

Why Christian Young People Don't Think And What to Do about It

by Kent Millen

One of the gravest situations the church currently faces is the inability of its young people to reason their faith. In Matthew 22:37, Jesus stated the first and greatest commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." Loving the Lord God with one's mind is two-fold: first, the will (the ability to engage in action) and second, the intellect (the ability to engage reason).

Young people have been criticized for not using their brains; if this is true, it has been cultivated by many sources. Some of the more obvious are media and popular culture. (For a great book, read Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.) Another source would be what Pitrim Sorokin, a Russian sociologist who wrote *The Crisis of Our Age*, called a "sensate culture." This is a culture that perceives truth by what can be processed by the five senses. If something cannot be directly felt, seen, or touched, it cannot be real. Another factor is the McDonaldization of culture. In this "Mc-Culture" everything needs to be instantaneous. "Your Way, Right Away"-this Burger King slogan characterizes this culture. These attitudes coupled together create a culture of young people who've been taught to expect things prepackaged, ready-to-go, easily digested, and effortless.

Sadly, many churches, specifically many youth programs, have bought into this-promoting it under the banner of "loving God with all your heart." This aspect is not to be disregarded, but to do it at the expense of "loving God with all your mind" will leave the church like a lame one-legged duck, swimming ineffectively in circles amongst the culture it wishes to influence, having no direction.

There are a few evidences illustrating how young people don't "love God with their minds." The first is preferential statements students say, such as they "liked the worship," "the music was great," or they "enjoyed the service." When did a worship service have to cater to the aesthetic tastes of adolescents to win them to the gospel? The whole purpose of the gathering of the saints is to glorify God, not to be entertained by a light show. Charles Spurgeon commented, "If you have to have a carnival to get them to church, you need to keep having a carnival to get them back." The church will lose if it attempts to compete or mimic what Hollywood offers.

Another evidence is the dumbing down of theology. Classic books are now being made into "student versions." What once was the common reading level of Christian literature is now diluted to the point where there's no need to stretch the mind or the imagination. Perhaps this isn't the students' fault, but a lack of serious intellectual initiative on the part of the parents, pastors, and youth pastors.

Attention span is the third evidence of this lack of reason in faith. Sermons or youth chats can be no longer than 20 minutes. Oftentimes this includes a significant part of the time for a video clip or some sort of illustration, leaving only a handful of minutes for content. The Apostle Paul focused on the message, not the method, in 1 Thessalonians 2:5-6, "As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed, nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others." How is it that crowds of hundreds, perhaps thousands of people (including families with young people and no childcare) were able to listen to the preaching of Jesus or Paul for hours on end? It was because they utilized their minds.

The most prevalent proof is the lack of reading or desire to read. Students struggle with "student editions" of the Bible. They would much rather IM about God on a computer, watch *The Passion of the Christ* to be sensationalized by the gore of the crucifixion, or listen to a CD/MP3 of the latest pop worship music than thoughtfully reflect in God's Word. These may all be good spiritual tools, but they fail to utilize the mind. Joshua 1:8a reads, "This book of

the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it." The phrase "meditate on it day and night" is a deliberate discipline of chewing on, mulling over, rereading, and processing God's Word. This is an ongoing intellectual process, engaging the mind to come into a full and proper relationship with the Almighty.

For centuries, the Christian faith has been regarded as a body of knowledge. Within the last 100 years, this faith has gone from a body of knowledge to a set of beliefs and, more recently, preferences. Dallas Willard, lecturer of "The Contemporary Belief System as Prison, and Jesus the Savior," discussed the difference between belief and professed belief. Beliefs are things which people act upon; professed beliefs are just loose opinions. Often, the church caters to the latter while Christ targeted the former. Young people often profess belief in Christ without reasoning the cost of following him. In Matthew 10:39, Jesus mentioned the cost of following him: "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Christ was quick to discuss the severity of choosing him, yet American Evangelicalism doesn't speak about this. Often, the church sells a fun-friend Christ, when the New Testament speaks over and over of a Lord who leads those who lose their lives for him.

Many effects have already been seen as a result of a lack of reasoning of the faith. There is a dualism found in the lives of professed believers. They have a "church" or "religious" compartment in their schedules, but no relationship at their core. The diluting and dumbing down of the faith has made Christianity on par with other world religions, and in a postmodern culture this relegates it to a religious preference. Paul warned us in 2 Timothy 4:3: "For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires." Church hopping illustrates how professing Christians choose a church like it's part of a religious buffet.

The mind has often been seen as the most vulnerable part of the Christian. In Genesis, Eve's thought process was challenged by questioning what God said. Paul recognized how people's thought processes are attacked in Colossians 2:8: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ." Once the guard of an individual's mind is down, a short time later actions will follow.

The solution falls into the hands of pastors, teachers, and parents choosing to use their minds, which in turn will trickle down to young people. The primary tool is the Word of God. Paul, in 2 Timothy 2:15, admonished people: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth." Handling truth requires reason. Parents, pastors, and teachers need to realize the imperative order behind this statement. Peter emphasized this point in 1 Peter 3:15b: "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." Notice Peter didn't say opinion, preference, or reaction. Reason requires thought, which requires preparation.

A number of helpful spiritual exercises can facilitate loving God with the mind. Reading is the most crucial way to exercise the mind. The most obvious source to read is God's Word. Diving into it daily, reading, and processing its content will stretch the mind. Also, read books on theology-especially classics by Augustine, Calvin, Spurgeon, Chambers, etc. Second, Scripture memory flexes the mind to better recall what has been read. Third, journaling assists in processing content with reflection. Journaling is effective because it engages the reader's thoughts with the content of the book and later allows for the opportunity to look back on one's spiritual journey. Fourth, writing is a tool that can help share with others what a believer has learned from God. The Bible is a collection of written letters. Writing is an excellent tool to develop the mind, because it's a discipline of

precision. Taking time to put one's thoughts on paper (or on a computer page), requires and develops diligent thought and reason. Lastly, prayer helps develop the mind. The connection between the Almighty and the mind is furthered via prayer. Prayer is the instrument of communication, thought, and feedback with the Lord.

The church is facing a dangerous situation. The church is being rendered ineffective and Christianity reduced to a religious preference practiced on Sundays. Young people aren't using their minds as it regards their faith, and adults aren't challenging them to do so. Instead, churches try to create an experience-only faith that produces instantaneous results with no depth or roots. The solution to this problem is a retooling of strategies on the part of pastors, teachers, and parents. This will require a long-term commitment, because this dilemma cannot be remedied quickly. It has been observed that a mushroom can grow in eight days, but an oak tree takes eighty years. Obviously the oak tree requires a lot more patience and nurturing, but it's significantly stronger and lasts longer. Adults in the church must see the solution this way; in order to create a stronger, more effective church there must be a commitment to loving God with the mind. Adults need to be students of the Word. They need to choose to discipline themselves to read, reflect, journal, mentor, question, and challenge the minds of young people. Daily reading the Bible and classical theology books and practicing other intellectual disciplines will sharpen the minds and the souls of the believers of Christ.

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