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## ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM IN THE CHURCH

by Michael W. Austin

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Many years ago as a seminary student studying both philosophy and theology, my family and I attended a large evangelical church in Southern California. I've forgotten the topic, but in the course of his sermon one Sunday morning, the pastor was discussing things that he didn't understand from Scripture. He gave the example of the Trinity, and in essence said, "The Bible teaches it. I don't understand it, but I believe it." And then he moved on to something else. It was as if there was nothing significant that we could draw from this challenging but crucial doctrine of the Christian faith.

I was incredulous at the time, and in the years since, I've often thought about this brief dismissal of the relevance of the Trinity for the Christian life. Although I agree that the Trinity is in many ways beyond our ability to grasp, it is not *entirely* beyond our ability to grasp. This sermon didn't need to include an extended discussion of the logical, philosophical, and theological issues related to the doctrine of the Trinity. It could have, however, at least included an attempt at showing how it might relate to everyday life in Christ. For example, the fact that God is triune means that reality, at its most fundamental level, is relational. This has important implications that are relevant to church, ministry, family, friendship, and the value of relationships in general. Surely this means that the quality of our relationships with others should be a priority for us as followers of Christ.

In fact, the doctrine of the Trinity has wide-reaching implications across all realms of life. Wayne Grudem offers a helpful discussion of this doctrine in his *Systematic Theology*.<sup>1</sup> A crucial point concerning the Trinity is that God has both unity and diversity within Himself. Unity and diversity are present in and reflected by a variety of human relationships. Consider some examples offered by Grudem:

*On a more everyday level, there are many activities that we carry out as human beings (in the labor force, in social organizations, in musical performances, and in athletic teams, for example) in which many distinct individuals contribute to a unity of purpose or activity. As we see in these activities a reflection of the wisdom of God in allowing us both unity and diversity, we can see a faint reflection of the glory of God in his trinitarian existence.<sup>2</sup>*

Grudem observes that there are many realms of life that can reflect, at least faintly, the Trinity. This brief discussion reveals the potential fruitfulness of thinking through the implications of the doctrine of the Trinity for Christian thought and practice. But even such brief discussions often fail to occur. Why is this?

### **FEELINGS ABOVE REASON**

There are probably many reasons that challenging Christian doctrines are rarely discussed on Sunday mornings. I am convinced that one of those reasons is that there is a significant strand of anti-intellectualism in the church, especially the evangelical church. The acquiescence of evangelicalism in this area of life is yet another way that we have failed to be truly countercultural, in the best sense of the term.

Anti-intellectualism is rampant in the United States.<sup>3</sup> For quite some time now, our culture has exalted feelings above reason, pragmatism over wisdom, entertainment over intellectual engagement, and we're now seeing the fruit of these choices. The criticisms are now clichés, but they are nevertheless true. Image often trumps substance. Slogans are more effective than sound policy proposals. The art of persuasion is less about truth and evidence, and more about tapping into the emotion of one's audience to get them to do or believe what one wishes. People focus more on the messenger's rhetorical abilities rather than the message itself. In these and other ways, the church often has followed suit.

### **Abandoning Higher Learning**

Why are large segments of the church anti-intellectual? There is a bit of history that is relevant here. While only part of the story, the withdrawal by evangelical and other theologically conservative Christians from colleges and universities in the first half of the twentieth century has had lasting effects not only on the university but also other cultural institutions.<sup>4</sup> The university is in many ways the mind of the United States. When most evangelical and conservative Christians abandoned it, the result was

realized not only in the university and the culture at large but also through them in the church itself. Ideas come into existence in the university, are transmitted via the media and entertainment industries, and are then often uncritically adopted by the public, both Christian and non-Christian. If you doubt this, ask yourself a question: how many people in church every Sunday are more influenced by consumerism, the pursuit of pleasure, and the news/entertainment industry than they are by sound biblical teaching and Christian thought? Just as troubling are the ways that naturalism and relativism can influence our thinking without us being aware of it. Many of us are skeptical about religious and moral knowledge claims, perhaps without even realizing it. Christians are taking on these ideas in subtle ways. Many in the local church aren't familiar with the sound arguments that have been raised against naturalism and relativism by top Christian thinkers. Fixing this problem would strengthen our faith and witness.

