

# CHAPTER 7

## WALK: CONFORMING TO WHAT?

**W**hat is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear a sermon on Romans 12:2: “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”? The change from a caterpillar into a butterfly is the process typically used to illustrate “transformation.”<sup>1</sup> Notice the context is not concerned with becoming a new creation, becoming a Christian. So what kind of transformation was Paul addressing? And does the definition of the word help?

The butterfly illustration paints a vivid picture. A caterpillar emerging from a cocoon as a beautiful butterfly, fluttering into flight, captures a biological wonder. Nevertheless, metamorphosis does not always refer to a physical change. Major changes or alterations in character are also a valid consideration.<sup>2</sup> A larva becoming a butterfly describes a supernatural change, but this is not actually Paul’s point in Romans 12:2. Rather he addressed a change the Christian himself is responsible for and is commanded to make—a makeover visible in the believer’s behavior as his life lines up with God’s word.

While Popeye illustrates the typical supernatural view to empowerment for Christian living based on Acts 1:8, Romans 12 gives the biblical perspective for living to be approved before God. Romans 12:2 is

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an echo of Romans 6, where positional righteousness was contrasted with practical righteousness, and Romans 8, where choices in practical righteousness concern living with respect to the Spirit versus the flesh. If the Spirit's ministry is primarily that of influence rather than causation, then *choices rather than empowerment* lead to Christlikeness. A study of Romans 12:2 makes evident that Christians are *not* transformed by the Spirit's power. Rather individual decisions make or break the transformation process. Lets look at this text to see if that is true.

### Transformation Process

#### **Transforming Texts**

In this book we are offering an alternative to the mainstream Spirit-causes-obedience view for Christian living. One reason this typical view is adopted is the use of the verb form of "transformation," which is used *only* four times in the New Testament as shown below (italics added).

And He *was transfigured* before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light (Matt 17:2).

Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He *was transfigured* before them (Mark 9:2).

And do not be conformed to this world, but *be transformed* by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:2).

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, *are being transformed* into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18).

The two Gospel references in Matthew and Mark refer to the transfiguration of Christ. Obviously it was a miraculous event when the Disciples were shown His glory. On the other hand, the remaining two occurrences relate to believers and their Christian experience.

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Romans 12:2 tells us that renewing the mind is the agent of change in conforming to Christ, while 2 Corinthians 3:18, a difficult passage to interpret, seems to imply that the Holy Spirit is the agent of change.

### **Mirror Analogies**

Using a mirror analogy, Paul wrote,

17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. 18 But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:17-18).

It must be determined what is the actual agent of the transformation in this important text. There are two primary options. First, the Spirit’s power causes the believer to be conformed to Christ. This is the supernatural approach, with the Spirit responsible for the change. Second, constantly beholding Christ transforms the believer so that he is more and more like Christ. In this case, the individual Christian is responsible. The selection will affect your understanding of the Holy Spirit’s present work in the Christian’s life. So which is correct?

By the rules of interpretation, the clearer passage (Rom 12:2) should be used to interpret the far less clear passage (2 Cor 3:18). While many use 2 Corinthians 3:18 to interpret Romans 12:2, a noted theologian correctly uses the clearer text to help understand the less clear one. In reference to 2 Corinthians 3:18, he wrote,

In this passage the Spirit is not the [Holy Spirit] but is identified with the ascended, glorified Lord. The Christian’s preoccupation with his exalted Lord will mean that he will be more and more conformed to the image of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Another author agrees with that assessment, when he wrote,

Again, let me remind you that Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 3:18 that we ought to behold Jesus Christ. The idea is, we should be steadfastly beholding him. The word “beholding” is in the present tense, which signifies a steady kind of action— looking

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at him, looking at him, looking at him...The more you and I look at him, the more we become like him.<sup>4</sup>

A passage outside the Pauline writings supports both men's perspective, providing insight to 2 Corinthians 3:18 and therefore clarifying the interpretation of Romans 12:2. James 1:22 and 25 uses the same mirror analogy.

22 But prove [*be*] yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For...25 one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.

Looking intently into the mirror of God's Word and abiding in it (make one's home there) results in a believer becoming a Word-doer and a work-doer. Likewise 2 Corinthians 3:18 pictures a believer exposed to the Lord in a mirror, which over time, transforms the believer more and more into the image of Christ. Isn't this the concept in Romans 12:2 where transformation comes by renewing the mind through exposure to the Word of God? Of course it is! The emphasis of Roman 12:2 is not the transforming work of the Holy Spirit but rather the transforming work of God's Word as the Christian focuses on Christ.

