

TRANSFORMED

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How God Renews Your Mind
to Make You More Like Jesus

Esther Engelsma



Reformation Heritage Books
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Transformed

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Reformation Heritage Books

3070 29th St. SE

Grand Rapids, MI 49512

616-977-0889

orders@heritagebooks.org

www.heritagebooks.org

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Printed in the United States of America

21 22 23 24 25 26/10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Engelsma, Esther, author.

Title: *Transformed* : how God renews your mind to make you more like Jesus / Esther Engelsma.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Reformation Heritage Books, [2021] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021020513 (print) | LCCN 2021020514 (ebook) | ISBN 9781601788894 (paperback) | ISBN 9781601788900 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Thought and thinking—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Brain—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4598.4 .E54 2021 (print) | LCC BV4598.4 (ebook) | DDC 230—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021020513>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021020514>

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TO JAMES

*It's an honor to walk life's pathway
with you.*

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PREFACE

Several years ago, the topic of renewing the mind grabbed my attention and began consuming my thoughts. I realized that I knew *what* the Bible instructed me to do with my mind: think on these things, set your mind on things above, bring every thought into captivity, and more. But I wasn't quite sure *how* to follow these instructions in a practical way. They felt lofty and unattainable to a normal Christian like me. How was I supposed to follow them in my everyday life? If I were following them, how would my thought life look different over the next day or hour or minute? If my thought life were different, what impact would that have on my words and actions, my feelings and desires?

At the same time I started asking these questions, I was beginning to feel the impact of the various forms of media I was looking at and listening to. What I was watching, hearing, reading, and seeing was changing me, and I wasn't sure that was a good thing. It seemed that my mind was not being renewed by the word of God but conformed to the world through my media consumption. I was becoming less like Jesus, not more like Him. And I didn't know enough about the process of being transformed by the renewing of my mind to know what needed to be changed in my life.

Over the past few years, I have learned about the renewing of the mind by studying the Bible, books, and the lives of godly people around me. God has used what I have learned to change me. I am not the same person I was before learning about this topic. Though

those of us who belong to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ will not be fully transformed until we see Jesus in heaven, God does renew our minds through the knowledge found in the Bible, and He transforms our lives by the renewing of our minds. This book is a record of what I have learned. In six chapters, we will discuss what our minds are and how they are renewed; how our media consumption impacts our thought lives; what it looks like to follow the instructions God gives us about our thought lives; how our thoughts transform what we say and do; what influences our feelings and desires; and how this all culminates in God conforming us to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Though its title is *Transformed*, this book will not transform you. But I hope that it will help you to better understand how God can renew your mind and transform your life, and I hope that this knowledge inspires you to seek Him more. After all, He promises that when you seek, you will find. And so my prayer for this book is simple: that it would motivate you to spend more time in the Book that *does* have transforming power and that it would point you to the One who *can* transform you by the renewing of your mind.

This book would not exist without the help and encouragement of many people. Thank you to my husband, James, for making the time for me to get away with a cup of coffee and a laptop so that I could focus, think, and write; to my kids for letting Mama go write and for asking, “How did your writing go?”; to my dad for the inspiration to write diligently and the willingness to give advice; to my mom for encouraging me and relating to me through writing a book at the same time; to my friends who believed I could finish this book when I wasn’t so sure and who encouraged me to keep plodding even when progress was slow. Above all, I give thanks to God—Renewer of minds and Transformer of lives—for the work He does in minds and hearts and the word that He uses to do it.

THE MIND

Running barefoot down a dirt path with the smell of campfires lingering in the air, anticipating the taste of toasted marshmallows.

Sitting in a creaky chair with a number two pencil in hand and a blank page of circles in front of you, sneaking a look around to see if your classmates are as nervous as you.

Spotting that lone ray of sun piercing through ominous clouds on a dreary day, reminding you of heaven and hope.

Reading words like these changes something in us. Maybe we long for the carefree days of childhood or breathe a sigh of relief that our days of standardized testing are over or glance out the window to see if the sun has come out again.

