

Change

“ . . . **be transformed** . . . ” (Romans 12:2) Transformation! It’s what young people marching in the streets demand. It’s what Marxists in our institutions desire and commit to bring about. It’s what everyone who takes a few minutes from the routines of life to reflect on things realizes is what’s needed. We need transformation because increasingly there’s corruption in business, in government, in education, in science . . . in every institution and endeavor. Lies. Violence. Sexual lusts. Greed. Contempt for others if not indifference. Narcissistic love. Power-lust. Hatreds. And more. The list of vices that characterize our world today is getting longer by the day. Popular today is the allegation of “systemic racism.” That’s nonsense. The racism isn’t in any “system,” it’s in the hearts or minds of people. Marxists suppose that it’s capitalism and society’s bourgeois ideas, beliefs and values that are the problem, so if our society can simply be transformed economically and politically, we’ll have the ideal world. That’s nonsense. We suppose that if only a different Party were in control of Washington. . . or, If only we had better leadership . . . or, If only our education system were different . . . things would be better. Nonsense and more nonsense. It’s *people* who need to be transformed. Because we humans are corrupt, thoroughly corrupt. Every one of us.

What we too easily miss when reading the Bible that the goal of the Bible front to back, beginning to end, is our transformation. In theology, it’s called sanctification. A more recent term in evangelicalism is “spiritual formation.” Scripture uses terms such as repentance, godliness, righteousness, or Christ-likeness, or “putting off the old man and putting on the new.” Whatever term we use, however we describe it, we need to be changed, transformed.

God gave His Word, the Old Testament Scriptures, to the people of Israel so that they would be transformed. Its work however was only preliminary. In time, Christ came, and He came to thoroughly change us. That’s God’s goal, it’s the purpose of Scripture and the reason for the gift of the Spirit. It’s what Christianity is all about. The mission of the church is to spread the Gospel so that people everywhere can believe in Christ and also be changed. Yes, there’s hell to be rescued from. Certainly. But 99% of the New Testament has nothing to do with rescue from hell, but with our transformation. Yes, our sanctification occurred when we believed in Christ, having been obtained for us by His blood that was shed on the cross (1 Cor 6:11, and others); and, Yes, our sanctification will be complete in the future when we’ll be changed into His likeness (Phil 3:21, and others). But the Christian life isn’t passively waiting for heaven. Rather, it’s continually progressing toward greater and greater personal holiness, righteous living and service to God. God makes an outrageous, radically life-changing call to us in the Gospel: “Be transformed!”

Our natural world needs also to be changed, and God, who created our natural world can do that easily enough. And He will one future day. But changing humans is entirely different. Only God can change us, but we have to want it and work at it. And there’s the problem.

Of course, unbelievers don’t want to be changed. They’re in love with sin, and they fully intend to remain in sin. A few unbelievers here and there have intellectual problems that keep them from Christ. But the overwhelming majority of unbelievers reject the Gospel precisely because they know that they would have to change their lives. And that they don’t want to do. So no transformation there. What’s astonishing is that *believers* don’t want to change either.

A hundred years ago, the Danish theologian/philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, found the state of Christianity in the Western world appalling. He called Christianity “Established Christendom” because it kept believers passive, superficial and unengaged. If he could see it now!!! The disconnect between God’s expectations of us, written down in the Word for all to see, and how we actually live is simply scandalous. We keep God on a shelf except for two hours on Sunday and if or when some distressing situation arises; the rest of the time is our own to live as we please. We suppose that taking the trouble to go to church, singing a couple of hymns, and enduring a homily from the pulpit is “worship.” And that that satisfies God enough so we can ignore His call to be transformed. *We* want to be in control of our Christianity, *we* decide how Christianity is expressed. We don’t murder or steal. We believe in Christ. We substitute knowing something about the Bible for living out the Bible. And we suppose that God is pleased with us.

