

# MYTH 8

Spirit Causes  
Transformation



## FREE TO CHOOSE

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*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.*

Romans 12:2

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*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 Corinthians 3:18

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TRUTH  
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In Lewis Carroll's classic, *Alice in Wonderland*, an interchange takes place between Alice and the Cheshire Cat, where two roads intersect:

*Which road do I take (Alice)*  
*Where do you want to go? (Cat)*  
*I don't know, Alice answered.*  
*Then, said the cat, it doesn't matter.*

In class at Dallas Seminary, Howard Hendricks would say, "If you don't have a goal, you will hit it every time." And "If it doesn't matter where you go, you will get there every time." Those without a moral compass will arrive wherever any road takes them.

Robert Frost postulated the need for evaluating choices, since those decisions ultimately make a difference in one's life. In the concluding stanza of his poem, *The Road Not Taken*, Frost wrote:

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*Two roads diverged in the wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

Frost understood that it does matter which road you take. Each path determines the outcome and the consequences that are the result of choosing. In the Christian life every believer faces diverging roads. At each turn a choice must be made: to follow Christ or to go in a different direction. The good news is that He has not left us without a roadmap to navigate through the twists and turns of life. His guidebook, the Bible, clearly defines the consequences of meandering down the wrong path.

### Embrace the Word

God has spoken, and it is important that we listen in order to keep on the right road. So unfold your map, the Word of God, and get set for the journey. Always remember that:

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

Inspired by God and handed down by the prophets and writers of the New Testament, the Bible is *profitable* for us in four key areas:

*Teaching*—making known the will of God

*Reproof*—exposing the sinful desires of man

*Correction*—revealing the way of correction

*Training*—providing the course of action for change

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Verse 17 tells the *result* of “following after God.” The believer is “adequate” (complete and ready) and “equipped” (fully outfitted) “for every good work.” Our spiritual map is our manual for every decision and action in the Christian life. If we are “following after God,” we can respond appropriately at each turn and intersection in life that comes our way.

### Translate the Road Map into Life

Redirecting your course in life can be a reality as you depend on the Scriptures as your road map for change. Having the charts in hand, however, does not mean the captain of a ship will automatically follow them; he has the choice to turn the ship in another direction. The same is true in the Christian life. Possessing a map does not guarantee success; it must be utilized and acted on. Rocks ahead can sink ships as well as individual lives. So, how do we translate the road map into life? How are lives transformed, so that they conform to God’s Word?

The verb form of “transformation” is used only four times in the New Testament.

Matt. 17:2 “He *was transfigured* before them”

Mark 9:2 “He *was transfigured* before them”

Rom. 12:2 “*Be transformed* by the renewing of your mind”

2 Cor. 3:18 “*Being transformed* into the same image”

The two Gospel references in Matthew and Mark refer to the transfiguration of Christ, when the disciples were shown His future glory. The two other occurrences relate to the believer. Romans 12:2 teaches that renewing the mind is the agent of change; and 2 Corinthians 3:18 (a difficult passage to interpret) seems to imply that the Spirit is the agent of change.

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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).

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

It is not clear that Paul conceives of the indwelling of the Spirit as an inner spontaneous power that issues in gradual progress and growth in Christian virtues...in this passage the Spirit is *not the indwelling power* of the new life 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>1</sup>

A passage outside the Pauline writings, agrees with Ladd's assessment, providing insight to 2 Corinthians 3:18 and therefore clarity for a proper interpretation of Romans 12:2. James 1:22-25 uses the same mirror analogy as in 2 Corinthians 3:18.

But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone

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away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But 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 (Jam 1:22-25)

James stated that to look intently into the mirror of God's Word and to abide in it (make one's home in it) results in a believer becoming a Word-doer and therefore a work-doer. Likewise 2 Corinthians 3:18 pictures a believer exposed to the Lord in a mirror, which progressively over time, transforms the believer more and more into the image of Christ. Even though James did not mention the Spirit, we must conclude that James assumed the Spirit's involvement in *knowing the Word* and *keeping the Word*. In turn one must not conclude that the choices and the actions of believers are not in view in Romans 12:2. The Book of Romans obviously addresses the Spirit's ministry in the believer. Romans 6–8 concerns the Spirit in present sanctification and 12:3-8 addresses the spiritual gifts. However, 12:1-2 involves much more than the work of the Spirit. In fact, the *first command* of Romans 12:2 says to not be conformed to the course of this world system, while the *second command* is a specific instruction to be transformed so that the will and desires of God are demonstrated (proven) in the believer's life. As believers walk as children of light (Eph. 5:8), they are "[proving] what is pleasing to the Lord" (v. 10).<sup>2</sup> This is similar to the *putting-off* and *putting-on* theme in Romans 13:12-14.

