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THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL

INTRODUCTION

It is worth taking note of the numerical growth of evangelicals over the past six decades in many countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. It is also encouraging to see in the same period of history a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit in almost all countries of the world. In addition, there exists in the church in all nations a greater openness to the Holy Spirit's activity, a fresh expression in praise and worship, and everywhere people are talking of discipleship, the unity of the church, and of the integral mission of the church in the world. We thank God for all of these realities.

But far from giving place to a deceptive triumphalism, with serenity and objectivity we should take another look at our weak points, with a desire to overcome them. Statistics on church growth only take into account numbers, not the quality of evangelical believers. Today we see everywhere a kind of fever over *quantity*, but not over *unity*, and even less concerning *quality*.

We need to review some basic matters. Could it be that our objective is only to seek in the nations of the world an evangelical majority? What about the quality of life? Why is there so much mediocrity in the character and conduct of many Christians? What about moral and social changes that the gospel should produce in the nations? Where are the men and women who are being transformed into the image of Christ? Why is the church's influence in society so small?

We need to review these matters seriously and in depth, to evaluate our reality and, in the end, to become in our generation the salt of the earth and the light of the world, just as our Lord declared.

***First part:* THE MEANING OF TRANSFORMATION**

1. THE CONDITION OF SOCIETY

God created human beings in his image and likeness (Genesis 1.26-27), which means with his own moral and spiritual virtues. But sin deformed God's image in human beings.

Current society has a life style quite opposed to God's character.

- God is LOVE, abundant and generous. He gives in abundance what he has. But in society, selfishness, individualism, materialism and greed prevail.
- God is HOLY, holy beyond measure. There is not in him the slightest shadow of sin.

- Yet in humanity we find sin, moral filth, licentious sex, prostitution, adultery, lying, deception, corruption, bribery.
- God is JUST, righteous. Yet in society we see an abundance of injustice, robbery, graft, corruption, bribery, unjust laws, unjust judgments, racial discrimination. There is an unjust distribution of riches at all levels: personal, business, national and international. There is exploitation of the labor force, family violence, abuse of authority.
 - God is LIGHT, he is TRUTH. Yet men are liars, deceivers, hypocritical, false.
 - God is PEACE. Yet human history is characterized by fighting, violence, wars, hate, crimes, aggression, insolence, disorder.
 - God is FAITHFUL; he fulfills his covenant. Yet there is much infidelity among the people: adultery, divorce, irresponsibility, laziness, failure to meet commitments in our work, fraud, lying.
 - God is MERCIFUL. Yet few people are concerned today about the condition of those who suffer, of the poor and those who live on the margin of society. Everyone seems to be living for himself.

Few persons give evidence in their behavior of character virtues, such as honesty, kindness, faithfulness, humility, meekness, holiness in sexual conduct, integrity and honor in financial matters, generosity, patience, brotherly love, solidarity, respect for parents, diligence, perseverance, willingness to serve, contentment, self discipline.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE GOSPEL

- God's objective is not only the salvation of the soul, but the person's transformation into God's image (Romans 8.29; 2 Corinthians 3.18; Colossians 3.10).
- The goal of the Christian disciple is not simply to reach heaven, but to become like Jesus, and to live as he did here on Earth (1 John 2.6).
- God did not choose us from before the foundation of the world, so that we could be saved, but rather so that we would be holy in all our behavior (Ephesians 1.4; 1 Peter 1.15-16).
- We were called, not only to be children of God, but also to be perfect, as he is perfect (Matthew 5:48; Colossians 1:28). *Perfect*, from the Greek *teleios*, means complete, mature, built up in all aspects of character and conduct.
- It is not enough to be born again; we should grow and mature until we reach the measure of the stature of Christ (Ephesians 4:13-15).

The individual's transformation into God's image is the principal factor – not the only one – in the transformation of families and of society in general.

[I say "not the only one", for in addition to the redemption of the individual, redemption is also needed from the sinful aspects of the distinct cultures and, above all, the transformation of societal, political and economic structures, through laws and more just systems in accord with the principles of the kingdom of God. But since my subject is the transformation of the individual, I will continue with that subject]...

