

SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION BIBLE STUDY

NAVIGATORS
— LEAD ON —

Whatever He asks. Wherever He leads.

TRUE SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

INTRODUCTION

If we are to grasp the nature of making disciples, it is very important to grasp the way God works in His people. He is able to take people who have spent all their lives following their sinful thoughts and behaviour, and transform them into people who please Him and bring hope and help to others. How does this happen?

Philip Yancey suggests: *“If we are to stimulate spiritual interest and create spiritual thirst in the lives of the people in our world, we must be in the process of being spiritually transformed. It is not sufficient merely to be a nice person or group of people. There are lots of nice people, living good lives that don’t have a faith in Christ.”*

But how does this happen? How are we spiritually transformed? How much is the Holy Spirit responsible to transform me and how much am I responsible to transform myself? I’m saved by grace – does that mean that I don’t have to worry about it? Just let go and let God? Or am I to work at my transformation? Do I transform myself by my hard work, by my self-control, by an act of my will? These are difficult and nuanced questions that we will consider in this study.

THE REQUIREMENT

1. How should we live as disciples, as members of the kingdom of God under Jesus’ kingship according to

- Matthew 5-7
- Colossians 3:1-17
- Galatians 5:19-24

THE TRANSFORMATIVE ASPECT OF THE GOSPEL

We all fall short of the standards required by the Scriptures. So what are we to do? Does the gospel provide us any hope?

2. Character and transformation are linked to the heart of a person. All Christians have a new heart. Read John 3:1-10. What is being born again equivalent to? Hint: compare v3 and 5.

Nicodemus is a member of the Jewish ruling council (3:1) which meant that he would have memorised the whole Old Testament. Not only that, but he is also “the teacher of Israel” (3:10) indicating that he was perhaps the head theologian in Israel. So when Jesus links water and spirit and says to Nicodemus that he should have known (3:10b), it must be that he should have known it because it is in the Old Testament.

Look at Ezekiel 36:25-27 where water and spirit are linked as a way of speaking of the new covenant. Who is taking the initiative? What light does this throw on what Jesus means by born again?

What part do you play in this transformation and what part does God play? Consider Ephesians 2:1-5 as well.

3. Another way of talking of the new covenant is found in Jeremiah 31:31-34. What is different about the new covenant? What light does this shine on what Jesus means by “born again”?

4. Look at John 3:8. How do you know where the wind is blowing? What do you think Jesus is getting at when He says “so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit”?

Jesus means by being born again that God has given us a new heart of flesh so that we can respond to the Holy Spirit, that we have been cleansed, and the law is written on our hearts so we can be obedient. And He says that in the same way we know there is wind because we see its effects, we know that we have been born again because we see the effects in our lives. Indeed, this is a promise of transformation which is part of the gospel: if we are born again, our behaviour will be transformed.

DEPENDENT RESPONSIBILITY¹

5. Read Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18. Notice that in both texts we are to “be transformed”; that is, something is being done *to us*. Who is doing the transforming to us? Hint – they are different.

6. Note that although “be transformed” is in the passive voice, it is in the imperative mood; that is, it is a command to do something. It is a *command to be transformed*. Believers aren’t passive in this transforming process. How do Philippians 2:12, 13 and Colossians 1:29 shed some light on this?

¹ I am indebted to Jerry Bridges for this concept. He fleshes it out in “*Transforming Grace*”, p113-116.

If I turn right, I see the need for change and I humble myself. But I can't do that on my own. I need the Holy Spirit to enable me to be humble, and I humble myself. Without Him I wouldn't do it.

Humility precedes repentance and confession. I need to acknowledge that I am wrong. And when we humble ourselves, the Holy Spirit also empowers us to be and to do what we could never do on our own. He is at work in me again. He is transforming me.

The Holy Spirit causes his fruit to grow in me. Self-control is one of the characteristics of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. We are not condemned to spend our lives in a losing struggle against the old patterns of behaviour. There is a great paradox here – we are strong not because we are strong but because we are weak, and under the Holy Spirit we humble ourselves admitting we cannot do it on our own.

This is where the left turn option comes in. If we had gone to the Bible, seen what was wrong and then turned left directly to self-control under your own power. It is the Nike option “Just do it”. It has some “advantages” – it allows you to stay on the side of truth and to preserve your independence. But it is a real mistake. It is the route of the flesh rather than the route of grace, the left turn option.

Now the other element is community, which is dealt with in more depth in another series of studies. Suffice to say, a Christian must have an environment where he or she can go and talk openly about how things are going in this matter of following Christ. It needs to be a place where one can get personalised attention, and give it to others. This transformation process is characterised by struggle. No-one can stick at it day after day, year after year, if they attempt to go it alone. Our community can encourage us when we are down and we can encourage others to keep turning right.

7. Make other observations on the process (note process, not event) of true spiritual transformation from the following passages, noting what they have to say about how we are changed.

- John 3:20-21, cf John 14:6 and 17:17
- John 15:1-8
- Romans 5:1-5
- Galatians 5:16-25
- Hebrews 3:13
- James 1:2-4
- James 1:21-25
- 2 Peter 1:3-7

8. As we seek to disciple another, how might we get this the wrong way round, or reinforce “left turns”? What are the long term consequences?

9. We noted that spiritual transformation is a process not an event. But this process has setbacks in it. What assurance does Philippians 1:6 provide for the true disciple?

SUMMARY

The transformation of believers in the midst of the unbelieving world is vital to the expansion of the Kingdom of God into the world. God is deeply committed to our transformation into Christ-likeness. As we respond to His work our worldview, values, and behaviour are deeply impacted. We are changed from the inside out.

In our transformation there are certain things only the Holy Spirit can do, and there are certain things He has given us to do. Only the Holy Spirit can create in our hearts the desire to obey God, a new heart - but He doesn't obey for us. We must do that. However, we can do that only as He gives us the enabling power to obey. We are responsible to clothe ourselves with Christlike character, but we are dependent on God's Spirit to produce His “fruit”. We cannot make one millimetre of progress in our transformation apart from the powerful working of the Spirit as we remain connected to Jesus, like branches to a vine. And God, the Master Gardener, will prune us for our good that we may share in His holiness.

DEEPENING YOUR UNDERSTANDING

10. Why is the heart so vital to transformation? What role, if any, can you have in changing someone's heart?

11. We are promised spiritual transformation as part of the gospel. Further, God the Holy Spirit works in us to transform us.

a. Look back over your life in the last 5-10 years. What evidence is there of your spiritual transformation?

b. While there will always be a battle (read Romans 7:7-25; 1 Peter 5:8), what areas do you still need to work on?

12. What is the place of the Spiritual Disciplines (bible reading, prayer, scripture memory and meditation, personal reflection) in the process of transformation? How are you doing with these?

13. What is one area you will work on this week? How will you do that?