"...Casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ." 2 Corinthians 10:3,5

Jesus is Lord! That exclamation is the most original of all Christian confessions, the simplest of all Christian creeds. When first century believers said "Jesus is Lord," they were, by that confession, ascribing deity and hence, sovereignty, to Jesus Christ (Jno. 20:28).

"Lord" means supreme ruler. The Lord is one with absolute authority and dominion. When Christians acknowledged his Lordship, they were expressing submission to his right to rule and obedience to his authority over their lives. They were saying, "Jesus Christ is in charge of my life and I am willing to do what he commands."

Whether or not you and I acknowledge his lordship and authority, Christ Jesus is still Lord. As a result of his completed redemptive work, the Father has invested him with this divine dignity and position. Our disobedience will never change that fact. The issue for us is not "Is he Lord?" but "Are we submissive to his authority over us?" Have we surrendered to his Lordship? Are we living in a way that acknowledges his right to rule? One day, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phi. 2:10-11). A Christian is a person who bows and confesses that fact now.

The Lordship of Jesus Christ extends to every sector of the believer's life, even what he believes and how he thinks (Rom. 14:6-12). Christ and Christ alone has the right to police the thoughts of his people. As followers of Jesus Christ, you and I do not have the right to determine what we will believe or to develop our own philosophy of life. Because he is the Lord, Christ has the authority to make exclusive claims upon the believer's mind.

Is Jesus Christ the Lord of your mind? It was a rude awakening in my own life when I began to realize that I had unwittingly adopted many secular values that were diametrically contrary to God's word. There are a number of books on the shelves of my library purchased during a time in my life when I was less discerning that promote ideas that seemed right to me at the time, but that I have since discarded. To this day, I still periodically find myself accepting an idea that sounds reasonable, only to discover later that it is inconsistent with the teaching of Scripture.

The very fact that I still struggle with a certain ambivalence concerning the way I think about various issues indicates that I do not yet perfectly possess the mind of Christ. I have not arrived at perfect wisdom. I am not yet completely sanctified by God's word (Jno. 17:17). In fact, I expect that this struggle to conform my thinking more and more to the principles of Scripture will continue as long as I live. R. C. Sproul agrees:

None of us have totally the mind of Christ. We don't always think like Christians. I have ideas by which I make decisions and by which I make judgments which are not consistent with the mind of Christ. It's a lifelong struggle to conform my thinking to the thinking of Christ, to love what Christ loves and to hate what Christ hates; to affirm what he affirms, and to deny what he denies. I'm talking about achieving a Christian life and world view, of learning to look at life the
way that God himself sees it, because we are convinced that He is the author and the fountain of truth.1

To see life exactly as God sees it, to agree with him totally, to understand his word perfectly, and to know his will entirely, is to be spiritually mature. It is to be like the Lord Jesus Christ. It is to submit to his Lordship over my thinking. It is to possess a Christian mind. Until I die, this is the challenge that faces me. This is the goal toward which I must move. This is the essence of Christian discipleship.

Taking Every Thought Captive
Helping God's people to develop Christian minds is also the purpose of the gospel ministry. In 2 Corinthians 10, Paul defines his goal as a minister of Christ's gospel in terms of a spiritual warfare, a “fight of faith,” if you please, against ideas, philosophies, and general thought patterns that contradict God's word. Notice the military imagery in his words:

"For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (for the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds;) casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." (2 Cor. 10:3-5)

Clearly, Paul saw his task as God's servant in terms of a spiritual conflict that involved both the conquest of territory ('pulling down of strongholds'; lit. military fortifications) and the establishment of a new government in its place ('captive to the obedience of Christ'). The function of the gospel ministry, according to Paul, is comparable to a military rescue operation in which prisoners of war are forceably liberated from unlawful captors and returned to their rightful Ruler. Like a Special Forces group of Green Berets or Navy Seals, the minister is called to infiltrate the enemy territory Scripture calls "the world," sabotage and demolish the philosophical fortifications and strongholds of unbiblical thinking with the sword of the Spirit, and take the minds of those, once enslaved to error, captive for Christ and his truth.

