

Problems Christians Have with Higher Education

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Abstract: Most of my academic colleagues testify to encountering various forms of anti-intellectualism in their churches and families—skepticism and at times outright opposition. This talk will explore why there is anti-intellectualism in Christian circles by examining some of the reasons and excuses Christians offer against higher education. It will highlight the many limitations of education. It will demonstrate how anti-intellectualism actually undercuts faith and a commitment to biblical truth and will close by offering ideas on ways churches can discourage anti-intellectualism while encouraging believers to think critically, to engage with the world of learning, and to develop a robust Christian worldview.

Most of my Christian colleagues in higher education have a deep sense of divine calling. They understand that they play an important role in spreading the Gospel and in serving the Body of Christ. But most of them also testify to encountering various forms of anti-intellectualism in their churches and families—skepticism and at times outright opposition.

While I was studying philosophy at the University of Kansas, I was attending a small Wesleyan church in the university town of Lawrence. When I was not studying, I was busy evangelizing and leading Bible studies with students. One Sunday morning at church, an older minister began talking about people who study at universities. I'm naïve and not very clever (and sometimes, I must confess, my mind wanders in church), so I thought he was just getting something off his chest. But as I began listening more closely, he said how shameful it was that people who are saved and filled with the Holy Spirit would think they needed education at a university. *"We don't need education. All we need is faith, prayer, and the Holy Spirit."*

We were a small church and I was the only full-time university student there that day. Gradually heads began turning, looking at me, since his little sermon was obviously aimed at me.

I again encountered this skepticism when I was heading for seminary in 1977. After I finished my five-year Bachelors of Theology degree, I was working in university campus ministry. As I shared Christ with university students, I met with stout opposition to Christianity and many questions about the credibility of the Bible and the claims of Christ.

At the same time I was studying philosophy at the University of Kansas which even at that time was known as one of the most liberal universities in the US. As I faced the vitriolic opposition to Christianity from my professors, along with the often-hostile questions from students, I realized I needed help. I needed more training in apologetics. So, after much prayer, I felt God was calling me to enroll at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School for their master's program in Philosophy of Religion. There I could be trained and mentored by outstanding godly scholars such as Norman Geisler, Paul Feinberg, Walter Kaiser, Harold O. J. Brown, John Woodbridge, Kenneth Kantzer, and others.

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My employment was with the mission department of my denomination. My director was a wonderful man of God and a dear friend. I loved and respected him deeply, as I do to this day. He came to me a few weeks before I was scheduled to move to Chicago, weeping. *“Please, Daryl, do not go to Trinity. I am afraid you will lose your passion for Christ and your zeal for evangelism at the seminary.”* The reason for his concern was that one of his wife’s relatives had gone to Trinity and gone off-track spiritually. So his fear was not baseless.

As I listened to his plea, I was deeply moved. *“I am so grateful for you and your concern and love for me. I really appreciate your honesty in sharing your burden and your concern with me. It means the world to me that you love me enough to confront me and to warn me. I am very fallible and I could easily be all wrong about this. I admit it. But if I know my heart, I know God is calling me to do this. I must go to seminary, but I will go prayerfully, asking God to please help me stay true to Him.”*

It turned out that my years at Trinity actually deepened my love for the Lord and for His Word. I have to admit that I have on occasion gotten off-track spiritually in the years since that conversation with my dear friend, but it was never the fault of my seminary training, but rather of my own fallen nature. Thankfully, once it was clear I was going to seminary, he was overwhelmingly generous in backing me in this endeavor, going far beyond the minimum to make sure I knew he was with me on this.)

I want to help those of us who are in education understand our calling better and to help us know how to respond Scripturally, graciously, and clearly to our brothers and sisters who are skeptical or even opposed to us studying or working in higher education.

First, we will look at some of the reasons Christians are skeptical about higher education. Then we will consider some of the excuses people give for their opposition to Christians in higher education. We will briefly review the many limitations of education. Then we will show how anti-intellectualism can actually be an attack on biblical faith and Christian truth. We will close by exploring what churches can do to discourage anti-intellectualism while encouraging a healthy engagement with scholarship.¹

Why Are Some Believers Skeptical About Christians in Higher Education?

Since most of us as academicians have encountered skepticism or opposition to our involvement with higher education, we need to honestly ask why this is? Are any of the concerns about education valid? If so, what can we learn from them and how can we respond biblically and graciously?

I am dividing these negative responses to education into two categories—reasons and excuses. Naturally my division is based on my own bias. But as I see it, reasons usually have some basis in truth or reality, whereas excuses are based on a misunderstanding of biblical principles or a misperception of reality.

¹ In another paper, *Why Christians Are Needed in Higher Education* I have made the case and presented reasons why Christians should be involved with education at every level. It is available on-line at <https://www.leadershipanvil.org/resources>.

The bottom line is that we need to know who we are in Christ and we need to clearly understand our calling. Once we know that, then we can serve Him humbly and graciously, even among those who may be suspicious of our work in higher education.

Reasons Christians Give for Their Opposition to Higher Education

Why are some believers suspicious of higher education? As it turns out, there are several understandable, if not, valid reasons for this suspicion.

