OUTTHINKING THE PAGANS

> "We live in the twilight of a great civilization, amid the deepening decline of modern culture. Our generation is lost to the truth of God...For this loss it is paying dearly in a swift relapse to paganism. The barbarians are coming. Savages are stirring in the dust of a decadent civilization."

Henry, Carl F. H. Twilight of a Great Civilization:
The Drift Toward Neo-Paganism

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How then may we stand on the side of truth?

We live in a time when basic Christian presuppositions and assumptions are no longer generally recognised both in the academia and in our culture in general. Christian students in particular find their faith challenged, especially those enrolled in the arts, the life sciences and the social sciences. When Christians realise that there are some basic discrepancies between their faith and modern thinking they usually either withdraw or they compromise.

+ When some Christians discover that their professors, their textbooks their classmates do not share their faith, they a become overwhelmed and if they are unable to draw on the intellectual resources of the Christian faith, they may give up their faith.

+ Other Christians facing the same intellectual difficulties do not necessarily quit. They compromise. They are unprepared to throw in their faith but because they crave the academic respectability and acceptance by peers and colleagues they may begin reinterpret Christian doctrines according to some contemporary fashions and values.

+ Mark Noll writes:

> "In general responses to crises, evangelicals in the late twentieth century still follow a pathway defined at the start of the twentieth century. When faced with a crisis situation, we evangelicals usually do one of two things. We either mount a public crusade, or we retreat into an inner pious sanctum."

(Mark A. Noll *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind,* William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994, p.141)

+ When confronted by secular philosophies that pit themselves against the Word of God, the church, Christians often retreat. Yet God's Word commands the opposite strategy. We are call to refute these false philosophies. 2 Corinthians 10 3-5 commands us to destroy their arguments, remove every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.

    + John Frame says to "take every thought captive to obey Christ" will involve questioning the unbeliever's basic worldview the most basic presuppositions of his thinking.

    + There is an 'antithesis' between believing and unbelieving thought. It is the same 'antithesis' between God's wisdom and the world's foolishness. We are to rebut the sceptic's philosophy, expose the loopholes of the evolutionary theory, expose the logical inconsistencies of secularism, expose the absolute lunacy of postmodern thought, and we have to pull the veil of pretence from their faces.

    + These worldly philosophies are simply a house of paper cards, quite vulnerable in the face of a careful and rigorous critical analysis. God is glorified when we intellectually prosecute unbelief.

    + God endows us with a rational mind and expects us to use it to tear down these intellectual strongholds

Putting a high premium on learning

Unless we place a premium on learning and scholarship, little will change.

+ Anti-intellectualism is an ugly and cramping thing. People who denigrate the mind think they are promoting spirituality when in actual fact they are distorting spirituality. At first glance anti-intellectualism seems spiritual but it is a kind of a counterfeit spirituality. Spiritual transformation does not bypass the mind. Romans 12:1,2 clearly tells us that the mind is employed our spiritual transformation.

    + To neglect the mind is to deface a part of God's image in us. As Packer documents in his lesser-known book *Knowing Man* rationality is a part of what it means to be made in the image of God. Part of what that means it means to be made in the image of God is found in our God-like ability to rationalise. And to neglect the mind is to neglect a part of God's image, and we end up somehow being less than human. The Psalmist: "Be not like the horses mules without understanding". The lack of understanding is associated with the animals.

Thinking like pagans

    + But because the postmodern world has been relativized so totally, not a few Christians have lost their nerves.

1. they are confused in that they do not know the Christian response to cultural issues around them.

2. they are weak in that they afraid that if they should absolutize the truth-question, it would make them sound like a dinosaur.

+ As a result, our ideology becomes inclusivistic and embraces a politically correct diversity.

+ It is the young that are most radically affected. The young do not have a grasp of the basic key points of a Christian's worldview. Most are unable to tell a biblical perspective from a humanistic perspective.

    + This places the average young Christian squarely within the secular humanist camp! Young people love Jesus in their heart. But in their minds they are thinking like pagans. Their hearts have a devotion for God, but their minds have capitulated into the Enemy's hands.

+ Fewer and fewer of our young people are able to mount a convincing philosophical critique of the culture they see operating around them in campus and in society. Few young people are capable of giving a philosophical/theological defence of the main tenets of our faith and how it impinges on all disciplines of life.

The mind matters

The mental faculties of the human mind, the power to think, reason, argue, form conclusions, wonder and imagine are precious gifts of God.

+ We cannot forge an artificial dichotomy between mind and heart. Tragically we live an age in which truth is measured by mass preference.