These reactions happen because God created us with powerful minds. We cannot help but respond to the words and images we take in. In an instant our brains turn these little black marks on a page into thoughts—thoughts that become the words we speak, the actions we take, and the feelings and desires we may or may not want. The thoughts we allow into our minds and the way we respond to them will determine how we live. If we are children of God and desire to give Him glory through a life of obedience and Christlikeness, we must learn to think in obedient, Christlike ways. A merely outward show of righteousness is not what God desires from us; He wants to make us new from the inside out, and that includes the mind.

What Is the Mind?

When most people today think of the mind, they automatically think of the brain, the physical location where thought takes place. But the mind is more than the brain. Rob Moll describes the difference:

The brain is the physical material that scientists can observe. It is the collection of neurons firing back and forth, the chemicals that lubricate those cellular interactions, and the blood flowing to keep it all working. In contrast, the mind is what can't be seen on an MRI or through any other tool of science. The mind is the collection of thoughts and feelings carried by those cells and chemicals. It is our sense of meaning and purpose, our desires and rationalizations. The brain is like the apparatus upon which the mind works.¹

Before the days of MRIs and modern scientific tools, the people of the Bible would not have associated the mind with the brain. They would have associated it with the heart because for them, the heart referred to the whole of the inner person—including the mind, the will, and the emotions.² This means that the heart was where every thought, every choice, and every feeling came from.³ A. Craig Troxel writes, “The mind, the desires, and the will are distinct functions of the heart, but they are not separate or unrelated. They constantly influence and relate to one another. This is the way the heart was meant to operate—with knowledge, affection, and volition working with each other.”⁴

1. Rob Moll, *What Your Body Knows about God: How We Are Designed to Connect, Serve and Thrive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 22.

2. *Strong's Concordance*, s.v., “*lēbāb*,” accessed March 17, 2021, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?strongs=H3824>; and Philip H. Towner, “Mind/Reason,” in *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), accessed May 8, 2020, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/mind-reason.html>.

3. Michael Barrett, “Conversion: Command and Response” (sermon, Heritage Reformed Congregation, Grand Rapids, Mich., December 2, 2018), <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=121181655476621>.

4. A. Craig Troxel, *With All Your Heart: Orienting Your Mind, Desires, and Will Toward Christ* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2020), 47.

This sounds strange to us because when we hear the word *heart*, we tend to think of how we feel, not how we think. For example, when we say something like “follow your heart,” we are talking about acting in a way that is based on feelings. So when we read about the heart in the Bible, we must be careful not to let our cultural context influence us too much. We must remember that when it comes to the heart, thinking and choosing are just as much a part of the heart as feeling. Troxel adds, “It may surprise you that out of all the times that the Hebrew word for ‘heart’ appears in the Old Testament, our intellectual and rational functions are most often in view. What modern people would attribute to the head or to the brain, Scripture applies to the heart.”⁵

To say that someone has a new heart means that because God has worked in her, she is thinking, choosing, and feeling in a new way—one that is more aligned with how God thinks, chooses, and feels. The *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* further explains the connection between the heart and mind: “The heart is connected with thinking: As a person ‘thinketh in his heart, so is he’ (Prov. 23:7). To ponder something in one’s heart means to consider it carefully (Luke 1:66; 2:19). ‘To set one’s heart on’ is the literal Hebrew that means to give attention to something, to worry about it (1 Sam. 9:20). To call to heart (mind) something means to remember something (Isa. 46:8). All of these are functions of the mind, but are connected with the heart in biblical language.”⁶

So as we discuss the mind, we must remember that it is a part of the heart as the Bible understands it. Remember the close connection between the mind, the will, and the emotions. While we can speak and think of them separately, they are so interconnected that if there is a change in one, there must necessarily be a change in the others.

5. Troxel, *With All Your Heart*, 26.

6. *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 719–20.

What Is a Renewed Mind?

When I sit on the floor with my kids on my lap and open the book *Madeline*, the first words we read are, “In an old house...” Without even needing to look at the page, I recall the next words, “in Paris that was covered in vines.”⁷ In fact, I don’t need to open the book to bring those words to mind. Even as I sit here and type “in an old house” I can’t help but fill in the rest of the sentence. Before I was a mom, an old house might have made me think of estate sales and classic wood floors, but it would not have triggered thoughts of Paris and vines. This is because at that point, I had not read *Madeline* many times.