### **Focusing on Christ**

Focusing on Christ takes us back to chapter 6 where we also addressed 2 Corinthians 3:18 and James 1:22, 25. There we concluded "focusing on Christ is a lifelong process of getting to know God as revealed in the Scriptures." Gradually, we become imitators of our Savior. Remember, "Jesus Christ didn't break into human history just to satisfy the curiosity of one generation."<sup>5</sup> His words and actions are for every generation, providing exposure to God Himself and His wishes for those who follow Him. As we intently look, observe, and abide in the Word of God, "we become like the object of our attention."<sup>6</sup>

Exposure to God changed Moses' countenance (2 Cor 3) and exposure to Christ should change the Christian's conduct. Of course maturing in Christ assumes a growing understanding of God's Word

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and then applying it in your life. The increasing accumulation and application of truth leads to maturity. It is dependent on the everyday decisions of the believer.

### Renewing the Mind

#### **Renewing Texts**

The term *renewing* is used only five times in the New Testament, as shown below (italics added). None teach that the Spirit renews the mind. Titus 3:5 *alone* addressed the work of the Spirit regarding “renewing.” There initial salvation—a renewed person in Christ—is in view. The remaining four passages refer to the Christian and his walk.

Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is *being renewed* day by day (2 Cor 4:16).

And have put on the new self who is *being renewed* to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him (Col 3:10).

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the *renewing* of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:2).

He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and *renewing* by the Holy Spirit (Tit 3:5).

And that you *be renewed* in the spirit of your mind (Eph 4:23).

The 2 Corinthian 4:16 and Colossians 3:10 mention the potential of the new person in Christ being renewed, being changed or made new, daily. Notice in the parallel texts of Colossians 3:10 and Ephesians 4:23 renewal concerns the “mind” and “knowledge.” The term *knowledge* in Colossians 3:10 refers to the knowledge of God and His will.<sup>7</sup> One would conclude that increasing exposure to and impact of God’s Word

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in the Christian's mind is in view, particularly since that is the idea in Romans 12:2. In each text referring to the Christian life, a renewed mind, not the Spirit, is the basis of the believer's transformation.

At initial salvation, believers are given an "illuminated mind" (1 Cor 2:15-16). Without this mind, receptiveness to godly thinking is thwarted (1 Cor 2:14). The believer's mind is to be continually and increasingly developed or revitalized through growing exposure to God's Word (see Appendix B). While the "illuminated mind" relates to the believer's new position in Christ, an increasingly "renewed mind" through the Word leads to a growing intimacy and fellowship, bringing increased maturity.

### **Words and Your Mind**

The author was a founder and the director of a high-tech consulting firm. For more than thirty years the firm provided competitive, market-share data to its clients. Annually each client was required to sign a six-page contract stipulating the way the market data provided could be used in their business. A few years ago, one client initiated a legal dispute relating to some restrictions specified in the contract. My lawyers and the client's lawyers sat down to discuss the issue. The detailed dialogue on the exact wording of every portion of the contract was tedious, time consuming, and quite costly. Thankfully as a result, the client had to agree with our legal position.

### *Words Have Meaning*

You do not have to be involved in a business dispute to understand that words have meaning and groups of words communicate thoughts. In government, the exact wording of a treaty is critically important for peace and averting war. In the kitchen, the wording of a recipe results in success or failure. You might be saying to yourself, "I'm not a lawyer, a diplomat or a chef. Someone will need to explain contracts, treaties, and recipes to me." While I must admit that lawyers have their own language, an average person can understand a normal reading of any communication simply by knowing definitions and following the structural arrangement of words. I am not saying it is necessarily

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easy. I may take some work, but it can be done. You can understand the original intent and meaning a document.

God has communicated to us through the words in the Scripture. “God has revealed himself in words to minds.”<sup>8</sup> In taking the “initiative to reveal himself...shows that our minds are capable of understanding [His words].”<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless I can hear you saying, “I’m certainly not a theologian. Someone must explain the Scripture to me.” Not so! Admittedly grasping the historical setting may require some study, particularly for the Old Testament, and a good translation is a necessity, but the average person can understand the original intended meaning in the books of the Bible.<sup>10</sup> Knowing the definition of the words used and following the structural arrangement of those words, Bible study is exactly like studying any other document. Nevertheless, you must remain cognizant that what is written is not just ordinary words. They are the very words of God, His message to you and me. Consequently, studying the Scripture is not to be just a mechanical or technical endeavor because the Spirit’s ministry is involved (see chapter 10).

