

## Biblical Change

### THE NEED FOR CHANGE

One of the goals of the Christian life is that we will be conformed into the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29). All of us are far from showing forth his likeness; we are not what we ought to be. Bridging the gap between what we are and what we ought to be is one of God's great interests, and it ought to be ours as well. We need to change. A shepherd's role is to help others change. Therefore, it is critical that we understand how change takes place in our own lives and in the lives around us. This chapter provides the theological and methodological foundation for the rest of the "Pastoral Care" section of the Manual.

This chapter is long in order to explore each aspect in detail. Here is a summary: The *goal* for our change is the life of Jesus himself. The *power* for change is nothing less than the grace of God. The *tool* for change is Scripture applied to our heart by the Holy Spirit. The *battlefield* of change is heart-rebellion against God, or idolatry. The *process* of change, then, is a two-fold discipline: first, repenting and turning from idols and second, believing the gospel. The *context* for change is the worshipping Christian community. Last, we are reminded that this is a life-long process and that God gives us strength to endure.

### THE GOAL FOR CHANGE: CHRISTLIKENESS

Becoming like Jesus in the beauty and glory of his humanity is the end for which God's children are destined. "Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did" (1 John 2:6). In looking at him we learn what it means to be a fully alive human being.

In the Incarnate Jesus we see one who lived with an undivided heart before God. All of his actions were done out of love for the Father. He committed himself to serving God's purposes and did so in complete dependence upon God, being bold in prayer and submitting in meekness to the divine hand. He participated whole-heartedly in the community of God's people, putting others interests above his own. He lived a life of purity, integrity, wisdom, faithfulness and love in thought, word and deed.

He took delight in the things which God delighted in and expressed joy at the Father's goodness. He was likewise grieved by the things which grieved God. The fallenness of the world (exemplified in sin, brokenness, poverty, oppression and death) made him deeply sorrowful.

The portrait could be expanded, of course, but even this picture shows us his glory. He lived a robust human life, and we are to be imitators of him in his humanity. Where we are unlike him in any of these ways we are to become like him. "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5).

### THE SOURCE OF CHANGE: GOD'S GRACE

#### 1. God Changes Us by Grace

The Scriptures make it clear that salvation in its entirety is God's gracious work. Salvation in *all* its parts—what has already happened and what has yet to happen—is a gift. We don't accomplish it or make it happen in the least. "God is the heart-changer." *Sanctification* (the ongoing work of making us holy) is just as much a work accomplished by grace as is *justification* (the once for all act of making us right with God). It is God who accomplishes the work from first to last. Jesus is both the "author and finisher of our faith". This leads us to the conclusion that this work of changing us and transforming us is ultimately mysterious. God is always graciously at work changing

us according to his plan and timing. His work goes on even though we may feel as though nothing is happening.

If we get this wrong, the consequences are disastrous. And yet many people go wrong at just this point. They *begin* the Christian life on the basis that their acceptance and entrance into a new status with God comes by grace and apart from anything they do. But they believe that *maintaining* that standing is dependent upon their own efforts. Becoming a Christian is up to God, remaining a Christian is up to them. Paul strongly cautions us against this kind of thinking. He sees it as having rejected the gospel (Gal. 3:3-5). At the very least, it means that we will not experience a life of grace and joy.

Elsewhere Paul writes, “And we, who with unveiled faces all contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). Growth in the Christian life is always growth by grace and under grace, never beyond grace. Lose sight of this and living the Christian life becomes burdensome. ***Change takes place by grace through faith!***

2. *God Enlists Our  
Efforts in His Work  
Of Changing Us*

Though we do have a role to play, that role is carried out only because of the prior working of God, and in dependence upon that fact. As Paul writes, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12,13) We are called to work, but we are to work *out* our salvation not *for* our salvation.

We have things to do, but God is in charge and is credited with producing the change in our lives. Aware that God is the Author of our transformation, we are set free to put forth the most strenuous effort imaginable. We do not have to be paralyzed by the fear of failure, nor do we need to throw in the towel when we are discouraged by the lack of progress. We are set free to skillfully apply the means of grace as we depend upon God to ever more deeply change our hearts.

## THE TOOL FOR CHANGE: SCRIPTURES

***Change takes place in our lives only when the power of the Holy Spirit and scriptural truth are together operating on our hearts.*** They help to expose our sin at both the behavioral and the motivational level. They also offer us encouragement and promises which we can use and depend upon in our battle to live faithfully. Therefore, if we are to see people’s character transformed (including our own), we will *both* pray for them and bring the Scriptures to bear on their lives. We will learn how to understand the Scriptures and to apply them effectively. Unless we expose our communities to the Bible and using it on our hearts to search us out, we will not see life-change taking place.

Paul tells us that, “All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16). For centuries, Christians have believed that the Bible is sufficient to address our real questions, needs, concerns and problems. Their very purpose is that we might understand and help people. In the Scriptures God tells us all we need to know to live a full and effective life. They “enlighten us about God, about ourselves, about good and evil, true and false, grace and judgment, and about the world that surrounds us with its many forms of suffering and beguilement” (Powlison).

Therefore, it is perilous to ignore its diagnosis and prescription for our condition. It is equally perilous to substitute alternative understandings and cures of what is wrong with us. When we turn to the Scriptures, with their penetrating insight into this world, we find in its pages the wisdom necessary to understand our lives and our problems in all their complexity.

## THE BATTLEFIELD OF CHANGE: A REBELLIOUS HEART

What is wrong with us as human beings? People define the core problem differently and therefore seek to bring about change in different ways. If our diagnosis is faulty, our prescription will be faulty as well.

According to the Bible, *our core problem is that we are in purposeful rebellion against God*. The spiritual battle is waged in our hearts before our actions. Our problem is a heart problem (Luke 6:43ff). At the level of our motivations, we want to serve ourselves rather than God. According to Romans 1, our chief problem is not that our needs are unmet, but that we have wickedly turned away from God in our hearts. We have been unwilling to glorify God and have rejected his lordship over us (Romans 1:18f). However, being fundamentally religious creatures who are built to worship, we must worship something. So we erect other objects of worship (Rom. 1:25). We ultimately become enslaved to these things and they wreak havoc on our lives (Rom. 1:26ff).

Another way of putting all of this is that *our core problem is idolatry*. We have developed God-substitutes and have given ourselves over to worshipping them. This central rebellion has led to all the emotional, mental and behavioral problems which we experience.

*The process to bring about change in anyone's life is turning from idolatries and replacing them with belief in the gospel.* This repentance/faith discipline is an ongoing process of renewal that continues throughout the Christian life.

### 1. THE FIRST DISCIPLINE OF CHANGE: REPENTANCE (TURNING FROM IDOLS)

#### *1. Idols and "Lusts of the Flesh"*

Idols are not merely crude material objects set upon pagan altars. Those objects were symbols for what a particular god could provide for its worshippers. When we understand that symbolism, we understand the sophisticated business that idol-making has become for us modern people. Idol worship is not something found only among the naive and superstitious, but is characteristic of all human beings.

