

## **“The Renewing of Your Mind”**

**(Romans 12:1-2)**

**Central Church of Christ**

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### **Introduction: Loving God with all Our Heart, Soul, Mind and Strength**

We live in exciting times of paradox. We know more about the universe and history of life on this beautiful planet than ever before. Every year we have more and more hard evidence that God exists and His actions in His world are historically accurate. Paradoxically as evidence for His existence increases fewer people in the western world are believing in Him.

Today we will talk about one important evidence and how God is still working 24/7. We'll talk about one thing we all have in common. We all have minds. They all work. God can renew them daily. We'll look at how this process works. I hope you can see possibilities and potential for your spiritual growth.

Moses is the first to teach us the greatest commandment in 1406 BC: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” Jesus adds one more important part of our being to this great commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and *with all your mind*, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30).

At a key point in his letter to the Romans, Paul the Apostle commands them to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).

### **Romans 12:1-2 and Research in Brain/Mind Science Over 2,500 Years**

The relationships of the mind, brain, body, soul, and spirit have fascinated people for thousands of years. In the fifth century B.C., Empedocles thought that the intelligence of mind lived in the blood and heart (the cardiovascular theory). Hippocrates believed that the soul resided in the brain, the source of intellectual powers (the encephalic theory). Plato had a hybrid view that the immortal soul resided in the head's “marrow” while the passions resided in the torso. Aristotle thought the rational soul was centred in the heart. Galen was a second century A.D. anatomist who believed that the life-giving spirits resided in the ventricles of the brain (the ventricular theory). In the fourth century A.D., Nemesius, a philosopher and bishop of Emesa, believed the brain had three basic sets of mental faculties - 1) sensation and imagination, 2) intellect/thought and judgement, and 3) memory, the storehouse of thought.

These ideas about the brain and mind shaped people's thinking until the A.D. 1500's. It was then that Andreas Vesalius, considered the “father of modern anatomy,” dissected different

mammal brains and made the first anatomically accurate descriptions of the brain. Unlike Aristotle who thought that the heart was the centre of the rational soul, Vesalius saw the brain and the nervous system as the centre of the mind and emotions. In the 1600's, Rene Descarte made a distinction between mind and body that lead to an understanding of the brain as essentially a physical machine and the mind as an immaterial holistic entity that controls the brain.

By the 1800's, scientists and physicians such as Jean-Baptiste Bouillaud and Paul Broca began to identify localized functions within the brain. Broca correctly identified the brain's speech centre. In his ground breaking neurological research and surgery on epileptics in the twentieth century, Dr. Wilder Penfield, located many more of the specific functions of the brain. Scientific research has discovered the organization in the brain's structure beginning with the basic building blocks of molecules which go together to form synapses, 15 to 30+ billion neurons and axons, networks, maps and the central nervous system.

Following Penfield and Descartes, most experts in neurology today make a distinction between brain and mind. As a complex organ, the brain makes consciousness and the process of thought possible much like a computer makes computation possible. In essence, the brain is the computer hardware and the mind is the software that controls, directs, and draws upon its resources. The mind is not so much an object as a *process*. The mind works through a stream of consciousness within the brain that integrates and employs its information organizing and directing power, a type of collective of all the amazing brain has to offer. The brain stores memories of events and thoughts through anatomical changes in its structure called "*engrams*." These are physical chemical changes in the brain's networks which store and recall the things and events which the brain remembers. The "self" is the collective of mind, brain, and soul, which experiences life and structures memories for recall and gives each individual their own unique identity and ability to make choices. The identification of the mind localized in the brain and how different parts of the brain support various functions of benefit to the whole person are enormous breakthroughs.

Scientists have gone on to make discoveries that are highly relevant to God's command to love Him with all of our minds and Paul's exhortation for the renewal of the mind. The mind/brain complex does not only change anatomically as it assimilates and remembers new experiences and information, it can change and re-pattern itself, even when injured. As John Dowling observes, "the view that the brain becomes hard-wired once we become adults is a common one, but not a correct one, and recent research on the mammalian cortex has shown that it is considerably more modifiable in adults than anyone believed just a few decades ago" (83). Norman Doidge uses case studies to show that the mind/brain complex is plastic and can indeed "change its own structure and function through thought and activity" (xix).

