

# “Personal Transformation Requires Supportive Community”

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*Ecclesiastes 1:1-10 and 2 Corinthians 5:16-21*

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Benjamin Franklin never wrote a book he very much wanted to write. His theme for the book was how to become a moral and perfect person. He felt he could write it only after he had experimented with the technique he believed would bring him to moral perfection. In his autobiography he describes his failed experiment.

Benjamin Franklin, as a Deist who did not believe God answered prayer, saw self-discipline as the only true path to moral perfection. He set out to replace his bad habits by listing thirteen virtues he wished to develop. He determined that if he worked on only one virtue each week, then at the end of thirteen weeks he could return and focus again on the first virtue. By repeating this self-discipline cycle four times a year, Franklin was confident he could develop his thirteen virtues to perfection.

Franklin records that he did pretty well on the first virtue the first week of his experiment. Confident at his accomplishment, he shifted his focus the second week to the second virtue and the third week to the third. By the fourth week, he realized he had experienced a total relapse in the first virtue. After continuing this experiment to the point of frustration, Franklin finally gave up. Thus, his book on achieving moral perfection never was written.

Franklin's failed attempt at moral perfection raises an important question for people of faith. Can a person really change at the deepest level of moral character? Were the depressed writings of Ecclesiastes correct in saying that all is vanity, there is nothing new under the sun, and everything remains the same? Just as the seasons cycle through apparent changes only to end up back in the same place, perhaps we are just kidding ourselves to believe that we can change.

On the one hand we have the depressing voice of Ecclesiastes saying we can never really change. Things remain the same no matter how hard we try to change. However, this is not the only scriptures regarding transformation. The Apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians promised genuine deep transformation was not only possible, but expected for followers of Jesus. Let's explore how Paul's admonition toward transformation actually works.

Hear the words of scripture from 2 Corinthians 5: 16-18:

**16** From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view;<sup>[b]</sup> even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view,<sup>[c]</sup> we know him no longer in that way. **17** So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! **18** All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;

Years ago I grew to appreciate the “search-and-replace” feature on a word processor. Near the end of my doctoral dissertation I discovered that I had made a consistent mistake in my footnotes throughout the document. Instead of going through the entire document to correct the footnotes one at a time, I learned that all I had to do with ask the computer to find all the occurrences of the mistake and change it to the proper word. With one command I corrected the entire document.

Thus, I can appreciate the pastor of a small congregation who used this “search-and-replace” feature on the word processor in order to change a funeral bulletin. The pastor decided to use the exact same funeral service for Edna that had been used for Mary some months before. The pastor told the computer to replace Mary with Edna throughout the document. With one easy command the funeral bulletin was printed. Everything went fine the day of the service until the congregation read the Apostle’s Creed together. Imagine their confusion as they read that Jesus was, “conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Edna.”

At first reading it might appear that the Apostle Paul believed transformation was as easy as a touch of the keypad. Paraphrasing 2 Corinthians 5:17 we understand that if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation. Does this mean Jesus always brings us easy, instant change? If we used to have a temper problem, Jesus will make it so that we are all smiles? If we used to be a strong personality, Jesus makes us meek and mild? As a college aged new Christian, I thought this was the miracle promise of God. Jesus would instantly and miraculously transform us like the search and replace feature on a computer. I quickly discovered this was not the case. So what did Apostle Paul mean?

The context of 2 Corinthians 5 is how we see each other in the family of God. This second letter to Corinth involves Paul’s apology and shift in tone as he writes to them. He realized his first letter may have been too harsh. Many in the congregation had been hurt by Paul’s tone. So he writes the second letter with an emphasis on reconciliation.

The theme of reconciliation flows through the entire letter, but particularly in chapter 5. Paul reminds them only as they forgive each other and seek reconciliation can they become the supportive community needed to bring genuine deep transformational healing to each and all. The church as God’s beloved people has such power to offer love and support, encouragement and accountability. When we experience these things we indeed become new in Christ, the old is gone and everything becomes new.

