

Introduction—How to Use this Study Guide

In developing this study guide to *The American Mind Meets the Mind of Christ*, we have tried to make a resource that is as simple, flexible, and user-friendly as possible. The study guide that follows includes an introduction and discussion questions for each of the nine essays in the book, written by the authors themselves. Of course, this study guide doesn't stand alone, and assumes you will be reading along in the book itself. Nevertheless, we also wanted to provide some thoughts as to how you might structure your time and study together, hopefully answering any questions you may have.

Getting Started—There is no study per se designated for Robert Kolb's preface to the book, but it is a good idea for all involved to read it before delving into the essays. Dr. Kolb's opening remarks provide the backdrop to the essays as a whole, as well as the purpose and goal toward which the book is driving. Discussing his preface may provide for some good initial dialogue about what the group hopes to get out of the study together.

How Many Sessions?—We have intentionally made this study guide to be flexible enough for any number of sessions. You may pick one essay for each session you are together, select appropriate essays for the number of sessions and interests you may have, or group essays together to study in tandem within a session. The book itself groups the essays around five main themes: Health and Wealth; Individualism and Community; Religion and Religiosity; Science and Culture; and the Media. Because the study guide is downloadable, you can choose to print the whole guide, or only those pages you need for discussion. Finally, the authors wrote their individual guides with roughly an hour-long session in mind. If your sessions will go longer or shorter than that, plan accordingly.

Use of Scripture—In various places, the authors point to Bible passages worth studying, either in the essays themselves or in this guide. Yet, this study guide does not necessarily impose a thematic or overarching way to study the Bible as part of your discussion. Thus, we would encourage the study leader to plan for how Bible study may or may not be incorporated with the reading and discussion of the book.

Other Media—You will also notice various places where other media (film clips, other writers, etc.) can be incorporated into the study. Use them at your discretion. Obviously the leader will need to plan ahead to ensure facilities are multimedia capable.

We pray God's richest blessing upon your study and conversation of *The American Mind Meets the Mind of Christ*. Copies of the book can be obtained by contacting Concordia Seminary Press at sempress@csll.edu or 314-505-7117, visiting the Concordia Seminary campus bookstore, or going to www.amazon.com.

Feel free to contact us with any questions or comments via the phone number or email provided above.

In Christ,
The Editors



Living in the Land of Milk and Honey

Dale A. Meyer

No doubt about it, America is a materially blessed nation. Most of us are thankful for that, but does thankfulness guarantee that you're right with God? What is the right attitude about getting and accumulating abundant material possessions? The book of Deuteronomy offers guidance. The children of Israel had gone without much during their wilderness wanderings but in Deuteronomy God promised them abundance but also counseled them about the blessings and dangers of prosperity. Those lessons apply especially to us, who were redeemed "not with gold or silver but with Jesus's holy precious blood and his innocent suffering and death." (Small Catechism, Second Article)

1. Share your reactions to the Ricky Bobby family prayer. Are you in the habit of offering prayers at meal time? If so, what prayers do you use? Are they from the heart, memorized prayers, sincere, or empty ritual? Does the fact that Ricky Bobby mentioned Jesus make a difference?

2. Has the Great Recession changed your attitudes toward material possessions? Has it changed your purchasing habits? Saving habits? Has it had an impact on your prayer and worship life? Can less be more? Has Jesus been a part of your reevaluation of things during the Great Recession?

3. Has American capitalism gone beyond meeting basic needs and made us addicts to consumerism, a "consumptive" disease? Did any of the passages from Deuteronomy about prosperity surprise you? Which ones? Why? The people of Israel were entering a physical promised land and so the passages applied directly. How do the passages apply to us who live in the further revelation of the New Testament and in the light of Christ?

