

Renewal of Your Mind

By: J. Michael Rowland - (Romans 12:2)

We hadn't seen Joe in years at the street ministry where I worked. The courts had appointed him a guardian, and the last we heard, he had moved to Arizona. But here he was, on our doorstep, seeking our help once again.

"Hello," Joe said to us. "I'm here so you can help me marry Farrah Fawcett."

Schizophrenia is a terrible disease. Those who suffer from it are doomed to perceive the world in a way that most others are unable to share, with the result that, apart from effective medication, they lose the ability to participate in the everyday events of life, an ability most of us take for granted. They live in a separate reality.

When we first met him, Joe was on the street, living on handouts and sleeping under bushes or in doorways. The guardian had been a blessing for him—someone who could manage his meager funds and make sure he took his meds. Without the meds, Joe found himself coping with a world that not only operated in a way that seemed irrational, but many times proved to be hostile.

Nevertheless, Joe was a lonely, fifty-something bachelor, and having perceived—at least according to his miswired lights—that Ms. Fawcett wanted him, and knowing as he did that she lived in our area, he somehow made his way back across the desert so that he might enlist our help in the arrangements. Who wouldn't?

We tried to get him connected to a doctor and back on his meds. Unfortunately, this is difficult proposition in this day and age. A kind of Catch-22 exists in the mental health field. A doctor can't give a schizophrenic anti-psychotic medicines unless the patient wants them, but patients who aren't taking their meds never want them.

We were able to track down the guardian and then gather enough funds from a few local churches to buy Joe a bus ticket home. After that came the tricky bit. Convincing him that his relationship with Ms. Fawcett was a delusion proved impossible. Joe was as certain of his reality as we were of ours. Ultimately, we fell back on nothing more nor less than personal trust.

"Joe," I said, "you know we care about you, right?"

"Yes."

"What we want you to do is take the bus back to Arizona. I know it doesn't seem like the right thing to do, but it is. You'll see that later. Will you do this, for us, just because we're asking you to?"

And so at last he did. It was hard for him, because we were asking him to give up a lot, but he did it for one simple reason: He trusted us.

A short while later, we received a nice note from the guardian. Joe had made it home safely and was back on his meds, and all was right with the world again. I don't know whether he continued pining for Farrah Fawcett or not.

There are two axioms that must be true if we are to have any chance at all of living as Christians. The first is, God made us and therefore knows precisely what we need. The second is, God controls all his created universe, and therefore has no problem providing exactly what we need, exactly when we need it.

Unless these two things are true, then we are deluding ourselves to believe that life in Christ is even possible. We're wasting our time trying. If they are true, on the other hand, then reality is radically different than the world at large perceives it to be. Reality, in fact, is so different that it would be crazy to try to live life the way the world does.

Popular imagery of the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit—the concept of two distinct selves at war within us, one good and one bad—is misleading. Christ did not make us some sort of monster, half righteous and half sinful, leaving these parts to fight for dominance like red and black ants in a jar. He made us a wholly new creation. The old has passed away.

Still, though, there is a war, as we are only too aware. This war, however, is not between our “good” self and our “bad” self. It is a battle between two separate perceptions of reality. Our experience of the world tells us never mind about invisible gods who may or may not render any help, the only rational course is to trust our eyes and ears and our abilities to control things, and then do whatever we have to do to get what we need. Our faith, on the other hand, tells us never mind how things appear, trust God, do what he says, and when the time is right, he will bring his plan for us to fulfillment.

We can't believe both. We can believe only one or the other.

Sin presents a different problem for us than we may expect. It is not a test of our strength, but of our belief. If the world is right, we would be stupid to depend on God. If God is right, we would be stupid not to do so, even if circumstances make depending on him appear fruitless or foolhardy. In light of all this, let me offer a new definition of sin:

Sin is the insane notion that you can somehow obtain a greater measure of God's providence by means of doing your own will.

Till now, you may have been trained to think that sin is weakness on your part, or that it is rebellion against God, or that it is hatred of your fellow man. Indeed, all these things are true. But you may also have found that attempts on your part to be stronger or more obedient or more loving frequently fall well short of the mark. You need not condemn yourself over it. Your sin proceeds from nothing worse (or, to be sure, less crazy) than a belief in a false reality, a kind of mental hangover from the days when you imagined a God who only helps those who help themselves.

Next time you have the insane notion that your needs require you to commit some sin or another, do yourself a favor. Go home and take your meds. Take Genesis or the Psalms or John's Gospel or Paul's Letter to the Colossians. Or take prayer therapy. Or take a wise friend to lunch and talk about it.

Perhaps even then you will still harbor doubts that God will come through for you. If so, let me ask you to try not helping yourself, just this one time, just because I'm asking you to. It really will turn out better in the end. Trust me on this. I know something about it. After all, as your brother, I can tell you for certain that spiritual schizophrenia runs in the family.



J. Michael Rowland is an adult convert to Christianity. Since that time, he has become an ordained pastor and holds an M.Div. degree. After working for Win Arn at the Institute for Church Growth, he served for ten years as the director of an evangelical outreach to the poor near Los Angeles, CA. Currently, he is writing a series of mystery/suspense novels based on his experiences in the street ministry. Mike's contact is: grapho@verizon.net

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