

Jacksonville Pastors' Conference
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“The Thinking Pastor”

Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything. 2
Timothy 2:7

Every one of you is a thinking pastor, as I want to be as well. It's why we're here at this conference. We long to be *more* than good thinkers, but we refuse to be less than good thinkers. Thinking is a privilege, entrusted to us by God, who is the original and perfect thinker. He created us in his image to discern and understand as part of our dignity and authority. And pastors especially should be good thinkers, because world redemption flows out through the gospel we preach, and the gospel is content, it is a matter of comprehension, it is to be believed through our powers of cognition. The gospel is not a drug, to dull our minds; it is doctrine, to awaken our minds. Jonathan Edwards taught us that the affections of the heart lie at the innermost depth of our beings; but the thoughts of the mind are the gatekeeper, the sentry on duty, challenging every new idea coming our way with “Halt! Who goes there, friend or foe?” And the mind either forbids entry to the heart or permits entry to the heart. It's why Howard Hendricks said, in a class at Dallas Seminary years ago, “Men, the most important thing a pastor does is think.”

How could it be otherwise? When we examine the New Testament for the verbs which have “the gospel” as their direct object, what do we find? The verbs with “the gospel” as their direct object include “preach,” “believe,” “proclaim,” “hear,” “testify to,” “obey,” “minister,” “present,” “declare,” “distort,” “advance.” All these verbs entail thinking. The gospel calls for thinking and gets nowhere without thinking. Moreover, what are verbs in the book of Acts that describe the ministry of the apostles? Those verbs include “reasoning,” “explaining and proving,” “trying to persuade,” “teaching accurately,” “powerfully refuting,” “pointing out,” “reasoning and persuading.” Strikingly, the opponents of the gospel in Ephesus, in Acts chapter 19, did not use reason and persuasion; they used mob intimidation and hysteria. But the ministry of the gospel

is a mind-awakening and mind-satisfying ministry, as we thinking pastors flood the understandings of our hearers with view upon view of the glory of Jesus. Looking outside the Christian church, Paul laments that “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 4:3). He grieves that “the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them” (1 Corinthians 2:14). But God’s redemptive release never comes through bypassing the mind; God’s saving power enters in by illuminating the mind with who Jesus really is. Jesus himself said to Peter that his confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, did not come through Peter’s own native brilliance but through the divine illumination of Peter’s mind (Matthew 16:16-17). And immediately after, when Peter foolishly pressured Jesus not to go to the cross, Jesus told him where his problem lay: “You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (Matthew 16:23). The apostle Paul told us that “to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (Romans 8:6). Isn’t it striking how Paul links the mind with the Spirit? We tend not to. But I believe Richard Lovelace, in his wonderful book *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, wisely helped us here: “In our quest for the fullness of the Spirit, we have sometimes forgotten that a Spirit-filled intelligence is one of the powerful weapons for pulling down satanic strongholds.” Paul thought that way. He is saying here in Romans 8 that what defines a Christian *as a Christian* is a mindset, a mentality, an alert new outlook converted *from* both laziness of thought and reasoning that blocks God out *to* vigorous reasoning that takes God and his gospel into account as the primary factor in all perceptions, considerations and possibilities. William B. Sprague, the Presbyterian pastor in the nineteenth century, defined revival as the glory of the gospel dispelling our dark thoughts of God, our misconceptions of God, our prejudices against God, as the clouds part and we see Jesus clearly in his mercy for all our need. Sprague wrote, “In all our efforts [as pastors] *to cure the disorders of the mind, or what is the same thing, to promote a revival of religion*, we are to depend chiefly on the means which God himself has appointed.” In other words, revival is the normal work of the gospel as we display Christ from Scripture with this impact: curing the sickly disorders of the mind, cleansing out the contemptible thoughts of Christ, the petty thoughts of Christ, so that he stands forth in people’s mental

vision full of grace and truth, and we all, with unveiled face, are beholding the glory of the Lord with transforming power. Sprague saw revival as the cure of our sick and weak minds by the powers of the gospel. If that is so, and I believe it is, then can we disagree with Howard Hendricks, that the most important thing a pastor does is think?

Paul himself urges us in that way with his words here in 2 Timothy chapter 2, verse 7: “Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.” J. N. D. Kelly, in his commentary, paraphrases the sense this way: “Work out what I am getting at.” That is, think it through, think way out into the implications, and Christ will give you the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16), for he “gives generously to all without making them feel foolish or guilty” (James 1:5, Phillips), and to the one who has shall more be given, and he will have an abundance (Matthew 13:12).

