

Don't think like the world

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. Rm 12:2

For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. 1 Cor 3:19

This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart. Eph 4:17-18

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Jm 4:4

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that *is* in the world -- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life -- is not of the Father but is of the world. 1 Jn 2:15-16

We are not to be conformed to this world, and this particularly involves the way we think. Probably the greatest danger to the Christian is to think in worldly terms because this results in a wide range of problems: outright sin, wrong paths of thinking, false doctrine, incorrect interpretation of Scripture, misunderstanding discipleship, and failing to hear God. If we think like the world we will never do anything right in the Christian life.

There are long-term believers who are very careful over doctrinal accuracy, who go regularly to church meetings, who say their prayers daily and yet are utterly wasting their Christian lives because in everything they think like the world. Legalistic obedience is of little spiritual value. The righteousness of the Pharisees was intense, legalistic and devoted to the true God, but Jesus said that this righteousness was insufficient and would not merit eternal life (Matt 5:20). If you touch the right nerve of legalistic Christians they soon show their true fleshly colours because they react like the world. I have known strict Reformed believers who have been Christians for many decades but who did not know the first principles of righteousness and Christian behaviour. This was because their thinking had never been changed and their minds never renewed. They did not know how to put off the old nature, and so constantly tried to reform it with human effort. This is trying to live the Christian life by worldly thinking. It is futile.

It is absolutely fundamental to discipleship that we put off the mind of the flesh and learn godly thinking. However, the reality is that many Christians, and indeed many Christian leaders, continue to think in worldly terms for decades – thus wasting their lives.

Worldly strategies are pointless in spiritual matters

The LORD knows the thoughts of man, that they *are* futile. Ps 94:11 & 1 Cor 3:20

No longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened. Eph 4:17

The universal adoption of human strategies by Christian churches is both shocking and stupid. Over and over again leaders take up fleshly ideas in order to run their churches, and fail time after time. Some men adopt a new tack every few months and drive their flock wild. This is the problem where someone else's 'successful' method becomes my millstone. Over time the church withers and falls apart, at least in terms of spiritual maturity.

The Willow Creek method of doing church by ‘seeker sensitive’ programmes is a case in point. After years of running the church focused upon sinners instead of Christ, of dumbing down instead of edifying, it became apparent to the leaders that it was doing great damage and all the mature families had left. The church was largely left with very weak and immature Christians who had no understanding of doctrine or practice. Despite this, thousands of churches worldwide had copied the Willow Creek system hoping to gain large numbers of members by it. The basis of the Willow Creek experiment was fleshly ideas – they tried to make the church more like the world in order to attract those from the world. The result was a ruined church, which was just a worldly, fleshly group of people with a Christian name doing a few Christian things.

The mind of man only produces futile thoughts in terms of spirituality; this means incapable of producing any useful result.¹ Men’s thoughts may produce clever technological achievements or design great edifices, but in terms of righteousness they are futile. Man’s thoughts only lead to sin and God’s displeasure; this is why our thinking must be mature and godly (1 Cor 14:20). If we follow worldly strategies then the result will be futility every time. What may seem to be, apparently, successful in human terms may be of no value whatsoever to God.

A modern example

I once read of a famous Christian leader in America who had built up a large church following over many years. He, like so many others, generated much money with which to build a huge church building at great cost. It became a local landmark. The numbers also grew, attracted by the new building. Late in life this man was walking down the street when he heard God challenge his heart. His response was, ‘*But look at what I’ve built for you Lord.*’ The Lord’s response was, ‘*You did not build this for me but for yourself.*’ At that moment the man realised that his whole life’s work till then was utterly useless; he repented and sought to live better. If we think like the world we may do great things, but they will all be futile.

Futility

It is important to understand the fulness of the weakness of human thinking. Anything coming from the old nature is not only inherently sinful but pointless and of no spiritual value. God does not look upon the world with human eyes but with the eye of wisdom, perfection, spirituality, holiness, justice and love. He judges our works by the measure of Christ not Adam; that is our thinking and works are examined and compared to the manhood of Christ not to the standard of ordinary human life. Thus a man can produce very fine works, even very powerful religious works, and yet produce nothing of heavenly value. This is because all the works of man are worthless since his thinking is futile.

The word ‘futile’ occurs 11 times in the NKJV and so does the word ‘futility’. This is interesting since the number 11 speaks of falling short of God’s decree (12). Twelve is the number of divine covenant, government and order; eleven is falling short of this. Ten is the number of divine completion or fulness; eleven is an addition to this marking a subversion or undoing of divine perfection. Eleven thus speaks of disorder, imperfection, disorganisation and futility. Edom, though related to Israel, was under God’s curse and its chiefs were eleven in number (Gen 36:40-43). Jacob’s family of the remaining eleven sons was in disorder after Joseph had been captured. The journey from Horeb to Kadesh Barnea was eleven days (Deut 1:2); another day’s journey would have carried the Israelites to

¹ In 1 Cor 3:20 ‘futile’ is *mataios* meaning: devoid of force, truth, success, result; useless, of no purpose. In Eph 4:17 the word ‘futile’ is *mataiotes* meaning: what is devoid of truth and appropriateness; perverseness, depravity; frailty, want of vigour.

completion in the Promised Land. The eleven apostles were incomplete and needed another.

