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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

Elmer J. Thiessen

## In Defence of Developing a Theoretical Christian Mind: A Response to Oliver R. Barclay

*Dr Thiessen, who teaches at Medicine Hat College in Alberta, Canada, discusses the concept of Developing a Christian Mind with special reference to Oliver R. Barclay's book of that title.*

The attempt to develop a Christian mind in the sense of a unique Christian approach to the various academic disciplines has been attacked in recent years by both Christian and secular writers. Paul H. Hirst, a prominent Cambridge philosopher of education has argued that the very idea of 'Christian education' is a contradiction in terms, because each of the forms of knowledge are autonomous and thus there cannot be a distinctively Christian approach to mathematics, science, engineering, or even farming.<sup>1</sup> Here I will not be attempting an answer to Hirst's secular challenge against the possibility of a Christian curriculum, since I have attempted this elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I wish to respond to another attack, this time by a Christian writer, a well known British evangelical, Oliver R. Barclay.<sup>3</sup>

The title of Barclay's book, *Developing a Christian Mind*, is in a way misleading, because it suggests a positive and constructive approach to the development of a Christian mind. Indeed, this is Barclay's objective, but only in terms of his own rather unique concept of a Christian mind. Much of the book is in fact an attack against those who would have us develop a Christian mind in a theoretical sense, and against those who have in fact attempted to work out a unique Christian approach to the academic disciplines

<sup>1</sup> Paul H. Hirst, 'Christian Education: A Contradiction in Terms,' in his *Moral Education in a Secular Society*, London: University of London Press, 1974, pp. 77ff. See also his 'Religious Beliefs and Educational Principles,' *Learning for Living*, Vol. 15, No. 4, Summer, 1976, pp. 155ff.

<sup>2</sup> Elmer J. Thiessen, 'A Defense of a Distinctively Christian Curriculum,' *Religious Education*, Vol. 80, No. 1, 1985, pp. 37-50.

<sup>3</sup> Oliver R. Barclay, *Developing a Christian Mind*, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984. All page references in the article refer to this book.

such as philosophy, sociology, education, etc. Thus, Barclay singles out Harry Blamires' influential and challenging book, *The Christian Mind*,<sup>4</sup> and criticizes Blamires for having too 'theoretical' a definition of the Christian mind and for being too enamoured with the kind of ideal that existed in medieval times where Christians assumed the need to develop 'a complete intellectual system' (19f; cf. 78, 81). The Dooyeweerdian school of philosophy, originating in the Netherlands, is also criticized for attempting to develop 'a complete Christian philosophical system', which according to Barclay is not desirable and is in fact not possible (202–207, 77f, 82). Barclay reminds us that 'there are quite a few' others who have followed the examples of Blamires and Dooyeweerd in understanding the Christian mind in a theoretical sense, but he does not list any of these other writers (20). There has indeed been a spate of publishing along this line in the past few years,<sup>5</sup> but Barclay would consider this trend regrettable.

One of Barclay's major concerns regarding the Christian mind has to do with pretensions of completeness. Again and again he criticizes those who want to develop a *complete* system of ethics, theology, philosophy, etc. (54, 57, 69, 81–3, 202). The Bible, according to Barclay, doesn't give us a complete system (69, 67), nor does it encourage us to do so (76, 20).

Barclay's attack, however, goes deeper—he challenges the very idea of a Christian mind in the sense of a theoretical Christian understanding of politics, philosophy, etc. Attempts at developing a theoretical Christian understanding of various areas of human concern and study often do not start with the Bible and necessarily go beyond the Bible, and thus they contain elements that are not specifically Christian (78, 84, 203f). Barclay goes so far as to suggest that there is an incompatibility between philosophy and Christianity because a philosophical system 'must answer questions that philosophers ask', whereas the Christian revelation 'is set out in terms of the questions that God asks'. Thus we should not '*reduce* the gospel to such a small thing as a philosophical system would be' (75, cf. 68)

Barclay is also very concerned that these attempts at developing

<sup>4</sup> Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind*, London: SPCK, 1963.

<sup>5</sup> There are, for example, two ongoing series of books being published, both of which clearly interpret the Christian mind in a theoretical sense: *Contours of a Christian Philosophy Series*, edited by C. Stephen Evans and published by Inter-Varsity Press; *Studies in a Christian World View*, edited by Carl F. Henry and published by Eerdmans Pub. Co. See also L. Kalsbeek, *Contours of a Christian Philosophy: An Introduction to Herman Dooyeweerd's Thought*, Toronto: Wedge Publishing, 1975.

a Christian approach to philosophy, politics and education will come to supplant God's Word, and thus cause Christians to take their directives from these artificial human constructions rather than from the Bible (78, 82). This concept of the Christian mind is also too theoretical and too intellectual for Barclay (13, 20, 22, 28f, 89). He is further concerned to philosophy or politics, because Christians invariably disagree about them (21, 61, 79, 83, 206f).

