

A Thinking Community

Together in Christ amid Divisive Times Sermon 4

Ephesians 4:17-24

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14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. **15** Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, **16** from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. **17** Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. **18** They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. **19** They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. **20** But that is not the way you learned Christ!— **21** assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, **22** to put off your old self,^[a] which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, **23** and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, **24** and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:14-24 ESV)

Cities and areas often become known for something they do best. For Pittsburgh it was steel. Detroit, the automobile. New York City, finance. Silicon Valley, technology. Washington D.C. has always been a little different. But, as one recent study has shown, there is one industry that Washington can claim all its own: the Think Tank. In 2009, the University of Pennsylvania conducted a survey of the world's think tanks and found that when it comes to the ideas industry, Washington D.C. is at the center of the universe. 393 think tanks are located in the District, with 149 more in the Metro region. When the study rated Think Tanks based on their influence, nine of the top ten in the United States had offices in Washington.¹ Think Tanks are factories of their own. They gather the best and brightest thinkers from around the world to do their best thinking about some of our toughest issues. Think Tanks exist and prosper because solving problems and living well requires knowledge, and knowledge, therefore, is power. I want to suggest that we should understand the local church as a Think Tank, but with a twist.

The church is a community called to engage the world with deep understanding, and therefore we are a thinking community; we are anything but an unthinking, anti-intellectual community.

However, as we'll see in this passage in Ephesians, we think differently than the world. While we too make use of IQ, science, even worldly wisdom, our natural abilities are shaped increasingly by their relationship to the Son of God. Our deepest desire is not just understanding a matter but understanding the mind of God about a matter. As we continue our fall series focusing on the life of the Christian community, we consider what it means to understand the church as a *Thinking Community*. Let's jump right into our passage, Ephesians 4:17-24, and see how the role of thinking, or the mind, emerges as a marker of Christian life and Christian community.

In our passage, Paul is calling the Christian community to stop living in their old way of life. Because they are God's people, they now are to live *differently*.

- **Stop Old:** Thus, in verse 17, Christians are to "no longer walk as the Gentiles do" (Ephesians 4:17) and in verse 22, "put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life" (Ephesians 4:22).
- **Start New:** This is contrasted, then, in verse 24, "put on the new self, created after the likeness of God" (Ephesians 4:24).

What I want us now to see, is that the transition from the old manner of life to the new, turns upon their mindset—how they think or use their minds:

- **Old Mindset:** So, verse 17, "You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do in the futility of their **minds**" (Ephesians 4:17).
- **New Mindset:** Then, sandwiched between the call to put off the old self and put on the new self, is the following in verse 23: "be renewed in the spirit of your **minds**" (Ephesians 4:23).

Apparently, if the Ephesians are to transition from their old manner of life to the new, it will require a different way of thinking, a different approach to using their minds. But what exactly does this entail?

What does it mean to no longer walk in the futility of your mind, but to have a renewed mind, a renewed way of thinking?

I want to address this question by making two observations, then a series of applications. The two observations are this: First, the heart affects the head, or the mind, because thinking is not purely a

rational phenomenon. And second, renewed thinking is relational, where a relationship with Jesus Christ is necessary for enlightenment.

I. The Heart Affects the Head

When we study this passage to learn more about what Paul means by a new use of the mind, what strikes one immediately is that the mind doesn't think alone but is impacted by other parts of the person. We can see this in the flow of verses 17-19. After bringing up the futility of the mind in verse 17, Paul further describes it:

18 They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them (Ephesians 4:18).

Darkened understanding and ignorance within them indicate an inability to really know and understand the world around them. However, as Paul moves on in this verse, he shifts from the head to the heart, and in doing so tells us a deeper cause of ignorance:

18 They are darkened in their understanding ... due to their **hardness of heart**. (Ephesians 4:18)

We learn two things from this:

1. The Bible does not separate our thinking faculties from our feeling faculties. Thoughts and emotions influence each other.
2. The heart may be the cause of ignorance and bad thinking, not a shortage of facts.

Sometimes you'll hear a teacher say that a certain student is plenty smart enough, they're just too stubborn to see what he's trying to teach them. Their hard heart is getting in the way of their head. Jonathan Haidt is a professor and social psychologist who studies how people think and behave. In his book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, he notes that rational thinking alone does play the dominant role in how people see the world and act in it; rather, emotions and deep instincts play a larger role.

