Thinking like a Christian
Part 2:

The Means of Grace, 
the Hope of Glory

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While on his knees this writer often joins with others in praying the General Thanksgiving:

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we Thine unworthy servants do give Thee most humble and hearty thanks for all Thy goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all men. We bless Thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all, for Thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.

The prayer continues:

And, we beseech Thee, give us that due sense of all Thy mercies, that our hearts maybe unfeignedly thankful; and that we show forth Thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to Thy service, and by walking before Thee in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with Thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honor and glory, world without end. Amen.

What are "the means of grace"? What is "the hope of glory"?

Marks of the Imago Dei

The mark of the human being's distinction from other creatures is the imago dei, that likeness of God with which man was stamped. What does it mean to have been created in the image of God? Surely it means that man bears certain resemblances to his Father; he shares certain attributes with Him—characteristics
that make man unique among all other elements of nature. Chief among these characteristics must be the eternal soul; next, however, is the human intellect or mind. Unlike all other of God's creatures, who act on instinct alone, human beings may act or react on account of reason. As beings made in the image of God, man possesses those divine attributes of will, intellect, and expression. Just as the Triune Godhead willed the world into being, spoke the cosmos into existence, and lighted the universe with the light of love, so too man is granted the powers of volition, expression, and illumination. Man can think and speak, reason and act, love and express. When God the Creator breathed into man the breath of life, when man became a living being, God gave these channels of access, these means of grace, to tie him to Himself.

This grace was at work in the experience of Adam and Eve. Adam found that life in Eden shared only with the animals was far from being paradise. Happily for man today, Adam discovered no lasting satisfaction in communing with the animals; so God provided the woman to be his partner, his companion, the only other creature suitable to share the glory and honor of being made in the image of God. But the same capacity for reason also yielded the corruption of insinuation, contradiction, prevarication, deceit, betrayal, and alienation from the very One in whose image the man and woman had been made.

Satan's rebellion was transmitted to the woman and the man by twisting the truth, by equivocating with God's decree, by playing intellectual games with the command for obedience. Satan still specializes in that particular ploy, saying one thing and leaving the impression that its meaning is plain, while a deeper, more complex meaning remains unsaid. So Banquo warns Macbeth in Shakespeare's play,

And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray us
In deepest consequence.²

From the temptation and Fall in Eden, it seems apparent that God expects Christians, who share His attribute of reason—corrupted by sin but redeemed by grace—to use that faculty in remaining obedient. They are to ward off the tempter's wiles by knowing God's commands, by recognizing Satan's distortions, and then by acting like thinking Christians in obedience.

But for many Christians, especially some who claim fidelity to the Scriptures, the notion of an obligation to be a thinking Chris-
tian seems almost scandalous. These are earnest believers who, like an army in battle, have retreated from one of the major theaters of war. They have evacuated the field, leaving the enemy free to overrun that territory. Many Christians have capitulated to the enemy when it comes to that field of battle called the mind. Perhaps because they underrate the importance of the mind and overrate the importance of the heart, these believers have no stomach for the fight. They would rather regroup and face Satan on some other battleground. But believers cannot retreat; they must recapture the mind given them by God. They must begin thinking with the mind of Christ, thinking like a Christian.

One of the great thinking Christians of this generation is Charles Habib Malik, statesman and scholar. Among his many books are *The Two Tasks* and *A Christian Critique of the University*, both essential reading for anyone willing to accept the challenge to think like a Christian, particularly anyone called to the vocation of Christian education. Malik is eminently quotable, as illustrated by these representative examples: "We are not only endowed with a soul and a will to be saved but also with a reason to be sharpened and satisfied."3 "The problem is not only to win souls but to save minds."4 "The greatest danger besetting American evangelical Christianity is the danger of anti-intellectualism."5