Paul summarises mankind as,

Although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became **futile** in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools,
Rm 1:21-22

The product of a man's heart is darkness. The thinking of the natural man is futility. The wisdom of humans is folly. Nothing men can do can please God. The book of Job puts it forcefully,

What *is* man, that he could be pure? And *he who is* born of a woman, that he could be righteous? ... How much less man, *who is* abominable and filthy, Who drinks iniquity like water! ... The wicked man writhes with pain all *his* days ... Dreadful sounds *are* in his ears; in prosperity the destroyer comes upon him. ... For he stretches out his hand against God, and acts defiantly against the Almighty, running stubbornly against Him with his strong, embossed shield. ... He will not depart from darkness; the flame will dry out his branches, and by the breath of His mouth he will go away. Let him not trust in futile *things*, deceiving himself, for futility will be his reward. It will be accomplished before his time, and his branch will not be green. ... They conceive trouble and bring forth futility; their womb prepares deceit. Job 15:14-35

Man's days are consumed in futility (Ps 78:33); reprobates were created for futility (Ps 89:47) and the nations are sieved with futility, being shown to err (Isa 30:28). Nothing man can do is of any value to God; he cannot do spiritual good (Rm 3:10-12). Even a great, wise and prosperous king had to accept that fleshly life was futility (Eccles 1:2 – the Hebrew word *hebel* ['vanity'] means, 'vapour, breath vanity, futility').

Since all this is true, why do Christians continue to think like the world? Do they not realise that all things are new (2 Cor 5:17). Not only are they in a new relationship to everything, but they themselves are new creatures called to think differently.

Think like God

We must think like God thinks; we must see with God's eyes; we must hear what God is saying. In order to do this we must study Scripture very carefully.

Now many Charismatics disparage the Bible and doctrinal thinking as dry and dusty; the way God spoke in the past. They prefer the subjective feelings of men which they falsely claim to be prophecy. But would God contradict himself? Can God say one thing in Scripture and then a very different thing in a church meeting? No! Anything spoken by men which contradicts God's word is not only a lie but comes from a futile mind. If followed, it will result in futility – it will do no spiritual good and will later be condemned. The way of God is very different from the way of men.

No; subjective prophecies are not the way forward, but utterly relying upon the word of God is. This means that assiduous study is necessary in order to know what God's will is. No one will ever please God if they fail to study his word. The word of God is supreme in converting a man's mind from futility to godliness. This is why the renewing of the mind is associated with doing God's will and worship,

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service. 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. Rm 12:1-2

If we want to serve God and worship him truly, then our mind must be continually renewed, and this involves considering ourselves dead, being a living sacrifice, denying ourselves and denying our human strengths. Only then can we cease from being conformed to the world and its patterns of thinking. If you know nothing of your mind being renewed, then you cannot serve God in a spiritual fashion.

‘Renewing’ means, renovation, change, a complete transformation for the better; it is the product of a repentant life. Repentance is ongoing, it is continually changing your old ways of thinking for the ways of God. As your old nature manifests itself and you fall, in repentance you determine to think differently and follow Christ. Repentance is a complete change of mind and heart attitude. The repentant life is seen in continually putting on the new nature and putting off the old. The renewal of the mind is the putting on of the new nature in terms of patterns of thought rather than behaviour. In order to change behaviour we must first change thought patterns and thus the renewal of the mind is vital for renewal of behaviour. There is no walking in the Spirit unless the mind has first been renewed.

The renewed mind is the mind that does not think like the world.

Numbers and success

An example of following the pattern of the world in thinking is the preoccupation of church leaders with large numbers. Jesus never thought this way; indeed, apart from only having a relatively small following after three years of magnificent ministry, there were times when he winnowed those following him, filtering away the majority (e.g. Jn 6:66). Instead, modern church leaders place large numbers at the top of their priority list. We know this to be true because so often more important leadership tasks (such as caring for the flock, meeting the needs of the poor, educating the flock in doctrine, home visitation) are ignored while multiple methodologies are continually adopted to increase membership size. In fact, there are some famous leaders who run churches of hundreds and thousands (including some so-called ‘apostles’) who have never ever done basic eldership tasks or even planted a church themselves. Despite this failure of Biblical leadership, they accrue power like some Third World despot and poor ignorant Christians submit to them in large numbers. Is it any wonder that the visible church is in such a mess following every wind of false doctrine?

A doctrinal example

Worldly thinking does not just affect behaviour and methodology, it also shapes doctrine. A modern example is the error of common grace. This error teaches that God gives grace to all men, which does not save, including the reprobate, in chiefly these ways:

1. In restraining sin in society. [Correct to a degree: God is sovereign over all men and nations for his own purposes.]
2. In provision of good things for all (food, rationality etc). [This is actually the doctrine of providence. God provides good things for the whole world in patience in order to sustain the elect. Good gifts increase the condemnation of those who do not believe in Christ. But God also sends what men consider to be bad things to all as well – hurricanes, earthquakes, floods. These do good to the elect but harden the reprobate.]
3. In helping men do good works to help mankind and please God. [Incorrect: Men cannot please God; they are under his curse and unable to do any good. Even their homes are cursed and their ploughing is sin. This denies Total depravity.]
4. God looks on men with favour. [Incorrect: God only looks upon the elect with favour. There is only one grace and it is for the elect. This denies Unconditional Election and Limited Atonement.]
5. Some men add that common grace also gives sufficient power to all men to believe in the Gospel if they choose. [This prevenient grace is an Arminian & Catholic heresy.]

