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THE BUTTERFLY PROJECT

Romans 12:2

When Toby got accepted into a residency at UC Irvine, he and Anna had to move to Orange County. They decided San Clemente would be a good location for them. They also decided to buy a home there. Their first forays as home buyers were initially discouraging. But then they found a house they thought was a real possibility. They told us to look at it on the Internet. When we did we were both less than enthusiastic. We didn’t like the location of the house most of all. But they wanted us to go look at it with them. We went with an open mind. When we did I had to admit the house had some big plusses. It had been remodeled, and I was dazzled by some of the work that had been done. It looked terrific. I noticed one or two things that I thought were odd, and I still wasn’t crazy about the location, but I was pretty impressed. Oddly, Toby and Anna had some slight misgivings on this second look. Then they had an inspector come and check the house out. Almost immediately after they heard from the inspector they informed us they were not going to buy the house. The reason was the minor things I noted and some things that caused them misgivings proved to be the tip of the iceberg. The house had some significant problems. Quite a few of them, in fact. It became apparent that the people who remodeled the house had bought it to flip it. They had done a lot of work on the house but it was all cosmetic. They did the things that were dazzling to the eye, but did not deal with the real issues the house had at all.

It is possible to take that approach to life in Christ. Make some cosmetic changes to make the life look better, but don’t deal with the real issues. That’s why you often hear non-believers accuse Christians of being hypocrites. It’s because it’s true. Too often Christians settle for cosmetic surface change and they are not truly different on the inside, and people sense how hollow that is. We’re going to see today that God’s work in the lives of his children is not a cosmetic project. It is way bigger and deeper than that. Let’s look at Romans 12:2.

There are 3 key words in this verse that summarize its entire message. They are conform, transformed, renewing.

DO NOT CONFORM

Paul instructs us to “not conform to the pattern of this world.” Literally he wrote, “Do not conform yourselves to this age.” The issue here is conformity. Unfortunately conformity is a big issue for all of us. Last year Laurie and I went snorkeling one day while we were on vacation. We’ve done that many times, but this time we encountered a very large school of fish. There were hundreds of them. I don’t even know what kind they were, but they weren’t very big and they weren’t going to eat me, so I wasn’t especially concerned about their ethnic identity. I observed a curious behavior. They all swam in basically the same direction. If you have a mass of human beings walking in an area they tend to mill around, moving in individual random directions. These fish didn’t mill around. They would all be swimming in one direction and then they’d all change direction together. How were they doing this? I don’t know, but experts tell us this kind of flock behavior is quite common in nature. You’ve probably seen it when a huge flock of birds sitting on the ground suddenly takes off flying together. They scientists tell us there is some sort of herd instinct that directs that behavior.

They also tell us that despite our independence, human beings also display at least some effect of that herd instinct. Years ago before our kids had headed off to college we all had a great vacation. On our trip home I made a mistake and had the wrong flight time. Fortunately we left plenty of time to get to the airport so by the time we got checked in we were still okay, but not by much. We were close to the boarding time for the flight. The short first leg for our flight was an open seating flight. When we got to the gate all the seats in the waiting area were taken. We were going to have to stand for a few minutes, so we figured we might as well stand over by boarding door. Seeing us standing there several people gathered their bags, stood up and came over to stand behind us in a line. At that point the stampede was on. Everyone in the waiting area got up and came over to stand in line even though they hadn’t even announced the flight yet. We started a mass movement just by innocently standing near the door when there was no place to sit. Herd instinct at work.

Other people around us exert a strong influence on us. It’s like they have a sort of gravitational pull on us that sometimes subtly and sometimes overtly influences us to become like them and follow them. Some time back I happened to catch just a few minutes of the old classic TV show, the original *Magnum, P. I.* Laurie and I loved that show. We liked it so much we even watched the reboot that has been on the past 4 years, mostly due to nostalgia and to the fact it takes place in Hawaii. Tom Selleck as Magnum wore his classic aloha shirt and Detroit Tigers hat, but in one scene he was wearing shorts. They were appropriately named shorts, because they were really short. Too short. I remember back in the70’s wearing shorts like that. There are pictures, though out of embarrassment I try to hide them. Maybe I should just destroy them. It was a true fashion abomination. I don’t remember when I consciously realized I needed to repent of my sin against fashion, when I said, “I grieve over my sin. I will never wear such clothing again.”