*Our idols are those things we count on to give our lives meaning.* They are the things of which we say, "I need this to make me happy" or "If I don't have this my life is worthless and meaningless". We say by implication, "Lord, it's good to have you, but there's this other thing which I must have or my life is not happy or meaningful. If I can't have it I will despair. You are not enough. I need this too as a requirement for being fulfilled. In fact, if you would take this from me, I'd turn my back on you. For you are negotiable, but this is not! This is the real goal of my life. If you are not useful to me in achieving it, I might turn on you."

Idols are by no means limited to "one per person". Calvin commented that the human heart was an "idol-making factory". We are sinfully ingenious at generating new idols and can easily find ourselves serving a number of them at the same time. "An idol can be a physical object, a property, a person, an activity, a role, an institution, a hope, an image, an idea, a pleasure, a hero" (Keyes). Believing that they have the power to grant us happiness and fulfillment, we come under their mastery. We hotly pursue them and wait for them to bestow their "blessings" upon us. They come to control us. We feel we must have them and go to great strides to get them.

It is when we begin to speak of these things by saying "I must have it" that we recognize the deep similarity between idols and what the Bible elsewhere calls the "lust of the flesh." Again we must be careful we don't define this concept too narrowly. "Lusts of the flesh" are more than bodily appetites, rather we should think of them as "inordinate desires." Many desires are legitimate in and of themselves, though some are not. Powlison makes the following list: "Desires of the body include life itself, air, health,

water, food, clothing, shelter, sexual pleasure, rest and exercise. Desires of the mind include happiness, being loved, meaning, money and possessions, respect, status, accomplishment, self-esteem, success, control, power, self-righteousness, aesthetic pleasure, knowledge, marriage and family.” The problem is not with wanting many of these things, but with wanting them *too much*. Our desires become inordinate. They come to rule us instead of God. We want them more than we want to obey and please God. When they assume this place they go from being things we want to lusts. They become idols.

So then, idolatry and lusts of the flesh are the “summary terms for what is wrong with people in God’s eyes.” These terms enable us to explain “why” we do “what” we do. They get at the motivation of human behavior. Idol worship leads to actions, attitudes and thoughts which overtake us and dehumanize us. All of our harmful behaviors and uncomfortable feelings— anger, worry, self-pity, etc.— can be explained in terms of our lusts and idols (Luke 6:43ff).

To free ourselves from these problems will involve breaking the power of idols, rooting them out of our lives, and coming under the mastery and control of God’s love. When we stop worshipping our God-substitutes and give ourselves over to worshipping God in Christ we will find our most destructive problems disappearing and significant change taking place.

## 2. The Role of Suffering and Mistreatment

It is pretty common for people to suggest that their problems are due to the harm and mistreatment which they have received from others. What are we to make of this claim?

*First, people do get hurt by others.* They have problems which arise from other people’s sins and from living in a fallen world. People are hurt in ways that they do not deserve. They are sinned against— sometimes in the most wicked of ways. It is senseless to deny this. The world is certainly not the way it is supposed to be, and people do not behave the way they are supposed to behave. People who have suffered from the mistreatment of others deserve to be treated with compassion, understanding and wise counsel. They need to be allowed to grieve the loss of what might have been. They need to be set free to call evil, evil. They need to be empowered to confront others when it is in order. They need to know that it is appropriate to distrust those people who have betrayed their trust. They need to be convinced that God is able to use evil for good.

*Second, as significant as the mistreatment may be it does not excuse our behavior.* It is simply not true that we behave in a certain way because we did not get enough love, were betrayed, were not given proper self-esteem, etc. Powlison writes, “Past events do not cause a craving to be accepted by others any more than current events cause that craving. The occasions of a lust are never its cause.” The sins of others against us do not cause our behavior. This would remove our responsibility for our actions and beliefs. We may be victims, but we must also accept blame for our behavior. It is perfectly appropriate to say it was wrong for a person to treat us the way they did. However, it is inappropriate to say their treatment of us forced us to behave in a certain way or caused us to have particular inordinate desires. Again Powlison writes, “There is no reason why a person serves a particular lust rather than God; sin is irrational and insane.” Though we should do all that we can to prevent people from experiencing suffering, the individual is still responsible for handling their sufferings in a way that is faithful to God.

Our afflictions may be the context of our behavior and might create tendencies toward certain behaviors. God may even take them significantly into account when he judges our attitudes and actions. But denying responsibility for our attitudes and actions is something which we may not legitimately do. *We are, therefore, simultaneously victims and guilty, sinned-against and sinners.*

### 3. Repenting of Our Idolatries

Repentance and mortification, the classic terms for overcoming sinful habits, are acts which are not well understood by our contemporary culture. However, they are essential if we are to effectively address our problems and find ourselves changed. *Repentance* can be defined as turning from sin, while *mortification* can be defined as putting sin to death. Repentance and mortification must take place at both the behavioral level and at the motivational level. In working on our selves and on others we must address both the “works of the flesh” and the “lusts of the flesh”, the external and the internal.

The acts of repentance and mortification of sin involve the following:

1. *Regular self-examination.* We must not only repent of sin generally. We must do so specifically. This requires taking a look at your thoughts and actions at the end of the day and determining specific ways in which you have failed to live a God-pleasing life. A helpful resource to this end is John Baillie’s, *A Diary of Private Prayer*, which provides guides for morning and evening prayer with the latter focusing on self-examination.
2. *Identifying idols of the heart which underlie specific behaviors.* If we are to engage in effective repentance for our idolatries it is important that we be able to identify them. However, one need not and should not go on introspective “idol hunts.” Instead specific occasions of sin offer an opportunity to reflect on the specific cravings or inordinate desires that rule the heart. For instance, an outburst of anger could have arisen because you demanded the peace of not being interrupted, because you demanded that things go smoothly, or because you demanded respect, etc. It is important to try to assess what ruling desires are taking the place of our desire to please God. Only then can our repentance and mortification be effective.

You might uncover some of your idols by asking the following diagnostic questions:

If you are *angry* ask, “Is there something *too* important to me? Something I am telling myself I *have* to have? Is that why I am angry—because I am being blocked from having something I think is a necessity when it is not?”

If you are *fearful or badly worried* ask, “Is there something *too* important to me? Something I am telling myself I *have* to have? Is that why I am so scared -- because something is being threatened which I think is a necessity when it is not?”

If you are *despondent or hating yourself* ask, “Is there something *too* important to me? Something I *have* to have? Is that why I am so “down”—because I have lost or failed at something which I think is a necessity which is not?”

3. *Consider the horror of your sins and idols.* We must come to see the ugliness of our sins and ruling desires. As one writer has said, “repentance is not a wringing of the hands or a hanging of the head but a working of the heart until the sin becomes more odious to us than any consequence could be.” We must strive to see the *guilt* of our sin (Christ was put to death for it. Don’t dare say, “its not so bad!”), the *danger* of our sin (if you don’t deal with them you will become hardened in them, you will become nearly impossible to change, and they will bring ruin into your life), and the *evil* of sin (sin grieves the Holy Spirit and foils the love of Christ. Jesus is wounded afresh by our sin).