4. The Large Catechism says, "Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God" (Kolb-Wengert edition, 386). In what ways do your attitudes about getting and accumulating physical possessions reflect who truly is your God? Why is consumerism a tempting substitute for the true, unseen God? Have you experienced disappointments because you invested your being in the false god of stuff? Can you have it both ways? See Matthew 6:24. But still we need material things to live. What is the tension we experience as we live both spiritual and physical lives? How did Jesus handle the tension during his visible ministry? What are some habits you can adopt to get it right? In what ways are words physical? How is the heard and read word of God a bridge between the physical and the unseen? How do the sacraments reflect both? Do you use religious art to keep the balance between physical and spiritual? How are the commandments about coveting an invitation not to be addicted to consumerism?

5. Not everyone in America has abundant possessions. Do you have a God-given duty toward those who don't? Are you personally involved in helping those who are blessed with less, or have you left that to the government, the church or to social agencies? What is the impact of economic inequality on the future of our country? Do you practice proportionate giving? To whom do you donate? What are the benefits to you and your family from getting involved personally with those who are less well off?

Individualism as the Insistence on my Rights

Joel Biermann

The Creator of the universe established this world with an intentional and deliberate design—one that directs and informs all the creatures occupying this world. Whether or not one chooses to name this truth the natural law, this premise is foundational in Christian thinking . . . or should be. Yet, this starting point for our narrative is not easily reconciled with the story told by the framers and present culture-shapers of the United States of America (or, for that matter, any other country in the western world, and many beyond the traditional “west”). It is important, then, that Christians realize and embrace the fact that to be faithful to their calling they must be, at the most fundamental level, counter-cultural. Of course, expecting and urging people to be different than their neighbors is to invite a certain amount of “pushback.” Nowhere are the counter-culture nature of Christianity and the inevitable pushback from those ostensibly bearing the Christian name more evident than when discussing the notion of rights. The culture around us asserts the foundational reality of human rights, and the consequential right to a seemingly infinite list of derived rights—the sorts of things once considered privileges, blessings, or gifts. Christians, however, are called not to claim rights, or even to argue on the basis of rights. Rather, we live by grace—creatures at the receiving end of the Creator’s giving. In addition to the following, the questions in the penultimate paragraph of the essay can also serve as avenues for thought and discussion.

1. What examples of the demand or expectation for personal rights have you witnessed in the last week?
2. How do you personally react to the idea that you have no rights?
3. What difference does it make to speak of *blessings* or *gifts* rather than *rights*?
4. How would your congregation be different if it began to see itself as the community of faith that mattered more than the needs or rights of the individuals who comprised it?
5. Why might a congregation resist shifting the focus from individual fulfillment toward being a community that simply celebrates God’s gifts and strives to conform to his will?
6. How would an emphasis on teaching that people have “no rights” affect the church’s task of proclaiming the Gospel of forgiveness in Christ?

**Individualism, Indulgence and the Mind of Christ:
Making Room for the Neighbor and the Father
Leopoldo A. Sánchez M.**

Theology that is practiced in North America must deal with the broader Western shift to the individual in his human and historical complexity. How does the church proclaim Jesus Christ to those who value individual reason (modernity) and, above all, individual perspective (post-modernity) and voice (post-colonialism)? Her witness will discern between a relatively positive “individualistic impulse” in society that foment creativity and a strong work ethic, and a sinful “impulsive individualism” which upholds the self to the exclusion of the neighbor. In our society, the church’s call to behold Christ the Servant and embody servanthood can channel self-indulgent individuals into persons who make room for the other. Care must be taken, however, not to equate the need for some indulgence with selfishness. An overworked North American society will also benefit from the church’s call to behold Christ the Son and embody his openness to leave the crowds to find refreshment and rest from the busyness of life in prayer-dialogue with God the Father.

1. We have made a distinction between a relatively positive “individualistic impulse” and a sinful “impulsive individualism.” How are these forms of individuality manifested among the people served in our congregations and communities? What are some ways in which you can make individuality a means to the end of serving the neighbor?