What Paul says here in this verse prompts us to consider three possibilities, three conceivable categories. *One, don't think, because the Lord will detour around your mind.* Real spirituality rises above the hard work of study and research and thought. Clearly, that idea is not of the Lord. *Two, think, because your autonomous mind is all you have and all you need.* You are above the Lord's understandings. And the Bible is so retro, and on the wrong side of history, and we just know better by now. Clearly, that idea also is not of the Lord. *Three, think, for the Lord will graciously enter into your diligent thinking to illuminate, to clarify, to prompt connections between Jesus at the center of biblical revelation and all the secondary and tertiary truths surrounding him, to give certainty and finality and conviction with a new awareness that is such a total outlook, such a global perspective, such a non-piecemeal but all-encompassing mentality, that you will grow with new eyes of gospel insight everywhere you look.* Isn't that what our verse is implying? “Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.”

There is no limit to the relevance and helpfulness of gospel-centered thinking, under the kind and patient and generous blessing of the Lord. We are not left to ourselves. We are not preaching our own hunches. The Lord calls us to engage in

Careful thinking, with the promise that he himself will meet us there. Our Lord is not pleased with passive and sloppy sermon preparation. He is pleased with expectant study and research and mulling over the biblical text with the help of lexicons and grammars and reference works and commentaries, and he blesses his faithful thinkers with insights into all the questions we face. He is not promising us infallibility, but he is offering us understanding so profound that the wisdom of a simple pastor who thinks diligently and faithfully before the Lord outperforms the opinionated grandiosity of a Ph.D. who isn't looking to the Lord. How did John Knox explain the great spiritual impact of the Scottish Reformation? Knox summed it all up this way: "God gave his Holy Spirit to simple men in great abundance." And so it was in the early church, with men like Timothy. And so it is in the modern church, with men like us. "The Lord will give you understanding in everything." If you are anti-intellectual, you will find no comfort in the Bible. If you are intellectually proud, you will find no comfort in the Bible. But if you are carefully and reverently thoughtful before the Lord, with a Bible always open, he will freely give you in great abundance things to say that are not of this world, not even of yourself, but are wonderfully of the Lord, for his glory in this generation.

Yes, knowledge can puff up, but love always builds up (1 Corinthians 8:1). And yes, there is such a thing as "philosophy and empty deceit" (Colossians 2:8). But it is also true that ignorance is not loving, and inactive minds are easily deceived. The ESV paraphrases the sense of 1 Corinthians 8:1 wisely: "This 'knowledge' puffs up," because what goes wrong is not knowledge; what goes wrong is the kind of knowing that makes us feel superior. What's always wrong is a spirit of self-assurance that gets church leaders saying, "We've got this. We know how this church should go. We're smart people. We're successful people. We know how things work." That "knowledge" puffs up. That arrogance doesn't even have the categories to understand how the work of God is done.

What then might be some differences between a thinking pastor and an unthinking pastor?

UnthinkingThinking

Has an office

Has a study

His door always open

His door sometimes shut

Wonders what to say on Sunday

Wonders what to cut out on Sunday

Great thinkers = mythical figures

Great thinkers = personal friends

Bored with the gospel

Fascinated with the gospel

Reads the Bible piecemeal

Sees the Bible in its totality

Sermons heavy with exhortation
that oppressesSermons rich with insights that
help and inspire

One of the most important things I've learned through the years is the superior power of insight over exhortation. Any moron can bark orders. But it takes thought and reflection to offer insights that *help* people. I got a call from a dear pastor friend who was struggling in his church. Eventually, I proposed this. Why not take one year and not "challenge" the people at all? Call a moratorium on "challenge" for one whole year. Instead, press more deeply into the Bible than ever before, calling out to the Lord for clarity, and offer your people new insights into God, into themselves, into the gospel. Some years ago, when I was going through a hard time in ministry and I read *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane* by Mark Rutherford, I was struck by this: "If your religion doesn't help you, it is no religion for you; you had better be without it." Exhortation doesn't *help*. Insight *helps*. But insight is harder to dig out of the text. We really have to think. But it's when our preaching starts lifting people up and equipping them as opposed to dumping on them. They're sitting there not feeling more guilty and small but thinking, "Hmm, yes, that's exactly what my life is like. And Jesus understands me *at*

that level and can help me *there*?” As we think it through to deeper levels than we ever have before, the Lord will give us that kind of understanding in everything, time after time.