All this flies in the face of a multitude of Scriptures, dishonours the cross (the only source of grace, which is solely for the elect) and weakens the Gospel. Its source is a universal love

of God for all, which is an unbiblical notion. It is not appropriate to discuss this further in any depth here.

The modern form of common grace developed from a three-volume treatise on the matter by 19th century Dutch theologian and Prime Minister Abraham Kuyper called '*Gemeene Gratie*'. Common grace today also contains the Arminian / Amyraldian idea of a well-meant or sincere Gospel offer to all but Kuyper denied this being a particular Calvinist (in fact he wrote a book called, '*Particular Grace: A Defence of God's Sovereignty in Salvation*'). He was honest enough to admit that his ideas were novel and never taught before by Reformed theologians.

Common grace, apart from being an unbiblical phrase, had never appeared in sound church history before Kuyper in this sense. Kuyper's purpose was to find a way for the church to unite with the secular world in order to take over the world and make a Christian commonwealth. He had resigned from the ministry in order to enter politics and saw the Netherlands becoming a fountainhead for the Reformed faith flowing throughout the world. Like many modern Charismatics and Theonomists, he had a vision for a Christian Utopia through gradual change, creating a changed world. This is a false vision with no Biblical basis. What he did was to subvert his theology to compromise with the world; he began to think like the world. This compromise allowed him to unite with Roman Catholics to gain political leadership, and common grace was the theological cement to do this.

As a result of thinking like the world and having fleshly aspirations to change it into a Utopia, Kuyper lost his theological moorings and developed a rogue doctrine. Later teachers then added to this so that common grace became a standard doctrine for evangelicals despite its utter perversion of Biblical truths. For example:

- Common grace teaches that sinful men can do good – the Bible says, 'There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one.' (Rm 3:10-12).
- Common grace teaches that sinful men can please God – the Bible says, 'they do not please God' (1 Thess 2:15). 'Those who are in the flesh cannot please God' (Rm 8:8).
- Common grace teaches that sinful men have God's favour – the Bible says, 'The curse of the LORD is on the house of the wicked' (Prov 3:33). 'Those cursed by Him shall be cut off' (Ps 37:22). 'For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men' (Rm 1:18).
- Common grace teaches that sinful men perform good deeds in their ordinary tasks of life – the Bible says, 'The ploughing of the wicked are sin' (Prov 21:4). 'The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination; how much more when he brings it with wicked intent!' (Prov 21:27).

Worldly thinking thus results in heresy. It is so tempting to think that God loves all men but the believer must stick to the actual word of God which says,

You hate all workers of iniquity. Ps 5:5

The LORD tests the righteous, but the wicked and the one who loves violence His soul hates. Ps 11:5

You hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. Rev 2:6

The believer must think like God and that means complying with his word, even if it tramples on our modern susceptibilities. God's word continually cuts across modern

sensitivities, but it is this word that we obey, not our fleshly thoughts steered by worldly peer pressure.

Illustrations

Scripture is filled with examples of the way of God being very different from the thought processes of men. Time and again we see human institutions and powerful kings overwhelmed by human weakness in alliance with God's power.

We have noted the great example of David against Goliath, but there are many more. A nation of pilgrims with no army routed the greatest army in the world at the Red Sea. Gideon's small force overwhelmed an army but used no human weapons. The King of the Universe was incarnated as a baby, laid in a manger, growing up as a poor carpenter before he began his heavenly mission with a handful of poorly qualified followers. A great nation was created from a single 100-year-old man, as good as dead, which later dominated the Ancient Near East (Abram). A single fearful man brought revival to the greatest and cruellest city in the then world (Jonah). A depressed man was able to hold back the rain and then summon it again by God's power (Elijah). Jacob thought he could grasp God's blessing by human strength and craftiness, but he only learned to be a blessing after he was smitten in the thigh, the power of his life broken, and he became a dependent man. We could go on and on.

Grace

What is crucial is that we live by grace through faith. Grace comes by believing, not by works, and the Christian is called to live by faith (Rm 1:17). To live by grace first requires that we think with a renewed mind. We can only believe what we know to be true, and this means that our minds must be filled with the truth. To live right, means that we must first think right. We cannot get grace if we are striving to live in our own strength.

This is why God graciously gives us many tribulations because these force us to rely upon God. Tribulation is meant to bring you to an end of yourself and make you utterly dependent upon God.

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. Jm 1:2-4

To be perfect and complete, walking in God's will, we need to be tried and taught to rely on God. The man who does not trust in his own strength will be the man who lives by grace. Only when we are weak can we be strong in God's power (2 Cor 12:9).

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