

## ROM 12.2: TRANSFORMING LIVES AND CHANGING CULTURE

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Do you know the difference between a thermometer and a thermostat?

- A **thermometer** registers and records the temperature of the atmosphere or of the body - it conforms completely to the situation in which it finds itself.
- A **thermostat** has the same characteristics plus one significant factor, the element of control. It is not the environment that determines the thermostat, but the thermostat that determines the environment.

As Christians we are called not just to reflect the environment in which we find ourselves, but to take control and react accordingly.

As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans: “**Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of mind**” (12.2).

Or as JB Philips put it in his great paraphrase: “**Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within...**”

The underlying presupposition here is that **there are two value systems** around - there are God’s values and there are the world’s values.

Furthermore, these two values systems are **incompatible with one another** - indeed, for the most part they are in direct collision with one another. In the words of John Stott: “*Whether we are thinking about the purpose of life or the meaning of life, about how to measure greatness or how to respond to evil, about ambition, sex, honesty, money, community, religion or anything else, the two sets of standards diverge so completely that there is no possibility of compromise*” (Romans).

Unfortunately time and again we Christians become compromisers. Instead of reflecting God’s values, we allow the world to squeeze us into its mould.

If you don’t believe me, then ask yourself these questions: “*To what extent is my life-style different from that of my non-Christian friends? Compared to my non-Christian friends is there a significant difference in the way in which I use my time, handle my money, care for my children, conduct my business, and relate to the opposite sex? Is the very way in which I live so distinctive that others ask what it is that makes me tick?*”

The fact is that as Christians we are called to be different and go against the stream.

As Christians we are called to be true non-conformists, people who refuse to adopt the values and standards of this world. Instead, we are called to live an alternative life-style which makes the ‘greens’ by contrast seem colourless.

Listen again to the Apostle Paul: “**Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of mind**” (12.2).

The contrast Paul is making is very clear in the original Greek, where he uses two very different Greek words to hammer home the point he is making.

The first Greek word (*schema*) refers to a person’s outward appearance, the second Greek word (*morphe*) refers to a person’s inner being, their personality.

In other words, Paul was saying “*Don’t try to match your life with the changing fashions of this world; don’t be like the chameleon which changes colour according to the context in which it finds itself*”. Rather, says Paul, “*let God transform you by changing your very personality*”.

This is what Jesus had in mind when he talked to Nicodemus about being ‘**born again**’ – those who put their trust in Christ undergo a change so radical that it is as if they belong to a different world. Paul adopted similar terminology, when he wrote: “**Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come**” (2 Cor 5.17).

We are called not only to experience a new life, but also to live a new life-style.

But for this change in life-style to take place, we need to play our part. We need to ensure that we do not allow the world around us to squeeze us into its mould. This seems to me to be one of the great values of belonging to a small group. The fact is that all too often we can kid ourselves that we are living out the Christian life, when the reality is that we are living our lives just like everybody else. But in a small group, where the truth is spoken in love, we can begin to see ourselves as we really are, and then take appropriate action to put things right. A friend of mine put it this way. *"To be complete I need you... I need you to help me understand who I am. Unless I am a contortionist, I can't see more than 70% of my body without the aid of a mirror: so too I can't see my self without the aid of the mirror you hold up to me"* (Rowley Croucher, *Grid*, Autumn 1991).

It is in a loving small group that Christians can challenge one another about how they reflect their Christian values at work and at home.

Indeed, it was with this in mind that John Wesley developed his system of "mutual accountability"! Each time the early Methodists met in their small groups, known as ‘classes’, they had to ask these four questions of one another:

1. *What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?*
2. *What temptations have you met with?*
3. *How were you delivered?*
4. *What have you thought, said or done of which you doubt whether it be a sin or not?*

We may smile at such questions. Perhaps we fell them rather quaint. And yet we need to ask similar questions of one another if we are to earth our faith in the way we live. Yes, in small groups we can be real with one another, we can pray with one another, and we can take a stand together against the values of this world – so that when the adverts tell us we need to buy this, that or the other to live a full life, we can say together ‘Who do you think you’re kidding?’

To quote Paul yet again: “**Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of mind**”

Or in Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase, *The Message*: “*Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out*”.

This then is the context in which I want to introduce our church motto for the year:

***Transforming lives and changing culture.***

To help you remember the motto we have produced a fridge magnet. Let me encourage you to stick your magnet on your fridge, so that every morning as you go to the fridge to help yourself to milk for your cereal, you will remember that as a church we are in the business of ***transforming lives and changing culture.***

This motto is actually part of a longer statement of values we have set ourselves as a church. In your new church handbook you will see that we have said the following:

*“Our mission is to go Christ’s way and make disciples’. [However] If we are to fulfil our mission, then people around us need to see that we are genuinely committed to Jesus. We want to be a community which is*

- *Warm and welcoming*
- *Risk-taking and God-trusting*
- *Excited and enthusiastic*
- *Sacrificing and resourcing*
- *Transforming lives and changing culture*

Over the next few Sunday mornings I want to look at this value statement.

I want to explore what it means for us to be ‘*warm and welcoming, risk-taking and God-trusting*’.