John Owen suggests that we “look to him whom we have pierced and be in bitterness. Say to your soul, ‘What have I done? What love, what blood, what grace have I despised and trampled on? Is this the return I make to the Father for His love, to the Son for His shed blood, to the Holy Spirit for His grace: Is this how I requite the Lord: Have I defiled the heart that Christ died to wash, that the blessed Spirit has chosen to dwell in? What then can I say to my dear Lord Jesus? Do I account communion with Him of so little value?...I have despised love, mercy, grace,

goodness, peace, joy consolation. I have despised them all as a thing of naught that I might persist in sin.’

4. *Put your sins and idols to death.* We sometime think of human nature as being like a “pressure cooker”. Sometimes the urge to sin gets so great that we feel like we have to blow off some steam to be healthy. After we have “sinned a little” we can go back to pleasing God. However, the biblical view of human nature is better likened to a house with mice in the walls. If you are going to get rid of the mice, you don’t feed them a little in hopes that by being nice to them they will go away. Instead, you starve them. You don’t leave anything around for them to feed on. We are to be ruthless with sin in our life in the same way. We are to know that situations which are especially tempting for us and avoid them. We should forecast our day and be aware of when occasions might arise where we are prone to fall and prepare ourselves for them. We are also to “resist sin to the point of shedding blood” (Heb. 12). To treat sin lightly or casually is to make yourself its ongoing victim.
5. *Put on those actions and attitudes which are part of a God-pleasing life.* It is not enough to stop sinful behaviors. We must also be engaging in the corresponding positive behaviors. For example, if a “love for money” had led us to steal, we must not only stop stealing, but also be generous towards others. (See Eph. 4:25-32)

All the above ought to lead one to the conclusion that repentance is far more than saying “I’m sorry!” It can be a slow and painstaking process. However, ultimately it brings life!

#### 4. Repentance in Light of the Gospel

As we move on to talking about the discipline of faith, it is important to be aware that repentance and faith are two-sides of the same coin. Biblical repentance always involves believing the gospel. Therefore, our repentance is always believing repentance, and our believing is always repentant faith. Repentance always involves turning from idols to Christ as Savior. Repentance which does not flow out of and lead to faith in Christ is not biblical repentance at all. It is only another work carried out in order to gain merit before God.

## 2. THE SECOND DISCIPLINE: FAITH (BELIEVING THE GOSPEL)

### 1. The Centrality of the Gospel for Change

In the letter to the Colossians, Paul wrote, “All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God’s grace in all its truth.” The language shows that we do not simply learn the gospel when we are converted and then move on from there. Instead, ongoing change also takes place by the gospel. It is only as we grow in our understanding of the gospel in all its vast implications and applications that we find our lives bearing fruit. We never grow beyond the gospel. It is what need to hear and understand to become a Christian. It is also what we need to hear and understand in order to grow as a Christian. It is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:18) and not just for the initiation of salvation, but for its completion as well. The gospel’s power is experienced as it is more profoundly believed and appropriated. Many of our problems arise from our failure to understand and apply the gospel. *The key to continual and deeper spiritual renewal is the continual re-discovery of the never-ending depths of the gospel.*

### 2. What is the Gospel?

The gospel is this: “God made him (Christ), who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). We are so sinful, lost and helpless, that only the life and death of the Son of God can save us. But it also says that those who believe in his life and death are now “holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation” (Col. 1:22,23). Another way of putting the gospel is: you are more sinful and flawed than you ever dared believe yet you are more accepted and loved than you ever dared hope *at the same time* because Jesus Christ lived and died in your place. The gospel (as Luther wrote) means we are *simul justus et peccator*—both sinful and

righteous simultaneously. When we realize we are still sinners, it humbles us and makes us recognize our limitations. When we realize we are, nevertheless, dearly loved children and holy in his sight on account of Christ, it exalts us and gives us confidence.

This acceptance which gospel brings is not merely a new standing with God; acceptance entails an indwelling. God does not accept us and yet keep his distance from us. It is not an acceptance granted grudgingly. The gospel message is that Christ, by His Spirit, lives in us. He is our constant companion whose power is at work within us. *The good news is that we are given the gift of radical acceptance and radical indwelling.* This is possible by Christ's work alone.

### 3. The Gospel Gives Us New Abilities for Change

When the gospel is really understood it manifests itself in three crucial ways:

1. *The gospel enables us to repent of our righteousness.* While most people are willing to admit and repent of their sins, the Christian is a person who also repents of his/her righteousness. The Christian sees that his or her righteous acts are not only insufficient to make them right with God, but are often sinful themselves. Why? They were performed in order to save himself or herself apart from Christ. The Christian rests solely on the finished work of Christ "plus nothing" for salvation. The Christian understands that it is our "good works" as much as our sin which comes between God and ourselves.
2. *The gospel enables us to admit the depth of our wickedness.* The Christian knows that he or she is far more sinful than he or she is aware of. There is always new depths of ugliness in our hearts to be uncovered. Because the Christian is confident of Christ's acceptance, he or she does not have to try and cover up how bad things are. He or she can be honest about the idols and inordinate passions which at times dominate his or her heart. This enables the Christian to work on his or her flaws and should also create a unique humility and lack of defensiveness.
3. *The gospel ends our attempts at self-salvation.* Prior to embracing the gospel, people live without depending upon God and as if they do not need God. This can be done either through irreligion or religion. Irreligious people seek to be their own saviors and lords through irreligion— "worldly pride." (No one tells me how to live or what to do. I determine what is right and wrong for me!) Moral and religious people seek to be their own savior and lords through religion— "religious pride." ("I am more moral and spiritual than other people, so God owes me!") Thus moral-religious people may be characterized by intense arrogance and pride, or they may be extremely penitent and sorry for their sins. But even in their confession, they see sins as simply the failure to live up to standards by which they are saving themselves. They go to Jesus for forgiveness— but only as a way to cover over the gaps in their project of self-salvation. Primarily, they reject God's grace and insist that they be worthy of his favor. The important thing is to see that both religious and irreligious people are seeking to be their own saviors and lords. Both are engaged in projects of self-salvation.

Christians are those who have adopted a whole new system of approach to God. They may have had both religious and irreligious phases in their lives. They have come to see that their entire reason for both their religion and irreligion was essentially the same and essentially wrong! Christians come to see that both their sins and their best deeds have all really been ways of avoiding Jesus as Savior. They come to see that Christianity is not fundamentally an invitation to get more religious. A Christian comes to say: "Though I have often failed to obey moral law, the deeper problem was why I was trying to obey it! Even my efforts to obey it has been just a way of seeking to be my own savior. In that mindset, even if I obey or ask for forgiveness, I am really resisting the gospel and setting myself up as savior." To "get

the gospel” is to turn from self-justification and rely on Jesus’ record for a relationship with God.

