



PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

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The concept of ‘transformation’ is not new; it is as old as the world of nature itself. A most frequently cited example is the caterpillar being transformed into the adult butterfly. Nonetheless, the worldwide popularity for transformation as one of life’s ideals is relatively recent. It is only in the last few decades that the pursuit of transformation has surged unprecedentedly. People across the world are seen overtly craving for a new life as they find their present lives deficient, meaningless and unfulfilling.

The extent and wide range of the quest

The quest for new life has swept the whole globe, both inside and outside the Church. As a result, the word ‘transformation’ becomes the ‘in’ word with a worldwide circulation, used in almost every arena of life, e.g. name of shops, title of publications, etc. The word is vivid and appeals to people immensely.

Proponents of transformation, be they from economic, social, political, or spiritual field, or behavioral science, label the word on their products, agendas, strategies, policies, programmes and projects respectively, advocating ‘transformation’ as the solution to human dilemma. They give the impression that their respective measures will take their customers from right where they are to where they should be. Much propaganda or something of this nature is publicized to lure people into thinking that personal transformation is attainable through human efforts alone, within the reach of everyone who passionately pursues it.

Simultaneously, believe it or not, hundreds of books and articles on the subject have literally flooded the market. In industrial field, the word ‘developmental’ is replaced by ‘transformational,’ a word that is regarded to be more significant; thus programmes and projects are depicted as transformational. In educational arena, advertisements such as “Read a book and be transformed”, “More than Excellent Education: Transformation” seem to say that if you want to make the grade, and be ahead of others, read the book or join the course designed for whosoever wish to move from failure to success, from insignificance to significance, from dishonour to honour. In the business world, there is offer for financial transformation: “Here is a total programme guaranteed to increase your company’s income

more significantly this year. The growth rate will increase from x% to y %.” Some development projects are termed transformational, although it is designed to improve merely the level of living, or to develop management or technical skills. There are many others which promise ‘you-feel-good’ or ‘you-look-good’ if you join their schemes or programmes of personal transformation, e.g. yoga, meditation and mystical experiences. Some try to change their lives by changing appearances, some by changing locations, and others, their careers. Consequently, we picture a variety of transformation offers on one hand and a frantic pursuit on the other. In some way, it looks as if the hope of some people has been revived, being offered a fresh breeze of optimism in their lives. In Christian circles, transformation projects have worked in some places.

Remarks on the current global quest

Several things can be said about the above. First, there is a variety of views on transformation. The word is used in a number of ways with different senses. It obviously means different things to different people. Getu is right when he says, “transformation is a value-loaded concept. As such, there will be no one absolute definition.”¹ Be that as it may, some understanding of the term is necessary in order to get to the heart of the Gospel.

Secondly, the world in which we live stands in need of transformation. The universal frenzied quest for it is a clear indication. People desperately yearn for answer to life’s disorders they are grappling with. It is indeed interesting to note how far some people will go in pursuit of an answer. However, many are not clear in their minds what they are really looking for. They simply try what they could grab hold of.

Thirdly, some believe that in their approach to modern men and women it would be better to leave out the words “God” and “Jesus Christ” and just talk about “the good life”. If God and Christ are left out, what is there? Nothing but humanism! Some of these transformational programmes have in fact strong humanist emphases. Many questions could be raised: Can personal transformation be brought about through sheer human system or works or thoughts alone? Since human designs always need adjusting and improving or refining as their designers learn, does it mean that our norm or paradigm or model of personal transformation needs changing? Can authentic personal transformation take place outside of God?

Fourthly, there is a wide range of transformation available in the market place. Indeed it is overwhelming. Many focus on one dimension of life only. Yet it is quite amazing that man should prefer the surface change or immediate problem solving, the limited possibility to the one that is comprehensive enough to meet man’s needs of the past, present and future. Also, many last only for a short while or a season. In short, these are stopgap transformations. People are doomed to spend their lives in the treatment of symptoms so long as they refuse

to get to the heart of the problem. They should deal with the cause, not merely effects.