I want us to see what it means for us as a church to be ‘*excited and enthusiastic, sacrificing and resourcing*’.

But today the focus is on ‘*transforming lives and changing culture*’.

As you will have seen from our weekly *Update* as also from the monthly *Team Talk*, this strap-line ‘*transforming lives and changing culture*’ has become part of our new church logo.

The communications team has done away with the old logo which involved writing the middle letter of the word Central like a Cross, and replaced it with a modern typeface imposed on a shadowy three-some. At the same time we have done away with the strap-line ‘going Christ’s way and making disciples’.

As some of you will be aware, this change has been somewhat controversial.

Some would have preferred us to keep to the old logo and the old strap-line

However, the communications team felt that we needed a different approach if we were to communicate to the world beyond the church.

We wanted to communicate that the church is about people – and what’s more, church is about people who want to see the lives of individuals changed, as well as the life of society.

It’s not that we no longer believe in the cross, nor that our mission has changed – rather it is about how we communicate our faith. Frankly, we will never fulfil our mission unless people see that faith makes a difference to life.

When Jesus went around Galilee, he didn’t simply call upon his contemporaries to “**believe the good news**”, he called upon them to ‘**repent**’ (Mark 1.15). And to ‘repent’ is to ‘change’ – it is to change direction.

When I was at secondary school, I was in the school army cadet corps. Indeed, we all had to be. Every Monday morning I went to school not in a blazer with a cap, but in my khaki uniform with a beret and with shiny boots which I had bullied. On Monday afternoons instead of lessons we had to do square bashing – we were marched from one end of the playground to another. As we marched, the officer in charge would bawl, ‘Squad, about turn’. And turn we did. Now if our officer had spoken Hebrew, instead of English, he would have used the Hebrew word for repent: ‘Squad, repent’. For to repent is to change direction.

And that's what Jesus has in mind for us.

He wants us to change direction – instead of adopting the world's values and going the world's way, he wants us to adopt God's values and go God's ways.

Jesus wants to see our lives transformed – he wants to see our culture changed.

But he doesn't just want our lives to be transformed, and our culture changed – he wants to see everybody's lives transformed, he wants to see the wider culture as a whole changed.

And that thought is present in our strap-line: “***Transforming lives and changing culture***”

I.e. we want to be a church which is transforming lives and changing culture in Chelmsford as a whole. We want to make an impact on our town as a whole. We want to change and transform the wider secular community to a community that functions on godly principles and values.

It's a highly ambitious desire. But Jesus was equally ambitious when he said to his disciples: “**You are like salt for the whole human race – You are like light for the whole world**”. Jesus wanted his disciples to make a difference the world around them. He wanted them to transform lives and change the culture.

“**You are like light for the whole world**” – so, says Jesus, don't hide your light.

He went on: “**No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl**”. The lamp in question was a small clay oil lamp – such lamps were put on stands so that they might give light to all in the house. Light is for shining.

Alas, far too many religious people have preferred to live in ghettos, rather than in the world. At the time of Jesus there was a very godly group of people who called themselves the “*sons of light*” – but the people who belonged to this Qumran community retreated to the desert – they forsook the darkness of the world. But Jesus calls us to shine – not just in the church, but in the town of Chelmsford as a whole.

“**Your light must shine**” – at work and at home, at school and in the pub, on the football field and in the squash court -, wherever you are, let your light shine.

“**You are like salt for the whole human race**”: Remember that in the ancient world and indeed right up to the days of refrigeration, salt was the commonest of all preservatives. Either it was rubbed into fish and meat, or they were left to soak in it. In this way bacterial decay was retarded, though not, of course, entirely arrested. Salt was used to keep things from going bad & rotten - it held at bay decay & putrefaction. I.e. to be salt is to exercise an antiseptic influence in the world. It is to step in & stop the rot in our culture.

The sad fact = there is so much rottenness everywhere.

Our world is in a state of decay - standards are declining everywhere.

We only have to read the paper or watch the TV to see that our society is suffering from moral gangrene.

But it's not enough to sigh with despair or to wring our hands in frustration. As Christians we are called to do something about it. What this will involve will vary

- At times it will involve debate - the fact of the matter is that there is a battle going on - a battle of ideas as to what is good and right - a battle which needs to be fought at school and at college, in the papers and in the TV studios.
- At times it will involve protest - we need to make our voice heard on matters like gay sex & euthanasia, as also on such matters as homelessness & board-room greed

One way or another we are called to seek to change the culture of Chelmsford.

When one bears in mind that there are over 150,000 people in our town, it may seem a highly ambitious aim. But it is amazing the difference that a community even just of our size can make. I remember once visiting a massive cave – and at one point the lights were turned off. It was incredibly dark – but then he switched on his torch, and what a difference that small torch made.

The same is true of salt. It only takes a few grains of salt to make all the difference to your fish and chips, or indeed to a packet of crisps.

If as a church we were all 101% committed to transforming lives and changing culture, what a difference we could make. So “**Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of mind**”  
With God’s help, let’s be a community, reflecting the life of Jesus, *transforming lives and changing culture*.