

Mind Renewal in a Mindless Age: Preparing to Think and Act Biblically
(A Study of Romans 12:1-2) by James Montgomery Boice, Baker Books, Grand Rapids:
1993. (31 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

1. Mindless Days and Times

We live in mindless times, days in which millions of people are drifting along through life, manipulated by the mass media, particularly television, and hardly know it. Few give thought for their eternal souls, and most, even Christians, are unaware of any way of thinking or living other than that of the secular culture that surrounds them. Fortunately, scattered here and there are people who yearn after God and want their lives to be different from the lives of mere humanists, materialists, and secularists. They want their lives to count for God. [page 9]

2. As We Think, We Will Do

The apostle Paul was practical. The last halves of most of his letters contain practical directions for how Christians are to live the Christian life. But it is significant that the first halves all contain strong doctrine, obviously because Paul was aware that what we think will determine what we do. [page 10-11]

3. Everyone Does As He/She Sees Fit

The problem is that without absolutes provided by God's revelation of Himself and His ways, all values are relative. With a godless world view, there is no real reason for doing one thing rather than another--except for selfish, personal reasons, an attitude that obviously destroys morality rather than establishes it. In other words, our days have become like the times of the Jewish Judges when there was no king, the law was forgotten and, as a result, "everyone did as he [or she] saw fit" (Judg. 21:25). [page 16]

4. Redeemed to Consecrate Self

The great preacher and biblical theologian John Calvin said precisely, "We are redeemed by the Lord for the purpose of consecrating ourselves and all our members to Him.,² [page 26]

². John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross MacKenzie (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1973), p. 262.

5. God's Way the Best

Does the world's "me first" philosophy lead to happiness? Is personal indulgence the answer? You do not have to be a genius to see through that facade. It is an empty promise. Paul calls it "a lie" (Rom. 1:25).

So wake up, Christian. Listen to Paul when he pleads, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - This is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer 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."

God does not lie. His Word is utterly reliable. You will find his way to be "good, pleasing and perfect" if you will bend to it. [page 31]

6. Save Us From Our Sin

.... someone has wisely noted, salvation does not mean that Jesus died to save us in our sins but to save us from them. [page 43]

7. Personal Holiness

The great parish minister and revival preacher Robert Murray McCheyne once said, "My people's greatest need is my personal holiness." [page 44]

8. God's Mercy to Us

John Newton wrote, "Amazing grace---how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind, but now I see."

Newton never forgot God's mercy to him. Once a friend of Newton's was complaining about someone who was resistant to the gospel and living a life of great sin.

"Sometimes I almost despair of that man," the friend remarked.

"I never did despair of any man since God saved me," said Newton.

In his most advanced years Newton's mind began to fail and he had to stop preaching. But when friends came to visit him he frequently remarked, "I am an old man. My mind is almost gone. But I can remember two things: I am a great sinner, and Jesus is a great Savior." Certainly the mercy of God moved Newton to offer his body as a living sacrifice to God and to seek to please him. [page 56-57]

9. God Does Not Enjoy Punishment

Once I was speaking on "Limited [or Definite] Atonement." After I had defined and defended this doctrine, I began to deal with verses that seem to teach the opposite. One of these is 2 Peter 3:9, which says, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance," I gave my understanding of this verse, which is that Peter is not speaking of all people in this passage but of the elect, his point being that God has not yet brought the final judgment but, rather, is delaying it so that the full number of the elect might be born, come to faith in Jesus Christ, and live for him.

