

Transformation: Dream or Reality?

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God brings about transformation in individuals, families, communities and nations where local churches understand and respond to his full intentions. Too often, however, transformation has not followed evangelism and church planting because Christians miss God's intentions.

The term transformation is a "hot button" in Christian mission circles. It merits analysis from a biblical perspective. I define biblical transformation as the process of restoration to God's intentions of all that was broken when humanity rebelled against God at the Fall. It is not the same as spiritual conversion, though it begins there. It is God's work. He calls his people to participate with him in it. This ongoing process will not be fully completed until Christ returns.

Many people involved in missions are wondering, "Shouldn't we be seeing more transformation in our societies after all the apparent conversions and new church plants? What has gone wrong? Should we do something differently?"

These are good questions that merit examination. First, though, biblical transformation is indeed occurring where local churches understand that Christ not only expects his people to proclaim the good news of salvation, but also to advocate for his rule in their communities. They do this by demonstrating his love to others.

Transformation in Uganda

A church in Uganda's capital is an example of community ministry bringing about transformation. Kampala Pentecostal Church has more than twelve thousand members and nine hundred cell groups. The church's membership was half that in the year 2000 when its leaders attended a Vision Conference conducted by the Harvest Foundation and Food for the Hungry, partners in the Disciple Nations Alliance (DNA) movement.

We organize DNA Vision Conferences in cities around the world. These conferences cast a vision for biblical worldview and holistic ministry. We present holistic ministry as a lifestyle of love in action that serves the needs of the whole person in obedience to Christ's command to love our neigh-

bors as we love ourselves. We teach the concept of "seed projects"—small holistic efforts that show God's love in the community. These efforts are accomplished with local resources, bathed in prayer and led by the Holy Spirit. Seed projects can, and often do, lead to larger, ongoing projects.

The Holy Spirit had already given the leaders of Kampala Pentecostal Church a desire to reach their city with God's love. At the Vision Conference they learned Harvest's practical strategy that could mobilize their members. Senior pastor Gary Skinner equipped and challenged his people to carry out seed projects. He asked every cell group to do at least two a year.

Pastor Skinner puts it this way:

The problems are not the communities' problems—they're our problems! They're not the government's problems. The government can't fix the problems because, although it may have a little bit of money, it has no love. Money does not solve problems. Love does! And if the government does it, God does not get the glory. But when the church does it with love, God gets the glory.

Skinner said that cell group members find a problem, take ownership of it, and engage and love the community. One seed project his church did was to fix and clean wells so the water was potable again. At a home for the poor, a cell group replaced a roof that was leaking so badly those living under it were wet, cold and sick. Another seed project raised food for orphans. "We are looking after twelve hundred orphans," Skinner said. "Half of them live in homes we have built."

Every cell group of Kampala Pentecostal Church has been asked to take ownership of a family with AIDS, a major problem in Uganda. The groups do whatever family members need: a visit, a hug for the sick, someone to sit by their beds or help in getting medicine. Nearly all the patients come to faith in Christ. When a patient dies, instead of the drunken orgy that commonly follows death, the group holds a worship service with family members, who come to faith in Christ because they have seen and experienced Christ's love.

Imagine the impact that at least eighteen hundred annual cell group outreaches are making in Kampala. Neighborhoods are taking notice. Kampala Pentecostal Church is recognized across Uganda and in government circles among leading churches fighting AIDS and serving AIDS orphans.

This testimony should be true of every church in every country. If Christ's church were doing what God intended, it would be a strategic institution in every culture where it exists. If communities do not see their churches as strategically important to community health, something is wrong. God intends his church to be precisely that important.

Kampala Pentecostal Church is one among many other churches reaching out with God's love. But today KPC is the exception, not the rule. I believe this is the key reason for the lack of visible biblical transformation in our societies.

Disappointed Expectations

During the past century, Christian churches—especially conservative evangelical and Pentecostal—have believed that the kingdom of God is extended primarily through evangelizing, planting churches and discipling believers in godliness. Thousands of missionaries have gone throughout the world, preached the gospel, won millions of converts and planted many churches. Their underlying assumption has been that transformation is mainly a personal spiritual issue.

In countries and cultures where the conservative church has seen great numerical growth, we would hope to see significant individual and societal transformation. If the gospel of Jesus Christ were changing people, then we would expect visible change in their societies. We would expect to see God's will being done in all spheres of society. With many new churches filled with many new believers, we would expect to see whole communities and even nations transformed.

By and large, however, we have not seen this kind of transformation. In some instances where there has been numerical growth of conversions and churches, we have even seen the opposite of societal transformation.

