

## Darkness of Mind

by Ray C. Stedman

What a baffling and confusing world we live in today. So many conflicting ideas and concepts are thrust upon us from every direction and many of them seem directly contradictory. Authorities of equal repute tell us one thing and then another and what they say clashes violently. It is hard to know what to believe today. In the last few weeks people have said to me:

- “I don’t know what to believe about Vietnam. I don’t know what is going on out there, or what kind of a position to take on it.”
- Others say, “I don’t know what to make of civil rights, and this civil rights program. I don’t know what position to take. There seems to be two sides to this.”
- Others say, “We don’t know what to believe about the present political outlook and our present administration.”
- Others are concerned about the philosophy of education of our day, the matter of training children, or the great and pressing issue of sliding moral standards which is brought before us so frequently today.

Who knows what to believe? Listen to all the voices around and you will come up with many kinds of conflicting philosophies. No wonder that many are confused and ready to follow any voice that seems to offer a way out.

Now, to a Christian living in this confusing, baffling, bewildering world, the Apostle Paul has a very definite word to say. It is not another vague, uncertain word of advice, simply another of the voices on every hand today, but it is clear and pre-

cise and right to the point of the problem that you and I are facing.

In the opening verses of the 4th chapter of Ephesians, the apostle has been dealing with the nature of the church and the part each Christian has to play in its operation and its growth. But now, with Verse 17, he turns to the Christian in relationship to an unbelieving world, a world in which that Christian must live. Though this account was written almost two thousand years ago, it is impossible to read this thoughtfully without seeing that the world today is exactly the same, and the Christian’s reaction to it must be exactly the same.

Following Paul’s usual pattern in presenting a subject, he begins with a general statement, then breaks it down into a more analytical study of the various aspects of the statement he has made. Here is the general statement, in Verse 17:

**Now this I affirm and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds; {Eph 4:17 RSV}**

Notice the force of that exhortation. The apostle says “I affirm and testify in the Lord.” That means this is not merely a piece of apostolic advice. This is not simple human reasoning, this is a result of divine revelation. This is part of that whole revelation of the mind of God that was given to the Apostle Paul in what he calls “visions and revelations of the Lord” {2 Cor 12:1}, when the Lord Jesus himself appeared to him and instructed him as to the message he should give to the church of his day, and, through it, to the church of our day as well.

This then is not mere human advice. Paul says, “I testify and affirm in the Lord that this is what must be done.” This is the finger of God placed squarely at the root of a human problem.

Well, what is it he says? He says, “You Christians must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.” It would perhaps be helpful to translate the word *Gentiles* here by the word *nations*. It is often translated that way elsewhere in Scripture and is the same word. It simply means “the nations,” worldlings, those outside of Christ. This has no reference to the distinction between Jews and Gentiles, it refers to anyone who is outside of Christ. “You Christians,” he says, “must no longer live as they do.” How is that? “In the futility of their minds.” Paul is saying, “The place to start in living as a Christian is to recognize you must think differently than the world does.” Notice, he does not start with actions. He is not one of these do-gooders who moves in and tries to change the outward scene only. He starts with the thought-life, with the mind, and he declares that the world’s thinking is futile, i.e., empty. This is the vital appeal that he makes to Christians, “You must not think like the worldling does, you must not adopt the world’s philosophy of living, or follow the world’s systems of value.” Why? “Because the worldling,” he says, “lives in futility, emptiness of mind.”

The word for *futility*, in the original Greek, means “void of purpose or appropriateness,” i.e., pointless. Phillips, in his modern paraphrase puts it very accurately and beautifully: “Do not live as the gentiles live. For they live blindfold in a world of illusion,” {Eph 4:17b-18a J. B. Phillips}. The New English Bible says, “Give up living like pagans, with their good-for-nothing notions,” {Eph 4:18a NEB}. That is exactly it, “good for nothing.” Impressive, perhaps, clever, oftentimes startling, provocative, but pointless! The world in its thinking is pointless.

