

Imagine that one night God wakes you from a dream and offers you the golfing ability of Tiger Woods. Or imagine being bestowed with the entrepreneurial capabilities of Bill Gates, the singing ability of Pavarotti, or the literary insight of C.S. Lewis. ¶ We could get lost in such fantasies, but in fact, the reality for the Christian is even more stunning. ¶ The truth of Christianity is that God offers us something infinitely more valuable than all these abilities put together. As Christians we can actually

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MIND CONTROLLED

GOD OFFERS US THE OPPORTUNITY TO HAVE THE VERY MIND OF CHRIST.

BY THE SPIRIT

have “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16).

Think about that. Somehow, spiritually, Christians have been given the mind of God-made-man. This is an incredible offer. In comparison, who cares about playing golf? Who wants to waste time making money? I want to think like Christ. Even more than that, I want His very mind.

And in the Spirit, I can have it.

We don’t talk much about the “mind” of Christ. We talk about His obedience, His sacrifice, His love, His kindness, His healings; yet in the midst of all this wonder, the miracle of His mind is often neglected.

The Romance of the Mind of Christ

My family and I were once invited to the home of an elderly woman. She knew I was a writer, so she invited me to look at some of the books in her garage. Boxes lined the walls, often three or four deep. I thought I had been given an advance ticket to heaven.

Until, that is, I opened one of the boxes and saw cover after cover picturing a passionate embrace. *Romances*. I quickly closed the box and opened another. The flowery covers immediately told me I had struck the same barren ground. I went through three more boxes before I realized this woman and I had very different interpretations of what constitutes a “book.”

Why are romances one of the mainstays of the publishing industry? There are a number of reasons, but one is that human romance is a shadow of a yearning that God has built into each of us to point us to our need for Him.

This might surprise some, but the mind of Christ is a mind filled with passion and romance — though not for physical contact. Jesus made it clear that our minds are a primary vehicle through which we can express our devotion and affection for God: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37).

We lose a profound truth when we think of love as something that comes only from our heart, only from our emotions. The Bible teaches us that our minds are powerful tools to express our devotion. While I doubt we’ll see stores selling chocolate brains on Valentine’s Day (they just don’t have the same effect those cute little hearts do), from a theological perspective, it’s appropriate to remember that our minds are a key component for loving God.

Love based solely on affection lasts about as long as a bag of cheddar cheese crackers left open in children’s church. When the *mind* is given over to love, however, love is given endurance.

How do we grow in the romance of the mind? The mind’s love grows when we understand new things about God, when our limits on His goodness are exploded, when our misunderstandings of His motives are dispelled, and when His righteousness and power are allowed to captivate us.

These truths fortify our convictions so that when our emotions start to wane — as they always will — our convictions will remain rock-solid. This means the sermon is a part of worship; it’s not merely a few thoughts dropped in after worship. By adopting the mind of Christ, we can increase our devotion and experience a long-term faith.

The mind that loves God is a mind that thinks God’s thoughts, a mind that is in harmony with His own. The good news behind this is it’s often easier to redirect our thinking than our feelings. Our feelings can get away from us, but our thought patterns are more within our control — and therefore a better indicator of our love and devotion.

If you sense your love for God has grown cold, use more than your heart. Use everything God has given you to love Him — including your mind.

A Mind of Warfare

“But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your

minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:3). Though we are given the mind of Christ, it is a battle to maintain it.

You walk out of church, full of God’s words and a dozen worship songs, only to return home and find out some awful news: A close relative has just been diagnosed with cancer; your house needs major repairs; a friend’s marriage is breaking up. At that point, your mind becomes a battleground. What will consume it? Fear? Dread? Anger? Peace? Faith? Trust?

We’ve considered the mind as an instrument of love; now let’s view it as an instrument of holy war. The Christian mind is a spiritual muscle; it helps us to live a holy life.

This is what Paul was talking about when he said, “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:22-24).

Paul is urging us to use our renewed minds to govern our bodily actions. He is also saying we can’t maintain a holy mind while participating in unholy actions. Holiness involves our entire being. The Pharisees would have been delighted to limit virtue to bodily activities, but Jesus put lustful fantasies on par with lustful deeds (Matt. 5:27-28). Jesus compared the murderous thought with the murderous act (Matt. 5:21-22). Jesus is the One who elevated the role of the mind in the Christian life.

God has given us something the animals don’t have: a moral understanding. We are not slaves to our darker inclinations. We can sift through the options and say, “No, I will reject that one because it is not in line with what God calls me to do.”

Our oldest daughter used to grab our youngest daughter from behind —

not with malice, but in play. Even so, it hurt our youngest and caused her to cry. What did we tell our oldest? "Think about what you're doing before you do it. Think about how this might scare a younger child, or how your strength might cause you to accidentally squeeze too hard."

