

A Dialogue

Relativistic Synthesis: Thwarting the Mind of Christ

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"...if the salt has become tasteless,...it is good for nothing"
(Matthew 5:13 NASB)

Lest Christians synthesize the ideas and thoughts of the world with those of the Bible and create a form of "relativistic synthesis," Dr. Chewning presents presuppositions and illustrations to encourage teachers in their quest to help their students develop the mind of Christ.

Christ's brothers and sisters are to be "salt" and "light" (Matthew 5:13-16). Are those who profess the name of Christ in our culture today fulfilling this mandate? If we were, would the social *putresco* (Latin: decay) be so pronounced and far reaching? More specifically, are those of us who bear the name of Christ and teach business and economics in Christian institutions of higher education, teaching those under our jurisdiction what it means to have the mind of Christ and thereby become salt and light in the service of Christ? Or have we too been seduced by the world? Are we guilty of emulating the world's thinking? Do we simply "Christianize" the world's thinking—coat their thoughts with superficial biblical analyses—and thereby resist or even pervert the mind of Christ that is to be formed in us? We are to "...see to it that no one takes [us] captive through philosophy

and empty deception according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ" (Colossians 2:8; also see 2 Corinthians 10:5).

Becoming a Christian carries with it many opportunities and obligations (flowing out of love), but one of the greatest opportunities is for the believer to have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16). We who labor to encourage the development of a biblical world-and-life view in the minds of our students should not rest until we ourselves have *sufficiently* (not exhaustively) gained the mind of Christ. We must continue to seek the mentally transforming work of the Holy Spirit (Romans 12:2) who will form Christ in us (Galatians 4:19). To be satisfied with anything less is to run the risk of being "wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked"—a very vulnerable state

of affairs for a professing Christian. The Laodiceans were rebuked for their sin in this regard (Revelation 3:14-22).

This treatise has five discernible objectives. They are: (1) to argue and demonstrate that all thinking is inherently *presuppositional* in character; (2) to show that our *beliefs* govern our *knowledge* in all of the qualitative realms of reality—spiritual, moral, values, virtues, matters of character, the meaning and purpose of life; (3) to set forth the *governing presuppositions* for the “Christian way of thinking”; (4) to distinguish between the world’s way of thinking and the Christian’s way of thinking; and (5) to offer two concrete illustrations from the area of business that demonstrate: (a) how the world thinks, (b) how Christians so easily synthesize their thinking with the world’s—in doing this their “salt becomes tasteless,” and (c) how a Christian way of thinking should differ from either the world’s way or that of “relativistic synthesis.”

Perhaps at the very beginning a “this is not what is intended” statement needs to be offered. The concept of a *Christian way of thinking* set forth in this treatise is not perpetrating the notion that all Christians will or ought to think alike. Neither is it seeking to foster a belief that Christians ought not to have differences of

opinion. It will instead be arguing that the presuppositions, points of reference, thinking methodology, attitudes, and motives are all radically different in Christian thinking (not necessarily fully mature or even accurate). Finally, the paper is not offered as a scholarly treatise where every major idea and thought is referenced. There are three reasons for this. I am not a scholar. I am, I believe, a biblically grounded observer and interpreter. Second, I have forgotten more than I remember and I cannot go back to “dig up old research bones” (a literature review with referenced sources) to show the origination of a number of my thoughts. And third, the real purpose of the treatise is to stimulate thought, not research. It is for personal reflection which may, in God’s kindness, result in a bit of personal growth in Christlikeness.

Proposition #1

All Thinking is Inherently Presuppositional in Character

All thinking takes place in the context of one’s world-and-life view. We are seldom conscious of this fact but it is nevertheless true. The reader, for example, will engage, read, examine, analyze, and think about this treatise in the light of his or her world-and-life perspective. One’s world-and-life view is the “big picture” or framework he or she has

constructed about life (mostly unconsciously) that enables him or her to make sense out of the endless bombardment of information being received from the external world through the sensory faculties.

More importantly, however, a person's world-and-life view is constructed atop an elaborate foundation of various *presuppositions*. This is universally true for every human. It is a reality that is necessitated by our finitude. Why is this so?

Not being infinite and eternal, we are confronted from birth with some very real limitations. For example, we ponder matters

regarding our existence. We question our purpose and meaning in the context of life. We wonder about what is valuable and what is not. And we think about values and virtues, and ponder their significance, if any. Are they merely important for social stability reasons, or are there other significant reasons why we should cherish or reject the notions of character and virtue? All nonphysical, intangible, qualitative dimensions of reality—those qualities that make up the “meta” dimension of the “metaphysical” inquiry—require an approach to them that

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is significantly different from the so called “scientific approach.”