If this is true you can see why there is such a fundamental cleavage between Christianity and the world, and why the Lord Jesus drew a distinct line of demarcation between the thinking of the world, the direction of the world, the destiny of the world, and those of the Christian. This is why the Christian is told he cannot love the world and the Father at the same time. John makes that crystal clear in his first letter {cf, 1 Jn 2:15}. There is a fundamental difference between the two. This is why “friendship with the world,” in the words of James, “is enmity with God,” {cf, Jas 4:4 KJV}. Notice, not friendship with *the worldling*, that is something different, but friendship with *the world*, with its

ways of thinking, its philosophy. That is enmity with God.

Now this needs to be made very clear, because it is a very important distinction. As we all know, fallen man prides himself on his ability to reason. We consider this the highest function of humanity and take great pride in the ability of man to ferret out knowledge and to put various items of knowledge together to produce very practical gadgets. We point with pride to the technological perfection of our modern developments, to the skill with which science has harnessed the forces of nature and made them the servants of man. Man exalts his reason, but the writers of Scripture universally agree, though all this may be very impressive, clever, and remarkable in the eyes of men, in the eyes of God the reasoning of man is pointless, empty, vain. As the Lord Jesus himself put it, “What is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God,” {cf, Luke 16:15 KJV}. Now that is putting it very strongly, is it not? That is speaking plainly.

But see how the apostle brings Christians face to face with the fundamental issue? We must face this very squarely. Either God is right or the world is right, one or the other. It cannot be both. The Christian must choose on which basis he is going to live his life. If he is to follow Christ, he must be willing to have his thinking changed. When you become a Christian this is the first issue you face. You must be willing to have your whole fundamental outlook on life drastically altered. Christianity is not merely a change in outward actions, a bit higher moral or ethical level. Christianity is a revolutionary change of government which results in a radical change in behavior. Paul certainly brings this out very plainly here.

Now he moves on to analyze more closely this problem of faulty thinking. What makes human thinking so pointless, so without ultimate significance? The answer he gives is in Verse 18:

**... they are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart; {Eph 4:18 RSV}**

He is tracing a chain of cause and effect here. Beginning with the most immediate effect he is tracing it back to that which causes it. The first step is that worldlings think futilely because their

understanding is darkened. Just as a cloud, passing over the sun, darkens the light of it, so the thinking of man in his fallen state is shadowed, obscured, darkened. Scripture continually uses these terms, light and darkness, as metaphors for truth and ignorance. Truth is light; ignorance is darkness. Paul's figure declares that men's thinking is shadowed with ignorance, it is pointless because it stems from ignorance. That is rather arresting, is it not?

We think we know so much, and we do. We know so much, but we never know quite enough. That is what the apostle is saying.

Again this relates to a truth that we find widespread throughout the Scriptures: Man is ignorant because there is a part of his being that does not function. It is his spiritual life. His spirit is blank, darkened, obscured. In that part of his being which was intended to function as the key to his life there is nothing taking place. As a result, all his knowledge is broken, unrelated, incomplete. That is the picture Paul draws. What man thinks, though it may be very clever, does not bring him anywhere, does not produce anything, does not better him.

We are haunted these days with the question: Has this tremendous civilization really done anything for us?

Last week I wandered among the ruins of an ancient Mayan civilization in Guatemala, viewing half-covered temples just now being excavated from the dirt and dust of centuries. The more archaeologists uncover the Mayan ruins, the more we learn of the remarkable civilization of that day. But modern man is continually haunted with the question, "Are we really any better than they?" We may be better off, but are we any better? Have we really advanced in any way? The understanding of man is darkened and it is especially evident in his thinking about himself and about God. It can be seen in his value systems, his evaluation of the power structures of life, in the way he determines what is important and what is not important.

Illustrations abound for this. Coming back from Guatemala last week I had to go through customs in Los Angeles. While waiting for the plane to be reloaded, I sat in the lounge and picked up a discarded newspaper. (That is the Scottish way of reading newspapers and I take advantage of it every chance I get.) Reading through the headlines, my attention was caught by an article headed, *Religion Fading, says Psychiatry Professor*. I read on and saw that the associate professor of

psychiatry at the University of California at Los Angeles Neuro-Psychiatric Institute had said that religion is fading away from modern civilization, and he calls this the most hopeful sign of our times. In the article there was this almost incredible paragraph,

The decline in religious feeling among civilized people is an indication that man is steadily becoming more rational and less subject to superstition and therefore less likely to kill and maim those who disagree with him.

