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Is there anything to learn from those that claimed to have had life-changing experiences of the ‘mystical’ nature? Those that found in Christ immense transformations to their lives, and their thinking?

When we Christians hear the word ‘mystical,’ we immediately get our hairs to raise—Isn’t *that* about weird practices and rituals? And if they aren’t, our minds certainly go to the fact that this isn’t the 3rd, 12th, or 14th century, and we live in the scientific age. . . where we *don’t need mysticism* to satisfy our spirituality. We have education, a fully-referenced Bible; and we have a modern, science-based brain.

I’m thus proposing a weird mix to examine here, obvious in the title to this piece: *What can the mystic forbearers of our faith teach us about encounters with God?* More profoundly, *What does the Bible teach about encounters with God that should result in a renewed mind for the Christian?* And finally—since we are modern and scientific, *What can neuroscience bring to the table on the matter of God and a change of mind?*

The Ancients

Let’s first get rid of the bias. We have a hard time with anything ‘ancient’ these days, and we have an even harder time with anything ‘mystical.’ That’s because we are mis-informed as to what the term ‘mystical’ truly involves. Also, we didn’t listen often to our parents, so we are much less inclined to listen—let alone read, absorb—some wisdom from foundational figures in Christian history.

The term *mystic* means *one who has moved from mere belief or belonging to God, to an actual, inner experience of God.*¹

John the Baptist was probably one of the first to experience the mystical during Jesus' life. He was a prophet, a visionary revealing God's son before Jesus came on the scene. After Jesus' death and resurrection, there was Paul.² He was the one blinded by God's light, thrown off his horse, eyes shut with scales, then healed miraculously, all of which were supernatural and extraordinary experiences. But what makes Paul a mystic is his complete surrender and unification with *the mind of Christ*.³ After him, John, often called John of Patmos, writes copiously in his Book of Revelations of extraordinary mystical experiences: "*taken up,*" "*seeing visions,*" having *OBEs* (out-of-body experiences). Wild things to come, in ages to come!

Let's not forget the Day of Pentecost, when the mystical breaks through, as prophesied, and people in the Upper Room are Spirit-filled. Tongues speaking *tongues*, and *tongues of fire!* Talk about being transformed! *God-in-us* (1 John 4:12–13; Luke 24:49) becomes a historical reality, testified to by charismatics ever since.

To be a *mystic* often has meant looking at those who have experienced *ecstasy*, like Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Ávila, or Francis of Assisi, who also bore Christ's *stigmata*. But mystics aren't solely those with extraordinary events or experiencing supernatural phenomena, although those are the ones we tell about.

I am not after discerning their experiences here. I'm after finding the more necessary and earlier *movements* necessary for a seeker, which allow for what Jesuit Joseph Maréchal has called the "gradual integration of the *ego* under the mastery of God."⁴

What ancients 'knew', and we need to learn, is the process by which we help ourselves move towards the goals set out in Romans 12:2: the *renewal of our minds*.

So, what *did* they know?

¹ Rorh, Richard (2008). *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality*. Franciscan Media, p. 81. Carl McColeman (2016) in his book *Christian Mystics*, clarifies further what mysticism and mystics are all about: The mystic experience is a broad-ranging *set of occurrences* for most individuals; people whose lives have been touched, or they have pursued and achieved a touch from God. Great mystics appear in every century in Christian history—with most of the "ancients" appearing between the 5th and 15th centuries. But mysticism did not remain in the past, as modern-day mystics have continued to appear with great influences. McColeman groups the mystical experiences into several categories, from visionaries to confessors, to poets, saints, and even those considered heretical. The bottom line here is that mysticism consists of a set of experiences which move the person from *mere participant* to *God-union*. Joseph Maréchal, Jesuit mystic, writes that the more common mystical experience is the one of gradual integration of one's *ego* under the mastery of God, through prayer, and detachment. For some, there is then a transcendent revelation of God to the soul, often experienced as an *ecstatic 'contact'*, or *union*, and is frequented with a "suspension of the faculties," i.e., the person leaves consciousness as we know it. Maréchal suggests such may bring on a "readjustment of the faculties," where God is a present and perceptible influence on the soul. This enables in the person a "selfless love" for all of God's creation. (See Maréchal, Joseph (2004). *The Psychology of the Mystics*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.)

