

CONFORM OR TRANSFORM?

ROMANS 12:1-2, 9-21

MAY 7, 2006

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We are in the season of Resurrection. The lesson today is from Paul's immortal *Letter to the Romans*—perhaps the greatest theological testament of all time.

Paul has just concluded the mission to which he devoted years of his life: collecting money from the Gentile churches of Asia Minor for Jewish Christians living in poverty in Jerusalem. This special campaign has served as a model for the church's giving to mission ever since.

What is so fascinating is that Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians were the early church version of Red states and Blue states. But Paul believed in the power of Jesus Christ to overcome any human divide. So he exhorted the Gentile Christians to reach deep and give to the fund for Jewish Christians. Sort of like Al Franken paying for Rush Limbaugh's subscription to the Wall St. Journal.

The second half of Paul's career was devoted to starting a church in Spain, a mission he never completed because of his martyrdom in Rome. But as he planned his mission to the Iberian Peninsula his first step was to convince the Romans to serve as his base camp.

Paul had not visited Rome before writing his letter but he knew the churches there were divided by Gentile v. Jewish Christian tensions: which was really a debate over whether you had to become a Jew first before you could follow Jesus.

Paul supported the Gentile or "strong" view of Christian faith—the belief that faith in Christ alone was enough. The Jewish Christian view was called the "weak" view because it required the reassurance of Torah—sort of like hedging your bets: if Jesus doesn't work maybe Torah will. But Paul was clear and adamant: strong Christians were to honor and serve weak Christians and never think themselves superior.

The letter to the Romans is eloquent because Paul was on a sabbatical between these two great chapters of his ministry. He took time to reflect deeply and carefully write this letter because the stakes of the Spanish mission were riding on his argument.

In today's reading, after he lobbies for the "strong" view of faith in Christ, he taps into the power of Christ—his conviction that through Christ humans can overcome any obstacle they face. This is where he parts company with those who say we need the Law, Torah to live the new life, to be Christian. The law is adhered to by human effort and is dead says Paul. Rather what we need is the power of Christ which transforms our whole nature into something new.

Do not adapt to this world, let your minds be remade and your whole nature transformed. Let hope keep you joyful, persist in prayer, contribute to the needs of God's people, call down blessings on your persecutors, care about each other, do not be haughty, be honorable, do not seek revenge, use good to defeat evil.

Paul was convinced when he wrote those words that the Risen Christ was soon to appear, bring history to a conclusion and restore the church to celestial glory. But there is a lingering question.

My hunch is that there must have been some poor soul in one of the churches in Rome, sitting in some Case Library conversation discussing Paul's letter. I can imagine that man raising his hand saying, "Yes, yes, but what is transformation? How is it accomplished? How do we live new lives in an old, broken world?"

How do we let hope keep us joyful when the news from the biopsy is bad? How do we serve the Lord with energy and zeal when we are exhausted from paying the bills, keeping the house clean and raising a family? Why should we not pay back evil with evil when office politics prevents a deserved promotion because of the color of our skin or gender?

Let me suggest there are at least three steps to take if we are to be transformed people in an untransformed world. The first is illustrated by one of our dynamic Presbyterian congregations outside of Washington, DC.

They struggle with this question in their vision statement: "In claiming the grace of God and living free forgiven lives, we face one of our greatest problems," they say. "In our urban, driven, secular place of power, we struggle daily with an enormous barrier to faithful living. Our environment insulates us from those who are affected by our materialistic consumption. We assuage our hunger for wholeness by blurring priorities and boundaries around work, family, leisure and church, by mindless spending, and by abusing God's creation."

That congregation wrestles with the question how do we live the new life in an old world by doing what the AA twelve steps calls "a searching and fearless moral inventory." They take an honest look at themselves, accept their humanity and acknowledge they have acted like the world we live in.

St. Paul would approve, for in this very letter to the Romans he says elsewhere "I do that which I do not want to do and do not do that which I want." This is the first step. But Paul does not stop there. The next step, after acknowledging that we don't live the transformed lives we want to live, is to start living "as if."

This past week I got into a conversation with the clerk at Talking Leaves book store. He was a young man, pierced and tattooed and had an artistic way about him. He commented on a notebook I was purchasing. He said he is using the same notebook to write a children's book about how to live nutritionally and to care for the environment.

Even though we live in the old world of an oil economy, suffering from pollution this young man is living "as if" he were in the new world of a green economy and healthy living. One group I know calls this "fake it, till you make it." Live "as if." Live as if everything Christ said was true even though sometimes you are faced with situations that make you wonder: can I really love my neighbor, am I really capable of turning my other cheek, can I give away my life and hope to get it back even though it looks like it will be lost forever?

How do we become transformed people in an untransformed world? Repent of our failure to live as a transformed people. Resolve to live “as if” the message of Christ and the Bible were the only way of life. Finally, to be transformed people in an untransformed world we have to fall in love.

I am thinking of a wise, elderly widow who wears her husband’s large gold ring dangling from a gold chain around her neck. They had a fifty year love affair. Fifty years of romance. They were in love. His death has not been easy. But seeing that ring reminds me what a team they were. Each one transformed by the other into their new identity as a couple.

When we fall in love like that we give away the agenda of our life to something bigger than ourselves. Something that includes the other, serves the other’s best interests. Following Christ, living the new life in Christ is exactly the same. It’s a love affair. Letting go of controlling the outcomes of my life, giving my will into the care of God. Not telling God what I want done in my life but asking God how can I serve him today.

Repent. Live “as if.” Fall in love. Being transformed in old world happens if we let it happen. If we open ourselves to it—as Paul asks us to do. The operative verb in verse two is “*let*.” That’s when the power of Christ’s Spirit enters our lives and remakes us.

Like that wise widow, I could tell by the twinkle in her eye and glow of her face; she placed her bet long ago on trusting something bigger than herself and she was transformed in the process.

Maybe it doesn’t matter that Paul never established the church in Spain because those who read his letter in Rome got the message.

They carried Paul’s conviction that power of Jesus Christ could overcome any obstacle we face in this life to the farthest reaches of the planet: to Spain and South America and Asia.

So come to the table. The feast of Christ’s sacrifice is prepared. *Let* us keep it and *let* us *let* him transform us into his glad and faithful people. Amen.