

## **God's Work of Transformation in the World: Defining 'transformation' in the invitational mission of God**

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If you were to browse the websites of any Christian organization involved in addressing poverty and social injustice, you will not be able to avoid the word transformation. Speak to college students about their aspirations, and it would not be unusual to hear some of them talk about wanting to change the world. Images of emaciated children in Yemen, devastated cities in Ukraine, Syria, and Iraq, and streams of refugees, along with stories of racism, terrorism, brutal gang warfare, human trafficking, and chronic poverty, are so corrosive that they destroy any semblance of human dignity. They remind us daily that our world needs changing and transformation.

### **What Is Transformation?**

The word 'transformation'<sup>[1]</sup> is now part of the vocabulary of most Christian development NGOs and is even used by government agencies such as USAID. But by promising the poor transformation, are we making promises we cannot keep? By encouraging people to change the world, are we setting them up for frustration and disappointment? The question is, what do we mean by transformation and wanting to change the world?

Evangelical Christianity has struggled with whether the mission of God focuses only on the spiritual dimensions of life and eternal life or whether it should also include addressing poverty and social injustice in the world today.<sup>[2]</sup> For those who believe that our witness is both in word and deed, the exact nature of deeds is not clear.

How do we as followers of Christ respond to the reality of poverty and evil that confront us in a globalized world? A human reaction, whether one is a Christian or not, is a deep sense that this is not the way the world is meant to be. So we focus on providing the poor with the basic necessities of life so that they can live with dignity. By focusing on social justice, we hope that lasting and enduring change can happen.

As Christians we are called to make a difference in this world—to be salt and light; salt that prevents further decay, and light that overcomes darkness. In the New Testament, the exhortation is to 'do good' (Gal 6:9-10), a phrase that was in regular use in Apostle Paul's world, referring to financial contributions to civic and community life. The acts of goodness that Paul encouraged were focused on the poor and social problems.<sup>[3]</sup> So where does the concept of transformation fit?

### **The Challenge of Transformation**

While the desire to 'change the world' is worthy of pursuing, the reality is that transformation is complex and often not properly understood. Transformation cannot happen just by addressing the physical realities of the world and focusing only on improvement in quality of life. Transformation is not achieved by a set of activities. Projects and initiatives that do not address underlying values

and attitudes have a high probability of failing. For change to be sustainable, attitudes, values, and ethics that often have their foundations in the spiritual dimensions of life have to also be addressed. The social and political barriers that trap people in poverty and destitution are rarely addressed by development projects.

A recent article in *Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy* proposes evidence-based indicators to measure kingdom impact (presumably leading towards transformation). Accountability is critical and needs to be central in any program. Many of the indicators the article proposes are proxy indicators to try and discern if there is spiritual life and a sense of mission. Subodh Kumar writes, ‘The mission of all Christ-Centered Organizations (CCOs) is to extend God’s kingdom on earth, which is manifested through individual and social transformation.’<sup>[4]</sup> What is missing is an understanding of what is meant by kingdom. Is it possible to speak about extending God’s kingdom without the king of the kingdom and bringing everything under his authority? Is this any different than the idea of extending and establishing God’s kingdom here on earth from the failed attempts of the social gospel in the early 1900s? God is the one who is building his kingdom and he invites us into it.<sup>[5]</sup>

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr writes about the flawed nature of individuals *and* society, which prevents transformation from happening.

[Man is] . . . gifted and cursed with an imagination which extends his appetites beyond the requirement of subsistence. Human society will never escape the problem of the equitable distribution of the physical and cultural good which provide for the preservation and fulfillment of human life.<sup>[6]</sup>

While some evangelicals equate transformation with building the kingdom, there are others who equate the biblical concept of *shalom* from the Old Testament with the idea of transformation; that transformation of the world is the *shalom* that God promised, and is therefore what we as the people of God should strive for in our community development programming.

John Stott cautions against this. While the Old Testament describes the concept to include political and material well-being, this was limited to ancient Israel.<sup>[7]</sup> In the New Testament the peace that is promised is reconciliation and fellowship with God through Jesus Christ and reconciliation with each other (Eph 2:13–22). However, there can be material blessings to being a child of God which can overflow and bless others. Stott writes about *shalom*:

So, *shalom* is the blessing the Messiah brings to his people. The new creation and the new humanity are to be seen in those who are in Christ (2 Cor 5:17) . . . In many ways we see the righteousness of the kingdom, as it were, ‘spilling over’ into segments of the world . . .<sup>[8]</sup>

## **The Fly in the Ointment**

Unfortunately, none of the present discussions on poverty and social injustice addresses the reality of human sin—the sin within individual human hearts and the sinfulness inherent in many social, legal, and economic structures.<sup>[9]</sup> Sin, in the form of evil, arrogance, power, and greed, is not only the cause of much of what is wrong with the world, but also what prevents lasting change or

transformation. As soon as some degree of social or political change is achieved, evil resurfaces in some form or the other to destroy, diminish, or undermine what has been achieved.

By not acknowledging the reality of sin and knowing how to deal with it, we promise the poor sustainable change to their social circumstances which we cannot deliver or assure. We also set ourselves up for disappointment when what has been achieved is undermined because of the greed of powerful individuals or factions in the community.

If human sin is a deeply entrenched reality in our world, is social and political transformation possible? Is it a biblical concept—something that we as Christians are called to strive for and achieve?

