

## **Transformational Ministry**

2 Corinthians 3:4-6

How should churches and their ministries define success? To define success, we must first be clear about the mission of the church. What are our marching orders? Before His ascension, Jesus made the mission very clear to His disciples when He commanded them to “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...*” (Matthew 28:19).

The mission that the church is commanded to be fully engaged in is a transformational mission. The church is commanded to make disciples for Christ of all nations—disciples who unashamedly proclaim the gospel of Jesus and are themselves living letters from Christ. And because making disciples of Christ cannot be humanly achieved, Jesus added to His marching orders, “*And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:20).

So, transformational churches and ministries define success not by how many people are coming to the church, but by who the people are becoming—not by its seating capacity, but by its sending capacity. As Jim Cymbala put it, “Our greatest fear is not that people might leave our church, but rather that they stay in our church and remain unchanged.”

Now this doesn’t mean that a healthy church will reach a place of sinless perfection. That will not happen this side of heaven. We are all a work in progress. But that’s it; we are a work in progress.

Being a healthy church is not about developing new programs and implementing new projects to draw a bigger crowd. Rather, it’s about devoting ourselves to the biblical processes of transformation, like prayer and the ministry of the word.

The membership and not just the leadership of a transformational church see themselves as a sent church (Matthew 28:19)—a church that operates not just for itself but also for the sake of a fallen world. The church’s first aim is not to bring about social change, but to be a conduit of spiritual transformation—transformation that will do more

than improve societal conditions, it will change a person's eternal destiny.

**Main idea:** Transformational ministry is not humanly achieved, it is humbly received from God to be unleashed to the glory of Christ.

To unfold this theme, we are going to observe some of the divine realities that enable believers to be ministers of spiritual transformation.

### **1. Ministers of transformation have a new confidence**

Notice that ministers of transformation have a new confidence. After making the bold assertion that the Corinthians were his letters of recommendation—letters from Christ, Paul writes, “*Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.*” (2 Corinthians 3:4)

Remember that behind Paul's assertion that the believers in Corinth were his letters of recommendation was his knowledge that false teachers in the church were undermining his leadership. They did so by falsely accusing him and questioning his fitness for ministry.

And it appears that they were being successful at sowing seeds of doubt against Paul in the hearts of his spiritual children. So, Paul reminds those being manipulated by the false apostles among them that they were his letters of recommendation from Christ—living proof of the authority of his transformational ministry.

Now although Paul made this bold assertion, he wanted to be clear about where his confidence lay. He didn't want them to get the impression that he was being self-confident by calling them his letters of recommendation. So, he elaborates in verse 4: “*Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.*”

Notice that Paul's confidence did not come from trusting in his own abilities. The confidence that Paul had in his transformational ministry came through his relationship with Christ.

I once heard Daniel Henderson share a story about an interaction he had with Henry Blackaby at a pastor's conference. While on break for lunch, and interacting about the current state of church ministry, Henry Blackaby offered a perspective that Daniel would never forget. With great conviction, he said to Daniel, "I am convinced that there are more men in pastoral ministry today motivated by insecurity rather than calling."

When I first heard this, it really spoke to me because although I'm in a better place today, I've battled with insecurity. And I'm aware that insecurity can not only cause you to turn away from your calling, insecurity can also rise up after stepping out by faith into your calling.

What is insecurity? Insecurity is a form of fear or a lack of confidence. And as I noted, it can keep us from moving into our calling or rise up after we have stepped into our calling. We can get so focused on doing ministry that we neglect our relationship with Christ through whom we receive our calling and confidence for transformational ministry.

When our confidence is not received and renewed through Christ, we will seek to find it in other places. This is idolatry. What is idolatry? It's seeking to find in something or somebody what we can only find in God.

Many today, including people involved in ministry, often look to their work to feel a sense of significance. Sometimes their entire identity is wrapped up in the task that they're performing or in the success that they achieve.

Remember, that Paul facetiously referred to those who opposed his ministry as super-apostles. They wanted the admiration and the authority that Paul had. They believed that significance was found in being in a position of prominence and power.

So, they exalted themselves by maligning Paul's reputation. They did so because their confidence, security and identity were not rooted in

the love of Christ. Rather, their identity was all wrapped in their appearance and positions before people.

Paul, on the other hand, didn't find his primary identity in his calling as an apostle or in how others viewed him. Instead, Paul found his identity in Christ and thus his confidence in ministry came from knowing who he was in Christ.

Brothers and sisters, when our identity and confidence does not come through Christ our motivation for ministry will be self-centered rather than Christ centered—inward focused, rather than God-ward focused. And this self-focus will produce either insecurity that will paralyze us from fulfilling God's calling, or self-confidence that will make ministry all about ourselves.