The matters outlined above are at the heart of the concerns of both philosophy and theology. In philosophy the issues fall under the heading of “ontology.” In theology they are the subject of Genesis. The challenges to the “origination” answers offered by these disciplines are many, and the challenges made to the proffered answers fall under the rubric of “epistemology” (the theory of knowledge)—How do

you *know*, that what you think you *know*, you really do *know*? How do you know, for example,

that what you *believe* about your genesis is in fact true? How do you know that you are created in the image of God and are not just a product of some chance and accident occurrence in a godless universe? Answers to these questions, and many others that originate in the metaphysical realms that transcend the measurable physical bounds of reality, point to the truth of the first proposition of this treatise—*all thinking is inherently presuppositional in character.*¹

A presupposition is simply an understanding, assumption, belief, or point of faith that precedes the

focus of the thought or statement currently in the mind or under discussion. Yes, every thought, expressed or unexpressed, is undergirded by a number of presuppositions. This is most easily demonstrated when reference is made in a conversation to some qualitative aspect of life. For example, a person attending a strategy meeting in a business might say, "We ought to promote Brian and make him the new V.P. of Marketing." Behind such a statement are numerous, hidden presuppositions. The speaker is probably not even aware of them. A few basic questions will often surface some of the simpler and more obvious presuppositions, however.

The first statements offered in a conversation reveal a number of superficial presuppositions (those nearest the level of consciousness):

- (1) Brian is an experienced sales manager.
- (2) He knows how to motivate people.
- (3) He is a good judge of people's ability.
- (4) He is a fair person.
- (5) He has good character.

Subsequent statements in a conversation may expose additional presuppositions at a somewhat deeper level. These may require a bit of digging to get them up on the surface, but they are there and are asserting a

genuine influence on the speaker's thinking, albeit unconsciously in most cases. For example:

- (1) Experience is important because by it, one knows both the pitfalls and genuine opportunities.
- (2) The speaker believes that "motivation" is either:
 - (a) an internal will to do something that responds to open-ended opportunities;
 - (b) a response to external stimulus—rewards or punishment; or
 - (c) a mixture of (a) and (b).
- (3) Having good judgment is an important quality in management.
- (4) Being fair is an important trait of character.
- (5) Good character is important when placing a person in a position of great responsibility.

There are four levels on which moral thinking may take place.²

A typical conversation bounces around on levels one and two (see Note 2). The two rounds of conversation outlined above did just that. The third level of disclosure, however, causes most people to become a bit uncomfortable because here people have to disclose their deeper thoughts. And the fourth level, our ontological or "genesis" level, is even more frightening to

most people for it contains the most basic presuppositions of all, our presuppositions regarding God, and mankind's genesis.³ These presuppositions are rarely visited in an open conversation in the business community. To the shame of most Christians, though, is the fact that our ontological presuppositions are rarely encountered on a conscious level (albeit silent) while we are having conversations at work or anywhere. But the ontological presuppositions do set the real direction for all of our intentions, thoughts, motives, and actions.

What might be some of the ontological presuppositions hidden beneath the surface in the two rounds of conversation outlined above? The second set of statements reveal a strong focus on matters pertaining to human motivation, good judgment, fairness, and human character. These are all aspects of human nature, a subject on which there is very little agreement in the world. Is the human a "natural person"—not subject to the consequences of a "fall?" Or are we "fallen people?" One's answer to this question has a lot to say about the person's view of the nature and character of God. To illustrate, if humans are not fallen, God is in some sense the author or creator of our existing nature—a propensity to self-centeredness which is evidence of a sin nature (a character unlike God's). God

is, from this perspective, the author of sin. But there are also those who believe that "god" is only an observer of the universe and uninvolved in the affairs of our daily life. Even worse still are Christians who profess to believe in a living, omnipresent personal God, but One who is absolutely ignored when they think about and discuss business matters—at work or in the classroom.

Do we really believe God dwells in us (Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19) and will help us when we face hard realities in business? Is there a godly way to fire someone, and will God be with us when we engage in such a matter? Is there a godly way to face an unethical superior? Is God concerned when we alter the quality of our product? Has He any advice for us on such matters? Our presuppositions about God—His nature and character—and our presuppositions about the nature of mankind are the two most impactful areas in which we have beliefs. And our beliefs (presuppositions) in these two areas will guide our thoughts and behavior in every other area of life.

Proposition #2 Beliefs Govern Knowledge

Do beliefs govern knowledge, or does knowledge govern beliefs? There are few questions in the study of Christian thinking that

are any more important to answer. The church has been divided over this question for over 700 years.

Augustine of Hippo

(St. Augustine: 354-430 A.D.)

believed strongly that faith preceded (undergirded) reason and therefore governed our view of reality. His view became the orthodox position of the early church and held sway for over 800 years. Then the scholastic philosopher/theologian, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 A.D.) reconstructed the options for a Christian epistemology and introduced the idea (belief, assumption, presupposition) that knowledge *could* (an allowable alternative) govern beliefs. The church has had adherents to one or the other position ever since. (The position taken in this treatise parallels closely the works of Professor Gordan H. Clark.⁴)

Aquinas was a *scholastic*. He tried to prevent the demise of the Christian faith (his interpretation of the situation) as it was being attacked by the classical, agnostic intellectuals of his day. To do this he resurrected the ideas of Aristotle (an empiric logician) and created a new formulation of the relationship between “faith” and “reason.” He made a double distinction when doing this. W.T. Jones states, “First he distinguished between philosophy and theology: philosophy is what can be proved by the natural light of reason; theology is what rests

on faith. Second, he distinguished between revealed and natural theology: the latter [natural theology] is the part of the former that is susceptible [to] proof” (213)⁵. It was his “natural theology” that turned the church on its ear. His view was that God was the author of both the Bible (special revelation) and the created order (natural revelation—the well-spring of natural theology), and that truth was equally discernible from both. God would not (could not, because of His nature) place contradictory truths in the two realms. Therefore, it would logically follow that if a person was having trouble interpreting a portion of the Scripture (Genesis 1-3, for example), he or she could turn to the arena of natural revelation (physics, biology, geology, etc.) for assistance in interpreting the biblical truth. This led to the conclusion that reason could lead faith—natural theology could lead us to the true meaning of the special revelation. Aquinas’ position became the official position of the Roman Catholic Church in 1879.⁶ His understanding offered an alternative to the older formulation that faith always guides reason.