² Saul of Tarsus, ca. 64–67 AD.

³ 1 Cor 2:16; Phil 2:5; cf, Eph 2:10

⁴ Maréchal, Joseph (2004). *The Psychology of the Mystics*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.

They knew that getting to the fullness of God in one's life required them to refuse the pressure to conform to the world they lived in (again, the first part in Romans 12:2).

They knew that a way to respond to this call was to offer themselves as a *living sacrifice* (Ro 12:1; Ro 6:13–16); and that has always meant something much deeper than ritual, becoming pious, or 'pure.' It involves the act of total humility and total purification. It is a much deeper annihilation of the *self's will* than what is often presumed.

They knew that paradoxically, if one would open one's self to *the dying of self*, that the self is returned to you; no longer as the '*selfish self*', but rather, *the self of the new creature in Christ*.⁵

They knew that to obtain the desires of the Psalmist (51:10), a "*clean heart*," that there would need to be *renewal of the mind*—it enabling a transformation, a new perception of reality; of what is unseen; of walking by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 4:16-18; 5:7). This renewal of mind as a radical perceptual shift, where everything is viewed differently.

And, they knew that to achieve this selflessness and expectancy of God's direction—this renewal—would mean getting to "*living without a why*."⁶ Living "*without a why*" means that one doesn't ask *What's in it for me?* or *Why am I doing this?* Whatever it is, the self isn't first—and let's be clear here: that includes the unconscious self also acting sideways.⁷ The good is done spontaneously, the way that God acts. (There is no self-interest in God's actions. . .and God doesn't have an *unconscious* to blame.)

Finally, they knew that a disciplined and serious approach to God-seeking was necessary.

*"I would put it this way, and say God deifies himself in us when we become, precisely, perfectly detached from the things of this world. Then we see that that's the nature of God's creation as the image and likeness of God—imago Dei. No, we don't deify ourselves in the process of detachment; but if we totally negate ourselves, then God deifies himself in us."*⁸

The Way of the Mystics

Mennonite pastor Doug Heidebrecht summarizes Paul's insistence that the first step in the process is not to be conformed to "*the age in which you live*." Let's be clear that doesn't mean rejection of all things cultural. It does mean relinquishing the age's requisite to conform to ways of living that are contrary to God's purposes and will:

⁵ See Davies, Oliver (1991) *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian*. London: SPCK.

⁶ Davies, Oliver (1991) *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian*.

⁷ More on this later. Suffice it here to state that *states of awareness* and *self-actions* are implied to change with a renewal of the mind.

⁸ McGinn, Bernard. Interview with Sara Miller, in *The Christian Century* (March 22, 2003), pp. 22–28. McGinn is a contemporary Christian mystic. He is the author of *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, and *The Presence of God: A History of Christian Mysticism*. Together with his wife Patricia McGinn, they co-wrote *Makers of Mysticism*, an introductory guide to Christian mystics.

*Paul summarizes [in Romans] the significance of this revelation of God's wrath and righteousness for both Jews and Gentiles, and lays the groundwork for how to live as God's people in response to his call of faith. . . . Christians are called to respond to this mercy by offering themselves as a living sacrifice in worship to God. . . .*⁹

But we can't reject the lure of contemporary *ego-living-large, defending ego*, until we assume practices which help us get into the frame of mind that challenges the world and helps us give up our self. And yet, it's not just the pursuit of practices which gets us to a fundamental openness to change (if we do just that, we are just "finding ways" and not finding God): Mystics of old *knew by experience* that there *are* some fundamental '*habits of the heart*' that do assist:

- **Scripture reading becomes imperative to receiving God's message.** Old timers knew that the 'habit' of reading Scripture helped establish that "proper conduct" that enables the perception of God's will for one's life. This sounds simple, and we have many times attempted to read Scripture ongoing. But let's be truthful: it takes determination to move through the calendar thicket of daily readings, or more. And yet, we understand that the rewards are profound. We *sacrifice our time and attention* when we do this. In turn, we get something, sometimes the dots connect in uncanny ways. Sometimes, marvelously so.
- **Scripture teaches we ought "give up the futility of our ways"**—and that can mean a lot of different things, yet one remains constant: We need to help ourselves let go of the idea that we (alone) know best. In Ephesians, we are admonished to "give it up" (and I don't mean applause!): To give up "*our darkened understanding,*" which then Paul connects to "*the old person which belongs to your former manner of life*" (Eph 4:17-19). The resolve? "*Put on the new person, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*" (4:22-24).
- **If we are to "dwell" (an *olde* word we seldom understand today), Scripture teaches we ought to pray "constantly"** (1 Thess 5:17; Eph 6:18; Luke 21:36). Tough order. Now I don't know if I've ever done that—but I do know that I pray a lot in what sometimes doesn't *seem as prayer*, more as conversation with God: in the car, on the move, as I walk the park, as I work out in the gym. I've long given up ear-buds and music as downtime, illusions of ether. I've come to realize that God often gets *shut out* of our minds by the noise we put *into* our minds. The point is, *we need to initiate communications. Often. Regularly.* If you can, "constantly," as a means of "letting go and letting God..." in. In doing this, we "dwell" in God.
- **For some, ancient and modern, sacraments and ritual generate effective environments, symbols, and acts of unification.** Thus, it's likely that you will find *meditation, rituals, sacramental acts*, to be motivators of our will to not only seek, but give ourselves up to the divine presence. These also become "habits of the heart" that generate perceptual and cognitive changes. More on this as we enjoin neuropsychology in our search, below.

⁹ Col 3:2; James 4:4; 1 Peter 2. Here's an example: We can't presume to enjoin a culture of immediate gratification, one that builds ego at costs to the self; to morals; even society at large, and pretend that these are (a) under our control; (b) these if not obsessive, won't clog our relationship with Christ; and (c) won't eventually cost us physically and spiritually. Paul's admonishment is that such persons are "foolish" and bound by their very lifestyles from enjoying the full gifts which a life for God at the center provides.

To sum up, for the moment: From mystics ancient and modern; from Pauline epistles and other Scriptures we get the direct message that to draw closer to God and receive God's fullness, *we need to be distinct from "this age."*

We need to establish the type of communication with God which enables *God's ownership of us*, and *decreases our own self-ownership*. We find that ritual *action* is part of what the Bible teaches, and the ancients knew so well helps our minds connect with the divine. And most important, if we read directly *and* between-the-lines here, the notion that a *renewed mind* along with *the help of the Holy Spirit* are dual essentials to achieve any of this.

Mind Renewal: The Renewal of Perception

In **Romans 12**, Paul is telling us of the two elements the Holy Spirit enables in our salvation: There is *regeneration* through the new birth in Christ, where the "old" (meaning our sins) is replaced by the "new" (meaning our justification). There is also the second—a possibility to bring on the "fullness of Christ" into our existence: a *transformation*, a complete change of mind.

Paul uses the Greek word *ανακαίνοσ* (*anakainos*), to mean *something new*, literally "*to make new.*" We want to get the full meaning here: Paul is using the term to imply transformation *by moving the mind from one stage, to a higher, more developed one*. In other words, making the mind *qualitatively new*. This is not an "improved version" of a former mindset; it is a complete "change of mind" for the better.

Mind-renewal of this sort is what enables resisting the pressure to conform to the age we live in. It is also how the *self* becomes "*crucified*"—the new mind being endowed with that *renewed self*, which then allows us to be "imitators of Christ" (Eph 5:1).