### *Words Demand a Response*

For Christians the Scripture is God’s “how to” book. The content does not just offer suggestions, but actual guidelines in order to live successfully in the Christian life. The Scriptures are our blueprint, our manual for every decision and the guide for conduct in living.

**16** All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; **17** so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17).

Did you catch that? Paul taught that God’s Word provides each one of us with all that is necessary to be “equipped for every good work.” The very good works for which we were created (Eph 2:10). Computer terminology has the expression *garbage in; garbage out*. For the Christian we might say, “What goes in is what come out,” or *Scripture in, Scripture out*. God’s communication to us was not merely an information download. It was given in order to re-orient our mind so

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that it increasingly aligns with His thinking. “Right living begins with right thinking”<sup>11</sup> because “our actions are a product of our thinking.”<sup>12</sup>

### Conforming Conduct

#### Flow of the Text

So, how should we understand Romans 12:1-2?

1 Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

A grammatical layout of Romans 12:1-2 gives a clear perspective (see chart 7-1) and a better understanding of the transformation process. Paul’s argument is readily recognized in the flow of thought below (author’s translation).

This text begins with an *appeal* based on the argument Paul made throughout the first eleven chapters regarding God’s work on behalf of believers in Christ.<sup>15</sup> In light of all God has done, Paul moves to the “how to” section of Romans—how Christians are to make themselves available to God. *Why?* In order not only to know what pleases Him but also for obedient living. This echoes Paul’s teaching in 6:13.

Do not go on *presenting* [to put at disposal] the members of your body to sin *as* instruments of unrighteousness; but *present* [to put at disposal] yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God (italics added).

Based on God’s work in the believer’s death and resurrection with Christ (Rom 6:1-11), Christians are told not to live improperly but rather obediently.

After encouraging believers to make themselves available for spiritual service, Paul then explained *how*.<sup>16</sup> With a familiar ring to 6:13a,



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7-1 <b>GRAMMATICAL LAYOUT ROMANS 12:1-2</b>		
VERSE	TEXT	CONTENT
1	put yourself at the disposal of God <sup>13</sup> and so <sup>14</sup>	<b>Appeal</b>
2	do not be conformed to the world's ways but be transformed [to be conformed to God's ways] by the renewing of your mind so that prove the will of God [God's ways]	<b>1st Command</b>  <b>2nd Command</b>  <b>Means</b>  <b>Result</b>

he first instructs Christians not to be conformed to the world. They are not to model their thinking and behavior after the world. Why is this critical? Believers can revert back to their old thinking and behavior (Eph 2:2). As in Romans 6:13b, Paul moves to the right response. He commands them to be transformed or changed. Changed to what? If believers are to be changed from practicing their old ways of thinking and habits, a different direction is necessary. Christian conduct needs to conform to God's new life within. He is to live God's way, not the world's.

How does the Christian know what to do? As discussed above, He must be increasingly familiar with God's Word. That is the *way* of change. Focusing on Christ, knowing what He taught and how He lived. Yes, that includes both the dos and the don'ts. As exposure to God's Word renews the Christian's mind, he increasingly reflects who he is in Christ.

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### **Change in Conduct**

Notice that the ultimate thrust of Romans 12:1-2 is the contrast between *conforming to the world* and *conforming to God's Word*. Paul charges believers to have a behavior makeover. Since Paul argues that a behavioral change is a consequence of new thinking, we must conclude that actions reflective of the world's ways are based on worldly thinking (fleshly mindset, Rom 8:5-6). On the other hand, the reprogramming the believer's thoughts to align with those of God's will become evident in the believer's conduct. Nevertheless, neither the change in thinking or behavior happens automatically.