A final and perhaps overriding concern of Barclay's is that an emphasis on the development of the Christian mind as a theoretical and academic exercise has made us lose sight of a very 'different' (20, 76), and more important notion of the Christian mind which is concerned with personal and practical obedience to our Lord. Barclay reminds us that in the New Testament, 'the Christian mind, or renewed mind, is a concept used chiefly to help us to see how revealed truths impinge on *practical living* (29). True, Paul does at times give us a very theoretical analysis of theological truths, but the primary purpose is 'to show how great truths that may seem quite theoretical do—or should—control our decisions about very mundane issues' (28). Thus, Paul repeatedly moves from doctrine to practice, in what Barclay calls the 'hinge sections' of the epistles (30). The New Testament concept of the Christian mind is concerned with *wisdom*, 'the ability to see the true nature of things and how, in the light of that, we should live' (93, 106, See Ch. 5). In order to counter the prevalent interpretation of the Christian mind as a theoretical and academic exercise, Barclay invents a new term, 'a Christian outlook', or better still, 'a Christian onlook', which is primarily concerned with practical living and obedience to God's Word (22, 69, 74f), and which according to Barclay captures the New Testament emphasis on what it really means to develop a Christian mind.

There is much to be said for Barclay's emphasis on the practical Christian mind. I agree that we as individual Christians, especially Christian academics, can become too preoccupied with thinking and theoretical analysis, so much so that we forget about the importance of applying theory to practice, about practical obedience to Jesus Christ. Christian theorizing is no substitute for Christian discipleship. Following theological trends cannot replace following Jesus in everyday living, even in the life of a Christian academic.

I also agree that all too often in the history of Christianity, being a Christian has been wrongly understood primarily in terms of having correct beliefs, or correct doctrine. And, thus there have

been Christian movements, such as the sixteenth century Anabaptists, who stressed that correct belief, or faith as intellectual assent alone, is not enough.<sup>6</sup> Even the demons believe and shudder (James 1:19). 'No one can know Christ unless he follow him in his life', wrote Hans Denck, an early Anabaptist. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said much the same thing and thus really should have been an Anabaptist! Insofar as Barclay is providing another and perhaps timely reminder to Christians, especially to Christian scholars, that Christianity is not just an intellectual affair, it involves practical obedience in everyday life, I as an Anabaptist Christian wholeheartedly agree.

Finally, I agree that it might be useful to contrast two different concepts of the Christian mind, practical and theoretical, though I will express some reservations about this later. In highlighting the practical Christian mind, I believe Barclay provides a useful contribution to contemporary discussions of the Christian mind, which *may* have focussed too exclusively on the Christian mind as a theoretical construct.

Unfortunately, however, Barclay does not limit himself to a constructive defense of the practical Christian mind. He goes on to attack the theoretical Christian mind in the ways I have already outlined. In all fairness, it must be pointed out that at times Barclay seems to suggest that 'there is a place' for the theoretical Christian mind (76). He grants that we need Christian thinkers in philosophy, politics, medicine, etc. (84). He acknowledges that Christian philosophers have provided useful critiques of secular philosophical systems (79, 202). He admits that those with intellectual gifts might need to struggle with developing an intellectual Christian mind (7, 22, 80f, 102). All this makes it very difficult to know what Barclay's position is with respect to the theoretical Christian mind as his position is quite confusing, if not outright contradictory. I would suggest that although Barclay seems, at times, to give a place to the theoretical Christian mind, his criticisms of this concept of the Christian mind are such that he has really undermined the very foundations of the theoretical Christian mind, as well as any motivation to cultivate it.

I would therefore suggest that Barclay's criticisms of the theoretical Christian mind need to be taken seriously, because they have serious implications for a long-standing tradition in the area of Christian scholarship. A response is also called for because Barclay is not alone in the objections he raises against the

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<sup>6</sup> See Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant*, Waterloo, Ontario, Conrad Press, 1973. See especially chapters 3 and 5.

theoretical Christian mind. There are many other evangelical Christians who share Barclay's negative feelings about Christian scholarship. I believe that Barclay gives expression to the major objections commonly raised against the theoretical Christian mind and that these objections therefore deserve careful reply.

