

EMPOWERING CHURCH LEADERS IN SOUL CARE, 2DM842
Professors: Jim Coffield & Scott Coupland
Winter 2009

“My Theology of How People Change”
By Tom Welch

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” - Romans 12:2

“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”
2 Corinthians 3:18

“[He that is] not busy being born is busy dying.” - Bob Dylan¹

The Christian faith makes the radical claim that the gospel changes people’s lives. More than simply changing behavior or changing beliefs, the message of Christ is that people can change from the inside out, from the core of their being. Much of what we call Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology is given to investigating how God changes lives. Most of what we call Practical Theology is given to explaining and applying Biblical principles for changing lives. The word the Bible uses for transformation (μεταμορφώω) is only found a few times in Scripture². Yet the principle is found throughout the Bible.

If this is so, why do we seem to see such little transformation among God’s people? Why do we get stuck in destructive habits and patterns of thinking from which we cannot seem to break away? Do people actually change? What is the process? What are the hindrances to change? I will seek to answer questions like these by investigating Biblical teaching on personal transformation. I will address this in the areas of Biblical Anthropology, Christology,

¹ From “It’s Alright Ma, (I’m Only Bleeding)”

² Matthew 17:2, Mark 9:2, Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 3:18

Regeneration, and Sanctification. I will be building on the readings and class lectures, even if my thoughts are weighed toward scriptural exposition³. I will also be looking at this question from the perspective of life in the body of Christ, rather than merely in a one on one counseling relationship, as helpful as that is. In this way I hope to communicate a pastoral ministry model of how people change.

Anthropology (or “What’s Your Problem?”)

Anthropology is the study of the human person. Though anthropology would include aspects of sociology, I will limit my focus to questions concerning the humanity of the individual. Our presuppositions are crucial in this investigation because we do not all share the same views about what makes us human.

Secular views of humanity often begin with denying our divine origin or ignoring and dismissing it. A strict biological materialistic approach will view the human being as the product of a long process of evolution through natural selection. Our thoughts, desires, and struggles are little more than the firings of neurons and the complex, but ultimately meaningless reactions of brain and body chemistry. The solutions to the struggles of the human “heart” are simply a matter of pharmacological regulation. Similarly, a secular behavioral approach targets only unhealthy behavior and seeks to change such patterns and habits. Doing the right thing becomes the goal, yet without a moral center to define what “right” is.

A Biblical view of humanity, while not discounting biology and behavior, goes much deeper in its penetration, down to the soul and spirit of mankind. The Scriptures teach us that man is a complex and wondrous creation. Our origin is nothing less that divine. Having been

³ I am a pastor after all!

created in God's image, we bear the fingerprints of God on our very souls⁴. We are capable of great works of ingenuity and creativity, acts of heroic compassion, moral discernment and outrage, relational longings and growth, self-awareness and introspection, and thoughtful reflection on meaning and purpose. All these witness to the image of God within each of us.

Yet on the other hand, the Bible teaches that the image of God within us has been bent, twisted, and tarnished by our sin and rebellion against our Creator⁵. The results of "The Fall"⁶ cannot be underestimated. Our rebellion against God⁷ has resulted in a triad of alienation: alienation from God, alienation from others, and alienation from ourselves⁸. Thus all relational, psychological, and emotional pain is rooted in our fractured, defaced humanity. We are all "Glorious Ruins", both victims and villains, sinners and sinned against⁹, a mélange of dignity and depravity, bearers of the Imago Dei and outcasts from the city of God. Small wonder our inner battles rage so violently.

At the core of our rebellion lies our inescapable bent toward idolatry. We are worshipers all, yet we seek not the living and true God, but idols of our own making. As Jeremiah, in his scathing accuracy put it, "for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water."¹⁰ Idolatry can range from the crass (stone and metal objects) to the sophisticated (power, prestige, position, popularity, etc...). But the root is seeking our

⁴ Genesis 1:27

⁵ Romans 3:10-19

⁶ Genesis 3

⁷ Though it was Adam and Eve who originally sinned, we ratify their decision every time we choose against God.

⁸ "John R. W. Stott, *Basic Christianity*, IVP 1971, p.71ff

⁹ From class notes

¹⁰ Jeremiah 2:13

satisfaction in anything other than God and seeking our justification in anything other than the cross.

