

Small Groups, 2009-2010
Main and Oklahoma Church of Christ
McAlester, Oklahoma
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Touching Hearts, Transforming Lives

Our small group initiative has two goals: helping people find Jesus, helping believers become disciples. These two goals require two things. First, hearts must touch hearts so that every heart can touch the heart of God. Second, believers must take seriously the challenge to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ so that our lives accurately reflect the life of Jesus. This is the essence of discipleship—becoming like Jesus.

A Model of Spiritual Transformation

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of spiritual growth? Many Christians picture an individual meditating or praying. While that concept accurately portrays one aspect of Christian spirituality, it does not tell the whole story.

Three Aspects of Transformation

The question of spiritual transformation is not new to the Christian faith. It has been a primary issue, though described and sought in different ways, throughout church history. From the time the Spirit of God descended upon the believers in Jerusalem, God has been transforming the souls of individual believers in the context of local Christian communities. Preaching never has been and never will be the only element needed for the transformation of Christians into Christ's image. Likewise, small-group Bible studies, personal Bible study, Sunday school classes, or even one-on-one discipleship efforts are not sufficient for spiritual growth, because these focus solely on communicating biblical information. There is a growing emphasis on transformation which touches the believer's inner and outer life—not just transformation of the intellect. This is the essence of touching hearts (inner life) and transforming lives (outer life). Three broad approaches to spiritual transformation have developed.

Fellowship Model

One approach is to create fellowship opportunities. Churches develop structured settings for members to build relationships with others. They launch small groups that meet in homes. They may convert their Sunday school classes into times of social engagement. These groups enable believers to be intimately involved in one another's lives. The fellowship model focuses on corporate prayer for one another, growth of interpersonal intimacy, and support for each other in times of need. This approach effectively connects believers within a church body.

Spiritual Disciplines Model

A second approach emphasizes disciplines such as meditation, prayer, fasting, and solitude. Such writers as Dallas Willard and Richard Foster have done excellent work on the spiritual disciplines. This approach takes seriously the inner life and intimacy with God. However, when used in isolation, this approach can make people think spiritual transformation is a private matter. Even though the spiritual disciplines include shared

elements (worship, service, and fellowship), some people treat the private exercises (silent retreats, journaling, meditating on Scripture, prayer, and fasting) as primary.

Counseling Model

A third approach relies heavily on personal introspection. Christian counseling emphasizes areas of sin or personal character flaws that cause interpersonal problems or destructive behavior. Counseling seeks to understand the roots of such problems by looking at one's heritage and temperament. Usually in one-on-one interaction, the counselor probes for the root issues hidden beneath the surface problem. Discovering these deeper issues can shed light on a person's consistent failure to make wise choices. This approach focuses on identifying and dealing with those internal obstacles that prevent spiritual growth. Dealing with the issues is a key component in spiritual transformation.

TOUCHING HEARTS, TRANSFORMING LIVES—an Integrated Approach

These three approaches are all valuable, but when taken alone they each have weaknesses. The fellowship model can fail to guide believers toward growth. The spiritual disciplines model can neglect to emphasize authentic and intimate Christian community, which is necessary for growth. The counseling model can fail to value the role that spiritual disciplines can have in growth, or it can focus so much on deficiencies that the person never benefits from the resources of God's grace. It can focus too intently upon the person's sin and failure and not enough on God's enabling power toward growth in holiness.

This **TOUCHING HEARTS, TRANSFORMING LIVES** series brings in elements from all three approaches. This series tries to balance the inward and outward elements of spiritual transformation. Its theme is: **“Experiencing divine power through relationships; striving together toward maturity in Christ.”**

A certain context is essential to the transformation process. That context is authentic community in which people come to trust each other. This is the process we call “touching hearts.” Though one-on-one relationships can be effective, multiple relationships are more effective. While one individual can spur another toward growth, that one individual has limited gifts and abilities. Also, although the spiritual disciplines are valuable, they are means toward the end of complete transformation of the believer's inner and outer life. The spiritual disciplines are not ends in themselves. Believers must understand sin's dynamic in their lives, seeing potential blind spots or obstacles to their spiritual well-being and learning to deal with the root issues beneath their areas of struggle.

One working definition of Christian transformation is:

Spiritual transformation is “the process by which God forms Christ's character in believers by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, in the context of community, and in accordance with biblical standards. This process involves the transformation of the whole person in thought, behavior, and styles of relating to God and others. It results in a life of service to others and testimony for Christ.”

While the transformation process may become an end in itself, the ultimate end is Christ's glory. He is the One adored by those who experience His presence and are transformed by Him. They, in turn, seek to exalt Him in the world.