4. *The Gospel Gives Us New Motives for Change*

The central place which God changes us is at the level of the motivations of the heart. A new lifestyle flows from a heart renewed in its love for God (Luke 6:43ff). Significant behavioral change flows from significant motivational change. We, therefore, should expect to grow in the area of our motives as we progress in the Christian life. The following motives should characterize the Christian:

1. *Love for Christ.* In 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, Paul writes, “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” The fundamental change which the gospel makes in us is to restore our love and worship of God. (God rules and has lordship over us rather than idols). Having experienced the love of Christ poured out upon us, we find our hearts transformed so that now we love him in return. It is this new affection for Christ which becomes the wellspring for our obedience. We strive to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind. We desire to please him. We do so not in order to be accepted, but because we have been accepted.  
***Obedience is not the condition for salvation, but the consequence of salvation.***

This new motive corresponds to the fundamental change from worshipping idols to worshipping God. It is also the central motivation we must cultivate. We must nurture our affection for Christ. John Owen put it like this: “We need to keep our hearts full of a sense of the love of God. That is the greatest preservative available to us against the power of temptation in the world...When the love of Christ constrains us to live for him, then we can withstand temptation. Therefore, fill your heart with a sense of the love of God in Christ, and apply the eternal design of His grace and shed blood to yourselves. Accept all the privileges of adoption, justification and acceptance with God. Fill your heart with thoughts of the beauty of holiness, as designed by God and made effective by his death.”

2. *Gratitude for grace given.* A second motivation the Scriptures offer for obedience is a spirit of gratitude. Thankful for God’s act of saving us, we express our appreciation through a life which is pleasing to him. We live for him not in order to be loved, but because we are loved. “Therefore, I urge you, in view of God’s mercy to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice to God” (Rom. 12:1). The Christian life is a joyful response to what God has done for us and what he promises to do for us. Appreciation for what has been done for us regularly gives us a desire to honor God in return. “How shall I repay the Lord for all the good he has done to me?” We obey God not out of a spirit of fear, but out of a spirit of thankfulness.
3. *Desiring to grow into what God has already made us.* Another motivating factor for obedience, according to Paul, is that it is the logical outworking of God’s redemptive work. Through Christ’s work, God has made us his children and has overthrown sin. We are to live in keeping with what God has done. To continue to live in sin after we “have been freed from sin and enslaved to God” is completely illogical. It is to work at cross-purposes with God. If the very purpose of salvation is to make us like Jesus in his humanity, then to live opposite of the way he lived makes no sense. This is the logic which is behind statements like these: “Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Jesus Christ. Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies so that you obey its evil desires”(Rom. 6:11,12). “You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light” (Eph.5:8). The imperatives arise out of the indicatives. As Richard Hays says, “Insofar as we perceive the truth about God’s redemptive work in the world, we will participate gladly in the outworking of God’s purpose; conversely, if we fail to act in a way consonant with God’s will, we are



living in a state of contradiction: we are failing to understand what is going on about us.” Again we see that obedience is a consequence of salvation, not its condition.

4. *Future Hope.* We are free to live godly lives in spite of the apparent cost to us when we contemplate the eternal glory that is promised. Dying to self, giving up idols and lusts, is easier in the context of eternity. Sin’s delight is insignificant and fleeting compared to the heavenly joys set before us.
5. *The Promise of Coming Judgment.* Though it takes a back seat to the other motivating factors, the Biblical writers sometimes appeal to the coming judgment as the warrant for our obedience and the change of our character. So Paul writes, “We make it our goal to please him whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:9,10). A secondary means an appeal to judgment has its place. It can break us out of our complacency and unmask our presumption.

#### 5. *Preaching the Gospel to Ourselves*

If we are to change we must be regularly preaching the gospel to ourselves and believing it. We must be continually showing ourselves, and those we counsel, the depths and greatness of God’s love for them. We must stop wasting our time trying to convince ourselves that we are lovable, and instead rest in the glorious fact that we are loved. It is this message which God uses to change us at the motivational level.

We must also be preaching to ourselves the promises of God which are part of the gospel: He has broken the power of our flesh so that our inordinate desires no longer have to have their way. He has made it possible to change what the heart really wants. Indeed, God is in the process of bringing us to the place where we want Him and His pleasure more than we want our own pleasure. We must know what God has made possible in Christ. We need to know that he is for us and wants us to succeed. We need to take to heart the reality that he dwells within us, is working by his mighty power, and will provide for us what we need in order to please him. We need to be regularly preaching these truths to ourselves and living in prayerful dependence upon them.

### THE CONTEXT FOR CHANGE: THE WORSHIPPING COMMUNITY

#### 1. *The Importance of Worship in the Process of Change*

Worshipping God enables us to see the beauty of God and the beauty of godliness. When we worship we find that our love for God deepens and the hold that other things have on us loosen. When we worship we find that it changes what we want: we want God and we want to please him more than we want and desire other things. Regularly worshipping God with the larger church, in small groups and on a daily basis as an individual is indispensable if our lives are to change. Redeemer’s weekly worship service booklet is a great tool for helping to cultivate this habit.

#### 2. *The Necessity Of Involvement in the Christian Community*

The Christian community provides a context where others can remind us of the gospel and give us support for the enduring battle of smashing our idols and becoming followers of Christ with undivided hearts. It also provides a context in which our sin and idolatry can be exposed and where others can “speak the truth in love” to us. Involvement in a rich network of Christian relationships is similarly indispensable to producing changed lives. In fact, the quality of one’s relationships within the Christian community is a key indicator of a person’s spiritual maturity.

### THE PROGRESS OF CHANGE

The Christian life is described by J.I. Packer as “a long convalescence, easily disrupted.” People who are keen observers of their own lives and the lives of others will find that to be a realistic, accurate assessment. We are not encouraged to expect quick fixes. Though God will occasionally deliver us immediately from a habit which has vexed us for years,

we can expect a lifelong battle in which change takes place incrementally. Often progress will be experienced as “two steps forward, one step back.” We should not expect that the war will cease. For as Paul writes, “*Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.*” (Gal.5:16-17). This battle is held forth as the normative experience of the Christian life. Therefore, endurance is required. We are called to persevere over the years as we fight this battle. It is important to understand this so that we do not get frustrated and throw in the towel.

J.I. Packer sums up the process of change and growth like this:

“Though the Christian life requires intense activity, it is not in the least self-reliant. Instead it follows this four stage sequence. First, as one who wants to do all the good you can, you observe what tasks, opportunities and responsibilities face you. Second, you pray for help in these, acknowledging that without Christ you can do nothing – nothing fruitful that is. Third, you go to work with a good will and a high heart, expecting to be helped as you asked to be. Fourth, you thank God for the help given, ask pardon for you own failures en route, and request more help for the next task. Biblical holiness is hard-working holiness, based on endless repetitions of this sequence.”

Equipped with the above understanding of how change takes place, a shepherd will be in position to pursue change in his or her own life, to help other group members pursue change in their lives, and pursue change in the group as a whole.

## ADDITIONAL READING

Powlison, David, “How Shall we Cure our Troubled Souls?” in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, edited by John H. Armstrong. Moody Press, 1996

\_\_\_\_\_. “Idols of the Heart and ‘Vanity Fair.’” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 13, No. 2 (Winter 1995).