But as Harry Blamires, the Anglican theologian writes:

> "The marks of truth as Christianly conceived, then, are: that it is supernaturally grounded, not developed within nature; that it is objective and not subjective; that it is a revelation and not a construction; that it is discovered by inquiry and not elected by a majority vote; that it is authoritative and not a matter of personal choice. Christian truth is objective, four-square, unshakable. It is not built of men's opinions. It is not something fabricated either by scholars or by men in the street, still less something assembled from a million answers, Yes, No, and Don't know, obtained from a cross-section of the human race. Christian truth is something given, revealed, laid open to the eye of the patient, self-forgetful inquirer. You do not make the truth. You reside in the truth.
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> (Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind*, London: SPCK, 1963 p. 107,113).

+ Jesus said a most profound thing when He said: “Sanctify them in the truth. Thy Word is truth”. There can only be recovery of the truth if there is a recovery of the mind.

+ In the *1985 Griffith Thomas Lectures* at Dallas Theological Seminary, Dr Bruce Lockerbie reminded the students that next to the eternal soul, the most God-like attribute of humanity is the mind.

    + The Bible is disinterested in the absurd and the irrational. The Bible knows nothing of a blind faith. In fact in the Bible, blindness, in the face of revealed truth, is the curse of a depraved mind.

    + I believe it was Clark Pinnock, who in his book *Set Forth Your Case*, makes the point that the New Testament may call on you to crucify your pride but not your intellect. When Paul asserted that the gospel is “foolishness”, it is foolishness to a person’s pride (hubris), not to her reason (ratio).

    + Christ Himself put a high premium on truth. He is in fact the very incarnation of truth. Indeed our Lord believes that the very first commandment should read: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt 22:37).

    + The text in Ephesians 6:14 “Gird yourself with the belt of truth” has the picture of bracing oneself and not allowing any flabbiness from becoming a restraining impediment. It is a call to muster all one’s capability and stamina to “think Christianly”.

    + The failure by Christians to gird themselves with the truth has sapped the intellectual morale of Christianity with the result we are producing Christians who have become mere caricatures of Christianity rather than imitators of Christ.

+ On September 13, 1980, the then Lebanese ambassador to USA and Christian statesman Charles Malik joined Billy Graham at the dedication of the new Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College.

    + Malik called on evangelical Christians to engage in two great tasks: “that of saving the soul and saving the mind”

+ Dr Hudson Armeding of Wheaton College once spoke of what he called “scholarship as stewardship”.

Learning is important because truth is important

Someone has said that when Christians denigrate the mind, unwittingly they undermine some very foundational Christian doctrines. They undermine the doctrine of creation, for God created us thinking beings (home sapiens); they undermine the doctrine of revelation, for God communicated to us through language; they undermine the doctrine of redemption, for God renews our minds

and gives us the mind of Christ; and they undermine the doctrine of judgement for God holds us responsible for the knowledge that we have.

+ Gene Edward Veith, Jr. makes the observation that the fact that God puts a high value on the mind may be seen in the fact that He has chosen to reveal Himself through a book. He communicates not primarily through dreams or visions or through some mystical inner experience, though we don't rule out the importance of those phenomena. The upshot of this is startling for it means nothing short of the fact that men and women, boys and girls may encounter the living God simply by sitting down and reading a book.

(Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Loving God With All Your Mind*, Illinois: Crossway Books, p.18)

+ This makes reading and learning for the Christian both a sacred gift to embrace and an obligation to cultivate.

+ Veith makes several points about education and the Bible:

+ In a time when illiteracy was pervasive in the world, it was the Church that promoted and nourished literacy. It was the centrality of Scripture that was the catalyst which brought about the high rate of literacy in Western culture.

+ In ancient times when many of the surrounding tribes didn't even have an alphabet and when those that did restricted the knowledge among the bureaucrats and the priests who thought it in their interest to protect the mysteries from the masses; even in a time like that every Hebrew boy was learning how to read God's Word.

+ During the Middle Ages, most people including the wealthy could not read. Even then it was the Church that promoted literacy by laboriously inscribing the Word of God, word for word, by hand and teaching it and passing it on.

+ In fact the great universities of Europe such as Oxford and the Sorbonne were founded to train the ministers of the Church in Scripture. And much later, historic American universities like Harvard and Princeton, and the majority of all private colleges were founded upon the same purpose, that of training the ministers of God in the Holy Scripture.

