

DISCIPLINE OF MIND

THE COMPLEX CAPACITY of the human brain is the subject of ever-widening scientific wonder. Its twelve to fourteen billion cells are only a shadow of its complexity, for each cell sends out thousands of connecting tendrils so that a single cell may be connected with 10,000 neighboring cells, each of which is constantly exchanging data impulses. These twelve to fourteen billion brain cells times 10,000 connectors make the human mind an unparalleled computer. The mind's activity has been compared to 1,000 switchboards, each big enough to serve New York City, all running at full speed as they receive and send questions and orders. Put another way, there is more electronic equivalent in one human brain than in all the radio and television stations of the entire world put together!

The human brain does not miss a thing. It is capable of giving and receiving the subtlest input — from imagining a universe in which time bends, to creating the polyphonic texture of a Bach fugue, or transmitting and receiving a message from God Himself — feats no computer will ever accomplish.

The dizzying potential of the human mind reaches its apex in the possibility of possessing the mind of Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit — a possibility affirmed by Paul when he said, “But we have the mind of Christ” — a mind which is constantly renewed (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:16 and Romans 12:2). No computer will ever be able to think God's thoughts, nor will any device ever be able to know the heart of God or do His works. But the mystery which resides between our ears has this capacity. Indeed, it was created for this — to have the mind of Christ.

This cosmic potential of the believer's mind introduces the great scandal of today's Church: *Christians without Christian minds*, Christians who do not

think Christianly — a tragic fact which is far more true of professing Christian men than women, as we shall see.

Some prophetic voices have been sounding the alarm for some time now, like that of former United Nations Secretary General Charles Malik, who told the distinguished audience at the dedication of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College: “Believe me, my friends, the mind today is in profound trouble, perhaps more than ever before. How to order the mind on sound Christian principles, at the heart of where it is formed and informed, is one of the . . . greatest themes that can be considered.”¹

Harry Blamires, in his much discussed *The Christian Mind*, has said that while Christians may worship and pray as Christians, they do not *think* as Christians: “[T]he Christian mind has succumbed to the secular drift with a degree of weakness and nervelessness unmatched in Christian history.”² Elsewhere he sees our generation as suffering from religious anorexia (*anorexia religiosa*), a loss of appetite for growth in Christ.³

The bottom line is: this grievous scandal comes from a declining willingness to properly program the amazing instruments God has given us. Christians leave their twelve billion cells unguarded and unthinking — and undisciplined.

When we turn to God’s Word, we are aware that the Biblical writers understood the problem in a less technical, though more personally beneficial, way. “Above all else, guard your heart,” says Proverbs, “for it is the wellspring of life” (Proverbs 4:23). “For as he thinks within himself, so he is” (Proverbs 23:7, NASB). The Scriptures tell us rightly that input determines output — that our programming determines production.

THE DIVINE PROGRAM

In the New Testament no one understood this better than the Apostle Paul. In fact, in his letter to the Philippians, after alluding to guarding the heart Paul prescribed his personal program in one sublime sentence: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things” (Philippians 4:8).

Each of Paul’s ingredients is explicitly positive. The true, the noble, the right, the pure, the lovely, the admirable all defy negative exposition. Each ingredient was, and is, *a matter of personal choice* — and our choices make all the difference in the world. We all can *choose* a thought program which will produce a Christian mind.

I have great sympathy for those whose past has been a series of bad choices. I understand that if over the years one has chosen the impure and the illusory and the negative, it is very difficult to change. But as a Biblical thinker I give no quarter to myself or anyone else who rationalizes his present choices by the past. Brothers, *as Christians we are free to have a Christian mind*. It is within our reach, and it is our duty.

As we consider how Paul's program should affect our minds, the sheer weight of its positives demands a determined rejection of negative input: "Finally, brothers, whatever is untrue, whatever is ignoble, whatever is wrong, whatever is impure, whatever is unlovely, whatever is unadmirable — if there is anything shoddy or unworthy of praise — do not think about these things." It was not that Paul was a naive Pollyanna. He knew the dark side of human experience. Romans 1 proves that. But he chose not to make such input a part of his mental programming.

So we must lay down as fundamental to our Christianity this truth: *a Christian mind demands conscious negation; a Christian mind is impossible without the discipline of refusal*.

Charles Colson tells of sitting at dinner with a president of one of the three major television networks. Colson felt he had a tremendous opportunity to influence the man, so he told him how millions of Christians were offended by the networks' programming. Knowing that TV executives have an intense interest in profit, Colson suggested that it would be good business to air wholesome family entertainment. "After all," added Colson, "there are fifty million born-again Christians out there." The gauntlet was down, and as Colson tells it:

He looked at me quizzically. I assured him that was Gallup's latest figure.

