



CHRIST FORMED IN YOU

The Power of the Gospel for Personal Change

BRIAN G. HEDGES

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Contents

Foreword	9
Acknowledgments	13
Introduction	17
Part One: The Foundations for Personal Change	25
1 Restoring God's Broken Image: The Goal	27
2 The Key to Transformation: The Gospel	43
3 The Curse Is Canceled: Justification	61
4 The Cure Has Begun: The Heart	77
5 Closing the Gap: Sanctification	97
Part Two: The Pattern of Personal Change	113
6 Captivated By Beauty: Holiness	115
7 Killing Sin: Mortification	131
8 Growing In Grace: Vivification	147
9 The Quest for Joy: Motivation	165
Part Three: The Means of Personal Change	185
10 Training in the Spirit: Disciplines	189

CONTENTS

11 The Refiner's Fire: Suffering	211
12 Life Together: Community	235
Notes	261
General Index	289
Scripture Index	299

Foreword

Do not try the following when you are discouraged by the lack of spiritual progress among those in your ministry setting. In other words, if you have been experiencing disappointment with the spiritual condition of those in your discipleship group, Bible class, or church, wait awhile before you attempt the experiment I suggest. For if you aren't discouraged before you try this little quiz, you almost certainly will be afterward.

Distribute pens and paper to all who are present. Then ask, "How many times do you think you have heard the gospel?" Some listeners, especially those who have been Christians for many years or who have attended Bible-preaching churches since childhood, may roll their eyes and say, "Thousands of times." Others will nod, affirming their repeated exposure to the gospel.

"Good!" you reply. "And since most of you profess to be Christians, you certainly had to not only hear the gospel, but understand it well enough to believe it and be saved, right?"

Again, you'll see relaxed, confident affirmations all around.

"Great! Since you're all so familiar with the gospel, I'm sure you won't have any problems with this simple exercise. Please take a sheet

of paper and write down the gospel. In a paragraph or so, write the message people must hear, understand, and believe in order to be right with God and go to heaven.”

Watch people freeze.

“Please, go ahead now and write a paragraph declaring the gospel which you say you have heard perhaps thousands of times and which you understood and believed when you were saved.”

Now, in an increasingly uncomfortable silence, people will begin shifting in their seats, shuffling their feet, and staring at the sheet of paper. Many will not know what to write. The only thing more discouraging than these empty sheets will be some of the things people actually do write.

What will likely become depressingly apparent in this pop quiz is that an alarming number of those in your group are unclear on the most basic and important message of the Bible. Despite the fact that by their own admission they have read or heard countless presentations of the gospel and claim to have experienced new life in Christ through its power, they are unable to convey even the ABCs of the message of salvation.

What are the implications of this inability to articulate the gospel? For some, it surely reveals the reality that they aren’t Christians at all. If you maintain—as I hope you do—that no one is saved apart from believing the gospel of Jesus Christ, it is rather hard to argue that a person has savingly believed the gospel if they cannot convey—in their own words and at their own level of understanding—the message they claim to have believed.

For those who are genuine Christians, but for whatever reason are unable to articulate the gospel, there’s another implication: Their efforts at personal evangelism are likely to be seldom and shallow. If someone cannot communicate the gospel in the loving environment of a gathering of Christians, how can they possibly do so with unbelievers out in the world? No amount of pulpit encouragement or shame about evangelism will motivate them to speak words under pressure that they cannot express in the best of circumstances.

Still another implication for true Christians who are unclear on the gospel—and the one most relevant to this book—is that a weak grasp

of the gospel is a hindrance to holiness. Or to put it positively, those who know the gospel best are those most likely to become closest to Christ and most like Christ. Brian Hedges understands that the pursuit of “the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14) requires a clear understanding of the gospel. For it is in the gospel that we see Christ in His glory most clearly. And the better we understand and feast our souls on the gospel of Christ, the more intimate with and like Jesus we become. This, writes the author of the book in your hands, is the message of 2 Corinthians 3:18, “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” Or as Hedges puts it, “God changes us by giving us a vision of his glory revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Turn the page now, and in the lines that follow, may you more clearly see “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

—Donald S. Whitney
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Acknowledgments

Writing and shaping a book, like the process of transformation itself, is a community project. The community surrounding the publication of *Christ Formed in You* is precious to me. It is a joy to acknowledge my gratitude.

Much of the book's content originated in a series of sermons preached at Fulkerson Park Baptist Church in Niles, Michigan, where I have happily served as Pastor for Preaching since 2003. I'm thankful for the privilege of pursuing Christ together with this special group of people.

Several people read either parts or the whole of my original manuscript and offered both encouragement and constructive criticism. Special thanks to Andy Hedges, Jeremiah Bass, Charles Clarke, and especially Paula Hendricks, for giving valuable time towards making this a better book. Thanks also to Mike Neises for his helpful advice in the early stages of this book.

My good friend Del Fehsenfeld III has his fingerprints all over this book. The seminal ideas were sharpened through our discussions about spiritual formation over Mexican food during the first year of my pastorate at Fulkerson Park. We have continued to swap books, insights,

and ideas over the years—many of which have found their way into my thinking and this book. I'm grateful for both Del's enthusiasm for this project and his regular encouragement. But I value even more the joy of sharing life and shepherding people together, along with the other elders with whom we serve.

I am very grateful to Shepherd Press, and especially Rick Irvin, for taking an interest in this book. I have always wanted to write, but didn't expect the opportunity to publish a book during this stage of life. But Shepherd Press announced their interest in new authors at a conference I was attending in 2008, so I stopped by their table and pitched my idea for this book. They were interested and so began our relationship. It has been a pleasure.