Because each of us is also a unique creation of God¹¹, our problems will manifest themselves in different ways. Each person is distinctive both in the ways we express the image of God within us and the ways we manifest the devastation of sin upon us. Factor in divergent life experiences and cultural differences and one can imagine the varied ways our struggles will present themselves as well as the call for varied approaches to addressing those struggles¹². We all may be addicts at heart, but our addictions will vary¹³. Real change will have to address the truth of our common fallenness and also each individual's unique personal composition. And yet understanding anthropology from a Biblical perspective gives us a significant base from which to operate.

Christology (or "What does Healthy Look Like?")

When speaking of change one must ask, "What does 'Healthy look like?" What is the goal of life-change? What do we want to change into? Real change that goes beyond life-management must address these questions. We must "start with the end in mind".

The gospel tells us that in Christ God is doing nothing less than overturning the curse and restoring our fallen humanity¹⁴. The Scriptures give us the goal of all transformation. In Romans chapter 8, the Apostle Paul gives us what is arguably the most complete teaching on

¹¹ Psalm 139:13-16

¹² And we haven't even touched on the complex issues of masculinity and femininity!

¹³ Sharon Hersh, *The Last Addiction*, Waterbrook Press, 2008, p.2

¹⁴ *"To read along the whole Bible is to discern the single basic plot-line of the Bible as God's story of redemption (e.g., Luke 24:44) as well as the themes of the Bible (e.g., covenant, kingship, temple) that run through every stage of history and every part of the canon, climaxing in Jesus Christ. In this perspective, the gospel appears as creation, fall, redemption, restoration. It brings out the purpose of salvation, namely, a renewed creation."*

<http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/about/foundation-documents/vision>

transformation in the entire Bible. He addresses transformation from its cosmic dimensions¹⁵ to the renovation of the individual Christian¹⁶. The ultimate goal of God’s work in redemption, from predestination to glorification, is that we would be “conformed to the image of his Son”¹⁷ We are called to become more like Christ. Christ, then, is the archetype, goal, model, and blueprint for all personal change.

A Biblical Christology tells us that Jesus, rather than being unapproachable and other-worldly, was the most complete human that ever lived¹⁸. Because he bore our humanity, yet without the stain of the Fall, Jesus most fully represents what it means to be human. When we look at the life of Christ we see the markers of healthy personhood as God intended. What do we see in Christ? We see authenticity rather than posturing and hypocrisy. We see healthy boundaries¹⁹ and appropriate self-care²⁰. We see integrity and truthfulness even in the face of opposition²¹. We see courage to move in hard directions²². We see compassion and sensitivity to the needs of those around him²³. We see the full range of human emotional expression²⁴. As John Calvin said, “Certainly, those who imagine that the Son of God was exempt from human

¹⁵ “...Creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” – Romans 8:23

¹⁶ Romans 8:29-30

¹⁷ Romans 8:29b

¹⁸ “Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man” Council of Chalcedon, 451 AD

¹⁹ Mark 1:37-39

²⁰ Matthew 14:23

²¹ John 18:33-38

²² Matthew 26:36-39

²³ Luke 7:12-13

²⁴ B.B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ*. Chapter 4: On The Emotional Life of Our Lord, P&R 1950, p.93

passions, do not truly and seriously acknowledge him to be a man.²⁵” In other words, in Christ Jesus we see someone who is fully living out his humanity as made in the image of God.

So, how do I gauge my spiritual/emotional health? I look at Christ. What is my aim and model for change? My aim is to be more like Jesus. Peter Scazzerro calls this “making the incarnation your model for loving well”²⁶. Therefore, simply making my life more manageable can never be the goal of life change. Life management can be a mask for the idol of security and comfort. No, the goal of all change must be conformity to the image of Christ. That means followers of Christ must live out the full expression of humanity we see in Jesus²⁷.

Regeneration (or “Where is the Power for Life Change?”)

But from whence comes the power to change? For many people all this talk of being more like Jesus is merely pious rhetoric without any grounding in real life experience. Does the power of sin make our efforts to change rather infantile? What we need is something new inside of us helping us to change from the inside out. The “something new” is what theologians call “regeneration”.