Your mind will not be renewed if you keep the old ways of thinking in your mind, and "sprinkle" the new truths on top of them. The old must be replaced. You must recognize the old, see the old for its destructiveness. Then let the Holy Spirit exchange the old for the new. You must let the Spirit reveal your negatives, even though you think you know them. Only God can bring out the truth of what remains from the past. That grace and truth can transform your mind, making changes at the level of identity.¹⁰

Going Deeper

Getting to the bottom of our psychological self not only takes courage, it also takes honesty. Seeing there the remnants of our old nature isn't pretty. It is a cognitive fact we tend to keep the past, with many of its encumbrances, because it is familiar. And because it is familiar, it is

¹⁰ Featherston, Carter (2013). One Thing to Remember about the Renewing of the Mind. *Blog*, September 16. I would add to Featherston's direct language the following: We can't be another Augustine and mutter, "**Oh Lord, give me chastity and continence, but not yet.**" Yes, he was honest, but honesty isn't the issue here. It's the will to let go. It's what the Psalmist eventually longed for in Psalm 51:10, "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit in me.*" That can only be desired when we've reached a place—a place of recognition that we need God to do an engine overhaul, not just an oil change.

comfortable despite its ugliness. We know its nooks and crannies. Releasing *how we thought in the past* is the ultimate humility. Often, it's the only way to gain purification. And yet, it's one of the most difficult things to do.

The self is a treacherous beast. It holds on to memory stronger than any glue. We beat the memories down; they come back to life, wanting *their* way, sometimes in egocentric tones and at other times, even egomaniacally so.

I've argued this point with colleagues and friends: We keep the past alive when we should let the memory of it die. We allow it to live, give it energy, each time we remember it and *lexically tell it*—whether to ourselves as unrestrained memory, or to others. Sometimes it takes the form of “*testimony*,” and we think it does good to go over the tawdry. If you've ever read Augustine's *Confessions*, plowed through its ramblings to its end, you find a man still tortured by the memories he has yet to fully release. God did wonderful things in Augustine's life; but he misses out on the totality of the renewal by perpetually retelling his past wrongs. In those acts, he keeps both a direct, and unconsciously subtle *judgment on himself* that deprives him from realizing *God can forget our past*.

Why is this important?

Because God has claimed *he forgets*. He *forgets our sins*. He's willing to not only forgive them but also *forget them*, “cast them into the depth of the sea” (Micah 7:19), *to be remembered no more* (Isa 43:25; Ps 103:12; Heb 8:12). While we may not be able to totally forget our past, there's a lot of neuropsychology that tells us we can *reorder past scripts and their affects* so these have little further say.

The mind can be renewed. We certainly don't need to go at it alone: Jesus says, “*I'm willing*” (Matt 8:3; Luke 5:13).

Going Neuro: Neurobiology, Belief, a Change of Brain and Mind

Neurobiology is a relatively new field that combines the bodily science of neurology with the cognitive sciences of psychology and psychiatry. It speaks to both the circuitry and the output. But it does not, and cannot speak to *mentations* (or *mind*¹¹) as a reality apart from speaking about the *brain* as an organ. What it can, and does do, is explore how *belief in God, thinking about God*, and in ways personal to respondents, *feel God*, changes the circuitry and the output of the organic brain.

¹¹ Let's be clear here, since this can get confusing. The term we use, *mind*, translates to the Greek *νοῦς* (*nous*). The Greek understood *nous* to be a *function* of the brain (Greek *μυαλό*), an “intellectual organ.” Mind was seen as a function of the brain (we do also), an “ability to realize fully the nature or essence of a thing as against its surface appearance” (Heidebrecht, 1996:3-4). It thus becomes the main function of the mind to discover the ‘real’ and separate it from the erroneous. This is *mental perception*. In Jewish thought, this *nous* or mind is that which the Lord gives human beings (Job 7:17), and through which humans can understand fully (7:20). There is a connection in these passages between *mind* and the inner *spirit* of the person (7:15), as the latter verse clearly shows Job's cognitive struggle with what he spiritually feels inwardly, and the mental perceptions he understands.