Transformation is a process of incorporating Truth into a new, biblical frame of reference leading to the application of Truth—the *result*. A Bible-based frame of reference comes from reorienting the thought process and manifesting itself in real-live situations. This new mindset is the grid through which all choices are made and behavior is evaluated. Remember, *what you think matters because what you think determines what you do!*

Notice the *first command* is “do not to be conformed” and is in contrast to the *second command*, “be transformed.” The *result*: “may prove what the will of God is.” The second command is a specific call to change in order that the will of God is lived out (proven) in the believer's life. The text's concern is *not* just a transformed mind, but also a transformed life.

### **Result of Changed Conduct**

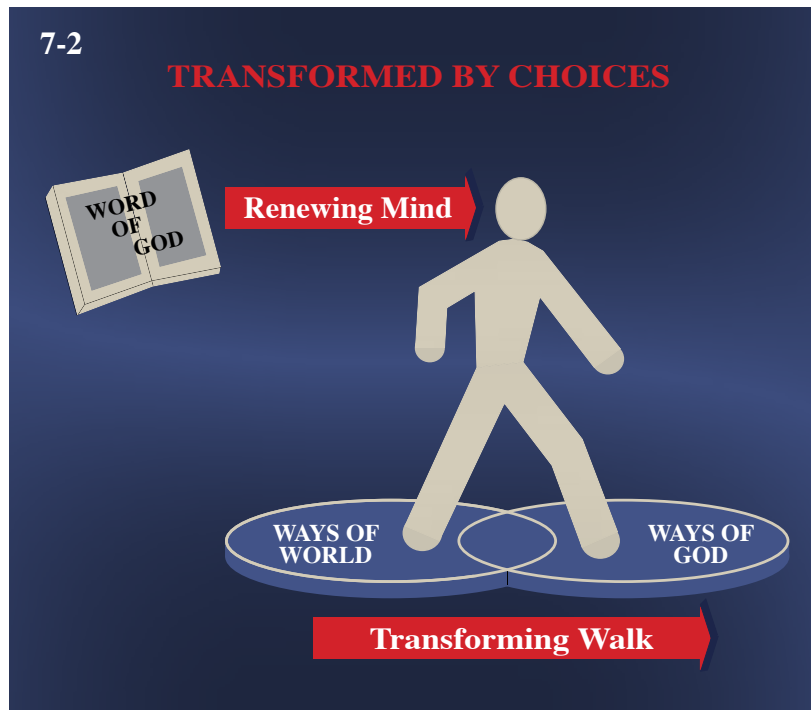
In Romans 12:2: “That you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect,” the use of the term *prove* or *proving* is identical to its use in Ephesians 5:8, 10: “Walk as children of Light...trying to learn [*proving*] what is pleasing [acceptable] to the Lord” (italics added). As believers live obediently as children of light (v 8), they are “[*proving*] what is pleasing to the Lord” (v 10, italics added). They demonstrate a lifestyle consistent with the ways of God as revealed in His Word by progressively conforming to God's will, not to the world. James likewise uses the term *proving* in the same way when he wrote, “Knowing that the testing [*proving*] of your faith

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produces endurance” (Jam 1:3, italics added) and “Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he *has been approved*, he will receive a crown of life” (v 12, italics added). He taught that the right response to trials evidences our conformity to God’s will. This echoes of the words of Jesus we discussed in an earlier chapter, “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (John 13:17). Knowing and doing should go hand in hand.

### Choosing to Become Like Christ

So, how is the believer in Romans 12:2 transformed? How is the Spirit involved?” The answer is *not* found in a mystical empowerment. Rather, the answer is found in knowing more and more of Christ through the Word and imitating Him in our decisions and in our obedience (see chart 7-2). This transformation process entails an internal struggle, as



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a believer must continually choose between the Word of God and the world—between the Spirit and the flesh. The agents of change are the Word and the Spirit. However, the Spirit does *not cause* obedience, rather the Spirit ministers through influence in filling, leading, teaching through the Word of God (see chapter 10). His work in the believer's life is not mystical intervention; instead He is a Helper. He does not manipulate; instead He is a gentle Teacher, leading and instructing.

Rather than pleading, “God, change my life,” and expect “special power” in order to live the Christian life, Christians must embrace God's Word and make choices that are in harmony with It. Only then will transformation be their experience. The Christian life is lived in cooperation with the Spirit, allowing the Spirit's influence to assist him in obeying God's Word and living out God's will.

Someone so wisely said, “We need to make good choices because the choices we make turn around and make us!”<sup>17</sup> Becoming more like Christ is a result of choosing Him versus the world. The decision is ours!