Christian perspectives on personal transformation

The above global quest challenges us all the more to study the subject, to have a clear understanding, to live out and work out the transformation that salvation brings, so that we can share its essence when we are asked. Personal transformation is a matter of great concern which we cannot ignore. It is the spring of all the other transformations – family, church, society, economics, politics, nation and the world. If individual believers do not experience it and are unable to demonstrate the new life in Christ, how can the Church fulfill her role as the agent of change? George Barna says: “The Church is paralyzed by the absence of transformed leadership (*Christian lives*).”² (Italics mine). What then is the Christian understanding of personal transformation?

Central to the Christian belief in personal transformation is that *it is a movement in which all three persons in the Godhead are at work on our behalf*. This is in stark contrast to the marketplace’s notions of personal transformation. The Christian version has a strong divine emphasis. It is distinct from the rest in that it is essentially God’s own idea. He is the source and fountainhead of human personal transformation. It is His loving and perfect will that the life of man should be transformed, no matter how defaced the image *in* man has become. God has not finished with us yet. He sees not what we have been but what we can become. He has designed for man an entirely new sort of life and the way it will take place. He has the power to change our lives. Something is very wrong with human nature; no amount of human effort can change it but God can transform it. Sinful, inadequate man can be transformed.

However, this new manhood is not given automatically. To become the man God intended, we need to come to Him in His terms. We must be willing to accept His way. This is non-negotiable. It is not a debatable option. It is imperative that we adhere to it, for God is the Lord of all with His rights over all. He has made available in Christ Jesus a personal transformation that is of a totally different category, the only one of its kind. Therefore, personal transformation must be at the top of our agenda and our paramount conviction. Any other approach to it means that we run the risk of alienating ourselves from the good purposes of God. Not believing this would reveal a lack of faith, and if indeed our faith is lacking, well, no wonder we are not experiencing anything.

God did not come into the world and dropped a set of plans on us. His amazing master plan did not come to us cheaply. It cost God dearly. His only begotten Son died for our sin and for the world’s. Because of the work of His Son, personal transformation is now possible. Paul says: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17). Evil found no foothold in the life of Jesus. In His utter self-giving on the

cross, sin was defeated. By union with that one victorious life, we experience inner transformation – *Jesus as the life changer*. In our moral and spiritual struggle with sin, we do not stand helpless and struggle on our own. In Christ, our lives will be reversed from abnormalities to normality, from alienation from God to orientation towards Him, from dysfunctional to functional, from deformity to recreation and from brokenness to wholeness. Such work of transformation goes beyond the conversion experience although it begins with it.

Transformed by the Holy Spirit

For Paul, to be a Christian means experiencing inner transformation by the indwelling Spirit: “If a man does not possess the Spirit of Christ, he is no Christian” (Rom 8:9, *J.P. Phillips*). The indwelling of the Spirit is the secret of spiritual vitality. He works in us to make us more like Jesus. He is powerful, creative and never leaves anything as it was before. He gave birth to the Christian Church: a dozen apostles in Jerusalem and some other men and women around their nucleus were transformed into an outgoing, thrusting movement in a short time.

The Holy Spirit has taken up residence in us – those who accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, implanting in us the mind of Christ, and working through different personalities with styles that vary from person to person. If the Holy Spirit is capable of such activity, why wouldn't He dramatically and miraculously change people's thinking and behaviour which the Bible says urgently needed? The usual answer is, of course, that human beings have been given free will, and God would never use His power to change people who do not want to be changed.

Personal transformation means being actualizing our new distinctive identity as God's people

Personal transformation is, as spelt out in the Bible, being made into what God intends us to be, i.e. Christ's likeness (2 Cor 3:18), leading eventually to the formation of Christ's image in us (Gal 4:19). If the transformation is genuine, this Christlikeness advances, progresses and grows to its fullness. It does not stay the same as when it first begins. We grow daily, more and more to be Christlike. We grow to become Christ's persons, or God's people, the God-given new distinctive identity. We move from bearing the name to actualizing it in our daily lives. A speaker once said, “God loves you just the way you are, but He refuses to leave you that way. He wants you to be just like Jesus.”

