

Book Review

Thinking: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God

John Piper

(Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010) 223 pages

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Pastor/scholar, John Piper, has written an easy-read apologetic for thinking as an integral and indispensable component of the Christian life that sets as its top priority to love God with all one's heart, mind, soul, and strength. His goal is less to delineate *what* to think and more to urge *that* we think. He also seeks to dissolve the false dichotomy of many Evangelicals—between *head knowledge* (thinking and use of one's intellect) and *heart knowledge* (faith, feeling, and experience). He pursues this by suggesting that the latter is impossible without the former.

Two key descriptors characterize this work—balanced and integrated. Piper neither polarizes the pursuit of God as a competition between the mind and heart, nor dismisses the nuances that Scripture itself gives to understand the differences and tensions that exist.

Those familiar with Piper's Reformed background should not too quickly dismiss this work as another rationalistic apologetic for an intellectual faith. On the contrary, the reader will encounter what is clearly a robust faith informed by careful biblical exposition of relevant texts in a spirit befitting the best of the Pietistic tradition. His overall strategy is to show that when the witness of Scripture is regarded, it is impossible to maintain the mistaken notion that a vibrant, passionate faith and love of

God can be maintained without serious and accurate thinking. A brief sampling of his seminal observations should prove the validity of his conviction.

He begins chapter 1 with an autobiographical sketch of his early struggles to resolve the tension between two seemingly irreconcilable tendencies: over-intellectualism and anti-intellectualism. I suppose that more than one academic will see something of themselves reflected in this honest portrayal. Piper uncovers the scriptural basis for this apparent tension—the many warnings against a knowledge that puffs up or the wisdom of the world that is contrary to the ways of God. Nevertheless, the Scripture clearly exhorts believers to think, read, and understand, which implicitly argues for careful and accurate thinking.

In chapter 2, he presents Jonathan Edwards as a seminal mentor in his intellectual pilgrimage, one who caused him to reject the either-or paradigm (mind vs. heart) for a both/and option—a passion to know and experience God that is grounded in “doctrinal knowledge of the principles of the Christian religion.”

Chapter 3 (“Reading as Thinking”) and chapter 4 (“Mental Adultery is No Escape”) is sure to find its way into supplemental readings lists for teachers of hermeneutics. Piper cogently presents the traditional goal

of hermeneutics (discovery of authorial intent) as the common sense approach to reading nearly any text. Moreover, he shows that accurate thinking is not only required and commended by Jesus, but the opposite reveals a form of “spiritual adultery.”

For many people who live on the pietistic side of the false dichotomy (faith vs. reason), chapter 5 will appear most controversial. Piper presents a clear and convincing case that thinking and rationality cannot be extracted from the process that leads a person to faith in Christ. Exposition of key passages demonstrates that faith in Christ is not open-ended, vacuous, or non-descript. The gospel that brings “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” is revealed in the facts of the gospel which must be read, understood, and, of course, believed. Rational thought evaluates those facts. While it does not lead one to faith, saving faith presupposes its presence. His point is well-taken, but Pentecostals will note the absence of any substantive role given to the Holy Spirit in this process.

Chapter 6 contains Piper’s excellent treatment of what it means to love God with all one’s mind. Piper deals with texts that serve to support his theological conviction: to love God is to treasure or value God supremely above all other reality. Such a goal cannot be realized without careful thinking and exegesis of many relevant texts that expound that love. God is not honored by groundless love. Nevertheless, right thinking (or behavior) is not equated with loving God. He paints a poignant picture of the affective side of love, but contends that its augmentation is contingent on right thinking about God.

Chapters 7 and 8 provide a primer for understanding relativism—a must for college freshmen or those who have never

critiqued relativism. Contained within is a strong denunciation of postmodernism’s rejection of absolute truth. The author persuasively and clearly shows the philosophical commitment to the denial of any or all claims to universal truth is dishonest and self-defeating. Moreover, it flounders alongside the teachings of Jesus (e.g., Matt. 21:23-27). Jesus affirmed what relativists deny: the existence of God who has not only revealed His truth, but placed it as the standard by which all competing claims are measured. The author’s indictment of “the immorality of relativism” is as compelling as it is disconcerting. Relativists often play duplicitous games of manipulating language to give the appearance of humility and openness, but are often a concealment of their doctrinal defection. The quote from J. G. Machen is powerfully convicting and relevant to our times. “It is not that the part is denied and the rest affirmed; but all is denied, because all is affirmed merely as useful or symbolic and not as true.”¹

The prescribed brevity of this review prevents comment on the very fine section of the “Challenge of Anti-intellectualism” (chapters 9-11), which portray the challenge as real and multi-faceted, but advocate that the solution is not to abandon careful thinking in pursuit of a knowledge and love of God. Instead, in chapters 12-13, Piper suggests a humble pursuit of knowledge that results in a deeper, more profound love of God and the consequent love of humanity that such knowledge serves.

¹J. G. Machen, *What Is Faith?* (1925), Repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991.