We all experience this in different ways. A song or a smell or a line of poetry triggers a specific memory or piece of information. At a different stage in life, the same song or smell or line would have triggered something different or nothing at all. The input is the same, but because of a change in how our minds think, the output is different. You might say that our minds have been renewed.

But these are only minuscule examples of mind renewal. When the Bible talks about the renewing of our minds, it means something far more grand and glorious than recalling a line of a children’s book. Renewing of the mind is the work of the Holy Spirit to renovate, or completely change for the better,⁸ the mind of the true Christian. This renewing of the mind is part of sanctification, which the Westminster Shorter Catechism defines in question 35 as “the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.” If we are true Christians, we are in the process of being sanctified, so our minds should begin to think different and more holy thoughts than they did before we were saved. Simply put, we have a new way of thinking.

7. Ludwig Bemelmans, *Madeline* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 1.

8. *Strong’s Concordance*, s.v., “*anakainōsis*,” accessed February 2, 2021, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=G342&t=NKJV>.

Before God saves and starts His renewing work, He is in none of the unbeliever's thoughts (Ps. 10:4). When there are no thoughts of God—no glorifying Him, thanking Him, or knowing Him—then all thoughts are futile, the heart is darkened, and God gives over to a debased mind and to a way of life that is not according to His word (Rom. 1:21, 28). This was often the case for the Israelites (Ps. 81:11–12), and it is the case for many people today. Unbelievers are increasingly conformed to this world (Rom. 12:2) because they are not thinking of God and He is not renewing their minds.

But (praise God!) He does work in the minds and lives of believers, and a key difference is in our thoughts. According to David Saxton, “Psalm 1 clearly distinguishes between the path of those who are wicked and godly. The key dividing line is one’s thinking, reasoning, and meditation. This is because these inevitably dictate one’s behavior.”⁹ When unrighteous people forsake their own thoughts and ways and seek God instead, He promises that He will have mercy and abundantly pardon (Isa. 55:6–7).

What does this change of thinking look like in practical daily life? Every day, we are faced with input in the form of information and circumstances. As the Spirit renews our minds, how we react to the information and circumstances changes. Our minds react with different, more holy thoughts than before. Because we are thinking in a different way, our lives show a transformed output of words, actions, and feelings. What once may have produced delight (for example, gossip or sexual sin) begins to produce disgust because we are beginning to think more about how much God hates sin and less about the short-lived pleasure we might receive from the sin. What once sent us into turmoil and seeking distraction (for example, sickness or inconvenience) begins to send us to our heavenly Father in prayer because we are beginning to understand the joy and benefits of prayer and that there are no joy and benefits from other sources of help to which we have turned in the past. What once bored us (for

9. David W. Saxton, *God's Battle Plan for the Mind: The Puritan Practice of Biblical Meditation* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 101.

example, the Bible or Christian conversation) begins to enthrall us because we are beginning to place more value on eternal, spiritual life than we place on temporal, physical life. The input is the same but our minds have changed, and so the output—what we say and do and feel in response—has changed.

This does not mean our thought life will be perfectly holy the instant we are saved—perfection will not be ours until heaven (1 John 3:2). It also does not mean our thought life will be automatically and effortlessly holy. As we'll see throughout this book, renewal of the mind happens as we live in obedience to Scripture and the Holy Spirit, which is not always easy. But we can be greatly encouraged that renewal is certain because God promises that He completes the work He begins (Phil. 1:6). He *will* transform us, and He will do it by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2).

Why Does My Mind Need to Be Renewed?

When Adam and Eve were created in the image of God, everything about them, including their minds, was very good. Everything they naturally thought, said, did, felt, and desired aligned with what God thought, said, did, felt, and desired. They were holy, which nineteenth-century minister J. C. Ryle describes as “the habit of being of one mind with God...hating what He hates—loving what He loves—and measuring everything in this world by the standard of His Word.”¹⁰ They did not need to struggle against corrupt thoughts or unholy desires because they had been created in His image and were in perfect communion with Him (Gen. 1:27, 31).