Regeneration (also called “being born again”²⁸) is the starting point for lasting life change. Regeneration is the miracle that happens inside of us when God gives us a new heart, transforming our “heart of stone” into a “heart of flesh”²⁹. Regeneration is God’s first act of restoring the image of God which was broken by the Fall. The idea of “new” is central to the

²⁵ Quoted in above, p.93, footnote 1.

²⁶ Peter Scazzerro, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, Zondervan 2003. P.172-193

²⁷ The implications are extensive. For instance, if my expression of emotions is not as full as that of my Savior, I have not yet reached emotional maturity.

²⁸ John 3:1-8

²⁹ Ezekiel 26:36

power of regeneration. A new heart cries out to God with a new faith. This new life results in new motivations. Now our change can be Christ-centered.

Until we are “born again” our life change will be stunted. Apart from the new life regeneration gives us, all a person can hope for is better life management. And if this means they stop hurting themselves and those around them, it is a very good thing! But to truly be in the process of recovering our fallen humanity we must be born again.

But we must also warn about what this does not mean. The life change that begins when we are born again does not mean we get a new personality. The Apostle Paul is a case in point. Pre-conversion Paul (aka “Saul”) was intense, driven, and did not suffer fools lightly. Post-conversion Paul was intense, driven, and did not suffer fools lightly – for Jesus! Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones reminds us that though we are renewed in Christ, we carry our essential personalities with us³⁰.

Regeneration also does not mean an instantaneous and immediate total transformation into the image of Christ upon conversion. That total transformation will not happen until the final day of resurrection at the return of Christ³¹. An over-realized eschatology will only result in depression among God’s people.

What we can and must expect with regeneration is what the late Francis Schaeffer called “Substantial Healing of Psychological Problems”³². We will not experience our complete healing or transformation into the image of Christ in this life. But we can see substantial growth in our lives.

³⁰ “For the fact of the matter is that though we are all Christians together, we are all different, and the problems and the difficulties, the perplexities and the trials that we are likely to meet are in a large measure determined by the difference of temperament and of type.” – Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*

³¹ 1 John 3:2-3

³² Francis Schaeffer, *True Spirituality*, Tindal House, 1981, p.123-134

Sanctification (or “What is the Process for Life Change?”)

If regeneration marks the first step in our journey with Jesus, sanctification is the road itself. We could call sanctification the process of transforming into the image of Christ. Technically “sanctification” means being made “holy”, but we must also remember that holiness is not always gauged by way of negation (what you stop doing). We also grow in holiness when we grow in “wholeness”. The Bible calls this “putting on Christ³³” – a process that is much more concerned with who we are becoming than what we are or are not doing.

My denominational tradition speaks of sanctification as both a crisis and progressive experience in the life of the believer³⁴. In what way can sanctification be both a crisis and progressive experience? The crisis moment of sanctification can be summed up in the word “surrender”. That crisis comes when the believer has exhausted his own efforts at self-transformation, realizes he is powerless to change into the image of Christ, and surrenders to the power of the Holy Spirit to do the transforming. Until we come to the end of ourselves we are still indulging what Sharon Hersh calls “The Last Addiction” – the idea that we can do it ourselves³⁵. Progressive sanctification is then the long path that follows surrender. Though the entire New Testament is concerned with this process, I will highlight four areas of practical focus in sanctification: Worship, Truth, Community, and Trials.

Worship

For many worship is the singing we do in church on Sunday morning. Its appeal is primarily sentimental and its effects last only as long as the tune remains in our heads. The

³³ Romans 13:14

³⁴ <http://www.cmalliance.org/whoweare/doctrine.jsp>

³⁵ Sharon Hersh, *The Last Addiction*, Waterbrook Press, 2005 p.66

Bible presents a much more powerful and pervasive picture of the role of worship in the transformation process. Consider the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:18:

“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” 2 Corinthians 3:18

Like the transformation Moses experienced when he met with God on the mountain, so we too are transformed into His likeness when we meet with him in worship. Worship is an intense and sustained gaze upon the glory of God. Such an encounter cannot help but change a person. The principle is that we become like the object of our worship. If we worship the idols of modern life we will become like them. Thus the inner struggles of the soul have their roots in a worship disorder³⁶. Transformation is only possible when we shift our gaze to the ultimate object of worship, the living and true God.

