

The Importance of the Christian Mind in Ireland Today

by ALAN FLAVELLE

In a striking sentence in his great work, *The Institutes*, John Calvin says: "the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols"¹. What he means is that in every age man has an incorrigible tendency to set up his own gods, gods to which he gives the affection and allegiance that belong to God alone. The word of God through Jeremiah addressed this problem: "Thus says the Lord: 'let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me'"²(9:23f).

Ours is a very different world from that of the prophet; yet who can doubt that knowledge, power and riches are three of the prime idols before which our contemporaries prostrate themselves today. What the Lord discounts is not wisdom and power and wealth in themselves, but man's wisdom, man's power, man's wealth, and these things so over-valued that men treat them as the only things that matter.

However, it is the positive thrust of the prophet's word that concerns us now: "Let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me." Herman Bavinck begins his book, *Our Reasonable Faith*, with the claim: "God, and God alone, is man's highest good"³. If this is so, and surely for us it is incontrovertible, then our main objective in life is to get to know God. Jim Packer brings this out in his own vivid way in his book, *Knowing God*: "What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God. What is the 'eternal life' which Jesus gives? Knowledge of God. . . . What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight and contentment, than anything else? Knowledge of God"⁴.

As Christians we believe that such knowledge of God is only possible by way of revelation. We come to know God not by human discovery but by divine disclosure. Because He is a Person, it is more a matter of God allowing us to know Him than of our attempting to know Him. He makes Himself known in Jesus Christ. He has entered our history; He has assumed our humanity; He has bridged the gulf between Himself and us. For in Jesus we do not have a mere messenger from God, but God Himself. "God was in Christ . . . God with us." (2 Cor. 5:19)

God makes Himself known through the Scriptures, since all that we know of Jesus Christ, we know through the Scriptures. While we may thus regard the Bible itself as revelation, we must remember that (as John Stott points out)

it is like a prescription which sends us to Christ and persuades us to drink the water of life that He gives, or like a map which gives us directions which we must take and follow to our destination.

And God makes Himself known by His Spirit. "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him, God has revealed to us through the Spirit." (1 Cor. 2:9,10) This in itself warns us that knowledge of God does not come merely by the exercise of human reason. Knowledge of God comes not only objectively through revelation given in Christ and through the Scriptures, but also subjectively through illumination given by the Holy Spirit. This is necessary, for as Paul points out in 2 Cor. 3, fallen man needs not only 'light' but 'sight'.

Now it is this knowledge of God—made known to us in Christ, set forth for us in Scripture and brought home to us by the Spirit, that makes it possible for us to have "the mind of Christ". To have this is to think God's thoughts after Him, to see things, as it were, through His eyes, to have the biblical point of view on life. We cannot do better than characterise this in the terms used by Harry Blamires:

"A prime mark of the Christian mind is that it cultivates the eternal perspective. That is to say, it looks beyond this life to another one. It is supernaturally orientated, and brings to bear on earthly considerations the fact of Heaven and Hell . . . The Christian mind sees human life and human history held in the hands of God . . . It sees the natural order dependent upon the supernatural order; time as contained within eternity. It sees this life as an inconclusive experience, preparing us for another; this world as a temporary place of refuge, not our true and final home"⁴

We might further clarify the concept: "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 enquiry and not elected by a majority vote; that it is authoritative and not a matter of personal choice"⁵

That we seldom show the Christian mind, that we fail to think christianly about the situation in Ireland, is a fact that few will dispute. Here in a country where we have respected the Scriptures, where we have cherished the evangelical heritage, where we still retain a Christian ethic and a Christian spirituality, we give little evidence that the Christian mind has been at work among us, shaping our convictions, determining our public witness, influencing our society, controlling our lifestyle. How much genuinely biblical thinking has been done about the underlying causes of the Troubles? When have authentic evangelical Christians come together to speak the Word of the Lord to our situation? What positive biblical guidelines have we formulated to help a Church and Community struggling to come to terms with social unrest, economic decline and rampant permissiveness? Personally, I would affirm that the most vociferous witness borne in the Christian name has been alarmingly at variance with the thinking of the Christian mind. We have heard the voice of religion all too stridently, but there has been a deafening silence from those who must see that much of our

religious life—our evangelical religious life included—is idolatrous.

What then are some of the ways in which the cultivation of the Christian mind is important in Ireland today? Naturally, I have to be selective, but here are some suggestions to set you thinking . . .