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## Biblical Change

### THE NEED FOR CHANGE

One of the goals of the Christian life is that we will be conformed into the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29). All of us are far from showing forth his likeness; we are not what we ought to be. Bridging the gap between what we are and what we ought to be is one of God's great interests, and it ought to be ours as well. We need to change. A shepherd's role is to help others change. Therefore, it is critical that we understand how change takes place in our own lives and in the lives around us. This chapter provides the theological and methodological foundation for the rest of the "Pastoral Care" section of the Manual.

This chapter is long in order to explore each aspect in detail. Here is a summary: The *goal* for our change is the life of Jesus himself. The *power* for change is nothing less than the grace of God. The *tool* for change is Scripture applied to our heart by the Holy Spirit. The *battlefield* of change is heart-rebellion against God, or idolatry. The *process* of change, then, is a two-fold discipline: first, repenting and turning from idols and second, believing the gospel. The *context* for change is the worshipping Christian community. Last, we are reminded that this is a life-long process and that God gives us strength to endure.

### THE GOAL FOR CHANGE: CHRISTLIKENESS

Becoming like Jesus in the beauty and glory of his humanity is the end for which God's children are destined. "Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did" (1 John 2:6). In looking at him we learn what it means to be a fully alive human being.

In the Incarnate Jesus we see one who lived with an undivided heart before God. All of his actions were done out of love for the Father. He committed himself to serving God's purposes and did so in complete dependence upon God, being bold in prayer and submitting in meekness to the divine hand. He participated whole-heartedly in the community of God's people, putting others interests above his own. He lived a life of purity, integrity, wisdom, faithfulness and love in thought, word and deed.

He took delight in the things which God delighted in and expressed joy at the Father's goodness. He was likewise grieved by the things which grieved God. The fallenness of the world (exemplified in sin, brokenness, poverty, oppression and death) made him deeply sorrowful.

The portrait could be expanded, of course, but even this picture shows us his glory. He lived a robust human life, and we are to be imitators of him in his humanity. Where we are unlike him in any of these ways we are to become like him. "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5).

### THE SOURCE OF CHANGE: GOD'S GRACE

#### 1. God Changes Us by Grace

Titus 2:11-12  
Grace ... Teachers us

The Scriptures make it clear that salvation in its entirety is God's gracious work. Salvation in *all* its parts— what has already happened and what has yet to happen— is a gift. We don't accomplish it or make it happen in the least. "God is the heart-changer." *Sanctification* (the ongoing work of making us holy) is just as much a work accomplished by grace as is *justification* (the once for all act of making us right with God). It is God who accomplishes the work from first to last. Jesus is both the "author and finisher of our faith". This leads us to the conclusion that this work of changing us and transforming us is ultimately mysterious. God is always graciously at work changing us according to his plan and timing. His work goes on even though we may feel as though nothing is happening.

If we get this wrong, the consequences are disastrous. And yet many people go wrong at just this point. They *begin* the Christian life on the basis that their acceptance and entrance into a new status with God comes by grace and apart from anything they do. But they believe that *maintaining* that standing is dependent upon their own efforts. Becoming a Christian is up to God, remaining a Christian is up to them. Paul strongly cautions us against this kind of thinking. He sees it as having rejected the gospel (Gal. 3:3-5). At the very least, it means that we will not experience a life of grace and joy.

Elsewhere Paul writes, "And we, who with unveiled faces all contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18). Growth in the Christian life is always growth by grace and under grace; never beyond grace. Lose sight of this and living the Christian life becomes burdensome. *Change takes place by grace through faith!*

## 2. God Enlists Our Efforts in His Work Of Changing Us

Though we do have a role to play, that role is carried out only because of the prior working of God, and in dependence upon that fact. As Paul writes, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12,13). We are called to work, but we are to work *out* our salvation not for our salvation.

We have things to do, but God is in charge and is credited with producing the change in our lives. Aware that God is the Author of our transformation, we are set free to put forth the most strenuous effort imaginable. We do not have to be paralyzed by the fear of failure, nor do we need to throw in the towel when we are discouraged by the lack of progress. We are set free to skillfully apply the means of grace as we depend upon God to ever more deeply change our hearts.

## THE TOOL FOR CHANGE: SCRIPTURES

*Ultimately only Scripture can bind your conscience*

*Change takes place in our lives only when the power of the Holy Spirit and scriptural truth are together operating on our hearts.* They help to expose our sin at both the behavioral and the motivational level. They also offer us encouragement and promises which we can use and depend upon in our battle to live faithfully. Therefore, if we are to see people's character transformed (including our own), we will *both* pray for them and bring the Scriptures to bear on their lives. We will learn how to understand the Scriptures and to apply them effectively. Unless we expose our communities to the Bible and using it on our hearts to search us out, we will not see life-change taking place.

Paul tells us that, "All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16). For centuries, Christians have believed that the Bible is sufficient to address our real questions, needs, concerns and problems. Their very purpose is that we might understand and help people. In the Scriptures God tells us all we need to know to live a full and effective life. They "enlighten us about God, about ourselves, about good and evil, true and false, grace and judgment, and about the world that surrounds us with its many forms of suffering and beguilement" (Powlison).

*Turn to Scripture not the world*

Therefore, it is perilous to ignore its diagnosis and prescription for our condition. It is equally perilous to substitute alternative understandings and cures of what is wrong with us. When we turn to the Scriptures, with their penetrating insight into this world, we find in its pages the wisdom necessary to understand our lives and our problems in all their complexity.

## THE BATTLEFIELD OF CHANGE: A REBELLIOUS HEART

What is wrong with us as human beings? People define the core problem differently and therefore seek to bring about change in different ways. If our diagnosis is faulty, our prescription will be faulty as well.

According to the Bible, *our core problem is that we are in purposeful rebellion against God*. The spiritual battle is waged in our hearts before our actions. Our problem is a heart problem (Luke 6:43ff). At the level of our motivations, we want to serve ourselves rather than God. According to Romans 1, our chief problem is not that our needs are unmet, but that we have wickedly turned away from God in our hearts. We have been unwilling to glorify God and have rejected his lordship over us (Romans 1:18f). However, being fundamentally religious creatures who are built to worship, we must worship something. So we erect other objects of worship (Rom. 1:25). We ultimately become enslaved to these things and they wreak havoc on our lives (Rom. 1:26ff).

Another way of putting all of this is that *our core problem is idolatry*. We have developed God-substitutes and have given ourselves over to worshipping them. This central rebellion has led to all the emotional, mental and behavioral problems which we experience.

\* *The process to bring about change in anyone's life is turning from idolatries and replacing them with belief in the gospel.* This repentance/faith-discipline is an ongoing process of renewal that continues throughout the Christian life.

## 1. THE FIRST DISCIPLINE OF CHANGE: REPENTANCE (TURNING FROM IDOLS)

### 1. Idols and "Lusts of the Flesh"

Idols are not merely crude material objects set upon pagan altars. Those objects were symbols for what a particular god could provide for its worshippers. When we understand that symbolism, we understand the sophisticated business that idol-making has become for us modern people. Idol worship is not something found only among the naive and superstitious, but is characteristic of all human beings.