To demonstrate, he uses the helpful analogy of the elephant and rider. The rider represents our rational or intellectual side, while the elephant represents our emotional and instinctive side. Haidt has found through his research that while with our rational side we may perceive facts and ideas and see what we should do, it is our emotional side that exercises far more influence. And, as the analogy conveys, it's hard to move an elephant in any direction except the one it feels like walking in.

Our passage is teaching us this first principle about the mind or thinking: **what we want, what we desire, what we love—the condition of our hearts—impacts how we think.** Our deepest convictions about the world, our final understanding, involve not only the head but the heart. It is not hard for any of us to imagine that the commitment of our hearts— to a group, an ideology, a cause, family— impacts what information we choose to take in, which voices we listen to, and how we finally process this information.

Paul says a futile mind, darkened thinking, ignorance, may have nothing to do with access to information; but rather, may issue from the hardness of our hearts. When a Christian community thinks, therefore, the first thing that makes it distinct, is that it must consider the condition of its heart as much as it makes use of its head. *So, what is your heart after when you engage that story on social media? What do you really want and desire as you enter a conversation with someone about a controversial topic? How might your heart be the elephant driving your head?* That's an insight into how thinking can go wrong and into the deeper way that we work. Next, I want to turn to Paul's positive vision—the renewed mind—and ask what it looks like to become different, or renewed thinking.

What does it mean, as Paul says in verse 23, to be “renewed in the mind”?

II. The Renewed Mind is Relational

Christians are to think with a renewed mind. This does not mean they make any less use of their intellect, facts, science, or effort. Rather, it means they add a new dimension to how they think: **they think by a relationship to Jesus Christ.** Let me show us how our passage makes this clear, then unpack what it means. In verses 20-21, Paul pivots to how Christians are to use their mind and does so with a laser focus on Jesus Christ. He writes, “But that is not the way you learned Christ!— assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus.” (Ephesians 4:20-21)

The phrase “learned Christ” is strange. Typically, we learn a subject or topic, not a person. But here, Paul says not only that the truth is in Jesus, but also says that what we learn *is* Jesus. This is where I get the idea that renewed thinking is relational. Jesus does not necessarily give us a higher IQ (of course He could), nor does He whisper in our ear all the answers then take off. Jesus comes into our lives and through encounters with Him, by His Spirit, day by day, He shapes how we think. We can suggest two ways this happens.

1. Jesus shapes our heart

We’ve already seen that our heart affects our thinking. Jesus knows that if what we love most is power, prestige, intellectual curiosity, or wealth, our thinking will ultimately be skewed. So, He works, often slowly, on realigning our loves.

We approach topics of interest then, not from a need to prove others wrong, but a desire to see from God’s perspective. We work hard in school, not because our happiness depends on our GPA and where we attend grad school, but because Jesus reminds us again and again how much our Father delights when we use our gifts with our best effort. If one’s heart is most deeply owned by their ideological camp, or a cause or greedy ambition, then they may never be free enough in their heart to think freely with their mind. If, however, Jesus shapes our hearts so they ultimately are trusting and loving God, then new freedom arises for us to think freely—free from the tyranny of old idols.

2. Jesus shapes our imagination

What I mean by this is that Jesus helps us situate things within the right perspective, or within the right storyline. Things are only finally understandable in light of a larger story. Philosopher Alastair McIntyre has demonstrated that how we understand things depends on the narrative, or story, we believe they are a part of. He famously uses the example of a man digging a hole. You see this man as your car zips by, bent over his shovel, perspiring, and a little pile of dirt. What is he doing? Maybe he is starting a garden? Maybe he is starting a fence? Maybe he is burying his beloved old dog? Maybe he is making his wife happy by doing a chore? How would you determine what the man is doing? You need to situate the single event—man using a shovel—within a larger story.

You must know the events that preceded this and how it fits into his own life and marriage and desires. Truly understanding a subject or topic or issue, requires situating it within the right story. Jesus shapes our imagination by opening our minds to the story of God.

Notice that in verse 24 Paul says we are “to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God”. That phrase, “likeness of God”, draws his reader into a majestic story—the true story of the world. It draws the mind back to Genesis 1:26-27 when God created human beings in his image and likeness. The Jewish Christians would have known this, but for those converts from the Greek and Roman world, this requires a renewed imagination about who they really were—to understand, they needed to know the true story. Jesus draws our minds into God’s story. And from this perspective, we think about matters in light of Creation, in light of our fall into Sin, and in light of God’s great mission of Redemption.

