

Living A Transformed Life Adequate To Our Calling

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"Walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called."
(Eph. 4:1)

"Since we stand before so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, with our eyes set on Jesus, who initiated our faith and will bring it to perfection."
(Heb. 12:1-2)

*"There is no good tree which produces bad fruit....
The good man out of the good stored up in his heart, brings forth what is good."*
(Luke 6:43-45)

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To fulfill the high calling which God has placed upon us in creating us and redeeming us, we must have the right inner substance or character. We must come to grips with who we really are, inside and out. For we *will* do what we are. So we will need to become the kind of people who *routinely and easily* walk in the goodness and power of Jesus our Master. For this, a process of "spiritual formation"—really, *transformation*—is required.

Spiritual formation for the Christian is a Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self—our "spiritual" side—in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself. In the degree to which such a spiritual transformation to inner Christlikeness is successful, the outer life of the individual will become a natural expression or outflow of the character and teachings of Jesus. We will simply "walk the walk," as we say.

Christlikeness of the inner being is not a merely human attainment, of course. It is, finally, a gift of grace. Nevertheless, well-informed human effort is indispensable. Spiritual formation in Christ is not a passive process. Grace does not make us passive. Divine grace is *God acting in our life to accomplish what we cannot do on our own*. It informs our being and actions and makes them effective in the wisdom and power of God. Hence, grace is not opposed to *effort* (in actions) but to *earning* (an attitude).

Paul the Apostle, who perhaps understood grace as none other, remarks on his own efforts for Christ: "By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me." (2 Cor. 15:10) The supernatural outcome that accompanies *grace-full* action stands out.

Spiritual formation in Christ is the way of rest for the weary and over-loaded, of the easy yoke and the light burden (Matt. 11:28-30), of cleaning the inside of the cup and the dish (Matt. 23:26), of the good tree that cannot bear bad fruit (Luke 6:43). It is the path along which God's commandments are found not to be "heavy." (1 John 5:3)

Before turning to some details of Christian spiritual transformation in the various dimensions of the human being, we need to be clear about **the general pattern** that all effective efforts toward personal transformation—not just Christian spiritual formation—must follow. Because we are active participants in the process, and because what we do or do not do makes a huge difference, our efforts must be based on understanding. The degree of success in such efforts will essentially depend upon the degree to which this general pattern is understood and intentionally followed. Jesus indeed said that without him we can do nothing. (John 15:5) But we can also be sure that if we do nothing it will be without him.

So he *commands* us to "abide in the Vine." (15:1-7) We must find a way to do that.

Let us begin with a couple of easy illustrations, and then spell out the pattern in its generality.

Learning to Speak Arabic

Suppose someone wishes to speak a language they do not presently know: say Arabic or Japanese. In order to carry through with this simple case of (partial) personal transformation, they must have some idea of what it would be like to speak the language in question—of what their lives would then be like—and why this would be a desirable or valuable thing for them. They also need to have some idea of what must be done to learn to speak the language, and why the price in time, energy, and money that must be expended constitutes a 'bargain,' considering what they get in return. If they are to succeed, all of this needs to be clearly before them. They need to be gripped by the desirability of it. That would be their *vision*.

The general absence of such a *vision* explains why language learning is generally so unsuccessful in educational programs in the United States. The presence of such a vision, on the other hand, explains why the English language is learned at a phenomenal rate all around the world. Multitudes clearly see the ways in which their life might be improved by knowledge of English. As the vision is clear and strong, it pulls everything else required along with it; and the language is learned, even in difficult and distracting circumstances.

Still, more than vision is required, and, especially, there is required an earnest *intention*. Projects of personal transformation do not succeed by accident, drift, or imposition. Effective action has to involve order, subordination, and progression, developing from the inside of the personality. It is, in other words, a spiritual matter, a matter of meaning and will, for we are spiritual beings. Conscious involvement with "order, subordination, and progression, developing from the 'inside' of the personality," is required.

Imagine, if you can, a person wondering day after day if he or she is going to learn Arabic, or if he or she is going to get married to a certain person—just waiting, to see whether it would "happen." That would be laughable. But many people actually seem to live in this way with respect to major issues involving them, including spiritual growth. That fact goes far to explain why lives often go as badly as they do. To learn a language, as for the many even more important concerns of life, we must resolutely *intend* the vision, if it is to be realized. That is, we must initiate, decide, bring into being, those factors that would turn the vision into reality.

