

RENEWED IN YOUR MIND

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And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.(Rom 12:2)

One of the features about our present culture which concerns me considerably is its marked subjectivity. Everything has been reduced to the individual and his perceptions, opinions, and preferences. There is no acknowledged objective truth, right or good apart from the individual. There is only now “truth for me,” “good for me,” etc. This radical subjectivity has been embraced by and absorbed into the bloodstream of American religion. Even secular social scientists have noted the religious phenomenon. Steven Wolf writes:

“Evangelical believers are sometimes hard pressed to explain exactly what, doctrinally speaking, their faith is. On her visits to a small town in Oregon, a sociologist found that “many of the most committed churchgoers couldn’t even really tell me their church’s denomination, a fact that suggested to me that feeling is believing.” One minister called his a “Heinz 57 church,” reflecting the wide variety of doctrines found within, while another told her that “a lot of us call ourselves Christian but we don’t know what we believe.” (“The Transformation of Religion in America” Page 72)

A few contemplative Christian teachers have noticed the same thing and have expressed grave concerns. David Wells has written:

There is no logical contradiction between a collapse of belief in the objective reality of God on the one hand and a surge of interest in things religious on the other. An interest in religion can be nothing more than a fascination with ourselves as religious beings quite distinct from our standing before the true God. It is one thing to dwell on our hunger for God – or for mystery or something else that transcends the routines, trivialities, and pains of contemporary life; it is quite another to dwell on God as he is in himself. It is altogether possible for private, internal religion to flourish while belief in God as externally and objectively true fades. (God in the Wasteland, pages 91-92)

Wells argues that it is not only *possible* for internal religion to flourish in a subjective culture, but that American Protestantism (Evangelicalism) is a prime example of it. He writes:

Among the boomers inside and outside the church, two traits are most evident. First, there is a hunger for religious experience. There is a hunger for God but a disenchantment with dogma or doctrine. And their characteristic abandonment of boundaries – boundaries between God and the self and between one religion and another – typically results in a smorgasbord of spirituality for which the only accepted criterion of truth is the pragmatic one of what seems to work

personally. ... In the fevered quest for individual fulfillment, commonality of belief is brushed aside as an irrelevance, if not an impossibility. The common NEED for religious experience of some sort is acknowledged but no restrictions are placed on the sort of experience that will fill the fill for any given individual. Thus do we welcome the personalized designer religion of the 1990's. (God in the Wasteland, pages 99-100)

In other words, Americans are looking for subjective religious *experience*, not objective truth by which to judge their experiences and the world around them as wise or foolish, right or wrong, good or evil. Wells maintains that the Evangelical churches are more than willing to offer the “product” desired for the price of popularity and success. As a result of defining faith as *feeling* to the exclusion of confession of truth, the Christian mind has disappeared. Harry Blamires lamented this state of affairs over forty years ago, stating, “there is no longer a Christian mind.” We might say that the Christian mind has atrophied and turned to mush, for we no longer evaluate and judge ourselves, our churches, our culture by the standards of divine truth. Often, in fact, we have substituted the standards of worldly wisdom.

This is why it has become almost impossible to carry out a polite and civil dialogue even within the confines of the Missouri Synod today. It seems ridiculous, if not evil, to many people that we Lutherans should draw lines of fellowship, especially at the altar, on the basis of confession of doctrine. If a person *feels* Jesus or *experiences* Jesus as intensely and powerfully as we might, isn't it irrelevant what doctrine he or she might believe to be true? (Or whether they “know” anything at all?) Who are we to judge someone else's experience or religious feelings? In the same way, it is almost impossible to explain that the liturgy is a powerful instrument for communicating and delivering the Gospel. People today prefer a service that is designed to generate good feelings. What difference does the substance of the words make if one is truly *touched*? Perhaps St. Paul's prayer that our love “abound more and more in knowledge and all discernment”(Phil 1:9) should be contemporized to “become more excited and intense.”

It is important for us to recognize in our present environment that the Spirit of God does not leave the mind out of His sanctifying work. It is not particularly pious to experience mindless emotions, whether they are “religious” or not. Neither is it godly or right for pastors to focus their ministry on generating good feelings in the sheep. Faith is not identical with emotion any more than it is an empty intellectual assent. Faith is confidence of the heart in the truth of the Gospel; namely, that Christ is the Son of God who offered His life as the lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. Faith may, or may not, be associated with strong emotions, neither are emotions a test whether faith is weak or strong in any given moment. Faith clings to TRUTH, and truth comes through HEARING, and hearing comes through TEACHING. After conversion, the Scriptures repeatedly urge the Christian to grow in KNOWLEDGE OF THE TRUTH. This growth in knowledge strengthens faith and enables the Christian to walk wisely through this deceitful world. SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT is a virtue of faith.

Thus we see in many verses of Scripture that the Spirit sanctifies or renews *the mind* of the Christian. Before we came to faith in Christ, our minds were darkened, deceitful, and corrupt (Rom 1:28; Eph 4:17; 1 Tim 6:5). Things seemed right and good that were not right and good. Our thinking and judgment were perverted by sin. When the Holy Spirit gives us a new birth through Christ, He begins to make our minds “new” (Eph 4:23; Rom 12:2). This newness is

something altogether different from the old, corrupted, sinful world. In our renewed mind we begin to see the wisdom of spiritual things that seem foolish to the world (1 Cor 2:10-14). In our renewed minds we can discern between good and evil (Eph 4:17-23) and we can understand that the will of God expressed in Scripture is good and wise (Rom 12:2). The beautiful thing about the renewed mind is that it enables us to have the same judgments about things, and to speak with one voice before the world (1 Cor 1:10). That is because the mind the Spirit creates in us through faith is “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16).

May the Lord bless us all as He blessed the two disciples who ate supper with Him on Easter Sunday, as Luke writes, “He opened their understanding that they might be able to comprehend the Scriptures.” Amen!