So I’ve been asked to write an article on “thinking Christianly”.

Oh yea? So do a riff on fides quorums intellectum for a few pages and you’re there.

Well, that’s a possibility, but there are some problems with that.

Problems? What problems?

When we say that faith seeks understanding, the question that comes to my mind is, “understanding what?” What is it that faith seeks understanding about?

Itself, of course. Faith seeks maturity and deepening by means of coming to an understanding of itself. Isn’t that what theology is all about?

Yes, that is what theology is all about, but I’m not always so sure that such a theological enterprise – even under the rubric of fides quorums intellectum – contributes that much to Christian thinking.

I’m not following you.

I guess I’m wondering why we think that Christian thinking is limited to theological thinking. I’m wondering why the understanding that faith seeks is an understanding of itself.

What else could it be?

Christian thinking could be a way of thinking that permeates, shapes and directs all of our thinking, all of our acting. The understanding that faith seeks could be an understanding of everything.

Look, I love theology, but if theology attempts to understand everything doesn’t it start to get too big for its britches? Doesn’t it start to have aspirations of royalty all over again?

No, because this kind of thinking, this kind of understanding isn’t the unique and sole aspiration of theology. Theology has a servant role in helping the people of God to think Christianly, but thinking Christianly isn’t a matter of thinking theologically. At least not in the more narrow definition of theology.
I’m still not getting it. If the character of our thinking needs to be Christian – even if it is about everything (though I don’t quite get that either) – then how could it ever be Christian without theological deepening and direction?

I admit that I’m actually conflicted on this myself. I agree that thinking Christianly needs theological deepening and direction but I’m decidedly underwhelmed by the ability of Christian theology – at least in the modern age, and from both more liberal and more conservative perspectives – to engender anything close to integrally Christian perspectives in areas like engineering, economics, social science, the arts, medicine, urban planning, and pretty much every other area of cultural endeavor.

Come on, there is a plethora of books out there dealing with all kinds of themes like these from a theological perspective.

Fair enough, and I don’t want to overstate my case. Indeed, I rejoice in the veritable renaissance of Christian reflection on these and many other areas of life. But I’m still uneasy with much of what I read. The worse of this literature amounts to little more than absolutistic pronouncements on God’s view of things like the movies, philosophy, bio-ethics and politics. There seems to me to be so little engagement in this kind of heavy-handed imposition of a Christian worldview.

Wait a minute, aren’t you yourself one of those ‘worldview’ guys?

Yea, but sometimes I wish that I’d found another word to describe what I’m struggling towards. I’m convinced that an absolutistic worldview is always bad news and always fails to really engage the world.

Why is that?

Because an absolutistic perspective can’t deal with the dynamism of a changing world. It gets reduced to a crabby contrarianism at best and a militant triumphalism at worst. Either be upset about the world around you or start strategizing to take the world over for Jesus. Neither option accords well with Scripture, I think.

Scripture? That’s precisely what these folks insist they are resting upon! God’s eternal, infallible and immutable word!

Immutable words can’t take flesh.

Why not?

Because flesh mutates. Flesh grows, changes, sweats, moves in time. Flesh bleeds when it is pierced with nails. Immutable words don’t bleed.
What?

Don’t you get it? This view of Scripture, this kind of absolutism, has no flesh to it. It’s got no balls!

WHAT?

I’m sorry I know that it is impolite to refer to our Lord and Savior’s scrotum – even if it is only metaphorically. But this is what I’m getting at. If we are going to think Christianly then we will need to do so from a place of engagement, a place of embodiment, a place of blood and suffering, of pain and disappointment, a place in time. Indeed we will need to think Christianly from a place, from a location in the world. And if that location is to be Christian, if that location is to be where Jesus is, then it will need to be a location of suffering. It will need to be a location of powerlessness, not power. It will need to stand with Jesus on the margins, not at the centre. Or if it is at the centre, then it will likely be on trial for blasphemy and treason. If it isn’t there, then I don’t know how it can be Christian.

Kind of sounds like a liberationist perspective.

Perhaps it is. Perhaps we need to agree with liberation theology that not only does the gospel have a preferential option for the poor, but that this entails an epistemological privileging of pain. When Christian faith seeks understanding it goes to the cross, it goes to the places of oppression, injustice and suffering. Because if faith can’t find understanding there then it can’t understand either itself or the world in which it is to be practiced.

And a Christian worldview and the Scriptures don’t help with this understanding and this practice?

No, of course they help. Without the Scriptures there is no understanding. Heck, there probably isn’t any faith either. And I still think that the Scriptures serve to shape a community’s worldview. It’s just that I think that an absolutistic worldview imposed on reality is neither biblical nor respectful of the reality on which it is imposed.

