

ARE YOU CONFORMING OR TRANSFORMING?

I'd like you to think back to what you were like, what your character was like when you were first called by God and I'd you to ask yourself how different your character is now? How much has your time in the church positively changed who you are as a person?

I once had an experience once that really brought this home to me. Ever since I was new in the church some 30 odd years ago on the back of my prayer list I would write down a list of my spiritual goals including sins I was trying to overcome. Back in the late 90's when my family was moving house I ran across one of my old prayer lists from a decade previous which made for very interesting reading. As I looked at my old spiritual goals there was a couple there where I could say "You bewdy! I had a win overcoming those sins." Then there one or two that left me scratching my head and I thought I don't ever remember having a problem with those – which has gotta be a good thing right since I if couldn't remember it I must have had a win against them. And then there were others where I hung my head and said, "Oh man I am still struggling with those."

Why is that we have an easier time getting on top of some sins and yet desperately struggle against others? How do we get on top of those more difficult sins we might battle with? Well today I would like to look at one key to beating the more difficult sins that the apostle Paul discusses over in Romans 12:2. Paul writes: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, in order to prove by you what is that good and pleasing and perfect will of God." Paul here makes a distinction between being conformed or being transformed. In this article I would like to take a look at the difference between conforming and transforming.

Conforming means to follow the same pattern. Paul talks about not following the pattern of the world's behaviour. That said, we can also conform to God's ways either willingly or grudgingly where we still want to do things our own way. There may be an external peer pressure to follow God but once that external pressure to follow God is removed many people go back to doing their own thing. We have certainly seen this in our recent church history.

Being transformed is something very different. It means to be completely changed. The Greek word that is translated transformed is "metamorphoo". It's where we get the word metamorphosis from. Of all the wonders of nature probably the most powerful witness against evolution is that of the metamorphosis that completely changes lowly caterpillar grubs into beautiful butterflies. Fred Meldau in his classic book "Why We Believe in Creation Not Evolution" writes the following about the process of metamorphosis:

"Unguided evolution in a billion years could not even think up such an involved plan as a 'complete metamorphosis' - much less put it into working order. Could it be that God, the Master Teacher, so designed the life cycle of the butterfly to teach us a lesson? Undoubtedly, spiritual and moral truths are illustrated in nature - and the metamorphosis of the caterpillar into the butterfly is an obvious lesson. If the grovelling, repulsive, greedy, earth-bound caterpillar pictures man in his lowly, fallen estate, then the transformation into the butterfly is a lesson in the need and reality of the new birth. And the butterfly, released

from its cocoon, flying heavenward, is a picturesque display of glory, speaking of the glory of the coming resurrection for the saved of earth."

It's a dramatic image isn't it that of the transformation of a caterpillar to a butterfly. Likewise God is working to transform us and our character to something that is very different to what we start off as.

How does a better understanding of the difference between conforming and transforming help us to better overcome our more difficult sins. I'd like to quote from a book by Fred Stoeker called "Every Man's Challenge" from a chapter entitled "The Death of Temptation" in which he discusses what transformed his mind in his victory against sexual temptation. After quoting Romans 12:2 Fred writes:

"How did Jesus think? Like a servant without rights. He loved righteousness and hated wickedness ... And now that we have been bought at a price and have become servants too we must think like Jesus...(Then he quotes 1 Corinthians 6:18-20) Flee from sexual immorality...You are not your own; you were bought at a price...

"During my battle for sexual purity I distilled this verse down to its core kernel which eventually transformed my mind totally – You have no right to look at that or think about that. You haven't the authority.

"When your mind is transformed to think like this, you will experience what we call the death of temptation. Satan's power of temptation lies in your supposed right to make decisions regarding your behaviour. If you didn't believe that you had the right to choose what you look at, no tempting power could touch you...If you are not transformed, then you still believe that you have a right to choose your behaviour...The moment you do you open yourself to discussing the pros and cons with yourself. But far worse, you open yourself to Satan's counsel. He would love to be heard on this issue...

"Some doubt us but we're telling the truth when we say that there's a step where you move from the conforming position, which takes much energy, to the transformed position, which takes little energy at all. You are His and you have the mind of Christ" (p.53-56).

That expression he uses – the death of temptation - is an interesting one. It brings to mind what Paul says over in Romans 6:11. The Apostle Paul writes "count yourselves to be truly dead to sin, but alive to God." The idea here is that those sins no longer get a response from us as if we were are dead to them.

Now is overcoming just a matter of surrendering our will and doing things God's way or is there something more to it? I said before that when it comes to following God's ways we can do that either willingly or grudgingly where we still want to do things our own way. If we do things God's way but still deep down want to sin isn't that just another form of conforming?