Yet I do not wear shorts like that anymore. How did that change come about? Without me making a conscious decision about it, as styles changed, I changed with them. I suppose it was a purposeful change, but it was more an evolution brought on by the influence of the herd around me. We all know that fashion does that to us in many ways, but that should be a caution to us that the herd is influencing us in ways we may not even be aware of.

When Laurie and I got married evangelical believers all were quite clear that God said sex was to be confined to the marriage relationship. That didn’t mean they all obeyed that. But they understood that was God’s divinely revealed standard. They might have made mistakes and violated that standard, but they knew that they were disobeying God when they did it. Today surveys show that the majority of evangelical Christians believe it is acceptable for a couple to live together before they marry. Among Christians ages 15 to 22, only 24% say they are committed to not living together before they marry. Among those age 29-49 over two thirds said they lived together before they got married. Among young evangelical Christians today, having sex before marriage is mostly seen as no big deal.

Has there been some theological revelation that has caused Christians to shift their thinking on this matter? Has there been some new understanding of the Bible that has shed light on the subject in a new way and caused Christians to realize that previous position was not correct? No, nor are most Christians saying that the Bible is just wrong. They are just sort of ignoring it. How has that happened? Living in our culture where the gospel of all sex all the time is both preached and presumed, gradually the thinking of Christians has been swayed. Believers are conforming to our culture, not by some theological decision, but simply through influence. Being conformed to the age is a big problem.

It would be common to cite the ways our particular culture is at war with a biblical worldview. Our culture is rife with rebellion against God and his ways. However, Paul told us to not conform ourselves to this age. Not just our culture, but to this age. In the theological framework of the Bible, we are still in the same age Paul was in when he wrote the book of Romans. No doubt he would warn us today about the effects of our particular culture, but in this verse he was warning about the effects of the thinking of this age that affects ***every*** culture, and will do so until Christ comes back and brings this age to an end.

In 2 Corinthians 4:4 Paul mentioned “the god of this age.” Who is the god of this age? He was referring to Satan. John wrote in 1 John 5:19, “the whole world is under the control of the evil one.” Satan influences cultures in this age. They do his bidding. They do it in very different ways, but they are aimed at the same results, ones that he is trying to produce. This is crucial for us to know because it means when we conform to this age, we are conforming with what Satan wants to happen to us. In case you don’t know, he is not trying to bless you and make your life great. So what is his program? What are the messages of this age?

The classic is that you must find life in something other than Jesus. This is about rebellion against God. It is rejecting him as the source of life and trying to find life apart from him. In some cases this will actually include religion. It will purport to be about God, but that is always someone other than Jesus. In our culture we are told that we can find life through possessions, having so much money that we can do whatever we want. It is through total autonomy, meaning being free to do whatever we want with no restrictions. A big one in our culture is that we find life through fame and approval. Or it might be through success. Pleasure is another source of true life, our culture tells us.

If you know your biblical history this is a message that should sound familiar. It made its debut to the first human beings. Eat of the fruit of the taboo tree and then you’ll really find life. Never mind that to do so means direct rebellion against God. God is trying to keep life from you. The only way you’ll find it is to disobey him.

A second that is linked to that first is to put yourself in the center. Again, this started in Eden. Eat the fruit that God said not to take and you will be like God. You’ll be the center of all things like he is. Make everything about you. Our culture promotes this idea. In his book, *From Guilt To Glory*, Ray Stedman wrote, “The spirit of the age is always the same. It never changes from generation to generation. The basis of it is clearly the advancement of self. Everyone in the world lives to advance himself. ‘What do I get out of this? What’s in it for me?’” This is how the world runs.

