Thinking like a Christian
Part 4:

In but Not of the World

D. Bruce Lockerbie

An emphasis on thinking, on loving the Lord with all one's mind, shows rising concern among some evangelicals. Such a resurgence may be dated from the publication of Frank E. Gaebelein's *Pattern of God's Truth*, in print since 1954; more recently, Harry Blamires's *The Christian Mind* and John Stott's *Your Mind Matters* may still be found in Christian bookstores.¹ Other indicators of the flowering of evangelical scholarship are the steady growth of periodicals such as *Christian Scholar's Review* and Dallas Seminary's *Bibliotheca Sacra*. A recent issue of *Publishers Weekly* devotes four pages to a survey by Leslie R. Keylock of Moody Bible Institute and *Christianity Today*, naming the "outstanding evangelical Christian scholars" in fields such as Old Testament, New Testament, theology, church history, philosophy, and others. His roster, based on a nominating list of 539 names, is impressive, headed by F F Bruce.² Also encouraging is the continuing stream of books by Arthur F Holmes, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Alvin Plantinga, Ronald H. Nash, and others whose topic is a reasonable faith.³ Beyond these books, evangelical publishing houses are to be commended for risking financial loss in producing purely academic books.

**Spiritual Immaturity**

Yet in spite of these notable causes for hope, the fact is that evangelical Christianity remains possessed by pietistic fervor at...
the expense of intellectual rigor. This is known to be true of many congregations; others would argue that it is also true of most Christian schools, colleges, and seminaries. For example the influence of so-called "contemporary Christian music" is evident in the evangelical subculture. Without arguing its legitimacy as music, its efficacy for evangelism, or its limitations on the nourishment of growing Christians, one may merely state that spiritual immaturity prefers the familiar over the unfamiliar, the popular over the serious. Spiritual immaturity gravitates toward ease rather than rigor. Spiritual immaturity has money to spend on entertainment but precious little in its coffers for challenge or conviction. Christians put their treasure where their emotions reside, as Jesus said; thus when the Thomas F. Staley Foundation's "Distinguished Christian Scholar" appears on a Christian college campus for several days of dawn-to-midnight pouring out—in lectures, classroom lessons, private interviews, faculty meetings, administrative councils, mealtime conversations, dormitory lounge discussions—he gives from his own learning and experience as a Christian husband, father, teacher, coach, writer, speaker, scholar. He is grateful for the honorarium paid, unless he bothers to think about the fact that the following night in the same auditorium where he called for thinking Christians, a group of surly looking smart alecks or scruffy clowns called "Noah and the Animals" or "Publicans and Sinners" will be wailing into their microphones and inundating their lyrics with cacaphonous din. And the fee charged to the college for this one-night stand would support true Christian scholarship ten times over.

Why is this so? Because, as one of these joyful noisemakers told this writer succinctly, "We give the people what they want." What too many young people from evangelical homes and churches enrolled in evangelical schools and colleges seem to want is froth and syrup and cotton candy served up by musical lightweights ignorant themselves of the relationship between worship and the beauty of holiness. As a consequence, the hymnody of the church—the legacy of Bernard of Clairvaux and Martin Luther, of Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley, Fanny Crosby and Reginald Heber—not to mention Bach, Handel, Mendelssohn, Bruckner, and others—is in danger of disappearing altogether, to be replaced by often insipid songs.

Furthermore in too many instances the Christian college is little more than a holding pen where young adults can "find themselves." What is shown in the advertisements for Christian colleges
in evangelical periodicals? Students playing frisbee, students hang-gliding, or relaxing on a campus lawn. Where are the photographs of students in a physics laboratory or library? Why must admissions officers and public relations personnel appeal to potential applicants as though their institution were a nine-month youth retreat where everyone sits around singing mellow songs about Jesus?

The Paradox of the Christian Vocation

No wonder Charles Malik so sternly judges evangelical colleges for not having "yet attained the stature of the fifty or one hundred top universities of the world, which set the pace and provide the model for all other higher institutions of learning." Malik also asks why

they cannot provide a single Nobel Prize winner in medicine or physics or chemistry or biology or any of the sciences, who is at the same time a firm and outspoken believer in the crucified and resurrected Jesus whose glory is that he is now and forever at the very right hand of God, and who therefore is Lord of lords and King of kings .... I mean a man who is recognized and quoted by the scientific community all over the world ... just as, for instance, the contributions of Maxwell or Einstein or Planck or Fermi are recognized ... and will at the same time stand up in public and recite the Nicene Creed and declare that he believes every word of it. 

