

## The Practices of a Christian Scholar By Charles S. MacKenzie

The last 50 years in higher education have been turbulent, tumultuous transitions from one way of life and thought to another. For me, they have been years of adventure, wrestling with new ideas that seek to control the minds of tomorrow's leaders. Intellectuals, with a will to power, became more frustrated and angry than ever because they could not control the flow of history. But what a time of opportunity the changes of the last century provided for Christian thinkers. Sadly, however, evangelical Christian scholars seldom have influenced the 20th century.

When I began my teaching career over 40 years ago, there were few evangelicals among my faculty colleagues. But I can recall a small cabal of "bomb throwers" who called themselves evangelicals. They seemed to disrupt every discussion by lobbing a few questionable interpretations of Bible texts and then walking out. Their unwillingness to come to grips with a rapidly changing world often caused students to walk out of their classes in disgust and caused other faculty to ridicule them as obscurantists. But today a wave of young, energetic, Christian scholars is attaining faculty rank in many of our best universities. But they must be on guard lest deadly arrogance and its twin, obscurantism, return.

Over the years, I have had a host of students come to my office or my home just to talk. One put it, "I want someone who has been over the road to show me where the bumps in the road are." An academic for over 40 years, I am here simply to point out where some of the bumps in the road are – to spotlight the danger zones for evangelical scholars in an era of mammoth social change.

First, we must be gracious, thoughtful champions for the Christian faith. Jude 1:3 challenges us to contend for the faith. The Greek word used here describes athletes who struggle to become champions. We must contend, but we must avoid an aloof, arrogant fortress mentality. We should not assume everyone is wrong but ourselves, nor should we imagine ourselves sitting in a fortress at the top of the hill, looking down on the multitudes who we think don't know as much as we do. This will help us to avoid falling into the trap described by the Spaniard Miguel de Unamuno who accused some intellectuals of being more concerned with winning an intellectual victory than with pursuing truth.

We must remember, then, that the pursuit of truth requires humility. The fact is that we finite humans are surrounded, on the one hand, by massive galaxies towering above us. Yet we loom large above unnumbered worlds tinier than one human cell. No wonder Scripture reminds us that in the vastness of it all "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" Pascal similarly reminded us that when we consider our perilous position between the vast galaxies above us and the tiny world of quarks beneath us, how humble we ought to be. The man who gets my vote for changing the world of the 20th century most dramatically is Albert Einstein, an intellectual giant who enlarged our understanding of the vast universe and in the process became an amazingly humble person. When I was a proud, arrogant, young academic, I lived just three doors away from Professor Einstein. He told me once "My role (as a scientist) is to bow humbly before the truth." Parenthetically, he also said "I have known most of the world's leading scientists. Without exception, they are all men of faith."

Second, when it is necessary to contend for the faith, we must differentiate between non-negotiable truths and ambiguous human constructs which in time will fade away. We need to know what is essential to Christian faith. If a doctrine is not clearly highlighted in Scripture, it probably is not essential. We should take our stand on that which is central in Scripture, not on non-essentials.

For me, the essentials include: the Triune God exists and has created all that is, and He has revealed what life is all about in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, as well as in Scripture and in nature. Ambiguous, non-essential uncertain teachings include such things as the millennium, the days of creation (24 hour days or geological ages), theistic evolution or immediate creation etc., etc. When Scripture is not explicitly clear on some issue, we should proceed cautiously, awaiting more light and more understanding.

Third, we should recognize that it takes a certain amount of truth to float an error. Therefore, we ought always to seek to understand what may be true in the thought of non-Christian thinkers. It is important to recognize the relationality underlying all that is true and real. Modern science has highlighted the connectedness of all things. The millions of electrons and protons whirling within this podium are interrelated, as are the bundles of energy scattered throughout our solar system. It is important to realize that God is the ground undergirding all that is real. Colossians 1:17 puts it that "in Him (Jesus) all things hold together." Part of our task as Christians is to propose to skeptics how and why Christianity relates to the world.

Therefore, Christians need to listen to skeptics, agnostics, and doubters. Could it be that some traces of truth are hidden in their skepticism? We should show respect and interest in their thoughts, even those thoughts with

which we cannot agree. Perhaps by listening to them we may help them to discern some Christian truth unwittingly embedded in their lives.

Furthermore, as we listen, we should watch for the basic foundational thoughts and presuppositions on which skeptics build their worldviews. The brilliant Oxford chemist Michael Polanyi has pointed out that the ideas held by scientists, philosophers, and theologians all grow out of “faith presuppositions.” If this is true, we should seek to help skeptical friends to discover what their “faith presuppositions” are. Then we can compare their presuppositions with the presuppositions underlying a Biblical worldview, as well as the practical consequences of their worldviews with the consequences of a Biblical worldview.

Fourth, we can win the respect of skeptics and the right to present our understanding of the Truth by becoming experts in one slice of the world of knowledge. Usually but not always, a master’s or doctor’s degree is a first step in that direction. For many years I have urged my doctoral students to spend ten years researching, digging, studying one key person or one critical problem until they know as much about that person or problem as anyone on the planet. Dallas Willard at USC became a leading expert on Husserl. That gave him credibility as a recognized scholar and brought with it invitations to speak all across the world. One of my former students spent years becoming one of the leading experts on the relation of time and eternity. That won 39-year-old Brian Leftow such intellectual respect that this year he is being installed at Oxford in one of the world’s most prestigious chairs of philosophy. As a Christian, his influence will be widespread.

