

SPIRITUAL

Growth



Clabon Bogan Jr.
609.230.5809

c.bogan2@gmail.com

LESSON 3

personal
spiritual growth

BIBLE STUDY

**Desire the sincere milk of the word
That you may grow thereby (1 Pet. 2:2)**

Christ Baptist Church

950 Jacksonville Road, Burlington, NJ 08016 — www.cbcburlingtonnj.org

Clabon Bogan Jr. — c.bogan2@gmail.com — 609.230.5809

The list of age-old questions is usually led by queries concerning – who we are, the purpose for our existence and the trajectory of our future.

“Who am I?” “Why am I here?” “Where am I going?”

- Our perspectives on these three basic questions help shape our essential reality
- These questions also define the lines of personal and spiritual transformational development.
- We have been uniquely designed to **respond to these age-old questions.**

Who are we?

Beyond being physical beings in a material world, we are all uniquely special spiritual beings who are here for a reason.

Why are we here?

Beyond being here to survive, we are creatures who are here to live fully, expand, and realize our full potential. Our hearts have the access to inner wisdom, the ability to dream (follow our hearts) and create a wonderful life.

Where are we going?

Beyond meeting our physical and material needs, each of us has something special to offer to the world. We are here with a higher purpose, to make a difference.

As we gradually mature, our perspectives evolve and this opens the doors for a wonder filled transformation to guide us along our life's journey.

As practical tools for transformation, the three essential lines of balanced development (**WHO-WHY—WHERE**) **evolve together**. We cannot have one without the others.

These three lines come together in the heart, the center of our being, and create a synergy as a “Transformational Triad” providing clarity, inspiration, and direction in our lives.

There are foundational core beliefs associated and involved in our spiritual formation:

I. Christ Is Formed in Us. Spiritual transformation is the process by which Christ is formed in us ...for the glory of God, for the abundance of our own lives, and for the sake of others (Gal. 4:19; Rom. 8:29; Rom. 12:1, 2)

- The possibility that human beings can be transformed to such an extent that they manifest the image Christ is central to the message of the gospel and therefore it is central to the mission of the Church.
- Spiritual transformation in the lives of redeemed people results in an increasing capacity to discern and do the will of God.

➤ **Rom. 12:2** And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

II. **Renewing the Mind** refers to God's will and delight that we actively resist being conformed to this world and seek instead mind renewal to a different standard

- The Greek word *nous* (translated *mind* in Rom. 12:2) goes far beyond, intellectual or cognitive knowing.

- It denotes the seat of **reflective consciousness** and encompasses a person's faculties of **perception** and **understanding** as well as the patterns of feeling, judging and determining that shape our actions and responses.
- Thus, any approach to transformation that seeks to bring about real change must go beyond merely grasping information at the cognitive level to full knowledge that impacts our deepest inner orientations and trust structures.
- This kind of change involves clear teaching about the nature of the Christian life, concrete practices that help us internalize truth in ways that change how we respond in the world, and community that supports and catalyzes the process.
- Mind renewal removes all obstacles that prevent us from fully surrendering to God.

III. The Work of the Spirit. Spiritual transformation is something of a paradox in that it is natural for Christ followers to grow and to change just as it is natural for human beings to grow from infancy to childhood to adolescence to adulthood.

- The Holy Spirit is the One who orchestrates our spiritual growth.
- Remember we are defining success in spiritual growth as “Any growth of any person, towards following Jesus more fully.”
- It’s a core truth that we cannot manufacture Spiritual Growth. The One who changes us is the Holy Spirit.
- Author A.W. Tozer wrote, “The idea of the Spirit by the average church member is so vague as to be nearly non-existent.”
- The seed of the Christ life (“everything we need for life and godliness”) is planted within us at salvation and if the conditions are right, that seed will grow and flourish

- However, the process of transformation is also supernatural in that it is something only God can accomplish in our lives through the work of the Holy Spirit.
- The third person of the Trinity has been given as our ***advocate, teacher*** and ***counselor*** to lead us into truth as we are able to bear it (John 15 and 16) and to communicate the depths of God.
 - **I Cor. 2:9-16** But as it is written: "*Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.*" ¹⁰ But God has **revealed *them*** to us **through His Spirit**. For the **Spirit searches all things**, yes, the deep things of God. ¹¹ For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? **Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.** ¹² Now we have received,

not the spirit of the world, but the **Spirit Who is from God**, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. ¹³ These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the **Holy Spirit teaches**, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. ¹⁴ But the **natural man** does not receive the things of **the Spirit of God**, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is *rightly* judged by no one. ¹⁶ For "*who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?*" But we have the mind of Christ.

- In V. 9, Paul refers to **Isa. 64:4** and states that God has prepared wonderful things for His children here and now.

- How does God reveal the great blessings He has prepared for us to us? Through His Spirit (v. 10)
- Notice that the Spirit teaches us in words (v. 13); and here we have the verbal inspiration of the Bible—the very words given by the Spirit.
- “Comparing spiritual things with spiritual” (v. 13) may also be translated, “combining spiritual things with spiritual words” or “explaining spiritual things to spiritual people.”
- In either case, the truth is clearly given that the Bible is the Word of God, given by the Spirit of God.
- We either trust God’s Word, taught by God’s Spirit, or the words of men.
 - ❖ Satan is certainly the energizing spirit in the world today (Eph. 2:1–3)
 - ❖ He has given lost men a “wisdom” that inflates their egos and blinds their minds; he has led them away from the simple truths of the Word of God.