Science thus affirms what God says through Paul in Romans 12:2. The human mind is capable of change, growth, and renewal. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:16, "Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day." While the mind can learn bad behaviours, it can overwrite these with new thoughts and motives and chose good behaviours. Traces of the old are still there but the new can become dominant. The highest sources of inspiration and motivation for these changes are God, His

Word, and His Spirit. There are many important and positive spiritual implications of being “transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Whatever you remember of this sermon, you recall because there has been changes in your brain. Your brain stores information by making small anatomical changes in the structure of its bio-electronic memory banks. Your mind, the “software,” retrieves information from the “hardware” of your brain. You will likely recall that scientific research shows your brain is capable of re-patterning itself, in Paul’s terms “renewing” itself. Barring major illness, your brain/mind complex learns and takes on new information as long as you live. Though we may not think of ourselves as always learning in the sense of going to school, our brains are constantly taking on new memories. Research shows the easiest things to remember are: 1) things we do regularly and repeatedly, and 2) things that are surprising and unique. The former speaks to the value of regular Bible reading, memorization of Scripture, worship and fellowship. The second speaks to our engagement in special events and openness to forming new relationships with people who need the gospel.

### **Romans 12:1-2 in Context of the Universal Problem of Sin**

God and Paul both know the potential of our minds to be renewed. Paul could write with confidence to the Christians in Roman that they should be “renewed by the transforming of your mind” (Romans 12:2). Paul begins and ends his letter saying he wanted the Romans respond to the gospel of Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection by the “obedience of faith” (Romans 1:5; 16:26). Serious problems among the people, however, threatened this response that would lead to lives of faith and Christ-like character. Problems in the multi-cultural city of Rome included idolatry, sexual aberrations, selfishness, self-righteousness, criticism, greed, envy, murder, arrogance, deceit and lack of love (Romans 1 and 2). Serious spiritual problems included pride and misunderstanding both the Law of Moses and the meaning of baptism into Christ. There was division between races and problems between strong and weak consciences. In summary, Paul identified the universal problem of sin in his day and ours. The Romans were being conformed to the image of the world instead of the image of Christ (Romans 12:1; 8:29).

### **A Scenic Vantage Point**

Romans 12:1-2 is like a scenic mountain outlook. From its vantage point we can look back and clearly see the foundation of chapters one to eleven where God explains His universal answer to the universal problem of sin through the gospel. We look ahead through Romans 12:1-2 as a gateway and theme statement for all of Paul’s practical instructions in 12:1-15:13 signifying how believers should live in a way that shows their love and dedication to God and one another in response to Christ’s death and resurrection.

### **Culture’s Mould and the “Plastic Paradox”**

In concert with Paul’s exhortation that Christians “not be conformed to this world,” researchers observe that culture significantly affects brain development, in our day as in Paul’s. The malleability (flexibility) of the brain/mind complex is a two-edged

sword. Norman Doidge writes: “Culture is not just produced by the brain; it is also by definition a series of activities that shape the mind.” In a world where minds are bombarded by information, we experience what Doidge describes as the “plastic paradox.” While our brains are resourceful and flexible, they are susceptible to unhealthy external influences which mould them to practice harmful habits that can be difficult to re-pattern. Doidge confirms Paul: the mind can be moulded for good or bad, into the world view of the age or of God.

Young people are most vulnerable to the negative side of this cultural mind/brain shaping, especially when combined with poor physical nutrition. Media have powerful effects on the developing brains of young children. Media can shorten their attention spans, slow language uptake, hamper social skills, reduce the ability to defer gratification and solve complex problems, and encourage responses based more on fear and emotion than on reason, a faculty that Paul strongly asserts is essential to grasping and doing God’s will.

### **The Power of the Gospel in Renewal**

Fortunately for the Romans and for everyone alive today, Paul invested eleven chapters in explaining that the gospel of Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection is God’s merciful universal offer of salvation to answer the universal problem of sin. In 12:2 Paul then calls for a response to God’s gracious saving gospel through voluntary sacrifice and transformation of the Christian’s whole being under the direction of a renewed mind “set on the Spirit” (8:6b). It is this transformation of mind through voluntary cooperation with the power of the gospel and the Spirit that makes obedience to Paul’s practical exhortations possible.

Looking from our vantage point back to the beginning of his letter, Paul’s theme statement of Romans 1:16-17 reveals the source of power from God for the transformation of the Roman church and all Christians: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘but the righteous man shall live by faith.’” The gospel is the power of God for the transformation of Jews and Gentiles from alienation to salvation, from unrighteousness to righteousness, from unbelief to continuous obedient faith. Thinking focused on Jesus and His death, burial and resurrection transforms our minds and the course of our lives.

