensely researched—creation, the resurrection, divine omniscience, divine eternity, divine aseity—my appreciation of God's truth and my awe of His personhood have become more profound. I am excited about future study because of the deeper appreciation I am sure it will bring me of God's personhood

and work. Christian faith is not an apathetic faith, a brain-dead faith, but a living, inquiring faith. As Anselm put it, ours is a faith that seeks understanding.

Furthermore, the results of being in intellectual neutral extend far beyond one's own self. If Christian laymen do not become intellectually engaged, then we are in serious danger of losing our youth. In high school and college, Christian teenagers are intellectually assaulted by every manner of non-Christian philosophy conjoined with an overwhelming relativism. As I speak in churches around the country, I constantly meet parents whose children have lost their faith because there was no one in the church to answer their questions. In fact, George Barna estimates that 40% of the youth in our churches, once they leave for college, will never darken the door of a church again.

There can be no question that the church has dropped the ball in this area. But the structures are in place in the church for remedying this problem, if only we will make use of them. I am speaking, of course, of adult Sunday school programs. Why not begin to utilize Sunday school classes to offer laymen serious instruction in such subjects as Christian doctrine, church history, New Testament Greek, apologetics, and so forth? Think of the potential for change! Why not?

I believe that our culture can be changed. I am excited about the renaissance in Christian philosophy in my generation, which bodes well for the next. Whether God is calling you to become a Christian scholar on the front lines of intellectual battle, a Christian pastor to serve as a broker of truth to your congregation, or a Christian parent or layman who is always ready to give a reason for the hope that is in you, we have the awesome opportunity of being agents of cultural change in Christ's name. For the Church's sake, for your own sakes, for your children's sake, do not squander this opportunity! So if, up until now, you've just been coasting, idling in intellectual neutral, now is the time to get it in gear!

Answers to the Quiz

1. Church Father (354-430) and the author of *The City of God* who emphasized God's unmerited grace.
2. The church council that in 325 officially ratified the doctrine of the equal deity of the Father and the Son as opposed to the view held by the Arian heretics.
3. The doctrine that in God there are three persons in one being.
4. The doctrine enunciated at the Council of Chalcedon (451) affirming the true deity and true humanity of Christ.
5. The view that the world and God are identical.
6. A medieval Catholic theologian (1225-1274) and the author of *Summa Theologica*, whose views have been determinative for traditional Roman Catholic theology.
7. The origin of Protestantism in the sixteenth century in the efforts of men such as Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli to reform the doctrine and practice of the Roman Catholic church; it emphasized justification by grace through faith alone and the exclusive authority of the Bible.
8. The Roman Catholic monk (1483-1546) who started the Protestant Reformation and was the founder of Lutheranism.

9. The doctrine that by His death on our behalf and in our place Christ reconciled us to God.
10. The intellectual revolt in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries against the authority of church and monarchy in the name of human autonomy; also called the Age of Reason.

Footnotes:

- [1] Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 25-26.
- [2] Charles Malik, "The Other Side of Evangelism," *Christianity Today*, November 7, 1980, 40.
- [3] *Ibid.*
- [4] J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Culture," *Princeton Theological Review* 11 (1913): 7.
- [5] Malik, "Other Side of Evangelism," 40.
- [6] Quentin Smith, "The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism" *Philo* 4/2 (2001).
- [7] Machen, "Christianity and Culture," 6.
- [8] *Ibid.*, 10.
- [9] *Ibid.*, 13.
- [10] John Wesley, *Works* 6: 217-31.
- [11] David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 253.
- [12] J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 1997), 93-94.