

CHRIST FORMED IN YOU

The Power of the Gospel for Personal Change

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Christ Formed in You

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Foreword

Do not try the following when you are discouraged by the lack of spiritual progress among those in your ministry setting. In other words, if you have been experiencing disappointment with the spiritual condition of those in your discipleship group, Bible class, or church, wait awhile before you attempt the experiment I suggest. For if you aren't discouraged before you try this little quiz, you almost certainly will be afterward.

Distribute pens and paper to all who are present. Then ask, "How many times do you think you have heard the gospel?" Some listeners, especially those who have been Christians for many years or who have attended Bible-preaching churches since childhood, may roll their eyes and say, "Thousands of times." Others will nod, affirming their repeated exposure to the gospel.

"Good!" you reply. "And since most of you profess to be Christians, you certainly had to not only hear the gospel, but understand it well enough to believe it and be saved, right?"

Again, you'll see relaxed, confident affirmations all around.

"Great! Since you're all so familiar with the gospel, I'm sure you won't have any problems with this simple exercise. Please take a sheet

of paper and write down the gospel. In a paragraph or so, write the message people must hear, understand, and believe in order to be right with God and go to heaven.”

Watch people freeze.

“Please, go ahead now and write a paragraph declaring the gospel which you say you have heard perhaps thousands of times and which you understood and believed when you were saved.”

Now, in an increasingly uncomfortable silence, people will begin shifting in their seats, shuffling their feet, and staring at the sheet of paper. Many will not know what to write. The only thing more discouraging than these empty sheets will be some of the things people actually do write.

What will likely become depressingly apparent in this pop quiz is that an alarming number of those in your group are unclear on the most basic and important message of the Bible. Despite the fact that by their own admission they have read or heard countless presentations of the gospel and claim to have experienced new life in Christ through its power, they are unable to convey even the ABCs of the message of salvation.

What are the implications of this inability to articulate the gospel? For some, it surely reveals the reality that they aren’t Christians at all. If you maintain—as I hope you do—that no one is saved apart from believing the gospel of Jesus Christ, it is rather hard to argue that a person has savingly believed the gospel if they cannot convey—in their own words and at their own level of understanding—the message they claim to have believed.

For those who are genuine Christians, but for whatever reason are unable to articulate the gospel, there’s another implication: Their efforts at personal evangelism are likely to be seldom and shallow. If someone cannot communicate the gospel in the loving environment of a gathering of Christians, how can they possibly do so with unbelievers out in the world? No amount of pulpit encouragement or shame about evangelism will motivate them to speak words under pressure that they cannot express in the best of circumstances.

Still another implication for true Christians who are unclear on the gospel—and the one most relevant to this book—is that a weak grasp

of the gospel is a hindrance to holiness. Or to put it positively, those who know the gospel best are those most likely to become closest to Christ and most like Christ. Brian Hedges understands that the pursuit of “the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14) requires a clear understanding of the gospel. For it is in the gospel that we see Christ in His glory most clearly. And the better we understand and feast our souls on the gospel of Christ, the more intimate with and like Jesus we become. This, writes the author of the book in your hands, is the message of 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.” Or as Hedges puts it, “God changes us by giving us a vision of his glory revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Turn the page now, and in the lines that follow, may you more clearly see “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

—Donald S. Whitney
Associate Professor of Biblical Spirituality
& Senior Associate Dean
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY

Introduction

Have you ever been in a situation where you knew your destination but couldn't find your way? It happens to me with almost predictable regularity. In fact, I've been lost in nearly every big city I've ever visited. Just ask my wife. In these moments of dislocation and disorientation, we need two things for our journey to be a success: a map and someone to show the way. When you come right down to it, we usually need a third thing as well. Especially men. When our journey has been reduced to an ineffective mix of hunches and guesswork, we need to admit that we're lost and need help!

Following Jesus is also a journey. Our destination is clear: conformity to the image of Christ. To be holy. Most Christians realize this and desire it. But we often feel disoriented in the midst of our journey. Though we know where we should be going, it can seem like we've lost our way.

A primary reason for this disorientation is simply that becoming more like Jesus—a process theologians often call “sanctification”—takes a lifetime, and life gets complicated. As the years unfold it can become unclear how sanctification really works, and how it fits with other elements of Christian life and thought. For anyone who takes faith seriously, honest, important questions will eventually arise.

