

We have to get God right or the whole thing falls apart.

If we get God wrong, what follows will be flawed. There's no way to construct a life of faith that is life-giving and redemptive when we've got God wrong. A lot of hurt has happened because of getting God wrong.

Let me say a little more about what I mean. I worked with youth programs for a good eleven years before I accepted the call to come here, and so I've drawn the conclusion that nine tenths or so of what we are going to encounter in life, we see in adolescence.

Think about it a minute: there are mean people in adolescence, and there are mean people in adulthood. Sometimes they are the same people.

There are myriad questions about sex and sexuality in adolescence, as well as tons of opportunities to make disastrously bad decisions – and guess what, there are in adulthood as well.

Your body does strange things in adolescence and sometimes hurts for no apparent reason, and ask anyone who can predict the rain with their joints, that too doesn't change.

We face tremendous questions of faith in adolescence and again, don't adults also?

I was sitting in Drew's office the other day and we were talking with another member of church about the sort of things that come up in youth ministry, and the question came up about the inevitable declarations of atheism that come up in adolescence... if you spend any time with young people whatsoever, eventually one or more of them are going to have a really hard time buying this whole *God* concept. And come to think of it so do adults.

And so as we were discussing it, I referenced an age-old tactic I've used through the years, which is this: ask exactly which version of God is being rejected.

It's a legitimate question because odds are very good that the God the child is rejecting is one that you and I and the church have already rejected ourselves.

The God who causes bad things to happen to us in order to exert control? Nope, I don't believe in that one either.

The God who micromanages our lives so that everything, including our parking spaces is preordained? Yeah, I don't buy that one.

The God who made the world and all that is in it and then retreated to watch it from afar?

The deists can have that version of God, I'm not interested.

All of us have plenty of versions of God that we have rejected or that we should reject.

Because if we get God wrong, it's hard to get anything else right.

Think about the image of a God who makes bad things happen to people – is that a good God? Can you trust that God?

Or a God who micromanages the world – do we have *any* freedom whatsoever if God is pulling strings like we're marionettes?

And that deist God – the cold and distant scientist who is observing us only – what good is that God in times of trouble? That doesn't sound remotely like the Lord from whom our help cometh, the maker of heaven and earth.

The apostle Paul is tremendously concerned that we get God right. Some scholars have said that Paul is the first theologian of the church and that Romans is his systematic theology.

To a certain degree, I think they are right.

Paul wends his way in this magisterial letter through the particulars of massively important doctrines of faith, concepts like justification and sanctification – he’s concerned about things like salvation and death and resurrection – big things that matter. Paul is not concerned with little quibbles in Romans – he is concerned about us *getting God right*.

For those who have read Romans more than once or twice, you may be getting a little antsy, thinking to yourselves, “But wait, you’re saying that Romans is all about getting God right, but almost every page of the book has the name ‘Jesus’ on it.”

You would be correct.

For Paul, getting God right means knowing Jesus Christ.

For those of us who are going to claim to be part of the church, who say that we are Christians, though the term wouldn’t yet exist when Paul was writing to the Romans, getting God right means knowing Jesus Christ.

Now before we go one step further, I want us to stop just a second and do a heresy check. I need to be really clear that the God we’re going to see in Jesus Christ is the same God we’ve been working with all along. The God we’ve gotten to know through Abraham and Jacob – it’s the same God. There’s not a God of judgment in the Old Testament and a God of grace in the New – it’s the same God in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The only God Jesus would have referenced would have been the God of Abraham – indeed, Paul is quick to remind us of Abraham as we’re preparing to know God through Jesus. So just remember, it’s not a different God from the Jews that we’re going to meet in the very Jewish Jesus. It’s the same God.

But it is God revealed to us in a particular way. It is God incarnate. It is God walking down among us and relating to us personally, human to human. It is as though Paul is saying, “If you want to know who God is, just look at Jesus. The God you see in him is going to enable you reject all the false caricatures of God.”

There are plenty of false caricatures of God. The Bible calls them idols. If our images of God are hurting us, we need to unload them. You see, Paul wants us to know Jesus. And he wants us to know him so that we can be transformed.

Do you want to be transformed?

It’s a serious question. Not everyone wants to be transformed.

Transformation can be a messy process. And, I might add, since we’re talking about a process in which God is involved, it’s a process in which we have little to no control. On a few occasions, the Bible likens what we are becoming to clay turning into a vessel.

I don’t know if you’ve ever thrown a pot or not, but it’s not a clean process. Well, maybe it is if you’re good at it, but for me, when I’ve sat at the potter’s wheel, there’s a fair amount of mess involved. There’s muddy water, there’s clay on my clothes – sometimes on the walls – it’s not clean.