I can't imagine working with a better editor than Kevin Meath. He spent many hours on this book, suggesting revisions, restructuring, and rewrites along the way. Throughout the process of editing, Kevin has been sensitive to my goals as an author and has shown deference to my style of working and writing. His sharp editorial skills have increased the book's clarity, verve, and practical usefulness. Kevin, I thank the Lord for you.

I also wish to convey my appreciation to Dr. Donald S. Whitney, Associate Professor of Biblical Spirituality at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, for graciously agreeing to read and supply the foreword to *Christ Formed in You*. Don not only wrote the foreword, but encouraged me in my desire to write when we first met several years ago (and also infected me with a love for fountain pens!). I am thankful for both his personal encouragement and his ministry to the church through his teaching and writing.

The biggest cheerleader for this book has been my best friend, sweetheart, and life partner, Holly. No one has encouraged me more in pursuing the dream to write. She has listened as I've read aloud countless paragraphs and given me high fives, hugs, and kisses in many milestone moments. Along with our wonderful kids, Stephen, Matthew and Susannah, she cheerfully sacrificed time during our vacation in 2008 as I hammered out much of the first draft. Her support throughout has been a great blessing, but living life together as we seek to become more

like the Lord Jesus is a greater blessing still. Holly, you're the love of my life. Thanks for traveling this journey with me.

Finally, I never would have written anything had it not been for the encouragement of my fourth grade teacher who first taught me how to organize my thoughts and put them down on paper, while encouraging me in the then daunting task of writing nine book reports. This teacher is particularly special to me, because she is my mom. Even more important than my intellectual shaping, however, is the spiritual shaping I received through both of my parents. Their confidence in God's sovereign goodness, love for Scripture and historical Christian literature, and humble trust in the gospel have left an indelible mark on me. Before Christ was formed in me, he was formed in them. They were the instruments God used to bring me to faith in Christ. And so, I gratefully dedicate this book to my parents, Ronnie and Gloria Hedges.

Introduction

Have you ever been in a situation where you knew your destination but couldn't find your way? It happens to me with almost predictable regularity. In fact, I've been lost in nearly every big city I've ever visited. Just ask my wife. In these moments of dislocation and disorientation, we need two things for our journey to be a success: a map and someone to show the way. When you come right down to it, we usually need a third thing as well. Especially men. When our journey has been reduced to an ineffective mix of hunches and guesswork, we need to admit that we're lost and need help!

Following Jesus is also a journey. Our destination is clear: conformity to the image of Christ. To be holy. Most Christians realize this and desire it. But we often feel disoriented in the midst of our journey. Though we know where we should be going, it can seem like we've lost our way.

A primary reason for this disorientation is simply that becoming more like Jesus—a process theologians often call “sanctification”—takes a lifetime, and life gets complicated. As the years unfold it can become unclear how sanctification really works, and how it fits with other elements of Christian life and thought. For anyone who takes faith seriously, honest, important questions will eventually arise.

- How do my current struggles with sin affect my standing with God?
- What practical steps must I take to deal with sin and nurture spiritual growth?
- What should I expect as I pursue change?
- How do I measure progress?
- And how do other aspects of my life—my longings for happiness, my personal disciplines and habits, my sufferings and trials, and my relationships with other people—fit into all this?

Dangers, Toils, and Snares

This journey towards holiness is further complicated by what the well-known hymn, “Amazing Grace,” describes as “many dangers, toils, and snares.” It is both terribly sad and undeniably true that a fair number of these perils have emerged from within Christianity itself.

Distortions of Emphasis

Many Christian traditions, all of them undoubtedly well-intentioned, emphasize certain aspects of biblical teaching to the neglect of others, leaving unsuspecting Christians with distorted ideas or false expectations about spirituality.

- Some put so much emphasis on having correct doctrine that the heart and affections get left behind in an overly intellectual approach to discipleship.
- Others so heavily emphasize inward piety and the importance of spiritual experience that they effectively replace joyful faith in Christ with an unhealthy and myopic introspection.
- Some neglect the work of the Holy Spirit altogether, leaving Christians with the impression that being holy is wholly dependent on moral effort and self-discipline.
- Still others put so much focus on the Spirit that believers wrongly view the Christian life as nothing more than a passive acquiescence to the Spirit’s work.

Misrepresentations of the Gospel

Even worse are teachings that eclipse the transforming power of the gospel altogether. These appear in two basic forms.

On one side of the spectrum are views that distort God's grace in ways that give license to ongoing patterns of sin. This is the error that Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace . . . the grace which amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner who departs from sin and from whom sin departs."

Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.¹

But on the other side of the spectrum, and even more contrary to the gospel and more detrimental to spiritual health than "cheap grace," are approaches to holiness that stress moral effort while neglecting the rich resources of God's grace in the gospel. This legalistic approach to holiness rips the heart out of Christianity, leaving people with nothing but the dead form of performance-based religion.