What exactly does God expect as our transformation? “**If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live**” (Romans 8:13). *You* must do it, Paul writes. It’s not the Spirit who is commanded to put to death the deeds of the body, *we* are. “**Therefore my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling . . .**” (Phil 2:12-13). By obedience to the Word of God we express our salvation, we work at our sanctification, and it’s done in the watchful presence of God, before

whom we should tremble with fear. We're to **"make holiness perfect in the fear of God by purifying ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit"** (2 Corinth 7:1). What does "everything" include? Everything. Commitment, self-discipline and work on our part are needed, thus Peter writes we need to **"make every effort"** to grow in godliness (2 Peter 1:5). What God expects of us is perfection, maturity, conformity to His will, **"being worthy of the Lord, pleasing Him in every way, and bearing fruit in every good work"** (Colossians 1:10). We're to think God's thoughts, love as God loves, desire what God desires, live as Christ lived, and be holy as God is holy.

Why are we to be changed? I suggest at least these six reasons: (1) It shows how much we love God. **"If you love me, you will keep my commandments"** (John 14:15). We become like those we love. If there's no love for someone, there's no desire to mimic that person. If we love God because of His perfections, such as His grace, then we'll want also to live showing grace. His selflessness? Then our selflessness. Etc.

(2) We must be god-like to be with God. No one with a sin nature can be in His holy presence. If we desire God to be active and present in our lives (and we should supremely desire it), we need to be sanctified. God isn't fooled by a thin veneer of religiosity; He wants to see the real thing (see #5 below).

(3) Wanting to be transformed – and diligently working at it – is our way of worshiping God. Worship is worth-ship. What is God worth to us? The sacrifices we need to make to change ourselves in order to please Him? See Romans 12, which is all about worship.

(4) Our changed lives witness powerfully to those around us of the truth of salvation. Words mean little in these modern times, but a changed life, a life visibly being lived for Christ, can deeply affect others. Not always, of course, for Satan uses cynicism to hold his people in a tight grip. But a changed life is a powerful testimony that God is real.

(5) Our changed life demonstrates that we've been born again. The writer of Hebrews subtly warns his readers saying they were to persist in good works: **"in order to make your hope sure"** (6:11), that is, so that the ultimate salvation they desire will be certain, will be actually realized. And again, **"You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you receive what he has promised"** (Heb 10:36). John writes, **"We know that we have come to know Him if we keep His commands"** (1 John 2:3) and, **"This is how we know we are in Him: Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did"** (2:5-6).

(6) The most compelling reason is this, we need to take responsibility for our sins. Transformation is essential because it shows our awareness of sin and the awfulness of it. It shows our awareness of God and His fearful holiness, and our awareness of the world and its deadly influence on us. The reason the Son had to leave heaven and take on humanity, suffer the agonies of crucifixion and death, was because of our sinfulness. The great cosmic issue that frustrated God's creation intent was the entry of sin. Sin alienates us from God. So by demanding we repent and be transformed into God's likeness reverses the issue of sin. This is not to argue that we repent of sin to be saved. Salvation is by grace by trusting in the atoning work of Christ. But once we're saved, and we realize what it is we're saved from, what we're saved for, and how sinful we are, we should want more than anything to depart from our sinfulness and be like God.

John couldn't make it clearer how anyone is saved: **"Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life"** (John 5:24), **"The work of God is this, to believe in the one he has sent"** (6:29), **"I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved"** (10:9), and **"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die"** (11:25). And of course John 3:16. There is only the need to believe in Jesus in order to be saved and to gain eternal life. Salvation is a gift, it comes by the grace of God. He loves His human creatures and wants to have them – lots of them – in His presence in heaven forever. But . . . Salvation brings with it responsibilities. It's inescapable.

The reason for salvation is not simply to escape hell. The reason for creation, and the reason for salvation, is to enjoy fellowship with the living, transcendent God, both now, in this life, and forever. To do that, we have to be transformed into totally new, God-like persons. That's why in John 3:3 Jesus referred to being "born again." Christ went to the cross to die for us and was raised **"in order that . . . we too may live a new life"** (Romans 6:4). Established Christendom knows nothing of this. It wants to keep a dangerous God in a cage, attempting to palliate Him with token religiosity. But that

can't be done. We have God's Word to know His expectations. If we're saved by trust in Christ, we need to be responsible and faithful in meeting God's expectations of us, to His glory. But there's a wrinkle here.

