

Sloth

By Michael S. Horton

Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, Inc -

If you ask Thomas Aquinas, it's one of The Seven Deadly Sins. I'm not talking about adultery, intemperance, or other vices that readily come to mind. Although it is increasingly tolerated even by the most precise moralists of our age, it is intoxicating in its very essence. The sin is "sloth."

John Calvin had the temerity to insult Cardinal Sadoletto with the charge that the cleric had an indolent, or lazy, theology, because in spite of his great learning the Cardinal had never really struggled personally with his own sin and need for an "alien righteousness." Today, much the same is true of all of us.

Many who are inclined to bring criticism upon the church for not properly teaching the people of God raise the concern of anti-intellectualism. Our age, as preoccupied with the flickering images on the screen as any medieval peasant, has given itself willingly to the enterprise of "dumbing down." But losing our grip on what really matters goes deeper than lazy thinking. It is not merely that we are "intellectualists" who want to make know-it-alls out of plumbers; it is the whole person that is involved in this sloth.

It is not only that we do not think enough; we do not love enough and--more importantly, we do not love the right things. C. S. Lewis writes, "Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." The church, we are told, has to satisfy the needs of the people; it cannot simply ignore the questions that people are asking today. Of course, that's true. It isn't enough for the church to simply educate; it must address itself to the whole person in the whole context of that person's life. We must make the connection between the text of Scripture and the experience of men and women living today. But the problem is the one expressed here by C. S. Lewis. Our felt needs are trivial. It's not only that they are human-centered, but that the pleasures of such religion fall so far short of the everlasting peace that comes from a sound understanding of The Faith. We're so wrapped up in tips for living, relationships and success in life we miss the grander scheme of redemption from God's wrath. We are like children making mud-pies in the slums when we could be enjoying a holiday at the sea.

You see, it's not just an "intellectual" thing, though it is certainly that. We are not only failing to love God with our minds, but also with our "hearts, souls, and strength." The doctrines that we champion at CURE are not merely there to fill our minds with wonderful thoughts, but to revive our souls, cheer our hearts, and animate our hands. We are loving someone or something with our minds and hearts, but is it God or is it ourselves? Whenever people clamor for the practical and prefer to speak about the horizontal dimension--for instance, relationships and success--they are saying that they love God less than they love themselves. They are more interested in using God as a means to their own selfish ends than in glorifying God and enjoying him forever. And yet, there are others who so pride themselves on knowing all the correct doctrines that the doctrines become the object of their worship rather than the divine person these doctrines are meant to describe. Both settle for less and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator. Some take doctrine, others take life, we are told. But that is quite impossible. Show me a person who is content with a merely intellectual religion and I will show you an unfulfilled and pitiful

man or woman. Equally, if I should meet a person who is quite happy to be occupied only with happy, joyful, pleasant feelings or energetic and zealous activities, it is easy to predict that such a person will end up resenting those feelings and despising those activities in due time. Both the "dry" intellectualist and the "wet" sentimentalist are lazy; both fail to love God well. You see, even if God did heal everybody and make everybody rich, this kind of religion would still be wrong--not because people would be demanding too much, but because they would be settling for too little! God wants to open the heavens of his spiritual riches in Christ and give us our inheritance as his children. He wants to tell us who he is and how he saved us from his wrath, and there we are asking him if he's got any candy in his pockets!

One of the great culprits in this whole enterprise is anti-intellectualism. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, Richard Hofstadter points out that the Reformed Faith built America's only indigenous intellectual tradition, and as Puritanism degenerated into revivalism, the nation lost its intellectual balance. While the Reformed evangelists of the Great Awakening were also presidents of Princeton and Yale, evangelists ever since Charles Finney have actually boasted in their lack of education. Evangelicalism has a legacy of anti-intellectualism that has not only crippled its witness to the watching world, but has opened the church itself up to the most remarkable reaches of stupidity and incredulity.

But anti-intellectualism is not humble. It is humble to say, "I don't know, but I'll have to look into that." But it's pride that leads us to say, "I don't know and that's OK." It's arrogant, first, because it makes oneself the center of the universe. Reading a particularly obscure piece of philosophy, a friend pronounced, "What a stupid debate!" It was a "stupid debate" because Bob does not understand it, much like the child in the math class might conclude of a complicated problem. Imagine one saying of the highly sophisticated formulas that were used to put a man on the moon, "What a stupid set of formulas!", even after the success is captured on television. To conclude that things which are beyond my reach of knowledge, insight or experience are not worth knowing is the height of arrogance. It makes oneself the measure of all values, all truths, and all meaning in the universe.

Second, anti-intellectualism is arrogant in its plea for balance. Ignorant people always cry for balance whenever they do not want to take the time to think through their own position. Holding some so-called "middle position" saves the person from the hassle of having to actually employ critical skills. Circumventing thought processes, it is a mere act of will that picks up the slack. This doesn't however, keep the person from claiming moral superiority for having the grace, moderation and sophisticated detachment to stand above and outside the debate.

A third way in which anti-intellectualism is arrogant is in its intellectual egalitarianism. Egalitarianism is the spirit of our age that insists on everybody being equal. I don't mean being equal before the law, but equal in abilities, skills, and authority. One person's views are just as valid as another's, no matter how stupid, because all ideas, like all people, are created equal. Anti-intellectualism makes egalitarianism possible by leveling the playing field. While in past ages, consulting wise elders and the books of the great thinkers was considered an act of humility, in our day it is considered elitist. In such a time, the church should be standing apart from such worldly arrogance, but instead she is often found at the helm of this ship of fools.

"Orthodoxy" is one of the most pejorative words in the contemporary vocabulary, but it is also the most often misunderstood. It is not about merely a matter of sorting out the intellectual paper-work, but of finding good wood for the fire. One doesn't build a fire in the

middle of the living room or wherever one happens to "feel" like enjoying its warmth; but neither does one build a fire, stack the wood ever-so-neatly, only to stare at it through the cold winter's night. If it is done correctly, orthodoxy builds us a fire that will drive out the darkness and warm the body and soul even in the most gloomy weather. When our hopes are frozen and our hearts are hard, the Good Shepherd never fails to lead us to shelter. He himself gathers the wood ("Sanctify them by the truth--Thy Word is truth"), and makes us dwell in safety.

Take the doctrine from me, and my fire will consume me; keep the doctrine from catching fire and it will remain distant, cold, and useless.

So let's stop being lazy. Instead of settling for too little--the trivial things that we call "practical" and "relevant," let us "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith," making every effort to study the Scriptures, gathering the kindling of truth from its sacred pages, and then let us fan the flame until its brilliant glow can be seen from distant places by the homeless souls seeking warmth and light on a cold winter's night.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. How important is theology for life?
2. Why do you think people today are afraid of theology? Are we to blame, in part?
3. Does Scripture acknowledge a dichotomy between head and heart? Is this an invention of Greek philosophy and Enlightenment thought that we should reject?
4. What are the dangers of orthodoxy devoid of contemporary relevance? How can we make the ancient, changeless truths of God's Word practical in an age such as ours?

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