### **Emphasis on Emotions**

Another reason that anti-intellectualism is rampant in the church is an overemphasis on emotion. Emotions matter, but if they are not tethered to the truth, they will fail us. We need to attend to emotions in better ways than we currently do, and shape our liturgies, education, and other practices accordingly. Nevertheless, as Dallas Willard once said, *feelings make great servants, but horrible masters*. Just because I feel deeply that something is true does not in and of itself make it true. If followers of Christ could learn and apply this fact to their lives, we'd be well on our way to undermining much of the anti-intellectualism that exists in the church. We'd also have a more positive impact on others with the gospel of Jesus Christ for the sake of God's kingdom.

In part because of our focus on feelings, much of the church still focuses excessively on "felt needs" in both outreach and teaching. There is a proper place for this, but often Christians and those we are trying to reach have deep spiritual needs that they don't feel. Moreover, we can tend to misdiagnose people's felt needs. Several years ago, I spoke at a large conference for Christian college students on responding to the problem of evil. There were hundreds of students packed into a hotel ballroom, and we had an excellent discussion. The next year, the conference organizers decided not to offer this presentation again. However, there were multiple sessions on love, sex, and dating. Teaching on how Christians ought to approach these areas of life is essential, and certainly it is important for college students. If we are seeking to equip students to minister on a secular college campus, however, knowing some of the main replies that Christians have given to why God allows evil and suffering is also important. When students are challenged in class by a professor or their peers to explain how a good and loving God could allow evil, the need to know some replies will quickly be felt. And when these students encounter suffering in their own lives or the lives of others, these

issues become very important to them. Of course, a focus on felt needs can lead to a flawed picture of God as a divine Santa Claus and of the Christian life as one of ease and comfort, which is certainly not the picture we are given in Scripture. In light of this, our church and parachurch ministries must create time and space to equip people in some foundational theological and apologetic truths.

## DEEP READING

One cause and symptom of anti-intellectualism in the church is neglect of a form of reading that Maryanne Wolf, a cognitive neuroscientist at Tufts University, refers to as deep reading.<sup>5</sup> This form of reading involves more complex thinking. It is slower, reflective, and thoughtful. In these and other ways, it differs significantly from the type of online reading most of us engage in. We may read more now than in the past, but what many of us read tends to be online, including blog posts, Facebook updates, tweets, and the like. The type of reading that we do online also tends toward shorter, less complex sentences. In this environment, we quickly scan for the relevant text, or the most important point—even the most important word. We become adept at scanning, clicking relevant hyperlinks, making quick judgments about what is worth our attention, and digesting small bits of text. In this sense, our brains are becoming digital.<sup>6</sup> So it is not just the content but how it is delivered that is having a negative impact. We cultivate skills that are useful in this online environment, but these skills are not helpful when engaging a longer piece of text, whether that is a literary novel, a theological position, or an apologetic argument. I've noticed this in my own life. Recently, I've had difficulty concentrating and following complex lines of argument, two pretty important things to be able to do in my line of work. In order to deal with this, I'm spending less time online and more time in solitude and silence.