It will *expose our rigid traditionalism*. The Christian mind is grounded in, and at every point governed by, the God-given revelation. But alongside, and often on a par with, “the faith which was once-for-all delivered to the saints”, we sometimes put the traditions year-by-year developed by the saints. Now not all tradition is wrong. After all, there is a body of tradition included in the Scriptures, and another body of tradition agreeable to the Scriptures. Danger arises when we give to man-made tradition the same authority as we give to God-given revelation; when we hold as tenaciously to things that stem from our culture as we do to things that stem from the Scripture. To think christianly is always to think biblically. You remember how when the Pharisees asked Jesus, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders?”, he immediately rebuked them: “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition . . . thus making void the word of God through your tradition”. (Mk. 7:5, 9,13) As Christians we need to take more seriously what Paul writes in 1 Cor. 4:6 “learn to live according to Scripture”.

Perhaps it might clarify what I mean if I quote you a passage from Lovelace’s book, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life*:

“By the 1930s the average American Fundamentalist was not at least a proponent of theocracy, but he did have a way of confusing America, the Republican Party and the capitalist system with the Kingdom of God. He did not practise circumcision, but he did assume that only those who had gone through a certain form of conversion experience were ‘born again’ Sanctification was not a subject he was used to hearing about . . . but he had an extensive behavioural code to distinguish dedicated Christians from liberals, the unsaved and the backsliders. He felt that black people, including black Christians, were all right in their place (and that included a separate place of worship), but he was ready to focus all the pooled hatreds and hidden fears of his heart on those who did not stay in their place If sufficiently well-trained, he could recognise the fact that theological liberals were Sadducees, but very rarely could he see the point of the liberal contention that he himself was a Pharisee”⁶.

If I simply ask you to substitute ‘Ulster’ for ‘America’, and ‘green’ for ‘black’, do I need to say more?

What happens when we try to think christianly about our *bitter sectarianism*? God is one; He loves the world; He gave His Son to save the world; He sends the Gospel into the world. He shows no partiality. He will not be used to countersign our selfish schemes, or support our pet programmes. He has no vested interest in any party, or country, or political structure. His only passionate concern is for His people, His Church, for His people are not only the recipients of His grace but also the agents of His purpose. He does not work to perpetuate our man-made divisions, but to

eliminate them. And if we stand with Him, that must be our work as well. But think how we all-too-easily slip into a sectarian mould, blinded by prejudice, poisoned by bigotry. And how sometimes so-called Christians with a sneer on their lips, rather than with a sob in their hearts, have excommunicated one another, rending the Body of Christ, grieving the Spirit of God. Now I am not arguing for an unbiblical inclusiveness—"We're all in this together"—or for a misguided ecumenism—"the more opinions we have, the fuller our grasp of the truth". No, but I am suggesting that our suspicion of, and separation from, other Christians often springs more from fear of man than from love of truth.

And it often betrays the kind of bigotry satirised in Wilkie Collins' novel, *The Moonstone*. Miss Drusilla Cluck speaks of herself and her friends: "*neither public nor private influence produce the slightest effect on us . . . we are above reason; we are beyond ridicule; we see with nobody's eyes, we hear with nobody's ears, we feel with nobody's hearts, but our own. Glorious, glorious privilege! And how is it earned? Ah, my friends, you may spare yourselves the useless enquiry! We are the only people who can earn it—for we are the only people who are always right!*" Sound familiar? You remember the man who said: "In matters controversial my perception's rather fine; I always see two points of view, the one that's wrong—and mine". Now, thinking christianly, saves us from such a spirit. We recognise that while it is given to all of us to see some of the truth, it is given to none of us to see all of the truth. The vitally important thing about any Christian is his or her relationship to Christ. All else is subsidiary—and must be seen to be subsidiary. But how lamentably evangelicals have failed to exemplify this. Might it be too much to hope that you, in the Centre, may pioneer some project in promoting a Bible-based, Christ-centred ecumenism?

The Christian mind is also an *antidote to an arid intellectualism*. In recoil from the experience-centred religion with which we have been plagued, the impatience with 'divisive' doctrines, we have introduced a new rationalism that lays so much stress on the thinking mind that the living soul is crowded out of our Christianity. If we reject an extremism where there is "too much in the heart and too little in the head", we must not embrace the opposite extremism where there is "too much in the head and too little in the heart". Truth and love must be held in balance: where we over-emphasise truth at the expense of love we are left with a dead and deadening orthodoxy; where we over-emphasise love at the expense of truth we are left with an anaemic caricature of biblical faith. Let me put that in another way: knowing God involves not only a seeing but a feeling; not only the mind but the heart and the will. The psalmist prays that he may see God in order that he may obey Him and enjoy Him. Such is the reality of God that He comes to us through every avenue of the personality. He breaks in on our whole being. Those of us who have an academic bias, a desire for logical coherence, must remember John Ruskin's warning that "a foolish consistency is the hob-goblin of little minds". We cannot imprison God within a neat formula; we cannot capture ultimate reality in a form of words.