In his essay, "The Centrality of the Gospel," Tim Keller captures the gospel-centered balance we need:

The key for thinking out the implications of the gospel is to consider the gospel a "third" way between two mistaken opposites . . . Tertullian said, "Just as Christ was crucified between two thieves, so this doctrine of justification is ever crucified between two opposite errors." Tertullian meant that there were two basic false ways of thinking, each of which "steals" the power and the distinctiveness of the gospel from us by pulling us "off the gospel line" to one side or the other. These two errors are very powerful, because they represent the natural tendency of the human heart and mind . . . These "thieves" can be called *moralism* or *legalism* on the one hand, and *hedonism* or *relativism* on the other hand. Another way to put it is: The gospel opposes both *religion* and *irreligion*. On the one hand, "moralism/religion" stresses truth without grace, for it says that we must obey the truth in order to be saved. On the other hand, "relativists/irreligion" stresses grace without truth, for

they say that we are all accepted by God (if there is a God) and we have to decide what is true for us. But “truth” without grace is not really truth, and “grace” without truth is not really grace. Jesus was “full of grace *and* truth.” Any religion or philosophy of life that de-emphasizes or loses one or the other of these truths, falls into legalism or into license, and either way the joy and power and “release” of the gospel is stolen by one thief or the other.²

These “two thieves” of legalism and license have plagued the church throughout its history, doing great damage and hindering many in their journey. It is directly between these extremes, therefore, that we must live, safe in the truth of the all-sufficient cross of Christ. This is how we reliably make progress toward the destination of Christlikeness.

To aid us on our way we need a good, accurate map. A map that not only tells where we are in the journey, but one that marks the path clearly and warns us of the dangers, toils, and snares—from our own hearts, from the temptations of this fallen world, and from well-meaning but misguided Christian teachers—that we will encounter along the way.

Piecing Together a Puzzle

My personal journey towards Christlikeness has certainly not been a straight line from conversion to transformation. I’ve often felt disappointed with my lack of progress and confused by the conflicting perspectives on how to change. But I’ve also experienced surges of growth as the Lord has opened to my mind the glories of Christ’s work in the gospel and the ways of his Spirit in the heart. Nor is my journey complete. I continue to fight sin and learn of my daily need for repentant faith in the crucified and risen Christ. My spiritual growth has been like putting together a jigsaw puzzle—slowly the borders have been formed and key pieces have fit into place, and the big picture has gradually taken shape.

The goal of this book is to explain where the process of transformation fits and how it happens in the Christian life. I hope to bring together various aspects of spiritual formation in a way that is unusual for most books. Many authors do a wonderful job of focusing on one or two of the following areas.

- The content of the gospel—unfolding what God has done for us in the cross and the resurrection of Christ.
- The application of the gospel—discussing the implications of the cross for daily life.
- The priority of holiness and the necessity of mortifying sin—explaining what holiness is and how putting sin to death is an essential and ongoing responsibility in any Christian’s life.
- The motivating power in Christian spirituality—describing the inner dynamics of grace and joy in helping us glorify God through the pursuit of holiness.
- The nature and means of spiritual transformation—explaining how people grow spiritually through the use of various methods (such as meditation and prayer).
- The role of suffering in spiritual growth—encouraging us to embrace trials as one of God’s means of changing us.
- The importance of community in our discipleship—reminding us that we need others to help us in our journey to Christlikeness.

I have been greatly helped by many of these books, authored by contemporary theologians and pastors such as J. I. Packer, John Stott, John Piper, Sinclair Ferguson, D. A. Carson, Don Whitney, Paul Tripp, Jerry Bridges, Richard Lovelace, and Tim Keller; as well as classic books on spirituality from previous generations written by great stalwarts of the faith such as Saint Augustine, John Calvin, John Bunyan, Jonathan Edwards, John Owen, Charles Spurgeon, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and C. S. Lewis. As I’ve read these and other authors over the past fifteen years, different pieces of the puzzle have slowly come together, giving shape to a larger vision of what the gospel is about and how it connects to the various dimensions of my spiritual life. My purpose in this book is to bring these pieces together, presenting a single, unified, gospel-centered vision of how to understand and live the Christian life.

The Power of the Gospel for Personal Change

Because you have picked up this book, you must feel the need for change in your own life. When you examine your attitudes, relationships,

thought-patterns, and personal habits, it doesn't take long to realize how far you still have to grow, does it? If you are like me, such self-assessment can quickly become discouraging! We know we need to change, but how do we pursue it?

My central claim in *Christ Formed in You* is that it is God's purpose to change us by progressively making us more like Jesus, and that this happens only as we understand and apply the gospel to our lives. In the pages that follow we will explore the transforming power of the gospel from several angles.

Part One focuses on the *foundations* for personal change. We will look at God's ultimate goal in transforming us (Chapter 1); the key to transformation, which is the gospel itself (Chapter 2); and the application of the gospel to our lives in three specific ways (Chapters 3, 4, and 5).

Part Two then takes up the *pattern* of personal change. We will explore the captivating beauty of gospel holiness (Chapter 6); with its demands that we both kill sin (Chapter 7); and grow in grace by the power of the Spirit (Chapter 8); and the quest for joy that motivates us in this pursuit and strengthens us in the battle for holiness (Chapter 9).

Part Three of the book focuses on the *means* of personal change, the tools God uses to transform us. These final three chapters, while building on the foundation of the gospel discussed earlier in the book, are the most practical. We will learn how God uses spiritual disciplines (Chapter 10); suffering (Chapter 11); and personal relationships in the body of Christ (Chapter 12) to conform us to the image of Christ.

In each of these chapters, my aim has been to "connect the dots" between the gospel, the goal of Christlikeness, and the specific aspect of spirituality under discussion. As Keller writes, I want us to see that "we never get 'beyond the gospel' in our Christian life to something more 'advanced.'"

