

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### ***Does Sin Affect the Human Ability to Think Clearly?***

In 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, the Apostle Paul makes an astonishing argument about the Holy Spirit's role in enabling the Christian to think, reason and embrace truth. He contrasts the "wisdom" of the world with the "wisdom" of God. God's wisdom is revealed, and human wisdom without God leads to foolishness and the defiant rejection of God's wisdom. But when we have the Holy Spirit, this changes. Paul utilizes a logical argument:

*Major Premise:* The Holy Spirit searches the deep things of God

*Minor Premise:* We receive the Spirit at salvation.

Therefore, we know God, His wisdom and his truth.

Indeed, from verse 16, we learn that the Holy Spirit not only enables us to understand the truth of God, but to also "receive" it (i.e., to welcome it, to embrace it). The result is that we have the "mind of Christ" (see v. 16), meaning that we have God's perspective on all things: We begin to see and understand things the way our God does!

Why is this work of the Holy Spirit so necessary in the area of our minds? Because of sin, we cannot think properly about things and we reject the wisdom and truth of God as a consequence. In theology, this is what is called the noetic effect of sin. Theologian Albert Mohler has provided a helpful summary of this noetic effect of sin. He posits fourteen "facets of the daily intellectual life of human beings that are directly linked to the fall. While the noetic effects of the fall are inexhaustible, it is helpful to sketch out some of the ways in which they are noticeable:"

1. Ignorance: had there been no fall, there would have been no ignorance. The things of God, even his invisible attributes, are clearly seen in creation, but the fall has clouded our ability to see these things. Ignorance would have been impossible until the fall, whereas it is now axiomatic.
2. Distractedness: every single human being has theological "attention deficit disorder." We are easily distracted.
3. Forgetfulness: everyone has committed to memory things that he has now forgotten. Forgetfulness would be impossible had we not sinned.

4. Prejudice: intellectual prejudice is one of our besetting problems. The problem is that we do not know ourselves well enough to know our intellectual prejudices, because we are prejudiced even in our thinking about our prejudices. One of the great achievements of the postmodern mind-set has been the forcing of an honest discussion of intellectual prejudices.
5. Faulty perspective: because of our finitude, we all have a finite perspective on reality. Had we not sinned, we would all share a right and accurate perspective. As it is, we are shaped by cultural, linguistic, tribal, ethnic, historical, individual, familial, and other blinders. We do not see things as others see them, but we assume that others who are right-minded must see things as we see them. The famous “parable of the fish,” often attributed to Aristotle, asks the question, “Does a fish know that it is wet?” The idea conveyed in the parable is that if you want to know what being wet is like, then do not ask a fish, for he does not know he is wet.
6. Intellectual fatigue: with the fast pace of modern life and the multitude of matters pressing for our attention, we can begin to feel depleted in our intellectual capacities and mental reserves.
7. Inconsistencies: it would be bad enough if we were merely plagued with inconsistencies. The bigger problem, however, is that we do not even see them in ourselves — though they are more readily detected by others.
8. Failure to draw the right conclusion: this is a besetting intellectual sin. Most people do not even recognize that they are drawing the wrong conclusions. There is the willful denial of and blindness toward data.
9. Intellectual apathy: if we did not bear the noetic effects of the fall, we would be infinitely passionate about the things that should be of our infinite concern. Our intellectual apathy, which works its way out in every dimension of our lives, is one of the most devastating effects of the fall.
10. Dogmatism and closed-mindedness: we hold to things with tenacity that we should not hold onto at all, because the intellect seizes upon certain ideas and thoughts like comfort food. They are only taken away from us with great force, even if reason and data directly contradict them.
11. Intellectual pride: the Scripture states that “‘knowledge’ puffs up” (1 Corinthians 8:1). One danger of higher education is the besetting sin of human pride that comes alongside human achievement, for intellectual achievements are some of the most highly prized trophies.
12. Vain imagination: Romans 1 indicts vain imagination, exposing the fact that we make images of God out of created things — even “birds and animals and creeping

things” (verse 23). As the psalmist writes, “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?” (Psalm 2:1).

13. Miscommunication: translation is difficult, and miscommunication is one of the great limitations upon intellectual advance. We live on the other side of both Genesis 3 (the fall) and Genesis 11 (confusion of language at Babel). From the story of the Tower of Babel, we understand that this issue of miscommunication is not an accident. Some of these noetic effects are because God has limited our knowledge.
14. Partial knowledge: we know only in part, and sometimes we do not even know how partial our knowledge is.

Mohler concludes: “All of these noetic effects of the fall are tied to the will. These effects influence not only our intellectual activities but also the way our intellectual activities work their way out in other aspects of our lives — our emotions and intuitions. Human knowledge works in what might be called ‘intellectual auto-pilot.’ We operate the only way a sane person can operate. Our emotions and intuitions are shaped by our intellect, which is shaped by our will. As such, we find ourselves not always thinking in an openly rational, self-conscious way.” Only the work of the Holy Spirit can begin to correct these noetic effects of sin, so that we develop the “mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16).

See Albert Mohler, *The Briefing* (4 May 2017).