

8 Putting the Renewed Mind to Work

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I knew I had a problem when I could barely force my car door open—the car had tilted over that far. Intent on looking at a new house, I had driven off the side of the road, and my car had become embedded up to the axle in soft mud. It took the winch on a tow truck to extricate my car from its predicament.

Christians face a similar predicament as they strive to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5, NIV). Our minds are stuck in a rut, a pattern of thinking that is antagonistic to the will of God. Successful Christian living depends on our getting out of that rut and establishing another, one that is characterized by biblical values and ways of thinking. It is this need that Paul expresses in perhaps the most famous of all New Testament texts about the Christian mind, Romans 12:2 (quoted here in the forceful paraphrase by J. B. Phillips): “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God remold your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves toward the goal of true maturity.”

But it is significant that Paul does not stop there. He goes on to speak of the purpose of the renewal of the mind: “to test and approve what

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God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (NIV). What does it mean to test or approve the will of God? John Murray offers this fine explanation: It means

to discover, to find out or learn by experience what the will of God is. It is a will that will never fail or be found wanting. If life is aimless, stagnant, fruitless, lacking in content, it is because we are not entering by experience into the richness of God's will. The commandment of God is exceedingly broad. There is not a moment of life that the will of God does not command, no circumstance that it does not fill with meaning if we are responsive to the fullness of his revealed counsel for us.¹

The renewal of the mind should lead to the practice of God's will in all areas of life.

What does the New Testament have to say about the application of the mind to day-to-day living? Are there guidelines for the Christian to follow as he grapples with the challenges of a complex world? And how can he actually go about putting the renewed mind to work? Those and other questions provide the agenda for this essay.

GUIDELINES FOR THE RENEWED MIND

The first question to be asked is this: What guidelines are there to help us in determining what it is we are to do? It is often suggested that the leading of the renewed mind itself is sufficient; that Christians need nothing more than the internal witness of the indwelling Spirit to direct their thoughts and actions. Certainly the New Testament strongly emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in directing the steps of the believer. Jesus promised that he would send "the Counselor, the Holy Spirit" to "teach you all things" (John 14:25-26, NIV). And Paul says to the Galatians: "Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of your sinful nature" (Gal. 5:16, NIV). But it is important to recognize that the New Testament does not stop there. In the same passage in which He promised the gift of the Spirit, Jesus also told his disciples: "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me" (John 14:21, NIV). And Paul, the great apostle of freedom in the Spirit, reminded the wayward Corinthians that "keeping God's commands is what counts" (1 Cor. 7:19, NIV). In fact, in the New Testament the internal, renewing work of the Holy Spirit is stressed side-by-side with a constant concern for obedience to external commands. As people who have been redeemed but not yet glorified,

1. *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 2:115.

Christians need both. As powerful as is the Spirit, He indwells people who still possess sinful natures. Reliance on the Spirit alone, with no external guidelines, quickly leads to an enthronement of the individual ego. I do what I do because it seems good to me—ignoring the fact that I do not have perfect knowledge of God. No one saw the imperfect nature of the Christian more clearly than did Luther. He called the believer one who is “at the same time justified and a sinner.” And because of that, he forcefully proclaimed the Christian’s continuing need for external guidance.

So the Christian is guided, in this practical outworking of the Christian mind, by commands. But what commands? This is not the place to deal with such a thorny issue in any detail. Suffice to say that the New Testament focuses on the commands given by Jesus and repeated and explained by the apostles. As his last charge, Jesus commanded his disciples to teach baptized converts “to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20, NIV; emphasis added). Throughout his ministry, Jesus authoritatively taught his disciples the will of God. And although believers today must be careful not to apply to themselves what Jesus meant only for those first disciples, the teaching of Jesus gives to Christians a rich store of commands for daily life. Paul himself referred to the teaching of Jesus in giving guidance to his churches (see 1 Cor. 7:10; 9:14). More often, however, Paul advised his churches on the basis of his own apostolic authority. Those commands can furnish the individual believer as well with concrete guidelines for the direction of the Christian mind. Throughout the New Testament, we see a similar situation. The inspired authors issued commands to their first century hearers, commands that have been preserved for us as a rich, variegated source for guidance. Again, not everything they said can be directly applied to the present circumstances: situations change and some of the New Testament authors’ advice was intended only for their own situations. But judicious application of good principles of interpretation (hermeneutics) will usually enable the reader to distinguish clearly what was intended only for the first century and what was intended as timeless advice to Christians everywhere, at any time.