God does not want us to live in mediocrity and beneath the standard He has set for mankind. This involves change: to be different from the world of self-interest, self-sufficiency and

self-assertion. When John the Baptist saw the crowds going after Jesus, he says, “He must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:30). Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Gal 2:20). This means self-concern should no longer be seen as our focus but God-concern which becomes the mark of what we say and do, to be noticed by others more and more. We do not exist for our own sake, nor do we exist for the sake of the holy, catholic and apostolic church. We exist for the sake of others and for the sake of God’s glory.

Christianity is Christ. In Him, we see Him ushering in a new age, a new creation, a new way of life, a new order, and a new kingdom, i.e. the Kingdom of God. In Him we see what humanity is designed to be. In His life and in His death we see love, service and faith to which we are called, and for which we were created. Above all, in His resurrection we see the final destiny which God holds out to those who come to Him in faith. Jesus is the example by which we live, and the vision towards which we move. We practice to become the people of God, not just good citizens. We practice to make our new identity a reality with the aid of the Holy Spirit, not merely bearing the label. If there is to be any change in the Church, in the nation and in the world, it must come through transformed men and women who bear the name of Jesus.

Personal transformation is about the whole person development.³

Christian personal transformation is not about cleaning up a few dimensions of our lives, nor is it about adding on a few religious activities – such as joining a few more special meetings, regularly attending Sunday worship, or actively involving in Christian fellowships. That is not what personal transformation is about. God is interested in our whole being, our whole lives. Transformation changes our being, not just what we do but who we are. Authentic transformation means the formation of a new character, i.e. the character of Christ. In the Bible, it is analogous to rebirth and new creation. This is not the language of repairing the old, but of creating something new, making new our heart, mind, will, attitude and character. The self is being transformed day by day and Christ’s character is gradually formed. Perfection comes when Christ returns.

Personal transformation involves us being remade from the inside-out.

In accord with the Bible, sin has a hold on our human nature. It is the most poisonous with perhaps the greatest societal effects. The only way to deal with it is to have a heart transplant as proclaimed in the Old Testament (Ezek 36:26). The psalmist recognizes the problem and sees it as a contamination that makes a person unclean before God. Thus he prays: “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Ps 51:10). Indeed, our

heart is the problem, full of evil (Ecc 9:3), deceitful and beyond cure (Jer 17:9).

The Hebrew word *lev* (translated as ‘heart’) in its abstract meaning refers to the totality of man’s inner nature. Not only is it the seat of emotion but also of the intellect, the center of will and decision-making. The ‘spirit’ is a metaphor for the entire person in terms of the motives and intentions that lie beneath sinful acts. Biblically, sin is a matter of the heart (and mind). That suggests that a solution must involve the heart (and mind). Personal transformation always starts from the heart (and mind). That is why Paul urges the believers to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom 12:2). If a person does not change the way he thinks, he will never change the way he feels; if he does not change the way he feels, he will never change the way he acts. To do this, he needs a new heart, a new mind. The thoughts of a Christian should be Christlike. The world compels us to conform to its image and squeezes us into its mould. But God wants us to take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. He wants us to be transformed.

The process of transformation begins from within but it does not end there. There should be indicators that the transformation is taking place in a believer’s life: the development of his life, the choices he makes in relating to receiving and understanding people and situations, understanding of the role entrusted to him, the ability to make moral decisions and live up to convictions, the ability to resist wrongdoing, and the capacity for forgiveness, healing and rebuilding and worshipping God.

It is only when we present our whole selves to God as living sacrifices – gladly, gratefully and entirely placing ourselves at His disposal in ways that He deems fit – that we have started our Christian life aright. Be transformed by the renewal of your mind! Note the grammatical structure of the sentence: “be transformed” is in the passive form implying that the transforming work is not something we can do ourselves. While God is the active agent, we are responsible to come continually before Him to allow Him to do it for us. By this, we can see transformation come to pass in our lives: we can be set free from the evil within us. We are meant to obey and please the Father. In the final analysis, that’s all that counts.