Finally, there is the message that we must fit in, be like everyone else. This age is trying to force us into its mold. Its influences match up perfectly with our broken human nature. We naturally seek freedom from God, we put ourselves in the center of life without even trying, and we feel that pull of trying to fit in continually. We need to remember the source of all of these influences and know that they are trying to destroy us. So we need to not conform to them.

Instead of conforming we need to:

BE TRANSFORMED

Paul calls on us to be transformed. The Greek word he used there is *metamorphoo*, the basis of our word metamorphosis. A metamorphosis is a dramatic change, a drastic one. It means changing from one form to a completely different form. The classic metamorphosis is the caterpillar that changes into a butterfly.

I have wondered what it would be like to be a caterpillar. You creep around on the ground, eating plants, doing whatever caterpillars do. I’m pretty sure they don’t play sports or watch television, so I’m not sure what they occupy themselves with. But I envision one day you’re with some caterpillar friends when one of them says, “Hey, where’s Carl?” Another says, “Oh, apparently he’s hibernating. He made this cozy little room for himself then tucked himself in there and went to sleep.” Another friend says, “Huh, I didn’t know we hibernate. But it sounds good. I’ve been getting a little tired lately and getting some extended shuteye sounds good. Do you know where Carl got the plans for his little hibernation room?” No one does, but you all go about your business. Then one day one of your buddies shows up very excited. He says, “Hey, I think Carl is done hibernating. It looks like he’s trying to get out of his little chamber.” So you all quickly crawl over, eager to welcome Carl back to the conscious world. The chamber breaks open and out comes….*what is THAT?* Instead of Carl you see this, this, *thing*. You don’t know what it is. You have to admit, it is spectacular. What happens a little later is stunning. The thing flaps these appendages it has and, can you believe it, *flies away*! It doesn’t crawl. It actually flies in the air. It leaves you all mystified. Where is Carl? What happened to him? How did that thing replace him in that little chamber? And just what is that thing?

Carl has been transformed. He is something completely different. He has become a new creature. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here!” Caterpillars, to me, are kind of ugly. They are sort of creepy looking wormy things. A butterfly, though, is totally different. I love butterflies, just like everyone else. I love seeing them flitting around our yard in the summertime. I’m quite sure I wouldn’t feel the same if our yard was teeming with caterpillars. Butterflies are beautiful, caterpillars just are not. It is hard to envision that a butterfly was once a creepy caterpillar. That’s because it has gone through a metamorphosis, and the resulting form is completely different than the first.

When Paul says we are to be transformed, he’s talking about a radical change from one thing into something completely different. This new thing is to be much more beautiful and so different from the first form that you would never associate the two. Much of the time in the Christian world we tend to do soul improvement projects. We make some incremental improvements and think we’re making big progress on what God wants because we maybe look some better than we used to.

Romans 12:2 says that is not the point. We are to be transformed, to undergo a metamorphosis, to be changed into something as different from what we used to be as a butterfly is different from a caterpillar. Paul himself was exhibit A. What he was in Christ was totally different than he had been before Christ. He was a Hebrew of Hebrew, a Pharisee, an ultra devout Jew who had nothing but disdain for anyone who was not a devout Jew. As for Jesus and his followers, he had one suggestion. Kill them all and let God sort them out. And now he was the most obnoxious Jesus lover and promoter in the world. He loved hanging out with Gentiles. Unclean Gentiles! Can you believe it? What happened to that guy? He was transformed. He was made into a new creation. He was nothing like he had been before. He headed to Damascus a caterpillar, and he came out a butterfly.

Too often Christians opt for some cosmetic remodeling. But that is not God’s plan for us is. His plan is true transformation, a metamorphosis into something that is radically different from what we were before Christ. New Testament scholar N. T. Wright said, “Jesus’ resurrection is the beginning of God’s new project, not to snatch people away from earth, but to colonize earth with the life of heaven.” God wants to transform us into people who live the life of heaven, something totally different than the ways of this age.