### **The Power of God’s Spirit in Renewal**

In Romans 7 Paul shows how difficult it is to conquer sin by our own power. In Romans 8 he reveals that the Spirit makes us God’s possession in Christ, gives life to our bodies, helps us in our prayers and gives us power to live in ways that please God. Scripture says that “God is light” (1 John 1:5b) and His kingdom is about the power of the Spirit (Romans 14:17; 1 Corinthians 4:20). Physicists have discovered that matter is ultimately made up of energy. This energy behaves in accordance with the information in specific laws and principles. Thus at the core of the universe is consistent information, the wisdom that governs life. This wisdom comes from God and pre-dates the universe which runs on its principles: “The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; By understanding He established the heavens (Prov. 3:19). Wisdom says of

itself in the company of God, “When He established the heavens, I was there” (Prov. 8:27). God is present throughout His universe by His Spirit. He is free to move anywhere and operate in and upon His universe and the minds of cooperative men and women in accordance with His will. Since God, in His wisdom, created mankind in His image, with mind, it is imminently reasonable and in line with Paul’s teaching that the Spirit of God is one of His primary agents in the renewal of the human mind (Romans 12:2b) and “the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). God’s thoughts become the Christian’s thoughts, His will become ours.

### **Conclusion: The Process and Results of Renewal**

Renewal begins with hearing and understanding the gospel as God’s universal answer to the universal problem of sin. Then through repenting and dying to sin, being immersed into Christ, rising alive by the power of his Spirit within, Christians walk in newness of life, living in harmony with the people of God. In Christ, minds are drawn out of the world’s mould, away from ephemeral passing things, to the eternal things of God. God resumes His rightful place at the centre of our lives. When we are baptized into Christ we receive His Spirit and begin our sanctification: being transformed by the renewal of our mind, becoming holy like Him. Renewal is a life-long process. The internal work of God in Christians prepares us to move from life in time to life in eternity: “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6).

Renewal comes from the work of the Spirit and the cooperative submissive will and active response of the Christian setting the mind on the things of the Spirit (Romans 8 and 12), thinking about what is good (Philippians 4:8), and living accordingly. When Christians do God’s will, He provides feedback confirming that the wisdom of His teaching comes from heaven (John 7:17).

The Word of God is one of the Spirit’s most incisive tools in the mind’s renewal (Romans 15:5, 13). It can shape the contents of our thought world. Renewal occurs as the mind absorbs, assimilates and metabolizes the Word of God (Romans 10; 15); “the washing of water with the Word” (Ephesians 5:26) is a direct sanctifying action of Christ. The worldly thoughts of the mind/brain complex become overwritten and outnumbered by the higher, beautiful, and more satisfying Word of God. God’s wisdom that permeates the universe becomes the wisdom that guides the Christian’s mind. The “plastic paradox” shows why the Word of God must be so strong and forceful to restructure deeply engrained habits and patterns of thought. Countering the pressures of the information age requires vigilance to re-pattern the mind with good thoughts. In the body of Christ, the Spirit works powerfully through the Word in preaching to exhort, convict, encourage, and uplift.

In light of God’s mercy, Christians offer themselves to God as living sacrifices to serve him using the gifts he gives (12:1-8). The renewal of the mind leads to an understanding of the will of God (12:2) and voluntary self-conscious humility (12:3). It is no coincidence that Paul goes on immediately to show that the Spirit gives the will and gifts of power that enable Christians to serve others through speaking for God (prophecy), ministry to one another, teaching,

encouraging exhortation, giving, leading and showing mercy (Romans 12:6-8). Paul proceeds to show how Christians guided by the Spirit are tender-hearted toward one another, diligent, fervent, rejoicing in hope, patient in sufferings, continuing steadfastly in prayer, and contributing to one another's needs (12:10-13). Within this God-centred view of the world, Christians seek harmony with their spiritual family and all men "so far as it depends on you" (12:18). Confident of their own salvation and freedom from condemnation (8:1), Christians are at liberty to seek the good of all men, including their enemies (12:19-20). The renewed mind allows Christians to respond appropriately to governing authorities and love those with differing opinions (ch. 13-14-15:13). A profound paradigm shift occurs for those in individualistic western cultures: renewed minds allow Christians to see themselves as part of a group vs. just individuals, as members of a body, members of one another, with minds and lives being transformed into the image of Christ.

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Further reading:

Norman Doidge. *The Brain that Changes Itself*.

John E. Dowling. *The Great Brain Debate: Nature or Nurture?*

Malcolm Jeeves. *Mind Fields: Reflections on the Science of Mind and Brain*.

David Gareth Jones. *Our Fragile Brains: A Christian Perspective on Brain Research*.

John H. Kaas, ed. *The Mutable Brain: Dynamic and Plastic Features of the Developing and Mature Brain*.