Three thoughts are noteworthy in Paul's metaphor: (1) The battle facing Christians is primarily philosophical. It is a battle for the mind - a battle of ideas - a battle for truth. The "knowledge of God" (i.e. God's revelation in Scripture) is the standard by which every thought must be measured. Any idea that is not consistent with Divine revelation, says Paul, is sheer "imagination." First and foremost, the Christian faith is a matter of theological truth, not spiritual experience or cultural morality. The modern distaste for doctrine, especially within the Christian community, is an error of the deepest dye, for it undermines the very essence and nature of Christianity.

(2) The Christian faith is essentially aggressive and exclusive. It aims to take over by replacing error with truth. Paul's goal was not to interject the gospel as one among many equally valid philosophies of life. Instead, he wanted to demolish "every high thing" and bring "every thought" captive to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. He saw every other idea as a competing worldview, vying for man's heart and mind and threatening the glory of God. Paul understood that antithesis, i.e. the principle of contrast, is woven into the very fabric of the Gospel. He knew that every unbiblical presupposition was essentially a rival religion. Because he was jealous for the
Developing a Christian Mind
Written by Michael Gowens

name of his God, Paul exhibited a holy intolerance for and antagonism toward every idea that was contrary to God's revelation.

(3) Because it is a battle of ideas, the fight of faith cannot be effectively waged with carnal weapons. Neither violence, anger, hostility, deception, nor flattery are appropriate methods of engaging the enemy and capturing men's minds. Only by truth can the kingdom of God advance in the world.

Growth in grace, for every follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, involves the liberation of one's ideas and convictions, at ever increasing degrees, from worldly wisdom, and captivation, more and more, by the principles of God's word. Is your mind the prisoner of Scripture? Is your conscience held captive by the word of God? Is Jesus Christ the Lord of your mind?

What is a Christian Mind?
When the believer's every thought is brought to the point of obedience to the authority of Jesus Christ, he has attained the mind of Christ. First Corinthians 2:16 says, "For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ." The mind of Christ is revealed in the word of God. Every Christian, consequently, has access to Christ's thinking on every essential issue of life if he has access to the Bible. Christ exercises his authority over people through the word. Scripture is His sceptre; therefore, submission to the word of God is equivalent to obedience to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. When the believer's mind is perfectly commensurate with Scripture, he has a Christian mind.

A Christian mind, then, is a mind that thinks in terms of Divine revelation, a mind that thinks Biblically. The pursuit of a Christian mind is a quest to develop a Biblical worldview - to see life the way that God sees it - thinking His thoughts after Him. Above everything else, this is the priority of discipleship. If he is to be a faithful soldier in the great fight of faith, the believer must first put on the belt of truth: "Stand therefore having your loins girt about with truth" (Eph. 6:13). Without it, he will inevitably fall prey to the enemy of his soul.

But doesn't every Christian think Christianly? The answer is, obviously, "no." In fact, many live mindlessly, without a conscious sense of purpose and direction, oblivious to any way of life other than that of the world around them. Because they lack purpose, they live by reaction, at the mercy of changing circumstances and vacillating emotions. Like a child, they are easily influenced, "tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14). The easiest and most natural thing in life is to drift along in a vague and thoughtless way, existing on automatic pilot. The Christian, on the contrary, is called to "walk circumspectly." The phrase means to "live a purposeful and disciplined life by setting Biblical goals and pursuing them." The individual who knows his goal lives proactively, not reactively.