When we lack the confidence that comes through Christ our motivation for ministry will be self-serving rather than self-giving. We will look out more for our own interests and not the interests of others. When our motivations for ministry are not divinely received, we will seek to use others to make us look good, rather than seeking the highest good of others.

Now after identifying where his confidence came from, Paul continues, *“Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God,”* (2 Corinthians 3:5).

Notice that although Paul already clarified that his confidence came through Christ, he further clarifies where his sufficiency was found. Paul was confident in the transformational nature of his ministry not because he was self-sufficient. He didn't think, “God chose me because I have what it takes.”

On the contrary, Paul's confidence came from his understanding that God's strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). That is to say, his effectiveness in ministry was founded in knowing that he had no ability of his own. And in turn he leaned on the Lord who worked through him and in those he ministered to.

In 1 Corinthian 15:9, Paul declared: *“For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle...”* Understanding our inability is a prerequisite to experiencing God’s ability in our lives and ministries.

This principle that God doesn’t call the self-sufficient, but instead makes sufficient those He calls is found throughout the scriptures.

When God called Moses, Moses responded, *“Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue.”* <sup>11</sup> Then the Lord said to him, *“Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?”* <sup>12</sup> Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak” (Exodus 4:11-12).

The years that followed Moses’ call to lead the people of God out of Egypt demonstrated the divine principle that God doesn’t call the qualified, he qualifies the called.

In his insightful commentary, Kent Hughes noted: “In a word, our weaknesses are part of, and the ground of, God’s call to serve him. Vance Havner is right! Our weaknesses and his strength form an unbeatable combination. The most eloquent statement of this truth that I know of comes from Oswald Chambers:

‘God can achieve His purpose either through the absence of human power and resources, or abandonment of reliance on them. All through history God has chosen and used nobodies, because their unusual dependence on Him made possible the unique display of His power and grace. He chose and used somebodies only when they renounced dependence on their natural abilities and resources.’”

Now, although acknowledging our inadequacy is a prerequisite to being used by God, there must also be, as Chambers noted, an *unusual dependence* on God. And the testimony of scripture is clear:

Renouncing our self-sufficiency and depending on God’s sufficiency is best measured by our devotion to earnest prayer.

Mike Gilbert-Smith keenly noted, “The preacher [or parent or whatever your vocation] who works hard but prays little trusts much in himself and little in the Lord.”

Moreover it is also clear from the scriptures that our inadequacies and weaknesses are not a valid reason for turning from the call of God upon our lives. Rather, God specializes in calling the weak and inadequate so that the sufficiency of His grace is magnified in our lives to the glory of Jesus.

This brings us to our second point: ministers of transformation have a new covenant

## **2. Ministers of transformation have a new covenant**

After noting that his sufficiency is from God, Paul continues: “*who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant,*” (2 Corinthians 3:6a)

Paul states yet again that his confidence came not only from the reality that God made him sufficient, but in what God made him sufficient for, namely to be a minister of a new covenant. Throughout this chapter Paul contrasts the Old Covenant of Moses with the greater and better New Covenant of Christ.

And as we saw last week, under the Old Covenant the law of Moses that governed the people of God was written on tablets of stone. But under the New Covenant the law of Christ is written on human hearts (v.3).

What Paul is demonstrating here is that because the Old Covenant was based on an external law, it could not give them the internal power they needed to keep it. Although the law of Moses with its ordinances, priesthood and animal sacrifices pointed to Christ, it was inadequate to transform their lives.

In contrast, the New Covenant, enacted by Christ through His shed blood, was a covenant of transformation—a covenant that frees

believers from the guilt of sin and changed them into the image of Christ from the inside out.

Notice that after the people of God demonstrated over and over that they could not keep the law as they had promised, Jeremiah prophesied: *“For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people”* (Jeremiah 31:33).

As one bible teacher explained: “The promise of internal renewal (the Law within, an intimacy with God, a personal relationship with God, and true forgiveness) all prophesied radical transformation. Then, centuries later when Christ came to the final hours of his life and held up the cup at Passover saying, *‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood’* (Luke 22:20), it was as if he laid his hand on that passage in Jeremiah and said, ‘This day this scripture is fulfilled before your eyes.’ Jesus Christ effects the radical transformation of the new covenant by his shed blood. Millions upon millions of such transformations have been worked in the lives of men and women for two millennia, and we ourselves share the flow of transformation.” Kent Hughes

Now it was this new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah and fulfilled through Christ that not only transformed Paul’s life, but also made him sufficient to be a minister of the new covenant. You see, the new covenant, which was mediated by the crucified and risen Jesus, and which we enter into by faith, is sufficient to save us and sufficient to make us ministers of transformation.

It makes us sufficient because the transforming power of the Spirit not only transforms us, but also works through us as we step out in faith to serve Christ and proclaim His gospel which is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe.