All this is very well, it might be objected, but doesn’t Paul himself say that Christians “are not under law, but under grace” (Rom. 6:14)? Isn’t it trying to put Christians back under the law to say that they must obey specific commands? It is true that Paul proclaimed Christians to be free from the law. But what law was he referring to? Even a casual reading of Paul’s letters shows that usually he used this word *law* to refer to the Mosaic law, that particular body of commands given

to Israel at the time of the ratification of the Sinaitic covenant. For instance, Paul said that the law was given four hundred and thirty years after Abraham (Gal. 3:17) and that before Moses there was “no law” (Rom. 5:13–14). What Paul meant, in other words, when he said that Christians were not “under law” was that they were no longer “held prisoners” (Gal. 3:23, NIV; see also Rom. 7:6) by the Mosaic law. The era in which the old covenant held sway had passed; with the coming of Christ, a new covenant had begun. Christians belonged to that new covenant. Certainly many old covenant commands were applicable to Christians: Paul quoted at least one of them as authoritative for believers (Eph. 6:2–3) and every one of the Ten Commandments, except the Sabbath command, is repeated in the New Testament. But as a system, the old covenant law no longer ruled the believer. He was now under the “law of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2), the “royal law” (James 2:8), “the perfect law that gives freedom” (James 1:25, NIV), the “new commandment” that Jesus gave (John 13:34). Therefore, it is vital to recognize that the believers’ freedom is freedom from *the* law, not *all* law. Believers must meet God’s demands in a new context, but God’s demands they are.

One other objection to the idea that Christians are obliged to obey specific commands should be mentioned. It is this: Christians are not obligated to commands but to a command—the love command. Jesus himself summarized the demand of God in this one, new command (John 13:34). Paul claimed that “the whole law” was fulfilled in the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself (Gal. 5:13–14; Rom. 13:8–10); James identified the “royal law, according to the Scripture” as the same command (2:8). All we need is love, many proclaim; as long as we love, anything we do must be moral. That approach, sometimes called the “new morality,” is popular, both within and outside the church. It exerts a strong appeal on a generation that is uncomfortable with absolutes, that would like to be free from conventional moral codes, that proclaims “I’m OK, you’re OK.” To such persons, right and wrong cannot be laid out in black and white; what is right in one situation might be wrong in another, and vice versa. Motivation is the only absolute. If I do what I do out of love for others, it is right.

Now there is certainly a germ of truth in that approach. It is accurate to say that the New Testament consistently highlights love as the essence and summary of God’s commands. But this love, according to Jesus, has an object prior to, and infinitely higher than, man: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment” (Matt. 22:37, NIV). And how do we love God? “This is love for God: to obey his

commands" (1 John 5:3, NIV). Genuine Christian love is focused, first and foremost, on God our creator and redeemer. And true love for God means a radical commitment to obey all that He tells us. As love is the greatest command, so obedience to God's commands is the greatest, deepest, most authentic expression of that love. Yes, love for the neighbor is the essence and summary of the law. But it does not exhaust the law, either the Mosaic law or the "law of Christ." If love were really all that was needed, why would Paul have spent so much time giving his churches concrete, specific commands? It needs to be understood that neither Jesus, nor Paul, nor James intended to set up love for the neighbor as the only command. What they did was to single out love as the greatest, the most important, the single clearest expression of the commands God gives men. It is, Jesus reminds us, one of "the weightier matters" (Matt. 23:23, RSV*). But it is not the only matter. In their sin and weakness, men too easily mistake love for selfishness; they too readily fool themselves into doing what they want out of so-called humanitarian motives. The love that should characterize all that men do needs to be guided. The internal motive of love works together with the external demands of God's law. No one can truly love his neighbor unless he loves God at the same time.