*Our idols are those things we count on to give our lives meaning.* They are the things of which we say, "I need this to make me happy" or "If I don't have this my life is worthless and meaningless". We say by implication, "Lord, it's good to have you, but there's this other thing which I must have or my life is not happy or meaningful. If I can't have it I will despair. You are not enough. I need this too as a requirement for being fulfilled. In fact, if you would take this from me, I'd turn my back on you. For you are negotiable, but this is not! This is the real goal of my life. If you are not useful to me in achieving it, I might turn on you."

Idols are by no means limited to "one per person". Calvin commented that the human heart was an "idol-making factory". We are sinfully ingenious at generating new idols and can easily find ourselves serving a number of them at the same time. "An idol can be a physical object, a property, a person, an activity, a role, an institution, a hope, an image, an idea, a pleasure, a hero" (Keyes). Believing that they have the power to grant us happiness and fulfillment, we come under their mastery. We hotly pursue them and wait for them to bestow their "blessings" upon us. They come to control us. We feel we must have them and go to great strides to get them.

It is when we begin to speak of these things by saying "I must have it" that we recognize the deep similarity between idols and what the Bible elsewhere calls the "lust of the flesh." Again we must be careful we don't define this concept too narrowly. "Lusts of the flesh" are more than bodily appetites, rather we should think of them as "inordinate desires." Many desires are legitimate in and of themselves, though some are not. Powlison makes the following list: "Desires of the body include life itself, air, health, water, food, clothing, shelter, sexual pleasure, rest and exercise. Desires of the mind include happiness, being loved, meaning, money and possessions, respect, status, accomplishment, self-esteem, success, control, power, self-righteousness, aesthetic pleasure, knowledge, marriage and family." The problem is not with wanting many of these things, but with wanting them *too much*. Our desires become inordinate. They come to rule us instead of God. We want them more than we want to obey and please God. When they assume this place they go from being things we want to lusts. They become idols.

So then, idolatry and lusts of the flesh are the “summary terms for what is wrong with people in God’s eyes.” These terms enable us to explain “why” we do “what” we do. They get at the motivation of human behavior. Idol worship leads to actions, attitudes and thoughts which overtake us and dehumanize us. All of our harmful behaviors and uncomfortable feelings—anger, worry, self-pity, etc.—can be explained in terms of our lusts and idols (Luke 6:43ff).

To free ourselves from these problems will involve breaking the power of idols, rooting them out of our lives, and coming under the mastery and control of God’s love. When we stop worshipping our God-substitutes and give ourselves over to worshipping God in Christ we will find our most destructive problems disappearing and significant change taking place.

## 2. The Role of Suffering and Mistreatment

It is pretty common for people to suggest that their problems are due to the harm and mistreatment which they have received from others. What are we to make of this claim?

*First, people do get hurt by others.* They have problems which arise from other people’s sins and from living in a fallen world. People are hurt in ways that they do not deserve. They are sinned against—sometimes in the most wicked of ways. It is senseless to deny this. The world is certainly not the way it is supposed to be, and people do not behave the way they are supposed to behave. People who have suffered from the mistreatment of others deserve to be treated with compassion, understanding and wise counsel. They need to be allowed to grieve the loss of what might have been. They need to be set free to call evil, evil. They need to be empowered to confront others when it is in order. They need to know that it is appropriate to distrust those people who have betrayed their trust. They need to be convinced that God is able to use evil for good.

*Second, as significant as the mistreatment may be it does not excuse our behavior.* It is simply not true that we behave in a certain way because we did not get enough love, were betrayed, were not given proper self-esteem, etc. Powlison writes, “Past events do not cause a craving to be accepted by others any more than current events cause that craving. The occasions of a lust are never its cause.” The sins of others against us do not cause our behavior. This would remove our responsibility for our actions and beliefs. We may be victims, but we must also accept blame for our behavior. It is perfectly appropriate to say it was wrong for a person to treat us the way they did. However, it is inappropriate to say their treatment of us forced us to behave in a certain way or caused us to have particular inordinate desires. Again Powlison writes, “There is no reason why a person serves a particular lust rather than God; sin is irrational and insane.” Though we should do all that we can to prevent people from experiencing suffering, the individual is still responsible for handling their sufferings in a way that is faithful to God.

Our afflictions may be the context of our behavior and might create tendencies toward certain behaviors. God may even take them significantly into account when he judges our attitudes and actions. But denying responsibility for our attitudes and actions is something which we may not legitimately do. *We are, therefore, simultaneously victims and guilty, sinned-against and sinners.*

## 3. Repenting of Our Idolatries

Repentance and mortification, the classic terms for overcoming sinful habits, are acts which are not well understood by our contemporary culture. However, they are essential if we are to effectively address our problems and find ourselves changed. *Repentance* can be defined as turning from sin, while *mortification* can be defined as putting sin to death. Repentance and mortification must take place at both the behavioral level and at the motivational level. In working on our selves and on others we must address both the “works of the flesh” and the “lusts of the flesh”, the external and the internal.

The acts of repentance and mortification of sin involve the following:

1. *Regular self-examination.* We must not only repent of sin generally. We must do so specifically. This requires taking a look at your thoughts and actions at the end of the day and determining specific ways in which you have failed to live a God-pleasing

life. A helpful resource to this end is John Baillie's, *A Diary of Private Prayer*, which provides guides for morning and evening prayer with the latter focusing on self-examination.

2. *Identifying idols of the heart which underlie specific behaviors.* If we are to engage in effective repentance for our idolatries it is important that we be able to identify them. However, one need not and should not go on introspective "idol hunts." Instead specific occasions of sin offer an opportunity to reflect on the specific cravings or inordinate desires that rule the heart. For instance, an outburst of anger could have arisen because you demanded the peace of not being interrupted, because you demanded that things go smoothly, or because you demanded respect, etc. It is important to try to assess what ruling desires are taking the place of our desire to please God. Only then can our repentance and mortification be effective.

You might uncover some of your idols by asking the following diagnostic questions:

If you are *angry* ask, "Is there something *too* important to me? Something I am telling myself I *have* to have? Is that why I am angry— because I am being blocked from having something I think is a necessity when it is not?"

If you are *fearful or badly worried* ask, "Is there something *too* important to me? Something I am telling myself I *have* to have? Is that why I am so scared — because something is being threatened which I think is a necessity when it is not?"

If you are *despondent or hating yourself* ask, "Is there something *too* important to me? Something I *have* to have? Is that why I am so "down"— because I have lost or failed at something which I think is a necessity which is not?"

3. *Consider the horror of your sins and idols.* We must come to see the ugliness of our sins and ruling desires. As one writer has said, "repentance is not a wringing of the hands or a hanging of the head but a working of the heart until the sin becomes more odious to us than any consequence could be." We must strive to see the *guilt* of our sin (Christ was put to death for it. Don't dare say, "its not so bad!"), the *danger* of our sin (if you don't deal with them you will become hardened in them, you will become nearly impossible to change, and they will bring ruin into your life), and the *evil* of sin (sin grieves the Holy Spirit and foils the love of Christ. Jesus is wounded afresh by our sin).