3. TRANSFORMATION IN PRACTICAL TERMS MEANS...

- Families that live in peace and harmony.

- Wise and kind husbands.
- Submissive wives, with a kind and peaceful character.
- Children who are respectful and obedient. Boys and girls that enter marriage as chaste and virgin.
- Older people who are respected and venerated by the younger generation.
- Children raised in the love and fear of God.
- Virtuous women, happy and full of good deeds.
- Disciples who are learning to be humble, patient, kind, generous, sincere, honest.
- Disciples whose life style is to love, forgive, serve, confess their sins, obey, pay their taxes.
- Workers who are responsible, efficient, diligent, faithful, trustworthy, productive, obedient and respectful of those in authority.
- Business owners and professionals that love their workers and employees as they love themselves and, consequently, use their intellectual abilities and economic resources to help in their integral development. Far from exploiting them in their work, they dignify them with the best wages possible, support their development and the general well-being of the families: home, health, education, economic and spiritual progress.
- Men and women who give evidence of the character of Christ: love for their neighbors, help for the needy; they weep with those who weep, rejoice with those who rejoice, return good for evil, support injustice with peace and joy, give thanks to God in all things, overcome temptation, live in the joy of the Lord, pray without ceasing, give testimony concerning Jesus, make disciples, give their money to serve their brothers and, above all, love God with all their being.
- And if a child of God occupies a place that is important or secondary, whether in a public or private institution, in a commercial business or of any other kind, whether as president of the nation or as doorkeeper in a small school; because of his character as a Christian disciple, he will exercise that function with absolute integrity, honesty, faithfulness and responsibility; without giving or receiving bribes, without lies or deception, without seeking personal advantage or favoritism; with total impartiality and equity. Moreover, he will understand that his job, whatever it is, is only a place of service for the good of his peers.

4. BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF TRANSFORMED PERSONS

- Zaccheus: From the role of public servant who was corrupt and a thief, he became an honorable man who restored what he stole. Instead of continuing to be greedy and selfish, he became generous, giving away half of his goods to the poor (Luke 19.1-10).
- Mary Magdalene: From being a troubled woman with seven demons, she became a holy person who served Jesus with all her possessions (Luke 8.1-3).
- The Gadarene: From being a ferocious man with a legion of demons, who lived among the tombstones, and was able to break loose from fetters and chains, he became a man completely free and tranquil, properly clothed and with good judgment, causing all the inhabitants of Decapolis to give witness of *what great things Jesus had done for him* (Mark 5.1-20).
- The Twelve Apostles: From being carnal men who argued over which of them would be the greatest, from ambitious persons like James and John who asked for

thrones in glory on both sides of Jesus, they were transformed by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost into spiritual persons and humble servants of the Lord.

- Barnabas and many others: They sold their properties and goods and placed them at the apostles' feet for distribution among the needy (Acts 4.34-37).
- Onesimus: From being a worthless slave who was lazy and a thief, he was converted and disciplined by Paul in a Roman prison. He was then of considerable worth to Philemon, and useful for the ministry as a colleague of the apostle Paul (Epistle of Philemon).

There are thousands and even millions more throughout history, most of them anonymous to us, but well known to God. Hallelujah!

Second part: RESOURCES NECESSARY FOR TRANSFORMATION

1. THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

For years we have preached that the requisite to be saved is *to accept Jesus Christ as your only Savior*. Of course, Christ IS the only Savior; the Bible teaches with great clarity that apart from him there is no salvation (Acts 4.12). That is not being questioned, but rather, what is the requirement for a sinner to be saved?

Although it may seem surprising, there is not a single verse in the Scriptures that affirms that Jesus Christ saves me when I recognize him as my Savior. In Romans 10.8-9 the apostle Paul declares: *“This is the Word of faith which we preach: that if you confess with your mouth the Lord (KYRIOS) Jesus, and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, **YOU WILL BE SAVED**”*.