Let me use a personal illustration. Nine years ago I retired from a west coast congregation. My wife and I moved to the Harrisburg area to be close to our four adult children, their spouses, and our three grandchildren. My wife was excited to be moving to “grandma land.” For me, however, it was not so easy.

Moving here was the first time in my adult life I was moving somewhere without a calling or job. I arrived knowing nobody other than our immediate family. For the first few weeks I tried to be a grandpa. It was OK. But I wasn't nearly as fulfilled in retirement as my wife was. In fact, by the second month here I realized I was sinking into depression.

I had suffered some pretty severe depression cycles earlier in my life and recognized the symptoms. I couldn't ask my wife to solve my problems. I needed help. So I called my best friend back in San Diego.

Allan and I have been in a men's support group for 16 years. Every week for those years our group of four men met for breakfast and shared our lives. We talked about family, careers, stresses and success. We explored our doubts and faith. We grew our trust to discuss uncomfortable topics and engage in opposing political viewpoints. As followers of Jesus we wanted to offer each other mutual support, vulnerability, confidentiality, and accountability.

So I called Allan. He listened and then gave me an assignment. Now, when we give each other assignments, we know there will be accountability. I knew in our phone call the next week he would check on my progress. Here was the assignment: Visit a local church and make a point of meeting the pastor and asking to go to coffee sometime the next week.

The pastor accepted my request to share coffee. He was an interim pastor in our Presbytery. Following our coffee, he called the Presbytery office and told them about me. By Friday, Presbytery office was submitting my paperwork to a local church needing an interim. With a couple months I was serving a congregation as semi-retired.

At the next Presbytery meeting the Rev. Jim Richwine (of our own congregation) invited me into a clergy support group. I've been in that group for 8 years now. Through building a support system here in central PA, I broke through my depression and became joyfully engaged with new friends as well as family. I am continuing my transformational journey of following Jesus and walking with the Holy Spirit.

Mrs. Dougherty was fresh out of college, excited to use her new degree, when she was hired to teach in a difficult situation. Little did she know that all the most difficult students for her grade level were in her class. Some of the other teachers had manipulated the situation so that they could avoid those students with reputations for causing trouble.

That first week Mrs. Dougherty could barely hold the class together. She did not seem able to accomplish any real teaching. She spent all her time trying to discipline the unruly students, getting one to sit down and another to be quiet. On Friday she made an appointment to talk with the principal.

When this young teacher arrived at the principal's office, he was out. There, on top of the principal's desk, was a file of her class. She saw her name on the top of the file. Out of curiosity, she flipped open the file and there she read the list of her students' names. Next to each name she saw a number: 142, 137, 128. She studied the numbers with amazement. She closed the file and walked out before the principal returned.

On Monday Mrs. Dougherty stood before her class and said, "Things are going to be different from now on. I know something about you that you would not have let me know, but now that I know it, things are going to be different. When I give an assignment, I expect you to read it. When I ask a question, I want ten hands in the air, and I want you to know the answer. When I tell that there is a written assignment, it will be neat and well written. If you have to type it, you will turn it in typed. Assignments will be on my desk when I arrive in the morning. This class is going to be different!"

Mrs. Dougherty ran her class exactly as she had promised. The students responded. Their grades came up to her expectations. Together they had an amazing year as teacher and students. In fact, at the end of the year she was presented with a plaque honoring her accomplishments with those students. After the ceremony she found the principal and said, "I have a confession to make. That first week when I started as a new teacher, I went into your office. I was supposed to meet with you, but you were out of your office. I did something very unprofessional. I looked inside the file on top of your desk. When I studied the IQ scores next to the students' names I realized I had the brightest and best in this school, and I raised my expectations for them." The principal looked at her and said, "Mrs. Dougherty, you have done an amazing thing with this class. However, I need to tell you something about that file. Those numbers were not the children's IQ scores. Those were their locker numbers."

As a church we can look at other as gifted, with wonderful potential to love and serve God, or simply as locker numbers.