There are two passages that I would like to quote. One is from A. W.

Tozer in *The Incredible Christian*:

*"For a long time I have believed that truth, to be understood, must be lived; that Bible doctrine is wholly ineffective until it has been digested and assimilated by the whole life. The essence of my belief is . . . that there is a vast difference between fact and truth. Truth in the Scriptures is more than a fact. A fact may be detached, cold, impersonal, and totally dissociated from life. Truth on the other hand is warm, living and spiritual. A theological fact may be held in the mind for a long time without its having any positive effect upon the moral character; but truth is creative, saving and transforming, and it always changes the one who receives it into a humbler and holier man. At what point then does a theological fact become for the one who holds it a life-giving truth? At that point where obedience begins . . . the Church or the individual that is Bible-taught without being Spirit-taught has simply failed to see that truth lies deeper than the theological statement of it"*⁹

Centuries ago Anselm wrote: "Just as the right order of going requires that we should believe the deep things of God before we presume to discuss them by reason, so it seems to be negligence after we have been confirmed in the faith if we do not study to understand what we believe"¹⁰. That I feel, gives the balance of the Christian mind.

But there is another statement that has meant a great deal to me as I have sought to understand what is to be our role in affirming truth and exposing error. It comes from Charles Simeon, who was a great evangelical in the Anglican tradition. He wrote:

*"The author . . . is no friend of systematisers in theology. He has endeavoured to derive from the Scriptures alone his views on religion; and to them it is his wish to adhere with scrupulous fidelity; never wresting any portion of the Word of God to favour a particular opinion, but giving to every part of it that sense which it seems to him to have been designed by the great Author to convey. He is aware that he is likely on this account to be considered by the zealous advocates of human systems as occasionally inconsistent; but if he should be discovered to be no more inconsistent than the Scriptures themselves, he will have reason to be satisfied. He has no doubt that there is a system in the Holy Scriptures (for truth cannot be inconsistent with itself); but he is persuaded that neither Calvinists nor Arminians are in exclusive possession of it"*¹⁰

Now I have great sympathy with that, simply because I do not think that any form of words exhausts the meaning of God or of His truth for us. On the other hand, I would be prepared to argue that some systems of doctrine more adequately express that truth than others—i.e. Calvinism. But I am altogether with Simeon when he adds: "The truth is not in the middle, and not in one extreme, but in both extremes . . . it is not one extreme that we are to go to, but both extremes"¹¹. That, if I may say so, is one of the reasons why I adopt a 'reverent agnosticism' about some of the things about which I once pontificated with dogmatic arrogance!

As against the intellectualism that reigns in academic circles, I recall the dictum from the Ancient Church: "It is the heart that makes the theologian".

Thus truth, even truth set forth by special revelation, may yield itself not so much to the man who is versed in the literature, but to the man who is steeped in prayer and meditation; not only to those who engage in the cut and thrust of debate—though this has its place—but to those who seek God in the silence; not in the discourse of the lecture room but in the worship of the house of God. Perhaps the best test of whether or not we are thinking christianly about God, His Word and His truth, is to ask ourselves, does it leave us with a sense of awe and wonder, or does it merely bring us a feeling of intellectual satisfaction? You may remember how John Stott, in his review of Packer's book, *Knowing God*, says: "he illumines every doctrine he touches and commends it with courage, logic, lucidity and warmth . . . the truth he handles fires the heart. At least it fired mine, and compelled me to turn aside to worship and to pray"¹². That is the ultimate accolade on any piece of theological study or writing.

Time forbids me to speak to you of the implications the Christian mind has for some of the other ills that afflict both church and community in our land: *the crass materialism* that is evident even among the people of God, pressurising them into acting as if this world, and the things of this world, is all that there is; *the false ecumenism* that works on the principle that the greater variety of opinions and insights that you collect, the greater the likelihood there is that you will arrive at the truth—ignoring as it does the fact that Christian truth is a gift once-for-all given by God, not a goal one-day-in-the-future to be reached by men; *the easy believism* which majors on the act of faith and underplays the life of obedience, which stresses what God gives but ignores what He asks, which makes fashionable a cultural conversion, changing the outward pattern of behaviour, but leaving the inner life unchanged; and *the ethical relativism* that assumes that moral standards for the individual are a matter of personal preference and moral standards for society something to be decided by consensus, imagining that since God is dead everything is permitted. These are some of the matters to which I hope you will apply yourselves in the years ahead.