Renowned psychiatrist Robert Coles related a story in his graduate class at Harvard University about a highly regarded psychiatrist who said to him in a discouraged tone, “I have been doing therapy with a man for 15 years. He is as angry, as self-centered, and as mean as he was the first day he walked into my office. The only difference is that now he knows why he is so angry and mean.” Dr. Coles pointed out therapy had helped the man understand how his wounding early in life led to his current dysfunction, but it had changed nothing about him. Coles asked, “Could we conclude that what this man needed wasn’t just information, but transformation? But is transformation possible for human beings?” That is a huge question, and it leads us to the third important word in verse 2.

We need:

RENEWAL

According to verse 2 transformation takes place through the renewing of your mind. The first thing it tells us is that it has to do with our minds. Everything we are and everything we do begins with our thoughts. You would not be at church this morning without first having the thought that you would like to go to church. First we think it, then we do it. That means that the battle for who you are and what you do starts in your mind, in your thoughts.

A couple of years ago I came across a study some people did that addressed the question of why Japanese children seem to do so much better than American children at math. Was it because they are just naturally gifted at it or because they spend much more time in school and studying it? The study tried to look at all possibilities. What they found was surprising. They found that when American kids failed or struggled at math they concluded they just weren’t good at it. Thinking they weren’t good at math and never would be, they tended to give up on mastering it. The Japanese approach told kids that failure and struggle was part of the process, that everyone has a hard time with it. So they should just stay at it, and as they patiently worked at it, they would get it. The point here is the battle for math, according to the researchers, really had to do with how kids thought. As soon as they thought, “I’m no good at math,” the battle was over. They were done. Understanding this, we should be aware that much of the transformation is going to do with what’s going on between our ears.

A very common understanding of this process is that the renewing of our minds has to do with having our thoughts changed by God’s word. So to renew our minds we need to read the Bible every day. So the application is, read your Bible. But there are a couple of obvious problems with that approach. The first is that when Paul wrote this letter the people who received it could not read the Bible. They did not possess it. Writing materials were very expensive, so there were not lots of copies of Scripture floating around in the churches. In fact, the New Testament wasn’t even completed when Paul wrote Romans, so they couldn’t read it. On top of that, some of his audience couldn’t read. So if they couldn’t read the Bible every day, did that mean their minds couldn’t be renewed and they couldn’t be transformed? Clearly that was not true, or Paul would have been rather unkind to write this to them.

A second problem with that approach can be seen in Dr. Coles’ words. What is needed is transformation, not information. Too many in the church think we just need to get more information, so read more of the Bible so you know it better and that will do the trick. But the problem with that is we can know something in our head and have it do nothing for changing who we really are. I’ve known Christians who had thorough knowledge of the Bible and of doctrine, whose lives are the farthest thing from transformed. I think we should read the Bible. We should do it as much as we can. It will help us keep our thoughts in line with God’s thoughts. But that is not the way we are totally transformed.

If that’s not the answer, then what is? It helps me a little to note a couple of grammatical notes. Paul did not write, “transform” or “transform yourselves.” He used the passive, “be transformed.” This is not something we do, it is something done to us. In order for us to be transformed it will require God working, doing something that we cannot do ourselves.

A second small grammatical note is the word translated “renewing” is not a participle, but a noun. It is the noun “renewal.” This is how the English Standard Version translates the word, correctly. It says, “be transformed by the renewal of your minds.” When I read “renewing” I think of this as something I’m doing on an ongoing basis. But when I think of a renewal it seems like something that happened at a point in time. When we put those two grammatical thoughts together it points us in what I believe is the right direction.

What is needed is not more information. Rather, we need something to happen to us that changes how we think, that gives us a whole new way of looking at God, at the world, at ourselves and at what life is about. And that takes us back to why Paul spent 11 chapters explaining and defending the Gospel of grace. It is the work of God to bring us to the place where we trust in the gospel of grace in Christ. That makes us a new creation, that changes our minds and gives us this new way of thinking. It is the work of the Holy Spirit and the grace and love of God that renews our minds, causing them to think completely differently.