When I'm faced with a clear temptation, I seek to apply this same teaching to myself. Exercising my mind as a spiritual muscle, I remind myself why I need to respond in a holy manner. This is part of what the Bible means by saying, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). Our resistance means exposing the devil's lies, and we use our minds to do that.

Other passages back this up. Peter tells Christians to "prepare your minds for action" (1 Peter 1:13). Solomon talks about how he turned his mind "to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly" (Eccles. 7:25).

Maintaining the mind of Christ is a choice that may involve struggle. Sometimes I find that I preserve the mind of Christ only with a fierce determination: "I will set my mind on things above. I will not dwell on earthly things." Other times, it's a natural outpouring of God's current blessing.

But with the mind of Christ, I know I never go into spiritual warfare without being fully armed. Jesus, Peter, and Solomon are in agreement: Use your mind as a muscle. Exercise it. Live thoughtfully. Call it into play.

A Mind of Perspective

After years of preaching to hard hearts and apathetic listeners, Francis Asbury finally began to sense a breakthrough in his parish. As an early Methodist minister, Asbury never flinched from preaching on a renewed mind. He believed that a spiritual breakthrough had finally come to his

Virginia congregation in 1776.

Now imagine being a Virginian in 1776 — what would occupy your mind? World and national events were colliding at an astonishing rate, yet Asbury testifies that in his parish, "Scarce any conversation was to be heard throughout the circuit, but concerning the things of God: either the complaining of the prisoners, groaning under the spirit of bondage unto fear; or the rejoicing of those whom the Spirit of adoption taught to cry, 'Abba, Father.' The unhappy disputes between England and her colonies, which just before had engrossed all our conversation, seemed now in most companies to be forgot, while things of far greater importance lay so near the heart."

For two years, I worked out of my home. When we put our house on the market to sell, I sought to "de-clutter" it by securing an office in a nearby business complex. I re-entered the world of doing business in an office, getting to re-meet the "average" person.

It was an eye-opener. Talk to your average person on the street, and almost invariably you find his mind occupied with the same things: concerns over finances, preoccupation with sporting events or entertainment extravaganzas, physical health, misbehaving children, and the list goes on.

Scripture warns us not to occupy our minds with things that will pass away. The mind of Christ is a mind set on eternity. "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (Col. 3:2). This may be the most difficult biblical standard for occupying our minds.

The ways of God do not make sense to natural men and women. From our limited perspective, God's ways can be downright confusing. Scripture addresses this time and time again. We think we're serving God, only to find we've fallen completely out of His plan: "Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind

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the things of God, but the things of men” (Matt. 16:23).

In the light of earthly ambition, Jesus’ death made no sense. In the light of eternity, it was mankind’s only hope. By focusing only on the former, Peter completely missed what God was doing. Because he did not have in mind the things of God, Peter’s thinking became skewed, and he lost all perspective.

If you were to write down all the things you’ve thought about this day, putting one group of thoughts in an “eternally significant” column and the other in a “will pass away” column, which column would be longer? Are you missing what God is doing because you’re preoccupied with things that are passing away?

The mind of Christ is an instrument of devotion, a weapon in spiritual warfare, and a context through which we live our lives. Because our minds have such an active role to play in the life of faith, we need a “lubricant” to keep them working. Thankfully, God has provided for that, too.

The Mind’s Lubricant

Scott is a seasoned campus pastor in Southern California. A recent testimony given at his college showed him how powerful the mind can be in calling God’s children home. Just as it’s dangerous for Christians to let the world into their minds, so it’s “dangerous” (from Satan’s perspective) for non-Christians to let God into theirs.

“Alex” is one of the students Scott met on campus. Alex suffers from muscular dystrophy, and his slow decline in his physical capabilities led him into bitterness, cynicism, and withdrawal. His cousin spent years trying to introduce Alex to the light and hope of Jesus, but when Alex’s brother was killed in a car accident and his father began using drugs, Alex turned to something else to escape the pain. He filled his mind with pornographic magazines and videotapes, supplemented by occasional forays into strip-clubs.

When some college friends invited him to attend a campus Christian outreach, Alex reluctantly agreed. He was so bored, with so few friends, that he would have gone just about anywhere as long as he wasn’t alone.

At first, Scott’s sermon fell on deaf ears. Alex was there to meet people, not to meet God. But the worship music had an astonishing effect; it softened him up. In Alex’s words, “The worship songs we sang there just wouldn’t leave me alone. They would echo over and over again in my head, no matter how much I tried to push them out.”

A few days later, Alex says the Holy Spirit “crashed into me like a tidal wave,” and he gave his life to Christ.

By God’s design, our minds become more fully alive in the presence of music. Without getting too technical, our brains are more active under the stimulation of music than during a presentation by a “talking head.” Pastors might lament this, but the congregation is more awake during singing than during the sermon.

This points to our spiritual “lubricant.” Christians can use this physiological reality to their advantage, packing their minds with songs that, as Alex put it, “echo over and over again” in a positive way. Paul explains that one of the ways we can be “filled with the Spirit” is to “speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:18-19).