So what’s the alternative?

This is going to sound trite, but maybe the alternative is to stop thinking so much and start being.

I can’t believe you said that.
Neither can I. And I’m not trying to set up that tired old thinking/being dichotomy all over again. But I am trying to combat the intellectualism of most worldview thinking that seems to assume that if we think right, then we will live right. There seems to me to be not one shred of evidence to support that assumption.

So again, what’s the alternative?

We need to understand three things. First, worldviews are narratively shaped. If we are going to retain the notion of worldview at all, then we need to sever it from an intellectualism whereby worldview is just a code word for what we used to call systematic theology. Worldviews have cognitive content, but they are not cognitive systems. They are storied visions of life, and the best way to be deepened in a particular worldview is by hearing, celebrating and retelling the stories that are its foundation. Second, worldviews – storied visions of life – shape us not so much by retooling our cognitive frameworks, but rather, by capturing our imaginations. Perhaps that is the weakness of the overly visual metaphor employed in the term ‘worldview.’ What I’m getting at, and what I think cultural anthropologists like Clifford Geertz and Mary Douglas were getting at, is the way in which a worldview shapes the way in which one feels, experiences, senses, responds, cares, and engages the world. Maybe imagination helps us here. The issue isn’t just how you ‘see’ the world but also how your imagination shapes the way in which you construe the world. Not just what you see, but how you see it, why you see what you see, and what hope you have for what you see. Imagination isn’t content with simply seeing the world as it is, but has the audacity to imagine that the world could be different.

That’s two things, what’s the third?

The third thing has to do with character and virtue. If we understand worldviews as storied visions of life, then the way that a such a storied imagination shapes life is through the forming of character. By indwelling this story, by allowing this story to shape the identity of the community, we become certain kinds of people. We are characterized by certain kinds of virtues.

Okay, I’m starting to understand where you are going with this understanding of worldview – even though you are now talking a language of narrative, character and virtue that I would identify with people like Hauerwas who is decidedly anti-worldview.

Yea, well sometimes you end up with odd bedfellows.

I don’t think I’ll touch that one with a ten foot pole.

Good idea.
But I still don’t see how this gets us much further with ‘thinking Christianly’. Nor can I see how the Scriptures will function in all of this.

Well, let’s consider Colossians.

Somehow I knew you would end up in Colossians. Do you think that Colossians can answer every question that we ask in the 21st century?

It’s not a matter of this ancient text ‘answering’ every question. Sometimes a close reading of this text helps us to ‘raise’ new and different questions. But, yes, I think that the sheer scope of Paul’s vision in Colossians shapes our imaginations in such a way that we have deep resources to engage our world, to live faithful lives and even to think more Christianly.

Didn’t you and Sylvia Keesmaat find a political ethic and even an ecological ethic in Colossians 3.

Yes, in Colossians Remixed we thought through the narrative ethic that Paul proposes and specifically asked how the virtues that he identifies with the new self in Christ – the character of Christian life – would play out in our political and ecological lives. I think we can do the same thing with the question of thinking Christianly. If the virtues of Christian character rooted in the story of Christ crucified, buried, risen, ascended and coming again can be understood to engender a political and an ecological ethic, why not read these virtues again and imagine how they would shape an epistemology?

I thought you were pushing it when you found political and environmental ethics in the text, but this is clearly over the top.

Take a look at the text for second. If we are concerned about thinking Christianly and we want that kind of thinking to not be a narrowly intellectualistic exercise but a way of interpreting the world precisely to engender faithful praxis in that world, then Colossians just might be our text.

You’ve still got my attention.

Okay, so try this out. The comprehensiveness of Paul’s vision of the gospel of Christ is undeniable in the letter.

True enough. In Christ ‘all things’ have been created. He is ‘before all things,’ ‘in him all things hold together,’ he has ‘first place in everything,’ and ‘through him God was pleased to reconcile all things.’ The poem in 1.15-20 is clearly breathtaking in its scope.

And ‘all things’ means ‘all things,’ right?
No argument.

But notice that Paul is also preoccupied with themes of knowledge in this letter. He prays that they will be filled with all knowledge, wisdom and understanding (1.9); he wants to teach them in all wisdom (1.28) because in Christ are ‘hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (2.3).

Yes ... go on.

And when he makes the shift in chapter three from the vices of the empire to the virtues of the kingdom he says that we have been clothed with the new self ‘which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its Creator’ (3.10).

Yes ... wonderful stuff. We are renewed in the image of God - renewed to our full humanity and our full calling as God’s stewards in creation. I love it.