2. In a society where the turn to the human subject is valued, are there some ways in which one can make room for individual reason, perspective, and voice in the life of the congregation? How do we foster a bold use of reason, perspective, and voice that is not only captive to but also confident in the Word of God as the answer to our deepest human sufferings and hopes?

3. The apostles chose deacons to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). Lutherans dedicate more time and effort to the proclamation of the Word as a means of grace than to prayer as a response to the Word. This is justified. And yet the apostles still were devoted to prayer. What are some concrete ways you might consider to make room in your life for prayer? Are there areas of your life that take away from time to both hear the Word of God and pray to him? How might making room for prayer-dialogue with the Father before and after work change your schedule and family life?

4. Well-known is the monastic motto *Ora et Labora* (Pray and Work). Luther was critical of monks who spent too much time praying to please God but not enough time fulfilling a vocation in the world to serve their poor neighbor. Perhaps, today we have the opposite problem: we live in a society where people spend too much time at work and give up their time with the Father. How does our congregation become an oasis of refreshment in a society filled with weary and overworked people? What are some concrete ways in which you might communicate intelligibly to the surrounding neighborhood that the church is a place for refreshment?

Pluralism and Mix-and-Match Religion

Paul W. Robinson

Every American has some experience with “mix-and-match” religion either through his or her own faith journey or through observation. Most people seem to treat religious convictions like a buffet, taking a little of this and a little of that as it suits them. The roots of this condition can be seen in the mindset of pluralism, the side-by-side existence of multiple faiths. Whether pluralism is of the philosophical, political, or ethical variety, it represents the final triumph of Enlightenment thinking about religion and sets the stage for our current mix-and-match condition. America is, especially by comparison to Western Europe, a nation of believers. But what Americans believe is another question. Religious influences abound and many refuse—or on principle claim to be unable—to decide between competing truth claims. Faced with this situation, congregations can be tempted to try too hard to solve the problem, when perhaps the most important thing they can do is be the church. Being the church means living what you believe, particularly when it comes to the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus Christ.

1. It can be argued that pluralism is a necessary condition for democratic government. Why would you agree or disagree?
2. Has pluralist thinking shaped your own understanding of the world in any way?
3. What examples of mix-and-match religion could you add to those given in the essay?
4. How could or does the phenomenon of mix-and-match religion affect your outreach efforts?
5. How could or does your congregation demonstrate that it is a place of forgiveness?

American Mystic Spirituality David R. Schmitt

The American mystics considered in this essay are neither traditional nor orthodox in belief. They hover on the edges of the church, attending to experiences or teachings we may have forgotten, and they ask us to discover with them how surprisingly powerful and beautiful these things are. It would be easy for mystics and members of the church to stand in silent judgment upon one another: the church could judge them for their lack of a clear confession of faith in Jesus Christ and they could judge the church for forgetting the mysterious presence and working of God. Instead of allowing such silent judgment, however, this essay seeks to begin a conversation. It may appear awkward at first, tentative, and filled with struggles to understand one another. Over time, however, such conversations could lead to connections: connections between what the American mystics experience and what Christians believe; connections between what the American mystics value and how Christians practice their faith; and ultimately connections between the American mystics and Christ as our words and life experiences build bridges and open doors into the life of faith for them.