In 1963, British author Harry Blamires began his landmark book entitled The Christian Mind with the startling, matter-of-fact sentence, "There is no longer a Christian mind." Although he resorts to language that sounds admittedly "hysterical and melodramatic," he proceeds to validate his hypothesis by many convincing arguments. He writes:

There is still, of course, a Christian ethic, a Christian practice, and a Christian spirituality. As a
moral being, the modern Christian subscribes to a code other than that of the non-Christian. As a member of the Church, he undertakes obligations and observations ignored by the non-Christian. As a spiritual being, in prayer and meditation, he strives to cultivate a dimension of life unexplored by the non-Christian. But as a thinking being, the modern Christian has succumbed to secularization. He accepts religion - its morality, its worship, its spiritual culture; but he rejects the religious view of life, the view which sets all earthly issues within the context of the eternal, the view which relates all human problems - social, political, cultural - to the doctrinal foundations of the Christian Faith, the view which sees all things here below in terms of God's supremacy and earth's transitoriness, in terms of Heaven and Hell.2

What Blamires terms the Christian's "descent into mental secularism" is called, in the language of Scripture, "worldliness." When people who profess to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ fail to apply their Christian faith to every sector of their lives, they will inevitably descend into the world's way of thinking. They will adopt the world's values, court the world's approval, and pursue the world's symbols of status. The church, consequently, will lose its distinctiveness, the basis of its power.

Taking Captive or Being Taken Captive?
If the statement "There is no longer a Christian mind" was true in 1963, it is even more accurate these three decades later. Because of the modern capacity for communication, instead of "taking every thought captive in obedience to Christ as Lord," now more than ever, people tend to be "taken captive" by the ideas of the secular culture in which they live. This is true for the Christian as well as the unbeliever. Without a deliberate and decisive effort to regularly gather in his thoughts around the word of God, the Christian's mind will be captured by philosophy and empty deceptions.

In Colossians 2:8, Paul warned the church at Colossae about a false teaching that was making inroads among them:

"Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of this world, and not after Christ."

The word translated "spoil" means "to take captive; to plunder; to cheat." The Colossians were in danger of deception by a subtle and almost sinister brand of mysticism that was infiltrating the church. This heresy, known as gnosticism (from the Greek word gnosis meaning "knowledge") taught that matter was evil and only spirit was good. Although they believed that knowledge was the only requirement for salvation, gnostics rejected the rational dimension of Christianity. In the gnostic vocabulary, "knowledge" meant "existential or mystical knowledge" not "rational knowledge." They believed that there was a higher sphere of knowledge, attained experientially apart from Biblical revelation. Gnosticism tended, consequently, to promote a class structure within the church of those who were "in the know" and those who were not. The gnostics saw themselves as the spiritual elite with an "inside track" to God, privy to a level of spirituality that the ordinary Christian was not. They jettisoned theology for experience, revelation for existential awareness, and objective truth for subjective feeling. Intimidated by the fear of being labeled an inferior Christian, the Colossians were buying into the aberrant teaching of the gnostics.
Developing a Christian Mind
Written by Michael Gowens

Paul viewed the gnostic heresy as a challenge to the sufficiency of Scripture and the preeminence of Jesus Christ. In fact, the sufficiency of Jesus Christ is the theme of his letter. Within the Colossian church, this fascination with the mystical had the effect of crowding Christ out of the gospel message. Attempting to supplement God's revelation with an emphasis on the mysterious, they were saying, in effect, that Christ was not enough. Gnostics said, "You need something more than the word of God. It is not enough."

According to Paul, however, the more the Colossians doubted the sufficiency of Christ and his provision for the church, the more they slipped back into worldliness. This emphasis, in other words, was not super-spiritual, but fundamentally worldly. The phrase "the rudiments of the world" refers to the most basic and fundamental principles of this world system. The Colossians thought that they were ascending to a higher plane of knowledge by adding mysticism to Christian faith, but, in reality, they were backsliding into the same lifeview of their pre-conversion days—a view of life without Christ at the center. They were not graduating to Christianity's high school; they were returning to the world's elementary school. The pseudo-Christian emphasis of these gnostic teachers was the very opposite of the Christian message.

