

"The Renewed Mind"  
by Francis Martin

**The heart of our salvation lies precisely in having a transformed mind.**

It is possible to be redeemed—and yet still live as the pagans do in our minds. "Let us no longer live as the pagans do," Paul tells the Ephesians, "their minds empty, their understanding darkened" (Eph. 4:17-18). Paul is exhorting Christians in this passage. That implies that it's possible to be reborn in Jesus Christ and yet still live with empty and darkened minds as the pagans do. Most of us can testify to the truth of this from our own personal experience. The best moments come when God takes hold of us, not in our bodies or our emotions, but in our minds—when he fills us with his grace and brings us into a personal relationship with him. That is what many of us have experienced in the baptism of the Holy Spirit. But we experience the worst moments in our minds too—when we are gripped by desire, anger, hopelessness, fear. Fear above all—fear that we'll look bad, fear that we won't measure up, fear of failure, fear of success. Because the mind is most often the place where we win and lose in the Christian life, the heart of our salvation lies precisely in having a transformed mind. The mind is the battlefield. Though our external behavior should mark us as Christians, it is in the mind that our identities as sons and daughters of Jesus Christ shine brightest.

A Christian will not only act, but also *think* differently. The essence of being a Christian is dying to the old self and putting on the nature of Christ. Paul describes this in terms of renewal of the mind. "Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life," he says, "and be renewed in the spirit of your minds" (Eph. 4:22, 23). This verse can also be translated as telling us to lay aside our old self "which deteriorates through illusion." The pagan mind lives in a fantasy world, in a world of illusion and deception. By contrast, a mind transformed in Jesus Christ is a mind that understands reality—our true condition as sinful creatures, and the good news of our salvation in Jesus Christ.

I am convinced that Christians today do not pay the kind of attention to the mind that they should. We think of the mind as an intellectual concern—a matter of ideas and abstractions and concepts. These are important too; we often neglect the intellectual side of our faith. But the mind that Paul is talking about involves much more than the thinking we do when reading a book. Everything we do as Christians is bound up with the condition of our minds:

Our prayer life will stagnate unless we understand to whom we are praying and why we are praying. Reading scripture is supposed to change the way we think. Does it?

We won't be able to preach the gospel and minister to the needs of others unless we acutely understand how different the kingdom of God is from the kingdom of the world.

We won't be able to take care of those who have been entrusted to us unless we have the spiritual sensitivity and wisdom to understand their real needs.

In fact, if I understand the passage in Ephesians correctly, Paul is saying that we will not experience the fullness of salvation until our minds are transformed. The key is a mind renewed by God, baptized in the Holy Spirit. That is the essential difference between an enlightened mind and a transformed mind. An enlightened mind knows things *about* God. It thinks correct thoughts and is full of spiritual knowledge. A Transformed mind is *in touch with Jesus Christ directly*. It knows who Jesus Christ really is. *It is a mind where the action of the Holy Spirit is made manifest.*

## ENSLAVED BY THE FEAR OF DEATH

Paul's warning that "you must no longer live as the pagans do" presupposes that we do live as the pagans live. What, then, are the characteristics of the pagan way of thinking? Let us look in some detail at the passage in Ephesians chapter four:

*"Now this I declare and solemnly attest in the Lord: You must no longer live as the pagans live, in the empty futility of their minds, with their understanding darkened, alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them caused by the hardness of their hearts. Devoid of any moral sensitivity, they have given themselves over to unrestrained self-indulgence, carrying out every sort of impurity, and greedy for more.*

*But that is not how you learned Christ, if you really heard him and were taught in him, in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. That is, to put off your former way of life, the old man which is deteriorating through illusory and deceitful desires; rather to be renewed in your spirit and mind, and to put on the new man who resembles God created in the righteousness and holiness of the truth (Eph. 4:17-24).*

Paul says that "the pagans live in the empty futility of their minds." "Empty futility" basically means that you don't know why you are alive. You don't know what you are doing. You really don't have any reason to live except that you don't want to die. In Hebrews, Paul says "the whole world is held in slavery by Satan because of the fear of death" (Heb. 2:15). This is the condition of futility— life without direction, without purpose, without meaning, without hope. Life is terrible. The only thing worse is death.