That in a day when crimes of violence are at an unprecedented height, when the streets of our cities are no longer safe to walk at night, and when the great cities of America literally seethe with suppressed hate and incipient riot and bloodshed! What a confirmation of the apostle's analysis of human thinking. The mind of fallen man is darkened, blinded, and does not see things as they really are. It can ignore obvious facts that thrust themselves upon us constantly and blithely dismiss them with a wave of the hand to pronounce that man is getting better and better. That is a sign of the ignorance and consequent darkening of the human mind.

This unaccountable darkness is seen in the glib talk today about *situational ethics*, i.e., morals determined by situation, expediency, also in *the relativity of morals*, and the widespread acceptance of the idea that sexual promiscuity is an expression of personal freedom, even though those who indulge in this kind of living inevitably show themselves to be increasingly the slaves of human passion, and suffer in their own lives the consequent inevitable restlessness of spirit and torment of heart. How can man be so blind? It is the darkening, the shadowing of the fallen mind:

- It is seen in Communism with its emphasis on the material and economic, and its ignorance of the emotional and spiritual forces at work in mankind.
- It is likewise evident in American materialism, with its passion for new and better things while ignoring the hunger of the spirit in man, concentrating only on supplying the needs of the body and the soul, especially the body.

- It is seen in our admiration for aggressive, hardheaded men who get to the top at all costs, and for our belief that power is measured by how many men you control, how many people are subject to you, how many you can get to serve you instead of how many you serve.
- It is seen, perhaps most clearly, in the naive ignoring of the basic twist of human nature that is evident in panaceas and programs that are continually offered as solutions to the problems of mankind.

I read the letters to the editor in the newspaper quite frequently and I am almost amused at how many people offer simple answers to complicated problems. They come out with very idealistic, wonderful sounding programs based on the naive assumption that human beings can be good if they want to badly enough. If they can just be shown that a thing is wrong they will all immediately stop it, yet the record of history is mankind is continually stumbling over its own footsteps. Man is his own worst enemy, and the basic problem is the twist of universal human evil.

In their ignorant blindness, men think themselves all right, and, therefore, fancy they do not need God. The next step is inevitable. They are “alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them.” Paul is not blaming men for this, any more than God blames them for it, he is simply analyzing a situation that exists. Because their understanding is darkened, shadowed, incomplete, in their ignorance they reject the life of God and therefore cut themselves off from the one thing man needs to be man! Both nature and Scripture concur that man is incomplete without God. Man was made to be the dwelling place of God. It is *God in man* which makes *man a man*. This was fully demonstrated by the Lord Jesus Christ. It was because he was so fully indwelt of the Father that he was able to be fully and wholly a man, man as God intended man to be. Therefore the life of God is essential to manhood and without it man is blinded, weak, and ignorant.

Some of the world’s great psychologists have seen the truth of this rather clearly. In a letter to E. Stanley Jones, the great Austrian psychologist Carl Jung wrote:

Those psychiatrists who are not superficial have come to the conclusion that the vast neurotic misery of the world could be termed a neurosis of emptiness. Men cut themselves off from the root of their being, from God, and then life turns empty, inane, meaningless, without purpose. So when God goes, goal goes. When goal goes, meaning goes. When meaning goes, value goes, and life turns dead on our hands.

Jung also saw this evil within himself. He said that the man who used psychology to look behind the scenes of his patient’s lives must also use it more especially to look behind the scenes in his own life. If he does not do this, says Jung, he is merely an “unconscious fraud.”

But there is yet more here in Paul’s great analysis. If men were cut off from God only because of ignorance of him, they might well excuse themselves, for no man can be blamed for not having what he doesn’t know exists, but now we learn the whole truth. It is all “due to their hardness of heart.” Man is born ignorant and cut off from the life of God, but he remains in that condition only because of the hardness of his heart.

