

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Bible Student* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bible-student_01.php

hope, love, these three; and the *greatest of these* is LOVE' (1 Cor. 13:13). The Apostle's catalogue of 'spiritual experiences' in Romans 5:1-5 ends with the great 'climax'—'the Love of God hath been shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Ghost which was given unto us'.

Note: The above Editorial is incomplete, posted separately the closing paragraphs have been lost in the post. The Editor is now in England and it would seem best to release the magazine for printing as it is rather than delay publication.—W.J.R.

THE PLACE OF THOUGHT IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

By E. G. ASHBY, M.A., B.D.

In view of the importance now increasingly attached to the influence of the mind in promoting or retarding physical health, it is well for us to consider its bearing upon the spiritual life. It is clear that on various occasions the Lord challenged His hearers, whether friend or foe, with the need of clear thinking. 'What thinkest thou?' He asked, and He expected a reasonable answer to which real thought had been given. In fact it is perhaps just here that we find the real failure of the Pharisee: he failed to think anything through to its logical conclusion. His hypocrisy was not so much deliberate make-belief, for he probably thought he was right, as a rationalisation (often unconscious) in defence of his prejudices.

Though the Decalogue for the most part paid attention to the external act, the 10th commandment was concerned with the attitude of mind, and in the Sermon on the Mount the Lord showed most definitely that the Law has relevance not merely for the outward act but also for the inner motive. Not merely murder and adultery are condemned, but the inner yielding to unrighteous anger or the lustful look. In the light of this it is easy to appreciate the truth of the Proverb (23:7) that 'as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he'. As one saintly preacher used

to say: 'You are not what you think you are, but what you think, you are.'

The first essential in our thinking is that it must be *Christian*. Perhaps the most challenging question the Lord asked was, 'What think ye of Christ?' (Matt. 22:42). Clearly as the whole destiny of man depends on this it is of supreme importance. There are many, brought up in Christian homes, who enter easily and quite simply into faith, who have never really had to face this question: they have rather been faced with the choice 'What then shall I do with Jesus?', since it has never occurred to them to doubt that He is the Redeemer, the Son of God. Rather have they to challenge themselves on their willingness to accept Him. But there are millions of others, some of whom may have come from Christian homes but many come from a variety of religions or have had no religious background at all, who approach as it were from the outside, who must think clearly upon this vital issue. Before they are to decide whether or not to accept Jesus, they need to be convinced that He is the Christ. To emphasize the need of clear thought is in no way to underestimate the value and reality of God's revelation. It is the meek God guides, and He guides them in judgment (Ps. 25:9) and as we were created with mental faculties it is clear we are intended to use them. 'What think ye of Christ?' was His question, and the answer to this may well be progressive. Such a process is illustrated in the experience of the blind man healed, as recorded in John ch. 9. His healing was on the Sabbath and this violation of convention caused much indignation among the Pharisees and perhaps some heart-searching. The blind man described Him first as, 'a man that is called Jesus' but he was again challenged by the critics 'What sayest thou of Him?' to whom he volunteered the reply that He was a prophet. As the argument continued he emphasized that He must be 'of God' and finally expressed his conviction that Jesus was the Son of God (vv. 34, 38). He had had one experience out of which he could not be argued (v. 25) and clearly the reasonings and disputings caused him to ponder more deeply the significance of this experience and the identity of his healer, and so he was led to complete faith. The

Book of Daniel records a somewhat similar idea of progress in the experience of Nebuchadnezzar, and no doubt many, particularly in non-Christian countries, could quote parallel experiences. The reading of words of the Gospel has commanded respect for a teacher, an inspired teacher, a Divine teacher, the Christ, and progressive experiences of blessing through His words are used of God to bring the soul into a personal decision concerning Christ.

But many fail to arrive there. Paul exhorts each man 'not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think: but to think soberly' (Romans 12:3) or to take a sane view of himself as some modern versions happily render it. Now this strikes at the root of all pride. It involves a due recognition of human sin and frailty, but some are unwilling to face the implications of this. As already indicated this was the folly of the Pharisee: his was not deliberate pretence, for he did cleanse the exterior in the realm of moral conduct, and he thought all was well. This attitude comes out clearly in the sequel to the healing of the blind man. The Lord expressed the purpose of His coming (v. 29) as giving sight to the blind, and blindness to those claiming to see. It was, He maintained, because they claimed to be able to see that their sin remained (v. 41). Here was no confession of sin or shortcoming, but rather a self-confident assertion of complacent self-sufficiency. They claimed to be teachers, leaders, wise, but He called them fools, for their thinking was all on the wrong level, superficial, and they had no sane estimate of themselves as sinners.