The Augustinian understanding of reality, however, finds two major faults with the Aquinian proposition. First, the created order fell with the fall of

our first parents, Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:16-19; 5:29; Romans 8:20-22), and *the fall extensively impacted the created order*. How then can we trust our observations regarding it? Scripture, on the other hand, is God's post-fall, perfectly superintended truth to His children. Why then would His children choose to use the possibly (probably) distorted revelations from the fallen natural order to interpret the unerring words of biblical truth? Second, those who believe that all humans are really dead to God prior to their regeneration—absolutely dead spiritually, not just “wounded”—do not (should not) trust their unrenovated minds to be able to discern genuine truth in the created areas of life until their minds have been re-formed by *the Holy Spirit's use of the Word of God*. Therefore, faith ought to precede and guide our reason.

Furthermore, even our views of the natural (created) order really rest atop a foundation of presuppositions. For example, do the “natural laws” that modern science is so apt to build its theories on reflect an irreversible reality that is independent of a sustaining “god,” or are these laws present and continuously upheld by Christ's sustaining power (Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:17)? The unregenerate, for the most part, believe in a closed universe in which the laws of nature are a disconnected (to

God) reality. The Christian, on the other hand, understands them to be directly related to God's *sovereign rule and sustaining common grace*—miracles are absolutely grounded in this presupposition.

Our presupposition about the relationship between faith and reason really governs our understanding and approach to the discernment of reality. Is it really possible for mankind to know anything about the real meaning of humanity apart from a correct understanding of the nature, character, and acts of God? No. True knowledge escapes all who neglect the biblical revelation of God. Then we need to at least mention Scriptures' S-N-A-P: *sufficiency, necessity, authority, and perspicuity* (understandability, clarity). We may well profess its “authority,” but if we question its “sufficiency,” we have just as quickly undermined its *full* authority. Other authorities will now be needed to interpret the Bible. It quickly becomes an authority among many authorities and its real authority is thereby lost. The same is true regarding our understanding of Scripture's “necessity” and “perspicuity.” When one of them is weakened, the “full authority” of Scripture is likewise eroded.

The line of reasoning outlined above is a brief defense of the position: *beliefs govern*

knowledge. If people allow their *so called* knowledge to govern their beliefs, it is this author's contention that both their beliefs and knowledge will be skewed. Until our *beliefs* are straightened out by the Holy Spirit, our *knowledge* cannot be truly aligned with reality.

Proposition #3

Presuppositions Govern the Christian Way of Thinking

It will be argued in this section of the treatise that the Holy Spirit is at work in Christ's inheritance (Ephesians 1:18) to renovate His children so they share a common base of spiritual insights—God's *guiding presuppositions* given to His children to live by. They are the presuppositions found in the Scripture that tell us about God's nature and mankind's nature.

Guiding Presuppositions for Christians

The Holy Spirit begins His work in Christ's "inheritance" by first regenerating them—making them alive to God and His Word. Upon becoming a Christian, a person begins to see things differently. The Christian's journey from his or her rebirth to maturity in Christ, is one that is recognized theologically as God's sanctifying work. The Holy Spirit dwells in Christ's people (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16; John 14:23), and they truly know Him (John 14:17,21). He forms Christ in

them (Galatians 4:19; Ephesians 4:13; Colossians 1:28) and gives them the mind of Christ, sufficiently, not exhaustively, (1 Corinthians 1:11-16; 2 Corinthians 3:3-4; Jeremiah 31:33). All of this takes place over time and is the result of a God-ordained process wrought by the Holy Spirit. Through the Word, the maturing Christian receives a number of *presuppositional building blocks* from God which are shaped, arranged, and cemented into place by God's providence. They are the core of the mind of Christ, as it is revealed to us. Some of these presuppositional building blocks are:

- (1) The nature and character of God who is spirit; life; the Creator of all out of nothing; absolutely independent of all His creation; eternal; infinite; invisible; immutable; omnipotent; omnipresent; omniscient; holy; righteous; wise; just; good; love; mercy; patient; absolutely sovereign; and Trinitarian in Their Oneness—God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, sharing absolute equality in their divinity, yet assuming different roles in their ministry—the Father (head of the Godhead and the One who ordains

whatsoever comes to pass throughout all eternity), the Son (God incarnate, perfect keeper of God's will for mankind, the atonement for mankind's sins), the Holy Spirit (the *Paracletos* for God's children, i.e., the perfect tutor, teacher, guide, discipliner, and comforter), etc.

