

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE AND CULTURE

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A TIME FOR RECONSIDERING

In response to the tragic events of September eleventh and the troubled times that have followed, we have all been doing a lot of rethinking. We have been reconsidering both public and private matters, rethinking national and international politics and policies, and thinking again about personal philosophical and religious questions. We have been reassessing our priorities and commitments, becoming more thoughtful about our roles and relationships, and rethinking both the details and depths of our lives. At the most fundamental level we have been rethinking life itself, reconsidering our most basic understanding of who we are and of what life is all about.

While the events of September eleventh and the subsequent troubles have occasioned this rethinking, the need for reconsidering our most basic understanding of life has been weighing on us for some time. For decades now modern culture has been burdened by a thin or lightweight understanding of human experience that has an emptiness at its center. Although we live in a time of endless possibilities and inventiveness, the inventiveness is hollow. Anything and everything is possible, but nothing

is necessary or essential. Even the self has turned out to be no more than a "vacant place in the middle of the web of words."¹ We are free, then, to create our own meanings and values and to believe what we want, but we must not see these views as running deep or as binding on others or even on ourselves. Well before September eleventh, our cultural history had pushed us into a "nonplace" that is characterized by emptiness, absence, clearings, erasures, and silence, a place where there are no deep meanings or essential truths, and where we play without security, without fault, and without truth.

The need for reconsidering our most basic understanding of life has been weighing on us for some time.

The problem with this morally thin and lightweight understanding of ourselves is that it just isn't adequate to life itself. It simply doesn't match up with the moral thickness and weight of human experience. Yes, we have become well-skilled in

doubt and in denying necessity, and we are increasingly comfortable with the enthronement of taste and with individualized meanings that have no depth. Nonetheless, we also continue to experience a depth of meaning and morality in our daily lives that contradicts the empty ways of thinking that have come to dominate our culture

over recent decades. In actual human experience meanings do retain meaning, freedom is an experience of discovery as well as creativity, and all of us draw lines that not only identify sites for the exploration of empty possibilities but also set limits that preserve significant and even sacred spaces.

Perhaps, if we could routinely fulfill the day-to-day demands of our jobs, sit passively in front of our television sets in the evenings, and take in the occasional bit of entertainment over the weekend, we might be able to get away with thin and lightweight ways of thinking. If only we could remain indifferent, we might be able to continue to think that there are no deep truths and that moral judgment is little more than established personal preference. If only we could remain numb, we might be able to go on spinning out individualized beliefs that have no depth and talking as if it is fine for each of us to believe whatever we want. Sooner or later, however, life brings experiences that make these ways of thinking untenable. Experiences come our way that demand a deeper understanding of who we are.

September eleventh brought such an experience into all of our lives. Suddenly, our televisions ceased to be the distractions that we generally want them to be, and they became windows into reality. Understandably we all groped for words, but our groping was telling, for it pointed to the gap between our understanding of life and life itself. We used words such as "cowardly," "stupid," and "mad" to describe what we were witnessing, and we wanted these to be moral terms, but the words were insufficient. Finally, we called the deeds evil, and it was immediately apparent that this was the right word. It was also apparent that in order for the word to be adequate, it could not stand alone. It could not simply be a slogan. It had to flow from a much deeper, thicker understanding of our situation on this

planet than the shallow, thin understandings to which our own cultural story has led. It had to grow out of a deep self-understanding that can help us cope with both the horror and heroism of that day.

Our more private and personal experiences also demand a deeper understanding of life. Here too, the depth and contradictions of life become apparent, and so does the gap between our self-understanding and the experience of life. William James once observed that life feels like "a fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success."² He is right. Life does feel like a fight. How we treat our children and our parents, what we make of commitments in friendship and marriage, and how we treat both neighbors and strangers seem to run deep. These are not just matters in which we indulge in groundless self-fashioning. These are matters in which we discover moral depth and meaning and in which we encounter the deep contradictions of our own experience. Here too we need an understanding of our condition that is compelling in the face of deep evil and tragedy as well as in the presence of greatness and glory. Finally, life itself demands an understanding of our condition that has moral substance and deep meaning to it, an understanding that cuts across the differences that individuals and even cultures spin out.

