

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

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MIND OF CHRIST

The following essay is a slightly abridged version of a sermon that Dr. Horner preached at his home church on November 4, 2012. You can hear an audio version of the sermon at cccgainesville.com.

Christians rightly look to Jesus as their example for how to live, but in doing so we sometimes overlook the obvious. For instance, what does it mean for Jesus to serve as our example in fulfilling the great commandment? What does it mean, specifically, for Jesus to love the Lord his God with a whole heart, a whole soul, and a whole mind? On your own time you can explore what it means for Jesus to love the Lord with all his heart and soul, but for now, I want to ask only, How did Jesus love the Lord his God with all his mind? (Mt 22.36-38)

There is always more that can be said in response to such a question, of course, but here are just three ways that I see Jesus loving the Lord his God with a whole mind.

First, Jesus loved the Lord his God with all his mind by studying the Hebrew Scriptures and rooting his thinking in them. (Mt. 4.1-11)

It does not go without saying that Jesus studied his Hebrew Bible and rooted his thinking in that Bible. This becomes apparent on page after page of the Gospels as Jesus draws consistently on what we call the Old Testament. In the only picture we have of his childhood, for instance, we find him sitting in the Temple with the teachers asking them questions and also giving answers to their questions in which he amazed

his listeners with his understanding. (Lk. 2.47) In keeping with his childhood education, Mathew pictures Jesus opening his ministry with a Sermon on the Mount in which we find frequent references to the Old Testament as well as the assurance that Jesus had not come “to abolish the Law or the Prophets” but “to fulfill them.” (Mt. 5.17-18)

Even Jesus’ allusions and passing references reveal his familiarity with his Bible. For instance, he mentions the repentance of the people of Ninevah and notes the interest of the Queen of the South in Solomon’s court, and he knew of both episodes because he knew his Biblical history. Similarly, his instruction to the ten lepers to show themselves to the priests demonstrates that he knew the details of Hebrew law. Even when someone in the

crowd randomly yelled out, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth,” Jesus answers by saying, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.” It comes as no surprise, then, when asked how to attain eternal life, Jesus answers by asking, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” (Lk. 10.26) The Scriptures were central to his thinking.

In Jesus’ interaction with the tempter we once again find a demonstration of the central role that the Scriptures played in Jesus’ thinking. (Matthew 4.1-11) Jesus responds to all three temptations by quoting the Scriptures, and when the tempter actually quotes scripture to try to trick Jesus, Jesus demonstrates that he not only

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knew the Scriptures, he knew them well enough to know when they are being abused. Jesus worshiped the Lord his God with all his mind by rooting his thinking in the scriptures that reveal his Father's will.

In recent weeks and in several different settings, I have had occasion to marvel at the fact that God has spoken to us – that we have the wisdom of the Creator available in written form. Among all the voices that clamor around us, there is one that is truly reliable. The tempter whispers doubts and encourages us to think for ourselves, but we do well to remember that freedom does not lie in being captive to the short-sightedness of our own ability to think but in allowing the Creator's wisdom to shape us into being all that our Creator has made us to be. The best way to find true freedom lies in the wisdom of our Creator and not in the self-centered desires of our darkened hearts, so we think well when we root our lives consciously in the Word of God. Even the Son of God knew to root his thinking in the wisdom of the Scriptures. How much more do you and I need to give ourselves to the source from which this wisdom flows?

Second, Jesus loved the Lord his God with all his mind by adopting a Hebrew way of being in the world that is observant, reflective, and imaginative. (Mk. 4.30-34a)

In keeping with the Hebrew prophets and with the Hebrew wisdom on which Jesus was raised, Jesus lived in a wonderfully observant, reflective, and imaginative manner. Sadly, we often look right past these important ways by which Jesus fulfilled all righteousness and by which he loved the Lord his God with all his mind. Think for a minute about Jesus' teaching. You will be hard pressed to find an extended formal argument there, but you will find observation after observation, followed by reflection and by the creation of powerful and enduring images and stories. As Blaise Pascal observed, "Jesus said great things so simply that he seems not to have thought about them, and yet so clearly that it is obvious what he thought about them. Such

clarity together with such simplicity is wonderful. (pensée #309)"