Practically speaking, when helping people with their struggles we must help them turn an upward gaze upon God, not primarily an inward gaze at the self. Gazing at God will unmask the idols of the heart and show us the resources the Lord gives us to help us. Standing in awe of the nature and character of God in all his triune majesty is a central means of personal transformation.

³⁶ “‘Their land is full of idols’ (Isaiah 2:8). After all, that is what addiction really is – it is worship. No matter how sophisticated or crude, any given addiction is a person, place, substance, activity, or ideology that becomes central to a human being’s mind, body, soul, and spirit. Whether it is alcohol or religious activity, addiction is at work when something or someone begins to affect the style and nature of all aspects of a person’s life and interacts with all his or her activities. The etymology of the word gives us insight into its idolatrous nature. Addiction is from the Latin word *addictus*, which means ‘to surrender to the gods.’” – Hirsh, p.14

Truth

The lies we believe and tell ourselves hold us in bondage. Jesus said, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”³⁷ The Lord has given his church a powerful change agent in the truths of our faith. Again consider the relationship between truth and transformation:

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” - Romans 12:2

The core truth of our faith is the gospel. Its simple message tells us that we are weaker and more sinful than we ever dared to believe, but through Christ we are more loved and accepted than we ever dared to hope.³⁸ This is a message that takes a while to saturate down to the soul level. And it is one that we must constantly revisit. Therefore the church should never apologize for the truth of the gospel. The gospel is not the “ABC’s” of the faith, but the “A to Z” of the faith. We should hold transformational teaching as a core value.

Practically speaking, we must help people to stop listening to themselves and begin to preach truth to themselves³⁹. As the truths of God take hold of us, the destructive lies are displaced and healthy thinking is restored. As our minds are renewed our lives are changed.

Community

The role of the body of Christ is crucial in changing lives. We were created to live in relationship with one another. Though relationships are the cause of much of our emotional pain, healthy relationships are the mark to emotional maturity. The Christian community is a

³⁷ John 8:32

³⁸ <http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/bio/timkeller.html>

³⁹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Its Cure* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965/2002), 20-1

means of grace as we seek to grow in the image of Christ. Note the relationship between love and holiness in 1 Thessalonians 3:11-12:

“and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.”

Paul clearly draws a causal relationship between our love for one another and our hearts being established blameless in holiness. Practical holiness is hammered out on the anvil of human relationships. Whereas our tendency is to withdraw when in pain, healthy relationships are what keep us afloat.

The church then must seek to become a therapeutic community, a safe place where we can gather as ourselves, without masks and without fear. The church should truly be “the safest place on earth”. Not that we have arrived by any means. Too often dysfunction in the church is a source of pain in our lives, But this should not excuse us from pursuing God’s ideal of the church as the environment for changing lives.

Trials

The role of trials in the life of a believer to produce life change is one of the clearest and yet most neglected areas of teaching in the New Testament. We must develop a theology of trials to frame our life experiences in such a way as leads to growth. A sampling of texts makes the point:

“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith--more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire--may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 1:6-7)

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (James 1:2-4)

“More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” (Romans 5:3-5)

Whenever I have asked someone what has caused the greatest spiritual growth in their lives, inevitably the answer is “the trials the Lord has brought me through”. More than sermons preached, counseling sessions, or books read, trials have been the catalyst for growth.

Therefore even the inward trials⁴⁰ must be seen in light of God’s redemptive purposes. We are inclined toward pain avoidance and much of our motivation to seek counseling is to relieve the pain. But, as was mentioned in class, “the way out is through”. When we embrace the painful times of our lives and trust ourselves to God’s compassionate and sovereign purposes then transformation is happening. As we help people walk through the trials the Lord brings, we see the impurities purged away and the likeness of Christ emerge.

Conclusion

As we consider how people change, we ask the crucial questions of anthropology (what is our problem?), Christology (what does healthy look like?), regeneration (where is the power for life change?), and sanctification (what is the process for life change?). We then develop a practical theology of worship, truth, community, and trials as we help people through their struggles. In this way we can be a part of seeing the Lord transforming people into the image of Christ.

⁴⁰ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, IVP 1973, p.221