

# Why Johnny doesn't think like a Christian and what we can do about it

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There are a lot of related questions that we could consider such as: "What does it mean to think like a Christian?" and "Why should we think like a Christian?" However, I am assuming that thinking like a Christian is critically important.

Every student is different so there will be a variety of different reasons, why Johnny doesn't think like a Christian. However, all the reasons are a combination of three basic reasons: Johnny won't, Johnny can't, and Johnny doesn't know how. We'll consider what we can do about each of these situations as well as reflect on what it means to "think like a Christian."

## **Johnny won't**

I suspect that there are a couple of factors that make this reason particularly appealing.

1. It's consistent with the Scriptures that say that *folly is bound up in the heart of a child* (Proverbs 22:15), *the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked* (Jeremiah 17:9), *there is no one who does good, not even one* (Psalm 14:3), and *they had rebelled against the words of God and despised the counsel of the Most High* (Psalm 107:11)
2. Our own experience reminds us that the problem with doing God's will often lies in our unwillingness to turn from other—at least superficially—attractive alternatives.
3. If Johnny **won't** do something, then as a teacher, I am not responsible—it's his fault, not mine. After all, even Jesus couldn't—or didn't—convert Judas.

Although there is always an element of truth in the reason, "Johnny won't," it is all too easy to use this as an excuse leading to resigned withdrawal, instead of an analysis leading to meaningful, focussed involvement in Johnny's life.

It may be that Johnny has never been motivated to think like a Christian by what he has experienced among those that claim to be Christian thinkers. If the message of our life isn't attractive because the love of Jesus isn't being demonstrated, it is no wonder that our students have no desire to become like Christ's representatives (2 Corinthians 5:20). Have we made Christian thinking alluring? attractive? persuasive?

If we really care for a person we will desire to understand why he is the way he is so that we can demonstrate Christ's love in ways that will touch his heart, mind, soul and strength. God knows every detail of our rebellious hearts but still patiently seeks us each individually even while we try to run from Him. He didn't abandon Jonah even though he had to suffer the consequences of his refusal to obey. We cannot ignore sin as Paul clearly reminded the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 5:9-13), but our actions are to bring change—repentance—not judgment. As Christian teachers we also need to be prepared to love Johnny both despite and because of what we know of his rebellion.

## **Johnny can't**

I suspect that Christian teachers often confuse "Johnny won't" and "Johnny can't." It is all too easy to forget that *the man [women, boy or girl] without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned* (1 Corinthians 2:14). No amount of effort or creativity can help someone who doesn't know Christ to think like a Christian. It isn't difficult; it is completely impossible. Many times when we think a person **won't** respond, the problem is that they **can't** respond because they are not indwelt by the Spirit of God. This can be a great problem in a Christian school where the majority of the students are Christians and virtually everyone can give the right answers. Knowing that Jesus is the Christ isn't enough for

even the demons know that (Luke 4:41, James 2:19). Just because a student does well on a theology test or Bible exam doesn't mean that they know Christ. Being a part of the organized church or its ministries doesn't mean a person has been born again. Even making a "decision" for Christ may have little more impact than a decision to lose weight.

A 1990 Gallop [sic] poll found that 74% of Americans claimed to have made "a commitment to Christ," yet Barna Research revealed that 84% of born-again Christians deny that there is a Devil, a hell, or a Christian doctrine. I am troubled that so many shallow salvation "decisions" in our Bible-believing churches end up as spiritual miscarriages. I have discovered that many respected evangelists and pastors estimate that over 50% of our church members may not really be saved! (Mt. 7:21-28) Dwight Moody lamented, "There is only about one in ten, who profess Christianity, who will turn around and glorify God with a loud voice. Nine out of ten are 'still-born' Christians." Dr. R.L. Hymers in his booklet, *The Falling Away*, provides the following estimates from renowned evangelists and ministers. Dr. W. A. Criswell said that he would be surprised to see 25% of his members in heaven! Billy Graham once estimated the percentage of lost people in evangelical churches to be 85% while Dr. A.W. Tozer put it at 90%! Dr. Rod Bell and Dr. Monroe Parker estimated 50%, while Dr. B.R. Lakin and Dr. Bob Gray believed that number to be 75%. In December 1958, the Oakland Tribune reported that out of the 26,000 people who came forward at a Graham crusade, only 13 people actually joined a church. That's less than 1%! (Raymond Kwong, *Why Many Professing Christians May Not Truly be Saved*)

