

STIMULATED

THE CHRISTIAN MIND IS DEFINED BY ITS RELATIONSHIP TO JESUS CH

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

BY BOB REYNOLDS



**When we become
aware of the
thought patterns
behind our sins,
we can become
so consumed
that we will fail.**

mines. The Christian man finds himself dodging seductive images at perfume counters and bath shops — and that's before he even gets near Victoria's Secret. Moreover, marketers are testing the old hypothesis that women are less visually oriented than men by blanketing store windows with life-size photos of hunky men sleeping, showering, or lounging around in their underwear.

At the grocery store, managers have caved-in to harried moms by implementing no-candy aisles at checkout, but eye-candy such as the seductive "Cosmo girl" is still visible at every cash register. At the video store, it's practically impossible to scan the shelves for *The Adventures of Pinocchio* without being confronted by the racy covers of movies such as *Barb Wire* or *Body of Evidence*. Well-meaning Christians may seek to vow with the psalmist, "I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes" (Psalm 101:3 KJV), but how can they deal with the wicked things that a permissive culture tries so hard to set before them?

The trap of worldly thinking can be baited with much more than just sexual sins. A Christian homemaker may not be tempted to lust by the woman staring out from the cover of *Vogue*, but that doesn't mean her mind is safe from temptation. Maybe she wants to look like that, to be able to make heads turn. Envy is just as antithetical to the Christian mind as lust. And if, on a very good day, she should find herself immune to lust or envy, Madison Avenue has plenty of other temptations to set before her eyes: greed, pride, materialism, hedonism, and rebellion, to name a few.

The apostle Paul told the believers in Philippi to think on "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute" (Phil. 4:8 NASB). To anyone who has ever struggled with sinful thoughts, the mindset Paul describes may seem like a relic of simpler times. Even in an im-

moral city like Philippi, they didn't have to contend with the estimated 1,200 advertisements that confront us daily — 1,200 temptations each day to think on whatever is tawdry, whatever is fleeting, whatever is worldly, whatever is humanistic. Is a truly Christian mind possible under today's circumstances?

A Well-defined Mind

The crucial first step is to establish a definition of this thing called the Christian mind. The natural tendency is to describe it for what it's not — not carnal, not temporal, etc. But that's like asking a police artist to sketch a bank robber based on what he doesn't look like: "He doesn't have any scars, he doesn't wear glasses, and he doesn't have red hair." That may eliminate a few billion people, but it doesn't help in catching the culprit.

Besides, focusing on the negative is often self-defeating. "I have prayed for an hour or more not to do something, not to fall into an inappropriate behavior, and I've gotten up from my knees and turned around and fallen right on my face," says Steven Mosley, a Christian seminar speaker and author of *There I Go Again: How to Keep From Falling for the Same Old Sin*.

"That's very distressing, because it makes you say, 'Where's God? Why did He fail me now?' Well, the fact is, I spent all that time in prayer running the anger tapes and running the lust tapes. I may have been thinking about those things in terms of resisting them, but the temptation was still the center of my attention. God wasn't the center of attention. The fruit of the Spirit wasn't the center of attention. I was essentially playing the wrong tapes."

Most modern Christians can identify with the frustration of Dominic, a medieval ascetic who was so troubled by the lustful thoughts plaguing him that he finally jumped into a briar patch and rolled around until he was bloody. That may have been an effective



short-term solution, but it's not terribly practical for anyone who has to work or raise a family.

What Dominic couldn't have known is that habitually repeated actions literally form pathways in our brains. Neurons surge along these pathways that typically result in physical action. "Destructive behaviors really begin in the mind," Mosley says. "When we believe that a temptation has just bowled us over out of the blue, 90 percent of the time there is quite an extensive pattern of thought that has preceded that to set us up for a fall. Most of the time we're not even aware of those patterns."

When we become aware of the thought patterns behind our habitual sins, we often become so consumed with resisting, we practically doom ourselves to failure.

The man who usually leafs through an "adult" magazine when he stops to buy gasoline may decide he wants to break that habit. But the familiarity of the setting — the smell of coffee, the swish of the pop machine, the action of pulling out his credit card — acts as a stimulus. Almost involuntarily he finds himself thinking about the magazine rack to the left of the cash register. The neurons are charging down that old path, and he has to work hard to avoid strolling over and looking. But the more he focuses on resisting the temptation, the more the neurons flow toward their traditional destination. A briar patch might look particularly inviting just about now.

"It takes a lot more energy to block a signal in our brains than it does to just let it through," Mosley explains. "We try not to lust, we try not to be angry, we try not to be vengeful. So what we're expending our energy on is blocking those negative signals."