But thinking should also be *controlled*. Writing to the Corinthians Paul reminded his friends that the weapons of Christian warfare are not carnal but spiritual, and he urged them to bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. (2 Cor. 10:5). This is one of Paul's helpful metaphors: the picture is of active service in wartime, the guards are alerted and any unauthorised loiterer is taken as a prisoner of war to be interrogated by the Commander-in-Chief, Who is Christ Himself. This is a most instructive aspect of Christian life, for it is a warfare, and the Lordship of Christ is all important. Paul has elsewhere

reminded us that we are dead to the old life and should walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4) and if newness of life is to be more than a pious platitude it involves the renewing of the mind by the Holy Ghost, which is consequent upon wholehearted surrender to the Lord. (Romans 12:1, 2). This newness is conferred upon every true Christian in embryo, for if any man be in Christ he is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17) but how far he becomes a new creature depends on experience. There may be arrested development and stunted growth: the life may still be dominated by old ways of thought and passions and emotions so that the Christian is carnal and not spiritual. Paul enumerates these emotions and attitudes of the old life in Ephesians 4 v. 22 *et seq.*, a state he described as the vanity of the mind, with the understanding darkened and being past feeling. The converse of this is charity which thinketh no evil (1 Cor. 13:5). The circumstances of life are not necessarily changed for the Christian and he may well be exposed to former temptations for a time and to new ones consequent upon his allegiance to Jesus Christ, for the disciple is to expect no better treatment than His master. But there is a new principle at work and a new power, and as the Christian lives looking off to Jesus, the Holy Spirit is given freedom of action and the mind renewal becomes a reality. Much of this will be unconscious, but there is also the place for the conscious control. Both speech and thought are controlled: what is clearly wrong is disallowed and that of doubtful propriety is referred to the Lord in prayer for His sanction or censure and the believer learns not to be of 'doubtful mind' for what is not of faith is sin (Romans 14:23). If this attitude of deliberate control of thinking were to be more commonly developed, how much less friction there would be among Christians in church life or Christian witness. The strong would thus learn to bear the burdens of the weak, the younger would pay all due respect to the elder, and the elder would exercise his oversight not as a lord over God's heritage but as an ensample to the flock. (1 Pet. 5:3).

In the third place thinking should be *constructive*. This may be regarded both from the negative and positive angle. Negatively, as Christians we are to abstain from destructive

criticism. In our relationships one with another we are to do nothing through strife or vainglory but in lowliness of mind are to esteem others better than ourselves (Phil. 2:3). Where it is a weaker brother involved we are to have no doubts in our own mind as to our course of action (Romans 14:5), nor are we to dispute with or despise those who do not see eye to eye with us. Each is answerable to his own master and this should be conducive to humility of mind. Positively we are to co-operate as workers together, and this presupposes a good measure of unanimity though this is not to involve compromise of principle and we are to live peaceably with all 'men if it be possible, as much as lieth in you' (Romans 12:18). But substantial agreement among fellow-Christians can only be reached if they are progressing along similar lines. 'Can two walk together except they be agreed?' (Amos 3:3). God's objective for us is that we may come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). As has been indicated this transforming process is attained by the renewing of the mind of those fully yielded, but this does not absolve us from the duty of positive thinking along right lines. If fair flowers are to grow in the gardens of our minds instead of the rank weeds of sin, it must be because they have been planted and cultivated. It is by the goodness of God that the fruits of the earth grow, but that does not exempt the farmer from his share in working for the harvest. So in the spiritual: spiritual life is indeed the fruit of the Spirit, but the Lord wants us to be active. The fallow ground is to be broken up, and we are to sow to ourselves in righteousness. In fact it is of the things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous and praiseworthy that we are to think. (Phil. 4:8). If this is sown, a corresponding harvest will be reaped. One is reminded of K. W. Baker's little poem, 'Let me grow lovely, growing old'. It is our Master's intention that this should be true, for as Christ is formed in us we grow more like Him. Not that this is always an easy process, for the flesh is still with us, seeking to be active, and the 'flesh lusteth against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh' (Gal. 5:17), but the answer

is found in the crucifying of the flesh and its affections and lusts (Gal. 5:24). Thus if we walk in the Spirit we shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh. (Gal. 5:16). There is also the difficulty of the limitations of our humanity. Often we do not know the course we should take, and though guidance is promised this does not exclude the necessity of careful and clear thinking. Even in times when God vouchsafed direct revelation by supernatural means, thought was required. It was when Joseph 'thought on these things' that God revealed to him about the infant Jesus, and in Peter's case even after his vision he was still thinking out its implications when the Spirit guided him. Guidance is not meant to be an irrational impulse, for as God has given to us sound minds (2 Tim. 1:7) He expects us to use them and He will work through them.