1. Much of higher education around the world is opposed to a robust evangelical faith.

Everyone knows that some of the most hostile attacks against Christianity come from professors at secular universities. And even worse, historically, it is undeniable that many times the drift of the Church into liberal theology has come from professors at seminaries or Christian universities. (and sadly, this trend away from historic evangelical faith continues to this very day). There is a reason why, in many church circles, seminaries are jokingly called “cemeteries.” To say otherwise is to deny a well-established pattern which has been repeated many times in the history of the Church right up to the present.

2. Many Christians who pursued advanced education have walked away from their faith.

Years ago, I saw a longitudinal study in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* studied the religious beliefs of freshmen entering university and showed that in the US a significant percentage of Christian freshmen were no longer following Christ four years later when they graduated.² A major Barna study found that only 20% of people who were active Christians in their teens were still spiritually engaged (reading the Bible, praying, attending church) in their twenties.³ Numerous studies have documented this trend, with some showing even higher percentages—up to 90%--of young people leave their faith during their university years.⁴

² “Spirituality in Higher Education”: The Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. <https://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/findings/>. Accessed July 24, 2020.

³ “Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years,” Barna Group, September 11, 2006. <https://www.barna.com/research/most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years/>. Accessed July 24, 2020.

⁴ J. Warner Wallace, “Updated: Are Young People Really Leaving Christianity?” *Cold-Case Christianity* January 12, 2020. Wallace lists multiple studies with disturbing results: *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2007), “90% of youth active in high school church programs drop out of church by the time they are sophomores on college.” *Lifeway Research Study* (2007) indicates that of church young people, “70% will leave the faith in college. Only 35% eventually return. 7 in 10 Protestants ages 18 to 30 – both evangelical and mainline – who went to church regularly in high school said they quit attending by age 23.” An Assemblies of God study (2007) reports that “At least half and possibly over two-thirds of Christian young people will step away from the Christian faith while attending a non-Christian college or university.” An old study from Southern Baptist Convention Data (2001) showed “they are currently losing 70-88% of their youth after their freshman year in college.”

What a powerful reminder of a simple truth:

*University works—for better or for worse.
Lives are changed by education.*

3. Some Christians become proud and arrogant as they get more educated.

Scripture warns us that knowledge “puffs up,” that it can lead to pride. We can probably all identify with the old fellow who said some people were “educated beyond their intelligence.” All of us in higher education have seen far too many cases like this. That should definitely concern those of us in education and it should be a warning to us, beware of pride!

But, on the flip side, I have also met many people who were equally proud of their *lack* of education; they were proud of their ignorance. The bottom line is among us fallen human beings, there is plenty of pride to go around on either side of the education divide.

4. Sadly, some Christians in higher education give little evidence of a fervent love for Jesus.

Tragically, the spiritual health of too many evangelicals in the academy seems weak and little more than a cerebral knowledge of God. It is understandable when believers with less education assume that this lack of passion for Christ is the result of their advanced learning when that may or may not be the case. They assume that too much education took away the spiritual zeal of these educated believers.

Since 1990 I have been working with Christian academics in countries around the world and I am deeply saddened by much of what I have seen among far too many Christian educators and I too have had to repent many times for my own failure to represent Christ well in my role as an academic.

- Many Christian academics do not seem to have a sense of divine calling or an awareness that they are in the academy to bring glory to God.
- Many Christians in the academy do not think or live with a Christian worldview.
- Too few Christian professors are active in sharing Christ with other academics or with their students.
- Very few Christian scholars address contemporary issues in their nation, their community, their discipline, or in the Church from a Christian worldview with biblical principles.
- Often academics are cynical about the Church and are aloof and uninvolved with their local church.

5. Believers who are denied access to education during persecution sometimes develop an opposition to education.

Denial of admission for evangelicals to the university was commonplace under the Marxist governments in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam,

North Korea, and other countries. In some cases, there was widespread killing, not just of Christians, but of anyone with education.

When I visited the killing fields in Cambodia, they reminded us that the Communists executed everyone who wore glasses simply because they viewed glasses as the mark of an educated person. After enough years of this persecution, strangely enough, sometimes a bias against education spreads in the aftermath of such slaughter and restrictions.

After several years of denial of access to higher education (and sometimes to primary and secondary education as well), evangelical churches in Communist countries had few, if any, members with advanced degrees, with no possibility for higher education. The churches had to manage and adapt, and in the process, sometimes developed arguments against higher education. Maybe it was a defensive measure, I'm not sure, like an inoculation. But the reasoning went something like this, "*We've made it all these years without higher education. Why do we need it now?*" Or, "*If education was such a powerful tool of Communism, why should we even get close to it?*"

My colleagues in places like Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia have explained this to me quite forcibly out of their own experience. I believe this is part of the reason why anti-intellectualism became so common among evangelicals in some Christian circles in the Soviet Union, Central and Eastern Europe, China, and Southeast Asia.

Excuses for Opposition to Christians in Higher Education

I would consider all the objections I have given you so far to be reasons for opposition to higher education, because they all have some validity. But there are also excuses which Christians give for their opposition to higher education, which are not valid.