The gospel is not the first “step” in a “stairway” of truths, rather, it is more like the “hub” in a “wheel” of truth. The gospel is not just the A-B-C’s but the A to Z of Christianity. The gospel is not just the minimum required doctrine necessary to enter the kingdom, but the way we make all progress in the kingdom. We are not justified by the gospel and then sanctified by obedience, but the gospel is the way we grow (Gal.3:1–3) and are renewed (Col.1:6). It is the solution to each problem, the key to each closed door, the power through every barrier (Rom.1:16–17).³

This explains what I mean by the subtitle of this book: *The Power of the Gospel for Personal Change*. The seventeenth-century English Congregationalist pastor and theologian, John Owen, put it well in a sentence that summarizes the entire thrust of my book. He said, “Holiness is nothing but the implanting, writing, and realizing of the gospel in our souls.”⁴ His treatises on the glory of Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, communion with God, the nature of indwelling sin, temptation, and the mortification of sin provided a road map for pursuing gospel-driven holiness.

While I would never venture to compare either the depth of my knowledge or the historical significance of my ministry to Owen’s, I have benefited greatly from his writings (along with those of Tim Keller and others) and hope that this book might serve in a similar way as a map for twenty-first-century believers who long to experience the life-changing power of the gospel in their own journey toward holiness.

PART ONE

THE FOUNDATIONS FOR PERSONAL CHANGE

Anyone who knows me well knows that a handyman I am not. When it comes to home repairs, I attempt only the simplest of tasks. Attempting to do more would be willfully setting myself up for the temptation to sin through frustration and anger! My father-in-law, thankfully, excels where I do not, and every time he comes for a visit from Georgia, Holly and I provide him a long list of house projects to do. And, being the smart, amiable man that he is, he never fails to get the jobs done, effortlessly maintaining a winning attitude all the way. As he usually quips with a smile, “It’s one of the many services we offer.”

But you don’t have to be another Bob Vila to know that foundations, blueprints, and taking the right steps in the right order are important when building things. And this also holds true in our spiritual lives, which is why part one of this book is about the foundations for personal change.

The first chapter focuses on the goal of transformation. Allow me to mix in a couple more metaphors. When piecing together a puzzle, it helps to look at the picture on the box. Before setting out on a journey, it is generally best to know your final destination. The purpose of chapter 1 is to provide that picture, to define that destination, as it relates to spiritual transformation.

The intention of chapter 2 is somewhat different. Since the claim of this book (for more, I refer you to the Introduction) is that the gospel is the key to transformation, I have devoted chapter 2 to explaining what the gospel is.

This is followed by three chapters about the application of the gospel to our lives. Fair warning: this is where the heavy lifting in this book comes in. We'll be dealing with some big theological concepts, like justification, regeneration, and sanctification. I suppose it would be tempting for the theologically trained people to skip these chapters (because you already know this stuff) and for the non-theologically trained people to skip these chapters (because this stuff is too deep and you're more interested in the practical parts of the book).

But I hope you won't skip them. For one thing, some of the most practical things I have to say in this book are carefully woven into these chapters. For another, I've tried to write these chapters in a way that both captures the beauty of what God has done for us in a fresh way and connects the dots between theology and the rest of life.

So, whatever your level of interest in theology may or may not be, I hope that you will prayerfully dive in to these chapters and discover new depths of joy in what God has accomplished through Christ and the Spirit to deliver you from both the guilt and grip of sin.

1



Restoring God's Broken Image

The Goal

The glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God.

—Irenaeus

By the time David Garrett was eight years old, he was studying violin with the world's finest teachers, practicing seven hours a day, and making solo appearances with legendary orchestras, including the London Philharmonic. As an adolescent, he studied at the Juilliard School in New York City.

In 2003, for the price of one million dollars, Garrett purchased a Guaragnini, a rare 236-year-old violin made by a student of Stradivarius. But on December 27, 2007, after a brilliant performance at the Barbican in London, David Garrett tripped, fell down a flight of stairs, and landed on the valuable instrument. Though still in its case, the violin was smashed, sustaining damage to the body, neck, and sound

post. Restoration was predicted to take eight months and cost more than \$120,000. Experts doubted the finely crafted instrument would ever sound the same.

Garrett's unfortunate accident and crushed violin recall a darker tragedy—the Fall of Man and the devastation that followed. We live in the rubble of the world's resulting brokenness. Pain, sickness, suffering, sin, crime, violence, war, alienation from God, shattered relationships, disease, natural disaster, and death are on every side, the ruins of our broken world. Can it all be made right? Is restoration possible?

Scripture teaches that restoration is not only possible, but is a certain reality, secured by God himself through the redeeming death and resurrection of his Son and realized in our lives by the power of his Spirit. The gospel is about nothing less than the redemption of fallen human beings and the perfect, complete restoration of our broken world. As Christ himself says in the closing pages of Scripture, “Behold, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5).

Restoration through the gospel is the hope of all Christians. But the practicality of the good news for personal transformation *here* and *now* sometimes escapes us. Someday, everything that is wrong with the world will be made right forever. God will wipe away every tear from our eyes; mourning, crying, pain, and death will be no more (Rev. 21:4). But is genuine change in *my* life possible *now*? And if so, how does it happen?

I believe transformation is possible. The goal of this book is to explain how. More than that, I hope to bring together various aspects of the Christian life in a way that is somewhat unusual in Christian books. As I mentioned in the introduction, many books do a wonderful job of clearly presenting the *content* of the gospel so that we might clearly understand what Christ did for us, or helping us grasp the *practical significance* of the gospel for daily life, or offering us *fresh motivation* for the Christian life in God's purpose to glorify himself and satisfy our souls, or teaching us to embrace the various *means of grace*—such as spiritual disciplines, suffering, and community—by which God matures us in the faith. This book attempts to bring all these approaches together, presenting a single, unified vision for how to change.