By way of contrast, Paul reminds the believers in Colossae that they are "complete in Christ" (Col. 2:10). "Complete" is a nautical term meaning "fully equipped." It has reference to a ship that is fully manned, stocked with cargo and provisions for the crew, equipped with every necessary tool for sea worthiness, and ready to sail. In Jesus Christ, Paul says, the believer is sufficient for the voyage of Christian discipleship. He has made adequate provisions for the church. Through his word and Spirit, Christians have been given "all things that pertain unto life and godliness" (2 Pet. 1:4). Christian faith does not need supplementation from legalism, mysticism, asceticism, or any other worldly philosophy.

"Beware, then," Paul warns, "that your mind is not captured by the philosophies of this world." To the extent that our thoughts are inconsistent with the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, we have been taken captive by secular culture.

Renewing the Mind
In order for the Christian to develop a Christian mind under the Lordship of Christ, screening the world around him with spiritual discernment, he must maintain constant exposure to the word of God. In Romans 12:2, Paul describes the means of sanctification in terms of "renewing the mind":

"And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."

The ability to "prove" (lit. discern) the will of God in every given situation of life, to sort through the issues and understand what pleases him, is a mark of spiritual maturity. "But," someone asks, "how can I know which choices and decisions are consistent with his will?" Knowledge of God's will is the product of knowing God's word.

None of us is wise and insightful enough to be able to sort through the mental jungle of life on our own. Unless we are regularly renewed in the spirit of our minds by God's truth, we will inevitably gravitate toward the passing fashion of this age. Every believer needs the adjustment
to his thinking that Bible reading, gospel preaching, and genuine Christian fellowship provides. If he once gets away from the renewing influence that God's word has on the mind, he will slide back into old patterns of thinking. This, among others, is the reason that regular church attendance is essential to a God-honoring Christian life. Personally speaking, it doesn't take long for my mind to become clouded and confused when I neglect to expose it to the resources God has provided for my spiritual growth. Because I am inundated every day with information and ideas from the popular media culture, I need regular reminders of what is true.

The gospel exercises a saving influence upon the believer (Rom. 1:16), if he keeps it in memory (I Cor. 15:2). How does the believer keep the gospel in memory? By being re-minded of it on a regular basis. Gospel preaching saves the believer from false teaching and worldly philosophy, "stirring up the pure mind by way of remembrance" (2 Pet. 3:1). It tends to refocus spiritual perspective, correcting the visual distortions that develop in the interim of life. Even though one may know and be established in a certain truth, yet for his safety from the deceptive influences of the fallen world system, he needs to hear that truth repeated over and over again (2 Pet. 1:12-13; Phi. 3:1). Without ongoing renewal of one’s thinking, he will inevitably fall prey to error and deception.

It is also the means by which the Christian resists the magnetic pull to conform to the pattern of this world and fulfills the call to Christian distinctness. The words "conformed" and "transformed" in Romans 12:2 suggest the image of shaping an object to a mold. "Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold," says Paul. The Christian's mindset is to be shaped by the word of God and the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's exhortation "Be not conformed to this world" means simply, "Don't be like the world system in which you live." In positive terms, Paul calls his readers to be different. The basic call of the gospel is a call to non-conformity, a call to be distinct from the world.

It is precisely the relaxation of this contrast between the church and the world that accounts for the low state of things in the church today. In many cases no visible distinction is evident. The line of demarcation between the two cultures is increasingly blurred so that even professing believers are confused. A contemporary author astutely observes,

In spite of the church's numbers and resources reaching an all-time high, she is weak because she has adopted many of the world's ideas, values, methods, practices, and 'solutions' to problems. She has lost the cutting edge necessary to slice through the fabric of humanism and present a scriptural alternative. It has gotten so bad that in some circles the person who thinks and acts biblically is considered radical within the church itself.6