If you know Jesus' teaching at all, you know he was a great storyteller, but have you noticed the extent to which those stories flow from an observant and reflective way of living? His eyes and ears were open, and his mind was constantly engaged. I have to imagine that he was gesturing toward someone's nearby garden when he told his listeners to "consider the lilies." Or again, I can imagine that a flock of noisy birds might have just interrupted the conversation when he encouraged his listeners, perhaps with a grin, to "consider the ravens." In both these cases, he simply reflected on what he saw and immediately taught his listeners a lesson. Look at the lilies, he says, and remember, "they do not labor or spin. Yet, I tell you not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these." Similarly, when you hear the birds in the morning, take note of them and remember, "they do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn, yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds!" (Luke 12.24)

Flowing from the practice of being observant and reflective, we often find Jesus not only noticing the world around him but also working with what he sees in creative and imaginative ways. Think of his images and analogies. "You are the salt of the earth," he tells his disciples. "You are the light of the world." He has similarly imaginative ways of presenting himself. "I am the living water," he says. "I am the bread that comes down from heaven." "I am the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep... I am the door... I am the light of the world..." Often he brings images of himself together with images that had implications for his disciples. "I am the vine. You are the branches. My Father is the gardener."

For many of us these images have become so familiar that we forget the creativity and imagination that lies behind them. Suppose for a moment, however, that you were in the crowd on one of the first occasions when Jesus taught in parables or opened up the Kingdom of Heaven to

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his followers. Like others you are hanging on his words, fascinated, puzzled, wondering what he might say next, constantly intrigued and provoked to thought by his teaching. He pauses, looks around at the faces before him, gestures toward the fields and farms alongside the road and says,

A farmer went out to sow his seed.... Some fell along the path and the birds quickly ate it up. Some on rocky places where it did not have much soil, sprang up quickly but withered in the sun. Some fell among thorns which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear fruit. Some fell on good soil and produced a crop of much fruit.

Jesus did this all the time: observant, reflective, imaginative.

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.” (Mk. 4.30-32)

Examples of this kind of imaginative teaching can be multiplied, and in each case Jesus leaves his audience deep in thought.

We too easily look past the fact that even in the style of his teaching Jesus fulfills the command to love the Lord his God with a whole mind by cultivating an observant, reflective stance toward life and by assuming a creative, imaginative way of being in the world. He understands, as Flannery O’Connor has written, that while the modern mind sees imagination as simply spinning out possibilities for filling an otherwise empty space, the redeemed mind knows that when imagination does its work well, it probes the depths of the sacred and reveals deeper truths. Remember that Jesus is the incarnate Word of God by whom all things were made, and that as the incarnate Creator, he con-

tinued to live creatively. As his followers, created and now recreated in his image, we too are called to love the Lord our God by cultivating this same observant, reflective, imaginative way of being in the world.

Having noted that Jesus’ thinking is rooted in the Old Testament, we do well to note that Jesus learned this way of living by reading his Bible. His observant and imaginative ways are in keeping with the wisdom that one finds there. The wisdom literature of the Old Testament is full of this observant, reflective viewpoint, especially toward God’s creation and human behavior. The proverbs contain line after line such as: “Like the coolness of snow at harvest time...” “Like clouds and wind without rain...” “Like a muddied spring or a polluted well...” “Like a fluttering sparrow or a darting swallow...” and so on.

Here is the wonderfully observant, reflective stance of the Hebrew worshiper who loves the

Lord his God with a whole mind and who knows that this begins by cultivating an observant and reflective way of life. The wisdom literature is part of the book on which Jesus grew up. As the eternal Word of God, by whom all things were made, he was the source of this wisdom. As incarnate Son of God he studied this wisdom, absorbed it, cultivated it, and embodied it. As the eternal second person of the Trinity he is the one who is personified in the Proverbs as the virtuous woman in whom wisdom resides. As the incarnate son of Mary he learned

this wisdom from her, learned to love his Father with a whole mind, and became the incarnation of this wisdom. Jesus opened his eyes, reflected on what he saw, and cultivated his imagination as ways of loving the Lord his God with all his mind.