A young Christian said to me recently, “Why is it, when we have the world’s greatest product, it is so hard to sell?” The reason is because man resists the truth, rejects light, turns from God’s love, clings to his error, and thus renders his heart gradually harder and harder and more unable to respond.

All of this marks the twisted, shadowed, empty thinking of the world. Paul says, “You Christians must not think this way any longer. If you are going to live a Christian life, the first place it must become evident is a change in your thinking. You must not follow these philosophies, you must not agree with these attitudes, you must not adopt these value systems.” For, if you do, you will go on to demonstrate the inevitable outcome, the next step in Paul’s analysis here, Verse 19:

**... they have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness. {Eph 4:19 RSV}**

He says the same thing in Romans 1, “God gave them over to a reprobate mind” {Rom 1:28b KJV}, that they might practice the awful list of evil

deeds that is so frankly and bluntly described there. It sounds like it was culled from the pages of any morning newspaper today. Why do people do these things? Why is moral licentiousness so rampant? Why are our standards so constantly deteriorating? It is because men are futile in their thinking; it is because of this shadowed thinking, this incompleteness, this ignorance from which men operate, even the best of them, even the finest of minds, unredeemed, unregenerated.

But the good news of the gospel is that God reaches even these kind of people. He draws and softens and melts. The amazing love of Christ penetrates even the hardness of men's hearts. Therefore, we are not to blame people like this, or to withdraw from them. We are to remember that we, too, had the same mind, the same outlook on life. As Paul says in Colossians 1:21, "... you who once were estranged and hostile in mind," that is the way we thought too, until God's love reached us. So we are not to be judgmental, not to be hard and harsh toward these who think this way. This is the basic condition of humanity to which the gospel makes its appeal.

Now the apostle goes on to trace one other thing. The only hope of helping these people is to demonstrate a wholly different pattern of thought, a wholly different set of values. The implication is clear that if we live like the world lives, even though we are Christians, there is not a thing we can do to help them, not a thing!

You remember the story of the boy who thought he would teach some sparrows to sing like a canary, so he put them in a cage with the canary, hoping the canary would teach them to sing. In a few days he found the canary chirping like the sparrows. This is always the case, is it not?

If we give ourselves to the attitudes and ways of thinking of those around us, we will inevitably do the same things, there is no avoiding it. The only way to help them is to demonstrate a completely different level of life. Many of us have been astounded this past year at leaders who have gone through moral breakdowns. Why? Because somewhere along the line they succumbed to the futile thinking of the world. They gave way in their thought life. This is what makes a man turn from the things of Christ to pursue materialism or personal ambition: He succumbs to the philosophy of the world around.

But now we come to the reason why Paul speaks so strongly. He says, in Verse 20,

**You did not so learn Christ! – assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus. {Eph 4:20-21 RSV}**

In other words, you must not live like the Gentiles because you need not. In Christ, you have a different principle of living, a different way of thinking. In Christ, you have the truth by which you can test everything else, the truth as it is in Jesus. That is a wonderful phrase. That ought to form the basic concept of all Christian thinking. You have found in Jesus Christ the truth, the simple truth:

- About life,
- About yourself,
- About the world,
- About the makeup of science and nature,
- About human behavior.

"In him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge," {cf, Col 2:3}. You have found in Christ the truth. I wish to stress that, for this is the point the apostle is making.

The Lord Jesus said these challenging words. "If any man follow me, he shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life," {cf, John 8:12}. That means a Christian does not need to walk in uncertainty about things, in lack of knowledge. It means that, in Christ, we have the truth that reveals. It is popular today to think that nothing can be known for sure. That is part of the futility of the world's thinking, to think that there are no final answers, no ultimate knowledge, no ultimate truth. Recently I heard even a Christian pastor say that all knowledge must at last be reduced to the tentative, we can only think we know but we never know for sure. Now Christianity repudiates that concept utterly. The New Testament denies that. Christ has come that we might know – not everything, that is true. We do not become paragons of knowledge automatically spouting out revelations of ultimate truth about everything. We do not know everything, but what we do know, **we know!** Christ said to his disciples, "If you continue in my word ... you shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free," {cf, John 8:31b, 8:32}.