But then something happened that broke this perfect alignment. Satan entered the garden in the form of a serpent and spoke words to Eve—words that she *listened* to, that made her begin to think differently than she had thought before. While listening to the serpent, she *spoke* a half-truth about what God's command to her and Adam had been. She began to *think* that God might be lying and that He

10. J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1956), 34–38.

was keeping something good from her (Gen. 3:1–5). Because she was thinking in this way, she *saw* that the fruit on the tree looked good and delightful, and she began to believe that it might make her wise, like the serpent had said. Everything she heard, said, thought, and saw led to what she *did* next—she took the fruit, ate the fruit, and gave the fruit to Adam (v. 6).

As the serpent had promised, Adam’s and Eve’s eyes were indeed opened after they ate the fruit, and they did know good and evil, but the knowledge did not make them more like God. It made them less like God. Their eyes had been opened to their nakedness (Gen. 3:7). Their actions had led to *feelings*—of shame, fear, and guilt. They were no longer in communion with God. Their *desire* was to hide from God (vv. 8–13).

Adam and Eve and the whole of the human race had been forever changed by what they had done. There was no way for us to get back to who we were created to be—no way, that is, unless God made a way. “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us” (Eph. 2:4) did make a way. The way turned out to be a person, and His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus was born as a baby in order to grow up and do what Adam had not been able to do—live a life that was perfectly aligned with God in everything He thought, said, did, felt, and desired.

Not only does Jesus provide a perfect example of how we should think and live but He also died on the cross, rose again, and ascended into heaven to provide a way for us to be saved from our sins, renewed in our minds, and transformed in our lives. God promises that to believe on Jesus alone for salvation is to be saved (Acts 16:31), and to be saved is to begin the challenging, beautiful, hopeful journey of sanctification. In sanctification, the Holy Spirit works in our minds and hearts as we grow in knowledge and obedience to make us more like Jesus.

Sanctification is such a hopeful journey because we already know the ending. We know that when we finally see Jesus face-to-face, we will be like Him (1 John 3:2)! We will never again have to struggle against sinful thoughts and their tragic results in our lives.

This hope, this knowledge of how our story ends (or should we say, how our story really begins?), is the evidence of what we can't see yet with our eyes (Heb. 11:1), the motivation to keep on running the race no matter what (12:1), and the energy to love others and to love God above all (Mark 12:30–31). One day, in a state of perfection and glory, we will look back on the light, momentary afflictions we are currently journeying through and be able to say not just with faith but with eyes that see clearly, “God worked all things together for our good [see Rom. 8:28] and His glory [see Isa. 43:7]!”

Who Renews My Mind?

We know now what a renewed mind is and why our minds need to be renewed, but we still need to explore the question of who renews our minds. Is it me, or is it God? How does my responsibility interact with God's sovereignty? Let's try to answer these questions by studying the story of Jericho.

God gave one of the most unusual battle plans in history to Joshua after the Israelites had entered Canaan. The obstacle before them was the walled city of Jericho. God told Joshua, “I have given Jericho into your hand” (Josh. 6:2) and then explained that all the Israelite men of war were to march around the city one time for six days, then seven times on the seventh day. During the final march around the city, the priests were to blow their trumpets, the men of war were to shout, and the city walls were to fall down.

This battle plan was not standard because it was not logical if we think of it in human terms. Merely marching around a city with trumpets and shouts doesn't make its walls fall down, and yet the walls did fall when the Israelites marched. It was clearly God's power that made Jericho tumble to the ground, but it was also God who told the Israelites to march. Could He have conquered Jericho on His own, without the people marching? Yes, He is all-powerful, and there are times when He did conquer without any effort on the part of the Israelites (2 Kings 7:5). But would He have made the walls fall down if the Israelites had not obeyed?

The answer comes in the next chapter. With Joshua's fame spreading through the land of Canaan after the defeat of Jericho, the Israelites thought they would easily win their next battle against Ai, but they were sorely defeated. The reason for their defeat? One man, Achan, had disobeyed God by taking some of the spoil from Jericho. God told Joshua explicitly that because of the sin, the Israelites could not stand before their enemies (Josh. 7:11–12).