A woman at this conference was disturbed by my message and puzzled by my interpretation of this verse. She asked one of the other speakers about it. Then she became even more disturbed, because he gave her a different explanation. Although the other speaker affirmed what I had been teaching about definite atonement, he felt that 2 Peter 3: 9 is to be explained by the different ways we use the word *will*. One way is to refer to God's efficacious will, according to which things happen precisely because God wills them. The other is to refer only to God's natural but not necessarily efficacious disposition. He felt that Peter uses the word this way, meaning only that God does not enjoy punishing people. [page 60]

10. Jesus Wants You

....you will only begin to understand the Christian life when you realize that God does not want your money or your time without yourself. You are the one for whom Jesus died. You are the one he loves. So when the Bible speaks of reasonable service, as it does here, it means that you are what God wants. It is sad if you try to substitute things and time for that, the greatest gift. [page 62-63]

11. God Wants Us to Be Like His Son

Christians often get greatly hung up on the idea of discovering what God's specific will is for their lives. In my judgment, there clearly are specific plans for our lives that God has determined in advance, because he has predetermined all things. The difficulty is that he has not revealed (and does not usually reveal) those specifics to us. They are part of the hidden wisdom and counsels of God, and they are not known by us simply because they are hidden. But although these details are not made known, general but very important things are, and the most important of these general things is that God wants us to be like Jesus Christ.

This is what Romans 8:28-29 says: "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." [page 67]

12. Service to Christ Is a Lasting Reward

The example is another missionary whose name was William Borden. He came from a wealthy and privileged family, was a graduate of Yale University, and had the promise of a wonderful and lucrative career before him. But he felt a call to serve God as a missionary in China and left for the field even though his family and friends thought him a fool for going. After a short time away and even before he reached China, Borden contracted a fatal disease and died. He had given up everything to follow Jesus. He died possessing nothing in this world. But "Borden of Yale" did not regret it. We know this because he left a note as he lay dying in Egypt that said, "No reserve, no retreat, and no regrets." Like so many others, he found the service of Christ to be eminently reasonable and gained a lasting reward. [page 70]

13. Let Our Minds Be Molded by the Word of God.

...The worldliness we are to break away from and repudiate is the world's "world view," what the Germans call a *Weltanschauung*, a systematic way of looking at all things. We are to break out of the world's categories of thinking and instead let our minds be molded by the Word of God.

Christians in our day have not done this very well, and that is the reason why they are so often "worldly" in the other senses, too. In fact, it is a sad commentary on our time, verified by surveys, that Christians in general have mostly the same thought categories, values, and behavior patterns as the world around them. [page 73]

14. All Things Relating to God

Instead of being conformed to this world, as if that is all there is, we are to see all things as relating to God and to eternity. Here is the contrast, as expressed by Harry Blamires: "To think secularly is to think within a frame of reference bounded by the limits of our life on earth; it is to keep one's calculations rooted in this-worldly criteria. To think Christianly is to accept all things with the mind as related, directly or indirectly, to man's eternal destiny as the redeemed and chosen child of God."² [page 75]

² Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant Books, 1963), p. 44.

15. Is Truth Relative?

We also need to think briefly about relativism, because, if man is the focal point of everything, there are no absolutes in any area of life and everything is up for grabs. Some years ago, Professor Allan Bloom of the University of Chicago wrote a book called *The Closing of the American Mind*, in which he said on the very first page, "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative."⁷ [page 79]

⁷ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of The American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 25.

16. Renew Our Minds by the Word of God

Paul writes as he does in 2 Corinthians, saying, "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" (3:18).

In 2 Corinthians Paul says, "It is happening," but in Romans 12 he says, "Let it happen," thus putting upon us the responsibility, though not the power, to accomplish this necessary transformation. How does it happen? It happens through the renewing of our minds, and the way our minds become renewed is by studying the life-giving and renewing Word of God. Without that study, we will remain in the world's mold, unable to think correctly and therefore also unable to act as Christians. With that study, blessed and empowered as it will be by the Holy Spirit, we will begin to take on something of the glorious luster of the Lord Jesus Christ and become increasingly like him. [page 82]

17. Written Words Promote Thinking

When we read something that requires us to think, there is a certain distance between ourselves and the printed page. We read, but we are not necessarily swept along with what we read. We analyze, ponder, weigh, compare, contrast, and disagree. We reread a paragraph if we do not understand the argument. If we are pursuing a technical paper, we may look up vocabulary we do not know. We follow the arguments, and we disagree with them if they seem to be inadequate. We may challenge the conclusions. There is even a certain distance between ourselves and more popular writing, which is why we

do not cheer a well-written sentence or applaud a powerful paragraph, though we may appreciate how well the work is done. People who read well and are conditioned by the written word can and do think. Written words promote thinking. Moreover, the more skillfully people read and the more they read, the better and longer they can think.