Excuse #1: "We don't need education. All we need is faith, prayer and the Holy Spirit."

Thankfully, when the preacher launched his diatribe against anyone who would study at a university, I knew in my heart of hearts that I had a clear purpose and yes, I would say, a mandate from God to be at the university. I was studying philosophy so I could be better equipped to share and defend the Gospel with lost students. So, while the old minister's diatribe was strange, it didn't deter me from my sense of calling to study and prepare.

But let's be clear. We definitely *always* need more faith, more prayer, and more of the Holy Spirit. A central tenet of the Gospel is salvation is by faith alone. *Sola fide* was one of the five great *Solas* of the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther was adamant that all the learning in the world will never replace faith and the Holy Spirit.

Paul and Luther were both scholars. Their lives remind us what this old minister was saying was a false dichotomy. It's not an either/or situation—*either* faith, prayer and the Holy Spirit, *or* education. Indeed, Luther's discovery that the Bible teaches justification by faith alone was birthed out of his years of painstaking scholarly research as a university professor, which was accompanied with intensive agonizing and praying. It was not one or the other; it was both/and for Martin Luther—and it is for us as well.

Os Guinness in his classic book against anti-intellectualism, entitled *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*, said. “Piety is essential, but it is not sufficient in itself. Truth, thinking, theology, and the place of the mind must be given the emphasis they deserve from followers of Christ.”⁵

In her research, Dr. Valerie Chernobay, **(right, with her twin sister Dr. Viktorija Hrytsenko to her left, who is also an academician)** one of my colleagues from Ukraine, found documents where the KGB sent agents posing as Christians into churches. The KGB agents told the Christians, “*If you have the Holy Spirit, then education is unnecessary and higher education is wrong.*” So the Communist Party did its own part to encourage anti-intellectualism in the Church.⁶



Thankfully, many Ukrainian evangelicals recognized this KGB line as a lie. While some denominations there still oppose higher education, at least one Pentecostal denomination not only voices their support for advanced education. They provide a stipend for Pentecostal members who want to study for their doctorate at the university.

Excuse #2: “Good Christians should not sully their minds with the thoughts and philosophies of the world.”

Usually this excuse is an attempt to quote Paul who admonishes us in Colossians 2:8 to not be taken in through “hollow and deceptive philosophy.” (NIV) But as Norman Geisler **(right)**, my philosophy professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, often reminded us, Paul doesn’t warn us against *any* attention to philosophy, but rather to not be taken in by *bad philosophy—hollow and deceptive philosophy*. And that is all the difference in the world.



To help believers and unbelievers alike not to be deceived by false teachings, someone needs to be trained in clearly identifying those bad philosophies and providing a response to them which was exactly why I enrolled in a philosophy of religion program and why apologetics is such an important ministry to this day.

Is there a danger in Christians studying the thinking and philosophy of the world in order to respond biblically? Yes, of course, there is, because it is poisonous and deceptive and Satan

⁵ Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Hourglass Books, 1994), 39.

⁶ From discussion with Valerie Chernobay at the Cambridge Scholars Network, July 2017.

delights to lure Christians into believing lies. But that danger is precisely why God calls some to specialize in apologetics. We are in a war for the souls and minds of men and women. The Bible never holds up safety or avoidance of risk as a proper value for us. J. Gresham Machen warned us that it is “far easier to be an earnest Christian if you confine your attention to the Bible and do not risk being led astray by the thought of the world.”⁷

“Shut yourself up in an intellectual monastery...and of course you will find it easier to be a Christian, just as it is easier to be a good soldier in comfortable winter quarters than it is on the field of battle. You save your own soul—but the Lord’s enemies remain in possession of the field. J. Gresham Machen

Excuse #3: “Why waste time on education when missions, evangelism, and church planting are the most urgent tasks of the Church?”

Another variation on this objection is, “How can you waste time getting a university degree when Jesus could come back at any minute?” How should godly students and academicians respond to this objection?

Christian academics definitely need to live with a passion for evangelism and mission. Sadly, far too many evangelicals in higher education have compartmentalized the categories of evangelism and missions and decided those tasks belong to other kinds of Christians, not to them. This is not mere conjecture on my part. Over many years of working to motivate evangelicals with PhDs to consider serving God by teaching at a university in another culture, an amazing number of them have directly told me, “Missions? That’s somebody else’s job. Not mine.”

Precisely because Jesus is returning soon, I need to be even more faithful to Him in the academy today.

So, I know from personal experience that we need a revival of evangelistic zeal and missional commitment among Christian academicians—I myself need such a revival. But having said that, we must realize that a burning desire to lead others to Christ is precisely an excellent motivation for investing time in higher education—not the only motivation certainly, but a worthy one. Higher education and a vision for evangelism, mission, and Jesus’ return are not mutually exclusive. Followers of Jesus should say, “*Because* Jesus is returning soon, I need to be even more faithful to Him in the academy. *Because* evangelism and spreading of the Gospel is so important, that is why I must be salt and light for Jesus in the university.”