The importance of obedience to God's commands for the direction of the renewed mind has been stressed so far in this essay, because many Christians are ignoring the importance of those commands. But once believers see that they are to be guided by specific external commands, they must move on to the recognition of the place of the internal, the Spirit-filled heart and renewed mind, in the process of determining what behavior will please God. It is this side of the picture that Paul had in mind when he commanded the Ephesians to "understand what the Lord's will is" (Eph. 5:17, NIV). Similarly, Paul prayed that the love of the Philippians might "abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ" (Phil. 1:9-10, NIV). The Christian faces many situations in which the Word of God gives no specific command. What is needed in such situations is the ability to apply the general guidelines of Scripture to those specific circumstances.

As believers grow in Christ, they will become increasingly sensitive to the will of the Lord, and the Spirit continually will be merging the direction of their will with the will of God. Another word that might be

* *Revised Standard Version.*

applied to the matter of obedience is the word wisdom. In the same context of Ephesians mentioned above, Paul exhorted the believers to “be careful, then, how you live—not as unwise, but as wise” (5:15, NIV). In Scripture wisdom does not refer so much to intellectual knowledge as to spiritual discernment and values. James said that this wisdom is “first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere” (3:17, NIV). The person who lives by those values is the one who is wise and who will be able to discern the right thing in any situation. This wisdom, as both Proverbs 2:6 and James 1:5 stress, is given by God and can be received by “[asking] in faith” (James 1:5–8).

In sum, then, the New Testament pictures as the ideal the believer whose heart and mind are so closely aligned with God’s will that he automatically does what is right. Such a renewed mind is a crucial source for the guidance of the believer’s thinking and actions. But the New Testament also makes clear that the renewed mind never becomes perfectly renewed in this life, but is always in the process of being more and more transformed. Thus, the external, specific commands of the “law of Christ” remain as the authoritative, indispensable guide to the renewed mind. One should not be set against the other: the renewal of the mind is to be guided by God’s commands. God’s commands are to be applied to specific circumstances through the wisdom that comes from the renewed mind.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RENEWED MIND

The new pattern of thinking that begins with conversion must undergo a constant process of renewal. In the building of this Christian mind, the commands of God in Scripture provide a basic blueprint, while the redeemed, Spirit-filled mind itself applies those commands in certain situations. But what are the specific concrete values and actions that should characterize people who have renewed minds? Where do some of the particular problems lie for believers today who are trying to think and act “Christianly”? Obviously, many problems could be cited. But the slogan “the me generation” captures particularly well the essence of the problem in the present day. Even secular social critics, such as Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), have seen that. Indeed, Scripture suggests that, in one form or another, pride, or selfishness, has always been a root sin. But as believers go about the task of developing genuinely Christian ways of looking at life, can they pinpoint specific

areas in which selfishness is likely to manifest itself in their lives? There are five areas the Scripture has much to say about.

THE SELF AND AUTHORITY

As a college student, I lived through perhaps the most anti-authoritarian era in American history: the late 1960s, with anti-Vietnam war rallies, countercultures, and rebellion. Many social critics have commented on the fact that that movement has now passed; Americans, especially young Americans, are now working within the system to advance their own interests. But this new semblance of the acceptance of authority has strictly defined, essentially utilitarian, limits: Submit to authority as long as its rewards outweigh its penalties. If you can get away with it, and it helps you, do it.

Christians are not immune from such trends. The tendency to obey only as long as it is easy or rewarding is deeply ingrained. Yet the New Testament stresses that the believer lives in a number of different authority relationships, and that his obedience to those authorities does not depend on convenience or whim. Four authority situations in particular are given attention in the New Testament: God, government, church, and family.

That Christians are to obey God in all that he commands probably goes without saying. Yet Christians need to remind themselves that God's commands are uncompromising and unchanging. They must beware subtle pressures to redefine the demands of God in order to make them easier to obey. To be sure, the believer must always be careful to apply accepted standards of interpretation and avoid taking everything in a literalistic manner. But more often the problem is that Christians shape their interpretation of Scripture to suit their wishes. If God is truly to be authoritative in the lives of believers, they must allow His word to speak to them, to direct them, to change them. It must judge them, not they it.