In the face of actual human experience, with all its depth and contradiction, then, we do well to rethink our lives, and in doing so to reconsider a biblical understanding of life. With its simple but profound teaching about the creation and the fall the Bible does justice both to the moral depth of day-to-day experience and to the contradictions into which we tend to slide as individuals and as societies. In the doctrines of creation and fall, scripture offers what Blaise Pascal called a "great principle of greatness" and a "great principle of wretchedness,"³ without which we cannot under-

stand ourselves. These principles help us understand how we could be both horrors and heroes, how, on the one hand, some of us could seek evil ends with such moral zeal and, on the other, some of us could hold to noble ends and yet do so with such moral indifference. The biblical teaching helps us understand how we human beings could be both the glory and the shame of the universe.

The biblical doctrine of the creation and the fall turns out to be compelling in our more private and personal experiences of moral depth and contradiction as well. It accounts for our deep moral intuitions and our repeated moral failures, our deep sense of meaning and our deep sense of meaninglessness, our joy and our sadness, our hope and our shame, our loves and our hatreds, our greatness and our wretchedness. It helps us understand our longing for a certainty we cannot achieve and a happiness we cannot secure. In the face of the depth and contradictions of experience scripture offers us an understanding of life that is compelling in ways that the thin alternatives available at the end of the story of modernity are not.

This is not to suggest that biblical wisdom "makes sense" of the evils of this world. Indeed, any understanding of life that purports to "make sense" of evil should be suspect for just that reason. It would, in fact, be inhumane to imagine a moment of epiphany in which our eyes suddenly light up and we exclaim, "Oh, now I get it! That's why there's evil in the world." Understandably we all want to make sense of the awful events of September eleventh, but we do well to pause. The compelling response to the events of that day is a mixture of anguish and tears, humility and sorrow, fear and fight, and anger and hope. The

self-understanding we seek, therefore, is the one that not only helps us understand ourselves and our world at such moments, but also one that yields an appropriate response and helps us recognize it as right and good.

We do well, then, to allow our reconsiderations to lead us not only to the creation and the fall but also to the manger and the cross. We do well to make our way to "Christ and him crucified," and to find in him an understanding of ourselves that not only helps us understand both the moral depth and contradictions of our lives but also offers hope. In his death he shows us both our glory and our shame, our greatness and our

wretchedness, and in so doing, he reveals our own nature to us. In his death he enters our struggles, draws us into his own suffering, and through that suffering brings redemption and restoration. In so doing, he reveals God's nature to us but also reveals a God who goes beyond our comprehension in granting us healing and hope. In all of this Jesus grants us understanding, transcends our understanding, and is compelling both in

what he reveals and in what he conceals. He is our wisdom and our righteousness, the fullest satisfaction of our longings for understanding and of our deepest moral needs.

Yes, modern reason pushed this understanding aside, but now it has become apparent that the modern cultural logic that ruled Christianity out of bounds led eventually to a place of absence and emptiness that contradicts life itself. We are free, therefore, to cast off both the modern burden of doubt and the postmodern burden of lightness to which doubt leads. We are not bound to live in the place of absence and emptiness into which our own cultural history led. Instead, we

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NEWS FROM THE CENTER

UPSTAIRS AT THE OX

STUDY CENTER SHORT COURSES

The Study Center is very pleased to have the Oxford Coffee Company not only operating in the Center building but flourishing and creating a lively and constant conversation. As the day goes by, one finds more and more students enjoying specialty coffee drinks, socializing, praying or meeting in small groups, and occasionally even studying. As a result, most students know the Center simply as "The Ox." When the Center offers classes, therefore, we hold them "Upstairs at the Ox."

This semester these four-week classes have included two short courses, the first of which offered a study of contemporary culture entitled, "There's No such Thing as a Postmodernist... and it's a good thing too." The class focused on the contradiction between a culture that tells us there is no deep meaning to life, and the actual experience of life that tells us there is. It considered the pathway by which our culture arrived at this contradiction and then looked to the seventeenth-century thinker Blaise Pascal for ways of responding to our cultural predicament with the message of Christ.