- How do my current struggles with sin affect my standing with God?
- What practical steps must I take to deal with sin and nurture spiritual growth?
- What should I expect as I pursue change?
- How do I measure progress?
- And how do other aspects of my life—my longings for happiness, my personal disciplines and habits, my sufferings and trials, and my relationships with other people—fit into all this?

Dangers, Toils, and Snares

This journey towards holiness is further complicated by what the well-known hymn, “Amazing Grace,” describes as “many dangers, toils, and snares.” It is both terribly sad and undeniably true that a fair number of these perils have emerged from within Christianity itself.

Distortions of Emphasis

Many Christian traditions, all of them undoubtedly well-intentioned, emphasize certain aspects of biblical teaching to the neglect of others, leaving unsuspecting Christians with distorted ideas or false expectations about spirituality.

- Some put so much emphasis on having correct doctrine that the heart and affections get left behind in an overly intellectual approach to discipleship.
- Others so heavily emphasize inward piety and the importance of spiritual experience that they effectively replace joyful faith in Christ with an unhealthy and myopic introspection.
- Some neglect the work of the Holy Spirit altogether, leaving Christians with the impression that being holy is wholly dependent on moral effort and self-discipline.
- Still others put so much focus on the Spirit that believers wrongly view the Christian life as nothing more than a passive acquiescence to the Spirit’s work.

Misrepresentations of the Gospel

Even worse are teachings that eclipse the transforming power of the gospel altogether. These appear in two basic forms.

On one side of the spectrum are views that distort God's grace in ways that give license to ongoing patterns of sin. This is the error that Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace . . . the grace which amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner who departs from sin and from whom sin departs."

Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.¹

But on the other side of the spectrum, and even more contrary to the gospel and more detrimental to spiritual health than "cheap grace," are approaches to holiness that stress moral effort while neglecting the rich resources of God's grace in the gospel. This legalistic approach to holiness rips the heart out of Christianity, leaving people with nothing but the dead form of performance-based religion.

In his essay, "The Centrality of the Gospel," Tim Keller captures the gospel-centered balance we need:

The key for thinking out the implications of the gospel is to consider the gospel a "third" way between two mistaken opposites . . . Tertullian said, "Just as Christ was crucified between two thieves, so this doctrine of justification is ever crucified between two opposite errors." Tertullian meant that there were two basic false ways of thinking, each of which "steals" the power and the distinctiveness of the gospel from us by pulling us "off the gospel line" to one side or the other. These two errors are very powerful, because they represent the natural tendency of the human heart and mind . . . These "thieves" can be called *moralism* or *legalism* on the one hand, and *hedonism* or *relativism* on the other hand. Another way to put it is: The gospel opposes both *religion* and *irreligion*. On the one hand, "moralism/religion" stresses truth without grace, for it says that we must obey the truth in order to be saved. On the other hand, "relativists/irreligion" stresses grace without truth, for

they say that we are all accepted by God (if there is a God) and we have to decide what is true for us. But “truth” without grace is not really truth, and “grace” without truth is not really grace. Jesus was “full of grace *and* truth.” Any religion or philosophy of life that de-emphasizes or loses one or the other of these truths, falls into legalism or into license, and either way the joy and power and “release” of the gospel is stolen by one thief or the other.²

These “two thieves” of legalism and license have plagued the church throughout its history, doing great damage and hindering many in their journey. It is directly between these extremes, therefore, that we must live, safe in the truth of the all-sufficient cross of Christ. This is how we reliably make progress toward the destination of Christlikeness.

To aid us on our way we need a good, accurate map. A map that not only tells where we are in the journey, but one that marks the path clearly and warns us of the dangers, toils, and snares—from our own hearts, from the temptations of this fallen world, and from well-meaning but misguided Christian teachers—that we will encounter along the way.

Piecing Together a Puzzle

My personal journey towards Christlikeness has certainly not been a straight line from conversion to transformation. I’ve often felt disappointed with my lack of progress and confused by the conflicting perspectives on how to change. But I’ve also experienced surges of growth as the Lord has opened to my mind the glories of Christ’s work in the gospel and the ways of his Spirit in the heart. Nor is my journey complete. I continue to fight sin and learn of my daily need for repentant faith in the crucified and risen Christ. My spiritual growth has been like putting together a jigsaw puzzle—slowly the borders have been formed and key pieces have fit into place, and the big picture has gradually taken shape.

The goal of this book is to explain where the process of transformation fits and how it happens in the Christian life. I hope to bring together various aspects of spiritual formation in a way that is unusual for most books. Many authors do a wonderful job of focusing on one or two of the following areas.