Too often thinkers spread themselves thin, studying a little bit of this, a little bit of that interspersed with fun and pleasure. The Christian scholar should remember the words of the Apostle who said, “This one thing I do.” It would be a worthwhile pursuit if a Christian scholar were to find one person or one issue that interests her or him, and then study the topic assiduously, and become an expert on it.

Then Christian faculty and graduate students should share their research and insights by writing carefully researched papers and by reading papers at professional meetings and conferences. We should let the world know our findings and discoveries. It does no good to be a silent bystander, fearful of criticism. At a recent humanities conference, three of my doctoral students read papers. One challenged French philosopher Lyotard’s rejection of metanarrative. A publisher heard that lecture and was so impressed that he offered that young doctoral student a contract to write a book on the topic. What is important is not getting a book published. But what is important is that a young evangelical scholar is beginning to have a voice in the intellectual struggles of the day. So to the young Christian scholar I say, don’t be a passive bystander. Focus your efforts on your studies. Dig hard and dig deep to understand how the Lord of the universe relates to your life, to your discipline, and to the burning issues confronting our world. Do your homework so you will have something worth saying. Then enter the battle. Show the reasonableness of a Christian worldview. Answer the skeptics, the unbelievers; but speak with intelligence, honesty, accuracy, and precision. Have passion. Show that you care about your project but be humble. Be nice!

Fifth, as Christian scholars, we need to pay attention to the issues of the day. Follow the example of Augustine, Pascal, Warfield, Kuyper and others who have tried to address the questions plaguing their contemporaries. I once heard Paul Tillich argue that the role of philosophers is to identify and to analyze the questions society is raising. Then, Tillich said, theologians should propose Biblical answers to those questions. But too often both philosophers and theologians are dealing with issues which were current 50 to 100 years ago. We need to be addressing the issues plaguing society today. Some of the issues which need answers today are:

- a) What is the nature of the human self? What is our true identity? What is our answer to Sartre’s assertion that the self is an empty bubble with nothingness at its center? A contemporary description of the Imago Dei (in the image of God) might go a long way in answering the question of what it means to be human.
- b) In light of 21st century understandings, what is the relation, if any, between transcendence and immanence, between universals and particulars, between special and general revelation? Keith Ward at Oxford is among the few Christian guides in this minefield. He leads the way in developing contemporary Biblical answers to the questions of Divine Action – how a transcendent God relates to a finite world.
- c) Is there some hidden connection between whatever truths the secularist holds and what divine revelation teaches? This involves an accurate appraisal of the secular mind-set as well as a rethinking of God’s revealings.
- d) What is the relation, if any, between Christianity and the other world religions? Is there something unique about Christianity? In today’s syncretistic atmosphere, this requires an honest understanding of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and the other religions of the world as well as a deeper understanding of Biblical religion.

- e) Is the nature of Christian revelation, which is normative and authoritative for most Christians, primarily doctrinal, relational, or informational? Or is it all of these? Some Christians insist that revelation is primarily propositional, leading to correct doctrinal statements. Others will propose that revelation is primarily perspectival, understood most clearly in its context. Others insist that revelation is primarily a relational, personal encounter with Jesus Christ. Still others like Pascal with his three orders have declared that revelation is multi-faceted and includes all of these notions.

One could go on endlessly listing issues needing the attention of keen Christian minds: problems of bio-medical ethics (i.e. cloning), of language (deconstructionism), the nature of power (multilateral vs. unilateral power among people and nations), the need for community – but what kind of community? We should be joining with others in developing Christian responses to today's burning questions by making up-to-date 21st century applications of eternal Biblical truths.

Finally, to be a Christian scholar who makes a difference requires most of all that we have an authentic, personal experience of Him who claimed to be "The Way, the Truth and the Life." He can reveal to our hearts and minds dimensions of Truth which cannot be gained except by an infinite Person revealing Himself to finite persons. Remember Jesus' words: "If any man's will is to do his will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God." In His will is His truth and in His Truth is His will. Those who do His will come to know the depths of His Truth.

T. R. Glover once asked, "How did the Church, confronted by the power of Greek philosophy, Roman might, and unchecked sensuality change the direction of world history?" That renowned historian replied that the early Christians out-lived the pagans, out-died them, and out-thought them. In our day, how can we change the course of history in a Christly direction? We must out-live and out-die the secular world. Thank God that many are doing that today. But we also must out-think the pagan world. We must provide better analyses, better answers, better solutions. And that, we must do soon. Who knows but what we have come to the kingdom for just such an hour, for just such an age of mammoth change as this. A confused world waits to hear what Christians have to say. And because of this, I turn again to the Christian scholar and say, give yourself to your crucified, risen Lord. Out-live, out-die, and out-think unbelief, and a lost, frightened, and bewildered world will listen.

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Editor's note: In the spring of 2003 the Christian Study Center of Gainesville, along with Intervarsity Christian Fellowship's Graduate and Faculty Ministry, hosted the second annual "Colloquium on Faith and Scholarship." Attracting graduate students and professors from both Florida State University and the University of Florida, the Colloquium sought to explore the possibilities and tensions of doing scholarly work within a Christian framework. One of the keynote speakers was Charles Mackenzie. Dr. Mackenzie, whose academic career includes Princeton, Columbia, Stanford, and now Reformed Theological Seminary, has spent a lifetime in the academy and here offers his perspective on the practices of a Christian scholar.