Can Malik be right to indict Christians for their smugness, their complacency, and their disinterest with the result that, after Billy Graham, scarcely another household name familiar in Christianity's subculture would register the slightest flicker of recognition in a Dallas restaurant? This self-containment is the point recently made by Nathan 0. Hatch. Describing the incongruity between "the sway of secularism" in the world-at-large and "a heady confidence" one is likely to find on the campuses of evangelical colleges, Hatch writes that "the jarring disparity between these two worlds testifies to how rarely the evangelical college serves as a bridge to issues and audiences beyond the safe confines of the evangelical world."

Christian education, as represented by schools, colleges, and seminaries, remains in a puzzling posture, afraid to be sufficiently committed to living out the paradox of the believer's vocation: living in yet not of the world. Too often these institutions swing toward one extreme or the other. The first extreme may be characterized as Of but not in the world. Claiming to offer a college-preparatory or
liberal arts education, the school or college isolates itself by scrupulous admissions requirements screening out unbelieving applicants; statements of faith from applicants or from parents on behalf of their children; pledges to forbid indulgence in sinful pleasures (always the same list of notorious iniquities, but never mentioning gossip, cynicism, or rudeness in chapel). The opposite extreme is the institution that is both *in* and *of* the world, so open to all comers—faculty as well as students—and so timid in asserting the evangelical distinctives of its biblical world view that the school or college has lost its Christian moorings. Generally this latter condition arises when the *sine qua non* of Christian schooling evaporates. Gaebelein wrote, "The principle, 'No Christian education without Christian teachers,' is not an oversimplification, but rather the essential for effective work in this field." 

In place of either extreme is needed a balanced Christian pedagogy, a balanced Christian curriculum, a balanced understanding of the interdependence necessary to loving God with one's heart, soul, strength, and mind; a balanced appreciation for the multiple gifts of each member of the body of Christ; a balance between acknowledgment of one's own gifts and humility in knowing how to use them. Perhaps in making a start toward achieving such a balance, the thrust of this article series needs to be reexamined. Thinking like a Christian is important; thinking has been so disparaged and neglected by many in the church that one cannot speak of *thinking* like a Christian and simply leave it there. Thinking must never become an abstraction, an idle pastime. For the Christian there must also be action. Thinking like a Christian means speaking and acting like Jesus Christ.

**Words, Words, Words**

One of the marks of maturity is thoughtful speech, the careful choice of words. Mark Twain said somewhere that the difference between the right word and the nearly right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug. What a person says matters because what he says is a direct reflection of who he is—or who he may pretend to be! Jesus Himself put it plainly: "For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart" (Matt. 12:34). From the deepest recesses of one's being comes the dead giveaway: the words he says.

That is why language is so important for Christians who wish to think and act like Christ. Thought, speech, and action are
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inextricable. But if believers are to think, speak, and act like Christians, they must become conscious that words are signs and labels, that they identify the speaker's world view. They tell more about the speaker than many realize.

A dozen years ago this writer was invited to speak at a college near Providence, Rhode Island. A few weeks earlier, blood vessels in his left eye hemorrhaged, leaving him totally blind in that eye. To anyone who asked about his eye he replied, "I've had an accident with my eye." Many kind people offered to pray for the eye but no one corrected the writer's use of language, and so he went on speaking about his accidental loss of vision. The night before he was to speak, he flew from New York to Providence. The weather was rainy and foggy. When the plane landed, he sat looking out at the mist rolling in off Narragansett Bay. Through that murk he saw the illuminated sign identifying the airport. One word seemed to pulsate through the fog: "Providence." For the first time this writer thought seriously about that word and his condition.

He realized that he had been guilty of far worse than the casual, unthinking misuse of language. He had carelessly demeaned the Lord of the universe, *Yahweh-jireh*, the God-who-provides. By telling friends of his "accident," he had been saying, in effect, "I live by chance in a world that is no more than a vast cosmic casino; I live by the random rules of a world governed by happening and chaos." For to trust God means delivering over to Him responsibility for all that is beyond one's power to control. Providence does not mean that Christians never have an automobile collision; it means that Christians never have an *accident*. Providence means that when Christians encounter an incident of disappointment or even death, the God they serve provides the fortitude they need to see them through their difficulties. For such a God, the word "accident" cannot be found in His vocabulary. As someone speaking on KBRT-Los Angeles said recently, "Our God never has to say 'Oops!'" So thinking Christians cannot speak of luck, fortune, chance, or coincidence because they have been called to speak as God's envoys.

**Worthy, not Worthless, Words**

Since man's Fall in Eden, God has chosen to speak to the mass of humanity through His chosen messengers, as the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews declares: "God... spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways"
(Heb. 1:1). Then God provided another voice—the Message and Messenger in One, the divine Logos, the eternal Word incarnate in Jesus Christ. This voice continues to speak, His message echoed and reechoed by those who have accepted His commission to be spokesmen for the Father. The Prophet Jeremiah records that commission as he heard it: "If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me. If you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be my spokesman" (Jer. 15:19, NIV).