As Christians render "to God the things that are God's," they must also be careful to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matt. 22:21). The new Testament plainly requires the Christian to be submissive to governing authorities (see Rom. 13:1-7; Titus 3:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:13-17). Certainly there is a limit to what government can force the Christian to do. When the authorities commanded Peter and John to stop preaching Christ, they refused (Acts 4:17-20). But the principle seems to be that Christians can refuse to obey government only when a violation of the Spirit-led conscience of the believer would be caused. Again, the tendency too often is to justify disobedience of secular laws

simply because it would be helpful to one or because one can probably get away with it. Cheating on tax returns, it seems, is endemic. Christians, however, are required to be scrupulously honest in filling out those returns; to list all their income, whether the IRS can find out about it or not!

The church, and its leaders, is a third authority structure in which the believer lives. Paul tells the Thessalonian Christians “to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you” (1 Thess. 5:12, RSV). The church at Corinth was told by Paul to take decisive action against one of its members who was committing a gross sin (1 Cor. 5:1-7). Believers are to submit willingly to church discipline as a means of correcting error and preserving the purity of the church. Certainly many Christians belong to churches where such discipline would be unheard of, but that is another problem. The point is that Christians should be willing to accept the reproof of fellow-believers; indeed, they should welcome such reproof as an aid in avoiding sin.

Perhaps the most controversial area of authority in our day is the family. Probably no institution in American life has changed so quickly, or so radically, as the family. Certainly, the traditional family structure was closer to the biblical norm than what now seems to be popular. Therefore, as the Christian works at applying the renewed mind to his family relations, he must guard against some of the prevailing tendencies. One such tendency is to disrupt or deny the lines of authority in the family. The New Testament makes plain that wives are to submit willingly and graciously to husbands (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; 1 Pet. 3:1-6) and that children are to obey their parents (Eph. 6:2-3; Col. 3:20). It is true that this teaching has often been abused. But abuse of a teaching does not justify abandoning that teaching. Believers need to avoid the pressure to make the Bible conform to the direction of their culture. The New Testament lays down clear guidelines for the functioning of the family, and the authority relationships within that structure are important.

THE SELF AND OTHERS

Loving one's neighbor as one loves one's self is a basic, frequently repeated, many-sided demand in the New Testament. It has as many applications as the people and situations we encounter. Loving others as one's self requires a willingness to take one's own interests and wants out of first place. When Paul wrote the epistle to the Philippians, the church at Philippi was apparently experiencing internal conflicts.

Paul encouraged the Christians there to be “like-minded, having the same love, being of one spirit and purpose” (Phil. 2:2, NIV). And what would provide the basis for such unity? A proper understanding of the place of the self in relation to others: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (2:3-4, NIV).

One of the clearest manifestations of the Me Generation is its emphasis on self-fulfillment. In itself, of course, there is nothing wrong with that. Everyone should strive to develop his God-given potential to the best of his ability. But what has happened is that self-fulfillment has gone hand in hand with disregard for the interests and needs of others. Many situations in which that is true could be mentioned, but two will do. Granted the economic realities of the present day, it is not surprising that many mothers find it necessary to take jobs outside the home. But their motivation for doing so must be carefully examined. Is the job economically necessary, or simply economically helpful? Is the mother pursuing her own self-fulfillment at the expense of the needs of her children? Is the desire for a higher standard of living, for a few extra luxuries, being elevated over the emotional and spiritual needs of children? Those questions are not asked to condemn working mothers, but to point out one way in which the focus on self can harm others. The same problem afflicts the father whose desire to get ahead or to develop his own potential leads him to spend too much time at the office, the health club, or the golf course, and too little time at home.

Concern with the self has a far more serious manifestation. Many women who get abortions do so simply and admittedly because the child growing in the womb is an inconvenience to her or to her spouse. The rights of the child, the sanctity of that human life, are shunted aside in the interests of the parents. Is not something similar beginning to happen in the attitudes of many toward the elderly, the infirm, the handicapped, the terminally ill? Does the impetus for “pulling the plug” come from genuine concern for an individual who is suffering, or from the worry that the continued life of such an individual is getting in the way of plans, of a career, or of pleasures? Difficult questions are bound up with these issues, and they should not be discounted. But cavalier disregard for human life is often deeply rooted in nothing more than selfishness.