Amen. But notice that this is renewed ‘in knowledge’ according to the image of the Creator. Exactly what is entailed in that knowledge is something that I’m not sure we can unpack in this dialogue, but it includes things like knowledge of what God is up to in the world through Jesus - that is, a deeper knowledge of the narrative of redemption. And it also entails, I think, deeper self-knowledge of who we are called to be as God’s image-bearers in a world populated by the false knowledge of idolatry.

Sounds good, but how does that help us to ‘think Christianly’?

The same way it helps us live our political and ecological lives Christianly. Take a look at the virtues that Paul lists and ask yourself, what would my thinking, my imagining, my construing of the world look like if it was shaped by these virtues?

You mean that list that includes compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness and love in Colossians 3.12-14?

That’s the list. Christians are shaped as people of compassion. How do such people think? How do such people know the world? When they look at the world, what do they see, and where do they look?

If compassion is a matter of sharing pain, then I would imagine that this would entail a knowing the world through the eyes of pain.

Yes, maybe we could call it a suffering epistemology. A way of thinking that is invariably drawn to where the blood is. A way of thinking that embraces the world in its suffering.
And what about kindness, humility and meekness?

Maybe folks who embody these virtues are people who eschew an arrogant and aggressive epistemology of subjection and mastery precisely because they know the world through a humility that recognizes its own limitations, its own fallibility and finitude, and that takes a stance of receptivity to the world. Instead of an aggressive realism such virtues call forth a listening epistemology in which our knowing of the world is a matter of epistemological stewardship. We are called to care and tend the world through our knowing. We are called to interpret the creational glossolalia all around us, hearing the creation in its joy and its sorrow.

I’m not sure that I really know what all of this means, but let’s keep going. How about patience and forgiveness?

I’m not sure that I know what all of this means either, but wouldn’t a knowing suffused with patience be the opposite of our culture of quick fixes, and cheap answers? Wouldn’t patience entail a slower, more careful attention to the world that will take the time to foster an intimacy in our knowledge of the world? And wouldn’t a forgiving spirit suggest a more communal, less individualist, and more relational and less antagonistic, approach to knowledge?

Might change the nature of debate in church and academy, in politics and business.

Yea, and maybe in our domestic feuds as well.

It all comes down to love, doesn’t it?

That’s not too surprising, is it.

No, not when you consider that the Hebrew word for knowledge is the same as the word for sexual intimacy.

Or that the Hebrew word for truth is the same as the word for fidelity, or troth. And that while Paul wrote in Greek he still thought in Hebrew.

This reminds me of N.T. Wright’s take on epistemological love.

That’s right (no pun intended). To know is to love. Knowing Christianly is a knowing that affirms the reality and goodness of the other, and longs to enter into a covenantal relationship of intimacy, troth, betrothal with the world. Christians are incurable world lovers – even when it hurts – because we follow one who so loved the world that he gave his only son ....
And so the apostle goes on to write, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts ... be thankful ... let the word of Christ dwell in you richly ... teach one another in all wisdom ... with gratitude ... giving thanks" (3.15-16). Kind of interesting that he repeats the idea of gratitude three times in two verses.

Actually he'll bring it in one more time in the very next verse; “And whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (3.17). Thinking Christianly is a matter of engaging the world in deep, deep gratitude. This is an epistemology of gratitude that refuses to take the world for granted, but always receives the world as a wonderful gift. The word of Christ dwells in us, he writes. The word of Christ, the word of the gift of all gifts, takes up residence in our community, in our thoughts, in our hearts, in our day to day cultural endeavors. And when that word dwells in us, we teach in wisdom. We seek to see things whole, we strive for a knowing of the world that is directed to integrality, to healing, to communality. And we seek to know that world in a way that brings healing because we know the world through suffering eyes, and bleeding hands. We know the world through the eyes of the Prince of Peace on a cross. We know the world and imagine the world from the perspective of shalom, and seek the shalom of this world of enmity, strife and war.

What about worship?

Yes, what about worship?

Remember that the text places this teaching in wisdom, this growing in knowledge – maybe even this notion of thinking Christianly – in the context of worship: “and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God” (3.16).

That’s a good place to end. You see, one of the insights of so-called worldview thinking was that all of life is necessarily religious. We are, if you will, homo religiosus. Everything that we do – in word or deed, Paul puts it in the next verse – is done in service, indeed in worship. The only question is, which God is worshipped in our words, our thinking, our imagining, our hoping, and our deeds. Whether we are talking about choosing a stock portfolio or a spouse, writing poetry or urban planning, local politics or the preservation of an ecozone, having babies or starting a business – whatever we do is done as an act of worship of one god, rooted in one narrative and committed to one vision of authentic humanity or another. I guess that thinking Christianly is a matter of placing all that we do before Christ as an act of worship.

Quite the calling.

Yes, quite the calling.