The problem with the unthinking pastor is not a lack of giftedness or a lack of opportunity or resources; his problem is a lack of love for God. Jesus told us that the greatest commandment includes loving God with all our mind (Matthew 22:37). That means many things, but at the least Jesus was calling us to press into the glory of God with an inquiring intentionality filled with bright expectancy of endless discoveries. Here is what that love for God can look like in concrete terms. Here is a photograph of the desk of A. T. Robertson, the great New Testament scholar at Southern Seminary, on the day he died in 1934:



The man kept thinking and studying and pressing in until his final hours. I count over 30 books there on his desk, as he was loving God with his mind, because he had found through the years that it was there at his desk with his books open that the Lord met him and helped him and gave him understanding and insight. He reminds me of the apostle Paul, as an old man, near his death, who wrote to Timothy, “When you come, bring . . . the books, and above all the parchments” (2 Timothy 4:13). My own dear dad opened up his wonderful theological library to the family, for us to plunder his lifelong book acquisitions, only two months before he died and when he no longer had the ability to continue studying. I remember one time, when he was still in his prime, dad said to me, “Bud, pray for me, that I will keep studying and reading and learning and stay on a growth edge all my life. Some pastors, after they’ve preached for twenty or thirty years and they have a barrel full of sermons – they quit. They start re-using old sermons. I don’t want to do that. I never want to stop growing.” My dad loved the Lord with his mind, and the Lord gave him many understandings. He and A. T. Robertson are probably comparing notes right now.

How could it be otherwise? The whole story of the Bible is a story of thinking. In Genesis 1 God thinks the creation into glorious existence. God speaks, God names, God blesses, God commands, God evaluates. Later the Bible praises him for his creative genius: “In *wisdom* you have made them all” (Psalm 104:24). John Frame, in his book *The Doctrine of God*, writes this about the mind of God:

Theologians, especially in the scholastic tradition, are fond of talking about God’s intellect or reason, but these terms are rare or nonexistent in English translations of Scripture. These translations do use the term “mind” occasionally of God, representing a wide variety of Hebrew and Greek expressions: mouth, soul, heart, thoughts, purposes. The Bible has no interest in isolating a divine faculty called “the intellect” and discussing its relation to other divine faculties like “will” or “imagination,” in the manner of scholastic philosophy. The use of “soul” and

“heart” to describe the location of God’s thoughts indicates that *thought belongs to his whole self, his whole being*.

In Genesis 2 Adam thinks as he names the animals. His naming was not arbitrary labeling. He didn’t just slap a word on each animal, but he observed and considered and identified each one with a name appropriate to its nature, as we see from his final act of naming – the woman. Adam thought it through, one amazing creature at a time, bringing the creation under his dominion by differentiation and categorization gently appropriate to the various natures that were there by God’s creation. Adam was a thoughtful man.

In Genesis 6 Noah intelligently follows God’s blueprint when he builds an ark that can ride out the mega-disaster. By contrast, the hero of the Babylonian account of the flood is a man named Utnapishtim. The Babylonian story gave this man another name meaning something like “Super-Genius.” By contrast, the Bible says that Noah was a righteous man who walked with God (Genesis 6:9). But which of them was wiser? Utnapishtim built his boat as a giant cube, 180 feet in length, width and height, with a displacement of over 200,000 tons. It would have sunk like a stone. Noah built something like a modern battleship, 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, 45 feet high, with a displacement of around 43,300 tons – a sensible plan. Noah carefully followed God’s plan and he far exceeded Mr. Super-Genius.

In Genesis 12-25 Abraham believed the promises of God. How? Romans 4 says he considered and contemplated his own aging body and the barrenness of Sarah’s womb (verse 19). He took into serious account these realities standing against the promises of God. But he thought it through, dialing God into the equation. And Romans 4 says that Abraham became “fully convinced, fully satisfied, that God was able to do what he had promised” (verse 21). And the biblical text calls that fully convinced state of mind “faith,” justifying faith. Real biblical faith doesn’t reject thought; it doesn’t run from the difficulties; real biblical faith faces and thinks through the hard realities, all the way into clarity about God, taking us beyond every reason for despair, into a fully convinced settledness about God.

