

**The Renewing of the Mind**  
**(series: Making Maturing Disciples of Jesus)**

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. <sup>2</sup>Do not conform 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.

<sup>3</sup>For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. <sup>4</sup>For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup>so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. <sup>6</sup>We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; <sup>7</sup>if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; <sup>8</sup>if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.  
(Romans 12:1-8)

The question is never, "Will I be a disciple?" The question is always, "Whose disciple will I be?" Everyone is a disciple ... of someone or some ideology. Every candidate for political office, every movie star, every rock star, every athlete, every bus driver, every lawyer, every teacher, every nurse or doctor, every CEO of every corporation, every secretary, every janitor, ... everyone is a disciple – of someone or some ideology. The question is never, "Will I follow?" The question is always, "Who will I follow?" The question is never, "Will I be a disciple?" The question is always, "Whose disciple will I be?"

In his letter to the followers of Jesus living in first century Rome, the apostle Paul takes us into yet another dimension of the unspeakable privilege of discipleship. "Do not be conformed to this world [to this age], but be transformed [literally, metamorphized] by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). Following Jesus involves the heart and hands and feet and ears and mouth, and, fundamentally, discipleship involves the mind. After all, the word translated "disciple" (*mathetes*) means "student," "learner." "Come to Me, all who are weary and have overburdened yourselves and I will rest you. Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me" (Matthew 11:28-29). Which is why before Jesus says "follow Me," He says, "repent." *Metanoieo* is the word – "Think around," "think again," "stop and make a U-turn in your thinking," and "come, follow Me."

Becoming and maturing as disciples of Jesus involves, at the core, the renewing of our minds; constantly learning from Jesus, and thus, regularly changing our minds. I like how J.B. Phillips rendered Paul's exhortation: "Do not let the world around you squeeze you into its mould, but let God remould your minds from within." Isn't that good? We function as disciples of Jesus in the real world to the degree that our minds are being renewed.

If you want to see what this looks like in the real world, see the movie 42, about the great baseball player Jackie Robinson. Yes, Jackie is the hero, who learns to live Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in the highly charged racial tensions of the 1940s and 50s. But as I see it, the real hero is Branch Rickey, owner of the then Brooklyn Dodgers, who goes through a massive, costly, renewal of his mind in order to bring an African-American onto an all-white baseball team.

In his book, *Fully Human, Fully Alive*, priest-psychologist John Powell makes this observation, which I shared with you when we made our way through Genesis 1-11: "It has been generally agreed upon that true and full living is based on three components like the legs of a tripod: intrapersonal dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and a frame of reference" (10). By "frame of reference," Powell means what others call "vision of reality," "mind-set," "paradigm," or "world-view." At the heart of discipling is a frame of reference; adopting and living into a new and different vision of reality.

John Powell continues: "Through the eyes of our minds you and I look out at reality (ourselves, other people, life, the world, God). However, we see things differently." Think multicultural, religiously pluralistic Vancouver!

Your vision of reality is not mine, and conversely, mine is not yours. Both of our visions are limited and inadequate, but not to the same extent. We have both misinterpreted and distorted reality, but in different ways. We have each seen something of the available truth and beauty to which the other has been blind. The main point is that it is the dimensions and clarity of this vision that determines the dimensions of our world and the quality of our lives.

And then, this: "Consequently, if we are to grow [mature], there must first be a change in this basic vision, or perception of reality" (10).

As I have said before, those who wear glasses can more readily grasp John Powell's, and the apostle Paul's point. Remember the first time you put on your "new eyes"? The world around you came into focus. Oh, it may not have been all the dramatic, but for the first time in a long time, you could see the words on the page, the distinct features of the faces of the people you love, and the signs in the street.

The fact is, every human being wears a set of glasses. It is just that they were not given to us by an ophthalmologist. They were shaped by our relationships (especially with our parents and grandparents), by childhood experiences (both pleasant and frightening), by our teachers, by the books we read, by the movies we have seen, by the video games we have played. The glasses we wear give us our perception of reality. And our perception of reality, our frame of reference, our paradigm, our vision of reality, determines the dimensions of our world and the quality of our lives. The question is never, "Will I wear a set of glasses?" The question is always, "Whose set of glasses will I wear?" And do the glasses help me see reality as it really is?

James Sire, in his excellent book *The Universe Next Door*, defines "frame of reference," or "vision of reality" this way: "A world-view is a set of presuppositions (or assumptions) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously) about the basic make up of the world" (17). Whether or not you and I can articulate our presuppositions, we all have them. And this is a key for discipleship, we act on our presuppositions all the time.