+ Ministers, if no one else, must be able to read and understand the Scripture, in order to be able to teach the Word of God. "In fact the term *clergy* and the related form of the word *clerk,* simply referred to someone who read. (As late as the 19th century a criminal could escape hanging by claiming what was then called "*benefit of clergy*" which he did by proving that he could read; a skill that was too valuable to lose to the hangman)."

(Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Loving God With All Your Mind*, Illinois: Crossway Books, p.18)

+ Veith also made the point that the reason why the Medieval Church fell prey to superstitions and error and favoured the tradition of men to the authority of Scripture

is due in part to the sheer scarcity of Bible and the shortage of people who could read them. The clergy had degenerated to becoming shamefully uneducated. Many churches did not even own a Bible

+ With the advent of the printing press universal literacy became possible. Even today the improvement of literacy is very much a part of modern-day missionary effort.

+ So right from the beginning, Christianity puts a high premium on learning and on the development of the intellect.

Presenting Christianity as the truth.

There is such a high stake put on learning because the question of what truth is hangs on our ability to grasp it.

+ Where God is concerned truth is something absolute, eternal and unchanging as they are reflected in those same attributes that make Him.

+ Our Lord insists that what He came to tell us is nothing but the truth and we should never present Christianity as if its truth is opened to veto by popular vote, even though in our present culture, to say: “Christianity is true” is to make a most titanic claim. Perhaps nothing else puts us on a collision course with the world than this daring assertion that Christianity is the only true way to God.

Telling the whole story

Our young people are thinking like pagans, if for no other reason, the reason that they just do not have an understanding of what it means to think “Christianly”, to cultivate a Christian mind.

+ One way to cultivate a Christian mind is to develop a comprehensive biblical worldview. We need to impart to our young people a full-orbed view of Christianity.

+ As early as 1899, Dr. Robert Flint one of the great apologists of Scotland made the point that the vindication of Christianity "seeks not merely to defend some portion of Christianity but to justify it as a whole". Christianity should not be defended in a piece-meal fashion. It must be set forth and defended as a totally comprehensive worldview.

+ The late Francis Schaeffer in the opening words of his article *The Abolition of Truth and Morality* puts his finger on the pulse. He writes:

> “The basic problem of the Christians in this country in the last eighty years or so, in regard to society and in regard to government, is that they have seen things in bits and pieces instead of totals.”

+ Schaeffer pointed out that many Christians do not really understand how their faith intersects with the issues of life beyond their personal relationship with Christ. It would seem like they do not think that their faith does impinge on issues outside their faith. Devoid of such a perspective of faith, they then become incapable of evaluating the crucial issues in our day from a biblical perspective from reading the Bible.

Starting with theology and doctrine

If it is all that crucial to have a clear biblical worldview, how do we go about developing one?

+ No one starts by developing a full blown Christian worldview from nothing. We do not start with worldview. We start with theology and with doctrine.

+ A Christian worldview is a succinct distillation crystallisation encapsulation of fundamental Christian theology that is framed by a helpful grid, through which all other worldviews may be sniffed for its truth or falsity.

+ Christians need to know their theology. Pastors need to be preaching theology and doctrine, about God, His attributes, the Bible, its revelatory nature, its final authority about idolatry, money, power; about what God says about life on earth, human longings, pain, illness, suffering, death; and what God says about our human responses to such matters; and about God-honouring relationships; about sex, about what's right and wrong; about righteousness, justice and mercy and about His purpose for us.

+ There is a dire need for consistent and careful teaching on these issues. Christians need a regular intake of Christian theology through the teaching of the pulpit, discipleship classes, great books, through one-to-one mentoring, and other creative means.

+ Our churches need to offer strong teachings in doctrine and theology out of which a seamless Christian worldview may quite naturally be forged.

Valuing scholarship

To tell what is wrong we need to teach kids to "*understand the times*". Young people need to be made aware of the kind of culture they live in; of the salient key points of the humanist and naturalistic worldviews. They need to be developing their nose to be acute enough to sniff out worldviews contrary to their own.

+ The Bible affirms people who were both highly educated in the knowledge of their day and who were also heroes of the faith

+ Moses was "instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:22)

+ Daniel and his three friends were at the court of Nebuchadnezzar and they were immersed in the knowledge of the Chaldeans. (Dan 1)

+ Paul studied "at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3). Gamiliel ran the most distinguished academy of the first-century Judaism.

  + Paul proven himself well-versed with Greek drama, philosophy and rhetorics. Festus was was concerned saying to Paul, "your great learning is turning you mad" (Acts 26:24).