Without in any way minimizing the positive contribution Barclay has made in highlighting the practical Christian mind, I want to focus specifically on his criticisms of the theoretical Christian mind and to attempt to answer these criticisms. In so doing, I also hope to overcome the confusing and contradictory elements inherent in Barclay's position. As a means of bringing some order to my discussion of Barclay's critique of the theoretical Christian mind, I will highlight ten major areas of disagreement.

### **I. The Biblical Mandate for a Theoretical Christian mind**

Barclay begins his critique of the theoretical concept of the Christian mind in a rather subtle manner by questioning 'whether such a view of the Christian mind is really the biblical emphasis at all' (20). He goes on to argue that the biblical view of the Christian mind really has to do with the quite different concept of the practical Christian mind (76). In the same context Barclay rather boldly states that he does not find an emphasis on the importance of intellectual analysis in the New Testament (76). Christian scholars 'who have fastened solely on the intellectual aspects of Christian world-views . . . have overthrown the biblical priorities and forgotten the biblical agenda', according to Barclay (81). We therefore need to ask, first of all whether the development of the Christian mind is in fact part of the biblical agenda? We must then address the question of Christian priorities.

In trying to establish a biblical thesis, there is always the danger of a selective reading of the Scriptures. Barclay clearly finds biblical support for the practical Christian mind, but he fails to do justice to the many passages of Scriptures that support the concept of the theoretical Christian mind as well.

There is first of all the greatest commandment which tells us to love God with all of our faculties, including our minds (Mark 12:30). Barclay acknowledges this commandment but interprets it in terms of the practical Christian mind (14f, 88f). I agree that this is one aspect of loving God with our minds, but it is surely arbitrary to exclude the theoretical search for truth as another aspect of loving God with our minds.

Barclay ignores the creation mandate with its call to subdue and rule over the earth and this includes intellectual rulership, since one of the first assignments given to Adam is to name all the animals,—surely a very academic enterprise (Gen. 1:28; 2:19f; cf. Ps. 8:6). Thus, Psalm III:2 has legitimately been interpreted by many as a text for scientific research: ‘Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who have pleasure in them’, a verse that Barclay does refer to, though to make a quite different point (148). Elsewhere, Barclay himself defends intellectual activity and quotes Paul’s words concerning the need to bring every thought ‘captive to obey Christ’ (93; II Cor. 10:5). This is important because as a result of the fall, man no longer wants to acknowledge that all truth is unified in Jesus Christ (Romans 1:18–20; Col. 1:15–120; 2:3). One important mandate for all Christians and also especially for Christian scholars is to be a partner with Christ in reconciling to himself *all things*, including all truth (Col. 1:20).

These all too brief comments must suffice to indicate that the Bible does support the challenge of developing the Christian mind in the theoretical sense. This is therefore an important task, especially for Christian scholars, and in so far as all people theorize, to varying degrees, it is also a task that applies to all Christians, each according to his ability.

## II. Christian Priorities

If we grant that there is biblical support for the development of the theoretical Christian mind, the question still remains as to whether this is less important than the development of the practical Christian mind, as Barclay suggests in several ways. He argues, for example, that in our focus on a theoretical understanding of the Christian mind, we can be ‘easily distracted from the *more important* task of applying biblical truth’, and he believes that ‘this has happened on a large scale’ (78; my emphasis). Elsewhere, he states categorically that the practical Christian mind is more important than the theoretical Christian mind (81). Christian scholars have pushed aside the practical orientation of the Bible for the more intellectual tasks and thus ‘they have overthrown the biblical priorities and forgotten the biblical agenda’ (80f). I believe Barclay’s generalizations concerning biblical priorities and the relative importance of these two kinds of Christian mind are in themselves confusing because they fail to distinguish between several meanings that can be given to the notions of importance and biblical priorities.

a. We need to ask first of all whether the Bible teaches that the task of developing a practical Christian mind is generally more important than the task of developing a theoretical Christian mind? Nowhere, is this explicitly stated. In many ways the very question is illegitimate. Given that there is biblical support for both tasks, as I have argued, it would seem that both tasks are equally important. Paul warned against thinking that certain tasks are more important than others. One man plants the philosophical foundations of the Christian mind. Another waters these foundations in terms of their practical implications and thus develops a practical Christian mind. Each will be rewarded, and it is only God who can make our efforts bear fruit (I Cor. 3:5-9; cf. I Cor. 12).

b. Another way in which the practical Christian mind could be said to be more important than the theoretical Christian mind is that the challenge of the former applies to all Christians, educated and non-educated alike (8, 15f, 80), whereas the latter applies to only a few. There is a sense in which Barclay is right in this. The practical Christian mind is more important in the *specific sense* that it applies to more Christians. Thankfully, God only calls a very few to be Christian philosophers! But this should not lead us to minimize the importance of the theoretical Christian mind generally, as Barclay has done.

