

The transforming work of the Holy Spirit in the personal life (I)

“God became man... not simply to produce better men of the old kind, but to produce a new kind of man.” (C.S Lewis)¹

Becoming a new person is the deep desire of many people. We often hear phrases like “I wish I could start my life again” or “how much I would like to be a different person”. Is this possible? Transformation is right at the heart of the message of the Gospel. *Christianity is essentially a matter of transforming people into the likeness of Jesus.*

We are before a very exciting reality, a great blessing. Being transformed by the Holy Spirit is at the core of Christian discipleship and becomes a powerful tool in our witness (evangelism). Wonderful... but we need to approach this issue with much wisdom and, above all, in the light of Scriptures. As John Stott reminds us, “we must never divorce what God has married, namely His Word and his Spirit. The Word of God is the Spirit's sword. The Spirit without the Word is weaponless, the Word without the Spirit is powerless”².

«Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come» (2 Cor. 5:17 ESV). Paul's memorable statement is both the starting point and a magnificent summary of our topic. Nevertheless we cannot interpret this verse whimsically. If we don't understand it well it may cause more frustration than inspiration, more confusion than joy.

Some Christians think that with the new birth they can start from scratch in every area of their lives. They would like the Holy Spirit to change them totally and instantaneously, wiping off everything that they do not like either in their temperament, their personality or their past memories. They expect to be born again in almost a literal sense! So we have to be careful.

God does not promise us to remove our painful past or the limitations from our temperament and personality here on earth. The work of the Holy Spirit within us is *not to destroy* our past but to *build up* our present and our future, to live a new life, the abundant life of Jesus (John 10:10). In this sense, the thorough work of the divine Comforter goes far beyond any human resource or technique because it is not something natural, but supernatural. A mysterious element is ingrained in this transformation in such a way that it transcends our human reasoning.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 182

² John Stott, *The Message of Thessalonians* (The Bible Speaks Today series), I.V.P., Leicester, 1991, p. 34

Three questions will guide us to understand this transforming work of the Spirit. Each of them will show likewise what is needed from our part, what is expected from us:

- **What and what for?** The *nature and purpose* of transformation. It is a great blessing. *The need to be led by the Spirit.*
- **How and how can I see it?** The *dynamics and the evidence* of transformation. It produces a profound change. *The need to remain in Christ.*
- **How far?** The *limits and frustrations* of transformation. We are moulded and polished, but still jars of clay. *The need of acceptance.*

In between we will consider some hurdles that may hinder our progress in this process: the spirit of this age that opposes the work of the Spirit of God, the divine transformer.

1. The nature of transformation: a divine metamorphosis

*«And **we all**, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, **are being transformed into His image** with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit» (2 Cor. 3:18 NIV).*

Our first question is **what for?**: the nature and purpose of our transformation

When I was a child I was fascinated by the amazing transformation of the silkworm into a butterfly after a while hidden in the cocoon. There was something mysterious and exciting for the mind of a 7-8 year old child in this incredible change. Every winter I would take care of the worms to later watch enthusiastically the butterfly emerge. At this early age I learned my first lesson in theology! I remember my father, a pastor and theologian, explaining to me patiently that this change was called **metamorphosis** and that the same word was used for another amazing change which was even more fascinating. It was the change Jesus made in us making possible that one day in Heaven we could be as free and joyful as this flying butterfly. I never forgot the illustration and since then I understood the meaning and goal of the transformation started by Jesus Christ and performed by the Holy Spirit.

Let us see how this metamorphosis is operated. When we are born of the Spirit we are given God's nature (John 1:13, 3:6), «we participate in the divine nature» (2 Pet. 1:4 NIV). It is like receiving **God's DNA**, the moral and spiritual code of God. As we hinted earlier, there is an element of mystery in this process that we cannot ultimately grasp. Wayne Grudem writes: “The exact nature of regeneration is a mystery to us. We know what happens –the outcome-, but

neither how it happens nor what God does exactly to give us the new spiritual life”³.

Within this new nature there is a sort of seed, **an embryo** that keeps growing till its full development. This process is very similar to **the growth of a child** to such an extent that Paul himself uses this metaphor: «My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth **until Christ is formed in you**» (Gal. 4:19 NIV).

It is a **growth into maturity**. In fact, the word “mature” or “perfect” –*teleios*– appears numerous times in this context of transformation. It is the same idea (and word) that we find in Philippians 1:6, «Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to **completion** (maturity) until the day of Christ Jesus».