- (2) The nature of mankind who are: finite; mutable; fallen; sinners; redeemable; created in the image of God with regard to their ability to truly know God (Colossians 3:10), to be righteous (Ephesians 4:24), and to be holy (Ephesians 4:24); inherently the possessors of the knowledge of good and evil; required to live by faith; able to think and retain knowledge; physical beings with a spirit; possessors of many desires (to be unconditionally accepted, to be successful, to belong); rationalizers; able to be kind, gentle, angry, violent, loving, etc.; possessors of a will; creative; choice makers; etc.

“Unpacking” the items listed in the two paragraphs above is a work of the Holy Spirit. He uses the Scripture and motivates the

“image bearer” to participate in that adventure. The result is a maturing biblical world-and-life view in the mind of the Christian that serves as a filter through which all of life is seen and interpreted. Because all created reality emanates from God, the Christian has the opportunity to relate everything he or she encounters back to God. When we are trained by the Spirit to do this, we are endowed with the mind of Christ (sufficiently, not exhaustively) and have a biblical world-and-life view.

Proposition #4 The World's Way and the Christian's Way of Thinking Differ

Is there really a Christian *way* of thinking? Yes! This does not imply, however, that Christians will necessarily think alike, draw the same conclusions, or somehow avoid differences. It will be maintained, however, that God desires to: (1) bring His children to *common points of reference*, (2) radically *alter Christians' attitudes and motives*, and (3) construct in His people a *method, process, or procedure of thinking*.

The Christian's Common Point of Reference

Scripture and the created order are the only common points of reference shared by all Christians. It is imperative, however, to know and remember

that it is the Bible, in the hands of the Holy Spirit, that is God's ordained way of ultimately bringing His children to a world-and-life view that is consistent with His view. To think that we are able to develop a biblical world-and-life view by ourselves is to invite disaster into our lives. We must remember what Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; *for apart from me you can do nothing*" (John 15:5, emphasis added).

God wants us to be "noble-minded Bereans" (Acts 17:11). We should examine our perceptions of reality every day against the Scriptures. It is the only trustworthy point of reference God has given us. He even says to us, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1), "for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). For example, is a particular thought we have, from the Spirit of God or a foreign spirit? We must test it. Paul also says of the Christian, "We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are *taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ*" (2 Corinthians 10:5, emphasis added). How do we do these things? We test the spirits against

the Word of God. We take our thoughts captive by examining them in the light of the Word of God. The Bible is the tool God has given us by which He/we will accomplish these things. The Bible is not an end in itself, it is God's instrument, in the hands of the Spirit, to bring us to Christ. We serve Christ!

The Christian's Altered Attitudes and Motives

Adam Smith's book, *An Inquiry Into The Nature And Causes Of The Wealth Of Nations* (1776), was the world's first full-blown treatise on economics. An unintended side effect of the work was to render "motives and intentions" virtually useless in the marketplace. This happened when the "invisible hand of competition" became the guiding hope for marketplace ethics. Suddenly a "natural order" force was offered as a replacement for the personal, internal ethics that had been emphasized for centuries. The internal, invisible moral character, reflected in the prior attention given to intentions and motives, was supplanted by a visible, public hand of competition. The public, we were told, need not worry about people's motives, they would be forced to be ethical by the marketplace forces of competition. The merchants could serve the public out of good motives or bad motives, but they would serve the public well

because they wanted their business—and the resulting profits.

This was certainly not the intent of Dr. Smith, a Scottish moral philosopher, but his work offered a rationale to the public discourse (following his death) that is still pervasive in the minds of most modern-day business people. It can also be argued that the general public's acceptance of this "natural order" truth was good, in the sense of common grace. But it is not good for the Christian to accept this natural order consequence as if it is sufficient or complete in the mind of Christ—we who have the mind of Christ know better.

The Spirit has said it plainly enough, "Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and *disclose the motives of men's hearts*; and then each man's praise will come to him from God" (1 Corinthians 4:5, emphasis added). God is as interested in our thoughts, intentions and motives as He is in our actions. Prior to a person's regeneration by the Holy Spirit, no one's motives or thoughts are concerned with Christ's glory, honor, or will. The thoughts of the unregenerate are focused on "self." Children of God, however, become more and more concerned with the will of God

and the purposes of God with the passing of time as the Holy Spirit works.