Here a biblical parallel might be helpful. All Christians are called to be witnesses, to spread the good news. That is a very important task. But God also calls some to be evangelists. Their task is also important. We can acknowledge the importance of both very different approaches to evangelism in the New Testament without contradicting ourselves. Similarly, we can acknowledge the importance of both types of a Christian mind without contradicting ourselves. We *all* need to cultivate a Christian mind in the practical sense. We also need a few who specialize in cultivating a theoretical Christian mind, and we must not think that the first challenge lessens the importance of the second.

The above analogy points to another difficulty which will be dealt with in more detail later. There is a sense in which all Christians are called to develop the theoretical Christian mind, to the best of their abilities, and thus even in terms of the number of people the challenge applies to, it is not less important than the practical Christian mind.

c. There is another broader perspective from which we need to look at the question of priorities. We also need to ask whether the church generally, and Christian scholars more particularly, have

placed an overemphasis on the theoretical Christian mind at the expense of the other equally important concept of the Christian mind, i.e. the practical Christian mind? I have already suggested that the history of the Christian church shows that an imbalance has occurred from time to time and thus there have been movements trying to restore a proper balance. But is the Christian church today suffering from this kind of imbalance as Barclay seems to suggest? Have we today overthrown biblical priorities in the sense of giving too much emphasis on the theoretical Christian mind?

Generalizations are dangerous, but I would suggest that even on this interpretation, Barclay is in error. Dr Charles Malik, a well known and beloved Christian statesman, recently issued this warning at the dedication of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College: 'I must be frank with you: the greatest danger confronting American evangelical Christianity is the danger of anti-intellectualism.'<sup>7</sup> This leads Malik to make an eloquent and passionate plea to evangelicals to cultivate the theoretical Christian mind, which he interestingly describes as 'the other side of evangelism'. Some twenty years ago, Harry Blamires was making a very similar negative assessment of the Christian church in his influential book, *The Christian Mind*. Everywhere Blamires found examples of the church succumbing to secularism.<sup>8</sup> I believe Malik and Blamires have got it right. Again and again I meet Christian scholars who have not begun the task of exploring how biblical presuppositions might impinge on their areas of speciality, who in fact do not even see how this is possible. How sad, but I'm afraid Barclay's analysis will only further enhance this deplorable state of affairs. I therefore suggest that in order to ensure that we do justice to all of the biblical agenda, we need more, not less emphasis on the theoretical Christian mind, while not forgetting the equally important concept of the practical Christian mind. The key is balance, as Barclay himself recognizes (192), but unfortunately, Barclay's own position suffers from imbalance.

### III. Personal versus Social Ethics

There is another way in which to highlight Barclay's distorted view of Christian priorities. Barclay is really reflecting contem-

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Malik, 'The Other Side of Evangelism', *Christianity Today*, Nov. 7, 1980, pp. 38-40.

<sup>8</sup> Blamires, p. 4.

porary evangelical preference for interpreting the Bible as being mainly concerned about 'personal ethics' (199). His practical Christian mind has to do mainly with individual obedience to God (See 8, 14f, 85). Thus we find this rather strong statement towards the end of the book: 'To launch into Christian politics, Christian philosophy or social ethics is not in itself to make any progress in the Christian mind' (199). Given Barclay's emphasis on personal ethics, one can understand why this is so. But surely it is rather arbitrary to minimize the importance of a certain concept of a Christian mind having to do with the broader social and political implications of the Bible, simply because one reads the Bible as being mainly concerned with personal life style. Thankfully, there are evangelical scholars who are breaking out of this narrow tradition and who are challenging us to read the Bible in a more openminded manner.<sup>9</sup> I would suggest that as we take up this challenge, we will become increasingly sympathetic with Blamire's concept of the theoretical Christian mind.

Here again, we must be careful to maintain a balance. We need to study God's Word both in terms of what it has to say to us concerning our personal life style and in terms of what it has to say regarding the broader social and political and economic issues confronting us in these rather troubled times.