According to Dr. Sire, most well-rounded, serious world-views include answers to five basic questions, usually worked out in stories:

1. What is prime reality? What is the really real?
2. Who or what are we? What does it mean to be human?
3. What happens at death?
4. What, if anything, is the basis of morality?
5. What, if anything, is the meaning of history?

I would add a sixth question:

6. What is wrong with us?

All serious visions of reality wrestle with the fact we all feel that we are not all that we could be. Why is this? What is wrong with us? We seem to be caught by something. What is the nature of this human bondage?

N.T. Wright adds a seventh question:

7. What time is it? Where are we in the flow of history?

A good discipleship exercise is to periodically sit down with these questions and write out your answers.

I am sure you would agree that the most important question is the first: "What is prime reality? What is the really real?" How I answer that question – consciously or subconsciously – affects how I answer the others. How I answer the first question affects everything else about my frame of reference.

If I had been able to pose questions for last Monday's debate between the candidates for Provincial leadership, I would have wanted to ask some of these world-view questions. Yes, I want to know where each one, and the parties they represent, stand on issues like mass transit, affordable housing, day care, health care, shortage of skilled labour, the Site C power project on the Peace River, the Northern Gateway and Kinder Morgan pipelines, the liquefied natural gas (LNG) possibilities for Prince Rupert and Kitimat, controlling gang violence, bullying, human trafficking, and the well-being of First Nations people. But I also want to know how each candidate answers questions like: "What is prime reality?" "Who, or what, are we as human beings?" And, "What is wrong with us?" "Can we be fixed?" "How?" "By whom?" They each have answers – as does everyone. The answers will shape everything about their decisions and actions, consciously or subconsciously.

"Do not be conformed to this world," says Paul. "Repent," "think again," says Jesus. "Be transformed by the renewing of your minds." "Learn from Me," says the Master.

So, let us do some renewing of our minds this morning. And let us do it by putting on three different sets of glasses. Let us set alongside each other three major visions of reality (which we'll necessarily do in very broad strokes). The first is the vision most dominant in the so-called Western world. The second is the vision most dominant in the so-called Eastern world. And the third is the vision shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let us pick up and wear each set of glasses ... one at a time, and look at life through their lenses. I will especially be asking of each vision, "what is prime reality? What is the really real? In the final analysis, what is it all about?"

First, pick up and put on the Western set of glasses. The name we could give this vision is scientific humanism, the frame of reference shaped by the assumptions of the so-called Enlightenment. What do you see?

Well! We see an incredibly beautiful world! We see how marvelously complex life on this planet is. We see the awesome vastness of inter-stellar space, especially through the Hubble telescope. We see the intricacy of microscopic existence. We see the amazing achievements of this animal called “woman” and “man.” We see how with her brain and hands she has significantly altered the shape of her environment. We see the wonders of electronics and transportation, the tools and toys invented to enhance the quality of life on this small corner of the universe. I find myself more and more standing in awe of human achievement.

We peer through the lenses, asking “What is prime reality?” What we see is a two-dimensional reality: humanity and humanity’s environment. Everything that is has its source in one or both of these dimensions. Everything that happens has its cause in one or both of these dimensions. The critical dimension is humanity. We are the measure of all things. As the Humanist Manifesto I put it in 1933, “Man is at last becoming aware that he alone is responsible for the realization of the world of his dreams, that he has within himself the power for its achievement.” Or, as John F. Kennedy once put it, “All man’s problems were created by man, and can be solved by man.”

As we adjust the lens and stare a bit longer, the distinction between humanity and humanity’s environment begins to blur. Through these glasses, human beings have no inherently special place, for men and women are simply the product of the environment. We have evolved from the same basic matter, through the same random processes as the stars and trees and frogs. The longer we stare, the clearer it becomes that reality is finally only matter and energy. Ultimately, reality is the chance collocation of electrons.

Is it any wonder that Western men and women should be known for their anxiety and emptiness? Is it any wonder that Western civilization is adrift morally? On what can morality be based in this paradigm? The survival of the fittest? Whatever gives pleasure? Whatever makes the economy grow? And no wonder Western men and women do not like to talk about death. We are afraid of death, for in this paradigm, death is the end. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes, electrons to electrons. That is finally all there is.

Or is it? What does our restlessness and searching say about us? That we implicitly know there is more. So John Updike has Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom say, “Somewhere behind all this ... there’s something that wants me to find it.”