[page 88]

18. TV Does Not Allow Time for Thought

There is a chapter in Postman's book that deals with news on television, and it is entitled "Now ... This." Those are the words most used on television to link one brief televised news segment--the average news segment on network news programs is only forty-five seconds long--to the next news segment or a commercial. What the phrase means is that what one has just seen has no relevance to what one is about to see next or, for that matter, to anything. Rational thought requires such connections. Thinking depends on similarities, contradictions, deductions, and the development of probable consequences. That requires time. It is what books and other print media can give us, as I said. But this is precisely what most television does not give, because it does not allow time for thought. And if it does not provide time for thought or to promote thought, what it essentially amounts to is "diversion."

Postman says that television gives us "news without consequences, without value, and therefore without essential seriousness: that is to say, news as pure entertainment."⁴ In other words, it is not only mindless; it is teaching us to be mindless, to the point at which we even suppose that our ignorance is great knowledge. [page 88-89]

⁴ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986). First edition 1985, p. 100.

19. Elections Are Won by Pleasant TV Images

How do campaign managers get their candidates elected these days? It is not by discussing issues. That is a sure way to get defeated, because any position on any issue unless it is utterly meaningless, is certain to offend somebody. The way to win elections is to present a pleasant television image and keep the candidate out of trouble for as long as possible. [page 90]

20. Preaching Felt Needs, Not Real Needs

But here is the important question: What is lost in the translation of religion to television? The answer is: Nearly everything that makes religion real. The chief loss is a

sense of the transcendent. God is mission. Postman says, "Everything that makes religion an historic, profound and sacred human activity is stripped away; there is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology, and above all, no sense of spiritual transcendence. On these shows, the preacher is tops. God comes out as second banana."⁷

In another place he says, "If I am not mistaken, the word for this is blasphemy."⁸

An observer who likes such religion's entertainment might object, "Well, what harm is done as long as genuine religion is still to be found in church on Sundays?" But is it? I would argue that so pervasive and normalizing is the impact of television that pressures have inevitably come to make church services as irrelevant and entertaining as the tube.

In the vast majority of church services today, there are virtually no pastoral prayers, much brainless music, chummy chatter, and abbreviated sermons. And what are preachers told? They are told to be personable, to relate funny stories, to smile, above all to stay away from topics that might cause people to become unhappy with the church and leave it. One extremely popular television preacher will not talk about sin, on the grounds that doing so makes people feel bad. Preachers are to preach to felt needs, not necessarily real needs, and this generally means telling people only what they want to hear.

Was Jesus amusing? Were Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, or Jonathan Edwards entertainers? [page 92]

⁷Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, pp. 116, 117.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 123.

21. Your Mind Matters

This is the point at which we need to talk about genuine mind renewal for Christians But I close here by mentioning a helpful little book by John Stott, the Rector Emeritus of All Souls Church in London. It is titled *Your Mind Matters*. The book deals with six spheres of Christian living, and it argues that each one is impossible without a proper and energetic use of our minds: Christian worship, Christian faith, Christian holiness, Christian guidance, Christian evangelism, and Christian ministry.

We must use our minds in worship, because worship is honoring God for who he is, and in order to do that we must understand something about his attributes. In other words, we must praise him for being sovereign, holy, merciful, wise, and so on.

We must use our minds in areas requiring faith, because faith is believing the word or promises of God, and to believe God's word or promises we must understand what they are.

We must use our minds in our growth in holiness, because sanctification is not a matter of emotional experience or simply following out a formula for sanctification today-but, rather, knowing what God has done in us when he joined us to Christ, and then acting upon it. It is knowing that we cannot go back to being what we were and therefore that there is no direction for us to go but forward.