Moses, though “instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22), far exceeded the pagan mind. Prior to Moses, the cosmos was perceived as something like a haunted house, filled with ghost-like forces and powers called gods and goddesses. And the life of these gods was bound up within the creation. From time immemorial, the worldview of the pagans perceived reality as animated, so that the rivers and trees and winds and seasons were the movements of the gods. The winter rains, for example, were the god Baal fructifying the earth, and the summer drought was the god Mot defeating Baal. That’s why sex was involved in their worship. Their worldview demanded it as the trigger mechanism to bring Baal back to life and restore the life-giving rains. It was sub-rational. It was like voodoo, where you get a doll that looks like your enemy, say the magic words, and stick a pin into the doll that somehow causes misfortune to fall on the actual person. It was superstition, not logic. So when Moses wrote those ten magnificent words, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” in one sentence he wiped the universe clean of the filthy nature deities that had us groveling as he lifted high one transcendent Creator God and thus made reality logical and worthy of exploration rather than fear and rendered modern science not only possible but inevitable. Rational thought was made theologically authoritative by Moses.

Of Solomon the Bible says, “And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. . . . He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish” (1 Kings 4:29-33). Solomon was a Renaissance man. He connected the Lord with all of life. His mind was alive. He was fascinated by *everything*. He studied plants. He studied animals. He composed music. He did not compartmentalize God. He understood that everything is connected with our Creator, and therefore everything is fascinating.

Job was one of the deepest thinkers in the Bible, because life forced him into it. Chapter after lengthy chapter, he struggles and wrestles and wonders, and he never quits, until God brings clarity. The book of Job is a striking illustration of 2 Timothy 2:7, with its command to inquire and its promise to illuminate.

Psalm 1 is the entryway into the entire Psalter, a book of worship. And Psalm 1 leads us into worship through meditation and personally individual and even lonely thought. Isn't it interesting that the blessed man is a singular, while the wicked, the sinners and the scoffers are all plurals? This man thinks for himself. He reminds me of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:2, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Whatever else the whole world might think, whatever else other Christians might think, the blessed man and the apostle Paul, in a very decided way, made up their minds about what matters most.

The whole book of Proverbs is about thinking. Proverbs 2:1-11 is especially fascinating as an insight into the psychology of personal change and growth. The passage takes us deeper into the kind of thinking that our verse in 2 Timothy calls for and the kind of rewards the Lord gives. Proverbs 2 uses strong and varied terms like receive, treasure up, make your ear attentive, incline your heart, call out for insight, raise your voice for understanding, seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures. And verses 5-6 promise, "Then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God, for the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding." The gospel grabs me by the scruff of the neck, as I am in my smug and complacent sin and says to me, "You're going to change and grow, and you're going like it, because God has a purpose of grace and glory for you that is blood-bought, precious, sacred, and I will not let you go until you're fired up to learn and stretch and grow like never before."

Then there's Ecclesiastes. I'm not sure I could be a Christian without Ecclesiastes. It is so realistic about this futile living death we're stuck in. So many think we're now in the land of life, on our way to the land of death. But the truth is the

opposite. Our present existence is a living death, and we are on our way to the glories of life. The author of Ecclesiastes accepts the limits of this life, even the limits of thinking itself: “In much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow” (1:18). And “much study is a weariness of the flesh” (12:12). So we will never think our way out of the futility of this life. But part of wisdom is really staring at that fact, staring at the defeat that our present existence is – staring honestly at it until we see and realize and accept that nothing in this world will ever bring finality, nothing in this world will provide the ultimate human experience we long for. That honesty is insightful. It is so helpful to middle-aged men and older men who are wondering why they are so successful and, at the same time, so disappointed. And the wisdom of Ecclesiastes is this. *What makes your life worthwhile is not where it takes you in this world but where it came from in God.* In other words, if you want some consolation while you wait to die, don’t look out ahead into the better future you think you can achieve; look back to the One who so kindly gave you everything you have. His bestowments in this life soon pass away; but still, they should be enjoyed, for they come from his good hand.