A more subtle manifestation of selfishness with respect to others can occur, strangely enough, among dedicated Christians. Their strong desire to grow in their faith can result in a one-sided emphasis on their

own personal development at the expense of others in the church. That was one of the main problems in the Corinthian church. They gloried in their own wisdom, but, as a result, there were disputes in the church (1 Cor. 1-4). They prided themselves on their freedom in the Lord ("Everything is permissible for me"), but were neglecting the needs of others ("but not everything is edifying," 1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23, NIV). They valued spiritual gifts according to their personal value instead of according to their value in edifying the church as a whole (1 Cor. 14:1-12). Faced with this intensely individualistic Christianity, Paul reminded the Corinthian believers of their responsibility for others in the body (1 Cor. 8:9-13; 10:31-11:1). It is no accident that the great "love" chapter is found in 1 Corinthians: "Love . . . is not self-seeking" (13:4-5, NIV). Without diminishing by one wit the desire Christians have as individuals to grow in faith, recognition must be given to the notion that true Christian growth involves an increase in one's ability and desire to serve others as well as in an increase in personal godliness.

THE SELF AND THE BODY

That selfishness can create serious problems in sexual morality is also clear from 1 Corinthians. Some in that church apparently felt they were so spiritual that it was wrong for them to have anything to do with sex at all. Paul reminded them that it was perfectly appropriate for Christians to marry and that it was necessary for sex be a part of that relationship (7:2-5). And he also stressed that the "one flesh" union of man and wife (Gen. 2:24) meant that the body of each individual belonged as much to the spouse as to the self (7:4). Sex in marriage was intended as a means of mutual pleasure and fulfillment, not of self-gratification.

Christians can err also in failing to recognize that God has a claim on their bodies and that that claim has far-reaching implications for sexual conduct. "The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body"; "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself?" (1 Cor. 6:13, 15, NIV).

If some Corinthians were taking the view that their new spiritual life made sexual expression inappropriate, others thought that it made sexual conduct unimportant. As long as a person's spirit belonged to the Lord, what did it matter what he did with his body? Few people today would justify sexual immorality on such grounds, but surely everyone is aware that the problem of sexual misconduct is a particu-

larly serious one in this culture. In that respect, first-century society was not much different. The serious moral demands of the Christian faith clashed head-on with the loose standards characteristic of Roman society. Then, as now, Christians had to realize that “the body is . . . for the Lord” (6:13). And God’s standards for the body are clear. Paul asserted that “neither the sexually immoral nor idolators nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders . . . will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9–10, NIV). The Greek word *pornoi*, translated “sexually immoral,” was a broad term that included a variety of sexual sins; sex before marriage was almost certainly one of those. Sex outside of marriage was condemned in the term “adulterers,” while the last words included all forms of homosexual relationships. In other words, the verse unambiguously condemned sexual practices that are becoming increasingly accepted in American society today—even by some who call themselves Christians. Faced with the growing toleration of sexual sin, Christians should be scrupulously careful to be sure that their sexual values and morals are being formed by God’s Word, not by the environment in which they live.

And they must keep in mind that the formation of sexual values involves much more than simply refraining from practices the Scripture forbids. Jesus made abundantly clear that sexual lust is a matter first, and most basically, of the mind and the heart: “I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:28, NIV). The practice of sexual sin is usually the inevitable culmination of a long tolerance of the idea of that sin in the heart. In order to guard themselves against the strong, swift current of sexual immorality, believers must be careful to anchor themselves to biblical values, to cultivate minds and hearts that are free from lustful thoughts. Our bodies have been given us by God; they will be redeemed by God. Believers are not their own. They have been “bought at a price.” “Therefore,” Paul continued, they should “honor God with [their bodies]” (1 Cor. 6:20).