- The content of the gospel—unfolding what God has done for us in the cross and the resurrection of Christ.
- The application of the gospel—discussing the implications of the cross for daily life.
- The priority of holiness and the necessity of mortifying sin—explaining what holiness is and how putting sin to death is an essential and ongoing responsibility in any Christian’s life.
- The motivating power in Christian spirituality—describing the inner dynamics of grace and joy in helping us glorify God through the pursuit of holiness.
- The nature and means of spiritual transformation—explaining how people grow spiritually through the use of various methods (such as meditation and prayer).
- The role of suffering in spiritual growth—encouraging us to embrace trials as one of God’s means of changing us.
- The importance of community in our discipleship—reminding us that we need others to help us in our journey to Christlikeness.

I have been greatly helped by many of these books, authored by contemporary theologians and pastors such as J. I. Packer, John Stott, John Piper, Sinclair Ferguson, D. A. Carson, Don Whitney, Paul Tripp, Jerry Bridges, Richard Lovelace, and Tim Keller; as well as classic books on spirituality from previous generations written by great stalwarts of the faith such as Saint Augustine, John Calvin, John Bunyan, Jonathan Edwards, John Owen, Charles Spurgeon, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and C. S. Lewis. As I’ve read these and other authors over the past fifteen years, different pieces of the puzzle have slowly come together, giving shape to a larger vision of what the gospel is about and how it connects to the various dimensions of my spiritual life. My purpose in this book is to bring these pieces together, presenting a single, unified, gospel-centered vision of how to understand and live the Christian life.

The Power of the Gospel for Personal Change

Because you have picked up this book, you must feel the need for change in your own life. When you examine your attitudes, relationships,

thought-patterns, and personal habits, it doesn't take long to realize how far you still have to grow, does it? If you are like me, such self-assessment can quickly become discouraging! We know we need to change, but how do we pursue it?

My central claim in *Christ Formed in You* is that it is God's purpose to change us by progressively making us more like Jesus, and that this happens only as we understand and apply the gospel to our lives. In the pages that follow we will explore the transforming power of the gospel from several angles.

Part One focuses on the *foundations* for personal change. We will look at God's ultimate goal in transforming us (Chapter 1); the key to transformation, which is the gospel itself (Chapter 2); and the application of the gospel to our lives in three specific ways (Chapters 3, 4, and 5).

Part Two then takes up the *pattern* of personal change. We will explore the captivating beauty of gospel holiness (Chapter 6); with its demands that we both kill sin (Chapter 7); and grow in grace by the power of the Spirit (Chapter 8); and the quest for joy that motivates us in this pursuit and strengthens us in the battle for holiness (Chapter 9).

Part Three of the book focuses on the *means* of personal change, the tools God uses to transform us. These final three chapters, while building on the foundation of the gospel discussed earlier in the book, are the most practical. We will learn how God uses spiritual disciplines (Chapter 10); suffering (Chapter 11); and personal relationships in the body of Christ (Chapter 12) to conform us to the image of Christ.

In each of these chapters, my aim has been to "connect the dots" between the gospel, the goal of Christlikeness, and the specific aspect of spirituality under discussion. As Keller writes, I want us to see that "we never get 'beyond the gospel' in our Christian life to something more 'advanced.'"

The gospel is not the first “step” in a “stairway” of truths, rather, it is more like the “hub” in a “wheel” of truth. The gospel is not just the A-B-C’s but the A to Z of Christianity. The gospel is not just the minimum required doctrine necessary to enter the kingdom, but the way we make all progress in the kingdom. We are not justified by the gospel and then sanctified by obedience, but the gospel is the way we grow (Gal.3:1–3) and are renewed (Col.1:6). It is the solution to each problem, the key to each closed door, the power through every barrier (Rom.1:16–17).³

This explains what I mean by the subtitle of this book: *The Power of the Gospel for Personal Change*. The seventeenth-century English Congregationalist pastor and theologian, John Owen, put it well in a sentence that summarizes the entire thrust of my book. He said, “Holiness is nothing but the implanting, writing, and realizing of the gospel in our souls.”⁴ His treatises on the glory of Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, communion with God, the nature of indwelling sin, temptation, and the mortification of sin provided a road map for pursuing gospel-driven holiness.