The Proper Stimulus

But if the Christian mind isn't simply one that avoids evil thoughts, what would a more positive definition look

like? To Mosley, it is defined by its relationship to Christ, not by a list of do's and don'ts. "It's a mind that is stimulated by exchanges with Christ," he says, "a mind that gets input and new ideas and inspiration from a relationship with Christ. It's very important not to put the mind in a box and say that a Christian mind is something that's limited by these parameters. Spirituality is an expansion of ourselves in Christ, and that includes our mind."

Jay Adams, best-selling author of books such as *Competent to Counsel* and *Theology of Counseling*, has spent his professional life analyzing the workings of the mind. He insists that in defining the Christian mind, "It's not a matter of what you think about, but how you think about those things." Simply refusing to think about the things of the world may make you a good ascetic, but it doesn't make you a good Christian, Adams says.

"Of course you think about worldly things; the Bible thinks about worldly things. If you think about what's going on in the world from God's viewpoint and think His thoughts about the world, that's perfectly fine. If you think the world's thoughts about the world, then you're in trouble."

The problem is that thinking God's thoughts never comes naturally. Adams points out that according to the apostle Paul, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). Our minds do not enter this world as a blank slate. Instead, says Adams, in our natural state we are "capable only of thinking wrongly about God and creation and other human beings. That's why the Bible had to be given to mold and change the minds of those who were open to it."

Though the Christian mind and the non-Christian mind may think about

the same things, they won't think about them in the same way. It's perfectly natural to dote on children, to spoil them, even to idolize them in the sense of putting them ahead of God. But the Christian mind will view them differently — as a gift from God, a sacred trust, a will to be brought into conformity with God's will.

The Christian mind, then, is one that tries to think God's thoughts in every aspect of life. The key word, according to R. Paul Stevens, professor of applied theology at Regent College, is *every*. "I think of it as the integration of all life so that one thinks and acts consistently, holistically, and completely for God in every aspect of life — business, family, neighborhood, and society," he says. "Thinking 'Christianly' isn't just an academic or an intellectual pursuit. It's really the integration of one's life around Christ. It's the opposite of living in compartments, or living a Jekyll-and-Hyde kind of life."

Stevens says Christians' love of God gives them a transcendent reference point unbelievers lack. He points to Luke 11:34, "When your eyes are good, your whole body also is full of light."

"If you're really focused on Christ, then your whole bodily life is illuminated," he says, and that light illuminates a Christian's thinking in every area of life.

Without such a reference point, non-Christians live a disordered and dis-integrated life, thinking one way about work, another way about leisure, and still another about family. Different standards prevail in different situations, so that selfishness at work is expected while selfishness within the family is discouraged. Occasionally, such as when a loved one dies, unbelievers may even think about God and religion. But such thoughts have no bearing on how they live the rest of their lives.

Unfortunately, says Stevens, Christians are increasingly thinking in much the same way, "accepting the division between the sacred and the secular, the



ideal and the material. They've allowed their minds to be divided by thinking 'Christianly' about church and ministry and prayer, but they don't make the link with money and family and work and sexuality and friendships."

So pressing is the need for integrated Christian thinking that Stevens recently co-edited, with Robert Banks, *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity*, an 800-page tome that professes to be "An A-to-Z guide to following Christ in every aspect of life." The book includes entries on topics that may at first appear to have absolutely no spiritual dimension: cars, chocolate, gardening, shopping malls, and tourism.

Too often, says Steven Mosley, when Christians suddenly recognize that their faith should permeate all their thinking, they react by trying to sort things into categories of good and evil. Thus, a woman who is given to binge on chocolate when she's depressed labels Hershey bars as wicked, and a man who can't control his spending decides his Master Card is of the devil.

"We tend to want to put things in boxes and point to certain boxes as things to be avoided," Mosley says. "Although that may look religious, it is in fact a huge sign of the carnal mind, which is always reductionist, always puts things in boxes and says that if I avoid this or that then I'm good. Spirituality is very different. The Christian mind is something that expands in Christ [because] we have access to the unlimited divine mind. It's very important for us, especially as conservative Christians, to understand that Christ is promoting spirituality in us and not simply a reductionist picture of what life is all about."

Mind Expansion

Besides, Mosley says, boxing up the world into good and bad simply invites the old problem of focusing on the bad thing to the point that it becomes an obsession. Instead, he suggests looking at the world as an endless source of spiritual lessons, an infinite number of opportunities to think about God.