THE SELF AND MONEY

That money and possessions represent a potent source of selfishness needs hardly to be said. Interestingly, Paul referred to money (6:10) immediately after castigating the sexually immoral (6:9). “Neither . . . the greedy . . . nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9–10). Probably everyone has been reminded often of the dangers of materialism. But abundant evidence exists that the warning is not being heeded within the church to the extent it should be. Indeed, there is

danger of a reaction setting in. Some of the Christian social critics who have done the most to make believers aware of the dangers of materialism have perhaps gone to an extreme in advocating specific social and political remedies. Many have reacted against such teaching by reasserting support for other social and political values and systems. The danger is that the important message for the individual believer concerning wealth will get lost in the crossfire. What is that message?

Very simply, it is that one's money, like his body, is not his own. That does not mean that a person should have no possessions of his own. Though the early church in Jerusalem experimented with an unconstrained pooling of resources (Acts 2:44-45), no other church in the New Testament followed its example. Rather, what is necessary is that Christians make decisions about the use of money on the basis of the principles of the gospel. Love for the neighbor, compassion for the needy, concern for the priority of God's work—those are the factors that should mold the Christian's financial decisions. The constant danger is to make those decisions solely on the basis of one's perceived needs and desires. James was perhaps bolder on the subject of misusing wealth than any other New Testament author. He warned his readers that their prayers were going unanswered because of the attitude of their heart: "You ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (4:3, NIV). And, in a biting attack on the misuse of wealth, he pronounced judgment on the rich because they hoarded their wealth, defrauded their workers, and were concerned only with providing for their own luxurious life-style (5:1-6). Christians in modern America need to recapture James's perspective on wealth. They need constantly to remind themselves that money is not an end in itself, but is a means of providing for themselves and for serving others. They need to be careful to define their needs by biblical standards, not by the standards of their neighbors or by television commercials. They must live in a way that will show materialistic Americans that people can be truly happy without every single element of the American Dream. They need to demonstrate with their money that they really do love their neighbors more than themselves.

THE SELF AND TIME

I hesitate to mention this last area of selfishness because the New Testament does not say much about it, at least directly. The importance of submitting to authority, the need to elevate concern for others above oneself, the dangers of sexual immorality and greed—they are all repeatedly emphasized in the New Testament. But about the only

passages that speak directly to the issue of time management are the passing comments of Paul about “making the most of every opportunity” (Eph. 5:16, NIV; Col. 4:5). Indirectly, however, in its comments about the believer’s responsibility to be a loving, caring family member, fellow-Christian, and neighbor, the Bible has much to say about the use of time.

I know personally how easy it is to be selfish about time. After a long, hard day at work, it is easy for me to imagine that I have earned time of my own. But under the lordship of Christ, is there really any time that is mine? Can I ever be justified in deciding to use my time without regard for the Lord and others? This is not to say that any time I spend on my own, pursuing my own pleasures, is wrong. It is to say that my choices concerning time should be made with respect for biblical values and principles. They should not be based on narrow, selfish desires for self-fulfillment or on the notion that somehow I have a certain percentage of hours every day that belong only to me.

In the contemporary craze for self-development (witness the enormous number of self-help and hobby books rolling off the presses), Christians must be careful not to put their own development ahead of the development of their families or their churches. Time that could be spent reading or playing tennis could be spent with one’s children or with one’s spouse; or it could be spent at a church meeting or in study of God’s Word. The needs of others should be given priority. Time for relaxing, for meditating, for thinking, and for exercising is important and necessary; God does not want anyone to burn himself out. What He wants is for Christians to cultivate a use of their time that reflects God’s priorities rather than their own. Attention to God’s priorities may mean that a Christian will spend more time in family recreation, in meditation, and in the cultivation of his mind than his secular friends will.

DEVELOPING THE RENEWED MIND

We have looked at the guidelines for the renewed mind—God’s commands in Scripture and the Spirit-created wisdom that God gives us. We have seen areas of life in which the renewed mind should make a difference in the world we live in. But we are left with the all-important question: How do we go about doing this? How can we avoid becoming “conformed to the world”? How can we rise above ourselves and our ingrained selfishness? I have no magical key, infallible solution, or “seven sure steps” to offer. But I think Scripture does have several things to say about this “how” that are important.

