

“Intellectuals: Loving God with Our Minds”

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Ninth in a Series *Loving God Many Ways*

Proverbs 1.5-7, 2.3-4, 4.4b-9

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The wise hear them and grow in wisdom;
those with understanding gain guidance.
They help one understand proverbs and difficult sayings,
the words of the wise, and their puzzles.
Wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord,
but fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1.5-7)

Call out for insight, and cry aloud for understanding.
Seek it like silver; search for it like hidden treasure. (Proverbs 2.3-4)

Let your heart hold on to my words:
Keep my commands and live.
Get wisdom; get understanding.
Don't forget and don't turn away from my words.
Don't abandon wisdom, and she will guard you.
Love her, and she will protect you.
The beginning of wisdom: Get wisdom!
Get understanding before anything else.
Highly esteem her, and she will exalt you.
She will honor you if you embrace her.
She will place a graceful wreath on your head;
she will give you a glorious crown. (Proverbs 4.4b-9)

Common English Bible (alt)

A few years ago, I was taking a course. It was called “Thinking Theologically.” I got to write a research paper. I titled mine, *“The God Who Suffers in Solidarity: An Exploration of the Doctrine of Divine Passibility.”* Exciting!

Exciting to me, that is. Does the eternal God suffer? Historically, a large majority of Christian theologians have said no, God does not suffer. However, in the past century that has turned right around. Now, most theologians say yes, God does suffer. Intriguing!

Intriguing to me, that is. So I set out to learn what I could. The best book I read on the topic

was *Does God Suffer?*¹ by Thomas Weinandy.² Here's the thing . . . he takes a position quite different from mine. But I loved his book! Reading it became for me an act of worship. Weinandy showed me more and more of who God is, and I was moved to praise. Understandably!

Understandable to me, that is. Because of all the spiritual pathways, the Intellectual pathway probably fits me best.

II

Since September, I've been taking a Sunday each month to look at different spiritual pathways. You know that we all have different personalities, different ways of doing things, different interests, gifts and weaknesses. We also have various spiritual styles.

I learned about this from a book by Gary Thomas called *Sacred Pathways*. He lists nine of them, and I've put them in your Sunday News.³

Our preferred pathways are the ways we express and live our love for God. They are ways we find our deeper connection with God. They are ways we offer ourselves to God in worship.

As I said, we've been doing about one a month. I hoped to finish by the summer. But other things intervened. So I'm cramming the last three in before the end of June. Last week we did Naturalists, who love God in the outdoors. Next week, we'll finish up with Sensates, who love God by engaging their senses.

Today, our focus is the eighth pathway: **Intellectuals**. We love God with our minds.

¹ <http://undpress.nd.edu/books/P00461?keywords=does+god+suffer>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Weinandy

³ Gary Thomas, *Sacred Pathways: Discover Your Soul's Path to God* revised edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). Here are his short definitions of each.

Caregivers love God by caring for others.

Traditionalists love God with our ancestors.

Activists love God by confronting injustice.

Contemplatives love God through adoration.

Ascetics love God in solitude and simplicity.

Enthusiasts love God by engaging mystery and celebration.

Naturalists love God outdoors.

Intellectuals love God with their minds.

Sensates love God by engaging their senses.

I've changed the order Thomas presents them, to fit my planned order for this series. I've also modified some of the descriptions.

III

Now, of course, we all use our minds. No matter our pathway, we can love God thoughtfully and intelligently. Intellectuals are not smarter or wiser. (Sometimes, definitely not!) What makes an Intellectual is not their intellect. It is what fires and stirs their love for God.

Intellectuals are awakened when they learn, when they discover, when they understand something about God: about who God is, about how God acts, about what God is doing. We love wrestling with things. We thrive on hard questions.

My friend Paul has trouble sleeping. He'll wake at 2:00 a.m. to pray. These days he's praying through the 13 volumes of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*.⁴ (Barth was probably the most important theologian of the 20th century.) Paul is reading this as part of his prayer and devotion to God. Each page has precious jewels of insight. Paul's goal is to pray through it before he dies. He inspired me, so last year I bought the whole set. My goal is to get through it too, before Paul dies. I hope he lives a long time.

