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Intellectual Love of God



by Neal Plantinga, Jr.

Readings: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Matthew 22:34-40

Matthew 22:37: [Jesus] said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

In one of his speeches, Howard Lowry tells of a time he attended a rehearsal of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in Princeton. He watched as the conductor tried to get the choir to sing the main chorale a certain way. (Imagine the hymn "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded" and you'll have the music.) The conductor kept rehearsing the choir, and they kept trying, but they weren't giving him the sound he wanted.

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So he called a halt, and he said something like this: "Look, your singing is skilled and it's full of talent, but it's not right for this music. The really good singing of music like this is congregational singing. You've got to sing this chorale more simply and deeply." And then the conductor told of his boyhood memories of going to church in Germany and the way people sang there. Finally, he said to the choir: "Now sing this chorale as if you were back in my childhood church."

So they sang again. They sang with simple depth, with deep simplicity. Of course they didn't sound exactly like a congregation. They probably couldn't have sounded like that if they had tried. The reason, of course, is that they brought all their musical understanding to the singing of the chorale, and so sang it with an educated simplicity, with a second simplicity, with a simplicity that lay beyond complexity.

We all know this phenomenon. According to a famous story, the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth was once asked to sum up the thousands of pages of his dense theology in one sentence. He paused. Then he said, "Jesus loves me; this I know; for the Bible tells me so."

Well, it's one thing for a child to recite these words, and quite another for Barth to say them. It's one thing to fool around at a piano by plunking out the notes of "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" with your index finger. It's another thing to hear that tune as a reprise, as a recap just after a fine pianist has played Mozart's variations on it. As a reprise the tune seems loaded.

Second simplicities lie beyond complexities and incorporate them.

And so it is with loving God. A child can do it. In some ways a child can become our teacher in

doing it. But there are also adult ways to love God, and these take some time to learn. Adults learn to love God considerately. Adults learn to love God with all the powers of an educated mind. Adults bring to God a love that has all the law and the prophets compacted in it.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” says our Lord. In other words, you shall love God with everything you have and everything you are. Everything. Every longing, every endowment, each of your intellectual gifts, any athletic talent or

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computer skill, all capacity for delight, every good thing that has your fingerprints on it—take all this, says Jesus, and refer it to God. Take your longing, and long for God; take your creaturely riches, and endow God; take your eye for beauty, and appreciate God. With your heart and soul and mind, with all your needs and splendors, make a full turn toward God.

That’s the great commandment, and Deuteronomy and Matthew give it to us in two versions. Have you ever noticed the difference? In Matthew’s gospel a lawyer asks Jesus what may have been a trick question: “Which is the greatest commandment?” And Jesus replies by quoting famous words from Deuteronomy 6, words that were on the lips of pious Jews morning and evening, words as familiar as “Now I lay me down to sleep.”

“Which is the greatest commandment?” And Jesus says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your MIND”—not with all your strength (that’s Deuteronomy), but with all your MIND (that’s Jesus in Matthew).

Here’s a change worth a little gasp. What if a four-year-old prayed one night, “Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my brain to keep”? You would notice.

“Love God with all your mind,” says our Lord. Take it as a charter for Christian intellectual life. Take it as a charter for Christian higher education. What’s the project for Christians engaged in these pursuits? What’s the big idea within them? The simple answer is that we’re trying to become better lovers. We want to love God with all our mind. Of course we want to offer our hearts to God, and we want to do it promptly and sincerely. And the same with our souls. But we are also intellectual beings, and Jesus Christ calls us to mindful love; he calls us to intellectual love.

“Love God with all your mind.” The command sounds simple, but it requires from us a second simplicity, a simplicity that incorporates a good deal of complexity.

So what does the command mean?

To love God intellectually is to become a student of God—a student who really takes an interest in God. Have you ever noticed that a fair number of Christians are not particularly interested in God? Some of them are ministers. These are people who don’t ask about God, don’t talk about God, and maybe don’t even think about God unless they really have to. Their interest in God seems merely professional.

Isn’t this strange? Shouldn’t we be somewhat *preoccupied* with God? Isn’t that what lovers do? They get preoccupied with their beloved. They notice things about the one they love.

And isn’t there quite a lot to notice about God? Isn’t God remarkable, after all—so surprisingly fierce, so surprisingly tender? You know, the Scriptures give us a portrait of God we would never have guessed. Sometimes the portrait makes us squirm. Think of some of the Biblical images for God. In the Bible God is lion and lamb, church and home, fire and water. God is not only a leopard, eagle, and bear but also a moth; not only a parent but also a child; not only a king and a warrior but also a barber (Is. 7:20) and a whistler (Is. 7:18).

Think of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The creeds give us a symmetrical doctrine of the Trinity—one God in three coequal persons. You would never guess from this tactful portrait that in Scripture the triune God is, so to speak, a bachelor father, his single son, and their agent. That’s God.