The final aspect of thinking that we shall consider is that of *calculation*, for thinking should be accurate, a careful reckoning with due regard to perspective. The word specially used in this connection is λογίζεσθαι, a word containing in it an element of calculation and it is well to give heed to this aspect since each of us is to give an account of himself to God (Romans 14:12—has the more or less cognate noun). Moreover if we attempt any judgment at all we are to consider the Christian and evaluate his usefulness in terms of this accountability. It is as ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God that we function, and faithfulness is the all-important characteristic (1 Cor. 4:1-3). Nor is man's estimate really very important: it is God Who judges, and all human judgment may well be suspended till the Lord comes. Clearly if the emphasis is on faithfulness no one can form an adequate impression of his fellow-Christian's service, and there is therefore all the greater need for self-judgment and criticism (vide also 1 Cor. 11:31). As a means towards producing the best results in our own Christian lives let us consider this calculation a little further. Firstly with reference to our *position*: We are to reckon ourselves dead unto sin and alive unto God, through our Lord Jesus (Romans 6:11). This is a fundamental requirement for any real sanctification, for resurrection and newness presupposes a death preceding it. 'I am crucified with Christ' Paul

wrote (Gal. 2:20) but there may be a world of difference between what is legally true in the purposes of God and what is actualised in the experience of the believer. This reckoning or calculation is an act of faith, not make-belief. It envisages something already true from the Godward side and it becomes operative when we claim it in faith. Resurrection life is impossible without a prior decease. (This thought of death, and the deliverance it effects is developed in Romans 7). Secondly in relation to our *problems* it is good to have a calculating faith, both with regard to particular problems or to the difficulties of life as a whole. Abraham was confronted with an apparently insoluble problem: the fulfilment of all the promises of God was vested in Isaac, but the command of God required his sacrifice. The patriarch might well have been tempted to doubt the guidance, to argue that it was illogical and that it must have been misunderstood. But Abraham who had had the faith not to stagger at God's promise but to expect the birth of a son had now the faith to calculate on the ability of God. God was able, if need be, to raise up Isaac from the dead, and so figuratively, he was raised. No hint is given as to how such faith was evoked, but must it not have been progressively developed by experience? He had proved God when departing from Ur, when entering into Canaan and at the birth of Isaac, and God had not failed. This is a law of science and of faith: from observation and experiment the principle is deduced and applied, and in the Christian realm there are those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern, and faith is deepened in this way. What is true of the major crisis of life finds its counterpart in the continuing process of trial and testing in life. Paul calculated that the sufferings of the present were not comparable with the future glory (Romans 8:18). Here there is need for perspective, and in the light of this he calls the present sufferings 'our light affliction which is but for a moment' and he balances this with a 'far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory' (2 Cor. 4:17). But here his calculation goes deeper: it is not merely that the one is offset by the other, but the affliction is actually productive of the blessing. The glory stems from the suffering as the developed character emerges from

the chastening. What is more, he not merely states the fact but hints at the means of attainment. It is all, it seems, a matter of what fills our mental and spiritual horizon. If we can look beyond the temporal to the spiritual, we shall be upheld like Moses who endured as seeing Him Who is invisible, and what is this sight but the vision of faith based on correct thought, a calculation which rests on the nature and character of God and His purpose for good? But our ultimate good is linked up with the life beyond, and with the consequences of the Second Coming, and it is here that *patience* is required. It is on this subject that right from the beginning there have been many who have looked askance and doubted, not only from the unconverted world outside, but some even among believers. 'Where is the promise of His coming?' (2 Pet. 3:4) men asked, and Peter explained that apparent delay was due not to slackness but to a longing for the repentance and salvation of men. Obviously the longer the period that elapses before the return of the Lord, the longer the time of waiting for the Church before entering into the enjoyment of promised blessing. But we are to wait patiently, and as we anticipate and look for such a climax we are exhorted to be without spot and blameless, accounting that God's longsuffering means salvation. Nor is there any room for complacency in Christian experience. We must review our *progress* from time to time, and in this calculation we are not to settle down as though we had already attained. On the contrary, we are to forget the past and reach out to the future, pressing to the mark of the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:12-14).

It is indeed an upward calling, which requires all diligence. There is a call to seek to develop and make use of a controlled, disciplined mind which plants positive, constructive thoughts, and seeks by the obedience of faith to enter more fully into the meaning and experience of being renewed in mind and motive, for as a man thinketh in his heart so is he.
