

# Minds Are for Renewing

Romans 12:1-8

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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We've reached the second sermon in my four part "What I Did on My Sabbatical" September series.

This morning, I want to share about a conference I attended called "Water to Wine." But the story of *what* this was all about and *why* I attended begins with a *who*.

Brian Zahnd is a name you've heard me quote periodically in my sermons (if you've been paying attention). He is the pastor of Word of Life Church, which is a big church in a small city called St. Joseph, MO, which is slightly smaller than Lethbridge and about forty-five minutes north of Kansas City.

He's in his mid-fifties now and he has pastored this church, I believe, since his early twenties!

I've been listening to his sermons every week for at least the last two years.

I've read nearly all of his books, which include *Farewell to Mars*, *Beauty Will Save the World*, *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*, *Water to Wine*. He also has one coming out shortly which will be called *Postcards from Babylon*.

He's a pastor and a writer that I respect and admire.

Why?

On the surface of it, we have very little in common, whether it's our church context or our personal stories.

He is the pastor of a megachurch in the heartland of Christian middle America. I am the pastor of a small church in what is increasingly becoming a post-Christian Canada.

The differences in the sizes of our respective churches hit home on my second day of the conference when we gathered for morning prayers in what they call “The Upper Room.” It’s a marvelous space designed to look like an old church, with stone and wooden beams. The room they use for small prayer services would have easily accommodated our weekly attendance.

He comes out of a Pentecostal charismatic background and this shows in the way he preaches—he has a very distinctive speaking style, lots of flourish and drama. He is natural orator. I suppose it won’t surprise many of you to hear that this isn’t exactly my story. I am a more natural writer than speaker, and, well, I am not exactly prone to charismatic flourishes of oration (I’m sorry if this disappoints you ☺).

So why do I connect with his preaching?

Well, his story is a very interesting one. For the first twenty years or so of his pastoral career, he was a roaring success story. He preached a very conservative, very nationalistic, very militaristic version of Christianity. He did it in compelling ways.

His church grew and grew and grew. At its peak, I believe weekly attendance was around five thousand people.

Brian Zahnd was named one of the top 25 mega church pastors in the USA (apparently, there are lists for such things south of the border). He was a superstar in the conservative evangelical world.

And then, in his mid-forties, he had something like a mid-life crisis. Or, more accurately, a mid-faith crisis.

Even though he looked successful by every external standard, the gospel he was preaching and the faith he was living felt thin.

He knew that he could keep coasting on autopilot and the church would continue to be a “success.” But he was increasingly unsure how much *any* of what he was doing had to do with Jesus and what he taught.

He never stopped believing in Jesus, so it wasn’t like he was on the verge of walking away from it all. But he had this sense that his faith and preaching lacked depth, lacked connection to the historic church, and most importantly wasn’t faithful to the person and work of Jesus.

He is fond of saying that he was getting tired of “easy-cheesy cotton-candy Christianity” that was all about getting people to make a “decision” for Jesus and then get on with the business of being good patriotic American consumers. He was getting tired of preaching a faith that was all about what happened after you die and had little to do with *this* life.

Another way he puts it is this: “I was in Cana and the wine had run out. I needed Jesus to perform a miracle.”

Perhaps you have had similar experiences along the way in the life of faith.

So, he did what any rational person would do in such circumstances and went on a twenty-two day fast.

And would you believe it? He heard from God!

He emerged out the other side with a renewed and revitalized faith—one that prioritized the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, one that emphasized peace and justice and mystery and not the super-certain Americanized Christianity he had spent the first twenty years of his life preaching. One that sought to draw people by the beauty of Christ, rather than fear of believing the wrong things.

This led to some changes.

He started to introduce liturgies and practices from the ancient church.

He instituted weekly communion as a way of emphasizing that faith isn’t just about what we believe in our heads but what we do, and that Christ is encountered in more than just ideas (he jokes that he just started doing a different kind of altar call!).

He stopped preaching politics.

He started to pray differently, approaching it less as “getting God to do what we want” than as one of the ways in which human beings are properly formed in the image of Christ. He now has “prayer schools” that he runs several times a year.

He started heavily prioritizing the four gospels in his preaching and reading the rest of the Bible through the lens of Jesus.

**In short, he did a pretty massive course correction in the middle of life, the middle of faith, and in the context of a very successful, very conservative American megachurch.**

He calls it his journey from water to wine.

You can probably imagine what happened. Some people trusted him and continued along with him on the journey. Many did not. I can’t remember exact numbers, but I believe over half of his congregation left.

Some have come back, most haven't. At the conference he shared very openly about the struggles—financial, relational, and otherwise—that they have had since that moment in 2004.

But he keeps pressing on. And he has become something of a beacon of light for those who find themselves in a similar place where the wine has run out and they need a miracle.

I've just sketched the broad outlines of the story. If you want to read the whole thing, I recommend his biography *Water to Wine*.

As luck would have it, I met Brian Zahnd earlier this year in, of all places, Bethlehem.