*By the rules of interpretation, the clearer passage should be used to interpret the less clear passage.*

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The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside [put off] the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.

Believers are commanded to refrain from doing certain things — making wrong choices that result in wrong behavior. At the same time, they are commanded to do other things—making biblical choices that result in godly behavior.

*The transformation process requires the active involvement of both the Spirit and the believer.*

The same *putting-off* and *putting-on* theme is also found in Colossians 3:1-15 and Ephesians 4:22-25. In the Colossians text believers have been made new in Christ and since the new inner man is continually being renewed, Paul commanded believers to *put off* (anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive speech, and lying) and to *put on* (compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, bearing one another, forgiv-

ing one another, and love). The parallel Ephesians text echoes the Colossians text.

These passages do not say that the Spirit is not involved in the walk of the believer. However, these texts do indicate that the believer is to be actively participating with the Spirit. Therefore “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2) and “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 13:14) are nearly interchangeable ideas, suggesting that *being transformed in Christ is equal to putting on Christ*.

Unfortunately many believe from Romans 12:2 that only an inward transformation of the believer is in view, and the believer’s



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choices and actions are not the issue. Transformation of the believer involves only an intellectual activity in which the believer *discerns* the will of God.<sup>3</sup> This view eliminates the believer's need to participate in the "working out of one's salvation" (Phil. 2:12). Rather, God's grace and the Spirit's power are the energizing cause of the believer's walk (see *Myth 4: Grace Causes Good Works* and *Myth 7: Spirit's Power Causes Christian Walk*). Obviously this interpretation does not align with the context of the Book of Romans.

Inquiring minds are compelled to ask, "How is the transformation of the believer in Romans 12:2 accomplished? How involved is the Spirit?" The answer lies not in some mystical empowerment with the believer merely understanding the will of God and behavioral modification being accomplished by the Spirit. Rather, the answer involves knowing more of Christ in the Word and conforming to His image through obedience to the Word—a process of being transformed from the world's influence to God's influence. This requires the active involvement of both the Spirit and the believer. This transformation process is a struggle, a conflict that takes place within the believer who continually must choose between the Word of God over against the influence of the World—between the Spirit and the flesh. The agents are the Word and the Spirit—the Spirit's filling, leading, teaching ministry through the Word of God. The Spirit's work in the believer's life is not a mystical intervention; instead He is a Helper. He does not manipulate; instead He is a gentle Teacher, leading and instructing.

*Our spiritual map  
is our manual for  
every decision  
and action in the  
Christian life.*

### Transforming Choices

Rather than "special empowerment" to live the Christian life,

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the spiritual life involves the cooperation of the believer with the Spirit in which he obeys God's Word and lives out God's will.

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### Myth 8, NOTES

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1. George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 518 (italics added).
2. Rather than “*trying to learn* what is pleasing to the Lord,” Ephesians 5:10 is better translated “*proving* what is pleasing to the Lord.” “*Proving*” is also mentioned in Romans 12:2; Ephesians 5:10; and James 1:3:  
  
Romans 12:2 (*dokimazein*, verb), “so that you *may prove* what the will of God is” (italics added).  
  
Ephesians 5:10 (*dokimazontes*, verb), “*trying to learn* [prove] what is pleasing to the Lord” (italics added).  
  
James 1:3 (*dokimion*, noun), “knowing that the *testing* [proving] of your faith produces endurance” (italics added).  
  
Proving, rather than testing or ascertaining, clearly presents the intent of these texts. Actions are the consideration in each text.
3. Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 602-03; David C. Needham, *Birthright* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1979), 125-27; and Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 755-58.