We do no one a favour when we deal with rebellion instead of regeneration, when we try to substitute instruction for repentance. If we redouble our efforts instead of depending on God Himself to give new life by the indwelling Holy Spirit, we simply get in His way and hinder His work. We dare not forget that *no one can come to Christ unless the Father ... draws him* (John 6:44) so without Him we *can do nothing* (John 15:5). We never like to think that we are totally dependent so this may be why we so often miss the fact that our students can't think like a Christian because they aren't Christians. Of course, quickly judging a person with a problem as being unsaved can also be an excuse for inaction or incompetence on my part. Neither frantic effort nor lazy indifference is appropriate.

### ***Johnny doesn't know how***

This reason creates problems for the teacher because if Johnny doesn't know how to think like a Christian, it makes sense that his Christian teacher should teach him how to do it. If the problem is ignorance and not a lack of spiritual life or the presence of rebellion, then a large measure of the responsibility for the problem lies with Johnny's teachers. This is where the warning in James that *not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly* (James 3:1), becomes particularly pertinent.

Citing the findings from a just-completed national survey of 2033 adults that showed only 4% of adults have a biblical worldview<sup>1</sup> as the basis of their decision-making, researcher George Barna described the outcome. "If Jesus Christ came to this planet as a model of how we ought to live, then our goal should be to act like Jesus. Sadly, few people consistently demonstrate the love, obedience and priorities of Jesus. The primary reason that people do not act like Jesus is because they do not think like Jesus. Behavior stems from what we think—our attitudes, beliefs, values and opinions. Although most people own a Bible and know some of its content, our research found that most

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<sup>1</sup> "Defining such a worldview as believing that absolute moral truth exists, that it is based upon the Bible, and having a biblical view on six core beliefs (the accuracy of biblical teaching, the sinless nature of Jesus, the literal existence of Satan, the omnipotence and omniscience of God, salvation by grace alone, and the personal responsibility to evangelize)" (George Barna, ***Only Half Of Protestant Pastors Have A Biblical Worldview***, January 12, 2004)

Americans have little idea how to integrate core biblical principles to form a unified and meaningful response to the challenges and opportunities of life. We're often more concerned with survival amidst chaos than with experiencing truth and significance."  
(George Barna, *A Biblical Worldview Has a Radical Effect on a Person's Life*, December 1, 2003)

Either there is a huge problem among professing Christians in that most of them aren't really Christians or there is a huge problem in that most of them have never been taught how to think like a Christian.

### **What we can do**

Our first impulse may be to assume that modelling alone will show Johnny how to think like a Christian. It is certainly helpful if students see their teachers skilfully, faithfully and lovingly thinking like Christians, but the expectation that they will figure out on their own how it is done, is unlikely.

Unless I perfectly model Christian thinking, Johnny may imitate me and still not think like a Christian. Paul did tell the Corinthians to *follow* his *example* (1 Cor. 11:1), to *imitate* him (1 Cor. 4:16), but underlined that Christ was the One that they all were to follow. In fact, Luke commended the Bereans for checking out what Paul said (Acts 17:11) and Paul warned about accepting him or even angelic messengers if they didn't proclaim the truth (Galatians 1:8).

Secondly, seeing the truth lived out doesn't mean that a person will understand what they have seen or even be motivated to imitate it. Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life for 30 years and yet it was in His home town, among His relatives, that He experienced the most resistance (Mark 6:1-6).

Jesus lived with His disciples for three years and they didn't understand Him or think like Him. They had a terrible time with His explanations, but certainly just being with even a perfect teacher wasn't enough for them to learn to think like Jesus. Of course, every believer now has the Holy Spirit as his indwelling teacher (John 14:26) so we have a tremendous advantage over the pre-Pentecost disciples. However, we have been put together into the body of Christ so that we could learn from and teach each other.