We must use our minds in seeking personal guidance as to how we should live and what decisions we must make, because the principles by which we must be guided are in the Bible. We need to study them, understand them, and apply them. This cannot be done without thinking.

We must use our minds in evangelism, because if faith is necessary for a person to be used and if faith is responding to the Word of God and acting on it (as I have just written), we are obliged to present the teachings of the Bible and the claims of Jesus Christ so people can understand them. If they do not understand what they are called upon to «believe" and therefore only respond emotionally, their «faith" is not true faith and theirs is not a true conversion. They will drop away eventually, as many supposed «converts" do.

We must use our minds in ministry, first, in seeking out a sphere of service («What am I good at? Where do my spiritual gifts lie? What is God leading me to do for him?") and, second, to serve in that sphere of work well ("How should I go about the work I have been given?").

Stott argues that «anti-intellectualism ... is ... part of the fashion of the world and therefore a form of worldliness. To denigrate the mind is to undermine foundational Christian doctrines." He asks pointedly, «Has God created us rational beings, and shall we deny our humanity which he has given us? Has God spoken to us, and shall we not listen to his words? Has God renewed our mind through Christ, and shall we not think with it?

Is God going to judge us by his Word, and shall we not be wise and build our house upon this rock?"⁹

They are important and helpful questions, if you think about them. [pages 93-95]

⁹John R. Stott, *Your Mind Matters: The Place of the Mind in Christian Life* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1972), p. 26.

22. Have a Christian Mind

... thinking Christianly is not a matter of thinking about Christian subjects as opposed to thinking about secular subjects, as many people suppose, but rather thinking in a Christian way about everything-having a Christian mind. [page 98]

23. God Is Before the Cosmos

How do we begin to think and act as Christians? There is a sense in which we could begin at any point, since truth is a whole and truth in anyone area will inevitably lead to truth in every other area. But if the dominant philosophy of our day is secularism-which means viewing all of life only in terms of the visible world and in terms of the here and now-then the best of all possible starting places is the doctrine of God, for God alone is above and beyond the world and is eternal. Even more, the doctrine of God is necessary and inevitable starting place if we are to produce a genuinely Christian response to secularism.

What does that mean for our thinking?

Well, if there is a God, this very fact means that the supernatural is a reality. The word supernatural means "over," "above," or "in addition to nature." In other words, to go back to Carl Sagan, who says, "The cosmos is all there is or ever was or ever will be," Christians say the cosmos is not all there is or was or ever will be. God is. God exists. He is there, whether we acknowledge this truth or not, and he stands behind the cosmos. He was before the cosmos. In fact, it is only because there is a God that there is a cosmos, since without God nothing else could possibly have come to be.

If anything exists there must be an inevitable, self-existent, uncaused First Cause that stands behind it. [page 100]

24. Without God's Word, All Is Equal

That God has spoken and that his word to us can be trusted has always been the conviction of the church, at least until relatively modern times. Today, the truthfulness of the Bible has been challenged but with disastrous results. For, without a sure word from God, all words are equally valid and Christianity is neither more certain nor more compelling than any other merely human word or philosophy. [page 102]

25. Critique of Western Materialism

The best critique of Western materialism that I know is from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a former citizen of the Soviet Union, now exiled. It is in the form of an address he gave to the graduating class of Harvard University in 1978. Up to this point, Solzhenitsyn was somewhat of an American hero. He had suffered in the Soviet Union's infamous gulag prison system and had later defected, which is why he was invited to speak at Harvard. But in this address he was so blunt in his criticism of the West that his popularity vanished almost overnight, and today he is almost never heard from, though he continues to write voluminously from a retreat in New England.