⁷ J. Gresham Machen, *Education, Christianity, and the State* (Jefferson, Maryland: The Trinity Foundation, 1987), 53.

Our review of these negative responses about higher education should help us as Christian academics to acknowledge that it is understandable that some of our brothers and sisters harbor a suspicion, if not outright opposition, to higher education. Having said that, I believe these fears and excuses “should be seen as rightful cautions but not fatal objections.”⁸

The Limitations of Higher Education

It is tempting to over-react to anti-intellectualism and exaggerate the importance of education. But in order to be good advocates of Christians in higher education, we also need to readily admit the limitations of higher education. Surely these are obvious, but sometimes it is healthy to restate the obvious, and we will be brief about it. In doing this, I will refer primarily to my lifetime hero—my man—Martin Luther, who was himself an academician, a professor throughout most of his adult life and a tireless advocate of education at all levels, along with being a pastor and a reformer.

1. Education does not save us or make us righteous

Education certainly does not bring justification. That comes by faith alone. While we have a solid biblical basis for affirming the importance of advanced learning, it should never and can never take the place of saving faith.

Luther declared, “Not through thought, wisdom, and will does the faith of Christ arise in us, but through an incomprehensible and hidden operation of the Spirit, which is given by faith in Christ only at the hearing of the Word and without any other work of ours.” He goes on to say, “No one is taught through much reading and thinking. There is a much higher school where one learns God’s Word. One must go into the wilderness.”⁹



When he was lecturing in the US, a student asked the famous theologian Karl Barth if he could summarize his theology and life work in one sentence. He quickly responded, “Yes, I can. In the words of a song I learned at my mother’s knee: ‘Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.’”¹⁰ Christians in higher education dare not deceive themselves into thinking that by their much learning they are brought into a special dispensation of grace or holiness.

2. Education does not make us smarter.

⁸ Clifford Williams, *The Life of the Mind: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002), 61.

⁹ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand; a Life of Martin Luther*, Mentor Book published by The New American Library, tenth printing 1961 ed. (New York, Abingdon Press, 1950), 173-175 (Kindle Locations 3056-3059).

¹⁰ Roger E. Olson, “Did Karl Barth Really Say ‘Jesus Loves Me, This I Know...’” *Patheos* January 24, 2013. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/01/did-karl-barth-really-say-jesus-loves-me-this-i-know/>.

Education simply makes us more informed. Malcolm Muggeridge quipped, “We have educated ourselves into imbecility.”¹¹

3. Education does not make us wiser.

Education and facts and more degrees, sadly, do not bring wisdom. Luther was very clear about this. “Reason corrupted by the Devil is harmful..., but reason informed by the Spirit is a help in interpreting the Holy Scriptures....Reason is of service to faith when it is enlightened, since it reflects upon things, but without faith it is of no use.”¹²

“Reason informed by the Spirit is a help in interpreting the Holy Scriptures.” Martin Luther

4. We need more than education in our service for God.

Luther insisted that faith and prayer are necessary for understanding God’s Word. “The Bible cannot be mastered by study or talent.”¹³ He illustrated this by pointing out that even an exacting and scholarly task like translating the Bible “is not an art that everyone can practice....it requires a right pious, faithful, diligent, God-fearing, experienced, practiced heart.”¹⁴

A while back I was speaking to a group of academics in Vilnius, Lithuania on this subject. After I had passionately presented my case for why scholarship is vitally important in the work that God is doing in the world, Darius, my good friend who was my pastor when we lived in Vilnius, quietly asked, “But isn’t there a danger of putting too much emphasis on the mind and the intellect?”

And of course, his point was right on target. In responding to anti-intellectualism, we dare not over-correct to the other extreme. As Luther quipped centuries ago, we can easily fall off the horse on one side or the other.¹⁵ Just so, we can easily slip from anti-intellectualism to stressing the intellect so much we fall into elitism and overdependence on the intellect. John Stott expressed it well when he warned against “abandoning a superficial anti-intellectualism in favor of an arid hyper-intellectualism. I am not pleading for a dry, humorless, academic Christianity, but for a warm devotion set on fire by truth.”¹⁶

Let us never forget that while education is important, education alone is certainly not sufficient to make us truly and thoroughly Christian in our scholarship.

¹¹ Quoted by Ravi Zacharias in the introduction to *Can Man Live Without God?*

¹² E. Harris Harbison, *The Christian Scholar in the Age of the Reformation* (New York, : Scribner, 1956), 123.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 131, quoting Works of Martin Luther, ed Jacobs, V, 119.

¹⁵ Martin Luther said, “The world is like a drunken peasant. If one helps him into the saddle on one side, he will off on the other side.” *Works* 54:111, cited by Matthew C. Harrison, “Keep Us Sober and On the Horse,” *The Lutheran Witness* <https://witness.lcms.org/2016/keep-us-sober-and-on-the-horse/>. Accessed July 22, 2020.

¹⁶ John R. W. Stott, *Your Mind Matters; the Place of the Mind in the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 18.