  + Sergius Paulus, Paul's first convert mentioned in Scripture was praised as a "man of intelligence" (Acts 13:7)

  + Apollo, Paul's co-worker, was from the city of Alexandria in Egypt (that great mecca of intellectuals in Egypt, which boasts of the one of the wonders of the world - the Library of Alexandria)

    The Scripture affirms him warmly as "an eloquent man" suggesting that he might have been trained in the rhetoric's and dialetics. But here we see a man who was able to combine scholarship with piety for Apollo was not only well-versed in the secular learning of his day but he was also "mighty in the Scriptures" Acts 18:24 KJV). (see Acts 18:27,28).

+ It is one thing to know our own beliefs, it is quite another to know the basic beliefs of those we seek to win for Christ. To outthink pagans, we need to first think like pagans; not in the sense of embracing their worldview but in the sense of understanding how far they deviate from the biblical worldview.

Knowing the enemy

The Bible commends the value of knowing the enemy's mind. Paul wrote: "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law." (1 Corinthians 9:20). He lived up to what he wrote. In his the sermon preached at Mars Hill, he gave us a remarkable example of how we emulate him.

+ Paul showed himself to be familiar with the cultural worldview presuppositions of the people he witnessed to.

  Note: Don Carson made the distinction between Acts 17 and Acts 13. In Acts 13 Paul, was in Pisidian Antioch, evangelising to people familiar with Judaistic worldview. In Acts 17, he was speaking to the Athenians, a people who had no prior knowledge of the Old Testament. They have never heard a Moses or a Jeremiah.

+ Athens was a pluralistic society. There were the Epicureans and there were the Stoics, the

Epicureans were atheistic naturalists; the Stoics were pantheists.

Note: John M. Frame has done us a great favour by helping us get a good grasp on Greek thought in his work, *Greeks Bearing Gifts* in W. Andrew Hoffecker ed., *Revolutions in Worldview: Understanding the Flow of Western Thought*, Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2007)

+ The Epicureans and the Stoics underestimated Paul when they called him "a babbler"; a derogatory term referring to someone who barters in scrapes of knowledge in a piece-meal fashion but have no idea of its total comprehensive philosophy.

+ To their amazement, Paul he showed them that he knew the Greek philosophers well. He showed himself to be well versed with the stuff that is found the textbooks of these Athenian philosophers. In v.25 Paul quoted from Euripedes; in v.28 he quoted from Epimenides the Cretan; then he quoted from Aratus, the Cilician philosophers. He knew their thoughts and their values. He understood their mindset, in short he knew their worldview.

+ He did not quote one single Old Testament verse. He knew that there were unfamiliar with those writings. He deployed what they were familiar and moved from the familiar to the unfamiliar.

Bringing the Christian worldview to bear on non-Christian thought

But there is something significantly more pivotal here.

+ Paul in this narrative, showed himself competent in bringing his worldview to bear upon the worldviews of these pagan philosophers.

+ Ned B Stonehouse, one time professor of New Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, delivered the Tyndale New Testament Lecture at the Divinity School in Cambridge in 1949. These lectures appear textually in a monograph form of 48 pages.

    + In a mere 48 pages , Stonehouse delivered, what was and perhaps still is the most brilliant exposition of Acts 17. Many believe it has not been surpassed in scholarship.

    + He called it *The Areopagus Address.*

(Ned B. Stonehouse, *The Aeropagus Address: Paul Before the Aeropagus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957)

+ Stonehouse made the following observations about Paul's acute awareness of the Greek philosophy prevalent in his time and his ability to respond meaningfully to it.

    + In verses 22 to 31 Paul begins his presentation of a biblical worldview

1) he presents God as the creator of "the world and everything in it" (17:24). He presents a clear distinction between God and His creation. The two are not one; God stands quite apart from His creation. By that, in one breath, Paul rules out pantheism.

2) he presents God as the sovereign Lord over all creation. "God is Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands" (v. 24). He presents God as One Who alone is the sole God. No other gods or goddesses to compete with His reign.

3) He a God, self-sufficient in Himself (v. 25); "he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything". The theological word there is *aseity,* from the Latin a "*se*" which means "*of himself*". "God does not have it in Him to go out of existence just as we do not have it in us to live forever. God necessarily continues forever unchanged because it is His eternal nature to do that.

4) This speaks of the very opposite of that above. Paul depicts us as being completely dependent on God (v. 25b). "He himself gives all men life and breath and everything else". The psalmist says if He should take away our breath, we die (Ps 104:29). Humans depend on God for their very lives.

5) Paul is sharp on his doctrine of humanity (v. 26). "From one man he made all the nations that they should inhabit the whole earth". He points back to the one man, Adam, from whom the entire problem of sin has come.

