

METAMORPHOSIS

In his book, *Velvet Elvis*, Rob Bell, founding pastor of Mars Hill Church, described dreaming with his wife about the kind of church they would like to be a part of. Have you ever done that? What kind of a church would you most like to attend?

For the Bell's, it would be a church whose services people didn't want to miss. Going to church would be their first choice for Sunday morning. They write: "Not 'I have to' but 'I get to. Not obligation but celebration. Not duty but desire."

They went on to list other characteristics: "Longing. Come as you are. Connection. A group of people who can imagine nothing better than this."

The music would reflect their alternative tastes: a "...raw art form that comes from your guts. Do it yourself. Strip it down. Bare bones. Take away all the fluff and the hype. ...strip everything away and get down to the most basic elements. A group of people desperate to experience God."

Is that a compelling vision for the church? I resonate with their desire for authenticity, their passion, vitality and longing. You have to love their heart for the church.

And shortly after I read *Velvet Elvis*, I read *Revolution of Character*, by Dallas Willard. Willard teaches philosophy at USC. He has invested most of his life thinking about spiritual formation. In a chapter entitled "Changing How We Relate To Others," Willard used Romans 12:9-21 to create a template for spiritually transformed people. Then he said this: "Just think about what it would be like to be a part of a group of disciples in which this list was the conscious, shared *intention* and where it was actually lived out."

It was an "Aha!" moment. While there is much to admire in Rob Bell's dream, his vision emerges from personal and cultural preferences. Willard describes something *trans*-cultural, an inward metamorphosis of character expressive of God's work in the hearts of his people that makes them irresistible, no matter how they organize their worship.

Please don't misunderstand. Rob Bell and Dallas Willard aren't at odds with each other. This isn't an *either/or* comparison, nor is it a criticism. There's room for a generous "and" in the conversation. But Willard offers an inside-out work of many graces in God's people. He writes: "Christ's apprentices would be [living] with a grace and power that is not from themselves, but from God."

As we begin 2008, we want to immerse ourselves in Romans 12. We want to ask Willard's question ourselves: "What would it be like to be a part of a group of disciples in which Romans 12 was the conscious, shared *intention* and where it was actually lived out?" Imagine our church family as the kind of people Paul describes in this amazing passage. Imagine this becoming our conscious, shared intention and actually living it out. Imagine experiencing transformed lives casting a long shadow that transforms our entire church.

Let's read Romans 12:1-21.

We have a wonderful journey in front of us. And we need to remind ourselves at the outset that chapter 12 is not a stand alone piece of Scripture. Paul has already taken his readers through an exacting examination of human depravity and divine grace. Because of Jesus, we don't get what we deserve. God's response to human evil is Christ whose death on the cross settled our debt with God. We become alive to God through faith in Christ. Christ-followers are set free from the condemnation of sin and the power of sin. By God's Spirit living inside us, we can live now as God intends. That's Romans chapters 1-11 in the briefest nutshell.

In chapter 12, Paul then transitions from theology, through doxology in the closing verses

of chapter 11, to what we might call *practology* – a practical theology of salvation living. He opens with a challenge – v. 1-2.

In light of everything God has done on our behalf, first and foremost, present your bodies as a sacrifice to God: living, holy and pleasing to him. This is reasonable service to render the one who has given us such an incredible salvation.

Isn't it interesting that Paul urges us to present our *bodies* in sacrifice. We have so camped on the idea that God is concerned most with our hearts that we embrace what amounts to a functional dualism in which our bodies don't count. We just need to get our hearts right. And if we get our hearts right, we mistakenly think, it doesn't matter what we do with our bodies.

We forget that we are embodied souls. We function in the unity of our beings. Our bodies are the instruments of our minds and hearts. And, at the same time, our hearts are shaped by how we respond to what our bodies desire.

So it matters that we present our actual physical bodies to God in sacrificial service. And note the three adjectives that describe how we offer our bodies. They are to be *living* sacrifices, holy sacrifices, pleasing sacrifices. Bodies that are offered as living sacrifices are bodies that are fully alive and responsive to God. Ours is not a "just say no" kind of faith. Our body response to God is a living, emphatic "Yes!"

We offer God bodies that are holy, set apart for God. We can't do just anything we wish with these bodies of ours anymore. They aren't ordinary. The Bible calls them holy temples, special for God.

And we offer our bodies to God as sacrifices that please and honor him – gifts that make God smile.

Paul said earlier: "Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness" (Romans 6:13).