John Owen suggests that we "look to him whom we have pierced and be in bitterness. Say to your soul, 'What have I done? What love, what blood, what grace have I despised and trampled on? Is this the return I make to the Father for His love, to the Son for His shed blood, to the Holy Spirit for His grace: Is this how I requite the Lord: Have I defiled the heart that Christ died to wash, that the blessed Spirit has chosen to dwell in? What then can I say to my dear Lord Jesus? Do I account communion with Him of so little value?...I have despised love, mercy, grace, goodness, peace, joy consolation. I have despised them all as a thing of naught that I might persist in sin.'

4. *Put your sins and idols to death.* We sometime think of human nature as being like a "pressure cooker". Sometimes the urge to sin gets so great that we feel like we have to blow off some steam to be healthy. After we have "sinned a little" we can go back to pleasing God. However, the biblical view of human nature is better likened to a house with mice in the walls. If you are going to get rid of the mice, you don't feed them a little in hopes that by being nice to them they will go away. Instead, you starve them. You don't leave anything around for them to feed on. We are to be ruthless with sin in our life in the same way. We are to know that situations which are especially tempting for us and avoid them. We should forecast our day and be aware of when occasions might arise where we are prone to fall and prepare ourselves for them. We are also to "resist sin to the point of shedding blood" (Heb. 12). To treat sin lightly or casually is to make yourself its ongoing victim.



5. *Put on those actions and attitudes which are part of a God-pleasing life.* It is not enough to stop sinful behaviors. We must also be engaging in the corresponding positive behaviors. For example, if a "love for money" had led us to steal, we must not only stop stealing, but also be generous towards others. (See Eph. 4:25-32)

All the above ought to lead one to the conclusion that repentance is far more than saying "I'm sorry!" It can be a slow and painstaking process. However, ultimately it brings life!

#### 4. Repentance in Light of the Gospel

As we move on to talking about the discipline of faith, it is important to be aware that repentance and faith are two-sides of the same coin. Biblical repentance always involves believing the gospel. Therefore, our repentance is always believing repentance, and our believing is always repentant faith. Repentance always involves turning from idols to Christ as Savior. Repentance which does not flow out of and lead to faith in Christ is not biblical repentance at all. It is only another work carried out in order to gain merit before God.

## 2. THE SECOND DISCIPLINE: FAITH (BELIEVING THE GOSPEL)

### 1. The Centrality of the Gospel for Change

In the letter to the Colossians, Paul wrote, "All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth." The language shows that we do not simply learn the gospel when we are converted and then move on from there. Instead, ongoing change also takes place by the gospel. It is only as we grow in our understanding of the gospel in all its vast implications and applications that we find our lives bearing fruit. We never grow beyond the gospel. It is what need to hear and understand to become a Christian. It is also what we need to hear and understand in order to grow as a Christian. It is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:18) and not just for the initiation of salvation, but for its completion as well. The gospel's power is experienced as it is more profoundly believed and appropriated. Many of our problems arise from our failure to understand and apply the gospel. *The key to continual and deeper spiritual renewal is the continual re-discovery of the never-ending depths of the gospel.*

### 2. What is the Gospel?

The gospel is this: "God made him (Christ), who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). We are so sinful, lost and helpless, that only the life and death of the Son of God can save us. But it also says that those who believe in his life and death are now "holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation" (Col. 1:22,23). Another way of putting the gospel is: you are more sinful and flawed than you ever dared believe yet you are more accepted and loved than you ever dared hope *at the same time* because Jesus Christ lived and died in your place. The gospel (as Luther wrote) means we are *simul justus et peccator*—both sinful and righteous simultaneously. When we realize we are still sinners, it humbles us and makes us recognize our limitations. When we realize we are, nevertheless, dearly loved children and holy in his sight on account of Christ, it exalts us and gives us confidence.

This acceptance which gospel brings is not merely a new standing with God; acceptance entails an indwelling. God does not accept us and yet keep his distance from us. It is not an acceptance granted grudgingly. The gospel message is that Christ, by His Spirit, lives in us. He is our constant companion whose power is at work within us. *The good news is that we are given the gift of radical acceptance and radical indwelling.* This is possible by Christ's work alone.

When the gospel is really understood it manifests itself in three crucial ways:

### 3. The Gospel Gives Us New Abilities for Change

1. *The gospel enables us to repent of our righteousness.* While most people are willing to admit and repent of their sins, the Christian is a person who also repents of his/her righteousness. The Christian sees that his or her righteous acts are not only insufficient to make them right with God, but are often sinful themselves. Why? They were performed in order to save himself or herself apart from Christ. The Christian rests solely on the finished work of Christ "plus nothing" for salvation. The



Christian understands that it is our "good works" as much as our sin which comes between God and ourselves.

2. *The gospel enables us to admit the depth of our wickedness.* The Christian knows that he or she is far more sinful than he or she is aware of. There is always new depths of ugliness in our hearts to be uncovered. Because the Christian is confident of Christ's acceptance, he or she does not have to try and cover up how bad things are. He or she can be honest about the idols and inordinate passions which at times dominate his or her heart. This enables the Christian to work on his or her flaws and should also create a unique humility and lack of defensiveness.
3. *The gospel ends our attempts at self-salvation.* Prior to embracing the gospel, people live without depending upon God and as if they do not need God. This can be done either through irreligion or religion. Irreligious people seek to be their own saviors and lords through irreligion— "worldly pride." (No one tells me how to live or what to do. I determine what is right and wrong for me!) Moral and religious people seek to be their own savior and lords through religion— "religious pride." ("I am more moral and spiritual than other people, so God owes me!") Thus moral-religious people may be characterized by intense arrogance and pride, or they may be extremely penitent and sorry for their sins. But even in their confession, they see sins as simply the failure to live up to standards by which they are saving themselves. They go to Jesus for forgiveness— but only as a way to cover over the gaps in their project of self-salvation. Primarily, they reject God's grace and insist that they be worthy of his favor. The important thing is to see that both religious and irreligious people are seeking to be their own saviors and lords. Both are engaged in projects of self-salvation.

Christians are those who have adopted a whole new system of approach to God. They may have had both religious and irreligious phases in their lives. They have come to see that their entire reason for both their religion and irreligion was essentially the same and essentially wrong! Christians come to see that both their sins and their best deeds have all really been ways of avoiding Jesus as Savior. They come to see that Christianity is not fundamentally an invitation to get more religious. A Christian comes to say: "Though I have often failed to obey moral law, the deeper problem was why I was trying to obey it! Even my efforts to obey it has been just a way of seeking to be my own savior. In that mindset, even if I obey or ask for forgiveness, I am really resisting the gospel and setting myself up as savior." To "get the gospel" is to turn from self-justification and rely on Jesus' record for a relationship with God.

