

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Exposition of Romans		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	156		Gary L.W. Johnson
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Renewing Our Minds

“Give me understanding,” prayed the Psalmist, “and I shall live” (Psalm 119:144). Five times between verses 144 and 159 the theme of *life* is accented. The Hebrew word translated *life* is CHAYAH. It means not merely to stay alive, but to enjoy a rich and meaningful life, one that is strong and full of vitality.¹ This thought is echoed in the words of Jesus: “I have come that they may have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10). What is the link between this kind of life and *understanding*? “The understanding,” wrote Thomas Manton, “is the great wheel of the soul, and guide of the whole man.”² It is true that the rest of our faculties follow the dictates and decisions of the understanding. In the quaint words of the King James translation of Proverbs 23:7, “as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.”³ The quality of our life is dependent then on how we think. How do we naturally think? The Bible describes the *natural* condition of the human mind with terms like: *foolish* (Titus 3:3); *ignorant* (I Peter 1:14); *futile* (Ephesians 4:17); *depraved* (Romans 1:28); and likened to *darkness*⁴ (Acts 26:18; Romans 1:21; Ephesians 4:18; Colossians 1:13). This language is used to describe how men think in reference to the true God and spiritual realities. It is not simply a question of intelligence, for we recognize that fallen man can use his mind to accomplish many things. John Owen observed: “Be men otherwise and in other things never so wise, knowing, learned, and skilful, in spiritual thing they are dark, blind, ignorant, unless they are renewed in the spirit of their minds by the Holy Spirit.”⁵ Psalm 10:4 says of the wicked, “in all his thoughts there is no room for God.” Who are these wicked people? The wicked are unbelievers, which is what we all once were. Wickedness is indeed a harsh word. We tend to think that that word is reserved for a special class of people like a Hitler or a Stalin. If that is the way you think, then perhaps you have never considered how great is the weight of sin.⁶ John Howe captured the essence of the matter when he wrote, “a wicked man’s life is nothing else but a continual forsaking of God, or departing from him.”⁷ Having been rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of Christ (Colossians 1:13; I Peter 2:9; Ephesians 5:8), we are called upon to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

I. THE NEED FOR RENEWAL

Romans 12:1, 2 is not the only text in the Bible that addresses this subject. We are told in Ephesians 4:23 that “we are to be renewed in the spirit of our minds.” The natural mind is hostile to God (Romans 8:7). It minds only earthly things (Romans 8:5; Philippians 3:19). Paul declares in Colossians 1:21: “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your *minds* because of your wicked behavior.” Therefore, our minds stand in need of constant renewal.⁸

II. THE MEANS OF RENEWAL

God has ordained means as well as ends. If we would be transformed, our minds must be renewed. The Lord Jesus prayed that His people might be sanctified by the truth of God’s Word (John 17:17). Notice that *truth* has to do, not with our feelings or emotions, but with our minds. In fact, our minds are controlled by what we think to be true. If what we think to be true is not, then we are deceived. This is

the condition of men in sin. They are blind to the truth and in bondage (unknowingly) to the devil (II Timothy 2:26). “Renewing our minds begins with understanding and applying the great Christian doctrines.”⁹ What would these be? Fundamentally, we need to stop thinking about ourselves along the same lines as the world thinks. We therefore must understand the Christian doctrine of man and his fall into sin, and we can only understand these doctrines in the light of what the Bible teaches about God and our need for redemption through the cross of Christ. We are urged to “crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation” (I Peter 2:2) and from this we are to move on to *solid food* which “is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:14).

III. THE MARKS OF RENEWAL

“A prime mark of the Christian mind,” writes Harry Blamires, “is that it cultivates the eternal perspective.”¹⁰ Blamires goes on to list some of the distinctive marks of the Christian mind. These include:

A supernatural orientation as opposed to a this-world-only-mentality. The Christian thinks in terms of heaven and hell.

An awareness of evil and the realities of this “dark world” that has the presence of unseen spiritual forces of evil (Ephesians 6:10-18).

The nature of truth. There are absolutes. God is real. His word is binding. Theology is not a plaything to be toyed with and discussed like one would politics.

Concern for the Person. Because of who God is, people are not simply a mass of faceless beings. Mankind is made in the image of God and, as such, the renewed mind learns how to think about other people (you shall love your neighbor as yourself – Matthew 19:19).

CONCLUSION: How can Christians have their minds renewed if all they hear from church is *user-friendly* sermons designed to meet *felt-needs*? How can Christians help from being conformed to this world if the ministry in their local church is actually taking their cue from this world? How can Christians be sanctified by therapeutic pop-psychology? Unless we are renewing our minds in the great truths of Christianity, we will not be transformed. These truths, captured for example in the great creeds and confessions of the church, are being sorely neglected, and what is the result? “It is,” wrote Abraham Kuyper at the turn of this century, “the ruin of the love from God with all the mind, when these confessional standards are removed from the life-view, and people are falsely instructed that everything hinges on the mysticism of the love of the heart [felt-needs] and on the deeds of the will [therapeutic psychology].”¹¹ Christian, be transformed by the renewal of your minds in the truth of God’s Word.

ENDNOTES

¹ *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* IV, eds. G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 334.

² *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton* III (rpt. Worthington, PA: Maranatha, N.D.), p. 423.

³ “The thoughts do most distinguish men’s hearts, because they are the freest acts of the mind, wherein the mind is most itself, and acts itself.” *Works of Thomas Goodwin* VI (rpt. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), p. 476. C.H. Spurgeon warns, “Where there is much traffic of bad thinking, there will be much mire and dirt; every wave of wicked thought adds something to the corruption which rots upon the shore of life. It is dreadful to think, that a vile imagination, once indulged, gets the keys of our minds, and can get in again very easily, whether we will or no, and can so return as to bring seven other spirits with it more wicked than itself; and what may follow, no one knows.” *John Ploughman’s Talks* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), p. 52.

⁴ “Spiritual darkness is spoken of in Scripture, not as a mere passive or negative thing, but as a *positive power*.” James Buchanan, *The Office and Work of the Holy Spirit* (rpt. London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), p. 56.

⁵ *The Works of John Owen* III (rpt. London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), p. 244.

⁶ This is actually the response Anselm gave to the question: “Why could God not simply wipe out man’s sin without requiring an atonement?” His actual words were, “Nondum considerasti quanti ponderis sit peccatum.” *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Man), Book 1, Chapter 21.

⁷ *The Works of the Reverend John Howe* I (rpt. Ligonier: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), p. 422.

⁸ Paul uses the present tense “continue to let yourselves be transformed.” The verb is also in the passive voice. It is *not* “transform yourselves,” but “let yourselves be transformed.” But the verb is also in the imperative mood – thus it is a command. The Holy Spirit will do the transforming, but we are not completely inactive. “The believer, being regenerate, cooperates with the Holy Spirit in sanctification, and hence may be urged to holy activity.” W.G.T. Shedd, *A Critical and Doctrinal Commentary On the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (rpt. Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1979), p. 359.

⁹ James M. Boice, *Mind Renewal in a Mindless Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), p. 118.

¹⁰ H. Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* (Ann Arbor: Servant, 1978), p. 67.

¹¹ A. Kuyper, *To Be Near Unto God* (rpt. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1979), p. 248.