This teaching will require that we articulate how to think like a Christian, as well as model the practise, just as it did for Paul and Jesus Himself. When our practise contradicts our words, we can be sure that students will imitate our practise for it is our practise that exposes who we really are and students become like their teachers, not like their lessons.

### **Pray for Johnny's teacher**

That's right, you're Johnny's teacher. You need to pray for yourself—and get others to pray for you also. God wants to use you to make a difference in Johnny's thinking but He won't force you to do anything. If you need wisdom—and we always do—you need to ask for it (James 1:5). If you need strength, patience, love, peace..., only Christ can provide it no matter how much training and experience you may have.

God's first purpose for you as a teacher is to change you to be more like Jesus. He'll use Johnny's problems to soften your heart, to bring you to an understanding of your dependence on Him. Johnny will become *like his teacher*—you—so God needs to first transform you so that you can have a transforming impact on Johnny (Luke 6:40)!

### **Learn to think like a Christian**

A teacher who wants to teach Johnny to think like a Christian needs to learn to think like a Christian himself.

Based on interviews with 601 Senior Pastors nationwide, representing a random cross-section of Protestant churches, Barna reports that only half of the country's Protestant pastors—51%—have a biblical worldview. "The most important point," Barna argued, "is

that you can't give people what you don't have. The low percentage of Christians who have a biblical worldview is a direct reflection of the fact that half of our primary religious teachers and leaders do not have one. In some denominations, the vast majority of clergy do not have a biblical worldview, and it shows up clearly in the data related to the theological views and moral choices of people who attend those churches." (George Barna, Only Half Of Protestant Pastors Have A Biblical Worldview, January 12, 2004)

Most of us as Christian teachers have a lot of work to do here. Do you know how to think like a Christian? I know that I often don't know how to think like Christ (Isaiah 55:8-9) even when I want to—and that's another whole problem (Romans 7). If a teacher doesn't think like a Christian, it is impossible for students to learn from him, but unless the teacher has a simple, concise, suggestive and memorable way to communicate what is involved, the students are unlikely to learn how to do it. What a wasted opportunity to set the patterns of the mind in a godly direction when the young mind is especially sensitive to God. It would be a tragedy if they do not learn to think for themselves or they expect others to do their "spiritual" thinking for them.

All too often we have been satisfied with collecting spiritual gems, but the truths haven't really impacted our thinking so our behavior is unchanged. Christian teachers have often had few models of Christian thinking and almost no teaching about how to do it. I know that I'm still scratching the surface after a lifetime in fine Christian churches, 3 years of theological education, and 25 years of involvement with Christian schools.

The world is working hard to develop ways to teach for understanding and to teach critical thinking skills. Changing minds is very difficult work indeed. It is no surprise that Christians haven't developed a fool-proof way of teaching someone how to think like a Christian. There's a spiritual battle involved. Everyone's been working on the process independently, so we collectively make little progress. We have been more concerned about winning souls than engaging the mind with the things of God.

### **Pray for Johnny**

Although I fear that talking about praying for Johnny seems like a trite cliché, it is the most important thing that any teacher can do for a student. Thinking like Christ requires that a person's mind be controlled by Christ for only Christ can think like Christ. *For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us* (1 Cor. 2:11-12). The problem is a spiritual problem and human solutions will not solve it.

We don't know why Johnny doesn't think like a Christian, but the Spirit of God that examines hearts and minds (Psalm 26:2) knows him completely and can guide us in the most appropriate way to deal with him. Whether the problem is rebellion, spiritual lifelessness or spiritual immaturity, we need to pray for God's discernment rather than depend on our own insight for we can only see the external behavior while God knows the motivation of the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).