While I would never venture to compare either the depth of my knowledge or the historical significance of my ministry to Owen’s, I have benefited greatly from his writings (along with those of Tim Keller and others) and hope that this book might serve in a similar way as a map for twenty-first-century believers who long to experience the life-changing power of the gospel in their own journey toward holiness.

PART ONE

THE FOUNDATIONS FOR PERSONAL CHANGE

Anyone who knows me well knows that a handyman I am not. When it comes to home repairs, I attempt only the simplest of tasks. Attempting to do more would be willfully setting myself up for the temptation to sin through frustration and anger! My father-in-law, thankfully, excels where I do not, and every time he comes for a visit from Georgia, Holly and I provide him a long list of house projects to do. And, being the smart, amiable man that he is, he never fails to get the jobs done, effortlessly maintaining a winning attitude all the way. As he usually quips with a smile, “It’s one of the many services we offer.”

But you don’t have to be another Bob Vila to know that foundations, blueprints, and taking the right steps in the right order are important when building things. And this also holds true in our spiritual lives, which is why part one of this book is about the foundations for personal change.

The first chapter focuses on the goal of transformation. Allow me to mix in a couple more metaphors. When piecing together a puzzle, it helps to look at the picture on the box. Before setting out on a journey, it is generally best to know your final destination. The purpose of chapter 1 is to provide that picture, to define that destination, as it relates to spiritual transformation.

The intention of chapter 2 is somewhat different. Since the claim of this book (for more, I refer you to the Introduction) is that the gospel is the key to transformation, I have devoted chapter 2 to explaining what the gospel is.

This is followed by three chapters about the application of the gospel to our lives. Fair warning: this is where the heavy lifting in this book comes in. We'll be dealing with some big theological concepts, like justification, regeneration, and sanctification. I suppose it would be tempting for the theologically trained people to skip these chapters (because you already know this stuff) and for the non-theologically trained people to skip these chapters (because this stuff is too deep and you're more interested in the practical parts of the book).

But I hope you won't skip them. For one thing, some of the most practical things I have to say in this book are carefully woven into these chapters. For another, I've tried to write these chapters in a way that both captures the beauty of what God has done for us in a fresh way and connects the dots between theology and the rest of life.

So, whatever your level of interest in theology may or may not be, I hope that you will prayerfully dive in to these chapters and discover new depths of joy in what God has accomplished through Christ and the Spirit to deliver you from both the guilt and grip of sin.

1

Restoring God's Broken Image

The Goal

The glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God.

—Irenaeus

By the time David Garrett was eight years old, he was studying violin with the world's finest teachers, practicing seven hours a day, and making solo appearances with legendary orchestras, including the London Philharmonic. As an adolescent, he studied at the Juilliard School in New York City.

In 2003, for the price of one million dollars, Garrett purchased a Guaragnini, a rare 236-year-old violin made by a student of Stradivarius. But on December 27, 2007, after a brilliant performance at the Barbican in London, David Garrett tripped, fell down a flight of stairs, and landed on the valuable instrument. Though still in its case, the violin was smashed, sustaining damage to the body, neck, and sound

post. Restoration was predicted to take eight months and cost more than \$120,000. Experts doubted the finely crafted instrument would ever sound the same.

Garrett's unfortunate accident and crushed violin recall a darker tragedy—the Fall of Man and the devastation that followed. We live in the rubble of the world's resulting brokenness. Pain, sickness, suffering, sin, crime, violence, war, alienation from God, shattered relationships, disease, natural disaster, and death are on every side, the ruins of our broken world. Can it all be made right? Is restoration possible?

Scripture teaches that restoration is not only possible, but is a certain reality, secured by God himself through the redeeming death and resurrection of his Son and realized in our lives by the power of his Spirit. The gospel is about nothing less than the redemption of fallen human beings and the perfect, complete restoration of our broken world. As Christ himself says in the closing pages of Scripture, “Behold, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5).

Restoration through the gospel is the hope of all Christians. But the practicality of the good news for personal transformation *here* and *now* sometimes escapes us. Someday, everything that is wrong with the world will be made right forever. God will wipe away every tear from our eyes; mourning, crying, pain, and death will be no more (Rev. 21:4). But is genuine change in *my* life possible *now*? And if so, how does it happen?