To love God with all one’s mind means taking

an interest in God and in the peculiarities of God. It means letting God be *God*. This is mere courtesy toward God, and you can't have love without it. The idea is that God gets to write his own autobiography. The idea is that God gets to write his own drama of life with us, including his own character description. Our calling is not to rewrite the script but to find our role there and fill it.

Mindful love of God means other things too. Dietrich and Alice von Hildebrand once observed that lovers give their beloved a good-sized benefit of the doubt. Thus, if our beloved acts well, we look upon the action as typical. If our beloved acts badly, we look upon the action as an aberration. To love somebody is to give that person a big line of moral and spiritual credit.¹

So with our love of God. God does not act badly, and if we really thought he did, then we ought to give up our religion. But it sometimes *looks* as if God acts badly. It looks as if God goes off-duty while millions of women and children are trafficked into slavery and while masses of Africans starve so wretchedly. It looks as if God blesses a lot of the wrong people and ignores a lot of the right ones. It looks for all the world as if God has a lot of explaining to do. That's what Job thought, and Job is in the Bible.

How do you love God when, for a while, you can't make any sense out of God? This is a question that is a lot bigger than I am, but I think we have to trust Jesus Christ. Even before his crucifixion Jesus suffered a lot more than most of us, and *he* says we ought to love God with everything we have. *He* clears the way to love God with a second simplicity. Doesn't God deserve at least the same benefit of the doubt that we give to anyone we love? It's a matter of faithfulness. It's a matter of intellectual humility. It's a matter of mere loyalty to God.

"Love the Lord your God with all your mind." It means giving God the benefit of the doubt because we know the limits of our understanding.

Further, loving God intellectually means taking an interest not only in God, and in the peculiarities of God, but also in the works of God. I'm thinking of creation in all its strength and majesty; creation in all its stupendous variety; creation in all its unguessable particularity. I'm thinking of humanity itself, in all its multicultural riches. For, of course,

God loves not only humankind but also human kinds, and it's our delight to love what God loves.

To respect creation is to show love for its creator. How do you respect creation? You give it room to be itself. You let it unfold before your watchful eye. You search it and know it with the preoccupation of a lover. Then you tell the truth about the actual state of creation, including not only its bird songs but also its terrible carnivorousness; including not only the way purple and coral impatiens thicken into great mounds of color in a cool September but also the way lions in Kenya beard themselves with the blood of fawns. You tell the truth even when you have to tell it about us—human creatures who look so much like God and act so little like God and have fallen so far from God.

To hear in the world both the song of God and the groaning of all creation, to prize what is lovely and to suffer over what is corrupt, to ponder these things and to struggle to understand them and God's redeeming ways with them—these are ways of loving God with all our minds. Becoming a real student of God and of the works of God—becoming alert, respectful, and honest in your studies—is an act of flagrant intellectual obedience because it is an act of flagrant intellectual love.

Let me add a word about where all this love must lead. Intellectual love must lead us out into the lives and habitats of other human beings in order to do them some good. Even that—doing people some good—sounds simpler than it is, of course. It's another of those second simplicities. Isaiah tells us right away in his first chapter that we have to *learn* to do good, suggesting that good in a fouled-up world is often elusive and ambiguous. The point is that we need to study lest we unwittingly do a half-cooked good, a dangerous good, a ruthless good. We need to study first and do good second.

For then, when we actually do it—when our studies actually bear good fruit in the lives of others—then once more God's kingdom comes and his will is done. Once more we become effective lovers of God. Once more we take a creature's role in the big project of building God's shalom.

So "love the Lord your God with all your mind." Let this command defeat every anti-intellectualism. What a sin this is and how much of the Christian

church happily commits it! Anti-intellectualism is anti-Christian. Never give in to it. Never concede anything to it. Never quit fighting against it. Anti-intellectualism is the sin of lazy people or of fearful people who content themselves with first simplicities and who resist the pain it takes to grow beyond them.

“Love the Lord your God with all your mind.” Let this command also defeat every selfish intellectualism, every worldly intellectualism, every idolatrous intellectualism. Let it remind us that the life of the mind has nothing to do with carving a niche for ourselves, or making a name for ourselves, or conquering some field of study as if it were an enemy. The life of the mind is an act of love, an act of reverence. It’s an act in which we get pulled out of our nervous little egoisms and combine together in a kingdom project so much bigger than any of us, so much grander than all of us, that we

cannot help getting stretched and ennobled by this move. Intellectual love of God is thus the antidote to proud scholarship and to envious scholarship and to angry scholarship—and to all the other deadly sins of scholarship. Intellectual love sets us free from anxious striving and opens the way for intellectual joy, the kind of joy that you can see in a fresh-faced nine-year-old.

“Love the Lord your God with all your mind.” Whether we are nine years old or ninety, whether students or professors or lifelong students, our job is to think more deeply, observe more alertly, research more thoroughly, and write more clearly—all in the service of love.

It’s a matter of mere obedience to Jesus.

Endnotes

1. *The art of Living* (Sophia Institute, 1965), 75.