Had Israel disobeyed God at Jericho too, it seems that the walls would not have fallen down. The pattern of historical events throughout the Bible shows that God wants our obedience more than He wants a "good outcome." His promises are often if-then statements: if you do this, then that will happen. At the same time, the Bible makes it clear that it is the Holy Spirit who works in our hearts so that we can obey in the first place. Back at Jericho, it wasn't the marching itself that made the walls fall. Yet without trust in God, trust that was given by God, trust that was made evident by the marching, it is likely that God would not have caused the walls to fall. Hebrews 11:30 says, "By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they were encircled for seven days." God works through the faith and obedience of His people to accomplish the work He wants to do, which involves far more than conquered cities.

This concept is crucial as we consider how God transforms us by the renewing of our minds. We don't renew our minds by ourselves, but God through His Holy Spirit renews us (Titus 3:5) and causes fruit to grow in our lives (Gal. 5:22–23). It is also God who gives specific instructions in the Bible about how we are to think, look, listen, speak, act, feel, and desire. Could He sanctify us on His own, without our obedience? He has the power to do anything. But does He sanctify us if we do not obey? It is not our obedience that causes sanctification, but without trust in God that is made evident by our obedience, God does not work out His sanctification within us. He uses our obedience, worked in us by His Holy Spirit, to accomplish the work He wants to do.

So who is responsible for renewing your mind? Who does the work? Is it you? Yes, in the same way that it was the Israelites who

conquered Jericho by walking around it. Is it God? Yes, in the same way that it was God who conquered Jericho by giving the command to walk, providing the power to walk, and making the walls tumble down after the Israelites had walked. God holds all the power, but He still commands us to obey.

How Is My Mind Renewed?

When the Israelites walked around Jericho, they were not doing so as robots, programmed to march around the city. God had given them a command, and they could choose whether they would obey it or not. In this case they chose to obey, and their choice had an effect. The walls of Jericho came tumbling down.

Like the Israelites, we possess the ability to use our minds to make choices, even to choose how we think. God has given us many commands in the Bible, and we can choose to obey by the power of the Spirit. And like the Israelites walking around Jericho, we experience both visible and invisible effects as a result of our choices.

One of these effects is that the physical matter that makes up our brains actually changes over time based on what we learn, think about, experience, and do. Caroline Leaf writes, “As you think, you choose, and as you choose, you cause genetic expression to happen in your brain. This means you make proteins, and these proteins form your thoughts. Thoughts are real, physical things that occupy mental real estate.”¹¹ This is a concept called neuroplasticity, which “by definition means the brain is malleable and adaptable, changing moment by moment of every day. Scientists are finally beginning to see the brain as having renewable characteristics (as in Rom. 12:2).”¹² Rob Moll explains the idea further: “Our brains are always changing based on new experiences and new information. Neurons form new ‘arms’ called dendrites and axons and connect to one another, making physical changes in the brain that allow us to recall a memory or information. Change doesn’t come easily, but as we establish new

11. Leaf, *Switch On Your Brain*, 32.

12. Leaf, *Switch On Your Brain*, 22.

patterns of thinking and habits, the neural pathways that were once new and difficult grow firmer and more well traveled.”¹³

This is both sobering and encouraging. It is sobering because what we might view as stray thoughts or inconsequential decisions have great impact on our physical brains and therefore on our minds. It is encouraging because it means God created us in a way that allows for the possibility of renewal and sanctification and having the mind of Christ! We don’t have to stay stuck in sinful ruts of thinking. As Mark Kelderman observes, “Every day that passes, every time we open the Scriptures, we are not the same person. We have either progressed or regressed. There is no standing still in the spiritual life.”¹⁴

When the Holy Spirit helps us to grow in knowledge of (Col. 3:10) and obedience to (Rom. 6:16) God and His word, we are changed. The way we think is changed, and the physical matter that makes up our brains is changed. And God is the one who designed it this way. God designed us so that everything we think forms us into who we are (Prov. 23:7). It is no coincidence, then, that He gave us commands like “think on these things” (Phil. 4:8 KJV) and “set your mind” (Col. 3:2; see also Rom. 8:5–8), which He works through to change us for the better, to make us think and act more like Christ if we will only obey them. It is no coincidence that in the Bible He gave us knowledge of Himself and the world that is meant to form the way we think so that it aligns more and more with how God thinks (Col. 3:9–10). It is no coincidence that He puts us in circumstances to test how we will react (Deut. 8:2; Jer. 17:9–10)—circumstances that make it evident whether we are really trusting God and loving our neighbor.