Our whole lives Changed

A radical transformation marks our whole being. We have not simply subscribed to a new set of religious ideas and rules, or adopted a few religious jargons and clichés and behaviour; we have been transformed; we have become a different kind of person. Responding to the initiative of God and life altering experience are inseparable. It leads from one to another. The post conversion life will be markedly different from the pre-conversion life. Our effectiveness at helping others will depend on how efficiently God’s principles working in us.

Whereas we once shared the sense of purposelessness that is prevalent in this world, we now

know that we are part of God's great plan. There is a purpose to life and it is centred in God. Whereas we were once in a state of hopelessness, we are now filled with a living hope in Christ. At such a time when chaos, pessimism and despair seem to prevail, we need to be both hope-filled and hope-dispensing believers. Whereas we used to let opportunities slip by, we now make the best use of them to develop our spiritual life and to further God's work of transformation in the world.

Effort is required in developing the relationship of our union with God. Our great fault may lie in the confusion of our priorities. We forget our essential dependence on Him; we neglect prayer, worship and His Word. We are more concerned with the results of that union rather than the union itself. We are more concerned with doing rather than being. If we are to preach Christ we must be like Christ in all aspects of our life. Only our continuing union with Christ will ensure that.

We need to develop our mind. We who believe in the Lord Jesus have His mind (Phil 2:5; 1 Cor 2:16). This means several things: first, there is no biblical injunction to empty our mind or bypass it. Secondly, we have a new capacity to think, talk, and act more and more like Christ Himself. In order to see life increasingly from God's perspective, it is necessary to spend time in God's Word absorbing His thoughts so that our mind could be renewed, that we may think, talk, and act more and more like our Lord Jesus. Thirdly, we should not be blind to the hard facts of life. Christ's mind is an informed mind, so should be ours. Fourthly, we should continue to use and develop the mind God has given us for the good of humanity.

We need to develop our character with the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23), reflecting the character of Jesus. These qualities are meant to be seen in our lives even in trying situations. Fruit is not what we do. Fruit is what we are. We can do without being. But we cannot really be without also doing. It is much more biblical to see the fruit of the Spirit as personal characteristics that are worked out because of the nature of what is in us. Zaccheus is our example. Through his encounter with Christ his life was changed. The ruthless financier found a new goal. Thus his former gods could be pushed from their throne. It was an inward change that issued an outward deed of restitution of justice.

The Holy Spirit awakens us to all that is wholesome and good. He makes possible for us in the true meaning of living. Through the Holy Spirit precious truths can be carefully preserved and freely shared. The Holy Spirit is given because we need Him. Without His gracious presence and power we cannot serve God effectively (Zech 4:6). One of the great ministries of the Holy Spirit is the careful tending of our Christian lives to bring us to our full potential. All are qualities of spiritual maturity. They are fruits, not works. It is the outgrowth of an inner life. The Holy Spirit is reproducing these Christlike characteristics in us.

If we live with Christ's life, our attitude should be the same as that of our Lord. Our Lord's

heart of compassion knows no barriers, so should be ours. As His people, we learn to bear the burden of others, to be sensitive to the needs of others without patronage, superiority and harsh judgment. For such fulfils the law of Christ.

Personal transformation is we become what we believe and say. It is the end of an old life and the beginning of a new life altogether. This new life is not a right but a gift from God. We must be grateful that our guilt was removed and we have been made new in Christ. It is not restrictive and narrow. It goes beyond introspection. It opens up new relationships; it is outgoing and welcoming. The goal is none other than Christ Himself and the possibility of being made like Him.

Personal transformation is a process

This process has different stages: the beginning of a process in this life and the completing of the same only when Jesus returns in glory. Transformation is not an instantaneous event but a lifelong process. It begins with the initial stage when we put our trust in God alone for our salvation and forgiveness; we are transformed from the status of slavery to that of being sons with inheritance right. We are transformed from following “mere natural instincts” – the desires of the flesh and of the mind (Eph 2:3) – to “following the mind of the Lord given to us through the Spirit” (1 Cor 2:12, 16). By the grace of God in Christ alone we are introduced to the process of transformation. But it does not cease there. It leads on to the process of continual transformation where God the transformer who grants us transformation in Christ brings our transformation to its next stage. God does this as we learn to see life from His perspective and from the perspective of His Word. We seek daily to imbibe nourishment from the Bible and its spirit, making its insight our own. Lastly, the wonder of transformation is brought to its consummation stage in the last day: its perfection is attained at Jesus’ coming again when each one of us will be totally transformed with a new resurrection body.

