

The Life of the Mind
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On the surface, Christianity can seem a simple, straightforward, thing: A baby is born to a young mother and placed in a manger. Rough and ready fishermen leave their nets to follow a teacher from Galilee. A shepherd searches all night for a sheep that is lost.

Christianity seems simple. And yet, it can also be as confounding a faith as you can imagine. All you have to do is to begin asking any question. Who was the baby born in the manger? What was it about the teacher that changed the lives of the fishermen and all who knew him? What kind of shepherd would care so much about one single sheep?

If you go even one tenth of one inch beneath the surface, you are face to face with the complexity and paradox of Christianity. The baby? No ordinary baby. The son of God, he was said to be. When the angel Gabriel announced to the child's soon- to- be- mother that she was pregnant, she threw up her hands in bewilderment, "How can this be?"

The baby was born as no other child has been born, and yet born of woman as has every other child. He grew up and became the teacher whom the fisherman followed. He taught and healed and preached and welcomed the

children. He overturned the tables of the money changers at the temple, and the religious leaders became so disturbed by his words and by his behavior, they conspired against him, and he ended up being killed as a common criminal.

None of this is as simple as it might seem on the surface. Think about the morning of the Resurrection. There is Mary Magdalene running to tell the disciples that the tomb is empty: Puzzled and bewildered, she says, “They have taken the Lord and we do not know where they have taken him.” He’s gone, but who has any idea where he is? (1)

The Christian story is not an easily followed plot that evokes only glad conviction. When Mary says she does not know, she is speaking for millions of Christians across the centuries who do not know but who have wanted to know and who have sought insight into the mysterious ways of God, revealed in Christ Jesus.

Four hundred years before the Protestant Reformation, St. Anslem famously described Christian theology as “faith seeking understanding.” Genuine faith is not afraid to ask questions. Genuine faith seeks the truth. Authentic faith understands that unexamined assumptions about God and God’s revelation in Christ can become dead bones with no life at all. The disciples spent most of their three years with Jesus asking him questions about the meaning of his

teachings and actions. To ask, to examine: these are the ways we grow in faith.

The Judeo-Christian tradition has always honored human reason and encouraged the life of the mind. Why? Because God gave the human creature a brain, and it is a sin not to use the gifts that God has given. The mind is intended to be used in the service of goodness and truth. We glorify God when we are good stewards of the gifts God so graciously gives to us. I think about the Super Bowl tonight. Beneath all the hype and hoopla there will be the basic beauty of human beings functioning at their physical and mental best.

Why would Christians want to settle for mediocrity of thought in the service of God? There is a little verse in I Peter that reads, “Every believer should always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” (I Peter 3:15) In other words, you should know what you believe. You should be able to give a reasonable accounting for the hope that is in you.

Jesus himself said, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” Sadly, there are many who claim to be Christ’s followers today who reject this, the greatest commandment. They do not think. They make pronouncements and dare

anyone to question the pronouncements. Here is what the Bible says. Either you believe it, or you will be damned, end of story.

I am reminded of a rhetorical question the novelist J.M. Coetzee asked, “What would life be if there were only heads or tails and nothing else in between?” What would Christianity be like if everything were either yes or no, up or down, in or out? It would be as flat as a nickel and thin as a wafer. One of the great assets of the Protestantism has been its emphasis on a thinking faith.

Much of the Islamic world in the Middle East today is in crisis, and that crisis has put the rest of the world in crisis. There are many reasons for it, but one is that as fundamentalist imams and mullahs have risen to the peak of power and influence, they stifled the rich intellectual history of Islam. For radicals, it’s always either heads or tails and nothing in between. God forbid that the Christian tradition in the West be commandeered by a similar sort of fundamentalism.

In his new book, *Our Endangered Values*, Jimmy Carter describes the marks of the new fundamentalism that appears to be emerging in America. (2)

According to Carter, these are the characteristics: rigidity, self-righteousness and an eagerness to use compulsion, including political compulsion. The spokespeople for the emerging fundamentalism have contempt for those who

do not agree with them 100%. Pat Robertson is a case in point. On national television, in a broadcast of the *700 Club*, Pat Robertson, a Christian minister, said this, “You say you’re supposed to be nice to Episcopalians and Presbyterians and Methodists... Nonsense. I don’t have to be nice to the spirit of the Anti-Christ.” (3)

Is not this kind of thing antithetical to the teachings of Jesus Christ and to the spirit of the movement called Christianity that Jesus began 2,000 years ago? Think of Jesus, who humbled himself, taking the form of a servant. Think of the Apostle Paul. Though sometimes arrogant, he never claimed to know everything. “We see through a glass darkly,” he wrote. We mortals cannot possibly know the full mind and will of God. We are limited by the fact that God is God and we are not. What we know, we know only in part. What we see, we see only in part, not only because of the limits of the mortal mind but also (Presbyterians, you can’t forget this!) because of the distortion of human sin. We cannot see things clearly, because even our best intentions are subject to sin. We are not perfect, and there is not one part of us that is free from the danger of being distorted.