If we were robots, God would not use commands, knowledge, and circumstances to work change in our hearts. A robot only needs reprogramming by its creator. But we are not robots. Our loving

13. Moll, *What Your Body Knows about God*, 157.

14. Mark Kelderman, “Grow in Grace” (sermon, Heritage Reformed Congregation, Grand Rapids, Mich., October 28, 2018), <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=102718213810>.

Creator did not program us but designed us, and we can be sure that the Creator who has designed us so precisely also has a purpose to work together every command, every piece of knowledge, and every circumstance for the good of those who love Him—to conform our way of thinking not to the world but to the mind of Christ (Rom. 8:28–29; Phil. 2:5).

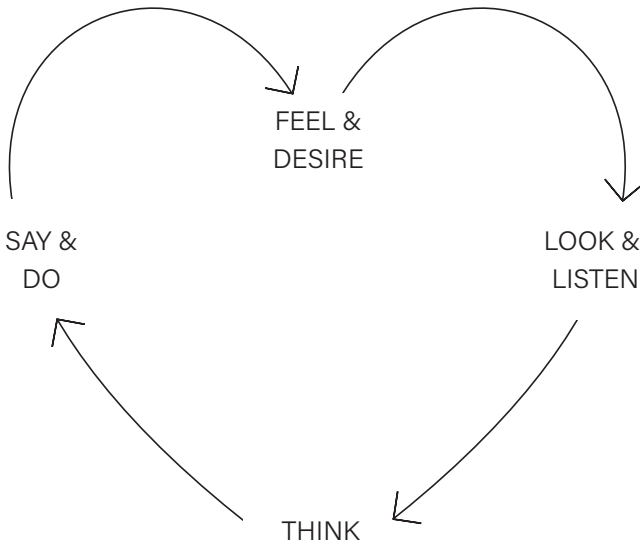
What Changes When My Mind Is Renewed?

To be conformed to the image of Christ, to have His mind in me, sounds wonderful, but what does it really mean? What changes when we start thinking like Christ? What difference does it make to have a mind that is being renewed?

The difference is total transformation (Rom. 12:2). When we begin to think differently, we also begin to look, listen, speak, act, feel, and desire differently. Our thoughts impact every other part of our lives. In order to really grasp this, we need to break down what goes on in our hearts.

Remember that the heart is the whole of the inner person. It includes the mind (how we think), the will (how we choose what to look at, listen to, say, and do), and the emotions (how we feel and what we desire). Each of these components influences the others. A. Craig Troxel emphasizes this: “Our desires and our will significantly influence our mind, just as our thinking affects our desires and will. God shaped our hearts in such a way that our thinking functions properly only if our desires and will are right with God.”¹⁵ To better grasp how these components of the heart work together, look at the picture on the next page. To draw the heart this way is to oversimplify it because the components are so intertwined in our inner person that they are really inseparable. Each component should really have an arrow drawn to and from every other component. But seeing it simplified in this way will help us think through what the impact of each component is.

15. Troxel, *With All Your Heart*, 57–58.



Because of the way the world thinks, it likes to start at the top of this drawing. It tells us that what we feel and desire is “our truth” and that we should base our choices and our thinking on that. When we do, what we “naturally” (that is, sinfully) feel and desire becomes the basis of what we look at and listen to. Our choice of information that we take in through shows, movies, social media, news, books, and music is based on what we feel like watching and hearing. Our thoughts are shaped by all this (often worldly) information that we are taking in, conforming us to the world without us even realizing it. As our thoughts are conformed, we begin to speak and act more and more like the world. This feels good and right to us because it aligns with our “natural” (sinful) feelings and desires, and the cycle continues.

In Scripture, God offers a very different way of life to follow. Sinclair Ferguson explains it this way:

God made men and women capable of thinking, willing, and feeling. In the divine design, our thinking was meant to be informed, shaped and governed by his revelation. We were