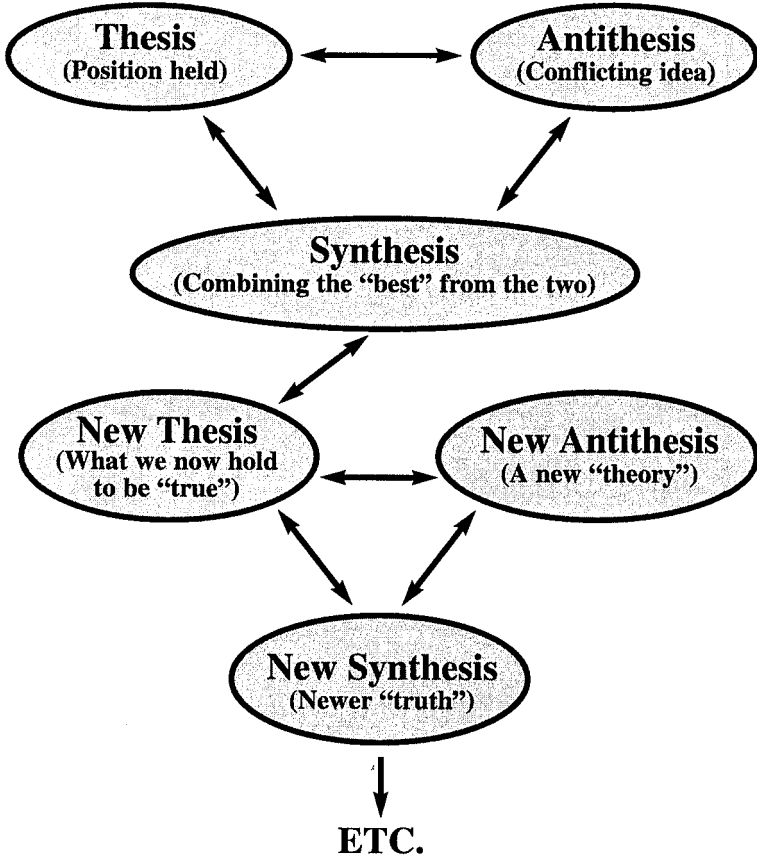
God gives His children everything pertaining to *godliness* through giving them the *true knowledge of Himself* (2 Peter 1:3). This includes new motives and thoughts that are related to God. We are new creatures in Christ. The "old" has been put away; the "new" is being put on (Ephesians 4:22-24).

The Method or Process of Thinking of God's People

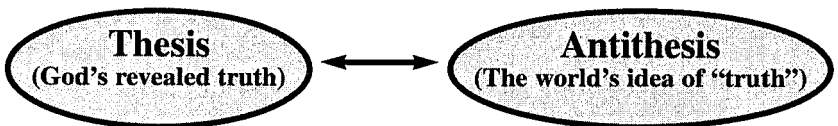
The western world took on a form of thinking in the late 1600s and 1700s that was described by G.W.F. Hegel in 1805 as "dialectical synthesis."⁷ This method of thinking worked wonderfully in the physical sciences where the physical dimensions of creation are encountered. It is a very positive methodology there—the Lord had instructed mankind to have dominion and to rule over His created order, as His stewards. Synthesis thinking has been very helpful here because the Lord had not given us any special revelation regarding His physical laws, per se—Genesis 1:26-30; Psalm 8:6-8.

This "new" thinking process worked havoc, however, when it was embraced by the Christian community as a part of their moral reasoning methodology. It presupposes that mankind is responsible, not God, for

determining right and wrong. It presupposes that moral truth is changing from the human perspective. The Hegelian thought form can be diagrammed as:



The Christian should learn to think in the “thesis/antithesis” format whenever a nonmaterial subject is being considered. This methodology would look like:



In this way the Christian is assured of standing firmly on the Word of God—our *thesis for life*. We are, after all, to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4; Job 23:12). But in fact, far too many Christians have succumbed, unknowingly, to the Hegelian way of thinking in all matters and have thereby lost their savor of saltiness.

The other area of great confusion in our culture, regarding how Christians ought to think, revolves around the “politically correct methodology” for knowing anything. There is a wide array of literature dealing with the rise of science and its impact on the relationship between faith and reason.⁸ At its heart, however, the “scientific methodology” became the only culturally accepted way to know anything. Because it is limited to the physical dimensions of life, when it is applied to the qualitative aspects of reality, by its nature it produces agnostic conclusions—you cannot really know truth in the realms of faith and values. This attitude—*belief*—came to govern our culture to such an extent that even the Christian community largely embraced its presuppositions.

Through this door of doubt marched Soren Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith” and with it came modern neo-orthodoxy. One’s only way of knowing *qualitative*

truth was thought to be by the route of “personal, existential experience.” Mankind once again assumed the “seat of control”—from mankind’s perspective. God was out; humanity was in. The result has been that much of the modern church believes that all anyone can really know of “truth” is what they personally say it is. Truth is a matter of one’s personal opinion. There is no objective standard by which we can determine truth. If this is doubted, ask people if they believe faith is an objective or subjective aspect of their life. The overwhelming majority will respond that faith is a subjective part of anybody’s reality.

The Bible, however, defines faith with a number of objective words. Hebrews 11:1 tells us: “Now *faith* [Gk.—*pistis*: being persuaded] is the *assurance* [Gk.—*hupostasis*: firm confidence; substance] of things hoped for, the *conviction* [Gk.—*elegchos*: evidence; proof] of things not seen” (emphasis added). God gives this kind of faith—evidential, “objective” faith—to His people so they can stand in the face of persecution, death, and famine. It is not a “blind faith” nor an existentially grounded leap of faith. It is a “historic/legal” faith.

What is a historic/legal faith? It is faith that is rooted in the acts of God that have taken place in the “time and space history” of

ordinary people like you and me. The Bible is an account of God's acts in the midst of His people. For example, Christ was not crucified in a vacuum. He was crucified in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover when the city was crowded with people. He was raised bodily from the dead. This was argued by Paul as a "legal matter."

For I deliver to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that *He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also* (1 Corinthians 15:3-8, emphasis added).

The portion in italics in the above quote is Paul's legal argument. *His defense is based on the evidence, borne witness to by the hundreds who saw the risen Lord.* The resurrection did not occur in a vacuum any more than did Christ's crucifixion. It was a public event. Not one to be repeated—a requirement of the

"scientific method." But it was a historic event observed by hundreds of people who could testify before a court of law as to what they had observed.