There's a huge and serious problem with this entire matter of change. In the West, in Established Christendom, society is civilized. It has taken on Christian or biblical attributes, such as kindness, charity, compassion, tolerance of others, generosity, mercy, honesty, and so on. Believers in the early church came out of a deeply pagan culture. So believers in that early church, adopting biblical values and being transformed, became counter-cultural. But now, after 2,000 years of the church's penetration of the western world, those biblical values and ideals have become "cultural." This means that it's easy for a believer in America today to be "Christian" just by adopting society's inherent values. American believers, participating in Established Christendom, are "Christianized" just by growing up and living in our society – not by the Word of God, not by the empowerment of the Spirit, not by willing to be changed. Thus there's little difference discernable between believers and unbelievers. Both live "Christian" lives. Both say, "I don't steal. I don't kill. I don't tell lies. I don't beat my wife. I live a clean life." Unbelievers see no sin in their lives; they see themselves as "good" people. They see no need for Christ.

But American society is now increasingly pagan. It's deliberately, progressively throwing off biblical values. So the difference between the life of the believer, whose values and lifestyle (should) derive from the Word, and the life of the unbeliever, whose values and lifestyle are (necessarily) those of the pagan culture in which he's embedded, will (or should) become stark. Once again, the church would be "counter-cultural." Participants in Established Christendom, who have simply absorbed biblical values from the prevailing culture, will be (in many ways, already are) in real jeopardy. Will they choose to hold to biblical values because it's God's will? That may prove to be exceedingly difficult as pressure mounts to either conform to our pagan culture or suffer loss. Or will they "go with the flow" and simply adopt society's new paganism as their lifestyle and their values, as they had been doing all along?

Let me illustrate. At the time of Christ, someone who was offended would of course want to get even. That was the normal thing to do in that pagan (often savage) culture. But Christ said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." And that's what believers in the early church, transformed by Christ's words and teachings, did. Most of us in America today don't have enemies. We've never had to even think about Matthew 5:43-48. But today, enemies of the church are gaining influence and confidence. What will believers do when threatened? Or actually harmed? Obey the Word or reach for a gun?

Wishful thinking can be dangerous if not deadly. Unbelievers who hold the fantasy of billions of years and evolution to avoid the demands God makes on us are self-deceived. The origins' narrative that modern science provides is wishful thinking more than it's science. Believers who hold the notion that God is entirely pleased with them because they believe in Christ, attend church, and are a "good" person are likewise engaged in wishful thinking.

Believers need to wake up to this reality, what the Word says about responsibilities, and *do something* about it. Established Christendom makes no demands, and surely that's why we embrace it. It seeks no change, and it provides no empowerment to change. Participating in Established Christendom simply doesn't cut it. God expects more, *far* more.

There is one thing that Established Christendom and civilized American society eschews, that's Gospel outreach. Polite people don't try to convert others to their religion! "It's intolerant, unloving, and arrogant to suppose your religion is superior to that of someone else." Society calls it "proselytizing," and the word is always uttered with a sneer. But the Word of God expects it of us. We **"belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God"** (Romans 7:4). Sharing Christ with others is our privilege and our calling; it's God's will for us. God doesn't want any of His creatures to have to be in hell, and neither should we. God can open hearts, if we just do our part of reaching out with the saving message of Christ. The Spirit will empower us to do it. We just have to do it.

Sharing the Gospel is exactly what each of us should commit to do, now and on-going. It's how we break free of being conformed to the world, break free of Established Christendom, and instead serve God and enjoy His presence and blessing. It's how we express our having been transformed by the Word of God. It's how, in this unique time we're in right now, we demonstrate that we're saved and sanctified.