

# AN INVITATION TO TRANSFORMATION

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

**Romans 12:2**

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## ROMANS 12: TRANSFORMATION

When I was a young believer, I was mentored by someone who stressed to me the importance of memorizing Scripture. One of the first passages I learned was Romans 12:1-2:

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. <sup>2</sup>Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Most commentators recognize that Paul makes a major shift in his thought in the twelfth chapter as he moves from talking about what has happened in Jesus to exploring the impact this new reality has in the life of those who recognize Christ as Lord. What difference does it make that in Jesus the Gentiles have been brought into the covenant community previously restricted to the children of Abraham, or that there is a new humanity formed in Jesus, the new Adam, or that life in the Spirit transcends what Jew and Gentile alike have understood about living faithfully as God's covenant community? What difference does it make that God's mercy has been shown to all of creation through Jesus?

For Paul, the world has dramatically changed. The promised new age has begun and this changes everything. Paul's admonition to the church is stated both positively and negatively. "Do not be conformed to this world" he says. The language is evocative. It pictures an artist pressing clay into a mold forcing the clay to take the shape of the mold (schema). The mold Paul is concerned about is the pattern of "this world" (aeon), this old age, rather than the new world Christ has brought into being. As C. E. B. Cranfield argued in his magisterial commentary on Romans, the Greek construction here implies that their lives were already being conformed to something. The issue is not "whether" to be conformed but "what" mold to be conformed to, and Paul wanted them to stop being formed by the mold of this age.

"Be transformed," Paul says. There's a new pattern. There's a new mold into which believers are to be pressed that will shape us by its patterns. This is the shape of the new age, the patterns of the promised age which the Jews anticipated as the kingdom of God. That mold is the form and pattern of Jesus, the crucified Messiah. And we are transformed by making our minds new again.

Paul knew that the old age had deeply formed the way his readers thought and acted in the world. As if by default they were shaped to think about and interact with each other in ways that now were simply inappropriate. Changing these patterns would take a lot of effort. It would be hard and possibly even painful. They would have to be diligent yet patient with each other. But this work would be worth the effort as their life together reflected more and more of the truth of the new age Jesus has brought, and the future which was coming upon them. [Back to top](#).

## ROMANS 12: RENEWAL

Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Paul was concerned about the mind. More than any other NT writer, Paul calls attention to our minds. Twenty of the 24 references to “mind” (nous) in the NT are by Paul. Twenty-three of the twenty-six references to “thinking” (phroneo) are his as well. Paul was well aware that the patterns of the old age shaped how they thought about everything and that they were already in the process of formation. His call was to a reforming that was so radical it could only be called transformation.

Paul’s connection between “mind” and “formation” is instructive. When we think of “mind,” we tend to think of it as a “container for ideas” which are judged as right or wrong, true or false. There’s something different going on here. He’s not merely admonishing them to hold true ideas (though that is certainly part of it). The mind Paul is concerned about is something that is formed, shaped, and molded. In this case, after a different mold/schema than comes naturally. He wants them to do more than think true ideas. He wants them to be formed by them, to embody them, to have them shape our lives.

This means changing the way they see things, not the least of which is the way they see themselves and others. Of course, seeing isn’t merely looking out and seeing what is there; we all know that we see what we want to see. This calls attention to the fact that seeing involves our desires, values, commitments, hopes, dreams, and fears.

Of particular interest to Paul in Chapter 12 is the way his readers see the different gifts, different vocations, and different contributions they each make to God’s kingdom work. He recognized that in the church there are different gifts and that these gifts were all given by God and had their own part to play in what God was doing. He was also aware that part of the “way of seeing” that is endemic to the “old age” was to perceive some gifts and vocations as more valuable, more important to the Kingdom work than others. It was natural to assign privilege and status to the bearers of these gifts.

The Romans lived in a deeply stratified social world that was very much at odds with the social world envisioned by, or rather embodied by the Kingdom of God brought into being by Jesus. Theirs, like ours, was one that attributed different levels of honor and one’s value and worth was associated with one’s place in the hierarchy. He knew that those hierarchies, often in spite of one’s best intentions, became inherently self-serving and tools to protect the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor and powerless to the detriment of everyone involved.

Paul is making it clear that in the kingdom things have changed. Since every believer has the Spirit of Christ dwelling in them, every believer has a part to play in what God is doing in the world. All of them are important; all of them are dependent on each other. The gifts graciously given by God were not given for the benefit of those to whom they were given, but were given to benefit the whole community. Paul was well aware of the

temptation to use these good gifts of God selfishly. He addressed it often in his writings, most famously in his letter to the Philippians in Chapter 2:

*1 "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2 make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus ..." [NRSV]*

At the heart of Paul's teaching is the recognition of the need to be transformed from the self serving patterns of "this age" to the life-giving patterns of the new age. Paul names this the mind of Christ. He wants his readers, whether in Rome or in Philippi, to be of the same mind as Christ Jesus.

