InterVarsity Christian Fellowship conference
"Following Christ: Shaping Our World"
Dec 29, 1998 – Jan 2, 1999

Shaping Our Inner World

December 31, 1998
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In some of the materials prepared by the Intervarsity staff leading up to this conference it is stated that "Scholars such as George Marsden, Mark Noll, Mark Schwen and others have described a vast gulf separating Christianity from the intellectual and ideological life of North American culture, and particularly from North American higher education. This gulf has contributed to a profound gap between the personal life of Christian scholars and professionals and the intellectual work that they perform. These Christians lack a vital community working together to bring the mind of Christ into the pressing ethical and ideological debates that shape our academic disciplines."

Mark Noll is quoted as saying that "Modern American Evangelicals...have largely abandoned the universities, the arts, and the other realms of 'high culture.'"

The language continues: "This void in the public square is echoed by a deeply personal one in the lives of graduate and professional students pursuing advanced degrees. Without a vital community of peers to challenge and encourage them, many Christian graduate and professional students experience isolation and loneliness. And when their academic life becomes sharply separated from their spiritual pursuits, their Christian faith is at risk."

The deep division in life which these statements call attention to has to do precisely with what is treated as knowledge in our culture. We must not mislead ourselves. The problem which this conference is to address is not something peripheral to the academic and intellectual situation of our day. IT HAS TO DO WITH THE COURSE CONTENT THAT IS REGARDED AS ACCEPTABLE IN OUR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES AND WITH WHAT IS REGARDED AS ACCEPTABLE RESEARCH PROGRAMS AND METHODS.

For two or more centuries Christianity has been on the defensive intellectually, and is deemed by many to have lost, so far as knowledge is concerned. Max Müller's comment in 1978 was that every day it is announced from the most widely read journals "that the time for religion is past, that faith is a hallucination or an infantile disease, that the gods have at last been found out and exploded." (Quoted from Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World*,[1] p. 2). Allen goes on to state that "Subject after subject is studied in our universities without reference to God, so that anyone educated outside church schools or colleges, is given the impression that religious questions are not among the fundamental questions which any person who uses his or her head has to confront sooner or later." (p. 3)

[1] Allen,D. (1989). *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

My way of putting the issue is to point out that there is not a single field of thought or practice in our world today where knowledge of God is regarded as essential to competence. (You might think that ministry would be an exception, but this is not so in all generality. In some quarters it is a qualification for ministry that you maintain knowledge of God to be impossible.)

The condition which the language of the Intervarsity staff describes so well is not just an external reality. It is a state of our individual and collective souls. It is a condition of our inner world. I agree with David Gill, in his language quoted on the front of the brochure advertising this conference, when he says, "I am thoroughly convinced that it is not only biblically mandated but really possible for Christians studying in secular universities and working in a pluralistic world to develop unified Christian perspectives on their fields (note: on their fields) — and then to THINK, WORK AND LIVE as veritable salt and light in the midst of that world." (Quoted from *The Opening of the Christian Mind*.[2])

Yes, it is "really possible." But we must understand that this can only be done by transforming the inner life of Christians themselves: their vision of God, reality and themselves, their feelings and emotions, even their bodily habits. We must actually be a new humanity in the likeness of Jesus Christ. And this, in turn, can only happen through an intelligent and unqualified discipleship, apprenticeship to Jesus Christ in every area of our lives, and especially in the fields of thought and practice that each of us profess.

Some while ago I was at a Christian college to lead a faculty retreat at the opening of the Fall semester. I wondered, "What would Jesus say to you if he were here in my place?" And I believe I was prompted to ask the faculty there, on his behalf: "Why do you not respect me in your fields of expertise?" Most of them were, I believe, rather stunned at the thought that Jesus would be placed in the context of their professional work. He does not appear on that horizon. They were formed in a context of graduate and professional programs where nothing was thought to be more irrelevant to their work than God and Jesus Christ. Their vision of their subject matter was atheistic by default. How then could they be disciples of Jesus, workers for God, while practicing their expertise? No way! That is our habit, not something we can blame on our environment.

At the foundation of the disconnection between our lives and our professed religion lies—

1. A vision of Reality as impersonal, random, pointless — "particles and progress." In contrast to a universe that is ultimately Trinitarian, personal, purposeful — The Kingdom of God.
2. The position of Jesus as:
   Irrelevant to actual life, only eschatological or social/political at most.
   The Glorious Accident: Understanding Our Place in the Cosmic Puzzle.[3]
   In contrast to a Jesus who is Master of the cosmos.
   The most intelligent man who ever lived on earth.
   Totally competent in every field.

[2] Gill, D. (1989). *The Opening of the Christian Mind*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
[3] Kayzer, W. et.al. (1999). *The Glorious Accident: Understanding Our Place in the Cosmic Puzzle*, New York, NY: W. H. Freeman & Co.

The way back:

1. To understand the central content of Christian teaching as a TRADITION OF KNOWLEDGE.
   The 'Apostle's Creed'-- "*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, Was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into hell; The third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy Catholic church, the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting.*"

   C.S. Lewis, "Mere Christianity"

2. Understand that nothing has been "found out" that refutes this as a knowledge tradition.
   - An 'atmosphere' has been established.
   - The Noah Porter/William Graham Sumner story. (Marsden)
   - Decision, not discovery.
   - The Brideshead Revisited quote.
   - The discredited idols: Darwin (as cosmic), Marx, Freud, Nietzsche.
   - Science cannot explain existence:
     a. Initial conditions
     b. The laws themselves
   - At most, science can establish an ultimate mystery.

3. To apply the Christian knowledge tradition to the moral life.
   - There is a life in the power of God that works.
   - The fallacy of "do the right thing."
   - The primacy of inner character.
     - Beyond the righteousness of the Scribes and the Pharisees.
     - I Corinthians 13.

4. To plan effectively on an eternal life for ourselves.
   - The open secret of the spiritual disciplines.
   - To offer it to others in all love and fairness.