## Grasping Difficult Ideas

Many Christians do read at least a few books every year, but a problem exists here as well. Christian bookstores have aisles of books on relationships, personal fulfillment, Christian self-help, and various forms of fiction, but very little theology or apologetics. Four of the ten Christian bestsellers on a recent list were adult coloring books.<sup>7</sup> This is both distressing and revealing. We don't read enough complex books, and we don't read well. We need to read books that stretch and challenge our souls. We need to learn how to follow the steps of an argument. Such reading may not always be entertaining, but not all reading should be done for entertainment. *Ideas matter*. They matter for the formation of Christian character, and they matter for our mission in the world. As J. Gresham Machen put it in his 1912 address at Princeton Theological Seminary:

*It should be ours to create, so far as we can, with the help of God, those favorable conditions for the reception of the gospel. False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion. Under such circumstances, what God desires us to do is to destroy the obstacle at its root.<sup>8</sup>*

We live in a culture saturated with relativism, naturalism, and various forms of skepticism, while Christianity espouses realism about truth, theism, and the notion that humans can know important truths. Grasping these ideas and related issues requires time, effort, humility, and persistent engagement. The results can include deeper impact for God's kingdom and a more Christlike character. Fortunately, as Wolf points out, we can relearn how to engage in this kind of deep reading. We can train ourselves to engage deep ideas. So what, practically speaking, can we do?

First, we might need to learn how to read well. For this, Mortimer Adler's classic *How to Read a Book* gives excellent guidance related to the different types of reading, as well as how to read different genres, such as literature, history, science, and philosophy. Second, we can set a goal of reading a few challenging books this next year. We have a tendency to give up too soon, but reading is like exercise: you have to challenge yourself in order to improve. Third, we should read entire books of the Bible with attention to genre, rather than just a few verses or a chapter at a time. For most books of the Bible, this is how they were intended to be read, and it is how they are best understood and applied.<sup>9</sup> Fourth, we will likely need to get ourselves (and our children, if we have them) away from screens long enough to read on a regular basis. Finally, I would suggest gathering with a few likeminded people at church, either in a small group or a larger setting, and read some challenging books on biblical studies, theology, apologetics, or philosophy together. Working through such books and discussing them with others can be very helpful to gain a better understanding of the ideas in them. Doing this together can better equip members of the body for ministry in the realm of ideas.

The problems in the church and in society are not merely intellectual. There are also many related to emotions and the will. But anti-intellectualism is an issue. In recent decades, a great deal of quality material explaining and defending a Christian worldview has been produced. It is up to followers of Jesus to make use of it. In a post-

Christian culture, this is no longer optional. It is essential to our pursuit of Christ and fulfilling our mission as ambassadors for the kingdom of God.

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## NOTES

- 1 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 226–61.
- 2 Ibid., 257.
- 3 See Michael W. Austin, “Anti-Intellectualism and Contemporary America,” *Psychology Today*, June 21, 2015, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/ethics-everyone/201506/anti-intellectualism-and-contemporary-america>.
- 4 For much more on this, see Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).
- 5 Maryanne Wolf, “Is Online Skimming Hurting Reading Comprehension?” Here and Now, WBUR, April 9, 2014, <http://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2014/04/09/online-readingcomprehension>.
- 6 Michael S. Rosenwald, “Serious Reading Takes a Hit from Online Scanning and Skimming, Researchers Say,” *Washington Post*, April 6, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/serious-reading-takes-a-hit-from-online-scanning-and-skimming-researchers-say/2014/04/06/088028d2-b5d2-11e3-b899-20667de76985\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/serious-reading-takes-a-hit-from-online-scanning-and-skimming-researchers-say/2014/04/06/088028d2-b5d2-11e3-b899-20667de76985_story.html).
- 7 Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, “Christian Bestsellers, June 2016,” Christian Book Expo, <http://christianbookexpo.com/bestseller/all.php?id=0616#>.
- 8 J. Gresham Machen, “Christianity and Culture,” *Princeton Theological Review* 11 (1913): 7.
- 9 For a good book on this, see Walt Russell, *Playing with Fire: How the Bible Ignites*
- 10 *Change in Your Soul* (NavPress, 2000). Also, try a reading plan that enables you to read the Bible a book at a time, such as the Legacy Reading Plan available at [http://www.equip.org/PDF/LEGACY\\_READING\\_PLAN.pdf](http://www.equip.org/PDF/LEGACY_READING_PLAN.pdf).