Let us now shift the frame of reference, and take up the Eastern set of glasses. What is prime reality according to this world-view? As we know, this paradigm is exerting increasing influence on the West. What do we see through the Eastern vision of reality?

Well! The first thing that catches our attention is the contrast. Not poverty versus wealth, not agrarian versus industrial, but contentment versus anxiety, quiet contemplation versus the rat race. Our first impulse is to say, “they’ve got it! Here is something to fill the emptiness.” The language of the gurus rings chords deep within us. They speak of oneness with nature, which lifts our souls after witnessing some of the devastation wrecked by the Western way. The gurus speak of reaching for and experiencing “cosmic consciousness,” some even speak of experiencing “God consciousness.”

We learn that this vision of reality can be labeled “pantheistic monism.” Monism meaning “oneness,” pantheistic meaning “all is god.” The creed of the East is “all is one, all is god!” It is what the taxi driver said to me the other day – “all is one, all is god.” With these glasses on we see that the rocks, trees, cows, birds, sea are all the same reality. As we peer longer through the glasses we learn that all that is, is divine. All reality is one and one is god. Nothing exists that is not divine.

We focus on the word “god” and we learn that God is not a Someone after Whom human beings can search. God is not a “who,” God is “being.” “Being” is the one infinite reality, the one infinite, impersonal reality, the one infinite, impersonal, and amoral reality. All there is is “being,” impersonal “is-ness.”

“But,” we ask, “what about these distinct objects I see, this table versus that table, this chair versus that chair, this woman versus that woman?” And we are told by some, “it is Maya, illusion.” “If anything that is not God appears to exist, it is maya, illusion, and does not truly exist (Sire, 132).

“But,” we ask, “What am I to do? How do I rid myself of maya?” It is then we are told the secret of this paradigm. We must learn to live beyond distinctions. We must learn the path to realizing oneness. We must find “cosmic consciousness.”

We focus the lens on those words, “realize,” and “consciousness.” There is something very elusive about them. For “when one is one with the One, consciousness completely disappears and one merely is infinite, impersonal being” (Sire, 134). As long as I am still conscious of myself as an “I,” and conscious of you as a “you,” I have not yet realized “consciousness.” The highest level of reality is total oneness, meaning total unawareness of anything distinct. This is why the Buddha sits and smiles unaware of anyone around him. Fulfillment, in the pantheistic monist world-view, comes when I lose my individuality, my distinct centre of consciousness. I find life when I “realize” I am but a drop in the vast sea of impersonal “is-ness.”

Are we surprised that some societies born out of this frame of reference are wracked by poverty and starvation? Partly the awful plight is due to injustice (e.g., Bangladesh). But mostly it is due to presupposition... the suffering is illusion. Life is found in transcending the illusion and losing ourselves in the sea of impersonal being.

Now, let us pick up the set of glasses shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ. What do we see?

A Person! That is what we see. A Person. The really real is a Person. At the centre of reality is a Person. And not only at the centre, but surrounding and intersecting all reality. Everything that is manifests something of the Person’s Personhood. We are both dazzled by the Person’s beauty and creativity and awed by the Person’s power and purity. The fact is that the Person’s beauty and purity shine so brightly that the Person protects us from the intensity by veiling Himself. The Person is other than creation, yet all of creation seems to recognize Him. “The heavens are telling the glory of God,” sings the Psalmist (Psalm 19:1), “the trees of the field clap their hands” (Isaiah 55:12).

As we focus the lens, we see why. The Person made the world and all it contains ... and did so out of nothing! And the person holds it all together. Were He to let go it would all collapse. Were He to cease to be everything else would cease to be.

As we stare through the glasses we are surprised by the things the Person does. For one thing, He speaks. This Person is not the great, unmoved, silent One. This Person communicates – He even wants to be called by name! “Yahweh ... you can call Me Yahweh.”

As we stare longer we begin to hear Yahweh’s speech. “I am your Maker, you own your existence to Me. I gave you life ... and I am giving you life right now. I am the source of all life and light and trust and grace and wisdom and peace and healing.”

And then we hear Him say, “you ache because you have ignored Me.” He gets more specific: “You have been tricked,” He says. “You have bought into a lie. You think you can live without Me. You cannot. I made you in such a way that only as you live with and in Me are you free and whole. Declare independence of Me and you sign your death certificate ... and end up in bondage.” And then we hear “and you cannot free yourself.”