#### **IV. Ideas Have Consequences**

There is another way to underscore the importance of developing a Christian mind in the theoretical sense. R. M. Weaver has brilliantly shown that 'Ideas Have Consequences,' in a book by this title.<sup>10</sup> It is ideas that have changed the course of history. We need think only of Marx's very theoretical works, but they have had profound practical implications. The distinction between theory and practice is really an artificial distinction. Thus I have always maintained that philosophy, which is my area of speciality, is one of the most practical courses one can take at a university. Unfortunately, the humanities are too often badly

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, R. J. Sider, *Cry Justice: The Bible on Hunger and Poverty*, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1980. C. J. H. Wright, *Living as the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics*, Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1983.

<sup>10</sup> R. M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948/19884.

taught so that students fail to appreciate the practical implications of the theoretical concepts they are studying.<sup>11</sup>

Barclay himself is forced to acknowledge the importance of ideas with regard to his own practical concept of the Christian mind (27f, 74, 193). Paul, as we have seen, repeatedly moves from a very theoretical treatment of doctrine to the practical implications of these doctrines. Thus doctrine is important, and occasionally we will need to focus for a while on simply getting our doctrine straight. And, we also need theologians who specialize in the search for correct doctrine. Similarly, we need Christian psychologists, economists and even philosophers who will help us to think Christianly in their respective areas, and who do so always with a double perspective: What biblical truths impinge on my discipline? What practical consequences follow from the theoretical position I have developed from the Scriptures?

### V. Two Concepts of the Christian Mind or Only One?

The previous point also serves to highlight a basic problem in interpreting and criticizing Barclay. If ideas have consequences, is it really possible to clearly distinguish between two concepts of the Christian mind, the one theoretical and the other practical? I think not, and thus Barclay is wrong in moving us towards this kind of polarization. Barclay would have us think that his Christian 'outlook' is very different from Blamires' theoretical notion of the Christian mind (20, 76). But, if we examine Barclay's own Christian outlook more closely, especially in the latter chapters where he tries to give us several examples of a Christian outlook, it all bears 'suspicious' resemblance to the writings of Blamires, Dooyeweerd and the many other writers who have tried to work out a Christian mind in a theoretical sense. In these chapters Barclay tries to develop a Christian view about man, a Christian view of marriage, a Christian view of education, a Christian view of work and a Christian view of culture (109-190). Of course he stresses the practical implications of the Christian perspective in each case, but he does first of all have to provide a theoretical framework, i.e. he has to first of all develop a theoretical Christian mind. His theoretical framework is very brief, perhaps too brief, and thus Barclay might well want to expand on his points some time and write an entire book on a

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<sup>11</sup> I have explored the need for a practical approach to teaching the humanities in 'The Need for Applied Humanities in Post-secondary Technical/Vocational Education', *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 69-81.

Christian view of man, a Christian view of education, etc. Barclay clearly prefers to deal with practical implications of theory, but practice presupposes theory and he himself is forced to do some theory, and therefore he is wrong in minimizing the importance of the theoretical Christian mind.

Clearly some works can be and are more theoretical than others. It is very much a matter of degree. There still may be some purpose to making the distinction between the two types of Christian mind, and I will continue to do so for the purposes of critical analysis, but I believe it is important to recognize that the distinction is not as clear and absolute as Barclay seems to think it is.

## **VI. The Basis of the Christian Mind**

According to Barclay, one of the problems with attempts to develop a Christian perspective in philosophy, sociology, education, etc., is that such perspectives are not linked closely enough to the Bible. It is only if every element of a Christian philosophy, sociology, etc., is 'created essentially by God's revealed Word,' or if our thinking in these areas has an 'absolute anchorage in God's revelation,' that it deserves to be called Christian (41, 44, 74). Invariably these so called Christian perspectives include elements that are not specifically Christian and they require 'guesswork' as scholars try to fill in the details of the framework given in the Scripture, and thus they are not really Christian according to Barclay (69, 76, 78, 84, 203f).

I would suggest that Barclay has too simplistic a view of what it means for a Christian perspective to be true to God's Word. His approach would in fact condemn most evangelical preaching today, because such preaching, if it is any good, will involve the creative application of God's Word to contemporary problems and issues. Such preaching must necessarily go beyond the Bible and involves an element of guesswork if it is at all to be relevant to today's world. That is in fact the biblical role given to the prophet.

This kind of creative guesswork is also a necessary ingredient in Barclay's own concept of the practical Christian mind. The Bible simply does not speak directly to such modern phenomena as state education, industrial pollution, trade unions, and unemployment, and yet Barclay manages to creatively apply biblical truths to these phenomena, and quite justifiably so (41f, 104f, 122ff, 130ff, 135ff, 152ff).