"What you are suggesting, Mr. Colson, is that we run more programs like, say, *Chariots of Fire*?"

"Yes!" I exclaimed. "That's a great movie with a marvelous Christian message."

"Well," he said, "CBS ran it as a prime-time movie just a few months ago. Are you aware of the ratings?"

All at once I knew I was in trouble.

He then explained: That night NBC showed *On Golden Pond*; it was #1 with 25.2 percent of all TV sets in America tuned in. Close behind was *My Mother's Secret Life*, a show about a mother hiding her past as a prostitute. It was #2 with 25.1 percent.

And a distant third — a big money loser — was CBS with *Chariots of*

Fire — 11.8 percent. In fact, of the sixty-five shows rated that week, “Dallas” was #1, *Chariots of Fire*, #57.

“So,” my companion concluded, “where are your fifty million born-again Christians, Mr. Colson?”

Good question. Where are we?

If even half of Gallup’s fifty million born-again Christians had watched the show with the Christian message, *Chariots of Fire* would have topped the ratings. But the disturbing truth, as studies by the secular networks as well as the Christian Broadcasting Network show, is that the viewing habits of Christians are no different than those of non-Christians!

Since TV is a business, it gives its customers — the public — what they want. It is but a mirror image of us.⁴

The Christian community is putting the same input into its collective computer as is the rest of the world. According to A. C. Nielsen, the TV set in the average home is on seven hours and seven minutes a day, and the average viewer watches four and one half hours each day.⁵ The statistics for religious homes is just a half hour less.⁶

A renowned media expert, Professor Neil Postman of New York University, says that between the ages of six and eighteen, the average child spends some 15,000 to 16,000 hours in front of the TV, whereas he spends only 13,000 hours in school.⁷ Postman says that during the first twenty years of an American child’s life, he will see some one million commercials, at the rate of about 1,000 per week!⁸

As to television’s effects, the results are infamous:

- Shortened attention span.
- Diminution of linguistic powers.
- Reduced capacity for abstraction.
- Homogenization of adulthood and childhood.

To attract and hold its audience, the TV industry feels it has to parade the taboos of culture: adultery, promiscuity, homosexuality, incest, violence, and sadism.⁹ As a result the lowest of activities become commonplace, and even morally cachet.

There is a distinct connection between these things and the background of TV executives as compared with the viewing public. Only 7 percent attend church regularly, as compared to 55 percent of the viewing public; 44 percent have no religious affiliation, as compared to only 10 percent of the viewers having no such affiliation.¹⁰ To deny there is a conscious assault on the Christian

mind and its traditional values is like believing Saddam Hussein is building a “kinder, gentler world.”

I am aware of the wise warnings against using words like “all,” “every,” and “always” in what I say. Absolutizing one’s pronouncements is dangerous. But I’m going to do it anyway. Here it is: *It is impossible for any Christian who spends the bulk of his evenings, month after month, week upon week, day in and day out watching the major TV networks or contemporary videos to have a Christian mind.* This is *always* true of *all* Christians in *every* situation! A Biblical mental program cannot coexist with worldly programming.

If we are to have Christian minds, there are things we must put out of our minds — and this extends beyond TV, to what we read, listen to, and laugh at.

My advice? Stop watching television. I mean that sincerely! Not watching TV will liberate so much time, it will become virtually impossible not to become a deeper person and a better Christian. Even if you play poker with your friends, you will be better off, because you will be *relating to human beings*!

I am not suggesting a new legalism which forbids TV and the cinema. (There are many worthwhile things to view; moreover, while Christianity is by nature countercultural, it is not anti-cultural.) But I am calling for believers to take control of their minds — what comes in and what goes out. If you cannot control what you watch and read, perhaps it needs to go. “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away,” says Jesus (Matthew 5:29). My wife and I chose to raise our children without a television for this very reason, and we have no regrets. What we did is not for everyone, but it may be for you.

The Psalmist gives sage advice for those living in the media age: “I will walk in my house with blameless heart. I will set before my eyes no vile thing” (Psalm 101:2, 3). We need to allow Christ to be Lord of our prime time.

Some of you need to schedule a confidential conference with your spouse and prayerfully seek God’s will regarding this. And you single men who have so much trouble with your minds need to likewise seek God’s will — and someone to hold you accountable. Let us not settle for being like other Christians or for having a church that is like other evangelical churches. May we be different because we have *Christian* minds.