To best understand and fully experience the transforming power of the gospel, we must begin with the end in mind. What is God's ultimate goal in saving and changing us? To answer this we need to grasp why God created us in the first place, what has been lost by human sin, and what God through Christ and the Spirit has done and is doing about it. In other words, we need to frame our concerns about personal change in the larger story of God's saving work, the story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.

Creation: Images of His Glory

Why did God create us? For what purpose? The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* answers, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever."¹ Speaking originally of the scattered exiles of Israel whom God promised to redeem, Isaiah 43:6–7 agrees:

I will say to the north, Give up,
and to the south, Do not withhold;
bring my sons from afar
and my daughters from the end of the earth,
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.

In the first chapter of Genesis we don't read that man was created for God's *glory*, but in God's *image*. What's the difference? Not much. As Sinclair Ferguson has noted, "In Scripture, image and glory are interrelated ideas. As the image of God, man was created to reflect, express, and participate in the glory of God, in miniature, creaturely form."² The *Heidelberg Catechism* agrees, "God created man good, and after his own image, in true righteousness and holiness, that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love him and live with him in eternal happiness to glorify and praise him."³

God created human beings in his image so that they would glorify him by rightly representing him. In other words, the more we resemble God, the better we honor him. With this in mind, look at Genesis 1:26–27.

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Human beings were God’s crowning achievement in creation. We alone are made in God’s image, after his likeness. Our creation alone was prefaced with the transcript of God’s consultation within himself: “Let us make man in our image.” For the creation of everything else Scripture simply records God’s words, “Let there be . . . and it was so.” But man and woman were different. We were designed and commissioned by God with a special assignment in creation: to display God. As the early church father Irenaeus said, “The glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God.”⁴

Let’s unpack what it means to be created in the image of God by briefly looking at three interrelated aspects of it.

To Reflect

To be created in the image of God means we are designed to display God’s nature, character, and glory. As a mirror is made for reflection, so God created us to be mirrors of his character, instruments for reflecting his glory.⁵

Created in God’s image, we are invested with special dignity and entrusted with particular duties. Our distinct worth as human beings springs from being God’s image-bearers, the unique reflectors of his character on earth. The rest of creation *declares* God’s glory, speaking of it vividly in a great variety of ways (Ps. 19:1). But we *reflect* it, actually making it, in small part, visible and tangible.

One of the supreme ways we reflect God’s glory is by relating to other human beings in God-honoring ways. We ascribe glory to God’s name by reflecting his character to others. As Anthony Hoekema writes, “We should not think of the image of God only as a noun but also as a verb: we are to *image* God by the way we live, and the heart of the image of God is love for God and for others.”⁶

To Relate

To be God's image-bearers means we are created for relationships. This is implied in Genesis 1:26–27: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

Why does the text connect being created in God's image with being created male and female? Not because God himself is both masculine and feminine—he is unequivocally masculine. It is because God himself is a community—a trinity of persons, existing in eternal self-giving love. In creating man and woman together, he created a community. God created man to image his glory, but his glory could not be adequately displayed by an individual living in isolation from others. God himself says in Genesis 2:18, “It is not good that man should be alone.” As John Ortberg writes,

Community is rooted in the being of God . . . The Trinity exists as a kind of eternal dance of joyful love among Father, Son, and Spirit . . . God created human beings because he was so in love with community that he wanted a world full of people to share it with. He wanted to invite them all to the dance. And life within the Trinity was to be the pattern for our lives.⁷

At the core of our nature as God's image-bearers, we are *relational* beings. This involves a threefold relationship: “between man and God, between man and his fellowmen, and between man and nature.”⁸

To Reign

As God's image-bearers, we are also to exercise dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:26, 28). God created human beings to serve as his vice-regents, reigning as his representatives and stewards over the created world. God placed the first man in the Garden of Eden “to work it and keep it” (Gen. 2:15). As God's delegated representatives on earth, human beings are intended to reign over the world—tending and maintaining it—not in exploitation, but in wise, responsible stewardship. Exercising this stewardship, human beings can reflect to the world the radiance of God's infinite worth and glory.

The Fall: Shattered Mirrors

The tragic reality, however, is that the mirror itself has been shattered. We rebelled against God and now live under his judgment and wrath (Gen. 3:16–19; Rom. 1:18). The image of God is therefore distorted. In Calvin’s words, God’s image is deformed, vitiated, mutilated, maimed, disease-ridden, and disfigured.⁹

This is true for all of us. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). We have failed to glorify God by not loving his person, obeying his laws, and delighting in his glory. Rather than exclusively worshipping our glorious Creator, we have served and worshiped created things (Rom. 1:21–23). We are “alienated from the life of God” and “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 4:18; 2:1). The image of God within us has become so marred and distorted that each of us, without exception, fails to display his character in fullness.

The Gravity of Sin

But we don’t realize the gravity of this evil. Our souls are so calloused by sin that we do not sense its infinite offensiveness to God. J. I. Packer observes that the biblical words for “sin” portray it:

in a variety of different ways: as rebellion against our rightful owner and ruler; as transgression of the bounds he set; as missing the mark he told us to aim at; as breaking the law he enacted; as defiling (dirtying, polluting) ourselves in his sight, so making ourselves unfit for his company; as embracing folly by shutting our ears to his wisdom; and as incurring guilt before his judgment seat.¹⁰

These pictures reveal several distinct aspects of our sin, but the common denominator they share is their *Godwardness*. All sin—even so-called little sins—are evil because they are ultimately committed against our infinitely holy God. When we sin against God we spurn his honor, preferring other things to his glory. Even when we sin against other human beings, we simultaneously assault God’s glory by hurting those who bear his image. James condemns us for using our tongues to curse others because they are “people who are made in the likeness of God” (James 3:9).