I'll be citing here from several neurobiologist's works, but will lean most heavily on one particular work—that of Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman.¹²

Newberg's previous work with Eugene d' Aquila demonstrated that the human brain is uniquely constructed to *perceive* and *generate* spiritual realities. Not only that, but all humans, from childhood on, contemplate the possibility that spiritual realms *exist*.¹³ In Newberg's more recent work, he and Waldman boldly state,

*Our research. . . has consistently demonstrated that God is part of our consciousness and that the more you think about God, the more you will alter the neural circuitry in specific parts of your brain.*¹⁴

And again,

*Intense, long contemplation of God and other spiritual values appears to permanently change the structure of those parts of the brain that control our moods, give rise to our conscious notions of self, and shape our sensory perceptions of the world.*¹⁵

Before the neurosciences, the brain was a maturing organ that reached its zenith in the second decade of life, and then slowly withered away with age. It changed only in terms of loss of abilities. This view has radically changed, and the term *neuroplasticity*—the ability of the brain to *structurally* change, to *rearrange*, *regrow circuitry*, *cancel out some*, *etc.*—gives us a new understanding of how our brain (and consequently our *mind*) can alter in response to a variety of events. If the environmental stimulus is significant enough (i.e., *perceived* as significant—in this case, God), the internal function of *nerve cells themselves* will change, causing rearrangement of cellular activity and even growth of new axons.¹⁶ By consequence, *reasoning* also changes. Change of *mind* is possible.

Additionally—the changes that occur with God in the picture are profound, because they seem to decrease the importance of *self* and increase the person's *social awareness* and *empathy*, while subduing *destructive feelings* and *emotions*.¹⁷

¹² Newberg and Waldman (2009) *How God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings from a Leading Neuroscientist*. NY: Ballantine. Before this work, Newberg began publishing in this area along with Eugene d' Aquila (1999, *The Mystical Mind*). To be acknowledged early on here, is that neuroscience's efforts at the study of religion in general, beliefs in particular—and stretching it—theological positions, do not result in neat conclusions or incontrovertible facts. That said, Newberg and Waldman do commit their research results to emphatically state the reticular influence belief has on brain structures, and vice versa.

¹³ Newberg and d' Aquila (1999).

¹⁴ Newberg and Waldman (2009), Chapter 1, p.3.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.7.

¹⁶ See: The Center for Synaptic Plasticity, at <http://www.bris.ac.uk/synaptic/research/res2.html>.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 18. Most neuroscientists working on religion come to similar conclusions, that “religion makes us more human” in the sense of generating *compassion*, the neural capacity to resonate with another person, and *respond* affectively to that person's pain. This increases tolerance of others and diminishes our own need to concentrate on ourselves, our faults and shortcomings.

I could go on, since there is so much evidence to show what I am highlighting, but suffice it to restate the essence succinctly here: Our ability to perceive God is a built-in feature of our cognitive structures. The reality of our *realization* of God, our willingness to *pursue routes to God* by all those elements noted above by mystics and seekers, *enable* the brain to change. *“Faith is embedded in our neurons and in our genetics, and it is one of the most important principles to honor in our lives.”*¹⁸

Now, am one to believe that *hidden in these statements* is the actual partnership that occurs with God—via the Holy Spirit—that helps channel and bring about the *direction* of our mental change. But *only if we are willing*.

The God Partnership in Mind Renewal: Human and Divine Agency

Scripture is clear on the direction of all of this: We must first believe (John 3:16). We must then be open and willing to become God’s partner in the renewal of our minds (Romans 13:14).

Believing that one can change becomes a concrete act of faith, a demonstrable willingness, the part of human agency often required for transformations.¹⁹ This human agency involves *mentations*,²⁰ mental acts of intention and deliberation: *“Yes, I want to be healed.” “No, you don’t have to go there, just say the word and it’ll be done.” “If I could just touch the hem of his garment . . .”* Jesus rewards each and every understanding that takes the human mind beyond what’s cognitively static history, and into action.

Mental agency also means giving up *understanding* in an anthropocentric way, allowing for that decentering of self which gives up the control (see below); activating faith, since faith is *“confidence in what we hope for, and assurance about what we do not see”* (Hebrews 11:1).