1. In American mysticism, mystics express their struggle not in terms of sins that they have committed and for which they need forgiveness but rather in terms of meaninglessness. What are some of the life experiences that create a sense of meaninglessness in the lives of Reynolds Price, Thomas Merton, and Annie Dillard? What other experiences could you add to the list? How can the congregation speak the word of God and enact the mercy of God in ways that address this sense of meaninglessness?
2. American mysticism embodies a two-fold irony. On the one hand, the mystics ironically find themselves returning to a church that they have abandoned only to discover a living God who makes his presence known there. On the other hand, the faithful believers in the congregation worshipping God are ironically ignorant of or not attending to the things of God that the mystic sees and experiences. As you consider the mystical experiences of Dillard, Price, Merton, and Ohlson, what are the basic orthodox teachings about God that they recognize through their experience? In what ways could our words and deeds give the impression to others that we have forgotten about or do not value these teachings? In what ways do we confess these teachings in our life together and in our lives in the world?
3. Dillard's mystical experience asks people to consider God's presence and work in their lives as opening doors "from eternity" rather than "upon eternity." To clarify the difference between the two ideas, name some bible passages that open the doors "upon eternity" for us, inviting us into hope of eternal life, and then passages that open the doors "from eternity" for us, inviting us deeper into faithful living within this world. Some people reduce Christianity to only one or the other in its message. Give some specific examples of what happens in worship, in one's reading of Scripture, in hearing sermons, in prayer and devotion, and in one's relationship with God and with others when one thinks only in terms of one or the other teaching. How do you struggle or maintain an appropriate balance between these two teachings in your own life?
4. One of the insights that American mystics offer the Christian church is the belief that God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ has filled daily life with sacred meaning. What are ways in which the American culture and our religious practices tend to turn our attention away from the sacred meaning of God's work in daily life? Beginning with your vocation, consider what aspects of daily living God has enabled you to see as sacred. How do you give witness to that sacred service in your words and your deeds in the world?
5. What are some of the ways in which American mystics threaten our beliefs? How can we understand and handle such threats so that we may faithfully witness and converse with those who are attracted by the experiences of American mysticism?

Science, Technology, and the American Mind

Joel P. Okamoto

This essay deals with two ways that science and technology affect the beliefs and values that this collection calls the “American Mind.” It first considers how science and technology are sources of both hope and fear, that is, it considers how science and technology have a *religious* significance. They are often looked upon as “gods” in the sense that we depend upon them for good things and for protection from want and harm, and they hold out ways by which human creatures might “play God.” The essay also considers how modern science raises the question of *truth*. Scientific theories and methods have expanded knowledge and understanding of the physical world so massively and successfully that science is sometimes considered as a source and norm for the truth about all things. The essay concludes with a few thoughts about implications for the life and witness of the Church today.

1. The essay contends that science and technology are sources of hope and fear for so many Americans because they are essential to most aspects of American life, and because they have delivered so much already and promise to deliver so much more in the future (97–98). In this way they can be “gods” in the Large Catechism sense. Read what the Large Catechism has to say on the First Commandment. Then identify and explain specific ways that science and technology are “gods.” Finally, remembering that science and technology do not have to be gods and also that we really cannot do without them in some sense, consider what it might mean to make more faithful use of them.
2. The essay recommends that Christians would respond appropriately by making sure to portray their God as the Creator of all things and be clear about the implications of this claim for teaching and life. Christians not only should respond to specific questions and concerns raised by science and technology, but also should foster teachings and practices that lead readily to believing in God as Creator and to understanding ourselves as creatures and the universe as creation. Then Christians will be better able to understand and deal with the “American Mind.” To promote discussion of this issue, consider and discuss different answers to such questions as, “If we portray God as the Creator, then how would we understand and talk about...

“the identity and the mission of Jesus?”

“the practice of evangelism?”

“the contents and contours of the Gospel message?”

“the meaning of Christmas and Easter?”

3. The essay argues that “science” and “technology” have contributed to self-centeredness and selfishness. By themselves scientific theories and methods along with machines and instruments do not do this. Science and technology promote self-centeredness and selfishness by the way in which they fit into American life. Identify how science and technology fit into American economics, politics, education, health care, and communications. Then discuss how their fit sustains or even promotes self-centeredness and selfishness. Finally discuss how your congregation’s activities (e.g., worship, evangelism, education) might either promote this kind of life or provide an alternative to it.
4. The essay points out the widely-held conviction that modern science has eroded the authority of the Church. Much of that erosion has happened because the Church has rarely tried to argue credibly for the authority of the Scriptures. How could this happen? And what kind of account of the Bible does the Church now need to teach and defend?