What sort of maturity are we talking about? This leads us to **the purpose** of this transformation. «We are are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory». **It is growth into Christlikeness**: becoming more and more like Christ every day is the goal of our transformation. *So transformation is essentially “Christ formation” within us.*

We see a remarkable example of this transforming power in the apostle Paul: he was changed from being a *persecutor* to *being persecuted*. Also the apostles after Pentecost were so strikingly transformed that «the people were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus» (Acts 4:13 NIV).

This transforming influence has continued over the centuries changing countless millions. As a psychiatrist I can bear witness to dozens of men and women whose lives have been changed by the power of the Holy Spirit, a change that goes beyond any human resource or explanation.

Furthermore this personal transformation has community implications. *It is an individual change, but not individualistic.* A historical example illustrates this idea. The ministry of William and Catherine Booth among the marginalized in London in the XIX century made such a social impact that Charles Spurgeon said, “If the *Salvation Army* were wiped out of London, *five thousand extra policemen* could not fill the place in the repression of crime and disorder”⁴. Hundreds of shipwrecked lives were rescued from the mud of delinquency and changed progressively into the image of Jesus. The transformation of the Holy Spirit indeed goes beyond the personal sphere to influence the whole of society.

We are called to be like mirrors that reflect the moral character of Christ. **This is a great blessing**, a tremendous privilege. “Indeed, the greatest gift the

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, 1994, p. 701

⁴ *Christianity in Action: The International History of the Salvation Army*, Henry Gariepy, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Michigan, 2009, p. 57

Christian has ever received, ever will or could receive, is the Spirit of God himself”⁵.

What is expected from us? **A willingness to be led by the Spirit, «live (walk) by the Spirit»** (Rom. 8:14, Gal. 5:16, 18, 25). Like a sailboat unfolds its sails to be led by the wind, so we need to let ourselves be carried by the wind of the Spirit.

2. The evidences of transformation: a change in three levels

Our second question is **how?** and **how can i see it?**

How? The dynamics of transformation.

The transforming work of Holy Spirit is a process occurring in three layers:

- **Being** a new person: I get a *new identity*. Expressed in a **new character** (see, for example, the fruit of the Spirit, Gal. 5:22-23).
- **Seeing** from a different view: I get a *new mind*. Expressed in a **new life purpose**.
- **Living** a new life: I get *new ethics*. Expressed in a **new behaviour**. Christian faith is something to believe as much as to be lived.

Being, seeing and living like Jesus becomes the core and the goal of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit

How can I see it? The evidences of transformation

This three layered transformation is unfolded, displayed, in many practical ways. They are the visible evidences of the transforming work of the Spirit. We can summarize them in two:

We get a “new heart”: a radical and holistic change. Some of these changes are immediate and total, others are progressive and partial, but they are all *radical*. Radical in the original sense of the word, namely that they go deep into the roots of our person, our heart. This transformation reaches the whole of us, it affects every “room” of our life. An existential, emotional and moral transformation is operated.

C.S. Lewis put it this way: “The regenerated man is *totally* different from the unregenerated, for the regenerated life, the Christ that is formed in him

⁵ John Stott, *What Christ thinks of the Church*, Milton Keynes: Word UK, 1990, p. 86

transforms every part of him: his spirit, soul and body”⁶.

This is why God said: «**I will give you a new heart** and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh» (Ezek. 36:26 NIV). Notice the new names given to Abraham, Jacob, Peter and others after their personal encounter with God symbolize this new person.

We get new eyes: «the mind of Christ». As we are transformed by the Holy Spirit we are gradually able to look at everything and everyone, including myself and my past, with new eyes because «The old has passed away... the new has come».

This new look is possible because «we have the mind of Christ» (1 Cor. 2:16 NIV). The word *mind* here (*nóos*) does not mean as much *thinking* (*phronesis*) as *perceiving*. It is a new perception, a new look from new eyes. The way we see and understand the world is changed: different attitudes, a new perspective on life (our worldview), new priorities (a new set of values), new relationships, a new vision and hope for the future, and so on with a long list of “new things”, made new in Christ by the Holy Spirit. In sum, we «walk in newness of life» (Rom. 6:4 ESV)⁷.

What is expected from us here? **We need to remain in Christ.** *Being in Christ* is the only condition (John 15:4-5). For this purpose we are equipped with two great resources which are the substance of our spiritual nourishment:

- *Prayer*: cultivating God's presence
- *The Scriptures*: meditating God's word

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⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 172

⁷ This idea was thoroughly developed by some of the Puritans, in particular by John Owen known as the “theologian of the Holy Spirit”. His contributions on the subject have been a source of inspiration to generations of Christians. See, for example, *The Holy Spirit*, Banner of Truth, USA