5. Education without a relationship with God can be toxic.

Luther was always clear about the limitations of education. He made it clear that as important as education is, knowledge does not save a person. He wrote, "They are not the best Christians who are the most learned and abound in many books. For all their books and all their learning are the 'written code' and the death of the soul...in our age it is to be feared, that by the making of many books we develop very learned men but very unlearned Christians."¹⁷

6. God often uses uneducated men and women to do His good work.

My grandfather, Raymond Creighton McCarthy (1898-1972) **(right)**, was a farmer who never went beyond the eighth-grade in school. But day after day he read his Bible and studied his Adam Clarke's Bible commentary. Every time I would go to his house, without fail, his big Thompson Chain Reference Bible was open and alongside it, a worn-out copy of one of the six volumes of the timeless Clarke's commentary. He was always preparing to teach his Sunday school class, but you quickly saw he read and studied out of sheer love for God and His Word. Even with his limited education, he had a deep grasp of Scripture and he truly lived it out better than I ever have with my degrees in philosophy and theology. Not that he disparaged education in any way, but he was the model of a truly learned and godly man who never earned a single degree.



Similarly, my father **(right)**, also a farmer, who did finish secondary school, had an insatiable appetite for the Word. I would often find him in the milk barn, in between tasks, reading his Bible. He had large passages of Scripture memorized. Sometimes we would play a game where we would read the first words of a chapter. He could usually tell us where the passage was and could often finish reciting much of the passage.



Education is definitely a helpful tool for equipping us to serve God, but let us not overstate the importance of our calling to scholarship by implying that education is a *necessary* condition for serving God in a significant way. God's work does not need elitists who presume that their calling to scholarship is the best calling for all believers or who look with contempt or disdain on their less-educated (but possibly wiser) brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ.

Conclusion. We simply affirm that education is a valuable and strategic tool for bringing glory to God and expanding His Kingdom. We embrace our calling as the one which God has given us as members of the Body of Christ. Thankfully, the Body of Christ is not one big brain, with

¹⁷ Marilyn J. Harran, *Luther and Learning : The Wittenberg University Luther Symposium* (Selinsgrove, New Jersey, and London: Susquehanna University Press; Associated University Presses, 1985), 16.

no hands to serve, no feet to go, no heart to feel, no eyes to see, or no ears to hear—but a whole body in which every part is important and needed by one another.

Pausing for Reflection and Discussion

1. Have you ever encountered skepticism or opposition from another believer about your involvement in higher education? If so, how did you respond?
2. Have you known anyone who grew cold in their faith while they studying at a secular university? If so, what lessons might you learn from how they were influenced by their education?
3. Why do you think we are tempted to become proud because of our education?
4. How can we keep a balanced perspective on faith, prayer, and dependence on the Holy Spirit when we are engaged with higher education?
5. Explain why education is a helpful tool but insufficient in and of itself to equip us for effective Christian service.

Responding to Anti-intellectualism in the Church

How then should we respond to anti-intellectualism among our brothers and sisters in the Church?

We began by considering some of the reasons we should be cautious about education since it comes with certain inherent risks. But does not every vocation come with certain inherent risks? We can easily make an idol out of any pursuit, profession, or vocation—or any gift from God for that matter—until it warps our vision of God and of truth.

Furthermore, we acknowledge that some of our brothers and sisters are responding out of a misguided but worthy protectiveness of the Church or out of fear based on bad experiences.

We dare not be naïve or blind to our vulnerabilities, but neither dare we retreat into a cozy cocoon out of fear, clinging to the safety blanket of a Sunday school understanding of our faith without daring to learn and use our minds and advance into a lost world with the boldness and confidence that comes with the knowledge that we are serving the living God and are filled with the Holy Spirit of that God who not only created all things, but Who holds all things together and Who is in the process of reconciling all things to Himself.

The ultimate issue is that the Bible commands us to love God with our minds and to use our minds to learn about His Word and about His world.

We are called to be a part of God’s work in the world, including His work in halls of learning. Is it risky and dangerous? Absolutely, but it may well be the very place to which God has called you.

Satan, the arch enemy of the Church and of our souls, is exceptionally wily and deceptive. One of the stark reminders of that is that many well-meaning believers who are honestly seeking to serve God and hold on to the Bible and truth, unwittingly betray the cause of God and truth with their stance of anti-intellectualism. We saw this in our look earlier at some of the excuses for anti-intellectualism.

Dangers Lurking Under a Guise of Piety

How does this happen? We need only take a moment to scratch beneath the surface of the opposition to education to see how Satan's tactics work, regardless of how pious the protestations against education may sound. Even with all the dangers of pride and the risks of over-emphasis on education, anti-intellectualism poses a serious threat to biblical faith.

- **Denial of Christ's Lordship.** Anti-intellectualism often postures as being more dependent on the Holy Spirit and prayer. But in practice it may actually be a surreptitious and even unwitting denial of the comprehensive lordship of Christ. Why? Because it fails to acknowledge that Christ's lordship is cosmic and all-encompassing over every square inch of the creation and not simply over the spirit realm (Cf. Colossians 1:15-23). The gnosticism which promotes this sacred/secular dichotomy is an intrinsic part of most versions of anti-intellectualism. It is heretical because it fails to declare Christ's lordship over the life of the mind and the world of education.¹⁸
- **Denial of objective truth.** The denigration of the mind is a key part of Satan's attack on truth and on the Gospel itself. In an odd twist, anti-intellectualism buys into the core post-modern teaching that truth is more determined by how we feel and what we experience, than by the objective and propositional Word of God. Anti-intellectualism sounds pious, but it easily drifts into a deconstructionist denial that God is the God of objective truth that can be known and that His Truth can be stated in propositional terms. To be sure, there is far more about God than can be expressed in propositional terms, but much of what God has communicated to us about Himself can be and has been expressed propositionally.