God can and will give Johnny the desire and ability to do His will (Philippians 2:13), but He has committed Himself to work through our prayers. We may not understand it, but the example of the New Testament and its clear command is to *pray continually* (1 Thessalonians 5:17) *for everyone* (1 Timothy 2:1). Because Paul wanted the Colossians to know God's will and have *spiritual wisdom and understanding*, he prayed for them from the day he first heard of them (Colossians 1:9).

I heard of a teacher who came early every day for over 20 years to sit in the seat of each of her students and pray for them. Will that make a difference in Johnny's thinking? Of course it will! When we as teachers acknowledge that we can't do anything without Christ, but allow Him to do anything He wants in and through us, we are beginning to model the thinking of

Christ. He said what our Heavenly Father told Him to say (John 12:49-50) and we must believe that unless He speaks to us, we also have nothing to say to anyone else.

If you are like me, it is a lot easier to talk about prayer than do it. I need to be changed in my thinking about the importance of prayer so that I can make a difference in the thinking of my students. It is a transformed teacher that God can use to transform Johnny and prayer is an expression of a transformed way of thinking about the relative importance of my efforts and God's. Anything and everything else that we do cannot defeat the enemy who seeks to blind and bind us. Only God can do the impossible of bringing life from death, freedom from bondage, faith from fear, and He has committed Himself to working through our prayers. However, prayer alone isn't enough.

### ***Teach Johnny how to think like a Christian***

Few students get instruction on how to think like a Christian. Critical thinking is taught, but not Christian thinking. Teaching a scientific method of approaching issues is considered a necessity, but it seems to be assumed that students will somehow absorb a Christian perspective without instruction. The influence of the character and methods of a teacher are incalculable, but if this "implicit curriculum" can be reinforced by the explicit, the learning is even more effective. If a teacher is needed to give direction and assistance in learning all the other material in a school, it is not surprising that many students won't "get it" unless they are taught Christian thinking skills and engaged in guided practice.

We teach students how to have devotions, do Bible study and lead worship, but few get instruction on how to think like a Christian. Learning how to relate everything in life and learning to God and His Word does not happen automatically. Modelling is critical, but developing the mind of Christ in a student in cooperation with the Holy Spirit who "will teach...all things (John 14:26) is too important to be left to spontaneous moments that invade the lesson plan.

Paul told his student, Timothy, that he was to learn so that he could teach others who would be able to teach others (2 Timothy 2:2). Developing the ability to relate all of life and learning so that you can influence your students is a short-term goal. God's long-term goal is to change us so that we can influence our students and prepare them to teach others what we've taught them. If we are serious about preparing our students to teach others we will seek to give them communicable concepts that they can share. Subconscious absorption is difficult to communicate.

### **What Johnny needs to know**

I believe that there are two essential elements to thinking like a Christian. The first element of Christian thinking is an understanding of what God is doing and the second is the practice of relating everything to God.

Even at age 12, Jesus knew He had to be involved in His *Father's business* (Luke 2:49). He knew what God was doing and was committed to being involved. Jesus said we are His friends, not *servants*, because *a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I [Jesus] have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you* (John 15:15).

When Johnny relates all of life and learning to what is known of God and His ways from the Bible, he is thinking like a Christian. The essence of Christian thinking is this kind of Biblical integration. It will transform everything because God is no longer restricted to a special "sacred" box while treated as irrelevant in the rest of "secular" life. Even when we don't know what He thinks about some specific subject, the conviction that it is all related to Him because He made everything and sustains everything for His purposes, will motivate us to search the Scriptures and His creation. Anything unrelated to God casts doubt on His ownership, mocks His involvement and rejects His purpose. We can't be satisfied with ignorance and indifference isn't an option. We need to love Him with *all our mind* (Mark 12:30) and think clearly about



everything, taking *captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ* (2 Cor. 10:5). Warm Christian feelings and charitable Christian activities cannot be sustained without Christian thinking.

A random collection of spiritual “gems” may be valuable, but not very useful. Like a box of unsorted stamps it may contain valuable items but the “collection” is unattractive and difficult to sell. The mind is strongly dependent on patterns that are developed through use. Good, but unorganized ideas are unlikely to impact thinking in any consistent way. It is, therefore, important that we have the “big picture” so that we know where to fit the details and can communicate what God is doing to someone else.