But one other aspect of our subject must be mentioned. The Christian mind will expose the pretensions of a facile optimism and dispel the mists of a crippling pessimism. As Guinness says in *The Dust of Death* that "a description of Thomas Mann could be an epitaph for our era: 'he died, undecided between a desperate optimism and a weary pessimism'"¹³. I sense both moods within the church and community today. On the one hand, there are those who are utterly despondent about the future in Ireland. They identify with Oscar Wilde's sentiment: "we did not dare to breathe a prayer or give our anguish scope; something was dead in each of us, and what was dead was hope". Now against that, we recognise that God is alive, that He is at work among us, that His Kingdom is a present reality, that in the words that John hurled in defiance against the empire of the Caesars, "the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns". (Rev. 19:6) There we do not despair; we become fellow-workers with God; we are confident that "if God is for us", nothing can be against us. We might well brace ourselves with words written by William

Temple during World War II: "When we worship God and serve Him, Christ reigns; when we know success or taste defeat, Christ reigns; when we live, when we die, Christ reigns. When history goes, when time shall be no more, Christ is King for ever and ever".

On the other hand, we note signs of an ill-founded optimism. Some people still imagine that if we had integrated education, greater social justice, better housing, less unemployment, fuller dialogue between opposing groups, then we might emerge from the tunnel—or is it the jungle? It is the old liberal optimism in modern guise—"move upward, working out the beast, and let the ape and tiger die"; or it's the spirit reflected in John F. Kennedy's comment: "All men's problems have been created by man and can be solved by man". Now the fact that God's Kingdom is 'here and now' saves me from pessimism, and motivates me to work with God for a better world, a fairer society, a more united church. But the fact that the Kingdom is also 'not yet' saves me from an optimism that would allow me to expect the gradual Christianisation of the world. The fact of Original Sin must never be overlooked. As Cambridge theologian J. S. Whale wrote: "The congenital weakness of human nature is the submerged rock on which the complacent claims of an optimistic humanism are wrecked"¹⁴ And Carl Henry reminds us that "although modern man zestfully explores outer space, he seems quite content to live in a spiritual kindergarten and to play in a moral wilderness"¹⁵ The stubborn facts of life in Ulster shatter any illusions there may be about the essential goodness of man.

Thus our only ground of hope is in the living God, the God of the supernatural, the God who comes to meet us in Christ His Son, the God who is ceaselessly at work in us and through us by His Spirit, the God who wants to share His mind with us, so that understanding what He is about, we may submit our lives to Him as agents of His irresistible purpose and subjects of His indestructible Kingdom. This is what calls us to rigorous thought, to courageous rejection of the easier options, to confident prayer and adventurous living.

What is our need then? We need thinkers—and thinkers are thin-on-the-ground in church circles in Ireland; we need Christian thinkers—and it is both difficult and dangerous to think christianly in a society infiltrated by an almost atmospheric secularism and where it is almost impossible to think and speak dispassionately; we need those who, in Paul's words, have "put on the new nature which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator;" (Col. 3:10) above all we need to heed the apostle's injunction: "have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus", (Phil. 2:5) who both in word and deed embodied and exemplified the grace and truth of God in terms which men and women understood and in a way that not only convinced them in the top of their heads, but also persuaded them in the bottom of their hearts. May this be your aim . . . and to an increasing degree your achievement.

NOTES

1. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (London, 1953) I, xi, 8.
2. Herman Bavinch, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids, 1977) p.17.
3. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London, 1973) p.31.
4. Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (London, 1963) p. 67.
5. *Ibid*, p.107.
6. Richard Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Exeter, 1979) p. 195.
7. Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone* (Heron Edition) p.209
8. A. W. Tozer, *The Incredible Christian* (Harrisburg, PA, 1964) p.92
9. Anselm *The Library of Christian Classics* (London, 1956) Vol. I
10. Charles Simeon, *Horae Homeletica* (London, 1819) p. 4-5.
11. *Ibid*. p.5.
12. John R. W. Stott, quoted on cover of *Knowing God* (London 1973).
13. Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death* (London, 1973) p.20.
14. J. S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine* (London, 1957) p.38.
15. Carl F. Henry, Article in *Christianity Today*, August 1972.