- ❖ The great centers of learning today do not want the Bible; they reject the deity of Christ and the need for salvation through the cross.
- ❖ This ignorance led men to crucify Christ—and men (even “learned” men) have been crucifying Him ever since.

We can find ways to open to this process of transformation as it is guided by the Spirit, but we cannot control it or make it happen ourselves.

- The wind of the Spirit blows where it will. (John 3:8)

In II Cor. 3, Paul alludes to the paradox of the natural and the supernatural by using two metaphors.

- The first is the process by which an embryo is formed in its mother’s womb: *I am in labor until Christ be formed (morphoo) in you.*

- Even though human beings have their part to play in conceiving and giving birth to children—and even though we think we understand certain facts about it—there is something that remains a mystery.
- No matter how much we think we understand it, the process of conception and birth is always a miracle. It is something God does. Every single time.
- Similarly, is the process of metamorphosis, referred to in Romans 12:2: *Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed (metamorphoo) by the renewing of your mind*
 - Through the process of metamorphosis, the caterpillar transcends its previous existence to take on a completely different form with a completely different set of capacities.
 - The caterpillar's transformation seems to have little to do with cognitive understanding about the process of metamorphosis; something more primal and God-ordained is at work.

Both the formation of the embryo in its mother's womb and the transformation of a caterpillar in the cocoon are natural phenomena in the physical world, but there is something about both that is a God-thing.

These metaphors place the process of spiritual transformation squarely in the category that we **call mystery**—something outside the range of normal human activity and understanding that can only be understood through divine revelation and brought about by divine activity.

In fact, everything we affirm as central to our Christian faith is somewhere in Scripture referred to as a mystery.

a) The mystery of God (I Cor. 2:1)

b) We are servants and stewards of God's mysteries (I Cor. 4:1)

- c) The mystery of God's will (Eph. 1:9)
- d) The mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:4)
- e) The mystery of the Gospel (Eph. 6:19)
- f) The mystery of marriage which is applied to Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:31, 32)
- g) The mystery of Christ in you, the hope of glory (Col. 1:27)
- h) God's mystery which is Christ Himself (Col. 2:2)
- l) The mystery of the faith (I Tim. 3:9)

If we are uncomfortable with mystery, we cannot be comfortable with the very gospel we preach.

The journey of transformation requires some measure of willingness to relinquish control and give ourselves over to a process that we cannot fully understand nor can we predict the outcome.

We know we will be more like Christ but we cannot predict exactly what the person of Christ lived in and through us will look like or where it will take us.

While we cannot transform ourselves into the image of Christ, we *can* create the conditions in which spiritual transformation can take place.

This is where spiritual practices come in. Spiritual practices are not ways to make brownie points with God or to prove our spiritual superiority to others.

They are not a self-help program by which we take control of our journey and change ourselves.

- Rather, spiritual disciplines are concrete activities that we engage in in order to make ourselves available for the work that only God can do.

This is what Paul is referring to when he appeals to the Christians in Rome to “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (Romans 12:1).”

He is saying that we can be intentional about creating the conditions for transformation by engaging disciplines that help us surrender ourselves to God –not just in theory but in reality.

- We are doing what we can do with our bodies, our minds, our hearts.
- God then take this simple offering of ourselves and does with it what we cannot do, producing within us deeply ingrained habits of love and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual transformation takes place incrementally over time with others (i.e., in community) in the context of disciplines and practices that open us to God.

Generally, and practically, while we are still on this earth, our transformation will happen by degrees (II Cor. 3:18) and we need each other in order to grow.

Paul's teaching on spiritual transformation in Romans 12 and in the other epistles is always given in the context of community—the body of Christ with its many members.

We are given to one another in the body of Christ for mutual edification and to spur one another on to love and good deeds.

Our spiritual gifts are given, not primarily for our own benefit or self-aggrandizement, but so we can be agents of grace for one another, building up the Body of which we are only one part

While our spiritual practices certainly include private disciplines (solitude & silence, prayer & meditation, scripture, self-examination and confession, retreat, spiritual direction), to be effective they must also include disciplines in community (corporate prayer and worship, teaching, communion, Sabbath, hospitality, caring for those in need, spiritual friendship and direction), and disciplines of engagement with the world.

- **For the Sake of Others involves** evangelism, caring for the poor, compassion, justice, etc.)

Spiritual transformation is both **an end** in itself in that it that brings glory to God *and* it is a **means** to other ends in that it enables us to mediate the presence of Christ to others and to discern loving action in the world.

The litmus test of mature spirituality is obedience to Christ's commandments (Matt. 28:18-20), which always involves an increasing capacity to love God and to love others. (Mark 12:30, 31; I Cor. 12; I John 4:7).

Loving presence and action in the world, includes **sharing our faith** (evangelism), **giving** generously of our resources, **reconciliation** and **peacemaking** (interpersonally and also across lines of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and people groups), **working for justice**, **exercising compassion and care** for the poor, and **working for the betterment** of life in the human community in Jesus' name.

All true Christian spiritual formation is for the glory of God, for the abundance of our own lives and *for the sake of others* or it is not *Christian* spiritual formation. For this we toil and struggle with all the energy that God so powerfully inspires within us.

BIBLE ESSENTIALS

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