Paul Stevens agrees. He sees those

1,200 daily advertisements as not just 1,200 temptations to be avoided, but 1,200 opportunities to think on the things of God. "We tend to see spirituality as a leisure activity," he says, "but I'm convinced that it's to be the focus of our entire lives. We're constantly bombarded with the world's messages, and the only way to counteract that is to walk in the Spirit. We should always have the sense that right now is the time when we can commit ourselves to God's gracious will."

Stevens recalls pulling up beside a bus on the way to teach his theology class. Any spiritual thoughts were immediately imperiled by the racy poster advertising condoms, plastered on the side of the bus. It was a moment of decision: Could he maintain a Christian mind in the face of such carnal allure?

"When I'm tempted to lust, this is an opportunity to seek God's viewpoint" and draw a spiritual lesson, Stevens explains. Looking back to the road, he chose "to revel in God's good gifts of pleasure within marriage, to prize the dignity and loveliness of every individual person that God has made" — not exactly the reaction Madison Avenue hoped for.

This kind of thinking when confronted with carnal temptation is the hallmark of the Christian mind, according to Jay Adams. "Christianity is not a negative thing; it's something very positive. It has negative aspects, but only because we have such a positive truth." When God's Word tells us to think on heavenly things, Adams says, it's not simply a matter of turning our minds away from worldly things. Rather, having the mind of Christ is about "applying biblical thinking to all those things that you're bombarded with. It's how we view those things and what we think about them."

Looking at one of Calvin Klein's notorious ads and reacting with thoughts of God's sovereignty or His love for sinners may seem like a stretch, but the experts insist it's possible. The key, they maintain, is Scripture. "The discipline of getting into the Word has been vital to me," says Mosley. "It's not just a mat-

ter of having a text to whip out and use on certain occasions when you're tempted. It's your whole perspective that's affected by having more of the Word in more of your mind. It's a matter of growing in the richness of the knowledge of Christ, as the Epistles encourage us to. Besides having better information about God, our minds become better tools at discerning His will when we have that discipline of daily Bible study."

As our minds become more and more saturated with Scripture, we become better able to re-integrate God into every aspect of our lives. "The whole of life is actually an invitation back to live the way we were intended in Genesis 1 and 2, which is to live in constant communion with God," says Stevens. He notes that the temptation in the Garden was one of pushing God out of everyday life. According to Genesis 3:6 (NASB), Eve saw that the tree was "good for food," so she could take bodily provision apart from God. She saw that it was a "delight to the eyes," so she could experience pleasure apart from God. And she saw that it was "desirable to make one wise," enabling her to have power apart from God.

Each time Christians think and act in a compartmentalized, secularized way, we re-enact that first sin, Stevens says. When we banish God from our thoughts at work, we are taking our daily provision outside of communion with Him. By pushing Him from our thoughts during leisure, we seek to experience pleasure apart from Him. And when we do anything in our own strength, with no thought of God's enabling power, we lose sight of the fact that "in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Thus, by re-integrating God into even the most mundane details of life — by thinking His thoughts in every situation — we live in constant communion with Him. The Christian mind re-creates a little bit of Eden, even in the middle of Sodom and Gomorrah. ■

Rob Reynolds is a Washington, D.C., journalist and frequent contributor to MOODY.



PURSUIT OF THE TRIVIAL CAN THWART THE RENEWAL OF OUR MINDS.

MIRRED IN THE MUNDANE



One of the cultural characteristics of contemporary society is the tendency to occupy the mind with trivial matters that provoke unwholesome attitudes. Our society operates on the basis of easy access to innumerable facts, many of which are neither necessary nor encouraging.

For Christians, this is a critical issue because Scripture places great emphasis on the use of our minds. In Romans 12:2, Paul exhorts believers to stop being conformed to this present age, but to be in the process of being transformed by *renewing the mind*. The idea of renewing the mind is that the believer is to evaluate his current values, interests, goals, needs, and attitudes by the truth of God's Word.

In other words, the Christian is to think as God thinks and not as those in the age in which he lives. Values and standards of the contemporary environment are not to be accepted by the child of God without first processing them through the grid of Scripture. In this mental process of learning the Word of God and evaluating life's experiences and world-views by it, the believer is transformed. Renewing the mind implies learning to think differently and to reprogram the database upon which we make judgments.

The key to successful Christian living is maintaining balance and focus. Exposure to the world or entertaining yourself with sports or theater is not contrary to having a pure mind, nor is it incompatible with Scripture to keep up with current events. The problem occurs when we allow the ungodly, the trivial, or the wasteful to influence sound biblical thinking.

One extreme is to be unaware of events or trends occurring in the very world we are trying to reach with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Hiding in mental monasteries is not God-honoring

BY ED GLASSCOCK



and certainly hinders our communication to the unsaved world. The old expression "so heavenly minded as to be no earthly good" applies to those who cloister themselves into only Christian books, TV, radio, or acquaintances.