This is not the only verse, for a careful study throughout the New Testament shows us that the CONDITION necessary to be saved is to recognize Jesus Christ as KYRIOS. *Kyrios* is the Greek word translated “Lord” in the New Testament.

- Peter at Pentecost concludes his sermon by saying: *“God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both KYRIOS and Christ”* (Acts 2.36).
- Paul said to the jailer in Philippi: *“Believe on the KYRIOS Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, both you and your household”* (Acts 16.31).
- In 2 Corinthians 4.5, the apostle says: *“We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ the KYRIOS”*.

The term “KYRIOS”, in reference to Christ, appears in the New Testament more than 610 times, whereas the term “SOTER” = SAVIOR, is only found 16 times in reference to Christ.

The apostles did not mutilate the gospel by presenting Jesus Christ only as Savior. The apostolic *Kerigma* presents him as the Son of God who died, rose again and is the Lord. In order to be saved, the sinner must believe and recognize him as LORD, with all that the word implies.

To accept Christ merely as Savior would involve the intention to receive forgiveness, salvation, peace, happiness and eternal life without any real submission to his lordship; and

this does not coincide with the teaching of the New Testament. Christ saves me and gives me all the benefits of salvation when I bow my knees to him and recognize him as Lord. This marks the end to my rebellion and the acceptance of his government and authority over me. It means the total surrender of all that I am and have, including my family, my home, my possessions, my money, my time, my plans, EVERYTHING, absolutely everything.

To accept Jesus Christ as Lord is to recognize him as my owner, my “boss”, the final authority over my life. It is to recognize him as God and Savior. In order for Christ to become my Savior, I must recognize him as my Lord. This is the essence of the gospel of the kingdom of God.

To recognize Christ as Lord is not only the indispensable condition for conversion; it is also the necessary requisite for the formation and transformation of each new disciple.

2. REPENTANCE, LIBERATION, WATER BAPTISM AND BAPTISM IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

The apostles led to repentance those who wanted to follow Christ (Acts 2.38), as well as to confession of their sins, a renunciation of all the works of darkness (Acts 19.18), and to baptism in water and in the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.38-39; 8.12-17; 9.17-18; 10.43-48; 19.1-6).

It is very important that everyone who begins the Christian life is led to experience a profound repentance, freedom from every work of the devil; that he be baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit in order to initiate his Christian life free from all bondage and filled with the transforming power of God.

3. DISCIPLESHIP

Jesus said: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them [and]... teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you...”* (Matthew 28.19-20).

A proper functioning discipleship must involve three elements: A disciple, a discipler and a teaching program (doctrine or *didachè*).

What is a disciple?

A disciple is a person who has acknowledged Jesus as his Lord. In the past, he lived according to his own criteria and did what he wanted to do, but now he is subject to Christ’s authority and, therefore, to all his teaching. When he was baptized, his former life was buried in the death of Christ, and he was raised with him to live a new life. Baptism is the precise step that defines him as a disciple. This is why Jesus said: *“Make disciples...baptizing them...”*

In a practical sense, a disciple is a student, one who is learning, someone who manifests a meek and humble disposition when faced with instructions from the Word of God. A disciple receives the teaching with faith and meekness. He accepts correction, he imitates the best example and desires to make progress. He has one objective in life: to be like his Master, both in conduct and in character.

What is a discipler?

This is a more mature disciple who assumes the responsibility to care for, instruct, teach, pray with and help a new disciple in his growth and formation. A disciple may have one or more disciples under his responsibility and care. His principal task is to teach each one Jesus' doctrine, which in Greek is called '*didache*'.

What is the *didaché*?

This Greek term is translated in various versions as "doctrine" or "teaching". It is used 30 times in the New Testament. It is derived from the verb '*didasko*', translated 'teach'. This verb is used 101 times in the NT. The *didache* consists of commands that reveal God's will (Mat 7.28; Mr 12.38; Acts 2.42).