David committed adultery with Bathsheba, murdered her husband, and covered his sin so the public would not know. Yes, these were grievous and horrible sins against people, but David's confession to God reveals his deeper understanding. They were not just sins against people. They were sins against God: violations of his law, infractions of his will, assaults on those who bore his image, and therefore, on God himself. That is why David confessed, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Ps. 51:4).

Every sin against a human being is also a sin against God. Egotism, lust, bitterness, gossip, slander, racial prejudice, violence, the devaluing of human life—these are sins against God's image-bearers, and therefore sins against God himself.

The Consequences of Sin

The consequences of sin are devastating; damaging each of the three relationships for which we were created—that is, relationships humans have with God, one another, and nature.

We see these consequences in Genesis 3, following the sin of the first man and woman. Before sin, they had enjoyed unbroken friendship with God. But after their sinful rebellion, they hid from him in shame and fear, trying without success to cover their shame with fig leaves. Before sin, they had also enjoyed the only perfect marriage that ever existed (Gen. 2:21–25). But following that fatal taste of the forbidden fruit, their relationship was characterized by shame, blame-shifting, and conflict. Before sin, they lived in paradise—a perfect environment. But ever since, humans have lived in conflict with a world under God's curse (Gen. 3:7–19).

- Sin alienates us from God, leaving us spiritually dead, enslaved to our passions, and subject to God's just wrath (Eph. 2:1–3; 4:18–19).
- Sin also brings conflict into human relationships: between husbands and wives; parents and children; and people of different races, languages, and nations.
- Sin is also what put us in conflict with the created order. Originally a welcoming environment, the earth is now hostile to human life

in significant ways. Natural disasters, environmental devastation, and the harshness of the elements are just some of the consequences of our rebellion against God.

Glorious Ruins

So, do human beings still bear God's image, given the extent of sin's devastation? The answer is Yes . . . sort of. Genesis 5:1–3 and 9:6—both written of the post-fall world—echo Genesis 1:26–28 by indicating that we do continue to bear God's image. But as Calvin said, “even though we grant that God's image was not totally annihilated and destroyed in him, yet it was so corrupted that whatever remains is frightful deformity.”¹¹ A trace of his image is still present, but not enough for people to rightly perceive his glory and give him the honor he deserves. Alistair Begg provides a helpful illustration:

One of the charming aspects of touring in Scotland is the discovery, often in remote regions, of ancient castles. While some of them are occupied, many of them are now in ruins. But they continue to attract our attention and cause us to pause in wonder because, although they have fallen into disrepair, there is still a grandeur to them. Ruins they may be, but they are still possessed of enough of their former dignity to be justifiably regarded as “glorious ruins.” So it is with man. As offensive as it may seem to be, the Bible says that we are ruins! On account of sin, God's image in us has been obscured, but not obliterated.¹²

We humans are amazing in our ability to imitate the Creator in countless ways: composing symphonies; painting beautiful landscapes; building cathedrals, skyscrapers, and bridges; and sending explorers into space. But as magnificent as these accomplishments are, they fall far short of God's intention, when done without regard for his honor and glory. We are glorious ruins! Tiny flashes of light flicker in our achievements. But these are merely distorted glimmers of glory in the broken shards of our fallen, fragmented world.

Redemption: The Gracious Rescue

The good news is that God is reforging the shards! When he is finished, no trace of the breakage will remain. For God has formed a rescue plan. Not willing to abandon his creation to evil, God has purposed to redeem and restore the world by setting a new people apart for himself.

Although hints of this plan are given even before the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden (Gen. 3:15), God's redemptive mission truly began to take shape when he called Abraham.¹³ God promised to give Abraham two things: A son (and descendants) through whom the world would be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3), and a special land that would belong to his heirs forever (Gen. 17:7–8).¹⁴ The promised son was Isaac. The descendants were the children of Israel. The land would be Canaan. God later rescued this people from slavery in Egypt and consecrated them as a special nation (Ex. 1–15) over which he himself would reign as sovereign king (Ex. 19:3–6; Num. 23:21; Deut. 33:2–5).

Once Canaan was settled, God promised David, the greatest of Israel's earthly kings, a son who would be forever enthroned over his people (2 Sam. 7). The entire story of the Old Testament is the outworking of these two covenant promises to Abraham and David. It is the story of God's glory gradually returning to earth through this people, chosen and redeemed to bear his image.

Israel, however, failed to reflect the glory of the Lord as they should. Israel's history in Scripture is marked by repeated cycles of rebellion against God, exile from God, and deliverance by God. In spite of God's grace and longsuffering, the hearts of the people continually turned to idols instead of their Covenant Lord. God repeatedly sent prophets to denounce their rebellion and idolatry, warning of the impending judgment that would surely fall upon them. They usually refused to listen. But a kernel of hope was buried in the prophets' oracles of doom. God promised that he would not utterly forsake his people. He would preserve a remnant of people, to whom he would faithfully fulfill his promises (Isa. 6:9–13; 10:20–22). He would send a suffering servant to lead the people in a second exodus. And he would create a new world (Isa. 40–66).

