

# SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

Vol. 2, No. 14

## Engaging the World

*\*The following is a second and final excerpt from James Emery White's *A Mind for God* (InterVarsity Press, 2006), released this month. Copies may be ordered at discount through [www.serious-times.com](http://www.serious-times.com), but are also available at all major bookstore chains (e.g., Borders, Barnes and Noble), Christian bookstores, and through [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).*

\*\*\*\*\*

Catholic scholar George Weigel writes that in June 1959 the commission preparing the agenda for the Second Vatican Council wrote to all the bishops of the world, asking them what they'd like to talk about. A forty-year-old auxiliary bishop of Krakow named Karol Wojtyla – the future Pope John Paul II – sent a single, sharp question: What in the world has happened? How did a twentieth century that had begun with such high expectations for the human future produce, within a handful of decades, two world wars, three totalitarian systems, Auschwitz, the Gulag, mountains of corpses, oceans of blood, the greatest persecutions in Christian history, and a cold war that threatened the future of the planet? *What happened?* What happened, Karol Wojtyla suggested, was that the great project of Western humanism had gone off the rails. As John Paul's biographer, Weigel summarizes the thinking of the late pontiff: "Ideas have consequences, and bad ideas can have lethal consequences."

Our purpose in developing our minds is our love for God; our mission, however, is to contend with the darkness for the sake of the Light. The exercise of our intellects does not exist merely to explore ideas and arguments. Those who study the history of Christianity as merely an *intellectual* history miss the point. As Robert Louis Wilken noted, "the study of...Christian thought has been too preoccupied with ideas...It's mission...[is] to win the hearts and minds of men and women and to change their lives."

...This is what *our* mind must be developed to understand in order to then offer something to the *world's* mind for consideration and challenge. If we cannot rise to this endeavor, we will have lost our place in the most critical of conversations – indeed, the only conversation that matters.

The mission of the church is paramount, and what propels the mission forward is an awakened mind; a mind ablaze with God and the things of God. This is the heart of the cultural commission within the Great Commission. The Great Commission calls us to reach out to every person with the gospel of Jesus Christ; the cultural commission calls us to lay hold of every nook and cranny of our world for the kingdom of God. They are not separate endeavors – they are the two edges of the single sword we are called to wield. Though frighteningly few Christians embrace the true dynamic and practice of the Great Commission, even fewer take hold of the cultural commission. Too often we retreat into our Christian sub-culture, with its books and magazines, radio stations and bumper-stickers.

Henri Nouwen writes of a priest who told him that he cancelled his subscription to the *New York Times* because he felt that the endless stories about war, crime, power games and political manipulation only disturbed his mind and heart and prevented him from meditation and prayer. "That is a sad story," writes Nouwen. "A real spiritual life does exactly the opposite: it makes us so alert and aware of the world around us, that all that is and happens becomes part of our contemplation and meditation and invites us to a free and fearless response."

This is the difference between a Christian who is intelligent and a Christian who has an intellect. No one, argues Richard Hofstadter, questions the value of intelligence; that excellence of mind that is employed with narrow, immediate, predictable ranges that are undeniably practical. Intellect, on the other hand, is the critical, creative, and contemplative side of things.

It is also the activist side of things.

For our minds to break free and loom large on the world's stage, we must recapture the lost art of thinking itself. Having a Christian mind means to think – and to think widely and broadly. This goes beyond the practice of reflection, important as this practice is, for reflection is more of a discipline or skill to be embraced. We are talking about application – prayerfully setting the mind to the task at hand. Nouwen's friend purposefully avoided the *New York Times*. Nouwen's reminder should not be lost: the point is to purposefully engage it.

This brings us to the heart of the mind applied. It is not simply *thinking* Christianly, for to know is to *do*. Our goal is to think in such a way as to know how to live. So what does it mean for Christ to lay claim to medicine? To law? To politics? To the economy? To a child in the womb? To sexuality? Consider the words of the prophet Micah: "And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." It is not enough to simply understand the nature of justice and love from within a Christian perspective. Then "we must go on," writes Dennis Hollinger, "to think about the strategies of justice and love in issues like poverty, race relations, abortion and political life."

This is the vanguard of Christian thinking – knowing how to live, and then working to make the kingdom of God a reality for others to be able to live as well.

James Emery White

Sources

George Weigel, *Letters to a Young Catholic*, pp. 43-44.

Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, p. xiv.

Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, pp. 50-51.

Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, pp. 24-25.

Dennis Hollinger, *Head, Heart and Hands: Bringing Together Christian Thought, Passion and Actions*, p. 44.

\*New to the Update? While current Updates are only available to subscribers (subscribe for free at [www.serious-times.com](http://www.serious-times.com)), 2005 Updates are now archived for your perusal at <http://www.serious-times.com/information.asp?TopicID=45>