If we were to look, we would see that this theme isn't limited to Romans and Philippians but can be found over and over in his epistles such as in 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Galatians, and Colossians. I don't think it would be overstating the case that it comes up in all of Paul's writing, and probably in all the New Testament. Resisting the patterns formed in us by the old age and being transformed by the mind of Christ, the patterns of the new age, is a constant and ongoing process. It is a never-ending task.

Next, we will take a deeper look at patterns, how we are formed by them, and some of the disruption that can happen when they change. [Back to top.](#)

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## ROMANS 12: PATTERNS

We saw how Paul warned his readers that they were already in the process of being squeezed into the patterns of this world and admonished them to "stop it!" Rather they should be squeezed into the pattern of the Kingdom of God. That pattern is in conflict with the patterns of the world, and Paul warns them that it will take a lot of persistent and difficult work. Paul is talking specifically about the way they treated and valued (or devalued) each other. That's vitally important for those wanting to live faithfully to the kingdom. We are shaped in ways we are often unaware of.

Let's dig a bit deeper into patterns: how our lives are formed by them and some of the disruption that can happen when they change. Too often we think that being squeezed into patterns is an unusual thing or something unique or even special. Actually, it's a lot more common than you might think. The ability to develop patterns is really important to all of us.

Think about what it is like to learn something new. At first you have to practice it over and over. While you are learning, it is hard, confusing, and complicated. It often takes intense concentration and a lot of work. But, once you have learned the task it takes much less effort, it seems much simpler, less complicated, and others watching you do it say that you make it look easy. The very act of learning is a process of becoming patterned, of being squeezed into a new shape.

Let me illustrate, think about when you learned to drive a car. When you first got in the car you had to check the rear-view mirror, the side mirrors, and the seats. You very deliberately looked in front of you and behind you. You learned to turn the key just enough to engage the starter but not so much as to grind it. You put just the right amount of pressure on the accelerator to start the car but not to rev the engine too high. Learning to use the brakes, the turn signals, looking before you change lanes, all of this has to be mastered. There are a thousand things involved, and it can all be a bit overwhelming at first. If you have taught someone to drive recently you are aware just how complicated driving is, and how hard it is to be patient with someone when it is so easy for us.

You don't have to think much about driving once you've done it for a while. You do all these things automatically, habits developed over your years of driving. Driving becomes easy, almost second nature, and the car becomes a space where you can do lots of other things too, which of course is why there are "distracted driver" laws which detail what you can't do while driving. The ability to learn behaviors like this is a gift that allows us to do more things than we could do otherwise. Imagine if you had to concentrate on driving as much now as when you were learning. [Back to top.](#)

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## ROMANS 12: CULTURE AND CHANGE

The truth is that most of the things we do we do because they are habits learned through repetition and practice and can now be done effortlessly and thoughtlessly. Most things we do are so much a part of us that we don't realize that we are doing them. That's all well and good as long as our habits serve us well, helping us do what we want to do and be who we want to be. But that's not always the case. Sometimes things serve us well for a time or in one context but then when things change, they no longer serve us so well.

My wife often tells the story of growing up as a missionary kid in Hong Kong in the 1960s. In her family she was taught to show respect by always answering adults with Ma'am or Sir. "Yes Ma'am" or "No Ma'am" was deeply ingrained into her way of interacting with adults. But when she got to her British school responding with "Ma'am" wasn't a sign of respect but disrespect. She quickly gained a reputation as the 'cheeky American' and that brought her no end of grief during those early years of schooling.

It's important for us to remember that patterns of behavior may be great in one context or at one time but do not work so well for us in another. Habits we have worked hard to develop or practices that we regularly participate in may have served us well in the past, sometimes even been liberating or life-giving but they don't serve us well in a new context or when we face other issues. Sometimes what is liberating at one time can be bondage at another.

This is the situation we are facing today. The cultural conditions we are living in are bringing rapid changes to almost every dimension of life. These changes are causing significant disruption to our patterned behaviors. Challenges to the habits of mind and body, so deeply engrained in us leave us not only confused, frustrated, and angry, but also alienated from the culture that used to feel so much like home. Often, we are at a loss as to how to respond to what's going on. Think, for instance, of the changes around communications and social media.

There once was a time when if something important happened it could take days, weeks, months, or even years for the message to get from one place to another. As travel became easier and safer, communications traveled faster and more securely. The ways we communicated adapted to the changes. Because information was scarce, institutions were created not only to collect it but to protect it and for transferring it from one place to another and from one person to another. Complex systems emerged. Because institutions are expensive, money was required, and financial models were created to support, protect, and maximize the work of the institutions involved. All of this was built on a culture of scarcity. But the days of information scarcity are gone.