This rescue plan comes to fruition in Jesus, the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1). Born in fulfillment of God's promises (Matt.

1:18–25), Jesus is the ultimate descendant of Abraham, the heir to David's throne, and the remnant of Israel (Gal. 3:16; Rom. 1:3). Jesus is the suffering servant who, through death and resurrection, ransoms God's people, inaugurates his saving reign, and ushers in the new creation (Mark 1:15; 10:45; 2 Cor. 5:17).¹⁵ As the great theologian Herman Bavinck summarized, "The essence of the Christian religion consists in this, that the creation of the Father, devastated by sin, is restored in the death of the Son of God, and re-created by the Holy Spirit into a kingdom of God."¹⁶

This has been only the briefest overview of the ways in which God's promises are fulfilled in Christ. But there is one more dimension of God's work in Christ that we must understand.

Restoration: New Man, New Creation

In contrast to Adam, the first man, Jesus came as the second Adam, the true image-bearer of God. Paul, looking forward to the final resurrection, says:

Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

—1 Corinthians 15:45–49

Similarly, 2 Corinthians 4:4 calls Christ, "the image of God" and Colossians 1:15 says that he is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." Along with Hebrews 1:3, which describes the Son as the "radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature," these passages refer to the divinity of our Lord as the eternal and preexistent Son of God. In the words of Herman Ridderbos, "When in this context he is called . . . the Image of God, this is to say nothing less than that in him the glory of God, indeed God himself, becomes manifest."¹⁷ But, as Ridderbos also observes, these passages "are in all

sorts of ways directly reminiscent of the creation story.”¹⁸ Jesus is not only fully God, he is fully man. He comes as the second Adam, the Last Man, the true image-bearer of God, the one who never sinned, never failed God, never fell short.

In the unique union of deity and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ, we therefore see not only the Word of God made flesh (John 1:14), but the perfect picture of what it means to be human.¹⁹ Jesus bears the image of God as Adam should have. The divine visage which is marred, distorted, and perverted in all other human beings, shines untarnished in him. As Hoekema writes, “Christ is called the image of God par excellence . . . In Christ we see the image of God in perfection. As a skillful teacher uses visual aids to help his or her pupils understand what is being taught, so God the Father has given us in Jesus Christ a visual example of what the image of God is.”²⁰

Jesus Christ perfectly reflects the glory of the Father, not only because he is himself divine, but because he perfectly images God’s character in his flawless humanity. In him we see what God intended all human beings to be in their relationships to God, to one another, and to creation. Consumed with a passion for his Father’s glory, Jesus lived in unbroken fellowship with God. He devoted himself to loving others, his love culminating in his death as our substitute on the cross. And he commanded the winds and waves—indeed all the elements of creation—as their true Lord and rightful King.

Jesus is the true *Imago Dei*, the true image of God. But he also re-makes human beings in his image through his work. His life on this earth was the perfect embodiment of all that is righteous, good, beautiful, and true. In his spotless obedience and sacrificial death, he took our place—living the life we should have lived and dying the death we should have died. And in his resurrection and exaltation, he now reigns as the second and last Adam, the True Man, the “firstborn among many brothers” (Rom. 8:29). The clear purpose of God’s saving work in Jesus is to conform us to the image of his Son. Jesus is the new man, ushering in a new creation, in us (2 Cor. 5:21).

This is the unfolding of God’s eternal purpose. God has predestined those chosen in Christ to be conformed to the glorious image of Christ (Eph. 1:4–5; Rom. 8:29). This divine goal will not be fully realized until

the Lord Jesus returns from heaven to “transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:21; cf. 1 John 3:2). But the restoration has already begun in the redemptive work of Christ, applied in our lives by the power of God’s Spirit.

Beholding and Becoming

The question this book aims to answer is *how* do we become like Jesus? *How does the restoration of the image of God within our hearts take place?* In the following chapters we will explore how Scripture gloriously answers this question. For now, let’s consider a passage that compellingly describes the transforming power of gazing at God’s glory revealed in Jesus.

But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. . . . And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

—2 Corinthians 3:16–18; 4:3–6

God changes us by giving us a vision of his glory revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ. The sensory language in this passage is remarkable. Paul speaks of the gospel being veiled or unveiled²¹ (3:16, 18; 4:3), of beholding glory (3:18), of blindness and sight (4:4), of darkness and light (4:4, 6). Can you imagine what it would be like suddenly to be given sight after a lifetime of blindness? This is what happens when a person is born of the Spirit. As we so often sing, “I once was lost, but now I’m found; ’twas blind, but now I see.”²² Though we were dead to God, blind to his beauty and glory, now we are God-conscious, God-aware.

This new vision of God is focused on God's glory. Paul describes "beholding the glory of the Lord" in 3:18, the "light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" in 4:4, and the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God" in 4:6. What is the glory of God? It is the beauty and radiance of his worth. Only when we see *this* about God, his beauty and worth, displayed in and through Jesus Christ and his glorious work (3:18; 4:4–6), are we really changed.²³ *Beholding the glory of Christ is the means of becoming like Christ in his glory.*²⁴

Though God's image within us is disfigured and distorted by evil and sin, the good news is that God is bringing redemption and restoration, freeing us from sin's penalty and power, and recreating us in the image of his Son. The vision of God's glory in Christ in the gospel has transforming power. As we see him, we become like him.

