BUT BE TRANSFORMED
(Romans 12:2)

Pilgrim Church, Duluth — Dr. Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

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Here we come to that same old verse again. "Do not be conformed to this world...but be transformed." Perhaps the "Good News for Modern Man" translation can provide us with a fresh perspective on this verse:

> "Do not conform outwardly to the standards of the world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will know what is the will of God - what is good, and is pleasing to him, and is perfect."

Two weeks ago we thought about the "Do not conform...to the world" part. We saw that the Christian way of life does entail acts of non-conformity. But this non-conformity is always in the interests of a higher conformity to the will of God as we understand that will.

But now we come to this other part of the verse, the more positive part, "But let God transform you." And now we must ask, what does that mean? and how do we do it?

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I. First, of all we need to see where the fundamental basis of the Christian way of life lies. I think that very often we lose sight of this foundation.

For example, we may think that the fundamental basis of the Christian life is some set of moral maxims - the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, and various lists of do's and don'ts.

I would be the last person to deny that a framework of moral guidance goes into any valid interpretation of Christian living. But we are mistaken, I think, if we see this as the foundation. We are looking at Christianity in moralistic, rather than in truly religious terms.

Again, we may think that the fundamental basis of the Christian life is a certain way of thinking about God and ourselves and the world in which we live. It is an outlook on life, a world-view, a set of symbols for making life meaningful.

I would not deny the importance of this element in the Christian way of life either. We live in a time when people search desperately for meaning; for a way of making sense of their existence. It is a time of competing ideologies, of conflicting interpretations of human existence. It is important that Christians be definite about their interpretation. Otherwise, despite their good works, they lose their way, and in the end they have no way of judging which works are good and which aren't.

But I think. if we make a set of ideas the basis of the Christian way we are taking an intellectualist view of Christianity rather than a spiritual one.

Right here, perhaps, we come to the source of the weakness in much of liberal Protestantism today. We take a moralistic approach to Christianity, or an intellectualist one, or both. And now, sensing that something is missing, some of us want to take what might be termed an emotionalistic approach. We thrash about looking for gimmicks to stir up feelings, and we would make that the foundation.

But the only true foundation is spiritual; that is to say, an inward, personal relationship with God.

Last week Gertrude Jacobson reported on some of the exciting things that happened at the General Synod of the United Church last summer. She feels some kind of renewal may be underway, and I hope she is right. She also senses that I have a hard time relating to our denominational activities. She is right about that. It is not that I usually disapprove of actions that are taken. On the contrary, I am usually quite enthusiastic about them. The United Church of Christ truly has been in the vanguard in recent years - in the vanguard of fighting for human rights, in the vanguard of expressing Christian faith in terms of the experiences of people living in the contemporary world. But so often I find myself operating on another wave length, so to speak. And the reason is not that I want to go back to the past, but that I feel the one thing needful for the present is lacking. I do not sense that people come together out of that thirst for the living God which drove the psalmist into song. I do not perceive that the basis of what is done is to be found in putting the lives of men and women into a transforming relationship with God's will here and now. The whole business is too human-centered, rather than God-centered. The result is that something most essentially human gets lost.

But to return to Paul's great passage in Romans 12:
It is important that we see that the foundation here is not simply moral, or intellectual, or emotional. It is spiritual. Paul is not just advising us to exchange one pattern of thought and conduct for another. He does indeed describe the pattern of Christian living in beautiful terms. But he sees this as the outcome of a fundamental process of change taking place inside of people. What he calls for is not just a change in our habits, or in our ideas, or in our feelings, but in the depths of the self. And that arises not from agreeing with a set of principles, but from a relationship with God. We are to put ourselves at his disposal. Then, he says, we shall discover God's will for us, not as an abstraction, but as a guiding force in our own lives.

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"Do not conform outwardly to the standards of the world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind."

"<u>But let God</u>." Teilhard de Chardin wrote:

"For in truth those will be saved who dare to set the center of their being <u>outside themselves</u>, who choose to love another <u>more than themselves</u>, and in some sense, become this other: which is to say, who dare to pass through death into life."

It is a strange saying and yet it is a familiar one. For this idea that the secret of life lies in setting the center of our being outside ourselves is repeated again and again by all the saints and sages in our spiritual inheritance. It goes back to Jesus himself. He who loses his life - will find it - in another - in God.

And how do we center our being outside ourselves? <u>One way, of course, is through love</u>. That is in a sense what love means, centering your being outside yourself in another. And that is why Jesus said that the commandment to love is more basic than all the others, more basic even than the Ten Commandments. For without love, even the Ten Commandments are nothing. The most important thing is that we give ourselves to God in love, for only

then can that basic re-orientation of life occur that spells the difference between what Paul calls conforming to this world and the Christian way. "Those will be saved...who choose to love another more than themselves."

A second thing we must do is to trust. It is to surrender ourselves and our destiny as wholly as we can to God's keeping. This does not mean, let us be clear, that we just sort of hang passively on God; to trust in God does not mean we are supposed to stop working. What it does mean is that regardless of what becomes of our work, we put ourselves in God's hands, as Jesus did on the cross.

One of the great temptations of well-intended people is that they live at times not only as if their own destiny depended entirely on them, but the destiny of the entire world. There is a fine line between living with a strong sense of responsibility, and living as if you were the indispensable man. Sometimes the only way people learn about that line is to suffer a heart attack or some other setback that puts them down in bed for a while and proves that the world can survive without them.

Profound Christian trust is a giving over of your life to God, not with the idea that you are going to relinquish responsibility, but in the confidence that so long as you make this gift of self to God you and your concerns will always belong to him. Such trust is a liberating force because it sets us free from the anxiety that grows from excessive self-centeredness. Once again in Teilhard's words, it helps to set the center of our being outside ourselves, in God.

A third thing we can do is to pray. This summer I drank a lemonade while sitting in view of Mt. Thabor, the traditional site of the transfiguration. I was hot and tired and I didn't feel much transfigured myself. I wasn't much impressed by the mountain either, especially since I am inclined to agree with those who regard Mt. Hermon as the more likely location for that event.

But wherever this event occurred in the life of Jesus it was a decisive one. In the form the story has come down to us, it is a very strange business, and it may seem to us like a lot of hocus pocus. But I think Luke gives us a clue to its real meaning with this line:

"And as he was praying, the appearance of his countenance was altered."

The medium through which Jesus was transfigured outwardly and inwardly was prayer. It is against the background of that experience in the life of Jesus that we need to consider Paul's words - "But be transformed." Prayer that honestly seeks God's will as Jesus did, is always a transfiguring and transforming experience.

It is prayer that transfigures life by serving to move that center out of self into God. It is not just any sort of prayer, of course. It is prayer which is centered on the discovery of God's will. It is not just prayer on the mountaintop, but prayer in the valleys amid the hurly burly. It is not just prayer on retreat, though that is important, but prayer in the midst of the action. It is prayer in the sense of a continual effort to see who we are and what we are doing and what others are doing under the aspect of God's will for us.

The late Frank Laubach was a Congregational missionary who became world renowned for his campaign to teach the whole world to read and write. Back