In contrast to the missionary efforts of conservative churches, liberal churches have believed the kingdom of God would come as they engaged in social issues and worked to change social structures. But these efforts have not transformed societies either.

Each approach—conservative and liberal—has failed to bring about cultural and societal transformation because each has failed to understand and act on the full intentions of God.

God's Agenda for Transformation

For the Christian church to truly obey the Great Commission and witness real transformation, it must under-

stand God's full agenda and the role Christ expects his people to play in that agenda.

God is indeed in the business of transformation. Throughout Scripture, God shows us his desire for healing and restoration in individuals, families and communities. His grand agenda is to restore all things—including creation—unto himself (Col. 1:20). What's more, he chooses to accomplish that work in partnership with his people as we obey him.

The Lord's Prayer succinctly reflects God's whole agenda for us and the world. Jesus taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). What is God's desire for us on earth? Scripture teaches us his will in every aspect of our lives—physically, spiritually, socially and intellectually. God wants us to obey his will in every area. As we do, he heals our brokenness, individually and collectively. As we obey God's will in increasing measure and depth, we influence families and communities. Communities influence cultures, and eventually nations are transformed.

In 2 Chronicles 7:14, God tells Israel, "If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." By forgiving our sin, God brings spiritual restoration. In response to our obedience, he heals our societies—our "land."

Christ's blood, Paul writes in Colossians 1:19-20, was shed for the restoration of all things—not only for our souls, not only for our relationship with God, but for all that was broken in the Fall. Clearly, not only our relationship with God was broken when humankind rebelled. In Romans 8:19-21, Paul writes that creation itself is groaning, waiting for its redemption. Unless we recognize that Christ's blood was shed for the restoration of all that was broken, and unless we see that his people are to participate in his broad agenda to restore all things, we do not have a full, biblical understanding of transformation.

The Church as God's Agent

We will not see complete transformation—the kingdom of God in its fullness—until Christ returns in his glory. However, Paul makes it clear in Ephesians 3:10-11 that the church is God's chosen and primary agent to bring his healing and saving touch to a hurting world. We need to be engaged as his representatives, working for the transformation of all things. God intends the church to demonstrate and model the full and future expression of Christ's reign. Until the church understands that its job is to represent all of God's intentions—not only spiritual conversion but transformation in every sector of society—it can never fulfill God's full intentions.

In the Great Commission, Jesus commands us to go to the entire world and preach the gospel. This is not only the good news of spiritual salvation but also the good news of what happens when Jesus is Lord of every aspect of our personal, family and societal life, as well as our relationship with creation. The good news is twofold: Christians can anticipate an eternal future in heaven with our Lord and we have the privilege of moving toward healing now, in this life.

Our churches need to prepare people to be God's representatives, doing his will wherever they are placed. We don't sufficiently equip people to see that the mission field includes the secular world where God has already placed us and given us unique gifts for his service.

In Ephesians 4:11-12, Paul lists the five types of ministers in the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. He gave each role the same summary job description: to prepare God's people for works of service, representing God's kingdom wherever they happen to be.

As we do works of service and obey his will, we express the fullness of Christ. In Ephesians 3:17-19, Paul defines the fullness of Christ as the love of God, which is so high, wide and deep that we cannot comprehend it. In other words, we reflect Christ when God's love flows through us in works of service in a broken world.

Corrective Challenge

If this behavior marks followers of Jesus Christ, we must ask ourselves a hard question: How well is the church equipping its people for a lifestyle of active service? Unfortunately, the answer too often is, "Not very well." We have not equipped the church to fully reflect Christ's intentions. We have preached the gospel and called church members to lives of personal holiness. Yet, we have often failed to equip the church to live the Great Commandment. We have represented the Christian life as weekly worship and daily prayer and Bible reading. Too often, we have failed to recognize that God is calling every church member to imitate Christ Jesus with a servant's heart and a servant's lifestyle.

The corrective challenge is at least fourfold:

- Bring local churches to an understanding of God's grand agenda and their role in it;
- Encourage these churches to repent of their failure to fully obey his instructions;
- Equip local church leaders to prepare members to carry out the transformational assignment God has given each of them;
- Build a system of encouragement and accountability for works of service into church life.

Harvest Foundation responds to this challenge by encouraging and preparing churches around the world to understand and respond fully to the directives of Jesus Christ. Our passion is to see churches become embassies of the

kingdom of God with members grasping they are ambassadors of that kingdom. In that role, church members live out Christ's teachings in their personal and family lives, and intentionally and strategically advocate Christ's rule where they live and work. To this end, we urge pastors and church leaders to adopt a biblical worldview and vision for holistic ministry. We then equip these leaders to train their members, using personal "disciplines of love" and group seed projects as means of applying the new understanding. ♦

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