Anti-intellectualism sounds pious, but it easily drifts into a deconstructionist denial that God is the God of objective truth that can be known and that His Truth can be stated in propositional terms.

- **Denigration of the mind God created.** When objective truth is sidelined by an exclusive focus on emotions and spirit, this is a denigration of the mind which God created as an essential and major part of what makes us human, a critical sign that we bear the *imago Dei*.
- **Diminishing of our God-created nature.** A classic sign of anti-intellectualism in Christian circles is a low view of the importance of the mind and education. This comes with statements like, "Don't ask questions. Just believe." "Don't bother with advanced degrees because the more you learn, the more likely you are to lose your faith." One of Satan's favorite ploys is to get Christians to emphasize the soul or the spirit to the neglect of the body and mind. This is why dualistic gnosticism seems to rear its ugly head in nearly every generation in a new and different way. The depreciation of the importance of the mind is one key way Satan seeks to diminish the way God created each one of us as a human being, a whole person with a mind, as well as a soul, a will, a spirit, emotions, and a body.

¹⁸ In his classic book, *The Christian Mind*, Harry Blamires makes this point in a chapter entitled, "The Surrender to Secularism." He points out that anti-intellectualism with its opposition to learning and education is itself a surrender to secularism by its implicit denial that Christ is the Lord of all things.

- **False dichotomy.** Many evangelicals have been faced with a supposed dilemma: “Since saving souls is the ultimate task of the Church, how dare we waste time on education?” But this is a false dichotomy. We do not have to choose between the two. Rather we must affirm both. Precisely because evangelism is crucial, education is strategic. We spread the Gospel most effectively when we understand how true the Bible really is. If we are serious about evangelizing, then the Church must be serious about education—education at all levels—primary, secondary, and tertiary education.
- **Leaves the Church vulnerable.** Anti-intellectualism is yet another attack from Satan on God’s people, because if we do not equip believers to think critically and to respond to attacks on their faith, we leave the Church defenseless and vulnerable to Satan’s assault. As C. S. Lewis wisely warned us, “To be ignorant and simple now—not to be able to meet the enemies on their own ground—would be to throw down our weapons, and to betray our uneducated brethren who have, under God, no defence but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen.” (“Learning in War-Time, 48) We are seeing the result of the Church being unprepared to defend the Gospel and unable to think critically with the current sweep of theological and political liberalism through the churches of North America and Europe.

We Believe in the Value of Christ-centered Scholarship

Another way we can respond to anti-intellectualism in the Church is through affirming what the Bible and history tell us.

1. God created the mind and gave us a thirst to learn.
2. God commands us to seek wisdom and knowledge.
3. In the Bible we have precedent for engaging the academy.
4. Ideas have consequences.
5. We want all of life to be shaped by Christ and His Lordship.
6. Christians need to understand the Bible.
7. We believe in missions and evangelism and we spread the Gospel most effectively when we understand how true the Bible really is.
8. The church must be protected against heresy and false teaching.
9. Truth is objective and real and can be known with our minds by the Holy Spirit’s help.
10. The world of higher education must be reached with the Gospel.
11. Throughout history, God has used scholars to play a key role in His work.¹⁹

Pausing for Reflection and Discussion

1. How would you respond to a Christian who insists that the mind is not important, that it is only the soul or the heart that matters?
2. How would you respond to someone who says that spending time in higher education is a waste of time since saving souls, preaching the Gospel, and planting churches is the only mission of the Church?
3. It is popular to say that truth is not propositional but personal. How would you respond to that?

¹⁹ This is an outline of the material presented in my paper, *Why Christians Are Needed in Higher Education*. It is available on-line at <https://www.leadershipanvil.org/resources>.

What Can Churches Do to Encourage Christians in Higher Education and the Life of the Mind?

Because this article is about problems, much of my focus has been fairly negative. After all, problems do tend to be negative. But once we acknowledge that many individual believers as well as churches have not thought biblically regarding higher education, we need to identify what can be done to correct this problem. How can churches do a better job in providing an atmosphere which is not only hospitable, but edifying encouraging for Christians involved with higher education?

Over the years Teri and I have been blessed to see a number of churches who do it right. Let's briefly review some specific actions which churches can take to encourage believers to think critically, to value the life of the mind, to engage with the world of learning, and to develop a robust Christian worldview.

1. **Acknowledgement.** Churches should have an annual event in which they recognize the importance of education.