If then creative guesswork is required in preaching and in the development of a practical Christian mind, we should also expect

it and welcome it in the development of a theoretical Christian mind. Barclay correctly observes that the Bible only gives us a 'framework' or a 'pattern' (54, 57f, 85, 200), and thus Christians need to fill in the details in a creative way, and this applies to both types of a Christian mind. Barclay is therefore wrong in objecting to the theoretical Christian mind on this basis.

There is further nothing wrong in another creative approach which Barclay objects to, namely that of coming to the Bible with a specific problem already in mind and then 'making' the Bible speak to this problem by looking for biblical principles that might help us resolve the problem. This is in fact involved in the development of Barclay's own practical Christian mind. This approach helps us to examine the Scriptures in a new light. It encourages us to think of theological truth as having practical consequences. It seems to me that the above approach of bringing contemporary problems to the Scriptures is the essential feature of 'praxis theology' and thus I believe Barclay's criticisms of praxis theology is largely unwarranted, resting in part on a caricature of this movement (39). Similarly, there is nothing wrong with Christian philosophers starting with questions that philosophers ask, and then examining how Scriptures might be relevant to the resolving of these questions. Barclay's criticism of the possibility of a Christian philosophy on this score rests on an assumption that the Scriptures only contain theology and are thus irrelevant to anything else, an assumption which he himself does not hold with respect to his own Christian outlook (75). Problem solving approaches to the study of Scripture certainly require some creativity, but this is healthy and a key to developing a truly Christian mind.

There is, however, a danger of going too far in one's creative guess-work, of doing so in such a way that one is no longer true to God's Word. We need to critically evaluate these creative theoretical and practical constructions which claim to be based on the Bible, and yet go beyond it. We need to develop criteria by which to conduct such evaluations. And this is no simple and easy task. The more creativity involved, or the more theoretical the enterprise the more difficult it will be to evaluate whether such constructions are faithful to God's Word. It will not do to simply talk of being 'under the control of God's Word' (41). We need to define such control. This is not the place to identify such criteria of faithfulness to God's Word, a task which belongs in part to the area of hermeneutics. Here I can only suggest that the defining of such criteria is an area that needs more careful attention by Christian scholars who are seeking to develop a theoretical Christian mind.

## VII. Secular versus Sacred Truth

Barclay's distorted view of the relationship between the Christian mind and the Bible also causes him to introduce an unwarranted dichotomy between sacred and secular truth. Barclay argues that any thinking which is in accordance with the latest insights of sociology, medicine or educational psychology 'is not distinctively Christian,' and hence we should not 'call this modern knowledge the Christian mind' (41).

For the Christian, however, all truth is God's truth and it is therefore wrong to introduce a distinction between sacred and secular truth. Elsewhere, when Barclay is countering anti-intellectualism and defending knowledge and scholarship, he himself refers to the rise of science in the seventeenth century where men like Francis Bacon recognized that God has spoken both through his Word and his Works (101). Thus the discovery of truth in 'The Book of God's Works', must also be seen as part of the development of the Christian mind.

Here a problem arises because there seems to be nothing 'distinctively Christian' about the discovery of truth in science or sociology and the non-Christian is quite capable of discovering truth in these areas without any reference to God and his Word. There is, however, something distinctive about the Christian's discovery of truth in a scientific laboratory because the Christian acknowledges God as the source of this truth. He recognizes that the fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of all knowledge (Prov. 1:8; 95). All finite beings have only a partial knowledge in all areas, but Christians do have a *more* complete picture of truth. The scientist who is a Christian should constantly be reminding himself that he is discovering God's truth, and I believe that on occasion, he should be verbalizing this to his non-Christian colleagues as part of his Christian witness.

The non-Christian scientist will of course not acknowledge this more complete dimension of truth. But the Christian knows that whether he likes it or not, the non-Christian scientist is living in God's universe and is using his God given capacities to discover God's truth. Of course, this added Christian dimension can be, and often is ignored in the scientific laboratory and in economic textbooks, and thus Barclay is right in suggesting that these academic areas have 'a relative autonomy' (181ff). But Barclay errs in treating this relative autonomy as a property that exists in objective reality itself. Nothing in reality is autonomous in itself because all things were created by Christ and 'in him all things hold together' (Col. 1:15-17). When we speak of a relative autonomy of academic disciplines, we need to ask, relative to

whom? It is *people who choose* to see knowledge and truth as either dependent or independent of God. The Christian chooses to see all knowledge and truth as dependent on God, and in so far as he does this, he has begun the task of cultivating a Christian mind even when he is discovering truth in the scientific laboratory, in sociology, in medicine and in philosophy.