This means that my body is not for immorality or excess, but for Christ and his kingdom. The parts of my body are his tools to accomplish his righteous purposes. My tongue is not for lying or cursing, but for blessing, truth-telling and encouragement. My hands are not for hitting or grasping, but for serving in love. My eyes are not for greed or vicarious lust, but for wonder, enjoyment, for seeing my world as God sees it. My ears are not for drinking in gossip and slander, but for loving others through active listening. My knees become prayer bones. My feet run with the good news of God's peace. I don't give God my left-over body energy – what remains after I have done my work, cared for my family, and enjoyed my recreation. I give God my body's energy in my employment, my family, my marriage, my play. And I conserve significant energy for worship and service.

Before we can talk about what we must do with our bodies, we must settle what we must be in our bodies: sacrifices offered to God: living, holy, and pleasing to him. In everything we do, we glorify God with our bodies – our physical selves, the entire unity of our being.

Then, Paul adds, stop letting the world press you into its mold, rather, be transformed by the renewing of your minds.

From day one of our existence we have been spiritually formed by the world around us, a world the Bible describes as being at odds with God. We absorbed the values and preferences of the homes in which we were raised. Our political system, entertainment, recreation, education all added bits and pieces of data that shaped our understanding of how the world works, how things ought to be.

And for as long as we lived outside of faith in Jesus our inner self was ruled by a stubborn rebellious heart, determined to find life and meaning on its own terms. In his letter to Ephesus, Paul described it this way: "...you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which

you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts” (Ephesians 2:1-3a).

Note that our bent toward evil was shaped by the ways of this world and by its wicked ruler. We were spiritually formed by what we knew from the world around us. We may have had godly parents or siblings that moderated the impact, but in ways beyond our conscious knowing, the world pressed us into its mold. In computer-speak, that was our original equipment operating system.

When we came to Christ in repentance and faith, God made us new on the inside. He gave us his Spirit and we became alive to his truth. We got this new operating system. But the old was not entirely erased. It still gives us grief.

God’s solution is for us to submit our minds, that core processor of our entire system, to an ongoing process of renewal. The Bible describes renewing our minds as a work of the Spirit who transcribes God’s truth onto the interior walls of our hearts and minds. As we read and respond to God’s word under the direction of God’s Spirit we are reprogrammed so that our entire lives may be transformed. God’s operating system takes over.

Our values change. For instance, in our old life before Jesus, we valued having things and having fun. The focus was on us. In Christ, we discover that it’s not about us. We value the joy we experience through generosity and serving others in love.

In our old system, or thinking about dating and relationships was profoundly influenced by what we saw and sang along with on MTV, romantic comedies and sitcoms like *Friends*. In Christ we discover the significance and freedom of sexual purity.

We have whole reams of internal programming that need to change. The word Paul used to describe that change is *metamorphoō*. What does that sound like? Metamorphosis – total transformation that takes place by radically changing our understanding of how the world works, and how things ought to be – renewing our minds.

As that process unfolds, we develop an instinct for God’s will: “...be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove [test; discern] what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

By the way, there’s an entire message on the will of God right here in verse 2. We already know God’s will about many things. For instance, we don’t have to pray about whether we should lie, or cheat on our taxes. God has spoken with clarity about many of the choices we make. But when we are perplexed as to which way to go, discern God’s will by applying these three tests:

- Is it good? Is there any hint of moral or ethical compromise? Any unseemly offense toward others? Any hidden motives that are not good?
- Is it acceptable? Does it make God smile? Will he be pleased with our choice?
- Is it perfect? By perfect, we should understand mature. Which choice best reflects the spiritually grown up thing to do?

Romans 12:1-2 is rightly one of those passages most of you have committed to memory. It deserves to be enshrined in our minds as a significant touchstone of truth. Verse two has become for me a paradigm-shaping text on how Christ is formed in us. We are transformed by the renewing of our minds.

But the text deserves more than a retrievable slot in our mental list of quotes. We err greatly when we think we have mastered a text by committing to memory. Knowing truth is not the same as doing truth. Paul’s exhortation is to action: make the sacrifice – offer God your bodies: living, holy, pleasing; stop letting the world set the agenda for your life – be transformed

by renewing your minds.

What a compelling exhortation for the first Sunday of 2008.

Remember the question we asked at the beginning? “What would it be like to be a part of a group of disciples in which Romans 12 was the conscious, shared *intention* and where it was actually lived out?”

It starts here.

- Will you make it your conscious intent to offer your body – and all its parts – to God in service to him?
- Will you stand against the tide of this present age by engaging with God’s Spirit in an ongoing process of life transformation through renewing your mind?