

## "RENEWING THE MIND"

(Romans 12:1-2)

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While we are on the subject of the mind, we should note a similar emphasis emerging from verse 2: By the "renewing of [the] mind" we transform ourselves and prove in practice God's "good, pleasing, and perfect will." When we change the way we think, we change the way we live. Two elements here deserve comment and application.

(1) It is a *process*. The fact that Paul calls on believers to engage in this renewing of the mind shows that it does not automatically happen to us when we believe. God's Spirit comes to reside in us, and he provides a whole new orientation to our thinking. But our thinking itself is not instantaneously changed. The ruts of the old life are not always easy to get out of. Some of our ways of thinking are deeply ingrained, and they will not disappear overnight.

I came to Christ as a twenty-year-old college student, and, almost thirty years later, I am still fighting against the mental habits I developed in my first twenty years. Through his Spirit, God wants to reprogram my thinking. But I must respond to the Spirit's work and actively engage in the process if it is to happen.

The key question then becomes: What are we feeding into our minds? Most Christians have little choice but to spend forty or fifty hours of every week in "the world," making a living. It is hoped that most Christians also seek to spend time with unbelievers as a means of ministry and evangelism. But if we spend all our discretionary time watching network television, reading secular books, and listening to secular music, it will be a wonder if our minds are not fundamentally secular. Our job is to cooperate with God's Spirit by seeking to feed into our minds information that will reprogram our thinking in line with the values of the kingdom.

(2) Renewing the mind is, by definition, an *internal* process. In a certain sense, this concept is Paul's response to a possible criticism of his gospel. If, as he has taught, Christians are no longer "under the law," that is, bound to the law of Moses (cf. 6:14,15; 7:4, 6), then what basis can there be for morality? What will direct Christians to live in a way pleasing to God? Paul's answer is that

God is at work in us, changing from within the very way that we think. This is a far better alternative than any law, for no law can conceivably cover all the issues we face in life. No matter how detailed, "law" will always fail to cover some situations. We need to face squarely this limitation and its consequences.

Many preachers, intent on getting their people to obey God, fall into a legal approach to Christian ethics. They focus on commandments, sometimes drawn from the Old Testament, sometimes from the New, and sometimes from contemporary Christianity. By doing so, they give the impression that Christian ethics consists in conformity to those commands. As a result, Christians tend to lead a



double life: "Christian" in that behavior for which they have been taught laws, but essentially secular in those areas of life not touched by those laws. A Christian may not abort her baby, because she has been taught not to do that. But she may harbor racist attitudes or cheat on her taxes without batting an eye. If renewing the mind is as important as Paul says, then the goal of ministry should be to form Christian minds in people. This will require preaching that goes beyond teaching people what is right and wrong and that inculcates a worldview in people.

Is law then wrong? Are commandments of any kind to be dispensed with by believers? No. In Galatians, Paul makes some of the same points we have been making here. He tells believers that they are no longer "under the law" (e.g., Gal. 3:25). He insists that God is at work, transforming people from within by his Spirit, who produces "fruit" pleasing to God (5:16-26). But he also insists that Christians are still bound to "the law of Christ" (6:2). Scholars debate the reference of this phrase, but I think it is Paul's shorthand for the new covenant standard of conduct. That standard is exemplified by Christ, focused on the demand of love (see 5:13-15), and illustrated in the teaching of Christ and the apostles.

The point I wish to make here is that this "law of Christ" includes commandments that are still obligatory for Christians. When New Testament writers deal with believers who are behaving in ways contrary to God's will, they are prepared to emphasize the need to obey commandments (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 7:17; 1 John [much of letter]). Thus, our emphasis on internal transformation must not exclude the continuing role of commandments in the life of the Christian.

We need to understand the roles God wants internal transformation and commandments to have in our sanctification. The heart of the matter is clearly the work of God's Spirit changing the way we think from within. But because we still live in a world hostile to God and are still prone to interpret God's Spirit for our own selfish advantage, we need commandments to indicate when we misunderstood the Spirit or failed to internalize his values.

Perhaps an illustration will help. Modern airliners are guided by their onboard computers. Pilots are told where they are and where they are to go by those computers. But airports still have many lights. Pilots check the accuracy of the computer by visually watching those lights. So also the Christian. We are guided by our minds, in the process of being renewed so that they perfectly reflect God's will. But because that process will never be complete in this life, we still need the external guidance of God's commands. Put the commands at the heart of ethics and we end up with a superficial and incomplete obedience. But exclude the commands entirely and we end up with self-centered and erratic obedience.