Proposition #5 **A "Christian Way of Thinking"** **Contrasts with "Relativistic Synthesis"**

The concluding section of the treatise will be devoted to two short illustrations (one general and one specific) which demonstrate: (1) the world's perspective on a business matter that is spoken of freely in the business literature; (2) how many Christian business persons and academicians synthesize the world's perspective with a superficial overlay of Scripture, thereby creating a "relativistic synthesis" that is materially in contradiction with other Scripture; and (3) how a *Christian way of thinking* should differ from that of "relativistic synthesis."

Illustration #1: **Business as a Profession**

The world's view of business. The field of business, both in the marketplace and the secular classroom, is generally assumed to function in a closed universe—God either does not exist or is uninterested in the daily activities of the marketplace. Mankind is the determiner of economic outcomes. The strong, powerful,

smart, wealthy, and influential people are the successful ones. Materialism is the unspoken goal—the people with the most “gold” are the winners. Personal fulfillment runs materialism a close race in importance, however. Everything is assumed to be relative. There are no moral absolutes, just cultural customs and mores. Right and wrong are personal matters, unless there is a law with lots of teeth. The natural laws regarding efficiency and productivity should be obeyed, unless of course you are strong enough to set them aside through a monopoly. There is no “accounting” to a higher authority. And all humans enter life with a “*tabula rasa*” mind which means they are neither disposed toward good nor bad and are all subject to being manipulated by their experiences and environment. Life is more akin to a cruel game than an existence with eternal meaning and purpose. After all, how could work have an eternal purpose? **The relativistic synthesis of nondiscerning Christians.** Do many Christians go to work on a daily basis with a conscious awareness of God’s presence with them and concern for all they do? *A few* do. Are many Christians conscious of God’s sovereign rule over all of life and thus relate their disappointments and successes in the marketplace to His absolute sovereign rule? Only

a few do. Do many Christians manage their stewardship responsibilities at home and at work very differently from those who make no profession of faith in Christ? Just *a few*. Do many Christians pay as much or more attention to God’s Word as they do the natural laws that seem to govern the marketplace? *A few* do. It seems to this observer that the majority of Christians have adopted the standards and philosophy of the world. Their “faith” seems to have been personalized, in an existential way—how they *feel* about the worship service and church they go to; how they *feel* about what is right and wrong; how they *feel* about their spouse; how they *feel* about their job; etc. They seem to be “relativistic, existential synthesizers.” More and more Christians seem to think and act very much like the world.⁹ **A mature Christian’s way of thinking.** “I have been crucified with Christ; and *it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me*; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me” (Galatians 2:20, emphasis added). This will be a living truth in the life of mature Christians. The Spirit of Christ is their eternal companion and they are conscious of His presence in all that they think and do. It is not a closed universe. God is

everywhere present and active. God is the determiner of economic outcomes, not mankind. He makes the rich, rich and the poor, poor (Deuteronomy 8:17-18; Proverbs 10:22; 1 Samuel 2:7-8; Job 1:21; 42:10). He raises nations up and puts them down. He does this through both His direct acts and the free choices and fallout of the “second causes”—mankind—which He rules over with perfect foreknowledge through His eternal decrees and providence (Isaiah 46:10-11; Acts 17:24-28; Matthew 10:29-31; Isaiah 10:5-7,12-16).

The *successful* people are not the strong, powerful, smart, wealthy and influential, but those who *truly know and understand the Lord God Almighty* (Jeremiah 9:23-24; Galatians 6:14). The goal of life is not materialism but to truly know God and to love and serve Him in all we do. It is not personal fulfillment that we are to search for, but our goal is to do the will of our Father

God is the determiner of economic outcomes, not mankind.

who is in heaven (Matthew 10:34-39; John 4:34; Luke 6:46-49; etc.). When we work, we work for the Lord, not men (Colossians 3:23; Ephesians 6:7). And things are not “relative” to the Lord. He is absolute in His every attribute—omniscience,

immutability, etc. There is right and wrong, and we, His children, can know it in the light of His Word (Psalms 18:28; 27:1; 36:9; 119:105, 130; Proverbs 6:23).

And we will all give a full “accounting” to our Creator of all that we have *thought and done* (1 Corinthians 4:5; Romans 14:10-12; 1 Peter 4:4-5; 2 Timothy 4:1). Life is not to be thought of as a search for personal fulfillment but as a response to the Living God, our Creator and Sustainer, who has told us what is good and what is required—we are “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God” (Micah 6:8). We are to die to ourselves and live for Him. We are to love Him with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and this will be accomplished as we follow and do His will *in every area of our lives*—family, work, and worship (John 14:21, 23;

15:4-6, 10).

This first illustration, “Business as a Profession,” has been intentionally

broad in scope. There are, however, numerous business discipline-related fields and subjects where specific illustrations could be brought forth to further identify the general problem we are exploring—“relativistic

synthesis.” For example: utility theory is value neutral; the consumer is “king”; the rational economic man is a reality; the consumer is “always right”; business growth is inherently good; we are to transform people’s wants into their needs; “puffery” in advertising is acceptable; participative management enhances decision-making effectiveness; profits are the most important purpose of business; debt is good; high credit card debt is good for the economy; child labor is always bad; leisure is preferable to work; personal fulfillment is the core purpose for working; international business is good; multiculturalism is best; “environmental rights” is a good thing; bluffing in negotiations is appropriate; etc. With this in mind, we will conclude the treatise with a specific example taken from the list just outlined.