And that brings us to the final element in the **general pattern** of personal transformation: that of *means* or instrumentalities. Carrying through with the pattern for the illustration at hand, one will sign up for language courses, listen to recordings, buy books, associate with people who speak Arabic, immerse yourself in the culture, possibly spend some intensive times in Jordan or Morocco, and practice, practice, practice. There are means known to be effective toward transforming people into speakers of Arabic or Russian, etc. This is not mysterious. If the vision is clear and strong, and the employment of the means thoughtful and persistent, then the outcome will be ensured.

Another Illustration: Alcoholics Anonymous

Another illustration of the "general pattern" of personal transformation is provided by Alcoholics Anonymous and similar "twelve step" programs. Here, of course, the significance of the transformation or change is perhaps far greater for the person involved, than in the case of learning a language; and the outcome is a negative one—that is, a *refraining* from doing something very harmful, something that could possibly lead to untimely death. But the pattern is basically the same.

A desirable state of being is envisioned, and an intention to realize it is actuated in decision. Means are applied to fulfill the intention (and the corresponding decision) by producing the desirable state of being: in this case, abstinence from

alcohol and a life of sobriety, with all the good that that entails. The familiar means of the traditional AA program—the famous "twelve steps" and the personal and social arrangements in which they are concretely embodied, including a conscious involvement of God in the individual's life—are highly effective in bringing about personal transformation.

V-I-M: The General Pattern

With these two illustrations before us (language learning and AA), the general pattern of personal transformation should now be clear. We emphasize that it also holds for those transformations that can only occur through Grace: through the initiative and through the constant direction and upholding of God. To keep the general pattern in mind as we continue, we will use the little acronym "VIM," as in the phrase "vim and vigor."

- Vision
- Intention
- Means

"Vim" is grammatically related to the Latin term "vis," meaning direction, strength, force, vigor, power, energy, or virtue; and sometimes meaning sense, import, nature or essence. Now spiritual formation in Christlikeness is all of this to human existence. It is the path by which we can truly, as Paul told the Ephesians, "be empowered in the Lord and in the energy of his might" (Ephesians 6:10) and "become mighty with his energy through his Spirit entering into the inward person" (3:16). It spells out the "life to the full" that Jesus, in his own person, brought into the life of humankind. (John 10:10) Only by receiving this life do we become adequate to our calling. God never intended anything else.

So, if we are to be spiritually formed in Christ, we must implement the appropriate vision, intention, and means. Not just any path we take will do. If this **V-I-M** pattern is not properly put in place and resolutely adhered to, Christ simply will not be formed in us. We do not want to be 'picky' about the details. That can sidetrack us into legalism. But apart from an overall **V-I-M** pattern of life, what we are inwardly will be *left substantially as it was* before we came to know Christ, and as it is in nonChristians. Our inner life—what makes up our inner being of *will, thoughts, emotions, social connections* and even the *dispositions of our body*—will constantly entangle us and defeat us. Paul's penetrating description has never been improved on: "For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish." (Rom. 7:19) Paul, of course, did not stay there. He knew the bitter reality, but he also knew how to move on.

We will make a quick survey of **V-I-M** in spiritual formation, and then return to each part for a deeper look.

The Vision of Life in the Kingdom

The *vision* of our life in the kingdom of God, is the place we must start. This is the vision Jesus brought. It was the *gospel* he preached. He came announcing, manifesting, and teaching what the kingdom of the heavens was like, and that it was immediately available in Himself. "I was sent for this purpose," he said (Luke 4:43). If we from the heart accept Him and His kingdom, we will find our feet firmly planted on the path of Christian spiritual formation.

What is "the kingdom of God." It is **the range of God's effective will**, where what God wants done is done. It is, like God himself, from everlasting to everlasting (Psalm 103:17; see also Psalm 93:1-2; Daniel 4:3; 7:14; and so on). The planet Earth and its immediate surroundings seem to be the only place in creation where God *permits* his will to *not* be done. Therefore we pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," and we hope for the time when that kingdom will be completely fulfilled even here on earth (Luke 21:31; 22:18)—where, in fact, it *is* already present (Luke 17:21; John 18:36-37), and is available to those who seek it with all their hearts (Matthew 6:13; 11:12; Luke 16:16). For those who do so seek and find it in Christ, it is true even now that "all things work together for their good" (Romans 8:28, PAR), and that nothing can cut them off from God's inseparable love and effective care (Romans 8: 35-

39). That is the nature of a life in the kingdom of the heavens *now*.