6) He declares that God created mankind to know Him. He presents God as creating humans for the purposes of relationship that some would reach out for him and find him (v.27). "God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him though he is not far from any one of us".

7) He then asserts that we have replaced God with our man-made idols (v. 29). "We are God's offspring we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone - an image made by human design and skill". He presents sin as what it really is, idolatry.

8) Paul presents the Christian view of time. The Greeks had a cyclical view of time. Paul presents the Christian linear view of time. Time has a starting point and a terminus. (v.31). "He has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed".

9) He puts a final piece of jig-saw into his Christian worldview; the value of the material human body (v.31b), "He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead". To ancient Greeks, the body was the prison house of the soul. Matter was thought to be inherently evil. This explains why in verse 32, "when they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said "We want to hear you again on this subject". But Paul presents the body as precious enough to warrant a future resurrection.

+ Paul presented nothing short of an impressive comprehensive understanding of the worldview he embraces. Further, he was able to present it coherently. He presented a clear message in which vital key areas in anthropology, theology, Christology, hematology, soteriology and eschatology are put in their proper framework.

+ Today, we address an Acts 17 crowd, rather than an Acts 13 one. We are witnessing to people who are totally biblically illiterate with whom you not find the faintest trace of the Judeo-Christian worldview.

    + It used to be that you could presuppose in people some understanding of the Christian message. This is no longer the case today.

    + We need to know the basic beliefs of the people we witness to and look for that window through which to introduce the gospel.

A final charge

We need to present Christianity in its full-orbed form as it pervades all disciplines and issues of life. We need to strive for an academic excellence that is permeated by a Christian worldview.

We are given the charge of becoming good stewards of our God-given minds. We need to weave a seamless worldview with the strands of both the gospel and culture. We need Christians who are unafraid of exploring God's world and excelling in all fields of learning. This, will arouse the world to take a second look at the gospel.

+ As always, C.S. Lewis, who “makes righteousness readable”, makes this point most clearly.

> “While we are on the subject of science, let me digress for a moment. I believe that any Christian who is qualified to write a good popular book on any science may do much more good by that than by any directly apologetic work. The difficulty we are up against is this. We can make people (often) attend to the Christian point of view for half an hour or so; but the moment they have gone away from our lecture or laid down our article, they are plunged back into a world where the opposite position is taken for granted. Every newspaper, film, novel and text book under-mines our work. As long as that situation exists, widespread success is simply impossible. We must attack the enemy's line of communication. What we want is not more little books about Christianity, but more little books by Christians on other subjects - with their Christianity latent. You can see this most easily if you look at it the other way round. Our Faith is not very likely to be shaken by any book on Hinduism. But if whenever we read an elementary book on Geology, Botany, Politics or Astronomy, we found that its implications were Hindu, that would shake us. It is not the books written in direct defence of Materialism that make the modern man a materialist; it is the materialistic assumptions in all the other books. In the same way, it is not books on Christianity that will really trouble him. But he would be

> troubled if, whenever he wanted a cheap popular introduction to some science, the best work on the market was always by a Christian. The first step to the reconversion of the country is a series, produced by Christians, which can beat the Penguins and the Thinker's Library on their own ground. Its Christianity would have to be latent, not explicit: and of course its science perfectly honest."
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> (C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970 p.93)

+ The cultural mandate given to us in Genesis 1:26-28 is still in force. We do not hold as some do that the church's mission is narrowly spiritual; neither do we hold that the cultural mandate has now been negated by the Fall. We hold rather that the gospel changes not only lives but it changes culture as well. We are called to challenge our spheres of influence with Christian message.

+ God's purpose for us is that we bring all areas of life and thought under the captivity of the Lordship of Christ (2 Cor 10:5). This is a call for us to trace God's truth in every discipline of study.

+ We are given the mandate not only to convert hearts but to convert minds as well. Romans 12:2 calls for a renewing of our mind. The early was able to put paganism on the retreat partly because they were converting the minds of the people. It was a kind of conversion which gave the Romans grave concern. And today, our world will be aroused to take stock when minds in every field of discipline capitulate to the mind of Christ. Unfortunately, so far we've succeeded in making small skirmished here and there. We have not begun to take on the culture quite intentionally in any concerted and strategic way.

+ The Christian worldview will always be on collision course with non-Christian worldviews.

+ We are making a call to engage that inevitable collision in the public square. Let the battle lines be clear. And let us begin building our battering ram to bring it up against the citadel of falsehood.

+ Are we prepared to take the pagans on? Are we prepared to outthink them?