Illustration # 2: The Principle of Participative Management

The world’s view of participative management.

Participative management, in one form or another, began its rise in popularity in the 1940s and 1950s. It began modestly enough as a “motivator” to increase the participants’ enthusiasm for their jobs—the employees were to think of things and ways to improve their own job performance. By the 1980s the

procedure had advanced to the establishment of “quality circles”—voluntary groups that met to identify, analyze, and solve quality-related problems.¹⁰

The more advanced rationale conceived of participative management as a means of enhancing group performance by stimulating creative thinking, identifying workable and unworkable alternatives, identifying new issues, and creating greater enthusiasm. Issues surrounding the practice involve deciding how much “decision-making authority” the group is to have as seen in light of: (a) a benevolent but autocratic manager, (b) a consultative manager, (c) a participative manager, or (d) a radically participative manager. And how much group agreement was expected—complete consensus or modest internal group disagreement? Then there are the problems of “group dynamics” that must be controlled, such as “groupthink” (reaching an agreement is more important to the group members than the soundness of the decision), “risk shift” (individuals have a greater willingness to accept risk in a group than they would as an individual), and “escalation of commitment” (the tendency of a group to continue a course of action long after they individually realize it has “had its day”).

Then there are group decision-making techniques to be considered. Should the group pursue a “brainstorming” method where the group seeks to generate a large number of ideas for later consideration? Or is the “synectics” process to be used where the members of the group attempt to “psychologically identify” with an idea, concept, or object that is central to their deliberations. And the “nominal grouping” technique is also popular where the discussion is structured and the final decision is selected by a *silent vote*. And finally, there is the “delphi” technique where other experts are consulted and the group participants seek to synthesize the input and decide upon an optimum solution of their own.¹¹ The process lives on dialectical synthesis.

The presuppositions underlying this management strategy are the same as those set forth in “Illustration #1: Business as a profession, The world’s view of business.” All of this takes place in a closed universe; mankind is the determiner of all economic outcomes; everything is relative; there is no accounting to a higher authority; etc.

The relativistic synthesis of nondiscerning Christians.

Christian academicians teach about participative management, and Christians in the marketplace take part in it. What do they teach

Serving the business rather than God is a trap that is all too easy to fall into.

or think that is different from what the world teaches and thinks? The *presuppositions* are not discussed in the marketplace, and rarely examined in the classroom.

Typically the Christian’s presuppositional thinking rests on the assumptions that teamwork is a good biblical principle (1 Corinthians 12:4-31; Ephesians 4:1, 3, 11-16) and that group thinking is simply a variation or form of “seeking counsel” which is a good thing to do (Proverbs 11:14; 15:22; 20:18). They may or may not think of the trade-off between the time wasted in group endeavors and the breadth of constructive ideas considered. The fact is that much compromise of one’s ideas and values may be involved also. It is all too easy to want to “get along” in the group and appear to be a team player for acceptance purposes. Serving the business rather than God is a trap that is all too easy to fall into.

A mature Christian’s way of thinking. At least five “caution flags” are raised in the closing paragraph in the section immediately preceding this one. They are:

- *Teamwork is a good biblical principle.* That is a true

statement when applied in the context of believers working together for a godly purpose. We need, however to teach *caution* to our students who are preparing to work in the marketplace. We need to warn our students of the dangers of close association with those who perceive reality very differently than we do. “What partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?” (2 Corinthians 6:14-15). It is amazing how many Christians *limit* the above reference to marriage—where it is applicable. But Paul makes no direct reference to marriage at all in the entire book of 2 Corinthians. Christians have, for the most part, “conveniently” ignored its *general application to every area of life*. Psalm 1:1, Proverbs 12:26, Romans 12:1-2 and other biblical references warn us to be on our guard as we navigate in the world.

- *Group thinking in participative management is a form of “seeking counsel.”* It is really more of a way of losing one’s identity and accountability in the world.

The manager who uses the group’s decisions as counsel is really acting as a “consultative manager” and not as a participative manager. The biggest danger is for anyone to overlook the reality that everyone is accountable to a higher authority (God) for every thought and act (1 Corinthians 4:5; Romans 14:12; 1 Peter 4:5). When a business practice (participative management) loses this essential ingredient of reality—individual accountability—it is hurtful to the endeavor of maturing people.

- *Compromise of one’s values may be required.* “Like a trampled spring and a polluted well is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked [any who do not trust in Christ]” (Proverbs 25:26). The lessening of one’s values is to allow darkness to replace light. We may compromise in many nonmoral areas of reality—certain methods, procedures, etc.—but in those areas that embody godly values we are not to be compromisers.
- *The desire for our acceptance by the group can lead to our engaging in inappropriate rationalizations.* Everyone desires acceptance by those with whom they work. Being

a member of a group can heighten the desire. This reality is clearly demonstrated in the Bible—"Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him [Jesus], but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God" (John 12:42-43). Are we preparing our students to face this temptation?