The prophet Isaiah called the people away from orgiastic abandon to the idols into thinking in the presence of the Lord: “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord” (1:18). Throughout the length of the book of Isaiah, the prophet never stops reasoning with the people, calling them to take God seriously into account. He says, “Stop regarding man” (2:22). He says, “Let us walk in the light of the Lord” (2:5). He mocks the idolaters: “They know not, nor do they discern, for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, “. . . Is there not a lie in my right hand?” (44:18-20).

We could go on, but I hurry to Jesus, who was a genius. No one ever out-thought or out-argued Jesus. No one ever caught him off-guard. His critics said, “No one ever spoke like this man” (John 7:46). People wondered, “Where did he get this wisdom?” (Matthew 13:54). Someone greater than Solomon was walking among them (Matthew

12:42). Jesus saw himself as a scholar training scribes, that is, his disciples, to help us bring out of our treasure what is new and what is old (Matthew 13:52). When I supervised Ph.D. dissertations at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, one thing I always looked for was something old and something new. The work had to be in continuity with older studies gone before, but it also had to advance our knowledge in a new way. Thinking pastors do this every Sunday in their sermons. They sit under the tutelage of Jesus himself, our rabbi, and his other, more advanced disciples like Augustine and Calvin and Edwards, so that we are deepened with the theology of the past; but the Lord also gives us new insights and fresh articulation to advance the church's understanding today.

Paul, in Romans 1, puts his finger on our flaw as fallen human beings when he says that we suppressed the truth, we became futile in our thinking, exchanging the truth about God for a lie, so that God gave us up to a debased mind (Romans 1:18-32). Which is why our intellects cannot save us any more than our wills or virtues can save us. "But God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). In other words, when we shut God out of our arrogant minds and barricaded the door with our own plausible theories, we discovered too late that the lock on our doors fastened on the outside. All we had left was the endless recycling of our self-exalting fancies. We were incapable of release into God's larger conceptual world. But God had mercy: "Long my imprisoned spirit lay fast-bound in sin and nature's night; thine eye diffused a quickening ray; I woke, the dungeon flamed with light; my chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth and followed thee." His awareness-resurrecting grace is why we are now learning to set our minds on things above (Colossians 3:2). We are learning to prepare our minds for action (1 Peter 1:13). "Preparing our minds for action" means that Christian thinking loves practical outcomes. The thinking pastor is restless for revival breakthrough and bold obedience and gospel advance in this generation. The thinking pastor is not a double-minded man (James 1:8); he knows what he wants and he's going after it with everything he's got. A thinking pastor endures suffering, "mindful of God" (1 Peter 2:19), aware of God, always taking God into account. Really, those three words,

“mindful of God” – that’s the whole Christian life, the moment by moment reality we live in. We cannot be Christians at all without being constantly mindful of God.

So we return to these wonderful words: “Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.” In conclusion, I want to focus on just word: “The Lord will *give* you understanding.” From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace, and we always will (John 1:16). *Understanding is a gift of God’s grace, and he has plenty more to give every one of us.* And that means the unqualified can succeed, the underachievers can excel, the ordinary can be wise, and the blind can see. Grace means miracle, and miracle looks only for need.

I remember my dad praying in sermon preparation, “Lord, give me light.” It was that simple: “Lord, give me light.” Every one of us can pray that: “Lord, give me light.” And the Lord did give my dad light. His preaching was captivating, and no surprise why. It wasn’t that my dad had such great native ability, though he was gifted. But what mattered most, time after time, was that the Lord gave him understanding in everything.

I have here the Bible my dad owned during college. He dated it on April 23, 1944, at the University of Redlands. Every page in this Bible is marked up. But what moves me most deeply is something dad wrote in the margin at Isaiah 45:2-3. Handwritten in the margin are these words: “The Lord gave this on 5/31/53, after a hard day of preaching – feeling empty and powerless.” So there was my dad, a young pastor, sitting up in bed on a Sunday night, thinking, “I really stink at preaching.” He’s searching the Scriptures that evening for a word of encouragement from the Lord, and he lands on Isaiah 45, where God says, “I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name.” Dad knew the exegesis of that passage and its reference to Cyrus. But that night the Lord gave this verse to my dad as a personal promise of illumination. And God kept his promise many times. I never heard my dad preach a boring sermon.

Pastors who feel empty and powerless can have their ministry back, because the Lord gives understanding freely, kindly, repeatedly. Our part? Slow down, go back to basics, open the Bible, and think, because the Lord has told us that's where his grace flows. Let's go get it, guys!