

Romans 11:28-12:2

Renewing of the mind: Learning to trust God

In chapter 12 Paul moves into the practical application of all he has taught. He begins with the need for a renewal of the believer's mind. Since God's ways and thoughts are so much higher than ours (Isaiah 55:9), we need to learn to trust even when we don't understand. This is not to devalue education (Proverbs 16:16), but it is to say that we all meet the limits of our understanding, and this is when faith is required.

Paul makes an appeal to the many Gentiles in Rome who had come to faith in Jesus, and it is an appeal to us as well: *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship* (Romans 12:1). *Your spiritual worship* isn't talking about Christians meeting on Sunday, but it is about giving our whole lives to Jesus. In order for this to happen in any meaningful way we need a renewal of our minds: *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will* (Romans 12:2). The Greek word for *transformed* is the same word that we get *metamorphose* from, which is what happens when an ugly butterfly turns into a beautiful butterfly. It is used also of Jesus when He was *transfigured* on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:3). It is quite a thought to think that we are in some way transformed as Jesus was transfigured! The only other place we find this word is in 2Corinthians 3:18, *And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.* The work of transformation that renews our minds comes from the Lord, through His word and is a work of the Spirit of truth and glory.

It has been said it was easy for God to get His people out of Egypt; but it was much harder to get Egypt, with all its sin and idolatry, out of His people! In the same way it is relatively easy for us to be saved (justified by faith). But the process of sanctification is much harder. However it is necessary in order that God can achieve his purpose in sanctification, which is given in Leviticus 26:11-12, *I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people.* Renewal of the mind is central to this process of sanctification.

Jesus, Paul and other Biblical writers used the expression *it is written* frequently because they shared an unflinching trust in the divine inspiration of the Scriptures. Jesus and the Pharisees had extremely heated discussions concerning the meaning of Scripture, but never about its authority. The situation in Western society is very different these days and Scripture is not regarded as authoritative by many. It wasn't necessarily a given for Greek Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus in the first century either. This was an important area that would require renewal of the mind. The first century Greek speaking world was shaped by the thinking of the philosophers such as Plato. To a large extent this is also our background as well, because Western culture has also been largely shaped by Greek thought. Tertullian famously said, *What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?* He meant that the Greek ways of thinking have nothing to do with the teaching that comes from the authority of Scripture.

When we come to Jesus we need to learn new patterns of thought which are aligned with God's thoughts as revealed in Scripture. Although we may not always understand, God's word can be trusted.

I will illustrate how Greek or worldly thinking can affect us negatively with two examples, one from church history, and the other from the Scripture itself.

Illustration from Church History

In 1054 there was a major split in the church between East and West, which is with us to this day (Western Catholic and Eastern Orthodox). As incredible as it seems the church split over the meaning of one word, *filioque*, which means 'Son'¹. An argument erupted about whether the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father (single procession) or from the Father and the Son (double procession). When I first learned about this I couldn't understand it or even see why it was relevant. I now understand that the reason for this argument was because church leaders had become far more interested in philosophising about the Holy Spirit than actually allowing the Holy Spirit to work in their lives! God is holy and we are not here to analyse Him, He has come to use to analyse us: *Examine me, O LORD, and prove me; try my reins and my heart* (Psalm 26:1-2). We do not fully understand His work in our lives, but we can trust Him. This is faith, but it requires that our minds be renewed.

Illustration from the Scripture

This illustration follows on from the previous example. Scripture teaches that God ordains all things (Romans 8:28). At the same time it teaches that God answers the prayers of His people (James 4:2). With our finite minds this seems like a contradiction. Either one or the other is true, but both can't be true. But believers accept both to be true, not because we understand it completely, but because it is revealed in God's word.

To the un-renewed mind this sounds really, really stupid, even childish! But it is neither stupid nor childish for those with a renewed mind, because believers find both to be true in real life experience. Our encounter with God in Jesus, and our new relationship with Christ inform us that both are true!

A final thought

In Romans 9-11 Paul teaches on the place of Jews and Gentiles in God's purposes. But his was not an argument based on the thinking of Athens. He says five times in these chapters, *it is written*. Paul received a revelation from the Lord through the Scripture which made sense of what he saw in the real world, that is, tens and hundreds of thousands of Gentiles coming to faith in Christ. But Paul (who had one of the greatest minds of his day) was quick to acknowledge the limits of his own understanding,

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counsellor?" "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Filioque>