Life in the New Creation

Paul describes the change believers have experienced as a new creation. In Ephesians 2:10, he says that we are the workmanship—the masterpieces!—of God "created in Christ Jesus for good works."²⁵ Similarly, Paul reminds his readers that when they "learned Christ," they were taught to "put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:20–24).²⁶ A parallel passage in Colossians 3 says the new man, "is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator" (v.10). And 2 Corinthians 5:17 exults that, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (cf. Gal. 6:15). For all who are joined to Christ by faith, this inaugural and decisive renovation of the heart has already taken place. They have put off the old man and put on the new man; they have put on Christ (Gal. 3:27; Rom. 13:14). New creation has begun!²⁷

Perhaps you remember the lyrics from the children's song, "Bullfrogs and Butterflies." Both were born again. The curse of sin has been canceled and its bondage has been broken. As a tadpole is transformed into a frog, and as a caterpillar leaves its earthbound cocoon a beautiful, airborne butterfly, so we experience a dramatic metamorphosis through the power of Christ and his Spirit. We are transformed. As fallen inhabitants of the old creation, our native environment is sin.

But as recipients of God's new creation in Christ, holiness is no longer alien to us. We are born again for God!

The Imitation of Christ

Today, we live in the interval between the inauguration of the new creation and its consummation and completion when Jesus comes again. In this gap between what has already begun and what is yet to come, we taste the joy of living under God's gracious reign as citizens of the new creation . . . even as we groan with the tension of living as residents in the world as it now is. We are *truly* new, but not *completely* new. The renovation has begun, but it is not finished. This is why Paul groaned as in the anguish of childbirth until Christ was formed in his fellow believers (Gal. 4:19).

Our transformation into the image of the Lord is *progressive*—it happens in stages (2 Cor. 3:18). And though spiritual change is a divine work of God's Spirit in our hearts and lives, it demands our *participation*. We must refuse to be shaped by this present age and instead be transformed by the renewal of our minds as we put sin to death and live in righteousness (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:25–32; Col. 3:5–14). This dynamic process lies at the heart of the Christian call to holiness.

The essence of this holiness is *likeness* to Jesus Christ—what some theologians call “Christiformity.”²⁸ When we become like Jesus, our lives reflect God's glory and we live in right relationship to God, other people, and the world. This is the goal God destined us for, the vocation he has called us to. This is why we are redeemed.

This also explains why Scripture calls us to imitate Christ. In 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul says, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” In Ephesians 5:1–2, he writes, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” And in Philippians 2:5–11, he urges us to have the mind of Christ, expressed in humility and selfless service to others. The apostle John also exhorts us to follow Christ's example, walking as he walked, practicing righteousness as he is righteous, purifying ourselves as he is pure, and loving others as he loved (1 John 2:6, 29; 3:3, 7, 16–18; 4:16–17).

Charles Wesley captured the heart of Christlikeness in these prayerful words:

*O for a heart to praise my God,
A heart from sin set free,
A heart that always feels Thy blood
So freely shed for me.*

*A heart resigned, submissive, meek,
My great Redeemer's throne,
Where only Christ is heard to speak,
Where Jesus reigns alone.*

*A humble, lowly, contrite, heart,
Believing, true and clean,
Which neither life nor death can part
From Christ who dwells within.*

*A heart in every thought renewed
And full of love divine,
Perfect and right and pure and good,
A copy, Lord, of Thine.²⁹*

This is a book about spiritual formation, the “grace-driven developmental process in which the soul grows in conformity to the image of Christ.”³⁰ The acid test of all spiritual formation is this: *Are you becoming more like Jesus?* Are the contours of your character being shaped by his image, formed in his likeness? Do you increasingly hate sin and love righteousness, as he already does perfectly? Are you growing in humility and self-giving, which he has practiced flawlessly? Are you making progress in loving and serving others, as he has always done in perfection?

Ongoing transformation is possible for you. You can become more and more like Jesus Christ. But there is only one way: through your increasing understanding and application of the gospel.

The Spell Is Broken

In C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, four children learn that the land of Narnia is under the spell of the White Witch. In Narnia, it is "always winter and never Christmas."³⁰ The people and beasts of Narnia are enslaved to the White Witch; if they make her angry, she turns them to statues of stone. The crisis comes when the White Witch has claimed the life of one of the children, a boy named Edmund, who has betrayed Narnia. But Aslan, the great lion who created Narnia, takes Edmund's place and is killed by the White Witch. The next morning, a wonderful thing happens. Aslan comes back to life! After his resurrection, he storms the castle of the White Witch, which is filled with stone statues. When Aslan breathes on the statue of a lion, this is what happens:

For a second after Aslan had breathed upon him the stone lion looked just the same. Then a tiny streak of gold began to run along his white marble back—then it spread—then the colour seemed to lick all over him as the flame licks all over a bit of paper—then, while his hind-quarters were still obviously stone the lion shook his mane and all the heavy, stony folds rippled into living hair. Then he opened a great red mouth, warm and living, and gave a prodigious yawn. And now his hind legs had come to life. He lifted one of them and scratched himself. Then, having caught sight of Aslan, he went bounding after him and frisking around him whimpering with delight and jumping up to lick his face.³¹

Aslan is alive. The spell is broken. Winter is over. The statues are coming to life!

Lewis's imaginative tale beautifully illustrates the True Story of what God has done through the work of Christ, and is doing by the power of the Spirit to renew and restore the world. Though we betrayed God through our rebellion and sin, Jesus became our representative and died as our substitute. But he has risen! The spell of evil is broken. The dead are coming to life. The winter is over and spring is on the way!

"Behold, I am making all things new."³²