Features of the *didache*:

- It consists mainly of teaching, instructions and clear commands that reveal God's will for our lives. Example: "*Love your neighbor as yourself*".
- It is simple and clear. Ex.: "*Children, obey your parents*".
- The tone is usually imperative. It is a command from the Lord and requires obedience.
- It teaches us to live according to God's will in all aspects of our life: Family, work, sex, money, worship, service, vocabulary, relations with others...
- It is a well-defined and complete body of teaching. Most of the *didache* can be found in ten chapters of the NT: Matthew 5, 6 and 7; Ephesians 4, 5 and 6; Romans 12, 13, 14 and 15.
- The objective of the *didache* is to make us like Jesus.
- It is God's word; therefore, it is unchangeable. Its content cannot be modified. "*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away...*"
- It is universal; its commands reveal God's will for all men in all times. Matt 28.19-20.
- We need to know it, obey it and teach it to others.
- To obey the *didache*, we must do so in the power of the Holy Spirit (Ezek 36.26-27).

4. PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

This factor is decisive in the transformation of our character and life style.

□ Assume your responsibility

Man was created in God's image. This means that he is different from animals. God gave to man responsibility that is moral, related to his work, his family, and in social and spiritual matters. Every person is responsible before God and must respond to him for his deeds, attitudes, words, conduct, thoughts, sentiments, desires and intentions.

John Stott tells us: "Our responsibility before God is an inalienable aspect of our human dignity. Its final expression will be evident on the day of judgment".

Emil Brunner affirms: "Responsibility is not an attribute; it is the substance of human existence. It contains everything... it is what distinguishes humans from all other creatures.

God required Adam, Eve, Cain, Saul, David, Ananias and Saphira, and Saul of Tarsus to give an account to him. And one day, we shall all have to give account to him of our entire life.

Satan's activities, the weakness of our flesh, the evil of other persons, the pressures of the world, or even adverse circumstances, do not exempt us of our responsibility before God. Through Jesus Christ, God has provided us with everything we need to be "more than conquerors" over Satan, sin, the flesh and the world, even in the most adverse circumstances.

It would be foolish to deny the influence that our genetic inheritance and our training have on our behavior. They influence, but they do not determine our conduct. The determining factor of our behavior and our life is a matter of personal responsibility.

How is it that Abel and Cain, with the same genetic inheritance and the same training, were so different? Why was Jacob different from Esau? Why was David so different from his brothers?

Yes. Through the abundant provision of God's grace we can be different, we can change. We can be transformed. Our character can be refined, our conduct can improve. We can be holy, humble, meek, kind, willing to serve; we can be like Jesus.

□ **Persevere in self discipline** (1 Corinthians 9.24-27)

Actions that are repeated over a period of time become habits. There are habits that involve ethical/moral characteristics which make up the various features of our character. This means that our conduct is shaping our character, and then character in turn determines our conduct.

- If we live according to the flesh, carnal attitudes become a part of our lives. For example: anger, lying, complaining, lust, greed and resentment.

- But if we live in the Spirit, we will put to death the works of the flesh, and the virtues of Christ will be evident in us: kindness, service to others, humility, truthfulness, forgiveness, etc.

When something is done once, twice, ten, twenty or a hundred times... habits are formed, which become specific traits of our character. In this discipline of the Spirit, the qualities of Christ's virtues will become the **virtues of our own character**. That is why it is important to live in the Spirit twenty-four hours of the day (Gal. 2.20).

□ **Guard your heart**

In biblical language, our heart is the center of our being, our innermost self. That is where we define what we are. Prov 4.23; Acts 8.21; Mat 15.19.

We should guard, or keep, our hearts concerning:

- The thoughts of our heart, Heb. 4.12
- The intentions of our heart, 1 Cor. 4.5
- The desires of our heart, Mat. 5.28
- The decisions of our heart, Daniel 1.8; Acts 5.4
- The deception of our heart, Jer. 17.9
- The motivation of our heart, Mat 6.1-6, 1 Cor 13.3

We should always keep our hearts sincere and clean, Heb.10.22

□ **Cultivate intimate fellowship with God**

We need to cultivate fellowship with God that is intimate, personal and secret, Mat 6.6. Here we should submit ourselves to the deeper work of the Word and of the Spirit to accept reproof, correction, sanctification and transformation. Heb 4.12; 2 Tim.3.16; 2 Cor 3.18; Rom 12.1-2.