Teri and I saw this modeled best by our home church, Vilnius Evangelical Church, in Vilnius, Lithuania. In post-Soviet nations, September 1 is a national holiday, National Education Day. Schools at every level host joyous ceremonies, complete with speeches and celebrations. Everyone dresses up. Our university, Lithuania University of Education, always hosted a concert that evening. And at church on the Sunday closest to September 1, the church celebrated education as well. Our pastor would first call on the primary students forward and pray over them, followed by the secondary students, and then the tertiary level students. Then he would call on the primary and secondary teachers and workers forward for a special prayer of dedication. Finally, he would call the tertiary level students forward, and finally he would invite lecturers and professors forward and pray over them. He dedicated all the educators to the sacred work of teaching and research and reminded them that they were serving God in their educational institution.

Churches around the world would do well to follow the Lithuanian example. Such a ceremony is a reminder that anti-intellectualism has no place among believers, that we honor educators as doing God's work. God has given us minds to use and educators are called by God to teach and do research.

2. **Support.** Churches which are blessed with more financial resources could provide regular stipends for postgraduate students who are working on their masters or doctorate degrees. Often the financial pressures on such students are intense and even a modest level of support would provide encouragement and affirmation from the church, but help relieve the pressure as well.

Earlier I mentioned my colleague, Dr. Chernobay, whose research showed how the KGB tried to sow anti-intellectualism among evangelical believers during the Soviet occupation of Ukraine. Thankfully, many Ukrainian evangelicals recognized this KGB line as a lie. While some denominations there still oppose higher education, at least one Pentecostal denomination not only voices their support for advanced education. They offer a stipend for Pentecostal members who qualify who want to study for their doctorate at the university.

This sends a powerful message to young people who otherwise might be tempted to see the Church as anti-education, and thus be more susceptible to the lies of the Enemy that they should not ask questions or explore the apologetical evidences for their faith.

- Platform.** Churches should recognize the ready resource which many Christian academicians and postgraduate students provide for their local congregation. Being involved in higher education means you develop knowledge and perspective on particular issues and areas of knowledge. Why not invite mature individuals who are engaged in higher education to give special talks, to teach Sunday school classes, or maybe even to give an occasional sermon on a topic they have researched?

Naturally, each one must be vetted appropriately, because as we discussed earlier, tragically many people go off track spiritually during their advanced education. Also many such speakers will probably need to be coached on “putting the cookies on the bottom shelf,” as my professor Norm Geisler used to tell me. They need to understand the difference between an academic audience and a “popular” audience made up of people from various levels of education. While academicians should never talk down to anyone, they do need to develop the skill of explaining complex ideas in simpler language, though without dumbing it down. They need to understand how to connect their academic perspective with a non-academic perspective and make the subject understandable.

These talks could be as simple as “A Christian Perspective on ____.” The topic could be apologetics, theological issues, the reliability and inspiration of the Bible, developing a Christian worldview, secularism, the media, political issues, homosexuality, same-sex marriage, racism, capitalism, Marxism, critical thinking skills, great Christians throughout church history, the expansion of the world Christian movement, a history of missions, the fate of those who have never heard the Gospel, great books of literature, Christian classics, famous Christians, and the list goes on.

Churches can sponsor one- or two-day conferences featuring special speakers, panels made up of academicians and postgraduates in their church, and other special presentation. (The Leadership Anvil is happy to suggest speakers for such events.) These conferences could focus on apologetics, a Christian worldview, or key social or cultural issues facing believers today.

Years ago our home church asked Teri and me to teach a course on Christian classics. We called our class, “Running with the Big Dogs—Learning from Christian Classics.”

Each year as part of their annual meeting the Evangelical Philosophical Society (www.epsociety.org) provides a conference hosted by a local church in whatever city they are meeting in. Such conferences send a powerful message to believers as well as to unbelievers that Christians do not have to be afraid of using their minds.

Some of these events could be framed especially for unbelievers to provide an intellectual event to which believers could bring friends who are skeptical about the Christian message.

- Learning.** Tragically, many churches discourage students from asking questions about

their faith. “Just believe and you’ll get over it,” seems to be the ruling mantra. To the contrary, churches should be the first place students run when they have honest questions about the faith. The church should be a safe place for questions, for working through how we know the Bible is what it claims to be—the Word of God; how we know Jesus is God incarnate in the flesh; how we know God is the Designer and Creator of everything that exists.

Churches with university students should regularly host events especially for the students. These events can be more academic in nature and could feature a presentation by a Christian academician. Hosting regular times for discussion about issues they are confronting in their studies is a good way to encourage and equip students. (The hundreds of videos available free of charge through www.foclonline.org provide excellent resources on a wide range of topics for such meetings.)

Several years ago Teri made the point that university students actually comprise an unreached people group. Worldwide they share a similar culture, a similar outlook, and to some degree even a similar language. This is even more true in our globalized world. Churches must seize the opportunity to equip the students and educators in their congregation to serve God and to stand boldly for Christ in the hostile atmosphere of the university. Churches which are near a university must also plan carefully ways they can encourage and equip Christian students and ways they can present Christ’s claims to students who are unbelievers.

