

# The Cost of Intellectualism

After a full semester of furiously studying philosophy, obsessing over essays, and panically preparing for my part in my university's theology conference, I happened to pick up Thomas à Kempis' devotional book, [\*The Imitation of Christ\*](#).

The experience was a substantive one in many ways—I learned more about what à Kempis thought, encountered his analytical evaluation of careless Christianity, and was reminded of the basics of faithful living—but the concept that most struck me was à Kempis' strong opinion on knowledge. Indeed, the first several chapters of the book promoted one central truth: Knowledge, when elevated above living well, is useless.

## What À Kempis Believed

À Kempis didn't *quite* use those words. And he certainly wasn't against good thinking, as the rest of his carefully considered book proves. Rather, à Kempis was pushing against an inordinate focus on knowledge, especially when it came at the cost of righteous living.

In the second chapter of *The Imitation*, à Kempis asks this: “What will it avail thee to dispute profoundly of the Trinity, if thou be lacking in humility, and art thereby displeasing to the Trinity?”

The quote is referring to the Christian conception of God as the Trinity, or the idea that God is one essence in three persons, a theological concept that has baffled thinkers for centuries. It is futile, à Kempis says, to understand the mystery of God without living in a way that pleases Him.

In another chapter, à Kempis again references the idea of divine pleasure and displeasure, telling his readers, “Truly, at the day of judgment we shall not be examined [on] what we

have read, but what we have done.” Though à Kempis recognizes that “learning is not to be blamed, nor ... knowledge ... [knowledge] being good in itself,” he recognizes that “a good conscience and a virtuous life is always to be preferred before it.” In other words, knowledge is not a replacement for—and should not be elevated above—moral actions.

## The Contemporary Problem

Growing up in an intellectually oriented church community, I was taught from a young age to value the life of the mind. The adult Sunday school lessons I attended as a child were usually devoted to refining and documenting theology, and the church would often discuss and analyze contemporary Christian doctrine, living, and practice. Though the men and woman around me handled the knowledge well, I constantly had to reconcile the tension between my mind (which spun out logic like candy) and my living (which never perfectly paralleled what I knew).

As I moved through my undergraduate degree, I began to see that I wasn't the only one struggling. Intellectualism—as a substitution for morality—was apparent in my university classes, especially ones centered on theology. While my professors navigated the thinking commendably, students would argue eloquently about the nature of God and the necessity of virtue, all the while neglecting the pursuit of God and the cultivation of virtue. Some (myself included) took inordinate pride in their intellectual accomplishments, forgetting that our world is not intended only as an object of analysis.

Broadly, then, the problem is hypocrisy: the declaration of one idea and the acting on another. More specifically, the problem is the unwarranted emphasis on the intellect: the subtle, sometimes unconscious, belief that *knowing* about virtue equates to *living* a virtuous life.

As I read through the short chapters and pithy sayings of *The*

*Imitation of Christ*, à Kempis reminded me of what I was beginning to forget: We are not first and foremost required to argue intelligently. Rather, we are called to live well.

## What This Article Is Not

Don't get me wrong: I am *not* advocating an overhaul of the mind. I've seen intellectual carelessness, both in the church and the broader cultural scene, and I don't want to see more. I do understand that much of knowledge is a gift: When given its appropriate place, it is admirable and worthy of pursuit.

Still, the seriousness of the subject matter deserves a serious reprimand. There are those of us who believe—subconsciously, perhaps—that knowledge alone determines our maturity, worth, or ability to claim praise. Yet, in and of itself, knowledge does none of these things. While knowledge may direct us in acting honorably, merely having knowledge falls short of determining a well-lived life. “Surely high words do not make a man holy and just,” à Kempis reminds us, “but a virtuous life makes him dear to God.” For, whether we believe in God or not, à Kempis' point is sound: Knowledge, when elevated above living well, is useless.

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