- *Serving the business can become so central to our concerns that we cease to serve Christ.* Idolatry is a major sin among Christians in the modern age. The profession of our allegiance to Christ is easy to give, but it is just as easy to fall into idolatry. God warns us of this. "I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:3). And, "let us lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith..." (Hebrews 12:1-2). The will of Christ must be our guide; the will of the

corporation must be examined in the light of Christ's will (consider Matthew 6:24).

Conclusion

When Christians synthesize the ideas and thoughts of the world with those of the Bible they will all too frequently create a form of relativistic synthesis. Christ is not a relativist, and those who possess His mind must guard it from the pollution of relativistic synthesis.

Christians have, in many significant ways, become so like the world that they have truly lost their capacity to be salt and light. They have become tasteless. They are therefore good for nothing. May we who teach Christian students earnestly seek Christ's mind with the help of the Holy Spirit, so we will not be guilty of practicing and teaching relativistic synthesis in the name of Christ.

ENDNOTES

¹Those interested in a thoroughgoing discussion of the critical importance of "presuppositions" in the human thought process, and the shaping influence of this on their epistemology, would benefit immensely from reading *A Christian Theory Of Knowledge* (1969) by Cornelius Van Til. This work is the expansion of a chapter, "The Christian Philosophy of Knowledge," which appeared in his book, *The Defense Of The Faith* (1955). These two works presuppose that the reader has some level of familiarity with his even earlier work, *Common Grace* (1947). All three books were published by the

Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., Phillipsburg, N.J.

²If one analyzes William K. Frankena's book, *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 2nd ed., 1973) it will be seen that in moral reasoning people always: (1) judge peoples' actions or character; (2) then they judge the acts and virtues as either "inherently good" (bad) or "consequentially good" (bad); (3) which is then followed by judging the inherent or consequential goodness by a set of "rules" or "non-rules" that are derived from commands, observations, situations, feelings, *agape*, etc.; and (4) finally these rules and non-rules can only be justified in the light of a person's *foundational, ontological beliefs*. People do not just move from level (1) to level (2), etc., but jump about from level to level randomly.

³In section three of the treatise, "The Presuppositions That Govern The Christian Way Of Thinking," the point is made that since all reality emanates from God, then Christians have before them the opportunity to *relate everything they encounter back to God*. This is at the heart of having a Christian world-and-life view.

⁴Gordon Clark, in his book, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1961), hammers out four concepts concerning the relationship between: (a) faith and reason; (b) faith without reason; (c) reason without faith (an impossible absurdity from Clark's perspective); and (d) reason and faith. He sides with Augustine who is the "father" of "faith and reason," and finds logical flaws in the arguments of Aquinas who is the "father" of "reason and faith." Aquinas' two best known works are: (1) *Summa contra Gentiles* (Against the Errors of the Infidels), a synthesis of philosophy—that of Aristotle's, primarily—and theology, and (2) *Summa Theologiae*. He believed the human intellect was only wounded in the fall rather than being absolutely dead to God. This resulted in the new doctrine of "partial depravity" and offered an alternative view to the Augustinian position of "total depravity." This opened the door to the proposition that reason could guide faith. This, in turn, is the door to neo-orthodox thinking as it establishes the primacy of the human intellect above the *special revelation* of God.

⁵W.T. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy: The Medieval Mind*, 2nd ed., (New York:

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1969, page 213).

⁶*Ibid.*, page 211.

⁷G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans., A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford Press, 1981 reprint, pages 1-57).

⁸See works like: (1) Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1968; (2) Richard C. Chewning, *Business Ethics In A Changing Culture* (Reston: Reston Publishing Co., Inc., a Prentice-Hall Company, 1984); and (3) David F. Wells, *No Place For Truth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994).

⁹Works like *Right From Wrong* by Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler discuss the research that shows a majority of church youth can no longer determine the difference between right and wrong (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1994). The article, "Not So Christian America" by Thomas C. Reeves in *FIRST THINGS* (October, 1996, pages 16-21) reveals the dichotomy described in this treatise. Overwhelmingly the public declares itself to be Christian, *as they understand themselves*, but "Still, the public tell pollsters (64 percent in 1991) that there are few moral absolutes. More people (43 percent) say they rely upon their personal experience instead of outside authorities [the Bible] when weighing issues of right and wrong. Only three persons in ten view Scripture as the ultimate authority in matters of truth" (p. 18). "Religious individualism seems to be at the core of American Christianity" (p. 19). "Christianity in modern America is, in large part, innocuous. It tends to be easy, upbeat, convenient, and compatible [with the world]. It does not require self-sacrifice, discipline, humility, an otherworldly outlook, a zeal for souls, a fear as well as love of God. There is little guilt and no punishment, and the payoff in heaven is virtually certain" (p. 21).

¹⁰G. Munchus, "Employer-Employee Based Quality Circles in Japan: Human Resource Implications for American Firms," *Academy of Management Review*, April, 1983, pp. 255-261.

¹¹Chapter 11 ("Group Decision Making," pp. 280-309) of Middlemist and Hitt's book, *Organizational Behavior: Managerial Strategies for Performance* (St. Paul: West Publishing Company, 1988) has a good review of these concepts.