**The Danger of Anti-intellectualism**

"Anti-intellectualism" is a dirty word—or should be—in the mouth of every Christian. Yet, if Malik is right—and he may be—then anti-intellectualism is an opponent of God's redeeming grace Which Christians, especially those in Christian education, must combat. The American historian Richard Hofstadter defines anti-intellectualism as "a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it."6 Taking Hofstadter's terms, one could say that seminary professors and teachers of the liberal arts and sciences in Christian colleges are among the most ready and apparent victims of American evangelical anti-intellectualism. Their work calls for inquiry into the nature of things, whether searching for the most authentic text of a canonical passage or seeking out the biblical answer to a problem of ethics never anticipated by the prophets or apostles. After all, What did Amos know about in vitro fertilization? What did Paul of Tarsus know about the colonization of outer space?
Which, of course, for the anti-intellectual is the very point! Whatever extends beyond the scope of Amos, Isaiah, the psalmists, Paul, as well as the recorded teachings of Jesus Himself, must be considered off limits to Christians today. The father of this writer was once pastor of the oldest Baptist church in western New York State. In the summer of 1956, he showed this writer minutes from a meeting of an evangelical church in Buffalo during the 1880s. Included in the minutes was a resolution adopted by the congregation opposing that new invention, the telephone. The statement read to the effect that if God had intended for His creatures to converse other than face-to-face, He would have so ordained it in His holy Word. One may laugh at such primitive literalism, but if he does, his memory is short, for today some Christians are just as opposed to technology, whether in communications, information systems, biomedical programs, or space exploration.

Their problem is the fear that, somehow, in some scientist's laboratory somewhere, a discovery will be made or alleged that undermines faith. These are pragmatic believers whose faith is enhanced by material evidence but might equally be destroyed by contrary evidence. This explains their ongoing interest in tracking down the ruins of Noah's ark or the fascination in proving that the shroud of grin does indeed bear stains of human blood dating to A.D. 29. Their patron saint—if they would acknowledge her as such—is Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, whose pilgrimage to the Holy Land in A.D. 327 resulted in the sorry business called relics. What does a person do when the emperor's mother asks to be shown a piece of the true cross? He finds it and shows her! He does not tell her any thinking woman's reasons why her request is both unnecessary and absurd.

Evangelical anti-intellectualism is misplaced devotion, often construed as orthodoxy-blind dogma. Its theology can be compressed to the slogan of a favorite bumper sticker: "God said it. I believe it. That settles it." The problem with such certitude lies in the initial statement. God said many things, some of which He later retracted; much of what God said appears to have been intentionally ambiguous, even mystifying. How else can a person explain the anomaly of divided interpretations of the same passage of Scripture, especially those apocalyptic and eschatological passages? Clearly, what God said about the structure of the church appears to have been confusing to many Christians over the last 2,000 years.
Evangelical anti-intellectualism is also misplaced allegiance to ideas presumed to be immutable truths. As is well known, history includes lamentable instances of the church's having taken a position on some issue, whether scientific or ethical, and defending that position as if it represented the last bastion of God's truth. Not infrequently, opponents of the church's position were put to death. How many centuries of racist teaching about "the sons of Ham" perpetuated damnable error in the name of truth? How many generations of earnest Christians have assumed that some sort of divine illumination rests on the King James Version of the Bible, to the exclusion of other equally human endeavors at assembling an English text? And how many of those loyal believers have held to a chronology that dates Creation from 4004 B.C., as Bishop James Ussher decided in the early 17th century? What were such readers to make of geological and paleontological findings that suggest a much older planet and an existence in this universe of far greater duration? Instead of irrational dogmatics as proof of orthodox faith, God asks much more. He requires that man learn wisdom and knowledge; He demands that people practice understanding.

To put it bluntly, evangelical anti-intellectualism is an unintentional but nonetheless egregious insult to an omniscient God. It tells God what is and what is not His truth; it limits Him from holding in store more truth than man has yet perceived. It presumes that man's finite intellect has comprehended in full the whole of God's revealed truth. It fails to acknowledge what enlightened believers from the Apostle Paul on have always known, that truth is universal, even when it is not immediately recognized as such. To the Corinthians, Paul wrote, "The foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (1 Cor. 1:25, NIV). On July 20, 1620, the final Lord's Day before the Mayflower sailed to the New World, the English Pilgrims' pastor, John Robinson, too ill to make the voyage himself, comforted his people with these words of encouragement: "I am very confident that the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth out of His holy Word."7