Does that seem weird to you? If not, maybe you are an Intellectual.

Of course, most Intellectuals are not theologians. Once, I was part of a university chaplaincy. Most of my friends were studying things like law, physics, economics, nursing, biochemistry, languages. Together we were seeing how we can love God with our minds within our chosen field. A biologist can love God with her mind as much as a theologian can. God created everything, so exploring, examining and explaining the natural world can show us more about God and help us know God better.⁵

For Intellectuals, whatever their field, what they are studying helps them love God more and more.

Thomas Aquinas was the most important theologian of the Middle Ages. He found that studying and learning was "*an ascent of the mind to God*."⁶ That's a great way to put it.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_Dogmatics

⁵ I adapted part of this from Thomas, 211.

⁶ Ibid, 201.

IV

As I've done with all of the pathways, I want to mention some of the particular temptations Intellectuals face.

A big one is pride. With learning, knowing and understanding can come arrogance. We Intellectuals love big words, like *infralapsarianism*. Sometimes we fling them around pridefully, to show how smart we are.

By the way, anyone know what *infralapsarianism* means? Neither did I until I looked it up, and learned about the great *infralapsarian* versus *supralapsarian* controversy.⁷ Don't worry, I'm not going to try to explain it! But it does point to another temptation for Intellectuals. We are drawn to controversy. Now, a good debate can be very helpful. But too much, especially over minor things, can divide the community of Jesus. My guess is that a lot of church splits in history have been caused, or at least fueled, by Intellectuals.

Here's another temptation for us Intellectuals. We love ideas. We love knowing stuff. Cramming stuff into our heads feeds us. Sometimes, though, it does not fuel our actions. We love that part of Jesus' Great Commandment which tells us to love God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Yet what we learn of God in our minds must shape how we love our neighbours (the second and equally-important part of the Great Commandment). Intellectuals are good at knowing. Sometimes we forget to live out what we know.

V

Let me finish with some ways Intellectuals can nourish their love of God.

You certainly don't need to be a formal student to learn. I love learning about history, but I'm not a historian. Find something you want to learn about, and start learning. It is easier now than ever. There are books, of course, but also online courses and reliable websites. I can help you with some things: the Bible, Church history, Christian beliefs, ethics. If something in those areas interests you, I can help you get started.

A good practice is starting and finishing your learning with prayer. As you begin, ask God to open you to the truths God wants you to know, and the questions God wants you to wrestle with. Pray throughout. As you finish, thank God for that time you had, and offer

⁷ I just picked *infralapsarianism* because it's pretty obscure outside of Calvinist-Reformed circles. It is the belief that God chose to save some and condemn others after the fall of humanity. (*Supralapsarians* believe God decreed this choice before the fall. As a non-Calvinist, I think the debate is pretty much beside the point.. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Logical_order_of_God%27s_decrees)

your learning as a gift to God.

Earlier, I mentioned Thomas Aquinas, the medieval philosopher and theologian. He was brilliant. About three months before he died, he was still hard at work. It was December, and he was praying in the chapel just before dawn. He was weeping, kneeling before an image of Christ crucified. He had a vision. Jesus said to him, "*You have written well of me, Thomas. What reward would you have for your labour?*" Thomas answered, "*Nothing but you, Lord.*"

Then something happened about which Thomas never spoke. After that, he stopped working. His companion Reginald pleaded with him to return to his writing. Thomas simply said, "*Reginald, I cannot, because all that I have written seems like straw to me.*" This great thinker compared his work to straw! You know what straw is good for in a stable.⁸

What was it that moved Thomas? Had Jesus answered his prayer? Had Thomas put everything else down, to have his greatest reward, Jesus?

If you are an Intellectual, plunge into your learning with an eye to that greatest reward. May the excitement of your mind be a way to enter more fully into the joy of God our Saviour.

Amen.

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Aquinas#Final_days_and_.22straw.22_.281272.E2.80.931274.29