Because each person is unique, God's formative process is unique for each. And though the Spirit of God is the One who transforms souls, each individual has personal responsibility in the process. Many spiritual disciplines can contribute, yet God is primarily concerned with transforming the whole person, not just patterns of behavior. For this reason, no one method is the single critical component.

A well-rounded set of activities provides the greatest catalyst for growth. For example, providing for the needy helps us understand and participate in Christ's love for the outcast, needy, lonely, and depressed. A small group offers the chance to encourage a struggling believer, learn from others how to apply God's Word personally, and comfort someone in his or her grief. A regular time for prayer can help us reflect upon God's intimate love, remember personal needs and the needs of others as they are brought before God, release anxieties to God, and express dependence upon God. Spiritual transformation occurs neither exclusively in private nor exclusively in public. For the character of Christ to be developed most fully, believers need an inner, private intimacy with God; an active, working love for others; and a pursuit of Christ-like integrity.

TOUCHING HEARTS, TRANSFORMING LIVES depends on effective group dynamics. Groups do not have to be led by trained ministers or spiritual leaders. Group leaders are more like facilitators—they do not have to have all the answers because group members learn from each other. The leader's role is to create an environment that fosters growth and encouragement.

The Theme of this Series

Instead of aiming for competency in a set of skills or techniques that will lead us to spiritual transformation, this series helps people identify the areas that must be developed in a believer's life. In other words, while it is necessary for a believer to know the "how-to" of the Christian life, it is not sufficient. Knowing how to do personal Bible study and being good at sharing Christ with others are praiseworthy skills. Developing these skills, however, is not the end goal but the means by which we live out who we are as new creatures in Christ. That is why this series starts with four critical components of the Christian life: identity, community, integrity, and ministry. These will provide the foundational concepts for a study of transformation based on Romans 12.

This series proposes that the Christian life involves:

knowing your identity in Christ,

so that....

you can make yourself known to others in a Christian community,

so that....

you can pursue a lifetime of growth in the context of community,

so that....

you are best equipped to glorify Christ by serving others.

Our Identity

To understand our need for transformation, we must understand who we are currently, both as individuals and as members of the body of Christ. We must know our identity. Who we are has been shaped by our past. Therefore, we grow as we explore various aspects of our identity, such as our heritage and temperament. What do these tell us about who we are and what we value? The interaction during this study bonds us and builds trust among us. Our goal is not to analyze, criticize, or control each other but is to grow and affirm what God is doing in and through one another.

In *Identity*, we ultimately want group participants to see themselves in light of their identity in Christ. Many of the values we live out stem from such influences as personality, family background, and culture. Not all of those values are contrary to our new identity in Christ. For example, the value a person places on honesty, a value he learned from his parents, is affirmed by his identity in Christ.

It can take a long time for the Spirit of God to transform our values to line up with our new identity in Christ. We cooperate with the Spirit when we reflect on what our values are and how well they line up with our identity in Christ as described in Scripture.

One very significant characteristic of our identity in Christ is that we are part of the body of Christ. The Christian life cannot be lived in isolation.

Our Community

While talking about *my* place in Christ, I must pay attention to *my* place in Christ as a part of a faith community. Understanding our corporate identity in Christ is crucial for a healthy community transformation process. The *Community* helps us understand how a Christian community develops and helps us experience a growing sense of community. Transformation depends on the relationships that come from our being known and valued in a faith community.

In order to experience intimate community in the biblical sense, we must learn to reveal ourselves to others. We need to honestly, freely, and thoughtfully tell our stories. Our modern culture makes it easy for people to live isolated and anonymous lives. Because we and others move frequently, we may feel it is not worth the effort to be vulnerable in short-lived relationships. However, we desperately need to keep intentionally investing in significant relationships.

Real involvement in others' lives requires more than what the term *fellowship* has too often come to mean. Real involvement includes holding certain values in common and practicing a lifestyle we believe is noble, while appreciating that this lifestyle does not make us perfect. Rather, this lifestyle is a commitment to let God continue to form us spiritually.

Community includes a group exercise, "Life Story," that has been tremendously effective in building community and enhancing self-understanding. "Life Story" walks a person through the process of putting together a personal, creative presentation of the most formative relationships and experiences of his or her life. As people share their stories with each other, a deep level of trust and commitment grows.

Our Integrity

When a group experiences *Identity* and *Community* together, members build significant intimacy and trust. Now we are ready to pursue a harder step. It is the heart of this

approach to spiritual transformation. Many believers greatly underestimate the necessity of intimacy and trust for successful growth in Christian holiness. But we must be able to share honestly those areas in which we need transformation. We can deal with deep issues of growth only in a community in which we are deeply known by others. We need others who have our best interests at heart. They must also be people we trust to hold sensitive issues in genuine confidence. Transforming comes as we grow with integrity.