Set Free by Truth

Here, then, is what Frank E. Gaebelein meant when he asserted that "for Christian education … to adopt as its unifying principle Christ and the Bible means nothing short of the recognition that all truth is God's truth."8 This statement should become a
corollary to the most liberating declaration ever uttered: "If you abide in My word," said Jesus, "you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" (John 8:31-32). Free from narrow-mindedness and parochial bias; free from denominational supposition; free from received opinions and traditional ignorance; free from shackles restraining redeemed intellectual curiosity and redeemed imagination; free from cant and shibboleth and prescribed terms of speech. Free to begin thinking like a Christian! Free to enter wholly into all those good things that the loving heavenly Father welcomes believers to enjoy. Free to become conscious, thankful recipients of God's bounteous grace, wherever one finds it and however it may be mediated to him: as courtesy from a stranger, hospitality from mere acquaintances, civility from a bureaucrat, sportsmanship from a golfing partner, compassion from an emergency-room nurse, diligence from an auto assembly-line worker, not to mention all the other elements of God's common grace poured out through the blessings of friendship, the immeasurable wealth of love, as well as the restraining power of God that holds back evil's worst assaults.

Yet some would, seem to take a more narrow view of God's grace, restricting it to the Cross and the Empty Tomb, the church and the Word, special grace unto salvation. Of course this is not to slight God's provision for man's redemption; but does not thinking like a Christian require believers to discover even more of God's unstinting grace? Is not Creation itself and man's participation in it an evidence of grace? Is not the Incarnation, with its eternal ratifying of human existence, another evidence of grace? And with these evidences, may one not find in the human attributes of mind, body, soul, and emotions their parallel in the experiences of the incarnate Lord? What about food and drink? Or love, family shelter, work, recreation, companionship, self-discipline, achievement, and even disappointment? Are not all these elements of life part of what James calls "every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift ... from above" (James 1:17)? How dare we disdain them, coming, as Paul told Timothy, from God, "who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy"(1 Tim. 6:17). Or again as Paul wrote, "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the Word of God and prayer" (1 Tim. 4:4-5).

But from time to time, Christians have forgotten the grace that sets them apart from the religions of the world. Too often Christians have erected religious categories, particularly in the arts and
entertainment, drawing lines between "sacred" and "nonsacred" music, art, edifices, and events. When Christians fall into this trap—constructing mazes to prevent themselves from free access to all God's good things—a puzzling consequence often seems to result. The work Christians perform and call "sacred" seldom matches the quality of work they would identify as "nonsacred." By contrast, when Christians simply do their work—all of it—dutifully and unself-consciously, ascribing to God any honor it might receive (as did J. S. Bach for example), then all that work becomes "sacred," or better, "sanctified." So, Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 in F is as sanctified as is his Cantata No. 140, "Sleepers, Wake." So too, Rembrandt's "Self-Portrait" is no less honoring to God than is his biblical masterwork "The Return of the Prodigal Son."

For those who are committed to thinking like a Christian, there can be no such division into categories called "sacred" and "secular," "religious" or "profane." Surely there will be encounters with men and women to whom nothing is sacred, who inhabit only the realm of the secular; persons who acknowledge no supernatural dimension, whose every act is a profanation of the spirit. But for the Christian wishing to think and act like a Christian, any arbitrary dichotomy is not only meaningless but also false. Furthermore for Christians to cut themselves off from God's gifts of grace and then elevate such dismembering to a virtue affronts the very One who is the Source of all good gifts.

The Fetters of Legalism

Such a view of God's invitation for believers to enjoy all things troubles anyone still encumbered by the fetters of legalism. Almost every time this writer speaks in these terms, someone in the audience asks, "Where's the line between liberty and license? How do you keep from going too far?" The question, while earnest, reveals the depth to which a legalistic attitude has penetrated, the degree to which the demands of "separation" have usurped the command for "integration."

Throughout his childhood and adolescence, this writer heard a great deal about "separation." Perhaps the favorite verse in many churches was "Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate, says the Lord" (2 Cor. 6:17). There was no doubt what this verse meant. People were trained to know who was enrolled in the Lamb's book of life by whether a woman wore lipstick or a man played cards or their church had a Wednesday night prayer meet-
ing. Christians were instructed to shun such persons whose behavior did not line up with their dogma, not only for fear of defiling themselves but also to avoid appearing to condone their behavior. Some were taught to regard several degrees of separation as necessary to their own doctrinal purity.