The other extreme is to become so enamored with the world's foolishness that one loses perspective of God's Truth, God's mission, and God's methods. The goal should be a spiritually mature balance.

Garbage In, Garbage Out

The acronym GIGO (garbage in, garbage out) refers to the fact that whatever information we program into a computer will be what we get out of it. If we put nonsense into the database, a program will produce only nonsense. Likewise, whatever we put into our minds will eventually show up in attitudes, values, lifestyles, and activities.

More complex, however, is the process of assigning value and meaning to data. Often the data presented to the mind are neutral — neither evil nor righteous. The heart, that part of the human in which Christ attributes the source of evil (Matt. 15:19), must be purified and made clean so that what the eyes, ears, mouth, and other physical data receptors take in is given the proper value and meaning.

For example, two men may see the same woman: One sees a sister in Christ for whom he cares but does not lust; the other sees a sexual object upon which he desires to gratify his lust. The difference is in the purity of heart that comes from surrendering to the Spirit of God. Thus, the data of the mind are assigned value by the heart, which is either pure or impure.

A Mind of Worship

The dangers of misusing the mind go beyond lust or error in doctrine. The mind is to be the focal point of worshiping God. Too often worship is viewed as an external activity. In reality, true worship takes place in our thoughts toward God. Jesus said the greatest commandment is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37 NASB).

A fascinating element in this command is that Jesus uses the word *mind* (*dianoia*, "understanding, mind, thought"), but the Old Testament passage he references uses *might* (*mod*). The substitution of this final word may be based on the fact that the Jews' zeal toward God was not to be questioned, but their understanding of Him was incorrect (see Rom. 10:2). Thus, they needed to love God not only with their hearts and souls, but also with their thinking and understanding. The Jews were to love the true God according to all that He had revealed of Himself and not just have a religious zeal — or worship their humanistic ideal of God.

The major characteristic of liberal theology is the rejection of a God who could send people to hell. Proponents of this theology believe a loving God could never inflict eternal torment on anyone. They may have a religious nature and may be morally good people, but to love God with understanding means acceptance of the whole testimony of Scripture as He has revealed Himself — not as we would like Him to be. The God who sent His Son to die as the only adequate compensation for the offense against His holiness is the same God who commanded Saul to exterminate every man, woman, and child of the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:3).

Many Christians today have a vague and confused knowledge of God because their minds have been programmed with misconceptions and error. Christian novels that are intended to entertain often attribute wrong attitudes and actions to God. The excuse of "creative license" is not adequate to offset the damage in creating false ideas of God. Television programs such as *Highway to Heaven* or *Touched by an Angel* constantly indoctrinate the mind with wrong ideas and religious fantasy rather than sound doctrine. That Christians are childish in their thinking about God is no surprise.

Adjusting Our Focus

The world offers many distractions and tempts the child of God to focus on immediate, material, and temporal "needs." Contrary to the world's view, Scripture exhorts the Christian to think

of other-worldly things: the eternal, non-material elements. Colossians 3:2 states, "Set your mind on things above, not things that are on earth" (NASB). The idea of "set the mind" is to focus or concentrate. For believers who live in a material and temporal world, it is difficult to look beyond immediate circumstances and concentrate on the eternal things of God's kingdom. Yet this is the very power and joy of the Christian life.

Jesus taught His followers to "Seek first the kingdom of God" and then these other things — what to eat, what to wear, what to drink — would be added by God Himself (Matt. 6:31-33).

What is the proper use of the mind? Is it to be occupied with temporal pleasures, material desires, or personal perceived needs? Scripture says "no." The Psalms offer clues on how a believer can please God and find blessedness: "His delight is in the Law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night" (1:2 NASB) and "how can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word" (119:9). "I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word" (119:15-16).

What occupies our minds? Perhaps the joy of our Christian faith and our wisdom for living victoriously would be more evident if more time were spent meditating (not just reading to fill our devotional time, but processing and understanding) in God's Word. Worldly philosophies and attitudes have crept into the church. Even our terminology reflects the world — business meeting, boards, budgets, management style, self-esteem, to name a few.

Perhaps our minds have been too influenced by the world and not enough by the Word. The proper use of our minds is to honor God with our thoughts, to seek His truth and His program, and to be involved with His work. Our minds are to be filled with God's values and standards and to be renewed according to His Word. ■

Dr. Glasscock is vice president for academics at Southeastern Bible College in Birmingham, Ala., and the author of Matthew in the Moody Gospel Commentary Set (Moody Press).