Worldviews in Collision
The tension between the church and the world expressed by Romans 12:2 is philosophical in nature. At the heart of this tension is the question, "Who will be God?" To the individual who thinks Biblically, this is no small matter. In fact, when Paul visited Athens and saw the city wholly given to idolatry, he was stirred in his spirit (Acts 17:16). He was so committed to the glory of God's name that he could not bear to see the worship due to God diverted to idols. The subsequent clash at Mars Hill between Paul and the philosophical schools of the day is a microcosm of the tension between Christianity and secularism. The very geography of this
encounter is significant. What could be more powerful than to see Paul teaching Divine wisdom at the very epicenter of human wisdom, preaching Christ in the shadow of Athena, and proclaiming Calvary's hill on Mars Hill? This encounter, illustrating the ongoing conflict between the church and the world, was nothing less than a collision of worldviews.

A comparable event in the Old Testament is Elijah's confrontation of the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. With a holy passion for the integrity of the name of Jehovah, Elijah challenged, "If the Lord be God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (I Kings 18:21). Note again the element of antithesis or contrast. The Christian mind thinks in terms of this "either-or" logic, not the "both-and" model promoted by religious and philosophical pluralism. There is not enough room in the universe for more than one God. Either Jehovah is God, or Baal is god. Because the church, like ancient Israel, exists as a people who are devoted to God's glory (Lev. 20:23-26; I Pet. 2:9), she will always, if she thinks Biblically, be at odds with the world.

The Offence of the Cross

Why is the believer different from others? What separates the church from the world? Personal worth? No, by nature Christians are no different than anyone else, being "children of wrath, even as others" (Eph. 2:3). Intelligence? No, for in many cases "the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light" (Lk. 16:8). Love for family? No, for even the world loves its own (Jno. 15:19). What is, then, the dividing line between the church and the world? The cross! The Christian is someone whose motives, hopes, attitudes, values, decisions, joys, and confidences converge, like the spokes of a wheel to the hub, at the cross. According to Galatians 6:14, the cross is the line of demarcation, the great divide, and the point of tension between the two:

"But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world."

Earlier in the same epistle, Paul speaks of "the offence of the cross" (Gal. 5:11). The cross is the watershed issue, not moral concerns, family values, or partisan politics. Unbelievers are not offended by the believer's desire to live a moral life. Some of them share that commitment to morality. Neither are they offended by his concern for his family. Many of them are just as committed to domestic stability. It is the cross that trips them up. The world at large, in other words, doesn't mind if you are religious. It will even admit the social value of religion. But it will not tolerate Christianity. Society doesn't mind if you pray, as long as you don't pray "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." Generic prayers and religion that is kept in its place is permissible, but the cross, with its inherent exclusivity, is taboo.

Because the Christian boasts in the cross alone, the world is crucified unto him. What does the Apostle mean? He means that those who have professed faith in the Christ of the cross have died to the world's way of thinking and living. The former patterns of life have been left in the waters of baptism, and the believer has risen from the water to walk in newness of life. There is a marked and visible change of lifestyle that prompts former companions to now "think it strange that you run not with them to the same excess of riot" (I Pet. 4:4). The believer, by the act of publicly professing faith in Christ as Savior and Lord, makes a break by that act with the world, crossing the line of antithesis. Now, he thinks of himself as a Christian, in terms of his
commitment to Christ, not merely in terms of his national citizenship, corporate position, life occupation, social status, or family heritage. He is living now for Christ, not for self-fulfillment. The rules of the game of life have changed, defined now by the Bible, not by popular opinion or personal preference. It is truly a radical change, a 180° turnaround, a kind of, shall I say, repentance.