### **Whose Transformation?**

Nowhere in Scripture are we called to transform the world.<sup>[10]</sup> However, transformation is a valid biblical concept because it is God who transforms and he invites us to partner with him. God is already in the process of redeeming human beings and creation, and will transform all when created time melds into eternity. On this side of eternity, Christians are urged to ‘do good to all people’ (Gal 6:10) and be faithful stewards of the world that God has created (Gen 1:28).

However, among Christian development professionals, the power of God is often functionally not part of their consciousness in planning social change. The reality is that community development and efforts at transformation are anthropocentric, where human beings see themselves as central and the main actors of social change. The focus is on mobilizing the community, on getting the community assessment and project design right, on implementing properly while ensuring participation, local ownership, and sustainability. The assumption is that if these are done effectively, transformation will occur. If it does not, then the planning or the process was flawed.

While all of these are important, what is ignored is that God is the author of history and is involved not only in the rise and fall of nations, but is present in local communities seeking ways to accomplish his will and establish his kingdom. Our prayers should be, ‘Lord, where and how are you already working, and how do you want us to be involved? May your kingdom come, may your will be done in this community, just as it is in heaven’, rather than ‘Lord, bless the work of our hands which we have planned.’

There is a major difference between believing that one can transform the world, and being a partner with God in the transformation that he is bringing about. Ron Sider identifies what the true motivation should be when he states, ‘Working for peace and justice is not based on naive thinking that there will be transformation—but with an understanding of where history is going.’<sup>[11]</sup> God is in the process of establishing his authority in a rebellious world, and one day he will reign here on earth in glory.

Theologian N.T. Wright bases transformation on the twin doctrines of creation and judgment:

Take away the goodness of creation, and you have a judgment where the world is thrown away as so much garbage, leaving us sitting on a disembodied cloud playing disembodied

harps. Take away judgment, and you have this world rumbling on with no hope except the pantheist one of endless cycles of being and history. Put creation and judgment together, and you get new heavens and new earth, created not ex nihilo but ex vetere, not out of nothing but out of the old one, the existing one.<sup>[12]</sup>

It is reassuring that in the midst of a flawed human race and decaying creation, God has not forgotten the goodness of what he has created. He is dealing with evil and will one day complete the new creation (ex vetere) that he has inaugurated with the resurrection of Christ. He calls us to partner with him in his work.

There is little agreement today as to what transformation would look like. Pioneers in the history of modern missions never spoke about transformation. But Robert Woodberry's research documents the impact of Protestant missionaries in West Africa in fostering the beginnings of democracy.<sup>[13]</sup> William Carey was instrumental in abolishing *sati*<sup>[14]</sup> in India. William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect ensured slavery abolished in the British Empire. They were used by God as agents of change for a better world.

### **Participating in the Transforming Mission of God**

While God does not call us to transform society, he calls us to be witnesses to the reality of the kingdom of God and its king. As the people of God in the midst of a culture that robs people of life, the way we bear witness and partner with God in his mission is by demonstrating compassion,<sup>[15]</sup> being advocates for justice,<sup>[16]</sup> and proclaiming a Redeemer in a sinful and broken world.<sup>[17]</sup>

### **Endnotes**

1. In the New Testament, the Greek word for transformation is *metamorphoo* meaning to change into another form, become altered, and is used in the passive voice to refer to Christ's transfiguration. The implication is that the change is not incremental but radical and holistic in nature. Most community development projects address incremental change and are not truly transformative in nature. For a detailed discussion on what is meant by transformation in community development, see Rupen Das, *Compassion and the Mission of God: Revealing the Hidden Kingdom* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library), 135-163. [↑](#)
2. For more on this debate and to understand the issues that undergird each position, see Das, *Compassion and the Mission of God*. [↑](#)
3. N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* (London: SPCK, 2002), 79. [↑](#)
4. Subodh Kumar, 'Toward Building Evidence of Kingdom Impact,' *Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy* 3, no. 2 (2022): 24–36. [↑](#)
5. 'He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"' (Rev 21:5). The kingdom is God's and he is building it. We are to pray, 'your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (Matt 6:10). [↑](#)
6. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study of Ethics and Politics* (New York, NY: Scribner's, 1932), 1. [↑](#)

7. While many of the surrounding kingdoms were much more prosperous than ancient Israel and some even experienced a semblance of peace for periods of time, the Old Testament never ascribes this prosperity to the *shalom* of God. [↑](#)
8. John. R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1975), 31. [↑](#)
9. The following have written extensively about sin embedded in social, economic, and political structures in society: Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992); Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study of Ethics and Politics*; Walter Rauschenbausch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York, NY: The MacMillan Company, 1917); Jayakumar Christian, *God of the Empty-Handed: Poverty, Power and the Kingdom of God* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1999). [↑](#)
10. The command to seek justice is given to the elite and powerful in society (Micah 6:8) and not to the poor to fight for justice. [↑](#)
11. Ron Sider, Lecture, Acadia Divinity College, Acadia University, Wolfville, NS. May 27, 2013. [↑](#)
12. N.T. Wright, 'Jesus Is Coming – Plant a Tree!' Plough, 2015, <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/justice/environment/jesus-is-coming-plant-a-tree>. [↑](#)
13. Robert D. Woodberry, 'The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy,' *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012): 244–74. [↑](#)
14. The practice of burning widows on the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands. [↑](#)
15. Gal 2:10, 1 Pet 3:8, Col 3:12, 1 John 3:17, Prov 19:17, 22:9, 16, James 2:14-17 [↑](#)
16. Isa 1:17, Micah 6:8, Zech 7:9-10, Prov 14:31, 22:22 [↑](#)
17. 1 Pet 3:15-16, Ps 96: 2-4, Matt 28:18-20, Rom 1:16 [↑](#)

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