

# Transformation Involves a Renewed Mind

“Do not be conformed to this world,  
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds...” Romans 12:2

*Romans 12:1-8  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa*

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Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” This profound passage of scripture was a guiding beacon in my own journey of faith from traditional to progressive Christian theological thought and biblical interpretation. It implies that that **the process of transformation involves a renewed mind.**

What do I mean by a transformation from traditional to progressive Christianity, something a majority of you here at College Hill have gone through? We use that phrase a lot, progressive Christianity, but perhaps it needs further explanation, or as a reminder for others. While there are any number of ways to explore it's meaning, a few brief bullet points are included in our **College Hill Brochure**, which is always available on the Information Table in the Narthex. It is something we hand out to share with visitors. Under the heading, “**What is Progressive Christianity?**” it states, “**While there is no one definition, there are some basic characteristics such as:**

- Willingness to question tradition, including orthodox understandings of:
  - church doctrine and
  - biblical interpretation
- Respect of intellectual integrity, including the use of the latest in biblical and scientific knowledge and understanding
- Acceptance and affirmation of human diversity – a ministry of hospitality and inclusiveness
- Strong emphasis on ministries to promote social justice, peace, care of the environment, and all of God’s good creation
- Centrality of the commandment to love one another – a ministry of compassion
- Outreach to those for whom organized religion has proved ineffectual, irrelevant, or repressive
- A life of faith is approached as a journey, not a destination

I cannot speak for your personal journey of faith, but in my own, I again state that I am one of those who made that transformation by how I understand what the apostle Paul declares, **“Do not be conformed to this world” – which for me includes simply giving intellectual assent to much of traditional Christian dogma – “but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.”** By that, I do not mean that those who cling to traditional theology or dogma should be ostracized, let alone demonized, for their beliefs. For like us, their journey of faith has led them to where they are. For as the apostle Paul reminds us in this same passage, “...I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment.” And ultimately, **any judgment, from a biblical perspective, should come through evaluating the fruit – the good works – that a person’s beliefs lead them to in how they live their lives and treat other people.** Therefore, **let us beware of what becomes an often-unfair, overly-generalized judgment against conservative and/or evangelical Christians, because most do a great deal of good works.**

But to put Paul's words in a different way, there can be no transformation unless there is a renewing of one's mind. With the human tendency to be biased against that which is different, to see one's own opinions as gospel truth and set in stone, **how else can the ever-present fear of change be overcome unless there is some kind of transformation from the norm and status quo?**

The actual Greek word used for 'transformation' is *metamorphousthai*, from which we also get the word 'metamorphosis,' which is an even a stronger and more dynamic word than transformation. Think of a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. **Paul is calling for nothing less than our metamorphosis, our transformation through the power of the Divine beyond, among, and within us.** As we all have experienced, this transformation by the renewing – the changing – of our mind is not a one-time event. Rather, it is **an ongoing, continual transformation and renewal. It is often circular instead of linear.**

The 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans marks a transformation, of sorts, in the structure of Paul's letter. **For Paul, the concept and practice of living in faithful obedience as a follower of the ways and teachings of Jesus, is what Christianity is all about. Therefore, faith and obedience go hand in hand.** Chapters 1-11 of Romans deal primarily with the faith part of faithful obedience. These chapters are generally designated as the 'theological' section of the letter. Beginning now with chapter 12, and continuing through the end, Paul shifts his focus to the obedience part of faithful obedience. This is where Paul offers 'ethical' instructions – the practical side of how to live a life of faith.

Again, for Paul there is no separation between faith and obedience – trust in God, and putting our faith into action. Therefore, **our inward transformation, which includes the thoughts in our minds, needs to result in an outward Christ-like behavior, thus reflecting the image of God. Otherwise, and this is what Paul is getting at, what's the point of Christianity?**

**Faithful obedience means we must live our transformation!** The big question is: How do you and I, how does this community of faith, do this? In part, Paul tells us to do this through our spiritual worship – but with an expanded definition and understanding of worship than we have today. According to Paul, true worship isn't just a matter of what we do here on Sunday mornings in this church building. Rather, the **true worship of God is reflected every day of our lives in and through our thoughts, attitudes, and yes, our actions.**

Paul admonishes us to present ourselves – make ourselves available – to God. He states it a way that sounds a bit strange to our ears today, “present your bodies as a living sacrifice.” There’s a lot to unpack in that statement, but what this basically means is that we are to worship God with our entire self in our everyday life. **All of life, therefore, should be lived in a state of spiritual worship. And since there is no place where God is not present, the entire world (not just a church building) should be experienced as a sanctuary.** Being out in nature is certainly a sanctuary for many of us.

Paul diverges, therefore, from the classic Greek distinction between body and spirit – as in physical=bad, spiritual=good. Worship, then, isn’t something we do with just our hearts, minds, spirits, and voices. It also includes what we do with our bodies. That is why Paul instructs us that **our attitudes and our actions together are our proper living sacrifice to God.** We don’t talk much about the meaning of the word ‘sacrifice’. So, it may help to remember what the Old Testament passage from **Micah 6:6, 8** states about proper sacrifice.

*With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before God with burnt offerings...? God has told you, O people,  
what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to  
love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

This may indeed be what Paul has in mind when he tells us not to be conformed to this world – a world that is filled with attitudes and actions of injustice, cruelty, selfishness, pride, and inequality. Another way to translate Romans 12:2, then, is, “Do not let yourselves be shaped by what everyone else does, but rather **let yourselves be transformed by a whole new way of thinking, so that you can discern what conforms to God’s will.**” Basically, to love one another. Let us not model our behavior on the many negative values of the world around us.

What we have here, then, is a clear call to **nonconformity**. You may have never thought of yourself in those terms before – being a nonconformist. (Well, I know some of you have!) It’s what civil rights leader, Rep. John Lewis, encourages, “Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.”

**In order to act differently, we need to begin by thinking differently. That, in turn, is reinforced by our actions** (that’s called cognitive behavior). These very thoughts themselves reflect the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives and in the ongoing process of the renewing of our minds. These past few years, living through a worldwide pandemic, our nation’s own political turmoil and threats to our democracy, a revived racial reckoning, watching and living through devastating effects of climate change, and other events, has led to the renewing of minds for a lot of people, thus true transformation. Hopefully, that transformation will make a profound difference in our approach to our current moment in history, and the future. There is much renewing of minds, however, that still needs to happen before real and necessary transformation can be realized, so that we can indeed discern what conforms to the will of God, and not to this world. So, this coming week, I encourage you to reflect upon the following questions:

- How are you daily offering your body – your entire self – in worship as a living sacrifice to God, and in following the ways and teachings of Jesus?

- How is God (currently as well as in the past) transforming you by the renewing of your mind?
- How are you, and we together as a community of faith, guided by the Holy Spirit through our words and actions to renew the minds of others in order to bring about real and lasting transformation, in church and society?

It is indeed a blessing to be part of a community of faith that takes seriously the renewing of our minds as a means to transformation, thus a crucial part of our life-long journey of faith.

Amen.

Resources:

*Romans* by David L. Bartlett, Westminster Bible Companion series, 1995.