That is what the truth always does, it sets men free. Truth, even though it is hard truth, difficult truth, is realistic and therefore it sets us free and tears away the veils of illusion.

Perhaps I should add this qualifying word here. Not everything a worldling thinks is wrong, because obviously God's truth is at work in the world as well, and the world has picked up a good deal of it. The world knows quite a bit of truth, but the point is, it is so intermingled with error that it is indistinguishable until you lay it alongside the truth as it is in Jesus. That is the only measuring stick we have.

- How can you tell what is true?
- How can you tell what is wrong?
- How can you tell what is error?

There is only one way, the truth as it is in Jesus. That truth is always to the point, it is purposeful, it leads to significant, useful, appropriate living. It is this the apostle is stressing. We must learn to test all our thinking by what the Lord Jesus has revealed, either directly himself or indirectly through the apostles whom he has sent to tell us the truth: The truth as it is in Jesus.

Tested by this, we discover there is much we must reject today. I do not have any problem with this "God Is Dead" movement. It does not bother me in the least. I know it is one of those things that sweep like cyclones across the landscape of human thinking and then is gone again, to be replaced next year by something else – one of those fads or fashions in theology that come and go. But do I give any credence to it, do I think it has any weight or merit? Of course not! For the Lord Jesus has said that God is not dead. God is an eternal Father, God is Spirit, eternal, immortal, invisible, constantly underlying all of life. Measured by the truth that is in Jesus all such nonsense is immediately rejected as unworthy of consideration.

There are *so* many things we can measure this way. Today the theological world, and many Christians, are troubled by the rise of the idea of universalism again, the hope that all men will be saved, that no matter what they do, all are redeemed, all will be saved. But, measured by the truth as it is in Jesus, we reject that statement – much as we would like to believe it. For, you see, Jesus says something different, and, though it is hard, he is the authority we accept.

Reading an article in *His Magazine* recently on this very subject, I found deep agreement with these words. The writer says,

I am deeply impressed by the argument of brilliant thinkers like Tillich, Ferre, Bultmann, Bruner and Barth, not to mention John of Damascus, Thomas Aquinas, the Pope, Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Bertrand Russell, and many more. But what do these men know? What are the data on which they base their judgments? When it comes to the important question, "What is man's destiny after this life?" I prefer Jesus Christ, the God-man, to Paul Tillich, as my authority. I prefer Jesus Christ to Rudolf Bultmann. And above all, lest you misunderstand me, I prefer Jesus Christ to my own blind human guesses based on woefully inadequate data.

Exactly! Christ is the authority. The truth is revealed in Jesus, therefore

- We reject all philosophies that urge the necessity of "getting even" as a way of living with one another.
- We reject all philosophy that says that trials are tragic occurrences for which we ought to feel sorry for ourselves, and act as though we have been offended when they come into our lives as though we had been specially singled out for difficulty. We are to remember, in the light of the truth as it is in Jesus, that these trials and sufferings are part of the program, part of God's ministering to us, part of that which it takes to make us what God wants us to be.
- We are to reject the common philosophy of the day that others are to blame for our weaknesses, that if we lived in different circumstances, with different people and had to face different problems, we could be different. The truth as it is in Jesus says that there is adequacy in Christ for any situation, any place; that God has put you where you are because he wants you to live the Christian life right there; that those around you will never have the chance to see the tremendous, revolutionary difference that being a Christian makes unless they see it in your life right where you are right now.

That is where we are to begin to live, and this is why Paul says we “must no longer live as the Gentiles do,” in the emptiness of their minds, for we “did not so learn Christ.” There are resources in him far greater than any worldling every dreamed of. There are possibilities of fruitfulness and glory and grace in Jesus Christ which, if they begin to manifest themselves in your life, will set your neighbors and friends saying,

- “What has this person got?”
- “What kind of a faith is this?”

- “What do these people have that makes them able to live like this?”

Now, that is the challenge the apostle sets before us.

In the rest of this chapter he will detail it for us in specifics, bringing it right down where we live. As we go through this, we shall see that what we do is itself witnessing, telling what we are.

Therefore, *what we are* must be *what Christ is*, for that is the only life that arrests and changes and challenges men.

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