Let me give you an example of this at work. I was talking recently with a group of Christian brothers about Coronavirus. We were *thinking* about it. But we were thinking about it with an imagination shaped by Jesus. So, we started asking questions like this: *What do you think God might want to teach people by this experience?* This led us to ponder: it sure seems the world has a hard time with death. It can’t process death. How might this fact—a global virus—draw our attention to deeper matters; like the fact that Jesus teaches us about the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come; He teaches us to have our treasure in heaven, not here. Perhaps the right way to think about this virus is not merely what it means for present health or economic realities (things we tend to with prudence) but also what it means about how we should value our lives in light of the promises of God. There is a second way renewed thinking is relational, I want to briefly highlight, and this has to do with our community.

People have long noted the social, or communal, aspect of knowledge. What we come to know depends in large part on the people around us—the teachers who teach us, the families who shape us, and the culture we grow up in. We also know that as finite and fallen human beings, we are always limited by our single perspective. It can be so helpful to see an issue from another person’s point of view—it can shed new light on things.

Jesus does not call us to follow Him alone but calls us into community. Likewise, He does not call us to think alone but to lean on our brothers and sisters in Christ—especially those with different

experiences than our own—to better understand the world around us. Hence, we are not just thinking Christians, but a *thinking community*. We've seen that our heads are impacted by our hearts and that a renewed way of thinking is relational because it depends on Christ for the shaping of the heart and enlargement of the imagination. I want to conclude with a few points of application.

III. Habits for Renewed Thinking in Today's Milieu

When Paul tells the Ephesian Christians in verse 17, “that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds”, he has a specific context in mind: 1st century Ephesus. There were habits of thinking, and pitfalls, common to that milieu that Paul had in mind. If Paul were addressing us—“no longer walk as the typical secular Washingtonian does in the futility of their mind”—what would he have in mind? What practical things might he tell us to do to really exercise the renewed mind? I'll suggest four.

1. Slow Down

In his book, *How to Think*, Alan Jacobs points out that good thinking is slow, not fast.² This represents a challenge for us because our current environment demands speed. We swim in an ocean of non-stop news cycles and minute-by-minute electronic updates in our pockets. With social media as our new public square, we are then asked to state our view in lightning speed, often before we've finished reading a single story about the matter.

Thinking fast and responding before we understand is thinking too often guided by the spirit of the world; it is thinking that plays on our anxiety, not our wisdom. Jesus would say to us: the world is in His hands, it's not ours to save, and we should not only read a little more deeply and broadly, but we should slow down to pray. *What is God's perspective on this matter?*

2. Don't Oversimplify

One thing we learn if we watch Jesus' ministry is that problems are often more complex than they seem. A social ill may have a dozen causes, and not only economic, but spiritual aspects to it. One thing our current environment does is reduce amazing complex issues—like poverty, race, or

healthcare—to single dimension issues with simple answers. It's certainly not wrong to get the public thinking about important issues, but one of the most intractable problems to many of our problems is how hard they are to define and understand.

Christians should recognize the complexity of issues and have the humility to ask many questions before giving answers. Christians should also always recognize that fully solving our deepest problems will require not merely the effort and ingenuity of man, but the presence and power of God. The renewed mind is leery of oversimplification.

3. Find a Like-Hearted Group to Think With

Drawing again from Alan Jacobs, a like-hearted group is not the same as a “like-minded” group. We typically drift toward like-minded people because they already agree with us. There's nothing wrong with this, but it will leave us stunted in our development if we're not careful. A like-hearted group is a group of people whose hearts align around a commitment to truth, rooted in a dependence upon God. They agree to not reject each other if and when they disagree; and they agree to pray much and study Scripture as much as they talk about other topics. We will truly be different from the world, if we think among, not just like-minded, but like-hearted people.

4. Prize Character over Knowledge

It's not that these two things are opposed to each other. Rather, it's that God doesn't want to fill our head with facts; He wants to form our hearts with virtue and love. A person of character has wisdom and tact, even when he or she doesn't know all the answers. They will increasingly know how to navigate the unavoidable complexities of this life with grace, with character. Or in Paul's words we are “to be renewed in the spirit of our minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” (Ephesians 4:23-24)

A Christian Think Tank at The Falls Church Anglican, not marked first by the intellectual prowess of its thinkers, but by the righteousness and holiness of its people.

Endnotes

1. For the study, see

https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1018&context=think_tanks.

Accessed Oct. 1, 2020; for article, see <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/washingtons-think-tanks-factories-to-call-our-own/> Accessed Oct. 1, 2020.

2. Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*; cited in Alan Jacobs, *How to Think*, 17.