INTENTIONAL PROGRAMMING

In the text we have been considering, Paul recommends that we focus our minds on truth, nobility, rightness, purity, loveliness, admirability, excellence, and

praiseworthiness, and ends with this loaded charge: “*Think* about such things” (Philippians 4:8, italics added). The word he uses is *logidzamai*, from which we get the mathematical computer-like word *logarithm*. It means a “. . . deliberate and prolonged contemplation as if one is weighing a mathematical problem.”¹¹ The way I handle my mail gives an example. Frankly, most of it gets tossed. I read the return address to see if it is an ad, perhaps open it, scan a few lines — and away it goes. But if it is an outdoor catalog, say the Orvis catalog, it gets deliberate and prolonged contemplation — especially the Superfine graphite fly rods. We are to think about the wonderful elements God wants us to put into our computers. God calls us in His Word to a massive and positive discipline of the mind.

Scripture

This can only happen through a profound exposure to and continual immersion in God’s Word, accompanied by the illumination of the Holy Spirit — an exposure that is within the reach of all literate and semiliterate Christians.

Lt. General William K. Harrison was the most decorated soldier in the 30th Infantry Division, rated by General Eisenhower as the number one infantry division in World War II. General Harrison was the first American to enter Belgium, which he did at the head of the Allied forces. He received every decoration for valor except the Congressional Medal of Honor — being honored with the Distinguished Silver Cross, the Silver Star, the Bronze Star for Valor, and the Purple Heart (he was one of the few generals to be wounded in action). When the Korean War began, he served as Chief of Staff in the United Nations Command — and because of his character and self-control was ultimately President Eisenhower’s choice to head the long and tedious negotiations to end the war.

General Harrison was a soldier’s soldier who led a busy, ultra-kinetic life, but he was also an amazing man of the Word. When he was a twenty-year-old West Point Cadet, he began reading the Old Testament through once a year and the New Testament four times. General Harrison did this until the end of his life. Even in the thick of war he maintained his commitment by catching up during the two- and three-day respites for replacement and refitting which followed battles, so that when the war ended he was right on schedule.

When, at the age of ninety, his failing eyesight no longer permitted his discipline, he had read the Old Testament seventy times and the New Testament 280 times! No wonder his godliness and wisdom were proverbial, and that

the Lord used him for eighteen fruitful years to lead Officers Christian Fellowship (OCF).¹²

General Harrison's story tells us two things. First, it is possible, even for the busiest of us, to systematically feed on God's Word. No one could be busier or lead a more demanding life than General Harrison.

Second, his life remains a demonstration of a mind programmed with God's Word. His closest associates say that every area of his life (domestic, spiritual, and professional) and each of the great problems he faced was informed by the Scriptures. People marveled at his knowledge of the Bible and the ability to bring its light to every area of life.

He lived out the experience of the Psalmist:

Oh, how I love your law!
 I meditate on it all day long.
 Your commands make me wiser than my enemies,
 for they are ever with me.
 I have more insight than all my teachers,
 for I meditate on your statutes.
 I have more understanding than the elders,
 for I obey your precepts.

(119:97-100)

You must remember this: You can never have a Christian mind without reading the Scriptures regularly because *you cannot be profoundly influenced by that which you do not know*. If you are filled with God's Word, your life can then be informed and directed by God — your domestic relationships, your child-rearing, your career, your ethical decisions, your interior moral life. The way to a Christian mind is through God's Word!

Again, we must be careful not to create a Bible-reading legalism — “good Christians read the Bible through once a year.” The Bible nowhere demands this. Some simply cannot read well, or fast, and speed reading is not the answer. As Lucy told Charlie Brown: “I just completed a course in speed reading and last night I read *War and Peace* in one hour! . . . It was about Russia.”

My own brother, who is severely dyslexic, having had the misfortune of receiving his schooling before much was known about learning disabilities, only learned to read well enough to get along in his trade. Recently he became a Christian, and with his newfound motivation to know God's Word he pur-

chased tapes of the Scriptures. His wife also reads to him. He is reading better each year.

Most people, however, will find that reading the Scripture through once a year is the best way because it requires only five pages a day and offers a reachable annual goal. Believers, whatever your ability, you must regularly read and study God's Word. If you refuse, you are in effect "editing God" and will never have a fully Christian mind.

In the Resources section of this book, you will find several detailed plans for annually reading through the Bible ("M'Cheyne's Calendar for Daily Reading," "Through the Bible," and "Topical Guide to Daily Devotional Bible Reading in a Year") and also sources for obtaining the Scriptures on audiocassette ("The Bible on Audiocassette"). I would encourage you to avail yourself of these opportunities.

