

A THINKING FAITH

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Epiphany Sunday, January 6, 1991. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

You can see the Magi out their in the night, standing on top of their Persian temple observatory, studying the stars. They painstakingly note the movement of the stars and planets. They're trying to make sense of a new configuration of planets or, perhaps, the appearance of a comet. ~~They try to make sense of what they see in the sky with what they've read in ancient holy writings about the coming of a King.~~ As they do this they feel strangely drawn to God. ^{They begin a journey. They travel far and search until they come to Christ.} Just how it happened we don't know, but God beckoned ~~to~~ ^{to Christ} them as they studied and thought about the universe (cf. Nederhood). The Magi were thinkers, forerunners of today's scientists and astronomers. Their story reminds us that ever since the birth of Jesus some of the world's most profound thinkers have been drawn to Christ.

When you think of the Christian faith today, do you think of it as a faith that draws or repels people who think things through carefully and who may, like the Magi, have to travel far and inquire and search diligently before they find Christ? Does the church draw or repel men and women who think deeply about the meaning life and the universe? Does the church even want to draw that kind of person?

Or does the church simply want "yes" men and women; people who say, "Just tell me what to believe? tell me what to do? tell me what's right and wrong? How should I vote? What kind of clothes should I wear? What kind of music can I listen to? I don't have time to think about these things. That's what ^{it} we pay the minister to do. I have my own work to do, children to raise, money to make, bills to pay."

Historically the Presbyterian Church has encouraged its members to think. There was a great emphasis in the Reformed church on an educated laity. When John Knox reformed the Church in Scotland he insisted on mandatory public education. He wanted all the men, women, and children of Scotland, rich and poor, aristocrats and peasants, to know how to read and think so they could study and interpret the Bible within the community of faith. He was convinced that ordinary people who read the Bible thoughtfully would be lead eventually to worship Christ.

The church, today, desperately needs Christian thinkers; men and women who will think about the issues of today in the light of Christ and within the community of faith. Only about 35% of those who are on the active rolls of the Presbyterian church attend public worship on any given Sunday. Only about 10% of the adult membership participate in Church School classes where the issues of the day are studied in the light of the Bible.

We've become a biblically illiterate nation. Not too long ago, David H.C. Read, former Minister at the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in NYC conducted a wedding where he read from Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels but have not love I am nothing...." After the service he was approached by a graduate of Harvard University who said, "I really liked what you read about love. Where did you get it?"

Not only the nation, but even the church has become biblically illiterate. Dr. John Leith, at Union Seminary in Virginia, wrote last year in the Presbyterian Outlook, "No one can seriously argue that Presbyterians are more knowledgeable about their faith today than they were 25 years ago. No one can seriously argue that we know more about the Bible than we did then. As a matter of fact, the most disturbing thing about life not only in our

church, but in our nation, is the rapid decline in theological and biblical literacy."

Last year I heard Dr. Gillespie, President of Princeton Seminary, explain how, at the turn of this century, nearly everybody who went to college went to church related colleges. They studied economics, medicine, law, literature, astronomy within the framework of an explicit Christian world view. Over the years, Gillespie said, individual churches, presbyteries and synods cut back their financial support for Christian higher education. As financial support declined many Presbyterian Colleges, he said, simply stopped teaching much of anything uniquely or distinctively Christian. Today it's possible to graduate from college without ever having studied the Bible even as literature. But how can anybody appreciate or understand literature, art, music not to speak of Christian thinking without some knowledge of the Bible?

We desperately need citizens in our society and members in our churches who are able to think about today's issues within the framework of the Christian faith. I believe our democracy depends upon a thinking citizenry. I believe that our church depends on a membership that knows the Bible and is willing to think through the implications of the Christian faith in every area of life.

There's little agreement in society or even in the church on morality, on right and wrong, on truth and falsehood (Nederhood). And think of the challenges of the nineties... the need to develop alternative energy sources, how to deal with global warming, how to fix the disintegrating family in the United States with all its attendant social fall-out. In years past Christian thinkers took the initiative in searching for answers to those kinds of social, scientific and moral questions.

Some of you may be thinking that I'm advocating an arid intellectualism; an ivory tower religion where we sit around and spin out our theories about God. I'm not talking about that at all. I'm talking about Christian thinking that leads us to action. I'm talking about thinking that leads us, like the Wise Men, to worship Christ and to give to him costly gifts.

I don't believe that education will transform the world. I don't believe that science will save the world. William Temple, the late Archbishop of Canterbury, use to say, "The world will be saved only by worship." When we delude ourselves into putting our hope and trust in the world's wisdom, whether it's science or politics or economics or philosophy we haven't heard the message of the wise men. Germany, before WW2, was highly educated...
~~a world leader in scientific research but they were spiritually bankrupt.~~

The Christian church in Germany was subverted and co-opted by the government and by a pagan ideology. The very same thing can happen to us if we don't carefully think out the implications of our Christian faith. If we let the experts do the thinking for us I believe we're headed for a new age of darkness.

It's only when education and science and politics and economics bow to Christ and are enlisted in his service that hope begins and the world may be saved (Andrew McLellan in ET).

One of the finest Christian thinkers I ever knew never went to seminary, never went to college, never graduated from high-school, but dropped out of school before he got to the sixth grade. He was my father, a railroad engineer. I remember as a little boy sitting on my father's lap in the living room before the days of television. He's reading about the stars to me from the Book of Knowledge. He shows me an artist's conception of the Milky Way Galaxy. "Our solar system", he says with excitement in his steel-blue eyes,

"isn't in the center of the galaxy, but way out here on one of the spiral arms." He tells me that just as the earth revolves around the sun, the galaxy itself revolves once every billion years or so. And both of us are lost in the wonder of it all.

And then my mother says, "It's time for bed." And my father carries me in his arms up the stairs and, before I get into bed, we both kneel down, like the Wise Men, and we pray; we pay homage to the one who created the Milky Way, who came to us a little child.

The poet Christina Georgina Rossetti wrote,

What can I give Him,
 Poor as I am?
 If I were a shepherd
 I would bring a lamb,
~~If I were a Wise Man~~
 I would do my part,-
 Yet what I can I give Him,
 Give my heart.

Let us pray : O God, who by the shining of a star didst guide the Wise Men to behold Thy Son our Lord : Show us Thy heavenly light, and give us grace to follow until we find Him, and, finding Him, rejoice. And grant that as they presented gold, frankincense, and myrrh, we now may bring Him the offering of a loving heart, an adoring spirit, and an obedient will, for His honor, and for Thy glory, O God Most High. Amen.