A closer reading and study of God's Word now indicate that "separation" as proclaimed and practiced by Christians committed to that stance is neither biblical nor Christlike. It distorts the message of holy living by grace and resorts to legalism. Like the Judaizers who overran the First Church of Galatia, such separationists have instituted their own taxonomy of extrabiblical standards. As if to compensate for the presumably insufficient work of Jesus Christ in achieving man's redemption, believers are urged to add works of their own: circumcision in the form of a checklist of disallowed entertainments and cultural taboos. In Galatians 5:12 the Apostle Paul, having refuted the argument that would compel compliance with a purely cultural means of identity, used language so dramatic and blunt as to leave no doubt: “As for those agitators [who require circumcision] I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!” (NIV).

Furthermore legalistic separation is the exact opposite of Christlike behavior. Of all the accusations brought against Jesus of Nazareth by His enemies, the one incontrovertible charge is also the most beautiful tribute to His mercy and grace: "This man receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). The Lord Jesus was a partygoer; indeed, He was accused by some of being a glutton and a drunkard. He certainly frequented the wrong places and met the wrong people—embezzlers, prostitutes, social outcasts of all sorts. And yet interestingly He neither condoned a sinner's sinfulness nor left the sinner to continue in his notorious ways. One woman known as a sinner came to Jesus, carrying an item possibly purchased with the earnings from her sinful life—the alabaster jar of perfume, not unlike that by which she made herself more appealing to her clients.9 But as she knelt before Jesus in recognition of His lordship, she wept tears of sorrow Then she poured out the very stuff that made her sin easier. She poured out her sinful posturing, her seductive glance, her alluring voice—she poured out the contents of that alabaster jar, and she never refilled it for those purposes again.

This emphasis should not be mistaken for antinomianism. This emphasis is not suggesting that Christians can be oblivious to sin. This writer is, for example, willing to campaign against
corrupt and anarchistic rock music videos and urge Christians to rid themselves of this poison the way they would purge their homes of dioxin or any other lethal contaminant threatening their lives. This music of death is in disharmony with God's gift of life. Its danger cannot be exaggerated; indeed some teenage suicide can be attributed to this nihilistic noise. Sin exists, sin defiles, sin destroys, but even so, God's grace is greater than all sin.

Instead of asceticism and deprivation, instead of isolationism and withdrawal from the world, thinking Christians need to reassert their calling to live in "sanctified worldliness," that is, to live fully and freely as children of God in appreciation of the world He has given them to care for, living responsibly as citizens of God's kingdom. For to lead the church of Jesus Christ at the end of the 20th century into fuller understanding of its redemptive mission in the world, people need the example of thinking Christians living in sanctified worldliness—Christians who know and appreciate nature, who know and love the arts, who know and enjoy recreation and entertainment; Christians who know and can explain the complexities of scientific discovery, who know and practice sound business principles, who know and comprehend the relationship between history and current events, domestic tranquility and social order. In short, Christians are needed who know and delight in sharing what they know with others—thinking Christians in the best sense of the phrase.

The hymnwriter John Keble expresses beautifully the simplicity of "the means of grace."

If on our daily course our mind
Be set to hallow all we find,
New treasures still of countless price
God will provide for sacrifice.
The trivial round, the common task
Will furnish all we ought to ask;
Room to deny ourselves-a road
To bring us daily nearer God.10

If, then, these simple qualities of life make up "the means of grace," what is "the hope of glory"? Is it not the eternal anticipation that all these good and perfect gifts suggest? For whatever its joy, each gift is temporal. Today's sumptuous meal will not supply all one's future need for nutrition and delectable taste. It must be followed by tomorrow's nourishment. But in that meal, that means of grace, lies a hint of that time and place when man shall never hunger or thirst again. Thus regarded, each meal, each day's
delight, is a sacrament, an outward and visible reminder of that inward and invisible grace called the gift of eternal life. This is "the hope of glory," not a sanctimonious and other-worldly disregard for the present sphere but a joyous celebration of the here-and-now as a foretaste of the everlasting There-and-Then.

For it is in the performing of each day's tasks that believers discover the mystery that makes the smallest details of their lives a means of grace. Surely God is in those details—the same God who is Himself the hope of eternal glory, eternity in His presence.

Editor's Note

This is the second in a series of four articles delivered by the author as the W. H. Griffith Thomas Lectures at Dallas Theological Seminary, November 5-8, 1985.

Notes

4  Ibid., p. 32.
5  Ibid., p. 33.

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