Solzhenitsyn's address was no defense of socialism. Quite the contrary. He celebrated its ideological defeat in Eastern Europe, saying, "it is zero and less than zero." But he declared, "Should someone ask me whether I would indicate the West such as it is today as a model to my country, frankly I would have to answer negatively Through intense suffering our own country has now achieved a spiritual development of such intensity that the Western system in its present state of spiritual exhaustion does not look attractive." He maintained that "after the suffering of decades of violence and oppression the human soul longs for things higher, warmer, and purer than those offered by today's mass living habits, introduced by the revolting invasions of publicity, by TV stupor and by intolerable music."⁵ [pages 104-105]

⁵ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *A World Split Apart: The 1978 Commencement Address at Harvard University*, Harvard Gazette, June 8, 1978, pp. 17-19.

26. No Ordinary People

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations----these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit--immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. C. S. Lewis. [page 109]

27. Man Is the Measure of All Things

Humanism is the philosophy to which human beings inevitably come if they are secularists. Secularism means eliminating from the universe God or anything else that may be transcendent, and focusing instead only on what we can see and measure now. But when God is eliminated in this process, man himself is left as the pinnacle of creation, and he becomes the inadequate and unworthy core for everything. In philosophy we usually trace the beginnings of this outlook to the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Protagoras. Protagoras expressed his viewpoint in Greek words that have given us the better-known Latin concept *homo mensura*, which means "Man, the measure" or, as it is often expressed, "Man is the measure of all things." The idea here is that man is the norm by which everything is to be evaluated. He is the ultimate creature and thus the ultimate authority.

Although this seems to elevate man, in practice it does exactly the opposite ... In effect, it deifies man, but this deification debases man in the end, turning him into an animal or even less than an animal. Moreover, it causes him to manipulate, ignore, disparage, wound, hate, abuse, and even murder other people. [page 110]

28. God's Image Possesses Personality

To be made in God's image means to possess the attributes of personality, as God himself does, but animals, plants, and inorganic matter do not. This involves knowledge, memory, feelings, and a will. [page 114]

29. Our Lives Show Those Things Good, Perfect, and Pleasing

From the world's perspective, the Christian way does not look attractive or even right. It says such things as: "God is in control of all things and has a purpose for everything that happens Man exists to glorify God Money cannot shield us against heartbreak, failure, sin, disease, or disaster.. .. Success in God's kingdom means humility and service to others." Because we are so much part of the world and so little like Jesus Christ, even Christians find God's way unappealing. Nevertheless we are to press on in that way and prove by our lives that the will of God really is "good, pleasing and perfect" in all things. [page 122]

30. New Creation in Christ

God is forming people who will prove the value of his way by conscious choices and deliberate obedience.

One of the best exegetes of the last century was a Scottish pastor named Robert Candlish. He wrote a book on Romans 12, in which he made this point well. Candlish said:

The believer's transformation by the renewing of his mind is not the ultimate end which the Holy Spirit seeks in his regenerating and renovating work. It is the immediate and primary design of that work, in one sense. We are created anew in Christ Jesus. That new creation is what the Holy Spirit first aims at and effects. But "we are created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them: (Eph. 2: 10). The essence of a good work is the doing of the will of God. The proving of the will of God, therefore, is a fitting sequel of our "being transformed by the renewing of our mind."¹ [page 123]

¹ Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant Books, 1978), p. 45. Original edition 1963.

31. God's Will Seems Hard and Dark

Of the fashion of the world, it may truly be said that the more you try it, the less you will find it to be satisfying. It looks well; it looks fair, at first. But who that has lived long has not found it to be vanity at last?

It is altogether otherwise with the will of God. That often looks worst at the beginning. It seems hard and dark. But on! On with you in the proving of it! Prove it patiently, perseveringly, with prayer and pains. And you will get growing clearness, light, enlargement, joy. You will more and more find that "the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." For "wisdom's ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace." "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and the honeycomb. Moreover by them is thy servant warned; and in keeping of them there is great reward." ⁷ [pages 131-13 2]

⁷Robert S. Candlish, *Studies in Romans 12: The Christian's Sacrifice and Service of Praise* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1989), pp. 96, 97.

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