We come now to our final point: ministers of transformation are a new creation.

### 3. Ministers of transformation are a new creation

Notice that when explaining that believers are made sufficient by God to be ministers of a new covenant, Paul adds, *not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*” (2 Corinthians 3:6).

Now when Paul clarified that his ministry is not of the letter but of the Spirit, he again is contrasting the superiority of the New Covenant verses the Old Covenant. When he writes, *not of the letter*, he is referring to the letter of the law—or the law of Moses.

Although the law is holy and good, it cannot save. In fact, apart from Christ the law kills—the law reveals our guilt and condemns us.

The Spirit of the New Covenant, on the other hand, gives life to those who receive by faith the saving message of the gospel. Through the Spirit all who are in Christ receive more than a new beginning or a new chance or a new lease on life. All who are in Christ receive a new heart and are new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

As did the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, the prophet Ezekiel also prophesied of the internal New Covenant work of the Spirit: *“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules”* (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

So, the Spirit doesn’t just teach us how to live according to the law of Christ, He also works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13). Unlike Moses, who was called to deliver the letter of the law to a people who were hard of heart, Paul’s new covenant ministry was accompanied by the Spirit which transformed the hearts of the believers he ministered to.

Because of the Spirit’s work in the heart, Paul did more than deliver the letter of the law; he delivered living letters from Christ.

Paul had great confidence in his gospel ministry because he knew that those who believed received more than an external law, they also received the internal presence of the Spirit who writes the law of Christ on human hearts.

Moreover, Paul was mightily used of God in transformational ministry because his awareness of his insufficiency cast him upon the sufficiency of Christ.

Pastor Kent Hughes makes this powerful observation: “Those whom God uses have always been aware of their insufficiency and weakness, be it Moses or Gideon or Isaiah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel or Paul or Peter or John. And it was their insufficiency that invited the sufficiency of God. God is not looking for gifted people or people who are self-sufficient. He is looking for inadequate people who will give their weakness to Him and open themselves to the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the transforming grace of the new covenant as it is ministered by Christ Himself.

[Beloved] I don't know what He may be calling you to do—it may be worldwide missions, it may be teaching a Sunday school class, it may be ministering to children, it may be reaching out in your neighborhood, it may be stepping up at work. But if He's calling you, don't hide behind your weakness—your weakness is the ground for His calling. Follow God, and He will use your weakness as an occasion for His power.

And if you are feeling terrifying stirrings within your soul as He nudges you outside your comfort zone, (but you know that He is calling you), give your weakness to Him and accept His sufficiency.”

O brothers and sisters, God will use us in our weakness, but only when we don't use our weakness as an excuse to limit what God wants to do through us. His strength is made perfect in our weakness when in recognition of it we cast ourselves on the sufficiency of Christ.

And remember, renouncing our self-sufficiency and depending on God's sufficiency is best measured by our devotion to earnest prayer.

The Christian who works hard for the Lord but prays little trusts much in himself and little in the Lord.

As many of you know, our brother Erol heard the Gospel, received it, and was saved at a Greg Laurie Crusade. But what many of you do not know, and I didn't know until recently, is the work of God that took place 12 years later.

Greg Laurie was prayerfully considering having a crusade in Chicago, and gathered a large number of prominent pastors from the area to ask for their support. Erol was invited to the event so he could meet Greg Laurie and share his testimony with him. Greg Laurie was not aware that he was saved at one of his earlier crusades. When Erol got the opportunity to share his testimony with Greg Laurie, Greg's jaw dropped. He then asked Erol if he would share his testimony with the pastors that evening. Erol agreed but when he was later handed the microphone, all the pastors eyes fell on him, and as he puts it, "I opened my mouth, but nothing came out."

This only added to his uneasiness so he silently prayed, "God, I can't do this!" And at that moment he sensed God saying, "I know. I was only waiting for you to admit it. Now open your mouth and speak!" And he did.

After the gathering had ended, pastor Greg approached Erol and asked, "Have you publicly shared your testimony before?" When Erol said he hadn't, pastor Greg said, "Praise the Lord! Because of what you shared, all those pastors are on board. Because you shared, we are going to have a Chicago Harvest Crusade. And because you shared, lost people are going to be saved!"

Brothers and sisters, unless we prayerfully depend on the superiority of the new covenant, we will not overcome our paralyzing insecurities and experience internal gospel transformation. Only the transforming power of the Holy Spirit can overcome our insecurities and make us sufficient ministers of the new covenant.

## **Conclusion**

God is not looking for men and women of great ability to do His transforming work. He's looking for men and women of great availability. With our eyes on the finished work of Christ and the sufficiency of the new covenant, let us be those men and women to the glory of Jesus.