The rest of his life will be spent in the pursuit of total transformation to Christ's likeness, though he will never reach the point this side of the grace of glorification when he can say "I have arrived at perfection" (cf. Phi. 3:7-14). Every day, he will have to repent again, confessing the areas of thought and behavior that are inconsistent with God's holy will, appropriating the forgiveness and cleansing God has provided in the blood of Christ, and renewing his commitment to holiness (1 Jno. 1:9; Pro. 28:13). Every day he will have to "put off" the habits of the old life, renew his mind with truth, and "put on" the Lord Jesus Christ in the way he thinks, the attitudes he maintains, the goals he pursues, and the values he obeys (Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:5-10; Rom. 13:12-14). As the Holy Spirit reveals areas of his life that are more consistent with the pattern of this age than with the word of God, that is, as he is shown that he is thinking and behaving in a worldly way, he will have to "deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow" Jesus Christ. This daily activity, known theologically as "sanctification," is a long-term, lifelong process. Though sinless perfection is not promised for this life, progress in holiness is. The essence of discipleship, therefore, is an ongoing attempt, through the strength of the Holy Spirit, to pull out the root of worldliness in the garden of the inner man and to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in its place. Because of the cross, the Christian is crucified to the world.

But Paul adds a further perspective. The cross not only separates the Christian from the world, it also separates the world from the Christian. The world responds to the believer's decisive break with its values by saying, "The feeling is mutual. I don't like you either." Does the world quietly withdraw from the believer, leaving him to follow his Lord, and go to some remote place to nurse its hurt feelings? No, it launches a relentless assault upon the believer in an attempt to recapture its lost spiritual territory. This aggressive assault takes the form of propaganda, peer pressure, and persecution, all aimed at ensnaring the mind, weakening the commitment, and controlling the will. It is, in the strictest sense of the term, a spiritual war.

Learning to Discern
As the Christian is increasingly sanctified by God's word (Jno. 17:17), he will grow in his ability to distinguish between the world's philosophy and Christ's truth. Developing a Christian mind is a matter of constructing an intellectual grid from Scripture through which everything one sees, hears, and encounters must pass. In a word, it is a matter of discernment.

Sadly, many people are not very alert. They accept at face value whatever they hear, without critical analysis and without question. Solomon said, "The simple believe every word, but a prudent man looks well to his going" (Pro. 14:15)

What is discernment? It is the ability to think clearly and Biblically in determining right from wrong; to evaluate situations and to assess everything one sees and hears by the timeless and absolute truth of God's word. The discerning person lives deliberately and purposefully; he "looks well to his going." He is not "unwise," that is, undisciplined and mindless, seeking
guidance by feelings, but he "understands what the will of the Lord is" (Eph. 5:17).

Like an archaeologist, whose skillful eye sifts through an assortment of rubble with critical precision, the Christian should weigh and evaluate his world, screening it all through the grid of God's word. The Bible stresses the importance of discernment. "Prove [test] all things," said Paul, "and hold fast to that which is good" (1 Ths. 5:21). John commands, "Try [test] the spirits to see whether they are of God" (1 Jno. 4:1). In fact, the ability to distinguish truth from error, right from wrong, and good from evil is a mark of spiritual maturity. The writer to the Hebrews says that "those of full age" are those "who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern good and evil" (Heb. 5:14).

Does that mean that Christians should suspect everything and everyone around them? No. Discernment is not synonymous with a spirit of suspicion or paranoia. The discerning mind does not look for the proverbial ghost in every closet. It does not automatically assume the worst. But it understands that because the universe is locked in a great cosmic conflict between competing worldviews, the need to look at life through the lens of Scripture is crucial to 20/20 spiritual vision. In other words, the discerning mind is a mind that thinks in terms of contrast, in terms of antithesis. Because God exists, absolute values also exist. Everything in the universe, therefore, must be measured against that reference point, against that objective standard, to see if it is good or evil, right or wrong, true or false.

The alert and discerning Christian is the only person who will be able to resist the pitfall of deception. When the swift philosophical current of popular culture seeks to rush him off his feet, he will be able to stand fast in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the glory of God. God help us all to think His thoughts after Him, for we have the mind of Christ.

- Michael L. Gowens