Here it must be granted that in certain areas the differences between a Christian and a non-Christian perspective on, say mathematics, would appear to be rather trivial, merely a matter of how we label the source of our claims (i.e. God's truth or man's truth). But labels are important! I believe, however, that even in mathematics, the differences are more significant than this, and these differences come to the fore when we consider the philosophical foundations of mathematics. Fortunately or unfortunately, most of us seldom get to this level of thinking about mathematics. But graduate students and professors of mathematics ought to, and when they do, Christians in mathematics ought to be cultivating a Christian perspective in this area.

In other areas where presuppositions concerning human nature come into play, the differences will appear to be much more significant (See 205). But the differences are nonetheless significant in both of the above mentioned areas of knowledge, and contrary to Barclay, in both areas the Christian can and must seek to develop a truly Christian mind.

### VIII. Completeness of Christian Perspectives

At the beginning of this paper it was pointed out that one of Barclay's major objections against the theoretical Christian mind has to do with its seemingly invariable pretensions to completeness. There would seem to be several concerns related to the problem of completeness.

a. There is first of all the difficulty of actually developing a complete Christian world-and-life view, a complete theological system, a complete Christian psychology, etc. (20, 81f). Barclay reminds us that although philosophers, for example, have been trying to produce a complete Christian philosophical system for many years now, they have in fact been unable to produce one (77, 202). Given the finiteness of human knowledge, I agree that man is incapable of ever developing a complete system of thought in any area. But, I know of no Christian scholar, even St. Thomas Aquinas, who would not want to acknowledge the incompleteness of their theoretical constructions. The Scriptures are crystal clear: Now we only know in part (I Cor. 13:12).

It needs to be underscored, though, that the impossibility of ever developing a *complete* Christian world view, etc., does not at all mean that we should not strive for greater levels of completeness in whatever area we are working in. Although we can never achieve complete perfection in the moral sphere, Paul still encourages us to strive for perfection (Phil. 3:12–14). The same surely applies also to our efforts in the intellectual realm. We must also strive for a more complete understanding of God's Word and its theoretical and practical implications. Barclay's concerns would seem to make a virtue of incompleteness and imperfection.

b. Barclay is also concerned about pretensions regarding the effectiveness of complete systems of Christian truth in answering all questions and solving all problems we encounter in daily life. For example, the Roman Catholic tradition supposedly has 'a complete moral casuistry—a system of rules and detailed conclusions from which one can read off the right moral response in almost every situation' (81). I agree that there are dangers of legalistic applications of complete systems of Christian thought (31, 44, 46, 200), but this is not a necessary feature of the theoretical Christian mind. Instead it has to do with a distorted application of theory and occurs as much with incomplete theories as with complete theories. Even the bare framework of the Bible has lent itself to legalism. I would also suggest that Barclay is attacking a false caricature of Roman Catholic ethics. No system of ethics is such that we can precisely read off what we are to do in every situation, and I would question whether Roman Catholic ethics has ever been understood in this way. Instead, there is again a need for creativity in applying biblically informed theory to concrete situations.

It seems to me that there is a need for evangelical scholarship to address this problem of applying theory to practice more carefully, as the problem isn't as easy as it seems as Barclay correctly observes (19). It is only if we define some general principles as to *how* to apply general moral theory to concrete situations that we will be able to avoid both the extremes of a kind of vague situationalism or a rigid legalism, both extremes that evangelicals tend to fall into (44).

c. Barclay also argues that attempts to develop a Christian mind in such areas as political theory will quickly become outdated (84). Life simply is too varied and too changing to be accommodated by a complete system of thought (198, 200). Here again Barclay is attacking a caricature of the theoretical Christian mind. We need to distinguish between completeness at a broad

theoretical level and completeness at a specific level. To my mind most attempts at developing a theoretical Christian mind are aiming for completeness at a broader and more general level. What does the biblical framework entail for a broad economic theory, social theory, psychological theory, etc.? These are the questions that Christian scholars are struggling with, and the answers to such questions are really timeless, that is if we get them right.

There is, however also a need to apply such theories to concrete situations. This is largely the role of the preacher, the prophet, and the practical activist. There may also be writers who concentrate specifically on the practical outworkings of the Christian theoretical mind for our day, and we must not minimize the importance of their work simply because their pronouncements, by their very nature, will soon become out of date in the light of changing circumstances. Perhaps we need to be roused to action. Thus we need the Christian prophet who tells us that this is what God's Word and Christian theory based on God's Word entail in this concrete situation. Ideas do have consequences, and very specific consequences, if we take the Christian mind seriously.