Paul was writing in part out of his own experience. When he was confronted by Christ on that Syrian road 2000 years ago, he underwent a paradigm shift of galactic proportions. This was a mental earthquake that knocked down almost everything he thought he knew, but then replaced it with a radical, new way of seeing everything. Jesus Christ is Lord! Who could have imagined such a thing? Yet it was true, and it meant that his worship, priorities, values, attitudes, even his personality, all became totally different than they had previously been. He was transformed by the renewing of his mind. He lived out the rest of his life fleshing out the implications of that new paradigm.

God’s grace is like a bomb going off in our heads. Though we may not have understood all of its implications immediately, it destroys much about the way we thought prior to Christ. Now we see that Jesus Christ is Lord. Worshiping him, serving him, honoring him is what life is all about. Grace utterly obliterates all my cherished illusions about myself. I was such a disaster spiritually that it took the torture and death of the Lord of all to rescue me. I am left with humility and not much more. I have nothing to be proud of and nothing to prove. But God loved me so much that he willingly went to that length to rescue me and have me as his child. My fundamental identity now is a beloved child of God by grace.

Grace destroys all our pretenses, our posturing, and replaces them with boundless gratitude that fills our souls, with love for God, with freedom, with peace and joy. It creates a total transformation, for now our motives, our goals, our identity, our priorities, our values, are all different from what they used to be.

The renewal has already happened. It happened when you trusted in God’s grace and said, “Jesus Christ is Lord.” If so, why would Paul need to tell us to be transformed by the renewal of our minds? In 2 Corinthians 10:5 Paul said, “We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” Our minds have been renewed. We know Jesus Christ is Lord. We know we are children of God through his astonishing mercy, kindness, love and grace. We know life is about him. We know we are free. Now life is about fleshing out this revolution. It is about applying these truths to ourselves, to our relationships with others, to our priorities, our values, our actions, to every situation we encounter. The more we live in that renewed mind and see every situation and every person through that lens, the more radically different we will be.

There was a time in my life when as a young, single man, that little children, especially babies, were not interesting to me. I recall some friends who got married, and a couple of years later had a baby. When I saw them with their new baby they asked, “Would you like to hold the baby?” I remember thinking, “Why would I want to do that? Where is the good in having an infant spit up on you, or eliminate waste while you are holding her and have it ooze out of the diaper onto you? What is the appeal?” For me it had none. I could see that little kids can be cute, but they tended to be self-centered, prone to melt downs and often get in the way. After Laurie and I got married there came a point where we said if we plan to start a family, we should probably get on with it. Honestly, I did so because I thought it was the right thing to do, not because I really wanted to have a child. I had misgivings about how well I would do as a dad. Then came August 20, 1982. A little after midnight on that day Laurie gave birth to our daughter, Carissa. I held our little baby for the first time, and in that moment my mind was renewed. Everything I thought about babies and children, about life itself, changed in that moment. I was transformed. We took baby Carissa to the pediatrician for a check up. As we were in the waiting room I was holding our precious baby and, sure enough, she spit up all over my blue shirt. We cleaned it up the best we could. Then they called our name and I stood up while holding Carissa, and found that she had, indeed, pooped, and there was a yellow brown stain all over my shorts for all to see. Here’s the amazing thing: I didn’t care! Somehow, all that I had feared, didn’t matter to me. We were off on an adventure of love at a level I had never known had existed. It would involve sleepless nights, tantrums and meltdowns, confusion and frustration over not knowing what to do, lots of expenses for all kinds of things. But I am a different person because my mind was renewed. I’m transformed. I’m way more sentimental than I ever was before. It’s kind of pitiful really. I get choked by almost anything slightly nostalgic. I let my grandchildren order me around like I am their slave. When Wesley says, “Bapaw, sit right here,” I sit right where he wants me to sit. I am delighted by everything they say and do. I have thought differently, I have made different choices and I have behaved differently. The Gospel of grace renews our minds, transforms us, and we spent the rest of our lives living out that transformation.