A mind in this condition, Paul says, is "darkened." It has no real perception of God. Life goes on in an endless turmoil of emotions—fear, anger, vengeance, desire, and lust. There is no God to turn to, no release, no meaning. People live this way because of "their hardness of heart." They see the truth, but they are too weak or lazy to grasp it. The heart is *hard*-unaffected by the truth, unchanged by it. The opposite of a hard heart is a heart that seeks the truth, that is open to the movement of the Holy Spirit, that allows itself to be shaped by the hand of God. A hard and darkened heart is devoid of any moral sensitivity. In Ephesians, Paul calls this trait "callousness" or "their resistance." Pagans have no sensitivity, no judgment. They are perpetrating evil against one another and against themselves, and suffering the consequences, yet they have no real grasp of the moral issues.

We see this moral callousness wreaking havoc on the world today, particularly in areas of sexual sin. Indeed, sexual irresponsibility is one of the surest symptoms of a captive mind. Paul says, "Without remorse they have abandoned themselves to lust and the indulgence of every sort of lewd conduct." Unrestrained self-indulgence gives meaning to a life without God. Why not? Something has to give us meaning. Why not something that gives pleasure? An endless round of experiences and indulgence of desires is an effort to fill the infinitely large void in the human spirit which is made for God. This miserable condition of the darkened mind stands in stark contrast to the wisdom possessed by the Christian with a transformed mind. "That is not how you learned Christ," Paul says. That's a marvelous phrase: learn Christ. The object of our learning is the man Jesus Christ. Pagans learn darkness and futility. We learn something else—a man like us in all ways but sin. As we learn Christ, he will transform us through the power of his cross and the action of the Holy Spirit.

## THE NORMAL CHRISTIAN LIFE

Scripture says that there are two things we must do to respond to the Lord's offer of a transformed mind: surrender to the Lord and be renewed. The first is simply to acknowledge that a strong drive toward sin causes us to resist the Lord who would transform our minds. We would rather seek salvation on our own than to receive it freely by grace. Our self-will-our flesh-is a constituent of our personalities: We can do nothing about it on our own. All we can do is turn it over to the Lord, so that he may crucify it through the power of the cross. The power to crucify the old self is available to us. We need to surrender to it and avail ourselves of it. This is what it means to live a normal Christian life—a life under the authority of the Holy Spirit. The second thing we must do is to be renewed. This was the whole prayer of the prophets. "Create a clean heart for me and renew a steadfast spirit," the psalmist prays in Psalm 51.

What is renewal? It is the newness of the light of salvation—the new thing that God is doing. We don't obtain a new mind out of our own resources. We gain it by experiencing the new life available to us through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The new man is Jesus Christ. Put on Christ. This new man is created according to the image of God. The life of righteousness and holiness as a new man in Jesus Christ is no illusion. It is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah: "I am going to make a new covenant, and this is the covenant that I will make with them. I will write my law in their hearts, and they will walk according to my will, and no one need tell his brother, "Know the Lord, because everyone will know me, from the least to the greatest" (Jer. 31:31-34).

This is what we were made for—to know God.

## LEARNING CHRIST

A transformed mind is an attainable ideal that we can experience in our daily lives. Learning Christ and putting on the new man is a very practical, down-to-earth, concrete experience. I want to discuss some practical ways in which the transformation of our minds occurs:

**1. Ponder the scriptures.** Our minds are sponges. They soak up everything that comes into them. In the course of our normal lives, they become full of illusions, lies, dreams, obsessions, disordered desires, and disconnected fantasies. We must wring out this dirty sponge and wash it clean in the pure water of God's holy word. I suggest that you quite deliberately immerse yourselves in the scriptures, especially if you have fairly recently been renewed in the Holy Spirit or come to a desire to live a more committed Christian life. Set aside a portion of the day solely for reading and studying the Bible. Seek the scriptures for God's perspective on your condition and his revelation for your life. The word of God has power. Use it.