If God chooses, He can speak from a burning bush or even through the braying of a donkey. God is perfectly capable of speaking directly, unmistakably, and terrifyingly, as on the walls of Belshazzar's palace. Furthermore God will speak again with the voice of a trumpet on the day of history's consummation. He will say to the dead, "Rise up!" and to the living, "Come, for all things are now ready." But for now God chooses to speak through believers, His human messengers, because God is personal, not a cosmic cipher; God is historical, not mythic; He is verbal, not incomprehensible. God's attributes include mind, intellect, reason; with these God imagines and thinks. God creates in His mind, then speaks and acts through human agents. He whispers His will in the ear of the one who listens and obeys. He calls by name, "Samuel, Samuel," to which the only appropriate reply is, "Speak, for Thy servant is listening" (1 Sam. 3:10). He asks for volunteers: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" To this challenge the only appropriate response is, "Here am I. Send me!" (Isa. 6:8). Of course God has angels to do His bidding. But because it is God's pleasure to share responsibility for this planet and this race's well-being with mankind, the creatures made in His own image, God commissions willing ambassadors to speak the message of truth, the word of warning, the word of comfort, the word of joy.

But God's commission carries with it a set of conditions, qualifications to be met before one can become His messenger. God imposes careful standards on those who would be His spokesmen. If Christians meet God's criterion, then their work will be effective; if they fail to measure up, their work will be useless. Some seem to possess an exalted notion of their own importance to the work of God. They act as though Almighty God were so weak and dependent on them that the kingdom would collapse without them to hold it up. They are indispensable, or so they think, and the need God has is so critical—the emergency so acute—that God will accept any service they offer on their own terms. In arrogance they present themselves, like impure vessels, not realizing that God...
abhors their sin; they present themselves as leaky vases, presuming to contain the splendor of God's grace; they present themselves as damaged goods, remnants from a fire sale, and expect to model the righteousness of God.

But what conditions does God impose? God evaluates the content of the message: "If you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be My spokesman." What are "worthless words"? In keeping with the emphasis on thinking like a Christian, it seems fitting to assert that style and content, form and message, are indivisible. Careless, imprecise, sloppy speech as a vehicle for communicating the good news is unacceptable. As Trueblood wrote, "We must, as Christians, stress excellence." Why does it matter how a person speaks or what he says? What difference does it make if he says "infer" when he means "imply," or "uninterested" when he means "disinterested"? Or so what if he speaks only the gibberish of the evangelical clubhouse? The fact is that much of God-talk, if not ungrammatical and malaprop, is often threadbare from casual, automatic, tongue-twitching overwork.

Nor can Christians excuse themselves by exclaiming, "What difference does it make, just so the general idea about the gospel gets through?" Scripture does not suggest that "in the beginning was the general idea," or that at the Incarnation, "the Vague Notion became flesh and dwelt among us." Jesus of Nazareth is the definitive Logos, divine Logic, sublime Reason, the Alpha and Omega, the eternal Word. The best attempts at articulating this mystery will always fall short of full expression, but that gives Christians no right to absolve themselves for selling out to the cheap phrase, the easy cliché.

**Actions Speak Louder than Words**

This writer's father, the Reverend E. A. Lockerbie, used to challenge his congregation with this anonymous quatrain:

We are writing a gospel, a chapter a day,
By the deeds that we do and the words that we say.
Men read what we write, whether faithful and true:
Tell me, what is the gospel according to you?

Christians should utter worthy words and then have the grace to act in ways that befit their speech. Two particular areas of behavior call for repentance, restoration, and renewed dedication: first, Christians' often oblivious absorption in popular culture; and second, their scandalous undermining of the family.
Muggeridge's vivid analogy of the boiling frogs portrays the uncritical immersion of many in today's popular culture. "The frogs are us," says Muggeridge, "the water is our habitat, and the Media, by accustoming us to the gradual deterioration of our values and our circumstances, ensure that the boiling point comes upon us unawares."

The most lethal aspect of popular culture, the most overtly satanic, is the music of death played and sung by louts and perverts, by screeching men and leering women whose caterwauling now moves from recording disc and concert hall to the family room by way of television. By watching their music videos and leafing through the "heavy metal" fan magazines, a person knows the message of Def Leppard, Twisted Sister, Judas Priest, Iron Maiden, Black Sabbath—or does he? No adult Christian—certainly no Christian educator in any field—can afford to ignore the blatant summons to nihilism and even suicide explicit in this poisonous sound.