Because a steady diet of biblical studies is essential to forming a biblical understanding of life, the Center's second short course is currently taking students into the careful study of the Biblical text in a class called "Moses, Elijah, and Jesus: From Sinai to the Mount of Transfiguration." This course explores the significance of Moses in the life of Elijah, the importance of Moses and Elijah in redemptive history, and the centrality of Jesus as the Christ to whom Moses and Elijah pointed.

Both of these short courses have met twice weekly, including a late-night session designed especially for students, and both classes have received a very encouraging response. It is especially satisfying to see a community beginning to form through these courses, see student interest increasing, and find that a growing number of local churches are represented in the ministries of the Center.

STUDY CENTER READING GROUPS

CLASSICS OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

and

THE CHRISTIAN GRADUATE ROUNDTABLE

In an effort to encourage the reading and discussion of worthwhile books, the Center will be offering reading groups each semester. This semester, under the rubric of "Classics of Christian Thought," five separate groups

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NEWS FROM THE CENTER

that include faculty, clergy, graduate students, and others, are reading selections from the British essayist C. S. Lewis. In September we read *The Weight of Glory*, in October *The Abolition of Man*, and in November we will read the first of Lewis' space trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*.

Another reading group, which is designed especially to give graduate students the opportunity to discuss what it means to follow Christ in academia, meets weekly at the Center to discuss *Finding Common Ground* by Tim Downs. Under the leadership of Todd Best, who is an intern and research assistant at the Center and a graduate student in religious studies at the University of Florida, this group represents the Center's interest in helping students and faculty live out the academic calling in light of their faith.

FORUM ON FAITH AND LEARNING

"LEARNING IN WARTIME"

On October 3, the Center sponsored a luncheon and panel discussion of C. S. Lewis' essay, "Learning in Wartime." Written during World War II, this essay turned out to be more timely than we had anticipated in its call to recognize the importance of giving ourselves to the life of the mind not only in the context of war but in the context of our spiritual warfare. Over twenty-five people participated in this event, enjoying lunch and listening thoughtfully to a panel that included Dr. John Sommerville, Professor of History at the University of Florida; Rev. Marion Clark, pastor of Faith Presbyterian Church; and Suzi Parsons, a forth-year medical student at the College of Medicine. We expect this to be only the first of many exchanges that will address questions of faith and learning.

FINANCIAL UPDATE

God has provided for the Center and blessed us in many ways. Through the generosity and vision of a University of Florida alumnus, we enjoy a wonderful facility that provides a home to both the Center and the Oxford Coffee Company. Through the generosity of numerous other individuals and churches, we have also been able to bring Dr. Richard Horner to the Center as Director, and we have launched several ministry initiatives. We want to say "Thank you" to all who have made this possible.

We also know that we are still in a critical start-up phase in which we are well aware of our dependency on God to provide through the faithfulness of his people. This is a good place to be. We want to encourage you to stand there with us, and we want to say "Thank you" for prayerfully considering the possibility of joining us as a financial partner in the work of the Center.

– BOOKS WORTH READING –

Deciding what books to read can be a daunting task. To serve you in this process, "Reconsiderations" will include suggestions for books that will help those who seek to serve Christ by being engaged with our culture in a way that is both compassionate and thoughtful.

*Love Your God with All Your Mind:
The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul*
J. P. Moreland (Navpress, 1997)

*Habits of the Mind: Intellectual Life
as a Christian Calling*
James W. Sire (Intervarsity Press, 2000)

J. P. Moreland and James Sire have both written about our need to care for and cultivate a Christian mind. Recognizing that loving God with all our being includes loving the Lord with all our mind, both writers explore the centrality of the renewal of the mind in serving Christ. Together these books offer a well-rounded discussion of the issues.