It seems to me that evangelical Christians are too cautious in regard to this matter of working out the specific consequences of biblical principles because we are so afraid of legalism, and thus Barclay's concerns regarding this danger (36, 44). Because of this danger, we prefer to stay with vague theological principles, and somehow hope that individuals will be able to apply these principles to everyday living on their own (45). But few do so, in part because it is difficult. We need to recapture the courage and the spirit of the Old Testament prophets who dared to condemn very specific practices with a clear 'Thus says the Lord'.

### **IX. The Authority of the Christian Mind**

The previous point leads to another problem for Barclay, concerning the authority of the theoretical Christian mind. Barclay is very much concerned that a complete theological system or a complete Christian philosophy will be seen as having an authority of its own, 'which is not secondary to Scripture' (82). He is afraid that people will begin to think that a Christian philosophy rather than the Bible has the answers to life (78). This concern is also related to an earlier point having to do with the relationship between the conclusions of a theoretical Christian mind and the Word of God.

The question of authority is a very important one for Christians. There is always a danger that human interpretations and human attempts to work out the implications of God's Word take on an authority that properly belongs only to God's Word. Jesus drew our attention to this danger when he criticized the Scribes and Pharisees for nullifying the Word of God by following their own human traditions and theories (Mark 7:1-13). This danger exists just as much for the practical Christian mind as it does for the theoretical Christian mind, a point that Barclay doesn't fully appreciate.

However, Christians need not succumb to this danger, and the key to avoiding it is humility. It seems to me that one of the most basic characteristics of the Christian mind, whether theoretical or practical, is humility. The Christian mind always bows to the authority of God's Word (See 92). It always views its own conclusions as secondary to Scripture. A degree of tentativeness should always colour attempts at developing a theoretical and a practical Christian mind, however complete or incomplete these might be.

### **X. Consequences of the Christian Mind**

Barclay argues finally that attempts to develop the theoretical Christian mind will lead to disappointment, disillusionment and disagreement (19f, 61f, 79, 83, 206).

Yes, human effort, in whatever area, is bound to lead to disappointment and disillusionment, because of the finiteness and the fallibility of man. But this is not unique to the theoretical Christian mind. It applies to Barclay's own practical Christian mind as well, as he himself acknowledges at one point (198). But if so, why then are disappointment and disillusionment raised as *objections* against the whole enterprise of developing the theoretical Christian mind? Our struggles for a complete and perfect system of truth will always be disappointing, but this does not mean that we should not strive for completeness and perfection to the best of our ability, as has already been argued.

Yes, there will also always be disagreement regarding proposed systems of Christian thought, but this again should not be viewed as a fatal objection against the theoretical Christian mind. There is also disagreement regarding the practical Christian mind, yes even regarding Barclay's own working out of some practical implications of biblical truth in the final chapters of his book, and yet this does not lead Barclay to simply give up in despair.

It seems to me that we are far too afraid of disagreement and

even controversy in the evangelical Christian church. Disagreement and controversy can be a very positive force in terms of waking us out of our dogmatic slumber and prying us loose from long standing human traditions which have replaced the spirit and intent of God's Word. Does Barclay really want to say that the disagreement inherent in the Protestant reformation should never have occurred?

We must also be very careful that our concerns regarding the disagreement that inevitably seems to accompany the development of the theoretical Christian mind is not rooted in a pernicious relativism that is so pervasive in secular thought today. Although Barclay himself objects to relativism, he is again not sufficiently aware of the fact that his concerns regarding disagreement are ultimately rooted in relativism (47f). The fact that Christians have difficulty arriving at a correct answer, does not at all entail that there is not a correct answer. The fact that Christians now disagree does not at all mean that someday the imperfect will disappear and perfect knowledge will be ours (I Cor. 13:9-12).

In the meantime, we must continue our struggle in working out the theoretical and the practical implications of the framework that is given to us in God's Word. We must not despair when we make mistakes, but humbly confess our failures when we become aware of them. In humility we must also always be willing to listen to criticisms of our own attempts to develop a Christian mind, as well as to others' attempts to develop the Christian mind that may differ from our own. Above all, we must in humility be listening to God's Word and allow this to be the ultimate judge of our fragile, yet important efforts to cultivate the Christian mind, both theoretical and practical.