Conclusion

Sometime ago my friend and colleague, Dr. David Bjork, sent me an email in which he talked about what he called “the sanctification of the mind.” He told me about a book he was reading, *Invitation to the Talmud* by Jacob Neusner (1932-2016), a scholar on Judaic thought. Neusner reflected on the way rabbis viewed “practical and critical thinking as holy.”

He went on to say that rabbis “were able to claim sainthood in behalf of learned men, to see as religiously significant, indeed as sanctified, what the modern intellectual perceives as the very instrument of secularity: the capacity to think critically and to reason. Here is the mystery of Talmudic Judaism: the alien and remote conviction that the intellect is an instrument not of unbelief and desacralization but of sanctification.” He discussed how we can “serve God through the life of the mind?” and how “the exercise of the mind, and not the suspension of its function, [is] a sacred act.”²⁰ God “taught the Torah to Moses.” (xiii) This shows how important logic and propositional truth and the mind are to God.

Naturally, there are many Christians for whom this would be strange language. We are living in a world where the life of the mind and thinking is not particularly popular. Just as there are strains of anti-intellectualism in the culture at large, there are definitely segments of evangelicalism where anti-intellectualism is alive. The challenge then is how do we respond in a way that honors our brothers and sisters in Christ who are negative about higher education, while at the same time we humbly and earnestly seek to honor God in our academic work. How do we, as Neusner puts it, “serve God through the life of the mind?”

²⁰ Jacob Neusner, *Invitation to the Talmud: A Teaching Book* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2003), xxii, xxvii.

We can begin by recognizing that God is calling us to use our intellects as believers to respond to the massive attacks on Christ and His Word. We must be faithful. We must use every weapon at our disposal, including our intellectual weapons. We dare not retreat from the battlefield of ideas and worldviews simply because of fears or our sense of inadequacy.

The challenge is even greater because of all the forces within the Church and outside of it as well which conspire to dull the minds of believers, to lull us to sleep, and to focus on feelings and entertainment instead of deep and critical thinking about the Word and about the issues facing us today. There is abundant research which shows that our constant exposure to digital media is changing the way we think. Viewing a screen for hours a day versus reading words on the pages of a printed book actually effects a neurological change.²¹

No surprise, nearly everyone around us—not just in the Church—is struggling with the decreasing ability to read lengthy or complex pieces. Critical thinking is for most people a lost art. Our ability to define, to analyze, or to critique is nearly gone. This is a problem for the culture around us, but it is most definitely a problem for us as believers who serve a God who communicates in words. God communicates in many ways but at the heart of His communication we find propositional statements. We find a Book—a Holy Bible.

While the Gospel is simple—so simple an eight-year-old boy like me in 1959 could understand it, it is also deep. It is profound. Interpreting and understanding some parts of the Bible and then applying it to today is often difficult and requires study, reflection, discussion, and thought.

Here is the bottom-line. Never has the Church been more in need of men and women who can reason logically, think critically, and reflect profoundly, who can drink from the deep fountains of saints and thinkers of past ages and ponder the great thoughts they have passed down to us, who can muse and ruminate, (and yes, I will use this outmoded word) who can cogitate—think seriously at length, brothers and sisters who are wise, sagacious, intelligent, well-informed, discerning, perceptive. In other words we need men and women who have been transformed by the renewing of their minds, who are clear thinkers, with sanctified imaginations, who are willing to put in the hard work of laboring over difficult ideas and concepts. We need believers who, as Neusner said, affirm that “the intellect is an instrument not of unbelief and desacralization but of sanctification.”

It makes sense that some of the thinkers the world and the Church are desperately in need of will be Christian academics—individuals who have surrendered their lives to the Creator-Lord of the universe who then spend their lives reading and listening and wrestling with ideas who then can distill and clarify and communicate these ideas to their brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ.

We understand and have reckoned the limitations of education and its risks. We accept the reasons why some fellow-believers will always be skeptical about education. We can respond graciously but firmly to the anti-intellectualism in our circles which would detract from God’s creation or the power of propositional truth. But our focus is on serving the Body by thinking critically, praying fervently, caring deeply, and communicating clearly. Let us be faithful to

²¹ Nicholas G. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton, 2011).

our Master even when others might question our calling. Using your mind for the glory of God is, as Neusner reminded us, “a sacred act.”

Recommended Reading on Christians and Higher Education

Guinness, Os. *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It*. Grand Rapids: Hourglass Books, 1994. This book provides a clear diagnosis and biblical plan for responding to the anti-intellectualism of many Christians.

Malik, Charles. *The Two Tasks*. Westchester, Illinois: Crossways Books, 1980. A classic and brief address on the two central tasks of the Christian—saving the soul and saving the mind.

McCarthy, Daryl. *Why Christians Are Needed in Higher Education*. 2020. Available on-line at <https://www.leadershipanvil.org/resources>.

Moreland, J. P. *Love Your God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul*. 2nd ed. Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2012.

Noll, Mark A. *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011. 180 pp. Excellent introduction to the importance of scholarship for the Christian life and insights into how to do our scholarship Christianly.

Stott, John R. W. *Your Mind Matters; the Place of the Mind in the Christian Life*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1973. 64 pp. Brief but powerful case on the Christian’s use of the mind.

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