Same for painting – once you’ve put that first swath of paint across the faded color of the old wall, there’s no going back... you can try the old color, but it’s already faded past usefulness, perhaps like some of our images of God. It isn’t going to work anymore.

And it’s going to get worse before it gets better. My house had a chartreuse room... the previous owners of the house picked the color, in case you were wondering... and as bad as it was, there was a period when the project started when it actually looked worse to start painting.

Transformation can be highly messy. Not everyone wants to do it.

Maybe you don't. Maybe you like the way it is now.

Or maybe you're scared. The unknown can be very frightening, and we don't get to hang on to control when the transformation starts. Maybe you'd rather hang onto the devil you know. Opening your life to God's power might feel a little like Pandora's box: you don't know exactly which of the hurt, pain, rejection and depravity and sin of others you've endured in your life is going to be the first to fly out. Better to just keep it tamped down, isn't that the way it goes?

And of course, there is the possibility that you just don't want to change at all... you like the way this system works. We're a pretty affluent crowd here, aren't we? We're not worried about where our next meals are going to come from – or if we're going to be able to send our children to college. Or maybe we're confident that our children's decision-making skills will be so superior that they won't make disastrous mistakes in their lives, but if they do the justice system is going to be fair to them, or better yet, let them off? Maybe we are satisfied with this system.

It's easier to hang on to what we like.

There's just one problem, and it is this: it's the eternal.

All that we've been describing is what Paul calls, "this world."

He says, "Do not be conformed to *this world*."

This world is fleeting and illusory, or so it would seem.

But Frederick Buechner puts a very different spin on that one...

He writes, "We think of Eternal Life, if we think of it at all, as what happens when life ends. We would do better to think of it as what happens when life begins."

St. Paul uses the phrase eternal life to describe the end and the goal of the process of salvation. Elsewhere he writes the same thing in a remarkable sentence where he says that the whole purpose of God's slogging around in much of history and of our own individual histories is somehow to prod us, jolly us, worry us, cajole us, and if need be to bludgeon us into reaching 'mature manhood'... the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. In other words to live Eternal life in the full and final sense is to be with God as Christ is with him, and with each other as Christ is with us."<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever noticed that in Jesus' preaching and teaching, nowhere – not one time – does he say about the kingdom of God, or loving your neighbor, or giving when giving is what is needed, "Put it off until you're dead."

No. Not once. Never does he say, "Heaven will solve that."

Maybe we better get serious about being transformed by the renewing of our minds.

As I said, Paul spent the chapters prior to this exhortation making sure we get God right, because what happens next is that he tells us what a Christian life looks like. Before he says word one about what is expected of a Christian – which Drew will preach about next week - he wants to be sure we get God right. Because if we get God wrong, we're never going to get the rest of it right.

Do you have God right? I know none of us can ever know the totality of God. So let me ask this a different way – do you know Jesus?

Are you aware of what he taught?

Do you know that Jesus has some rather shocking ideas about violence and some rather radical ideas about money and that they apply to us all equally?

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<sup>1</sup> Buechner, Frederick. Wishful Thinking: a Theological ABC. (Harper, NY: 1972.) p22

Did you ever notice that Jesus never talks about making converts to Christianity? He just asked his disciples to follow him and live the way he taught – he was as interested in practice as he was in beliefs. I know it's sort of shocking that Jesus never tried to convert people to Christianity – but I think maybe it tells us something about God.

We have to get God right – that means putting down destructive assumptions or selfish assumptions or anything that suggests that status quo is going to be just fine - because that is not transformation.

I do not know what being renewed by the transformation of your mind looks like for each of you. I can hazard a guess some of you, I have right strong opinions about a few others, and I have a pretty good idea of what it looks like for me.

For me, I decidedly have to feel more. I'm a head person and it works for me, but if we're really honest, I'm the sort of Christian who needs to be open to having his heart strangely warmed. We had a wonderful Thursday theology this past week and I was humbled and grateful to hear the stories of our own congregation members of their mystical experiences of God's grace. Perhaps some of us who are long on knowledge need to open ourselves to feel more and to be more open to that which we have not ourselves experienced.

Many of you have plenty of heart already. You *feel* more than enough. But if you don't know Jesus, what he said, what he meant, and perhaps most importantly, that vast quantity of material that he absolutely did not say, then the renewal of your minds might look different. Your mind might need to learn a few things to be transformed.

I don't know what transformation means for you, but if this is the beginning of eternal life, we'd better get started.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.