Christian Literature

Along with reading the Word, we ought to be reading good books. The brilliant Jewish radio talk show host Dennis Prager, a man who makes sure he is well-informed, said in a recent interview in *The Door*:

One thing I noticed about Evangelicals is that they do not read. They do not read the Bible, they do not read the great Christian thinkers, they have never heard of Aquinas. If they're Presbyterian, they've never read the founders of Presbyterianism. I do not understand that. As a Jew, that's confusing to me. The commandment of study is so deep in Judaism that we immerse ourselves in study. God gave us a brain, aren't we to use it in His service? When I walk into an Evangelical Christian's home and see a total of 30 books, most of them best-sellers, I do not understand. I have bookcases of Christian books, and I am a Jew. Why do I have more Christian books than 98 percent of the Christians in America? That is so bizarre to me.¹³

It is bizarre — especially when a commitment to Christ is a commitment to believe in things that go far beyond the surface of life. Sadly, the bulk of the non-reading Christian public are men, who buy only 25 percent of all Christian books.¹⁴

Men, to deny ourselves the wealth of the accumulated saints of the centuries is to consciously embrace spiritual anorexia. Great Christian writing will magnify, dramatize, and illuminate life-giving wonders for us. Others have walked the paths we so want to tread. They have chronicled the pitfalls and posted

warnings along the way. They have also given us descriptions of spiritual delights which will draw us onward and upward.

In preparation for speaking and writing about the subject of the mind, I mailed a questionnaire to thirty Christian leaders, including such people as Charles Colson, James Dobson, Carl F. H. Henry, J. I. Packer, Warren Wiersbe, and Calvin Miller. I received twenty-six responses. The survey asked four questions:

- 1) What are the five books, secular or sacred, which have influenced you the most?
- 2) Of the spiritual/sacred books which have influenced you, which is your favorite?
- 3) What is your favorite novel?
- 4) What is your favorite biography?

The devotional/theological books mentioned most were C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, Oswald Chambers's *My Utmost for His Highest*, John Calvin's *Institutes*, A. W. Tozer's *The Pursuit of God*, and Thomas a Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*. The most frequently mentioned biographies were Mr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor's *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret* and Elisabeth Elliot's *Shadow of the Almighty*. The favorite novels were Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Fyodor Dostoyevski's *The Brothers Karamazov* (which was, for example, the favorite of Charles Colson, Wayne Martindale, Harold Myra, J. I. Packer, and Eugene Peterson). These titles make a superb list from which to select if you have not done some serious Christian reading. (All the survey responses can be found in the Resources section of this book — "Personal Reading Survey.")

Also, today many books are available on audiocassette (great for listening as you drive to work or when traveling, etc.). For example, my own town's public library carries tapes of such great books as *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan, *Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoyevski, the *Diary of Anne Frank*, *Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Homer's *Odyssey*, *Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis, *Lord of the Rings* by Tolkien, *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy, and many others.

Men, you need to fill your mind with good stuff. I am not suggesting a manic spree (George Will, for example, is able to read two hefty books a week). But many of you would do well to commit to reading two or three good books this next year.

What amazing instruments reside in the three or four pounds between our ears, instruments with greater capacity than a thousand busy New York City switchboards. The mind is greater than all the computers put together, for it can possess the *mind of Christ* and think God's thoughts after Him, wear His heart, and do His works. What an eternal tragedy it is, then, to have this mind and have it redeemed, yet not have a Christian mind.

We must protect our minds. We must refuse to allow our culture's media to write our program. We must say no to the wastelands that invade our homes.

And we must make a conscious effort to submit to the Divine Programmer through reading His Word. There has got to be some holy sweat. "... train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" (1 Timothy 4:7, 8). Prayerfully commit yourself to reading and studying God's Word.

Further, read the great works of those who have gone before you.

Prayerfully make your commitments now.

Food for Thought

What does a comparison of Harry Blamires's statement ("[T]he Christian mind has succumbed to the secular drift with a degree of weakness and nervelessness unmatched in Christian history") and Proverbs 4:23 tell you? Do the things we think about really matter?

What does Philippians 4:8 say about the thought life? Are we supposed to take a Polly-anna approach to life and deny the stresses and strains of life? If not, then what is this passage teaching?

What do Matthew 5:29 and Psalm 101:2, 3 tell us about a disciplined mind? Is it really possible to live out these verses day by day? How?

What can the Word of God do to help us in this area (see Psalm 119:97-100)? Are you doing what these verses prescribe? Why or why not?

Have you ever read the Bible through in a year (or even two years or three)? Will you covenant with God to do this now, in order to become more familiar with the whole of Scripture and to better hear God's voice to you through His Word?

Name at least three or four Christian books that have made a major impact on your life. Then list at least two Christian books you have been meaning to read. By what date will you read these books?

Application/Response

What did God speak to you about most specifically, most powerfully in this chapter? Talk to Him about it right now!

Think About It!

In what ways do you know you need greater discipline of mind? What are your greatest struggles in this area — perhaps sexual lust? self-pity? dwelling on past pain? pride? worry? other? What can you do, practically and spiritually, to experience growth toward wholeness in these areas?