Bible study is crucial to maintaining the mind of Christ, but there comes a time when our eyes grow weary and we need to relax with some soul-stirring music. Not only can it help us defeat sin, but it can help us fulfill our calling.

When Martin Luther composed “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” he did so knowing that his life was threatened. The music fed his and other early Protestants’ courage as they set out to pursue their understanding of God’s direction. In fact, most major “revival” or restoration movements in the

church have spawned a rich heritage of new music. Consider the role of Charles Wesley's brilliant compositions as he worked with his brother John to found Methodism.

Music can make our minds strong. It can embolden us to press forward with what we know is right.

Thinking and Faith

To many people, *thinking* is the opposite of *faith*. Some might even define faith as the absence of thinking. Ten million people will win the lottery before one Christian with that mindset will reach maturity.

Christian thinking is a discipline, a holy exercise that can reap great rewards. Mature Christians are thinking Christians who have learned to cede the area of their minds to God, millimeter by millimeter. God shapes our faith and calls us to renewed action through disciplined thinking, not in spite of it.

Some time ago, I ran across one of the most controlling men I have ever met. Left in his wake were dozens of Christians who had felt abused, run over, and manipulated. Though God had undoubtedly used this man, he went through volunteers like a family of six goes through Dixie cups. He developed nonsensical rules that he refused to follow himself ("I've paid my dues," he would say), but that he insisted his volunteers unquestioningly adhere to.

A vocational assignment led me into his path, and I soon became party to his overbearing demeanor. It was not a pleasant experience.

About a week later, I was greatly challenged during a time of prayer. I realized how infuriating it must be to this individual to watch Christians whom he has attacked later join for meaningful fellowship — leaving him virtually alone. Through my limited perspective I had judged this man, but in prayer God was calling me to have compassion — to feel what he must feel.

I remembered the Scripture, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31) and was reminded that while God opposes sin in all its manifestations, He continues to reach out to the sinner. And then I realized that as God's image-bearer, I must do the same. God would not allow me to "write this guy off." I was being charged to continue reaching out to Him with the grace, truth, and mercy of the gospel.

This was a new mindset for me; God was asking me to change my thinking, which then would affect my behavior.

In other situations, I've wallowed in self-pity: *Why do other Christians have it so easy?* I ask. *Why does everybody else get a break?* Then I remember another Scripture: "Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:17-18).

Again, my mind was challenged to re-think my complaint. Instead of self-pity and bitterness, God was calling me to thankfulness, submission and humility — but it had to start with a new understanding, by adopting the mind of Christ.

Thinking and faith go hand in hand. True faith is an intellectual exercise. We condition our minds to accept that what a higher authority says must be true, admitting our perspective is not reliable. This is soul-building and it hurts — every bit as much as body-building hurts (but ultimately reshapes) a weight-lifter.

Finally, the mind of Christ, more than anything else, is a tremendous blessing to us.

The Blessing

In a world filled with people who pour spiritually cancerous things into their minds — worry, fear, lust, hatred, jealousy, bitterness, greed — we are given the opportunity to set our minds on

whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy (Phil. 4:8). This is the opportunity of a lifetime.

Just go to a local McDonald's, a public library, or a shopping mall and watch how people treat each other. Recently I was walking into a library when I heard a father swearing at his son. It was summer, and the father had driven up to the curb so his son could quickly drop off a book in the return slot. The son left the passenger door wide open as he ran the six feet from the curb to the book return slot.

"You're going to break the *\$&#! air-conditioning!" The father yelled. "Can't you close the *\$&#! door?"

The door was open for about 10 seconds, but that was enough to send this father off on a tirade. I felt for them both. What must it be like to live with such anger — either as the perpetrator or the receiver?

Just step outside and see the hurting souls, the lack of kindness, the sadness, the exasperation. God is offering you a way out of that. He will give you the spiritual power to refocus on positive, pure, praiseworthy, and noble things. You will be freed from the plague of polluted, depressing thoughts.

We are given many opportunities in life, but this is one we should take care not to miss. God is offering us the mind of His only Son.

Will we accept that offer with gratitude and then diligence, or will we continue to waste one of the most valuable gifts God has ever created — the gift of a human mind remade according to the image of His Son?

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). ■

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STIMULATED TO

THE CHRISTIAN MIND IS DEFINED BY ITS RELATIONSHIP TO JESUS CHRIST.

WHOLESOME

THINKING

“Get your mind out of the gutter.” That old admonition may not apply anymore. These days, it’s more like “Get your mind off that billboard.” Or shop window. Or checkout stand. Or video store. The gutter’s gotten so big, it can be hard to find the sidewalk. How are Christians supposed to keep their minds focused on heavenly things when the earthly, the temporal, and the downright dirty are clamoring for attention at every turn? ¶ Shopping malls are virtual battlefields strewn with mental land

AND KNOX

BY ROB REYNOLDS