The vision that underlies spiritual (trans)formation into Christlikeness is, then, the vision of life now and forever in the range of God's effective will. This means we are *partaking* of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4; 1 John 3:1-2) through a birth "from above," and *participating* by our actions in what God is doing now in our lifetime on earth. Thus Paul tells us, "Whatever we do, speaking or acting, do all on behalf of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father" (Colossians 3:17, PAR). Being born into his Kingdom, in everything we do we are permitted to do his work. That is what we are learning. That is the privilege extended to us in the gospel. What this vision calls us to is to live fully in the kingdom of God—and as fully as possible *now* and *here*, not just hereafter.

The Intention to be a Kingdom Person

The vision of life in the kingdom through reliance upon Jesus makes it possible for us to *intend* to live in the kingdom as he did. We can actually *decide* to do it. Concretely, we intend to live in the kingdom of God by *intending to obey* the precise example and teachings of Jesus. This is the form taken by our confidence in him. Our confidence in him is not merely a matter of believing things *about* him, however true and important they may be. Indeed, no one can actually believe the truth about him without trusting him by intending to obey him. It is a mental impossibility. To think otherwise is to indulge a widespread illusion that now smothers spiritual formation in Christlikeness among professing Christians and prevents Christian spiritual formation from naturally spreading worldwide.

Gandhi, who had closely observed Christianity as practiced around him in Great Britain and in Europe, remarked that if only Christians would live according to their belief in the teachings of Jesus, "we all would become Christians." We know what he meant, and he was right. But the dismaying truth is that the Christians *were* living according to their "belief" in the teachings of Jesus. They *didn't* believe them! They did not really trust him.

Knowing the "right answers"—knowing *which* ones they are, being able to identify them and say them—does not mean we *believe* them. To believe them, like believing anything else, means that we are set to act as if they (the "right answers") were true, and that we will so act in appropriate circumstances. And acting as if the right answers are true means, in turn, that we intend to obey the example and teachings of Jesus our Master. What else *could* we intend if we believed he is who his people through the ages have declared him to be?

The idea that you can trust Christ and not intend to obey him is an illusion generated by the prevalence of an unbelieving "Christian culture." In fact, you can no more trust Jesus and not intend to obey him than you could trust your doctor or your auto mechanic and not intend to follow their advice. If you don't intend to follow their advice, you simply don't trust them.

Intention Involves Decision

Now, an intention is whole and real only if it includes a decision to fulfill or carry through with the intention. We commonly find people who say they intend (or intended) to do certain things that they do not do. To be fair, external circumstances may sometimes have prevented them from carrying out the action. And habits deeply rooted in our bodies and life contexts can, for a while, thwart even a sincere intention. But if something like that is not the case, we know that they never actually decided to do what they say they intended to do, and that they therefore did not really intend to do it. Accordingly they lack the power and order that intention brings into life processes.

Of course the robust intention, with its inseparable decision, can only be formed and sustained upon the basis of a forceful vision. The elements of **V-I-M** are mutually reinforcing. Those whose word "is their bond," or "is as good as gold," are people with a vision of integrity. They *see* themselves standing in life and before God as those who do not say one thing and think another. They "mean what they say." This is greatly valued before God, who abominates "swearing falsely" and

honors those "who stand by their oath even when it harms them" (Psalm 15:4, PAR). Similarly, it is the vision of life in God's kingdom and its goodness that provides an adequate basis for the steadfast intention to obey Christ. And that intention, carried through, will in turn enhance the vision by making it clearer and brighter.

Means

The clear vision and the solid intention to obey Christ will naturally lead to seeking out and applying the *means* to that end. That is the natural order in human life. Here the means in question are the means for *spiritual* transformation: for replacing the inner character of the "lost" person with the inner character of Jesus—his vision, understanding, feelings, decisions, and character. By finding such means we are not left to ourselves, but have rich resources available to us in the example and teachings of Jesus, in the Scriptures generally, and in his people through the ages. They include such practices as solitude, memorization and meditation upon scriptures, fellowship and accountability to others, and so forth. More on this below.