Past mystics and current, intention-driven Christians find that *“dwelling”* on God, meditation²¹, prayer, involvement with sacramental and other acts, become “enablers” of their minds—to open to the divine, to diminish their self-centeredness, and to focus on

¹⁸ Newberg and Waldman, p.20

¹⁹ Faith is a requisite for many of the miracles Jesus undertook, since Christ seems to establish it, stated as “believing,” in many of his commentaries to both disciples and those who asked for healings: To the blind men he asks, *“Do you believe I can do this?”*; and answers, *“According to your faith, let it be done.”* To the invalid at the pool he asks, rhetorically, *“Do you want to get well?”* He tests the Canaanite woman’s faith by bringing up her precedence, and rewards her faithful answer. He rebukes, many times, his disciples for not having enough faith—*little faith*—or, having faith, and then doubting. And, when asked by his disciples why they couldn’t do the same types of miracles as he, Jesus answers *“Because you have little faith.”*

²⁰ Donald Davidson, *Essays on Action and Events*, (1982), 119.

²¹ Meditation, which first includes *mindfulness*, allows for an expansion of our awareness in each moment, beyond language itself—a more direct experience—a *gestalt* understanding that doesn’t create the rumination in thinking we are so prone to. Thinking about change can indeed be helpful, but it becomes harmful when we fall into mental ruminations about questions we have still to answer. Meditating begins the process of “living without the *why*.”

change. And we now know through the neurosciences what, exactly, such do neuronally to transform mentations we hold.²²

If we still find our faith lacking (i.e., the “*I can’t change my head*” bit, or worse, “*My change is never enough*” because “*I’ll still act within old habits,*”) one can resort to the second format of human agency: the type that clamors confessionally, “*Help my unbelief.*”

In Mark 9, there is the story of the boy possessed and the father seeking help from the disciples. But these could not cast out the demon. When the father approaches Jesus and tells him of this, Jesus first and in frustration declares, “*You unbelieving generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.*”

The father, after being asked how long the boy has been like this, states to Jesus, “*But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.*” And Jesus replies, rhetorically quoting back the father,

“*If you can?*” “*Everything is possible for one who believes.*”

And here is where we connect with this second type of assistance. The father replies, “***I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!***” Jesus’ answer is, “*I am willing.*”

Thus, a partnership is formed: God becomes a mutual agent for change, our human efforts combining with the Holy Spirit to revv up our neuronally changing mindset. We are not left to grow our own faith, or attempt to change our thinking on our own. *God helps our enabling because the Holy Spirit is a “difference maker,”*²³ the one who ups the faith platform, levels our playing field; the one who elevates our wherewithal so that we can move mountains. From this divine help, *change* certainty takes a foothold.

Ah, But the Self

I’ve left the best and worst for last. Within our self-consciousness there is this sense of *self*, this notion of being *someone*. Psychology calls it *personality*, those enduring traits that signify *us* vs. *everyone else*. Psychoanalysts call it the *psyche*, and break it down into the *id*, *ego*, *superego*. The bottom line isn’t what we call our consciousness of self, but *what “it” does*, and *how “it” acts*.

I recently wrote to a friend the following,

²² It’s important to note here that when we focus on Christ, make Christ the mind-center (i.e., God-centric mentations), data show remarkable changes happening neuronally, and a change in *our thinking habits*: Thought patterns *also change* in response to how the brain is now “seeing,” vs. “how it saw”— we are talking about a *change of mind*; a perceptually different type of thinking. See Newberg and Waldman, Chapter 3, “What Does God Do to Your Brain? The Neural Varieties of Spiritual Practice.

²³ Van Aken, *Causal Interactionism*, 174. Adding to Van Aken’s ideas, neurosciences underscore that experiences which are meaningful in some way are causal agents of neuronal change. Think of such in light of the Holy Spirit’s work and presence in a person’s life, and most Christians “get it.” Immediately, we understand the force of Presence acting on our embodied mind, our brain, to churn synapses and move beyond static histories and into new thinking.