He was one of the speakers at the Christ at the Checkpoint conference that our MCC Alberta delegation attended in Bethlehem (which you will hear more about next week). In fact, seeing his name on the list of speakers was one of the reasons I was intrigued to go on this tour again. The rest of the MCC folks teased me about being his “groupie.” 😊

We only spoke briefly. I thanked him for his preaching and for the encouragement of his story. He and his wife were very gracious. And they encouraged me to come to visit their church.

So, that's how I found myself hopping in a rented Hyundai and driving for two days through Montana, South Dakota, and parts of Wyoming and Nebraska and landing in a megachurch in the middle of a cornfield in sweltering hot Missouri one week in late June.

And it was a good conference.

We had engaging sessions where we talked about faith, church leadership, worship, prayer, the role of art and imagination. We talked about better ways of reading the Bible. We talked about prioritizing voices on the margins rather than the center. We heard more about the story of Word of Life Church.

I left with a few misgivings. I think that this version of American Christianity is still too heavily dependent upon individual pastors (I heard people anxiously asking where they could find other “Brian Zahnd type churches” in their cities).

There was at times a kind of self-congratulatory vibe at the conference—a sort of, “Thank God I'm not like those fundamentalists anymore.”

But overall, I left encouraged. I was glad I went.

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So why have I shared all this with you? What does it have to do with you and me in Lethbridge, AB? What relevance does it have for your faith and mine?

I think that Brian Zahnd's story is a kind of outworking of Romans 12:2, which is the verse that guided me as I reflected on this experience.

*“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

I think he would say that for the first twenty years of his pastoral career, he conformed to the pattern of the world he lived in. He preached the American flag, American individualism, and American consumerism.

His mind—and the mind of his church—needed to be transformed and renewed. And he had the courage to walk down this road, even, at times, in the face of great difficulty.

His journey is not everyone's nor should it be.

**Each of us, as individuals and churches, must ask what renewal and transformation and not being conformed to the pattern of the world looks like in our context.**

In our Canadian Mennonite context, it might look less like leaving behind conservative, consumeristic, individualistic Christianity and more like leaving behind a kind of thin liberal moralism that has little to say about our personal faith or hope in the living truth of historic Christian belief.

Or it might be somewhere in the middle.

But implicit in this statement of Paul's is that our minds are not only capable of being renewed, but **that this is the task of the life of faith.**

“Life is a journey.” This sounds so cliché. But like most clichés, it also contains some truth.

And it's *certainly* true for the life of faith.

Faith is not a package that we accept or a contract that we sign and then forget about it.

Brian Zahnd talks often about asking himself a question that seems silly on the face of it, but which I suspect many of us might recognize.

“Why would I assume that I had God and faith all figured out at seventeen (when he decided to follow Jesus)?”

Indeed.

We certainly don't assume seventeen-year-olds have it all figured out in other areas of their lives (sorry, Claire 😊), but sometimes it seems like when it comes to faith, people think that the form of faith that they first embraced is the truest version and non-negotiable.

To rethink some things, to leave some things behind, to take up a few new understandings... in some circles, this is seen as capitulation or that your faith is somehow less authentic or true.

Romans 12 pokes a few holes in this. It reminds us that minds are for renewing.

We ought always to be in the process of testing, discerning, asking ourselves, "In what ways am I conforming to the pattern of this age? What do I need to walk away from in the process of ongoing transformation?"

And, more importantly, what ought I always to be walking *toward*? Our growth in the life of faith must always be in dialogue *with* and submission *to* Jesus Christ, always testing and discerning what the will of God is for our cultural moment.

This part is non-negotiable. This is something that we really should cling to, whether we're seventeen or ninety-seven or anywhere in between.

Many people are attracted to Brian Zahnd's story and his preaching because he offers them a lifeline out of American-type fundamentalism.

This may not be your story. It's not mine. I don't have the religious baggage that many people who attended the conference did.

I am attracted to his example because he remains laser-focused on Jesus—on his example, on his teaching, on what he has accomplished on our behalf, and on the hopeful future he holds before us.

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I've talked a lot *about* Brian Zahnd this morning. So I'm going to give him the last word in this sermon. This is from his biography, *Water to Wine*. He writes this after spending four days and forty-two miles on the "Jesus Trail," walking from Nazareth to Capernaum:

I've thought often about those four days on the Jesus Trail. It's an apt metaphor for what the Christian life is really like. It's not static. It's not standing still. It's not sitting in the same pew for fifty years. It's not grimly holding onto the same doctrinaire attitudes you held when you lived by the lies that life is black and white. The Christian life is a journey. It's a road. We have to walk it. Jesus' call to discipleship is always the same—"Follow me." It's presumed that we are going to be on the move. We're going somewhere. The

Christian life really is following in the ancient footsteps of Jesus through a modern world. We have to find our way by looking for the subtle blazes that mark the way. On the Jesus Trail we did lose our way a time or two, forcing us to retrace our steps and find out where we'd gone wrong. **But that's exactly what it's like walking the Jesus way through life. We make mistakes. We correct our mistakes. We press on.**

If the journey has its proper effect, we learn to let go of our fears and walk through life as open souls.<sup>1</sup>

Amen.



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<sup>1</sup> Brian Zahnd, *Water to Wine: Some of My Journey* (Spello Press, 2016), 185.