Cinema and the American Mind

David I. Lewis

Any serious effort to understand what constitutes the American mind should, among other aspects of American life, take into account that realm known as “American popular culture.” Any discussion of American popular culture should include a consideration of American films. Film could well be called the defining medium of American popular culture of the twentieth century as well as the one medium through which American popular culture has exerted great influence outside of its borders. By studying together American cinema, we may better understand what is true and good in the worldview of “pop culture,” but also how in light of our calling in Christ, we are to live in witness against many of these beliefs, attitudes, and ideas.

1. Do you think that the movies predominantly “affect” or “reflect” American culture? Why or why not?

2. According to Ideological film theory, American cinema, especially in its classical period (1929–1967) reflects “the American capitalist ideology.” How do you see this portrayed in American films even today? What is problematic about such an ideology co-opting a popular art form, or such an approach to studying film?

3. If time and space allow it, watch the opening sequence to *It’s A Wonderful Life*, in which the angelic figures tell the story of George Bailey (James Stewart) up to the present moment of the movie (a good place to stop could be the end of George’s dinner conversation with his father about 19 minutes in, but feel free to watch as much or as little as the group wants). Discuss the depiction of George in light of this essay’s summary of the archetype of the “ideal male.” How does George as a character play both *for* and *against* the “ideal male,” especially in relation to George’s father (Peter), brother (Harry), or Mr. Potter? What role does prayer play in how the film sets up this characterization and tension? What does the film’s opening say about the way America conceptualizes community and public life?

4. “Next, when considering the *experiences* that lay at the heart of ‘the American capitalist ideology’ in the films of this era and how these are evaluated, perhaps some very interesting debate may arise among observers, debate that may not be so easily resolved” (p. 135). Read the two paragraphs that follow this sentence on pages 135–136 in the book, and take some time to debate how you would answer the second paragraph’s questions about how we might consider the implications of such “part[s] of the American story” as the War of Independence, industrialization, and the Great Depression. How might we view these things differently in light of current events like the Great Recession?

5. Read Philippians 1:27–2:18. What strikes you about Paul’s characterization of the “mind of Christ” (2:5)? What aspects of Christ in this passage belong solely to him and which can we, as his disciples, emulate in our lives? How do movie characters like George Bailey or Ethan Edwards both exemplify and contradict Paul’s understanding of Christ’s “mind” and life? What other movie characters—either “ideal male” or “ideal female”—could you compare and contrast to Paul’s exhortation here?

Media as a Source of Information and Identity

Anthony A. Cook

Especially as electronic forms of media (the Internet, social media, etc.) have taken center stage in contemporary life, it is easy to see how media has become a predominant source of information and identity for Americans. It is hard to envision any aspect of our lives that isn't "mediated" in some way. By understanding media as "mass communication" and how it supplies both information and identity to our lives for both good and ill, we can begin to differentiate our lives in light of Christ and suggest uses of media with the contexts of the Christian life and the church.

1. For the sake of our discussion, we have defined media here as "mass communication" and offered the seminal definition of Charles R. Wright (pp. 146–147). What other ways might there be for defining "media" in the 21st century? How would you define "media" today?
2. The essay looks at the four primary activities of mass communication—surveillance, correlation, socialization, and entertainment (pp.147–151). How do you see these activities playing out in contemporary forms of media? Which of these do you think plays the most significant role? Can you define other activities that the media perform in American culture and life?
3. How have you seen the effects of the media play out in your own contexts—community, church, family, friends, yourself?
4. The essay proposes the theory of the "patchwork persona" as a way to understand American identity in a media-saturated society. Does this image ring true in your experience? What are its pros and cons? How would our witness to the gospel speak to such a view of identity?
5. One could say the essay ends with a kind of call to arms to utilize forms of media for the sake of the gospel. How have you seen Christians using media in your own contexts, either positively or negatively? How is your own church or community using media for both information and identity? What are new ways you can use media for those purposes?