We adjust the lens of this set of glasses further, and we see the most amazing thing imaginable. One day the Person at the centre of reality comes into our world in bodily form. What? We wipe the lenses in astonishment! The person by whom all reality exists comes into our world in bodily form! In the days of Herod, King of Judea, and Quirinius, governor of Syria, when Caesar Augustus thought he ruled the world, the Living One incarnated Himself in our flesh. The Creator became a Creature! First an embryo, then a fetus, then an infant, then a little boy, then a grown adult. The Invisible One put on a face ... and took on a new name, the name Jesus, Yeshua, Yahweh to the rescue!

Stare through the lens longer. Watch Him walking through towns and villages, stretching out His hands, touching people, real distinct people, freeing them from bondage, restoring them to wholeness. And there, in the middle of history, hear Him continue to speak: “Turn around,” He says. “Come to Me,” He says. “I can make you whole,” He says. “I will not obliterate you in the vast sea of ‘is-ness’,” He says. “In relationship with Me you do not become less... you become more – more who you were meant to be before you bought the lie.”

He gives sight to a blind man, and says, “I am the light of the cosmos... whoever follows Me will not walk in darkness” (John 8:12). He stands by a well on a hot day, and says, “everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water I give shall never thirst; that water I give becomes in you a well of water springing up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14). He embraces the grieving sisters of a man who just died and says, “I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in Me shall live even if they die” (John 11:25).

As we stare longer a troubling question begins to emerge. “How can I relate to this Person?” He seems so pure ... I am not. That was Martin Luther’s struggle. How could he, impure as he was, possibly relate to this absolutely pure One? He was terrified by the huge chasm that separated him from this God. How could he bridge the chasm? What could he do to make himself acceptable to God? He did everything he could think of. He accepted the most menial tasks to earn God’s affection. Then, while reading Paul’s letter to the Romans, his eyes were opened. He experienced a profound paradigm shift. He discovered that what he could not do, God had done for him in Jesus. Luther discovered the gospel ... to which his long held world-view had blinded him. The gospel declares that the Person at the centre of reality has come to us to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. On the cross, the Person at the centre of reality cries out “it is finished!” “I have done everything that needs to be done in order for you to relate to Me!”

A Person! A Living Person, with a passion to be known. That is what it all comes down to in the gospel world-view. When this becomes clear the rest of reality comes into focus. We discover that we humans are not the chance mutations of a purely mechanistic evolutionary process. We are the work of the Master-Artist, created to know and love, to obey and enjoy Him. Our lives have meaning!

We discover that creation, tarnished as it is by humanity's having bought the lie, is still full of the glory of God. Every inch of the earth is sacred ground ... for the Living One is there. This Sanctuary is sacred space, but so is your living room, and your bedroom, and the board room, and the hospital room, and hotel room, and restaurant, and library, and supermarket. Where can I go where Yahweh is not present? Where can I run from Jesus?

When we see the Person at the centre of reality we realize that history is the stage of His continual self-revelation. In spite of all the ups and downs, ins and outs, history is moving somewhere ... history will culminate at the feet of the God with nail printed hands.

We discover that morality flows out of His character. He delights in justice and mercy, in truth and grace. The Bondage-Breaker delights to free and empower us for holy living. We discover that He has hard-wired us for participation. He has uniquely shaped each of us to participate in His very life, in the inner life of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He has uniquely shaped each of us to participate in His mission in the world ... to be part of His renewing of creation! When I look at you through gospel glasses, I see incredibly gifted people! Oh, sure, I see brokenness – especially in me. But in the brokenness I see Jesus, in you, making all things new.

And death? We discover through gospel glasses that death is not the end at all. Because of Jesus' resurrection, death has lost its sting, its victory ... and is now the door through which we finally see Him face to face. What a frame of reference! What a vision!

And discipleship involves putting on those glasses every day, every hour, in every situation. And discipleship involves inviting others to take up those glasses. Inviting our neighbors and co-workers to just "Try them on" ... see if you like what you see?

"Do not let the world around you squeeze you into its mould," Western or Eastern. "But let God remould your minds from within," let Jesus change your mind.

Look at the table before us today. What do you see there? With Western glasses? All I see is bread and wine (grape juice). Just bread and wine. With Eastern glasses? I see no distinctions at all. I make of this whatever I want it to be. With gospel glasses? I see a Person! Crucified and Risen, offering us Himself. "I am the Bread of life," He is saying. "Come to Me, and you will never hunger. I give you Life. I am Life."