Still many Christians not only ignore its dangers but seem to revel in its blasphemy. When this writer visits Christian colleges, his accommodations are often in a dormitory guest apartment. Each afternoon, as he returns to his room, he literally has to step over the bodies of potential Christian leaders sprawled beyond the confines of the television lounge, temporarily transfixed by the diabolism of MTV. Later that night, he may well have to resort to earplugs to lessen the throbbing din of Duran Duran, Motley Crue, and Van Halen, blasting from rooms where students, presumably being taught to think like Christians, are doing their homework. These campuses need to be invaded by Christians who will proclaim the lordship of Jesus Christ—not David Lee Roth!—and drive out the corrupting power of Satan.

At an evangelical college in the Midwest the writer was sitting in the student union with an older freshman, a man of 25 but looking 50—scant of hair and teeth, his face marred, his arms gouged by years of drug addiction. It was November. The previous summer on a street corner in Los Angeles he had been handed a flyer announcing an evangelistic meeting nearby. There he had heard the gospel for the first time. The next day, momentarily clear of his drugged state, he had returned to the church and confessed Christ. The pastor saw something in this man and prevailed on his own college to take the new convert into summer school—even though the man had dropped out of junior high school, already an addict at 14. The college took him; he had survived summer school
and had been admitted to freshman standing. Struggling with both the demands of college and his newly redeemed life, what puzzled him most was the inconsistency of professing Christians.

In the conversation in the lounge he paused for a moment to hear the music being piped from the main desk of the student union, one of the current Top 40. This young Christian, with his battered face and rotten teeth—yet radiating joy in Christ—said, "They shouldn't oughta play that music here. These people here, they don't know what it means. They've never been on the other side of the door. But me, I've been on the other side of the door, and, Mister, it means death!"

Christian education must be committed to life, not death. One's course of study and his manner of living, must transcend the best that the secular cosmos has to offer with the best that the Lord of heaven and earth has to give: abundant life, life with a purpose fulfilling itself day by day. A sure indication that a person has begun to experience that abundant life will be an aroused sensitivity toward the needs of others. Loving God with heart, soul, strength, and mind goes hand in hand with loving one's neighbor. If a professing Christian's heart is dull to the needs of others, if his jokes are frequently at the expense of ethnic minorities, if his respect for the opposite sex is minimal, if his compassion for the less gifted or less privileged seems stillborn, then his religion suffers from arrested development and stunted growth.

Furthermore loving God by loving others begins at home, with love and gratitude, respect and honor for one's parents; love and graciousness, respect and fidelity for one's wife or husband; love and patience, respect and responsibility for one's children. The single most distressing characteristic in evangelical Christianity—unthinkable only a generation ago—is the sinful neglect of biblical standards for loving and cherishing each other. Laxity has been permitted to creep into today's understanding of family obligations, resulting in a shoulder-shrugging neutrality toward marriage vows and abdication of authority with regard to the bringing up of children. The world fosters the self-centered ideal, favors the institutionalizing of the elderly, promotes live-in fornication rather than lifelong marriage, tosses off the blame for unruly children on the rest of society. All this is in place of accepting God-ordained roles as members of a Christian family.

For all this the writer's generation is at fault for not having had the courage to oppose the incursion of decadence into the home and church, the school and seminary. On the younger generation,
then, falls the burden to help redeem from folly an evangelical Christian subculture not far removed from having the word "Ich-abod" inscribed as its motto: "The glory of the Lord has departed." Now, as never before, is needed the youthful enthusiasm of today's Christian generation, along with their flaming sense of mission, the passion of their first love for God, to lead believers back in repentance, restoration, and renewal to the wisdom that is Jesus Christ.

In the summer of 1918 a Presbyterian minister named William Hiram Foulkes stood on the railway platform opposite the Stony Brook Assembly conference grounds, now the campus of The Stony Brook School. Waiting for his train to New York City, Foulkes met another Presbyterian, Calvin Laufer, who told Foulkes that a melody had been running through his mind for several days. Laufer hummed his original tune, and on the train to the city William Hiram Foulkes wrote his hymn, called "Stony Brook." The next evening, the congregation at the Assembly sang it for the first time.10 May this first stanza be like a closing prayer:

Take Thou our minds, dear Lord, we humbly pray;  
Give us the mind of Christ each passing day;  
Teach us to know the truth that sets us free;  
Grant us in all our thoughts to honor Thee.

May Christians today go forth in the name of Christ. Thanks be to God! 12

Editor's Note

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Notes

expanded form are to be published by Multnomah Press under the title *Thinking like a Christian.*


5 Ibid., pp. 51-52.


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Dr. Roy Zuck
Dallas Theological Seminary
3909 Swiss Ave.
Dallas, TX 75204

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu