

Gospel-Centered Personal Renewal

A Blog Series by Timmy Brister

I. Gospel-Centered Renewal: I Have Been Made New

I believe one of the defining theological marks of my generation is a passionate commitment to the centrality and sufficiency of the gospel for all of life. Some of this could be understood as a corrective to a truncated or shelved gospel, but I am more inclined to believe that God is awakening His people to see all of life through the lens of the gospel and apply it to every area of the Christian experience, from beginning to end.

Along these lines, I want to share how renewal in the Christian life is grounded in the gospel as those who have been saved (justification), are being saved (sanctification), and will be saved (glorification). In terms of renewal, it could be stated that *I have been made new* (justification), *I am being made new* (sanctification), and *I will be made new* (glorification). In this post, I will address justification and follow up with subsequent posts to round out what I hope to be a robust understanding of gospel-centered renewal.

Justification says, "I have been made new"

To a rebellious, hard-hearted people, God promised to make **a new covenant** (Jer. 31:31). This was a covenant that would be everlasting and established by God not only dwelling among His people but *in* His people. It is a new covenant in that God promises to "give them one heart, and **a new spirit** I will put within them" (Ez. 11:19). Not only will they receive a new spirit, by God continues with giving them "**a new heart**" (Ez. 36:26) thereby removing the heart of stone and grant a heart of flesh. To put this in New Testament terms, God saved us "by the washing of **regeneration and renewal** of the Holy Spirit" (Tit. 3:5).

Unlike the sacrifices of old which were repeated and could never "make perfect those who draw near" (Heb. 10:1), Jesus offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins by which He has perfected for all time those who come to "**the new and living way**" which He opened up for through His flesh (Heb.10:12, 20). Only through the purchase on the cross can sinners be made new, that is, have new life. And this newness is secured by an accomplished mission which has continuing effects in bringing renewal until the work of Christ is brought to completion (Phil. 1:6).

Union with Christ is the fountainhead of Christian renewal, and insofar as we appropriate and experience all that it is to be "in Christ," we will appreciate the immeasurable riches of God's grace towards those who believe. And this is precisely the reason why any and all lasting renewal emanates from the centrality of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Simply put, if anyone is in Christ, he is **a new creation** (2 Cor. 5:17). This

is the heart of the Christian experience. We are made new by promises made by our Father, fulfilled by our Savior, and applied to our lives by the Holy Spirit.

The countervailing approach to renewal in the times of the early church was the practice of circumcision. Paul encountered a faction in Galatia who thought that it was necessary to find renewal outside the gospel. He frankly asks, "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh (Gal. 3:3)? At the heart of his letter was the defense of **justification by faith alone**. If circumcision is accepted, Paul says "Christ will be of no advantage to you" (Gal. 5:2). At the conclusion of his letter, Paul left his readers with the following words, "For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but **a new creation**" (Gal. 6:15). We who have "begun by the Spirit" have been made "a new creation" in the work of God justifying sinners on the basis of Christ's merits alone appropriated by faith in His finished work. To go anywhere else to be made new is wasting our lives with broken cisterns that cannot hold any water.

Justification says "I have been made new" because God has given a new spirit and a new heart through a new a living way in the substitutionary death of His Son. We have been saved by the regenerating and renewing work of the Holy Spirit which amounts to nothing short of a new creation in Christ. The blood of the new covenant will never lose its power, and because we have been saved to the uttermost (Heb. 7:25) by its Mediator, we can come to Him for renewal as one who is the author and perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12:2).

It makes sense, then, to hear Peter preach the gospel and call sinners to repentance attaching the results of justification and renewal/refreshing thus:

*"Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, **that times of refreshing may come** from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago" (Acts 3:19-21).*

In the second part of gospel-centered renewal, I want to continue by show how the present tense of the gospel (I am being made new) reveals the reversal of the curse and renewal into the image of Christ to which our sanctification finds its course.

II. Gospel-Centered Renewal: I Am Being Made New (Part 1)

Picking up where I left off, I want to draw out the continuous nature of gospel renewal through the ongoing work of sanctification. Behind these posts is the central theological motif that our union with Christ is the fountainhead of all genuine renewal in the Christian life, and therefore we should center our lives, churches, and ministries on the gospel of Jesus Christ and experience its satisfying and strengthening work from beginning to end.

Justification and Sanctification

We are made new by the justification of God where the new covenant promises of the Father are fulfilled in new and living way of Christ's atoning death through which we experience regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. This work of renewal continues as those who are being saved continually repent and believe the good news which is forever theirs in Christ Jesus. God is committed to perfect a people for Himself by reversing the curse of sin through the Fall as His people are changed into the likeness of Christ, the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15).

In justification, we are made a new creation in Christ by the sovereign work of God in bringing those who are dead in trespasses and sin and making them alive (Eph. 2:1-5). The continuing work of this resurrection power is seen as "the old passing away as all things become new" (2 Cor. 5:17b). We are being made new (sanctification) only because we have been made new (justification). Those who seek renewal upon spiritual performances and not the gospel are trying to be made new without having been made new, thereby replacing justification with sanctification. This deathly treadmill is a cycle which does not breed new life but new despair in the heart of those whose hopes are in what *they* can do for God rather than what *God* has done for them.

The goal of the gospel's work is seen in the "golden chain of redemption" where, for everyone in Christ, God has foreknown, predestined, called, justified, and glorified (Rom. 8:28-29). The goal in all of this is so that we may be "conformed into the image of His Son." The in-breaking of the kingdom of God established in our hearts results in the outworking of our salvation with fear and trembling in a process called sanctification where the image of Christ is daily being formed in the new man God has created having been united with His Son.

Sanctification says, "I am being made new"

The relationship between having been made new and being made new is spelled out for us in Ephesians 4:17-24 where Paul writes:

*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, 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 4:17-24*

The pivotal moment from what we read in verses 17-19 about life outside of Christ and verses 22-24 about being made new through a ongoing basis is verses 20-21 which speak of “learning Christ” and the change it brings. There is to be a sharp contrast between those who are “alienated from the life of God” and those who are “created in the likeness of God” through the process of being “renewed in the spirit of your minds” and “putting on the new self.” Without daily renewal through the gospel, there will be little distinctiveness between the two kinds of people in this text (the old man vs. the new man).

But notice also how we are to regularly be renewed–“**in the spirit of your minds.**” Those outside of Christ walk “in the futility of their minds” with a “darkened understanding” while those who are being sanctified are not being conformed to such thinking but are “being transformed by the renewing of their minds” (Rom. 12:2).

Consequently, we “learn” Christ by being “taught” in him because the “truth” is in Christ Jesus. The role of the mind in apprehending biblical truth by the illumining work of the Spirit is essential as such knowledge is intended to help form the character of Christ who has been revealed in our hearts. Becoming *like* Christ is impossible without intimate knowledge *of* Christ. Being renewed into His image is preceded by a genuine understanding of His character (“true righteousness and holiness”).

The means by which we are conformed into the image of Christ is through the daily renewal of Spirit-inspired, Spirit-illuminated biblical truth whereby the pattern of our lives is programmed by the gospel of Jesus Christ and nothing else. Everyone united with Christ are in the process of becoming like Christ, and everyone of us have been gospel truths to learn, meditate, pray through, and enjoy as our satisfaction of what Christ has done our behalf overflows with joy inexpressible and full of glory (1 Pet. 1:8).

III. Gospel-Centered Renewal: I Am Being Made New (Part 2)

16 So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. 17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

Colossians 3:5-10

18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:18

According to Scripture two things are happening simultaneously. Outwardly, we are “wasting away” while inwardly we are “being renewed day by day” (2 Cor. 4:16). This body Paul calls a “jar of clay” has in it “this treasure” of the gospel of the glory of Christ. And it is because of this treasure that we both experience “momentary afflictions” and one day “an eternal weight of glory.” Without the centrality of the gospel, neither of these realities would be known.

Beholding Christ and Being Made New

The way in which we are being made new is seen in 2 Cor. 3:18 which says:

*And we all, with unveiled face, **beholding the glory of the Lord**, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

This little verse packs glorious truths of how we are being made new and what God is making as the Potter upon these jars of clay. The means of renewal is “beholding the glory of the Lord.” Sounds quite abstract, doesn’t it? But Paul makes it plain what, rather who, we are to behold in 2 Cor. 4:4, 6. We are to behold (vs. 4) “the light of the gospel of **the glory of Christ**” and again (vs. 6) “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in **the face of Jesus Christ**.” The gospel is the eternal spotlight on the glory of

Christ, so if we want to know the glory of God, we must look supremely upon the face of Jesus Christ.

The effects of beholding Christ is that we might be renewed (transformed) into the image of God from one degree of glory to another. We are *being* transformed because this process of being made new is so glorious that we cannot handle it but in degrees! The image of God marred by sin is be recreated in the new man being perfected for glory. Paul tells the church at Colossae that they have put on the new self, which is **being renewed** in knowledge **after the image of its creator**" (Col. 3:10). The image which God is committed to renewing comes from the knowledge found in the gospel which leads us to see and savor Jesus Christ who is our hope of glory (Col. 1:27).

What this means for you and me is that renewal in the Christian does not come by growth steps but by gospel sight. It is not what we do for Jesus but what we see in Jesus that brings us into greater conformity to His image. A failure to center your life on the gospel and embrace the supremacy of Christ has tragic implications because this is precisely the means of renewal we need to experience the eternal weight of glory that awaits us. Each degree of glory in our daily renewal and transformation are like birth pangs when **we shall be like Him** fully, for **we shall see Him** as He is (1 John 3:2).

And oh, what a glorious day that will be!

IV. Gospel-Centered Renewal: I Will Be Made New

16 So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. 17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

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What we often fail to consider is the eschatological hope of renewal in the glorification of the saints—the future tense of the gospel. As those who enjoy the good of the gospel through repentance-driven renewal, we are “waiting for new heavens and a new earth” according to His promise (2 Pet. 3:13). We who have been made new through the promise of the Father in the new covenant, purchased by the Son in His death, and applied by the Spirit in His regeneration, are awaiting the day where we will be changed so that mortality will be taken on immortality and corruption will be taken on incorruptibility (1 Cor. 15:52-54).

This is only possible because the “second Adam” brought new life where the first Adam brought death (Rom. 5:12-21). Where sin brought death and condemnation, grace brought life and acceptance in the beloved—and it is this reign of grace that will persevere to glory and usher us into His presence. Paul tells that the first Adam was merely a living creature, but the “last Adam” is a life-giving spirit because of whom those bearing “the image of the man of dust” will also bear “the image of the man of heaven” (1 Cor. 15:45-49). This is a picture of the progressive renewal of the image of God in man through the application of the gospel in apprehending our union with Christ which satisfies the heart of the one who treasures Jesus.

In the meantime, we join with creation with an eager longing for the coming of our Lord and the “revealing of the sons of God” (Rom. 8:19-22). The whole creation is groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now, and so are those who have received the Spirit of adoption and are seeking to see Christ formed in them (Gal. 4:19). It is not only what has happened to us in the past (having been made new) that should inspire continual renewal but what will happen to us when our Lord comes and changes us, renewing us fully for eternity in His glorious presence.

The covenantal union of Christ the husband with His bride the church shall continue in the new heaven and the new earth, as John describes in Revelation 21:1-5.

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” 5 And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

Jesus Christ, seated on the throne where there is no more pain, sickness, sin, or death, wants us to know that even still he is “making all things new.” God Incarnate came to dwell with us in humanity, and in the new earth we, His new humanity, will dwell with Him in glory.

To know that we have a Savior who is the author and perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12:2), to know a Father who began this “good work” in us and will bring it to completion (Phil. 1:6), and to know a Spirit who breaths new life in us (Titus 3:5) and empowers us each day should dominate our lives as we dedicate them to His glory. If you want to experience continuous renewal in your spiritual life, do not look to yourself. Look to Christ as He is seen in the gospel and know there is where God is *for* us, Christ is *with* us, and His Spirit is *in* us solely on the basis of His passionate and perfect work on the cross to make us new.

V. Renewal Through Remembering

I’m continuing my series on gospel-centered renewal with excerpts and commentary focusing on how we experience renewal in the Christian life. If our union with Christ is the heart of renewal, then we should also consider the main arteries from which such nourishment and vitality comes.

Today I want to encourage you to consider how remembering the works of the Lord bring renewal in the Christian life, and in particular, I want to pull from the book of Psalms. There are times in our lives where we are hungry and feel empty, thirsty and cannot find water to satisfy being parched, downcast in spirit and seemingly walking in perpetual darkness. When your life feels like it is being wasted away, what do you do to find renewal? You remember who God is and meditate and all that He has done, specifically in the gospel.

In Psalm 42, we find the psalmist panting and thirsting for God where his tears have been his food day and night. The refrain of this psalm reveals the nature of his struggle, “Why are you cast down, O my soul?” (Psalm 42:5, 11). The answer to this question is hoping in God by remembering what He has done. Verse 4 explains:

These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival. Psalm 42:4

Again, in Psalm 63 we find King David at a time where his soul thirsts and flesh faints for God “as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” How is David satisfied and renewed? When he remembers how the Lord has been his help and meditates on him. He writes:

*5 My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, 6 **when I remember you** upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; 7 for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy. 8 My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me. Psalm 63:5-8*

Psalm 78, 105, and 106 are testimonies of the works of God in the history of redemption speaking to God's covenant faithfulness and steadfast love to deliver, protect, provide, and guide. Psalm 105:5 command us to "remember the wondrous works that he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered" and in doing so be renewed to live faithfully in the promises of God. Yet, the sad testimony of Israel is that they were not renewed because they forget the works of the Lord. Hear the report:

*6 Both we and our fathers have sinned; we have committed iniquity; we have done wickedness. 7 Our fathers, when they were in Egypt, **did not consider your wondrous works; they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love**, but rebelled by the sea, at the Red Sea. Psalm 106:6-7*

After all that God had done for them to rescue them, again it is reported that "they soon forgot his works; they did not wait for his counsel" (Psalm 106:13). The sin, iniquity, and wickedness stems from a forgetfulness that is the seed of rebellion against God. Forgetfulness results in unfaithfulness, and unfaithfulness spiritual adultery and "playing the whore." Should we not consider then the importance of remembering the Lord and having the gospel afresh in our minds that we not become functional atheists and fail to live in the power of the resurrection, walking in newness of life?

May we be like Asaph who appeals to the "years of the right hand of the Most High" and declared:

11 I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. 12 I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds. 13 Your way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God? 14 You are the God who works wonders; you have made known your might among the peoples. 15 You with your arm redeemed your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph. Psalm 77:10-15

What a striking contrast we see here! While forgetfulness led to rebellion and wickedness, remembering and meditating on the mighty works of God led Asaph to awe and wonder at the majesty and power of God who redeems His people.

What you and have before us each day is the opportunity to be renewed in our devotion to Jesus Christ through remembering what He has done and mediating on all that He is for us. Consider how the Lord has been merciful and gracious to die for the ungodly, to bring new life, to indwell you with His Spirit, and fill you with everlasting joy. Remember how Jesus took the curse that was ours, paid the price for our sins, and purchased us with his precious blood. Daily fill your heart and mind with the gospel

wherein we see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and such remembrance will daily renew you to experience the mighty hand of God for even greater works to be done in your midst. When you awaken each day with hope that renewal is provided by an all-pervasive consciousness of God's faithfulness, you can join the psalmist who exclaimed:

1 Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. 2 Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them. 3 Full of splendor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. 4 He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered; the Lord is gracious and merciful. Psalm 111:1-4

VI. Gospel Renewal Through the Fear of the Lord

A couple of weeks ago, I started up a series on **gospel-centered renewal**, and I want to continue thinking through spiritual renewal that is gospel-nourished. One of the things that has struck me of late is how the Scripture connects "the fear of the Lord" to metaphors or direct references to life, sustenance, and satisfaction.

Before I do, I want state by way of premise that I believe the "fear of the Lord" is the outworking of the gospel as stated in the new covenant promise (Psalm 130:4; Jer. 32:39-40). Apart from the gospel's work in a believer, it is impossible to know the fear of the Lord and thus impossible to experience the realities depicted in the verses below.

Fear of the Lord Leads to Life

*The fear of the Lord **leads to life**, and whoever has it rests satisfied; he will not be visited by harm. Proverbs 19:33*

Fear of the Lord Prolongs Life

*The fear of the Lord **prolongs life**, but the years of the wicked will be short. Proverbs 10:27*

Fear of the Lord a Fountain of Life

*The fear of the Lord is **a fountain of life**, that one may turn away from the snares of death. Proverbs 14:27*

Fear of the Lord an Honorable Life

*The reward for humility and fear of the Lord is **riches and honor and life**. Proverbs 22:4*

Fear of the Lord a Satisfied Life

*Oh, fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him **have no lack!** Psalm 34:9*

The common thread in all these verses is the fear of the Lord producing and sustaining a rich, vibrant, abundant life that lives in the good of the gospel. When you work out your salvation “with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12), you will know that the very manner in which you do that (fear) will become a ever-increasing means (fountain of life). This is because it is God who is at work in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13).

The source of fear is God’s work in you, and operating on the basis of that holy fear produces continual renewal for the kind of abundant life Scripture speaks so vividly about. The fear of God is a fountain of life because God is both the source of our fear and our life in Christ Jesus. When you are standing in the gospel of grace, you are standing under the waterfall of God’s promise to put holy fear in you, and the delight you take in that waterfall serves as the means of enjoyment and renewal in the Christian life.

VI. Jonathan Edwards on Continued Transformation and Renewal

In his book *Religious Affections*, Jonathan Edwards argued that one way distinguish truly gracious affections from others is that they are attended with a change of nature. When the soul has a spiritual understanding of the excellency and glory of divine things, such understanding brings the supernatural effect of transformation, or a change of nature. Because this conversion not only imparts “light from the Sun of Righteousness” but also becomes “a luminous thing” by partaking of the nature of the Fountain of their light. To put it another way, Edwards says “the saints not only drink of the water of life that flows from the original fountain, but this water becomes a fountain of water in them, springing up there and flowing out of them.” What Edwards is illustrating is the continual renewal that comes from participating in the glory of divine things through the transforming power of the gospel.

As I have been developing a theology of renewal in recent weeks, I want to post the following excerpt from Edwards quite pertinent to the discussion. Check it out.

*“As it is with spiritual discoveries and affections given at first conversion, so it is in all subsequent illuminations and affections of this kind; **they are all transforming**. There is a like divine power and energy in them as in the first discoveries; they still reach the bottom of the heart, and affect and alter the very nature of the soul, in proportion to the degree in which they are given. And **a transformation of nature is continued and carried on** by them to the end of life, until it is brought to perfection in glory. Hence the progress of the work of grace in the hearts of the saints is represented in Scripture as **a continued conversion and renovation of nature**” (270).*