Why does the pursuit of Christian holiness need to occur in community? There are at least two reasons. First, we need accountability in the areas of sin with which we struggle. When we confess our struggles to a group, we become accountable to all of the members to press on toward growth. Because the group is aware of our sin, we cannot hide it in darkness, where it retains a hold on our life and can make crippling guilt a permanent fixture in our walk. If we are struggling, we have not one but several people to lean on. In addition, the corporate, or group, setting increases the likelihood of support from someone else who has struggled in the same way. In one-on-one accountability, one person may not be able to relate well to the other's struggles. He or she may have different areas of struggle.

The second benefit of corporate pursuit of holiness is that without the encouragement and stimulus of other Christians, we are often blind to the ways in which we need to grow. In the counsel of many who care for us, there can be greater wisdom. If some believers are blind to being hospitable, the hospitality of another believer can spur them on to develop that quality in their own lives. If some never think about how to speak encouraging words, the encouraging speech of another can become contagious.

Our Ministry to Glorify Christ

With *Identity*, *Community*, and *Integrity* in place, believers are prepared to discern how God wants them to serve in the body of Christ. "Where can I serve?" is not an optional question; every believer should ask it. Nor is this a matter simply for individual reflection. Rather, we can best discern where and how to serve while in community with people who know our past, interests, struggles, and talents. The community can affirm what they see in us and may know of opportunities to serve that we're unaware of.

The Layout of These Materials

Each of the sessions has the following features:

- *Session Aim* states the goal or purpose of the lesson.
- *Preparation* tells what assignment(s) you need to complete in advance to get the most out of the group. This section will help you get ready in advance.
- *Bible Text*. The sessions include a biblical exercise. This section will give you the text, and perhaps help guide your advance Bible study as you identify the principles of the passage or texts. A biblical exercise is a self-study in which you'll spend time outside the group studying a passage from Scripture.
- *Introduction* introduces the topic for the session. Some of the principles from the text may be expanded in this section.
- *Welcome/Icebreakers* will provide some questions or exercises to start the group thinking about the lesson and to get to know one another better.
- *Worship* suggests some exercises the group may want to include as part of their introductory devotional time.

- *Bible Study* provides material around which group discussions and exercises will focus. You should read the “Introduction” and “Bible Study” sections before your group meeting so you will be prepared to discuss them.
- *Application* wraps up the session and suggests some ways group members may want to use the session concepts to change their lives during the next week.
- *Conclusion* sets the scene for the next group meeting and lists “homework” assignments to complete before the next session meeting.

Each session includes all three aspects of transformation: personal introspection, spiritual disciplines, and the experience of God in relationships. God’s Holy Spirit is at work in your life in all three of these areas.

A Method for the Biblical Exercises

The biblical exercises will guide you through a self-study of a passage that relates to the session topic. You’ll begin by making observations about the passage. Pay attention to the following categories:

Who? -- Identify persons in the passage: the descriptions of persons, the relationships between persons, and the conditions of persons.

What? -- Identify subjects in the passage: the issues or topics being addressed.

When? -- Identify time in the passage: duration of time that passes and when the events occurred in relationship to one another.

Where? -- Identify places in the passage: the descriptions of locations, the relationships of places to other places, and the relationships of persons to the places.

Why? -- Identify purposes in the passage: the expressions of purpose by the author and/or the characters.

How? -- Identify events in the passage: the descriptions of events unfolding, the relationships between events, and the order of events.

Six categories aid the process of observation: “look for things that are (1) emphasized, (2) repeated, (3) related, (4) alike, (5) unlike, or (6) true to life.” By observing the passage, you can better interpret the passage, determining what the main point of the passage is. Then you can reflect on how the main point applies to your life. Be sure to ask for God’s guidance in this process. After all, the purpose of Scripture is for God to speak to us and, as a result, for our lives to be transformed.

Proposed Schedule (subject to change)

Mark your calendar for the following small group meetings and activities.

September	1-Small Group Kickoff (Let’s Begin: Touching Hearts, Transforming Lives)
October	2-Introduction: Be transformed
November	3—Transformed by knowing our identity
December	4—Transformed by being known in a faith community
January	5—Transformed by Confession
February	6—Transformed by Trials
March	7—Transformed by the Spirit
April	8—Transformed by the Resurrection
May	9—Transformed: Growing with Integrity, Serving Others, Glorifying God