Transformation is a divine-human partnership

Transformation is a cooperative effort that flows out of our relationship with Christ. It is true that transformation is not something we can acquire merely by our own strength. Yet, the stress on God’s part in the process does not cancel man’s responsibility. There is a place in the Christian life for effort and action. We are to put on the new self, which is “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:24).

In salvation, it is by *His* grace through *our* faith that redemption comes. And it is by our conscious cooperation with God that spiritual life develops. In other words, transformation is not a ‘do-it-yourself’ operation because God must work or nothing is achieved, nor is it all

of God. We do not cease to be responsible for our own actions. We, the transformed people, are not programmed do-good-Christian-robots! We are not spared from difficulties and temptations. The experience of transformation means this: having been transformed by Christ, we have the resurrection power. We must use that power to live the resurrection life, the transformed life, and seek to be more like Christ by following His example. Sub-Christian living tarnishes the reputation of Christ. We must put on the new self, see to it that everything we are and do are marked by the Spirit of Christ, even in daily routine and humdrum. If we do not have the right attitude, then the best of us will not come out and what we do will not take on new value!

Life is never free from responsibility. What pleases God is this: do our part the Christian way and serve Him with a transformed attitude, with His love in our hearts, His truth in our minds, His strength in our wills, and with undivided loyalty and conscientious thoroughness. We now belong to God; we are called to be Christlike in all aspects of our life.

Personal transformation is available to all

All these wonderful possibilities are not just a ‘transformation package’ for a few pious souls. It is made available to all. Of course, there are people who believe that they are not to be blamed for their sinful practices or destructive habits, because a leopard cannot change his spots and neither an Ethiopian his skin. However, Jeremiah 13:22-25 says that it is not that people cannot be changed, rather they do not want to change or to be changed. If anyone is enslaved to any sinful habits, what he has to do is simply to admit his sinfulness and helplessness, and humbly accept the divine offer of complete forgiveness and transformation in Christ Jesus. God can transform his heart and enable him to change, making possible what seems impossible.

Personal transformation is for the blessing of others

We know that the work of the triune God is to make us Christlike. But it is not to be seen as an end in itself. It is only the means. We are to be so changed that we might attract others around us to have and enjoy the transforming experience available in Christ. Christian faith is not something private and concerned only with individuals. Our Lord Jesus, whilst on earth, is the man for others, the man for the world. So should be all of us. That “Help Wanted” chapter is still open. The cry of humanity for personal transformation continues. God has made believers His agents because there is no way for men to be transformed other than through Christ. The Bible also makes it clear that God’s blessing goes with His call to personal transformation – this is not for believers only. We are to be a blessing to others: a man for others just as our Lord is.

Conclusion

Jesus says, “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.” But there is obviously a credibility gap among us all. We have heard these remarks many times: “Jesus is wonderful, but you Christians – you are not like Him!” “You proclaim ‘the gospel is the power of God for salvation of everyone who believes,’ but it is hardly evident among you!”

Personal transformation is primarily to be a model of how God works when He is allowed to come into our life. When our lives are not transformed it gives the impression that God’s own idea has not worked. Obviously, our response is to be contrite before God, rise up to consecrate ourselves to Christ afresh, live our lives acceptable to Him, and in all things let Him have the preeminence. We will then see the transformation that salvation brings. It begins with personal life, followed by family life, life in the marketplace, and society as a whole. We pray and hope that the whole moral, psychological and spiritual atmosphere will be turned around. Personal transformation is possible but cannot be self-manufactured. It is what we allow God to remake us in His terms. Ω

Notes:

¹ Makonen Getu, “Measuring Transformation: Conceptual framework and indicators,” *Transformation, an International Dialogue on Mission and Ethics*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (April 2002), p. 92.

² George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church* (Nashville: Word Books, 1998), p. 101.

³ Borrowed from Makonen Getu, *op. cit.*, p. 94