#### 4. *The Gospel Gives Us New Motives for Change*

The central place which God changes us is at the level of the motivations of the heart. A new lifestyle flows from a heart renewed in its love for God (Luke 6:43ff). Significant behavioral change flows from significant motivational change. We, therefore, should expect to grow in the area of our motives as we progress in the Christian life. The following motives should characterize the Christian:

1. *Love for Christ.* In 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, Paul writes, "For Christ's love compels us; because we are convinced that one died for all and therefore all died. And he died for them and was raised again." The fundamental change which the gospel makes in us is to restore our love and worship of God. (God rules and has lordship over us rather than idols). Having experienced the love of Christ poured out upon us, we find our hearts transformed so that now we love him in return. It is this new affection for Christ which becomes the wellspring for our obedience. We strive to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind. We desire to please him. We do so not in order to be accepted, but because we have been accepted. *Obedience is not the condition for salvation, but the consequence of salvation.*

This new motive corresponds to the fundamental change from worshipping idols to

worshipping God. It is also the central motivation we must cultivate. We must nurture our affection for Christ. John Owen put it like this: "We need to keep our hearts full of a sense of the love of God. That is the greatest preservative available to us against the power of temptation in the world. When the love of Christ constrains us to live for him, then we can withstand temptation. Therefore, fill your heart with a sense of the love of God in Christ; and apply the eternal design of His grace and shed blood to yourselves. Accept all the privileges of adoption, justification and acceptance with God. Fill your heart with thoughts of the beauty of holiness, as designed by God and made effective by his death."

2. *Gratitude for grace given.* A second motivation the Scriptures offer for obedience is a spirit of gratitude. Thankful for God's act of saving us, we express our appreciation through a life which is pleasing to him. We live for him not in order to be loved, but because we are loved. "Therefore, I urge you, in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice to God" (Rom. 12:1). The Christian life is a joyful response to what God has done for us and what he promises to do for us. Appreciation for what has been done for us regularly gives us a desire to honor God in return. "How shall I repay the Lord for all the good he has done to me?" We obey God not out of a spirit of fear, but out of a spirit of thankfulness.
3. *Desiring to grow into what God has already made us.* Another motivating factor for obedience, according to Paul, is that it is the logical outworking of God's redemptive work. Through Christ's work, God has made us his children and has overthrown sin. We are to live in keeping with what God has done. To continue to live in sin after we "have been freed from sin and enslaved to God" is completely illogical. It is to work at cross-purposes with God. If the very purpose of salvation is to make us like Jesus in his humanity, then to live opposite of the way he lived makes no sense. This is the logic which is behind statements like these: "Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Jesus Christ. Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies so that you obey its evil desires" (Rom. 6:11,12). "You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light" (Eph. 5:8). The imperatives arise out of the indicatives. As Richard Hays says, "Insofar as we perceive the truth about God's redemptive work in the world, we will participate gladly in the outworking of God's purpose; conversely, if we fail to act in a way consonant with God's will, we are living in a state of contradiction: we are failing to understand what is going on about us." Again we see that obedience is a consequence of salvation, not its condition.
4. *Future Hope.* We are free to live godly lives in spite of the apparent cost to us when we contemplate the eternal glory that is promised. Dying to self, giving up idols and lusts, is easier in the context of eternity. Sin's delight is insignificant and fleeting compared to the heavenly joys set before us.
5. *The Promise of Coming Judgment.* Though it takes a back seat to the other motivating factors, the Biblical writers sometimes appeal to the coming judgment as the warrant for our obedience and the change of our character. So Paul writes, "We make it our goal to please him whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:9,10). A secondary means an appeal to judgment has its place. It can break us out of our complacency and unmask our presumption.

#### 5. *Preaching the Gospel to Ourselves*

If we are to change we must be regularly preaching the gospel to ourselves and believing it. We must be continually showing ourselves, and those we counsel, the depths and greatness of God's love for them. We must stop wasting our time trying to convince ourselves that we are lovable, and instead rest in the glorious fact that we are loved. It is this message which God uses to change us at the motivational level.

We must also be preaching to ourselves the promises of God which are part of the gospel: He has broken the power of our flesh so that our inordinate desires no longer

have to have their way. He has made it possible to change what the heart really wants. Indeed, God is in the process of bringing us to the place where we want Him and His pleasure more than we want our own pleasure. We must know what God has made possible in Christ. We need to know that he is for us and wants us to succeed. We need to take to heart the reality that he dwells within us, is working by his mighty power, and will provide for us what we need in order to please him. We need to be regularly preaching these truths to ourselves and living in prayerful dependence upon them.

## THE CONTEXT FOR CHANGE: THE WORSHIPPING COMMUNITY

### 1. The Importance of Worship in the Process of Change

Worshipping God enables us to see the beauty of God and the beauty of godliness. When we worship we find that our love for God deepens and the hold that other things have on us loosen. When we worship we find that it changes what we want: we want God and we want to please him more than we want and desire other things. Regularly worshipping God with the larger church, in small groups and on a daily basis as an individual is indispensable if our lives are to change. Intown's weekly worship service bulletin is a great tool for helping to cultivate this habit.

### 2. The Necessity Of Involvement in the Christian Community

The Christian community provides a context where others can remind us of the gospel and give us support for the enduring battle of smashing our idols and becoming followers of Christ with undivided hearts. It also provides a context in which our sin and idolatry can be exposed and where others can "speak the truth in love" to us. Involvement in a rich network of Christian relationships is similarly indispensable to producing changed lives. In fact, the quality of one's relationships within the Christian community is a key indicator of a person's spiritual maturity.

## THE PROGRESS OF CHANGE

J.I. Packer described the Christian life as "a long convalescence, easily disrupted." People who are keen observers of their own lives and the lives of others will find that to be a realistic, accurate assessment. We are not encouraged to expect quick fixes. Though God will occasionally deliver us immediately from a habit that has vexed us for years, we can expect a lifelong battle in which change takes place incrementally. Often progress will be experienced as "two steps forward, one step back." We should not expect that the war will cease. For as Paul writes, *"Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want."* (Gal. 5:16-17). This battle is held forth as the normative experience of the Christian life. Therefore, endurance is required. We are called to persevere over the years as we fight this battle. It is important to understand this so that we do not get frustrated and throw in the towel.

J.I. Packer sums up the process of change and growth like this:

"Though the Christian life requires intense activity, it is not in the least self-reliant. Instead it follows this four stage sequence. First, as one who wants to do all the good you can, you observe what tasks, opportunities and responsibilities face you. Second, you pray for help in these, acknowledging that without Christ you can do nothing – nothing fruitful that is. Third, you go to work with a good will and a high heart, expecting to be helped as you asked to be. Fourth, you thank God for the help given, ask pardon for your own failures en route, and request more help for the next task. Biblical holiness is hard-working holiness, based on endless repetitions of this sequence."

Equipped with the above understanding of how change takes place, a shepherd will be in position to pursue change in his or her own life, to help other group members pursue change in their lives, and pursue change in the group as a whole.

**ADDITIONAL READING**

Powlison, David, "How Shall we Cure our Troubled Souls?" in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, edited by John H. Armstrong. Moody Press, 1996.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Idols of the Heart and 'Vanity Fair.'" *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 13, No. 2 (Winter 1995).

Keller, Timothy J., *School of Servant Leadership: Part I: The Gospel and the Heart*, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 1996.