How do we know God? As people of faith, we look to Christ. We affirm by faith that he is the manifestation of God’s will for salvation for the world and is, in fact, the way to salvation. These claims are the rock on which we

stand, while affirming at the same time the freedom of the one sovereign God, who cannot be confined to the finite box of our own assumptions. I think of the words of Reinhold Niebuhr: “The man who thinks it is a rather simple matter to know God’s will always ends up excluding everyone who does not agree with him.”

Reverence, inquisitiveness, passionate seeking, glad findings: these constitute the path to a living faith. The word “disciple” itself comes from a Latin word meaning “to learn.” To follow Christ is to move forward in our understanding rather than settling for where we are. To follow him is to wake up and grow up and leave behind our childish ways. I think of how I, as a girl in Mississippi was led to believe, even by the church of which I was a part, that only white people were members of the household of God. But when I became a grown person, I put away that assumption. God has been about the business of opening my mind and helping me see new realities all my life. Once I thought this, but now, through God’s grace I see more fully, not completely, but more fully.

The Presbyterian Church has long been a faithful steward of the intellectual aspect of Christianity. The great thinkers of our tradition, notably John Calvin, understood that the knowledge of God and the knowledge of everything else are intrinsically interrelated. Calvin wrote, “...from the

feeling of our own ignorance, vanity, poverty, infirmity, and what is more depravity and corruption, we recognize the true light of wisdom, wound virtue, full abundance of every good and purity of righteousness rests in the Lord alone.” (4) In other words, a little humility is always a good posture to take in this life.

In our tradition, it is not only the preachers who have a calling to be theologians. We talk in the Protestant tradition about making a decision for Christ, but you cannot make and keep a lasting decision without engaging all the aspects of who you are: emotion, spirit, will, and mind.

In our tradition, there is no such thing as second- hand faith. (5) There is only faith that is the result of our working out our own salvation with fear and trembling, and with thought, prayer, and study. One of the greatest things that has happened to me was receiving the gift of an adult faith as I moved beyond the simple categories of my younger faith. Among the ways God was at work in my life was through learning, through studying theology and studying the Bible. God is still finding me along those same paths and shaking me up and leading me out of those places where my ideas have calcified and on into fresh understandings of what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

I rejoice that the Presbyterian Church teaches people to think theologically, and that a learned laity and a learned clergy are always a part of our life together. Did you know that it was a religious impulse on the part of the Puritans that a little school called Harvard College was begun in 1636 to “advance learning and perpetuate it for posterity.” The story was the same wherever Protestants settled in the new world: churches first, then schools, always schools, always the life of the mind. (6)

I rejoice that education is becoming more central to our lives here at Morningside, and I encourage you to allow your own faith to seek deeper understanding.

I also encourage all of us to get involved in the broader conversations about religion that are taking place in American society today. More often than not, the Christian voice that is heard is one that is not representative of the Christ we meet in scripture. Surely now is the time for thinking Christians to join in the discourse. I believe the whole nation is ready for a Christian voice that stands up for the great affirmations of our tradition while practicing civility and respect for those who have different convictions. I believe there is an urgent calling for thinking Christians to be active in conversation, speaking bravely, listening respectfully, and acting boldly in the service of love, goodness, and truth. What are we waiting for? Who, if not people who

are blessed by the rich tradition of Protestant Presbyterianism, ought to do it?

The story is told of a conversation Albert Einstein had one day on a train ride into New York City from Princeton, where he lived and taught.

Professor Einstein was in his seat reading quietly when a bubbly, young student sat down beside him. She began to chat with the Professor.

After a moment or two of conversation, she asked him, “So, what do you do?”

“I study Physics,” he answered.

“Oh,” she said, “I finished Physics last semester.”

Friends in Christ, don’t let anyone ever fool you. We will never finish exploring the mystery of God’s who is in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. (II Cor. 5:19)

“The heart is a wonderful organ but so is the brain.” (7) Use yours to the glory of God.

Notes:

(1) Jon Meacham, “Tidings of Pride, Prayer, and Pluralism, *The New York Times Book Review*, 12/25/05.

(2) Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values*, Simon and Schuster, 2005.

- (3) Garry Wills, "Jimmy Carter and the Culture of Death," *The New York Review of Books*, February 9th, 2006.
- (4) John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.1.1.
- (5) Robert McAfee Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism*, p. 123.
- (6) *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- (7) Nicholas D. Kristof, "Believe it or Not" *The New York Times*, 8/15/03.