The reason we have this struggle is because, even though at the academic level we may believe that sin hurts, we often waver in our belief deep down in our hearts that sin is bad for us and is going to hurt us. Deep down we believe that the benefits of whatever sin we are enticed by outweigh the hurt that it will produce and this shows in the choices that we make.

The Roman philosopher Seneca wrote, "People love their vices and hate them at the same time; they hate their sins and cannot leave them."

To defeat our more difficult sins we need to be fully convicted, completely sold at the deepest level that the sin just doesn't work and that only God's way will work. So long as we vacillate or "halt between two opinions" to quote what Elijah said to the people of Israel with their mixed worship of God and Baal we'll struggle.

If we can get to the point of being fully convicted that the sin just doesn't work and that only God's way will work we will willingly follow God wholeheartedly rather than vacillating between doing our own thing and obeying God. At this point we will willingly surrender to God because what we want is the same thing as what God wants. It's at this point we don't just conform to God's will but become transformed as our mind is renewed.

In the second half of Romans 12:2 Paul says "transformed by the renewing of your mind, in order to prove [or test] by you what is that good and pleasing and perfect will of God." We prove or test what is God's will. We do this testing by experience. Sometimes this takes years. Sometimes we are stubborn and we have to try and fail doing it our own way over and over and over again before we finally come to the point that we are convicted that our way just doesn't work.

With a more responsive heart it is possible to expedite the process. In John 16:8 Jesus says the following about the Holy Spirit: "And when it comes, it will convict the world concerning sin, and concerning righteousness, and concerning judgment."

The power and prompting of the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin and of righteousness. We need God and His Spirit to overcome with these intense spiritual battles. We can do so by asking Him to convict us more and more deeply that our sins are destructive to us and our character and hurt others and that only His way is the way to go. We can ask God to teach us to hate our sins more and through this process of being fully convicted God's way is the only way we can truly be transformed.

I'd like to quote from an article entitled "What is a Liberal" written in 1979 by Mr Herbert Armstrong where he talks about the kind of attitude and approach that we need to be transformed and not just conform to God's way. He wrote:

"What is the mind of Christ? What is His attitude - His approach to viewing and deciding all activities? Does He, as I asked before, really WANT TO sin, to think and act contrary to His Law, but because of His super power, restrain Himself? We know He has never sinned. But why? Is He sinless because He has such supernatural POWER to, restrain Himself? A THOUSAND TIMES, NO! The living Christ has never sinned because He does not want to sin! What is HIS MIND, that should be also in us? It is a mind that HATES sin, that LOVES righteousness. It's a matter of ATTITUDE! The liberal is not hungering and thirsting after RIGHTEOUSNESS! He WANTS to ease off a little on God's Law. He wants to do only as much as he has to, to receive the reward of eternal life. He has not yet fully gotten rid of the GET attitude, and come into the GIVE attitude."

I'd like to conclude with a great story that really illustrates well what Mr Armstrong was trying to convey in this article.

There were once three men who applied for a chauffer's job and their job was to be a chauffer of a very important rich magnate and they called them all in one after another and tested them over and over again....and they came down to just three men. They'd eliminated all the rest and so they decided to find out which one would be best at protecting the life of the man riding in the back seat so they asked them all one question and they took them out to a gravel road which came right around to the edge of a cliff.

They asked them, 'How close could you drive to the edge of that cliff and still be safe?' The first one looked at it, thought about it and said, '4 inches'. The second one after being asked the same question said, '6 inches'. Then they called the third one and asked him the same question, 'How close could you drive to the edge of that cliff and still be safe? We want to know if you're a good enough driver to protect the man we're going to have you drive around.' The man looked at it and said, 'I wouldn't go closer than 6 feet.' He said, 'I'd probably be crazy to do that. I wouldn't even go closer than 12 feet.' And then they said to him, 'O.K. you're the one who's got the job.'

The last man effectively said, 'I'm going to keep as far from that cliff as I possibly can. I'm not going to be that foolish.'

We have to have that same attitude towards sin. We may very well understand the pleasure and the advantages the sin may have but we should be so completely sold on the fact that its dangers outweigh those that we don't want a bar of it. We will not underestimate the power of the Dark Side and we will want to stay away from it as far as possible. With that attitude towards our sins we will willingly surrender to God because what we want is the same thing as what God wants.

It's only when we get to the point that we are fully convicted and sold on God's way rather than vacillating between our way and God's way that we can be truly transformed in any particular area of our spiritual life. When at the deepest level we want the same thing that God wants it is then that we can truly be transformed.