Paul wants that to happen so that we may “test and approve what the will of God is.” The words “test and approve” translate one Greek word. Its roots are in the idea of testing. Throughout our son’s long and arduous journey to become a doctor he has had to take a series of board exams. These tests are grueling, long ordeals. One of them lasted 17 hours. He had passed all of his exams and been certified as a qualified physician. A couple of months back he had to take one last massive test in order to be certified as a specialist in emergency medicine. It was an oral test lasting many hours and it was a beast. Toby told me he was sure he had failed. He was wrong. He learned just a couple of weeks ago that he had passed. He had proven that he was capable, that he knew what he was doing, that he was safe to turn loose on the public and be trusted. He had proven that.

That is the idea behind the Greek word here. I would translate those words, “that you might prove what the will of God is, that it is good and pleasing and complete.” Paul meant that as we are transformed by the renewal of our minds, we will prove to ourselves and others that God’s will is beautiful, it is good, it is what we want, and it is all we need. We will experience life as he intended, and in us others will see life being lived out as he intended, and that’s a terrific thing to see.

CONCLUSION

Having our minds made new by God’s grace means we will be something the world is not used to seeing. It will be different. We will live by different values, we will have different reactions to circumstances, we will treat people differently than others and we will live for a totally different set of goals because we have had a metamorphic paradigm shift. The way we see all of life has been changed, just like happened with Paul. Our minds have experienced a transformational renewal. The result of that is we will not be like the world around us, we will not conform to it.

It would be nice if that was automatic. Flip the switch and from that moment on everything we are and do is different. It’s not quite that simple. Many years ago with our then single children Laurie and I went on a kayak trip up the Wailua River in Hawaii. We had 2 tandem kayaks. Laurie and Toby were in one while Carissa and I had the other. Laurie and Toby had some issues learning to work together to paddle their boat. Carissa and I had a much easier time of working together, but we had some significant navigational issues. On that river there are tour boats and power boats. They are supposed to stay on the south side and kayaks are to keep to the north side. We had a strange thing happen. We couldn’t seem to go straight. We propelled the boat forward just fine, but as a big tour boat came down the river our kayak began veering into its path like it had a mind of its own. We frantically worked to correct the problem, paddling on one side to turn the boat. We succeeded in not getting run over, but now the kayak perversely headed toward the shore, seemingly no matter what we did, and it ended up running us into a bush. We got out of that predicament and began moving forward again, but once again we began wandering out toward the wrong side of the river. We were able to go up the river, but our path was like a series of S turns.

That’s kind of like the path our renewed minds will take us on. Everyone else in this age is going west. But our minds have been renewed and as a result we have turned and are going against the norm, heading east. It would be nice if we had a path directly due east, but we veer off to the left, then to the right. We see our thoughts taking us in the wrong direction, and we correct, get back on path. We apply the truth of the gospel to our thinking and our choices and actions in regard to how we see our relationship to God, ourselves and our own value and where it comes from, how we see both the victories and losses of life, how we deal with the problems and hardships that come along, how we relate to people who are difficult or even incorrigible at times, what matters in life, how we use our resources, and everything else that happens.

Recently we had a visitor to our church that Laurie and I spent time with. In the course of our long conversation I had to explain some of our history. It’s kind of dismal. We planted a church in this area, spent 3 decades leading the church until they fired me because they found me to be inadequate in many ways. We started another church. It has lasted for 12 years but has dwindled down to a handful of people, seemingly perhaps validating my previous church’s evaluation of me. That could be pretty deflating and defeating. I could easily wallow in a pit of discouragement and failure. Or I could live in the truth of what I know in my mind renewed by grace. God loves me. Life isn’t about me, it’s about the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord. If I’ve failed, so what? It’s not about me. How do I even evaluate failure given that if Jesus Christ really is Lord and he is sovereign, then all that matters is I’ve been faithful to him, and I have tried to do that. My resume and accomplishments aren’t impressive, but my life isn’t about impressing. I can rejoice, because God has me as part of his plan and I don’t know what my part actually is in it. I just know I’m here to serve. The result is I can live with peace that goes beyond understanding and with great joy, because God loves me. This is being transformed by a renewed mind.