We all know that is no longer our reality: information isn't scarce, it's abundant. With the creation of the internet it's not that there is too little information but that we have too much. We have more information at our fingertips than has ever been available to humans in the history of the world. And it doesn't take days or hours or even minutes for information to travel around the world, it takes nanoseconds. [Back to top.](#)

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## ROMANS 12: ABUNDANT INFORMATION

The cultural conditions we are living in today are bringing about rapid changes in almost every dimension of life. These changes are causing significant disruption to our behaviors. One such change is the abundance of information that is now available.

There are countless benefits from the information revolution; we are better informed about things that are important to us, about history, science, medicine, events going on in the world, to mention only a few. Most of us embrace our new situation enthusiastically. Think about how often you "Google" something to get

information you want. We love that we can communicate instantly with people around the world, or get an update on something you care about that has happened somewhere across the globe.

But access to so much information so quickly is also changing us. I know as a teacher, this has dramatically impacted what happens in the classroom as students now can “fact check” claims during the class lecture and look up alternative critiques or concerns about ideas being presented; not to mention the variety of new resources available for use in writing term papers or doing other assignments.

We have always assumed that more information would mean we would make better decisions. We believed that with more information we are less easily deceived, misled, or taken advantage of. But what we have found is that as good as it is to have lots of information at our fingertips it really is a double-edged sword. With so much information we have to be more discerning about the information we collect, whether the source can be trusted, or whether important information is being intentionally left out or distorted. More information has made it harder to make good decisions, not easier.

This highlights what has always been true but just more hidden in the past: that knowledge is based on trust. What is now clear is that we have always trusted someone if we say we know anything. When the cost of publishing a book was high, we trusted that someone was making sure what was being written was trustworthy. Books were only published by recognized experts in the field. But that has changed. The cost of publishing something is now so low almost anyone can do it. The trustworthiness of our sources is now strongly contested, and the very abundance of information once so empowering has become a stumbling block.

Educational institutions are being overwhelmed by the implications of this new reality. In a thousand ways, from educational philosophy to institutional structure to governance models to financial models, everything is impacted by these cultural changes. This has been painful particularly as they disrupt the deeply ingrained habits and practices that we have developed to do our work.

It’s tempting to look at what’s going on in culture and to wring our hands in despair in the face of all these changes. But if we believe in the sovereignty of God, then we must trust that God is ultimately in control of even these changing realities and that God’s work is being done in and through these changes. If that is the case then our task is to discern what the Spirit is doing and to join God in that work. That takes deep discernment because hearing the voice of God in the midst of change means that God may call us to change as dramatically as the changes in our cultural situation.

We are going to explore what these cultural changes mean for us as an educational institution. This includes what it means for the way we think about teaching and learning, for how we structure ourselves as an institution and the financial models we use, for how we do our work with the communities we are called to serve, and what it means for collaboration and communication. We are excited about what God is doing in the world around us, particularly in the world of education and the church; we are excited for the opportunity to be



a small part of this work. [Back to top.](#)

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## ROMANS 12: LEARNING IN A NEW WAY

We have looked at how following Christ is an invitation to be transformed by the renewing of our mind. We have learned that when Paul refers to the “mind” he has much more in view than we have traditionally understood. Transformation requires us to break from the molds in which we are often so comfortable. This can be a challenging – even disorienting – process because it invites us to become aware of and then to reconsider what has shaped us.

We are learning that one of the more disorienting aspects of the transformation we are experiencing in Kairos is related to how it requires learning to be understood, practiced, and assessed in new ways. Historically, the academy, the church, and really modern culture in general, have approached learning as the process by which one acquires knowledge. Over the years, we have attempted to include things like “praxis” or “field education” but have done so from a pretty limited perspective – one in which the goal is still “knowing” ideas or content. Our definitions of excellence, measurements of quality, systems of assessment, and priorities have all been shaped by one particular stream or tradition wherein “content” (and only particular types of content) is the most important aspect of learning.

We are going to explore what it means to approach learning in a new way. We will ask questions like:

- What are standards of excellence and where do they come from?
- Is there a more robust way to think about knowledge, one that encompasses whole life discipleship?
- How do we ensure quality in a new paradigm of learning?
- What might we need to let go of in order to embrace a more holistic way of learning?
- Does student learning assessment need to look different in this approach?
- Is there a way to approach contextual theological education that keeps us from being developed in an echo chamber?

That is to say, how do we learn alongside the “fellowship of differents” that is the Body of Christ while simultaneously learning to engage faithfully in our local context and theology? [Back to top.](#)