In *Love Your God with All Your Mind*, J. P. Moreland examines how our intellect is deeply connected to our worship of God, to our spiritual formation, to the communication of our faith, and to our vocational life. Picking up from Mark Noll's notion that there is not much of an evangelical mind these days, Moreland offers a guidebook for the recovery of the Christian mind. He begins by pointing out that while biblical Christianity is rooted in intellectual truths and ideas that lead to emotional engagement with God, we find ourselves currently being driven by emotion and even by anti-intellectualism. Although Christians have historically led the culture in valuing intellectual development, this role has gradually received less and less emphasis. After noting several key points in this process, Moreland concludes that the

church and the culture have become wastelands of reason and thought.

Drawing on key biblical texts, Moreland builds a theological case for loving God with our minds. Drawing from philosophy, his field of expertise, he also provides helpful insight into the workings of the mind, offering an understanding of knowledge and even providing a lesson in basic logic. Finally, he suggests ways to apply his thesis in worship, vocation, ministry, and elsewhere. While Moreland's work includes ideas with which not all readers will agree, we could all benefit from engaging *Love Your God with All Your Mind*, a work in which Moreland moves the reader to want to love God with a whole mind.

Like Moreland, Sire also argues that each Christian is to glorify God with a whole mind, but then he focuses on the intellectual work to which God calls only some of us. "An intellectual," he tells us, "is one who loves ideas, is dedicated to clarifying them, developing them, criticizing them, turning them over and over, seeing their implications... [and] bringing them into contact with their counterparts in other systems of thought. (pp. 27-28)" A Christian intellectual is one who does "all of the above to the glory of God."

Sire writes as one who knows how important it was to him personally to recognize that being an intellectual does not require an anti-faith or anti-theistic stance, and he knows that this ought to be important to other Christians as well. He writes in the hope that he can soften the anti-intellectualism to which too many believers hold, and he provides a model for living out a productive and God-honoring intellectual life.

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Sire interacts in an engaging manner with a broad range of thinkers—some Christian some not—who come from a wide array of fields, including theology, philosophy, literature, and the arts. Only a handful serve as his chief counsel in setting forth a model for thinking to the glory of God, and the foremost of these is the Roman Catholic thinker John Henry Newman. Drawing on Newman's writings, Sire explores the goal of intellectual pursuits, the relationship of thinking and emotion, the virtues of the intellectual, the disciplines of intellectual development, and intellectual responsibility. The gem of the book is a surprising chapter that considers Jesus as "the smartest man who ever lived."

Sometimes Sire tries too hard to entertain the reader, but in the end he offers a thought-provoking and challenging work to those who desire to use their minds faithfully to the glory of God. In addition, his use of thinkers

who are often overlooked by evangelicals is refreshing and suggests that we would all do well to read far more broadly than we are inclined to do.

*Todd Best, Intern and Research Assistant,
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are free to look for a more compelling understanding of life and to reconsider the deep ways of thinking that were unfairly, unreasonably, and unfortunately driven into exile. We are free, finally, to reconsider the possibility that in the face of experience itself, with all its depth and contradiction, a biblical understanding of life and culture is compelling after all.

*Richard V. Horner, Director
Christian Study Center of Gainesville*

CHRISTIAN STUDY CENTER OF GAINESVILLE

WE'D LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU

The Christian Study Center is funded solely through the generous contributions of those who share our commitment to serve the university community with a biblical understanding of life. We invite you to join us as a financial partner and thank you in advance for your consideration. We are also eager to expand the Center community and welcome your suggestion of others who might share your interest in our ministries. Thank you for checking with them before giving us their names.

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"Reconsiderations" is a bi-monthly publication of the Christian Study Center of Gainesville. Its purpose is to explore a biblical understanding of life and culture and to offer resources to those who seek to serve the Lord with a whole mind. If you do not wish to receive "Reconsiderations," please let us know by e-mailing us at info@christianstudycenter.org or calling us at 352-379-7375.

The Christian Study Center of Gainesville exists in order to encourage the university community in the exploration of a biblical understanding of life and culture.

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- 1 Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. xxxvi.
- 2 William James, *The Will to Believe* reprinted in *William James, Writings, 1878 - 1899* (Literary Classics of the United States, 1992), p. 502.
- 3 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, A. J. Krailsheimer, translator (Penguin Books, 1966), # 149.