**2. Daily prayer.** If we do not pray every day, we are not in touch with God. Prayer is a duty in the same sense that breathing is a duty. If we stop breathing, we will die. If we stop praying, we will shrivel up spiritually and become captive to a hardened and darkened mind. As you pray daily, ask the Lord to teach you what it means to die to sin. That is the very essence of what it means to have a transformed mind. Also, ask God to reveal his love for you. Be courageous. Ask him every day. Tell him that you just don't understand his love, or that you understand his love but do not experience it. Stick with it. There is nothing God wants to reveal to us more than this—that he loves and cherishes us and desires our happiness. I will make you a promise. Your knowledge of how much God loves you will ultimately change your whole personality. In the depth of God's love, we begin to understand a transformed mind. Nothing can compare with God's love. The Lord may have to show you a lot of sin

before you can grasp how much he loves you, but once you understand it, you will never be the same.

**3. Order in your life.** The third area is to apply your mind to your life. Take responsibility for your life. One day God will ask you what you did with it. Don't run away from that responsibility. Many of us go through our days in a random, mindless confusion. Instead of resolutely fulfilling our responsibilities we are pushed around by the opportunities and desires of the moment. We waste time with a long chat in the office. We don't pray because it is too tempting to stay in bed an extra half hour. If this describes your day, you need to make some hard decisions to bring some order into your life. So make them and stick to them. Look at your relationships. Do you want to reach out to other people, to tell them about the Lord, to minister to their needs, to simply be a friend? What have you done about these resolutions? Have you begun to work on difficult relationships or are you still hoping to "get around to them sometime"? Be honest. A transformed mind is an honest mind. If you see failure call it by its right name. Don't be afraid of the truth—seek it and act upon it.

**4. Time and information.** Judge the quality of the information you receive every day. We Christians are entirely too uncritical about television, the secular press, and the media generally. Ask hard and perceptive questions. What value system is governing the way in which this material is being presented? Is this movie truly entertaining and refreshing, or is it appealing to an aspect of our personality that is troublesome to us? A transformed mind is an active, disciplined mind. Use your mind to filter and assess the information that comes into it.

**5. Emotions and desires.** The final transformation involves our emotions. We know that much of our behavior is governed by our emotions. Consider how much our thoughts are pure emotional fantasies. Do you find yourself replaying an encounter with someone you are angry with? That is pure anger. It is an acid that will eat the life out of your heart, and everyone else's heart. Get rid of thoughts like these. Get rid of lustful thoughts. Get rid of depressed thoughts. Extinguish the ego trips and fantasizing that consume your thought lives. Look at your desires. The surest test of a transformed mind is to examine the sources of the basic desires of joy, grief, hope, and fear. Do you find your joy in your accomplishments or in the salvation won for you by Christ? Do you grieve over insults or over your personal sin? Do you hope in your success, health, money, or intelligence, or do you hope in Jesus Christ? Do you fear people more than you fear the Lord? If your joy, grief, hope, and fear come from yourself, then your desires are based in illusions and fantasies, not in Jesus Christ who is the truth.

We have been considering what it means to have a renewed mind and the means given to us by God to achieve this. Before you finish this article, take some time to pray and speak to the Lord about his will for the renewal of your mind. The renewal of our understanding is the most precious gift that God can give us. We must ask him every day to pierce our minds with his truth, and we must learn to obey when he leads us to repent for our sins and turn away from them. It is through obedience that our Lord Jesus Christ leads us to revelation: "The one who has my commandments and keeps them, that is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and make myself known to him" (John 14:21).

Note: This article originally appeared in the January 1988 edition of *New Covenant Magazine*, v.17 1987-1988. Available at HathiTrust Digital Library; URL: <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015078389361>  
*Reformatted to save space.*