Suppose, for example, we are convinced that we should, as Jesus would, be generous to those who are in need, but who have already taken away some of our money or property through legal processes. Mere "will power," with gritted teeth, cannot be enough to enable us to do this. By what means, then, can we become the kind of person who would gladly do this, as Jesus himself would do it? If we have the *vision* of the goodness of it, and we *intend* (have decided) to do it, we can certainly find and implement the *means*.

For example we might, in solitude, prayer and scripture meditation, identify our resentment and our anger toward the person who needs our help as the cause of our not gladly helping him. And then there is *justice*. Ah, justice! Perhaps in the form of "I do not owe it to him. He has no claims on me." Or perhaps we feel the legal case that went against us and in his favor was rigged or unfair. Or again, perhaps we think we must secure ourselves by holding onto whatever surplus items we have. After all, we may say, who knows what the future holds? Or perhaps we think giving to people what is unearned by them will harm them by corrupting their character, leading them to believe one can get something for nothing. Or perhaps it is just not our habit to give to people with no prior claim on us—without regard to whether they may also have injured or deprived us. Or perhaps our friends, including our religious friends, would think we are fools. And so forth.

What a thicket of darkness and lostness stands in the way of doing a simple good thing: helping someone in need, someone who just happens to have previously won a legal case against us, possibly quite justly. It is the all-too-customary human thinking, feeling, and social practice that stands in the way. And, truthfully, it is very likely that little can be done *on the spot* to help one do the good thing that Jesus commands. But by a course of study, prayer and practice we can become different inside, and then be able to do it with ease and joy.

This is characteristic of all Jesus's example and teaching. When my neighbor who has injured me or triumphed over me in the past now stands before me in a need I can remedy, I will not be able "on the spot" to do the good thing, if my inner being is filled with all the thoughts, feelings, and habits that characterize the ruined soul and its world. On the other hand, if I intend to obey Jesus Christ, I must intend and decide to *become the kind of person who would obey*. That is, I must find the means of receiving his grace and changing my inner being until it is substantially like his, pervasively characterized by his thoughts, feelings, habits, and relationship to the Father. Overall, this will amount to a life organized around wise *spiritual disciplines under grace*. We learn that we cannot do what we should do just by *trying*, but that by *training* we can become the kind of person who would do it with little thought or effort.

In the spiritual life it is actually true that "where there is a will there is a way." It is true there because God is involved and makes his help available to those who seek it. On the other hand, where there is no will (firm intentions based on clear vision) there is no way. People who do not intend to be inwardly transformed, so that obedience to Christ "comes naturally," will not be transformed. God will not pick us up and throw us into transformed kingdom living, into "holiness."

In sum, the problem of spiritual transformation (really, of the normal lack thereof) among those who identify as Christians today is not that it is impossible, or that effectual means to it are not available. The problem is that spiritual transformation into Christlikeness is not intended. People do not see it and its value, and decide to carry through with it. They do not decide to do the things Jesus did and said. And this in turn is, today, largely due to the fact that they have not been given a vision of life in God's kingdom, within which such a decision and intention would make sense. The 'gospel' they have heard did not bring that vision. As a result, the entire **V-I-M** of Christ's life and life in Christ is not the intentional substance and framework of their life.

Now, with this preliminary survey of how transformation into Christlikeness unfolds before us, let us go back and look into each division of **V-I-M** in greater depths.

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"Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you." (2nd Peter 1:10-11)

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MATTERS FOR THOUGHT:

1. Is the emphasis upon the 'inner' aspect of spiritual formation correct, or just an evasion of responsibility to act rightly and publicly, sometimes called "privatization"?
2. 2nd Cor. 9:8 and Zech. 4:7 are clear statements of grace as "God acting in our lives to accomplish what we cannot do on our own." Can you find other verses that express this understanding? How does this understanding contrast with or supplement ordinary views of grace?
3. How might spiritual formation in Christlikeness make obedience to God easy?
4. Have you experienced, can you think of, other areas of application for the "general pattern" of personal transformation?
5. Do you believe that you could change to the point where loving your worst enemy would be the natural thing for you to do?
6. How close is the vision of life now in the Kingdom of God related to what you normally hear as the gospel of Jesus Christ?
7. Can intention really be as important for spiritual formation as suggested here?
8. Are there "means" which you have found especially helpful toward inner transformation into Christlikeness? Describe how they worked.