I believe transformation is possible. The goal of this book is to explain how. More than that, I hope to bring together various aspects of the Christian life in a way that is somewhat unusual in Christian books. As I mentioned in the introduction, many books do a wonderful job of clearly presenting the *content* of the gospel so that we might clearly understand what Christ did for us, or helping us grasp the *practical significance* of the gospel for daily life, or offering us *fresh motivation* for the Christian life in God's purpose to glorify himself and satisfy our souls, or teaching us to embrace the various *means of grace*—such as spiritual disciplines, suffering, and community—by which God matures us in the faith. This book attempts to bring all these approaches together, presenting a single, unified vision for how to change.

To best understand and fully experience the transforming power of the gospel, we must begin with the end in mind. What is God's ultimate goal in saving and changing us? To answer this we need to grasp why God created us in the first place, what has been lost by human sin, and what God through Christ and the Spirit has done and is doing about it. In other words, we need to frame our concerns about personal change in the larger story of God's saving work, the story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.

Creation: Images of His Glory

Why did God create us? For what purpose? The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* answers, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever."¹ Speaking originally of the scattered exiles of Israel whom God promised to redeem, Isaiah 43:6–7 agrees:

I will say to the north, Give up,
and to the south, Do not withhold;
bring my sons from afar
and my daughters from the end of the earth,
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.

In the first chapter of Genesis we don't read that man was created for God's *glory*, but in God's *image*. What's the difference? Not much. As Sinclair Ferguson has noted, "In Scripture, image and glory are interrelated ideas. As the image of God, man was created to reflect, express, and participate in the glory of God, in miniature, creaturely form."² The *Heidelberg Catechism* agrees, "God created man good, and after his own image, in true righteousness and holiness, that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love him and live with him in eternal happiness to glorify and praise him."³

God created human beings in his image so that they would glorify him by rightly representing him. In other words, the more we resemble God, the better we honor him. With this in mind, look at Genesis 1:26–27.

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Human beings were God’s crowning achievement in creation. We alone are made in God’s image, after his likeness. Our creation alone was prefaced with the transcript of God’s consultation within himself: “Let us make man in our image.” For the creation of everything else Scripture simply records God’s words, “Let there be . . . and it was so.” But man and woman were different. We were designed and commissioned by God with a special assignment in creation: to display God. As the early church father Irenaeus said, “The glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God.”⁴

Let’s unpack what it means to be created in the image of God by briefly looking at three interrelated aspects of it.

To Reflect

To be created in the image of God means we are designed to display God’s nature, character, and glory. As a mirror is made for reflection, so God created us to be mirrors of his character, instruments for reflecting his glory.⁵

Created in God’s image, we are invested with special dignity and entrusted with particular duties. Our distinct worth as human beings springs from being God’s image-bearers, the unique reflectors of his character on earth. The rest of creation *declares* God’s glory, speaking of it vividly in a great variety of ways (Ps. 19:1). But we *reflect* it, actually making it, in small part, visible and tangible.

One of the supreme ways we reflect God’s glory is by relating to other human beings in God-honoring ways. We ascribe glory to God’s name by reflecting his character to others. As Anthony Hoekema writes, “We should not think of the image of God only as a noun but also as a verb: we are to *image* God by the way we live, and the heart of the image of God is love for God and for others.”⁶

To Relate

To be God's image-bearers means we are created for relationships. This is implied in Genesis 1:26–27: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

Why does the text connect being created in God's image with being created male and female? Not because God himself is both masculine and feminine—he is unequivocally masculine. It is because God himself is a community—a trinity of persons, existing in eternal self-giving love. In creating man and woman together, he created a community. God created man to image his glory, but his glory could not be adequately displayed by an individual living in isolation from others. God himself says in Genesis 2:18, “It is not good that man should be alone.” As John Ortberg writes,

Community is rooted in the being of God . . . The Trinity exists as a kind of eternal dance of joyful love among Father, Son, and Spirit . . . God created human beings because he was so in love with community that he wanted a world full of people to share it with. He wanted to invite them all to the dance. And life within the Trinity was to be the pattern for our lives.⁷

At the core of our nature as God's image-bearers, we are *relational* beings. This involves a threefold relationship: “between man and God, between man and his fellowmen, and between man and nature.”⁸

To Reign

As God's image-bearers, we are also to exercise dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:26, 28). God created human beings to serve as his vice-regents, reigning as his representatives and stewards over the created world. God placed the first man in the Garden of Eden “to work it and keep it” (Gen. 2:15). As God's delegated representatives on earth, human beings are intended to reign over the world—tending and maintaining it—not in exploitation, but in wise, responsible stewardship. Exercising this stewardship, human beings can reflect to the world the radiance of God's infinite worth and glory.