Our greatest desire should be to “KNOW” the Son of God, the perfect man, Eph 4.13. This does not refer to intellectual knowledge (the Greek concept), but rather experimental and total (the Hebrew concept), until we become completely one with him.

5. NEED FOR A CORRECT ATTITUDE CONCERNING SUFFERING

Suffering is an important resource that God uses to transform us. Gold can only be purified inwardly by fire. There are aspects of our character that only the fire of pain can sanctify.

Jesus did not promise his disciples a life without pain. What he did promise us is peace and victory in the midst of afflictions (John 16.33).

Today it seems that many of the world’s values have become symbols of success in the Christian life: money, fame, popularity, prosperity, numbers, people, power... How little is said concerning the cross, suffering, discipline, sacrifice, being despised!

For me, one of the most difficult verses to understand in the New Testament is Hebrews 5.8: “*Though he was a Son, he learned obedience by the things which he suffered*”. If the Son of God had to suffer to learn obedience, how much more should we!

In the face of suffering, we can take one of three attitudes:

- 1- Rebellion and bitterness.
- 2- Resignation without understanding the purpose, as with Job’s experience at the beginning.
- 3- Acceptance as God’s perfect plan for our purification, sanctification and transformation, until we are conformed to Christ’s image, Rom 8.28-29.

Suffering helps us to become humble, patient, compassionate, merciful, obedient, dependent upon God, that is, to be like Jesus; for it continues to produce in us a more excellent and eternal weight of glory (2 Cor 4.17).

6. NEED TO LIVE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

The twelve apostles had the best discipler and received all the *didache*, yet all that, although indispensable, was not enough. They had to be filled with the great and superabundant power of God in order to be transformed. Why?

The inherent weakness of our human nature

The Bible calls this condition “being in the flesh”. It is the natural state of man following the fall: weak, sinful and incapable of pleasing God. In the “best case scenario”, I try to do God’s will with my own resources, only to fail time and again. Paul said: “*The good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil that I will not to do, that I practice...*” (Rom 7.14-25).

And in the “worst case scenario”, I drop all restraints and yield to the potential evil that is in me (Gal 5.19-21).

The law of God

God's law is good and holy. It requires of us to do God's will, but it does not enable us to fulfill it.

The complete work of redemption

On the cross Christ not only bore our sins; he included us in the process. "*Our old man was crucified with him*" (Rom. 6.6). His death is our death, and his resurrection our resurrection. But that objective reality becomes subjective and experimental reality through the work of the Holy Spirit in us (Rom 8.2).

The work of the Spirit

- Christ not only sent the Holy Spirit into our hearts; rather, through the Holy Spirit, he comes to live in us (John 14.18).
- Due to the indwelling of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to have the Spirit is to have Christ in us (John 14.10-11; 1 John 3.24).
- The Spirit communicates to us the efficacy of Christ's death and victory over our flesh, with the power of his resurrection (Gal 2.20).
- The Holy Spirit's function is to transmit to us Christ's life, Christ's glory, his moral virtues, his love, his humility, his peace, his meekness, his holiness. Referring to the Holy Spirit, Jesus said: "*He will take what is mine and show it to you*" (John 16.14).
- The Spirit's function is to form Christ Jesus in us; to transform us from glory to glory in his image (2 Cor 3.18).

"For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: he condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8.3-4).

"That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation... that you may know... what is the exceeding greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places..." (Ephesians 1:17-20).

The great resource of every disciple of Christ is to live full of the Spirit twenty-four hours of every day, living by faith, filled with the glory of Christ, and walking according to his glorious power that is in us. Amen and Hallelujah!