

Intellectualism

By William MacDonald

Intellectualism is a peril in every age of the Church but for some reason it seems to be posing a special threat in evangelical circles today. Whenever we make such a statement, some one rises to the defense with the cry, "What do you want us to do? Throw our minds away?" That, of course misses the point. The intellect is a God-given faculty and should be exploited to the full. But the danger comes when human reason is exalted above the word of God.

Intellectualism can become a subtle form of idolatry when man's mind rather than the Bible becomes the authority. The best use of the intellect is to "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5) We should test our thoughts by God's Word, and not vice versa.

Marks of intellectualism

There are certain distinctive marks of intellectualism as it exists in the evangelical world today. First of all, there is an exaggerated regard for what is called "scholarship." But what is meant by scholarship? When you investigate you find that it is almost invariably connected with the possession of certain postgraduate degrees. If you check more thoroughly you will find that many of these theological degrees were granted by universities that are not particularly noted as bastions of the Christian faith. The truth is that in order to get degrees with status in the theological world today you have to go to colleges which are pest-houses of infidelity. You get the status you ought alright, but what a price to pay. The second mark of modern intellectualism is the tendency to be more concerned with what the prominent theologians have said than what the Scriptures are saying. If you know what Barth, Tillich, Niebuhr, and such men have said you are intellectual. If you only know what the Bible teaches, you really don't have the proper credentials. I am sick to death of remarks and magazines that rehash the pompous sayings of these theologians. I often feel like crying out with the Apostle Paul. "Do ye set those to judge who are of no account in the church? I say this to move you to shame" (1 Corinthians 6:4.5).

Closely linked with this lust for intellectual status and this preoccupation with noted theologians is an increasing esteem for men of liberal persuasion. Separation has become a naughty word; the "in" word is cooperation. Men like William Barclay are quoted and courted. It was Barclay who said, "Jesus was the end and climax of the evolutionary process." Concerning the account of the fruitless fig trees he wrote, "The story does not ring true. To be frank, the whole incident does not seem worthy of Jesus. There seems to be a certain petulance in it." In his book on Luke, Barclay writes, "The man who walks with God can say, 'I am the master of my fate, I am the conqueror of my soul.' " Perhaps one of his most brazen handlings of God's Word is in the way he explains away the raising of Lazarus. Yet it is men like this who are honored by the "intellectuals" today.

There often seems to be a more tolerant attitude toward modernists than toward those who are sneeringly called "fundamentalists." Too often there is an attitude bordered on contempt for those whom God has called, that is, the foolish, the weak, the bare, the things that are despised, and the things that are not (1 Corinthians 1:27-28). Have we become oblivious to the fact that the humblest believer, taught by the Spirit of God, can understand the deep things of God whereas the most scholarly unbeliever has a native incapacity for knowing them? (1 Corinthians 2:14)

GOD USES THE UNEDUCATED

Modern evangelical intellectualism also seems unaware of the fact that the gifts God has given to the church are charismatic, not professional. The idea is abroad that only those with professional training are qualified to minister the Word. There seems to be a mounting disinclination to listen to men who, like John and Peter, are uneducated, common men (Acts 4:13). When will we learn that "some simple minded folks know more about God and His ways than some professors will ever know" (Barnhouse)?

1. Though not universally true it is often an undermining of the inspiration of the Scriptures. These men do not speak with the conviction of the Reformers. They use weasel words to hide their wobbly stance.

2. An evasive position on Genesis 1-3. When there seems to be a conflict between the Bible and science, we see a worry-some leaning toward the voice of science and a pathetic attempt to dilute the words of Scripture until, as Spurgeon said, there is not enough left to make soup for a sick grasshopper.

3. A noncommittal policy on prophetic matters: "My mind isn't made up on that as yet." Yet they can be quite vehement in their stand against dispensationalism, against pretribulationism, and against premillennialism, which creates a distinct impression that their prophetic position is more definitive than they wish to say.

4. A tendency to give naturalistic explanations for Bible miracles. A well-known evangelical scholar, for instance, has gone on record with naturalistic explanations of all the plagues in Egypt.

5. A propensity to take a slap at typological interpretations but before long the baby is thrown out with the bath.

William Kelly once wrote: "There are no men less to be trusted than mere scholars, because, being scholars, they are naturally apt to be proud of their scholarship; and whatever we are proud of is always the very thing in which God will humble us."

I am persuaded that the type of intellectualism we have been discussing is sterile and devoid of power. What we need today is Christians who have a thorough knowledge of the English Bible and Spirit-filled men who can preach with such power that wherever they go, something will happen for God.