Living this way is going to look different from person to person, so I am not going to reduce Christ’s example to some single action item to add to your “to do” list. I will ask, though, where and how are we seeking to love the Lord our God with a whole mind in a way that reflects his creative nature in us and that imitates Christ’s own

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example of living in a reflective and imaginative manner. Have our televisions paradoxically made us blind and deaf? Has busyness eliminated the very possibility of reflection? Has anxiety paralyzed or killed our imaginations? Bearing the image of God means that we are created to be creative even as the Creator of all things is creative. As one of my thoughtful friends puts it, "You are creative in the image of God." How might Christ be calling us to cultivate eyes that see, ears that hear, and a mind that reflects and creates for the glory of God and the good of others?

Third, Jesus loved the Lord his God with a whole mind by doing the mental work needed to give people reasons to believe. He did not encourage a leap of faith. (Mark 12.35-37)

I admitted a few moments ago that it is hard to find anything like an extended formal argument in Jesus' teaching, but that is not to suggest that he did not engage in argument. To the contrary, Jesus' analogies, stories, and parables typically lead to well-reasoned conclusions. Sometimes he states these conclusions clearly and sometimes he leaves them for his audience to figure out, but there is almost always a "therefore" at the end.

For Jesus the work of imagination leads seamlessly into the work of argument. When he tells his followers to consider the birds and the lilies, he then makes the argument that if God cares for birds and flowers by virtue of being their Creator, how much more will he care for you by virtue of being your Father. When he tells his disciples that they are the light of the world, he concludes, "therefore, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

On other occasions, when Jesus is not telling parables or stories, he reasons with people, urges them to think clearly, and leads them to reasonable conclusions. He does this from early in his ministry to the very end, from the Sermon on the Mount to after the resurrection. The word "therefore" occurs repeatedly in the sermon, and when he talks with the two on the Emmaus Road, Jesus observes, "How foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" (Lk. 24.25-26)

As we have observed, Jesus rooted his thinking in the Scriptures, and he often used Scripture as the starting point for his arguments. Perhaps the single most important example of this can be found at the end of Mark twelve where Jesus quotes Psalm 110

and asks, "How can the Christ be both David's Lord and David's son?" Jesus pushes his audience to think, and then he leads them to realize that the one intellectually satisfying answer to his question is Jesus himself. By virtue of being the Son of God, Jesus is David's Lord. By virtue of being Mary's son, born in the lineage of David, Jesus is David's son.

Jesus never asked anyone to take a leap of faith. To the contrary, he argued repeatedly that there are good reasons for recognizing him as Messiah or Christ. Too often people who reject Jesus do so not by refuting his arguments but by choosing not to listen carefully enough to know what his arguments are. If you are willing to listen, you will find it hard to win an argument with Jesus, and it may scare you to have to wonder if you are represented in the biblical narrative by the Pharisees, whose rejection of Jesus rested not in good reasons but in hardness of heart. For Jesus to love the Lord his God with a whole mind meant that he did the hard mental work of arguing his case, so that his followers would come to him not by taking a leap of faith but by acting on the basis of reasonably held convictions.

What did it mean to Jesus to love the Lord his God with a whole mind, then? It meant first, to study the Scriptures as the Word of God and to root his thinking and his life in those Scriptures. It meant, second, to live in an observant reflective manner and to approach his life and his teaching imaginatively and creatively. Third, it meant that he did the hard work of thinking and of making the case that he was, in fact, God incarnate, the promised Messiah in fulfillment of the Scriptures.

I know his example challenges us, but I hope it also encourages us. It does not demand that we all be intellectuals or artists, but it does open up a richness of what it means to follow Christ and to let him become our example in all things. Jesus' way of being in this world inspires us and enriches life. He entices us with the true freedom of a life rooted in the Scriptures, He excites us with the prospect of living in a more observant, reflective, and imaginative manner, and he leads the way in doing the hard work of being ready with reasons for our hope in Christ. Let's look to him as our model for how to love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind.

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