### **The *Visual Valet***

It is not easy to find teaching models publically available to help teachers and students develop as Christian thinkers. None are adequate for every situation, but like the “loaves and fishes” Jesus can multiply what is available to meet the needs. I would like to offer the *Visual Valet: Personal assistant for Christian thinkers and teachers* for your consideration.

The *Visual Valet* is a visual organizer that can help Johnny understand what God is doing. Diagrams are more easily remembered and more suggestive for expansion because not everything is specified. Because Christian thinking is something that everyone should do all of the time as they think about anything and everything, it is important that the model be simple and concise. Because so many connections are involved, it is better to have a model that is suggestive rather than prescriptive. If a person begins to think in a Biblically integrated way, they will develop their own specific techniques, but it is important that they have a good foundation and actually get started. After that it is possible to evaluate resources that will enhance and further develop the skill. By avoiding any kind of mechanical approach there is a danger that the person will be uncertain how they should proceed, but I believe the advantages of a more open system out-weigh the possible problems.

The *Visual Valet* first of all serves as a reminder to do Biblical integration. It is an “unforgettable” reminder that God has always been and will always be involved with this universe as well as individual lives. Good intentions are not enough when it comes to practising Christian thinking; it must be done to make a difference. The most thorough model that is unused is less valuable than one that is simple but actually is put into practise.

God’s intention is not that people should simply know more about Him and become proud, or understand more of Him and become more accountable, but that knowledge and understanding lead to wisdom where truth transforms a life from the inside out. Knowing about Christian education and Biblical integration and understanding their importance are not enough. God wants us all to think like Christians so that education will be Christian in nature and not just in name. Any other response to His truth would be foolishness, not wisdom. Wisely choosing His way will produce disciples who will be able to teach others also.

The *Visual Valet* is also a framework for organizing all that God says about Himself and His creation so that pieces of Biblical knowledge are not unrelated to each other or unconnected to other concepts. However, the framework is expandable so it does not need to be abandoned with further study.

A common framework allows different people to share their insights and collaborate effectively. Christian education based on Christian presuppositions runs contrary to the patterns of thinking of society and even the experience of most Christians. Changing from non-Christian education to Christian education will require teachers to work together to make a difference in their schools and classrooms. At least in accountability pairs but preferably as an entire faculty, teachers can help each other by sharing this simple and concise visual outline.

The *Visual Valet* is a guide for making the connections that are central to biblically integrated Christian thinking. Because it is suggestive rather than prescriptive, it is possible for people of

different interests and abilities to profitably use the same model. It can be adapted and developed in as many ways as God gives insight, but there is a constant check with the BIG picture of God's activity. Details can always be analyzed separately, but the four major themes of a Biblical worldview—creation, fall, redemption, and fulfillment—will keep the imagination sanctified and obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Most important, the *Visual Valet* can be taught to students so that they can learn to think like Christians. Biblical integration is not merely an exercise for academics pursuing advanced studies, but is an essential part of every thinking Christian's life. If each generation is to be *transformed by the renewing of their mind* (Romans 12:2), it is vitally important that they be taught from the earliest age to connect God's special revelation of Himself in Christ as recorded in the Bible with everything else in His creation.

This diagram could become the sign of someone special—the Christian thinker. It is simple enough to be understood by young children and open-ended enough to be used by sophisticated scholars. May it be like a Swiss-army knife, a practical tool enabling you to make progress in the great project of becoming a Christian thinker and teaching your students to be Christian thinkers also. May God transform us as teachers so that He can use us in the process of transforming our students so that they can be used to transform their world for Him—transformed teachers transforming the transformers.

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### **Visual Valet sources**

The *Transforming Teachers* website, [www.transformingteachers.org](http://www.transformingteachers.org), has the *Visual Valet* available for reading online and to download as a PDF.

Contact Harold Klassen at [hklassen@teachbeyond.org](mailto:hklassen@teachbeyond.org) to purchase a copy for 8 EUR plus shipping.