

Vitality and Transformation ***A Brief Take from Romans 12***

“Vitality” and “transformation” are big, attractive words. But what do they mean? And most importantly for the church today, what do they mean FOR us and what do they ask FROM us?

Let’s start with the verse that many of us probably memorized at some point in our lifetime:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2)

Some of us may have come from backgrounds or traditions where this set of commands was emphasized in isolation from the rest of Paul’s teaching in the chapter, so that we feel it threatens rather than exhorts us. Such an approach prods us to resist the outside world in principle, and even confront it directly. Our minds may also go immediately to our current political context, where even Christians resist and decry one another over their political convictions and affiliations. The text can, in this incomplete interpretation, become tinged with a judgmental tone. Thus this text, taken alone and read threateningly, can cause us to isolate ourselves from the world, which is clearly not our calling (see Matthew 28:18-20).

Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of Romans 12:2 in *The Message* gets us off to a better start, one that is a bit more consistent with the original Greek. Consider these words:

Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

Do you notice the differences? Peterson’s take on the verse captures the more nuanced setting overall in Romans 12. (Consider that verse 3 calls us to humility, arguably fleshing that exhortation out in the 17 verses that follow!) Peterson’s paraphrase pulls into verse 2 a sense of where our non-conformity comes from: It comes from the Lord’s work and our willingness for him to be at work, not to change the world, but to change us as we become conformed more and more to the likeness of his Son. We are not then cut off from the world, but God engages with us and equips us to live in the church *and* in the world in a way that glorifies him. These means of engagement are marks of Christian vitality and of living a transformed life.

Vitality and transformation are about each one of us opting fully into our life with Christ. It means entrusting our grief over the changes in the world and in our communities to the Lord. It means asking him to give us fresh eyes to see the needs around us. It means bravely stepping up to engage with the surrounding community (and perhaps more than just that part of the community in which we feel comfortable). It means that we all undertake face-to-face

encounters that are authentic and ongoing – encounters that may entail a task, but that also help us risk getting to know new people and new opportunities around us. It means we might need to re-think financial priorities or budget structure or worship venues of the church to live into God’s calling. And it is in conversations around such functional, concrete operations of the particular church that we encounter ourselves and our priorities, our grief and our memories, our stubbornness and our pride; we discover whether we trust more or fear more. It takes all of our gifts. It takes stewardship appropriate for the times. But it all still boils down to where we all are with the Lord, each one of us.

Vitality and transformation require honest (and gracious) conversations in congregations, soul-searching on the part of individuals, a willingness to honor the past without being controlled by it or tethered to it, a willingness to engage the world without compromising Scriptural truth, refreshing our prayer lives, rediscovering the breath of the Spirit in Scripture, and a willingness to listen for (and then follow) the Lord’s call.

The work of the Spirit is the engine. Checklists and programs can be helpful at certain phases, but they cannot take the place of the Spirit at work in us and through us. It has been said that we must be clear why we are doing something before we decide what we are doing. In our Book of Order, Foundations come first. We too must revisit the “why”s from time to time to keep us on track. Our central “why” is Jesus Christ. If we pin our future to anything else, we will find ourselves frustrated and flailing.

The **Committee on Congregational Vitality and Transformation** will gladly enter into conversation with your congregational leadership about the realities behind the two big and attractive words (“vitality” and “transformation”) and how you might fuel these qualities in your own context as you journey toward the future.

We are collecting various **resources** that can assist a church of any size and in practically any phase of its church life cycle as it seeks (1) to be transformed as a church and (2) to enter a new season of re-styled ministries and ministry relationships. These resources provide practical assistance and concrete, consequential steps that can release the resources of your church, including its members, for reinvigorated ministry to the community. The resources and approaches are not one-size-fits-all. Many options may require some changes in how you operate as a church, which will require patient, clear, loving, thorough conversation. We are here for you to support you along the way.

For more information, please contact the CCVT team.