We begin, naturally, with the Holy Spirit. When a person becomes a

Christian, not only does he enter into a new relationship with God, but God, by his Spirit, enters him. Far from being a person imprisoned in his own sinful, fallen nature, he is now indwelt by God's Spirit and is free to love and serve God, to produce "the fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22). That is where the "how" of the Christian life begins—with the transforming power of God's Spirit in the heart and mind. Romans 8:5-8 gives prominent place to "the mind controlled by the Spirit" (NIV), the mind that is aligned with the desires of the Spirit. But the process is far from being automatic. People are not trees which automatically produce fruit; they are creatures with a will, a will that is capable of rebelling against control of the mind by the Spirit. The New Testament recognizes that and pictures the Christian life as a life of growth and development. Paul said, "We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18, NIV). Paul himself "[pressed] on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus" had taken hold of him (Phil. 3:12). He encouraged Timothy to work hard, to exercise discipline, to "endure hardship" (2 Tim. 2:3-7, NIV).

Christians tend to move toward two extremes in this matter. Either they think that they can lie back and let God's spirit automatically produce Christian maturity, or they think that they, by clever programs or strenuous exertion, will succeed by main force in becoming perfect. Scripture, of course, combines these perspectives. In a verse that summarized a major discussion of the Christian life, Paul promised that "if by the Spirit" the believer was "putting to death the deeds of the body," he would live (Rom. 8:13; compare NIV). The believer, the acting, willing individual, is, indeed, to do something, but he can do it only "by the Spirit." The point to be made is that the indwelling Spirit, by Himself, does not guarantee a truly renewed mind. Christians must actively and constantly develop, mature, and practice what the Spirit has given them.

How can a Christian facilitate the process of training the renewed mind, the mind of the Spirit? The key would seem to be environment. What are the influences, the atmosphere in which his mind is being formed? What is determining the direction of his thinking? How ironic it is that many Christian parents who are concerned about the kind of school environment in which their children are being trained are completely unconcerned about or even unconscious of the environment that affects their own way of thinking. A mind that is exposed constantly to a barrage of secular television, secular advertising, secular literature, and secular ideas is probably going to turn out to be a secular mind. It

is extraordinarily difficult for a person to resist the pressure to let his own values and beliefs be molded by those influences. Yet many Christians seem to be totally unaware that that is what is happening.

The Christian can reduce the power of the secular in his mind. He can do so not necessarily by cutting himself off from the secular world, although it is understandable why many Christians say that television, for example, presents so powerful and dangerous an influence that it might be best to avoid it altogether. Rather, what is important is that he be careful to expose himself to Christian resources that are able to mold his mind. He should avail himself of scriptural teaching, in a variety of forms. God's Word possesses the power to change one's thinking, to develop a distinctly Christian mind-set in a person. But that cannot happen unless he places himself in an environment in which the Word is prominent. Daily study of Scripture, participation in Bible studies, regular church attendance, reading of Christian literature, even listening to Christian music, all are part of that environment. Then, armed with a biblical world view, the Christian can evaluate the other influences about him. Paul told the believers in Colossae to "let the word of God dwell in you richly as you teach and counsel one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Col. 3:16, NIV). That Word will be able to dwell in believers "richly" only if they come in contact with it constantly.

Just as we who are believers should be concerned about the factors influencing our thinking, so, too, should we be concerned about the direction of our thinking. "Whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Phil. 4:8, NIV). As those who have been joined to Jesus Christ, "[sitting] at the right hand of God" (Acts 2:33), God has "seated us with him in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 2:6, NIV). We have been made citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20). That new spiritual identity must always be uppermost in our thinking. We are "strangers here" (1 Pet. 1:17, NIV); our true home is the heavenly realm, with its distinctive values and laws. Our thinking should conform to that new identity. "Set your minds on the things above, not on earthly things" (Col. 3:2, NIV). The renewed mind is a mind that is formed by, and focused on, the unseen spiritual world to which we belong by faith. The more we understand and identify with the things of that world, the more our minds will be transformed. We will let Paul's prayer for the Colossians be our closing prayer:

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will

through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.

(Colossians 1:9-12, NIV)