I agree with you that the paradox of following Christ is to “lose one’s life” to “gain another.” In my experience, following Christ’s call tries to mirror what Miroslav Volf so eloquently stated, that is, getting the self to acquiesce its control over all things.²⁴ The “dying of self” to me is akin to the daily task of self-removal from the driver’s seat; a reminder in the moments of the day, or week, of who is (or should be) in control. It’s the moving over so that Christ can will God’s good purpose in my life.

And it is a cross to bear. It is a cross that, we hope, eventually becomes a “delectable pain,” akin to what many of the saints spoke about: a willingness to step aside in discomfort to the self, to let God in; to keep God central. Volf understands we need a metamorphosis of the self. God understands we still need a self. Thus, the “killing spirit” isn’t rendering the self dead, exactly. Rather, he says, we stop bargaining with God for our will, and effortlessly give God the command. This becomes the metamorphosis of “Christ in us”—our crucifixion—if we really achieve it (Gal.2:20): “I have been crucified with Christ. It is I no longer who live, but Christ is who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Giving up the space the self holds—that autonomy that puts the *me* central—is essential to mind renewal. We can get the mind to change *some* on our own, for certain. But for *transformation*, for *renewal*, we need to get the self out of the psyche’s center place. By allowing the self to be *crucified*,²⁵ we open ourselves to that partnership, that “partaking of his death” (Rom 6:5) which it then allows.

And just as Christ resurrected, we are not left in the tomb of our self-negation. We also partake in his *resurrection*: Crucifixion allows the self to be *reborn*, *renewed*, “in the likeness of Christ” (Rom 6:6-7). We put on *the mind of Christ* (Eph 4:23-24).

For some seekers, mind transformation comes through a moment of letting go and finding enlightenment (e.g., Augustine, St. John of the Cross, Teresa of Ávila, Francis of Assisi). For others, it’s in their meditation and their worship. Still for others, it’s *hard work*, this letting go and letting God. But whatever the form, the good news here is the rewards: Mind renewal allows a perspective that defeats the *why questions* and the *me* questions.

What They Knew We Should Know

If we could only “see the other side” of our transformation, we would be wooed by the new creature we see. Ancients knew that the only way to that other vision was to truly “*behold the*

²⁴ Volf, Miroslav (1996). *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Abingdon Press.

²⁵ I don’t think most Christians understand the depth of this passage, or Paul’s true intent in using the term *crucifixion*. I believe the Pauline message here stresses the need to de-center, but rightly understands that this process requires an extreme sacrifice, thus the term *crucifixion*. On other of his epistles, Paul settles this battle of wits between the self-as-center and the need to de-center the self: In his famous passage in Romans 7, revealing the mortifications of his own psyche and will, he comes to the conclusion that the only answer is the redemptive work of Christ. The “who can free me from this body of death?” line invokes a forthcoming transformation enabled by Christ’s sacrifice—Christ’s *crucifixion*, and his *resurrection*. The promise of renewal in Romans and Ephesians is our letting God help us do the sacrificial work of dying to self so we can be reborn in his image. . .and with his mind.

glory of the Lord.” That now sounds rather archaic, and we may even wonder what that means. What it means is gaining a *perceptual understanding* of the magnitude of God’s abilities and powers, and the immensity of his sacrifice through Christ. We can only achieve that through God’s revelations: Hearing the gospel, reading Scripture, reading the greats and their wisdom, and meditating on the meaning of what Christ has accomplished.

We and the Holy Spirit must work from the inside out, breaking down those neurons of staid thinking and building new ones. Elaborating the circuits, and enervating those parts of the brain that causally improve our understanding; de-throning our *selves*, and allowing the fullness of God to reach our inner being. From the inside out, we must also embrace a kind of *humility* that allows us to step aside, not ask first and foremost, *“How will this affect Me?”* I never understood the cliché, *Let go and let God*, until I did. . .

Perhaps you, me, we will be fortunate and reach a state of mindfulness that can continuously let go and let God. May it then form the habits of old via novel neurons, centralizing Christ in the renewed mind.

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