

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 (1984 NIV)

New Creation Witness

16 So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. 20 We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. 21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Introduction

In 1937, the American self-help author, Napoleon Hill, published arguably his most popular book titled "Think and Grow Rich". It was the product of some 20 years of hard research. In the process, Napoleon Hill interviewed hundreds of successful entrepreneurs in America.

Hill was looking for the common traits that these successful men shared in their stories. And once he had identified these traits, he presented them as a philosophy for financial success in his book "Think and Grow Rich". Since 1937, this book has sold more than 42 editions, and has impacted American society greatly.

Hill's conclusion is that if you want to be wealthy, you must develop an obsession for money—meditate on it, plan for it, sacrifice to get it, make it top priority.

While I am not here encouraging us to be sold to his philosophy, I believe Hill's basic observation is worth noting—i.e. today's obsessions will become tomorrow's realities.

(<https://www.fatrank.com/think-and-grow-rich-by-napoleon-hill-book-summary/#:~:text=more%20than%20him.-,Conclusion%3A%20Success%20is%20Achieved%20with%20Desire%2C%20Focus%2C%20and%20Persistence,goals%20will%20likely%20find%20success>)

What are our obsessions today? Are they in alignment with that of the Lord? To answer this, we have to answer another question—i.e. what is God doing in our world today?

- Well, I believe one thing that God is busy doing in the world today is the urgent evangelisation of lost people so that they may come to faith in His Son, Jesus Christ.

- Thus, for the people of God (the church) to be similarly “obsessed” with this task is a worthy mission indeed.
- Put in another way, to say that the church (our church) exists to be a living witness for Christ in this world is to affirm that we want to do that which is so central in the heart of God.

The Apostle Paul himself was “obsessed” with reaching out to the lost world for Christ during his time. In 2 Cor. 5:15, he said—“And he (i.e. Christ) died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”

This verse is also for us today because by our living for Christ in this world, we witness for Him who died to save fallen humanity from sin.

We want to examine what Paul says in 2 Cor. 5:16-21; to discover what Paul has to teach us concerning how we can witness for Christ in our world today.

Firstly, we can witness for Christ in our world today by ...

I. Regarding others from a transformed perspective (vv. 16-17).

Paul says in v. 16 that we now “regard no one from a worldly (fleshly) point of view”.

- In other words, we live and witness for Christ by viewing people differently with a transformed perspective; not like how the world views people—i.e. largely based on outward superficiality.
- This means that in Christ, we view people based on inward possibility.
 - We view them with value.
 - We view them with potential.
 - We view them as people whom Christ has died for because of His love for them.
- In other words, we are to stop evaluating a person’s worth based biasedly on external distinctions—like race, class, wealth, sex, occupation.

I believe Paul is here able to exhort this transformed perspective of people because he himself was so transformed by Christ Himself.

- Before Christ, Paul persecuted Christians and tried to force them to denounce their faith. Transformed in Christ, he laboured to help Christians mature in their faith and stand firm against persecution.
- Before Christ, Paul’s energy was aimed at promoting himself and his world’s agenda. Transformed in Christ, his energy was expended towards promoting Jesus Christ and the Lord’s agenda.
- Before Christ, Paul was being destructive of the church. Transformed in Christ, he became constructive and founded many church communities.
- Before Christ, Paul lacked compassion for people, especially the Gentiles. Transformed in Christ, he now loved people deeply, both the Jews and Gentiles.

- Before Christ, Paul seemed to have a low view of women. Transformed in Christ, he was able to pen beautiful words to encourage respect for women (e.g. Eph. 5, Col. 3, and Rom. 16).

Thus, we see how the Lord took Paul's misdirected life and redirected him with a transformed perspective such that he came to regard the Lord, his own self, and people differently. And with this transformed perspective, Paul was able to do the Lord's work in, for, and through him with zeal and determination. As a result, Paul dared to be different and influenced his world mightily for Christ.

Indeed, transformed in Christ, Paul was delivered from his earlier "obsession" to live for himself and his own agenda. The Lord had met his innermost need when He met Paul on the road to Damascus—Paul experienced the Lord's love for him in spite of all his human ugliness.

Like Paul, we too can suffer from a damaged self-image, from rejection by others, from disappointment, and even from some aimless social wandering because we are looking for and using people to "meet my needs".

- The sad reality is that people often let us down.
- And as a reaction to that, we often pick and choose people and the way we relate with them, so that we can best get them to "meet my needs".

It is with this in mind that Paul exhorts us to "regard no one from a worldly point of view". In essence, Paul is saying, "Once, we were looking for and using people who could meet our needs—those who had power, wealth or fame. We cultivated their goodwill, followed them around, imitated them, and dropped their names. Others whom we would consider obscure were shunned by us because they could not add value to us; they could not meet our needs. But now transformed in Christ, we are to view people differently because Christ in His love has died for us all—we all are of such high value to Him."

Paul was actually sharing from his own experience because he himself had "once regarded Christ in this way"—i.e. he himself had once viewed even Christ from a worldly (fleshly) perspective.

- Paul had once viewed Christ as a blasphemer, an enemy of the God of Abraham, and a heretic distorting the traditional rabbinical teachings of Israel.
- Paul had once regarded Christ as an imposter and phony, and had tried to persecute and arrest those who followed the Lord.

But Paul now would see Christ and the church from a transformed perspective.

- He would now see Christ as His Lord and Saviour.
- He would now see people, both inside and outside the church, differently—i.e. not with contempt, but with compassion.
- In other words, having experienced the saving and transforming grace of God in Christ upon his life, Paul would now see and relate with people differently.

- He would see and relate to them as Christ saw and sacrificed for them when He died on the cross.
- Transformed in Christ, Paul would now see each person as having value, potential, possibility—each person is in the image of God, and thus, significant in the sight of God and needing to be saved from the power of sin.

Paul exhorts us in v. 17 with these words—“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” This implies that the Christian as a new creation in Christ not only looks at others differently, but also looks at himself and his past (the old) differently. If he has a sinful past, he must not be stuck in deep-seated guilt—in Christ, he is forgiven and cleansed; he is a new creation; the “old had gone, the new has come”.

The devil can use any past and unresolved ill-feelings about ourselves and towards others to his advantage and against us. The psycho-emotional baggage we carry with us can cause us to isolate ourselves or be alienated from others. In other words, the devil can use our “bad” past to destroy our Christian witness in our relationships with others.

I believe that is what Paul wants those who are now in Christ to do away with when he says, “The old has gone and the new has come.” The old worldly way of looking at ourselves, and even at our past, is to be replaced with a new and transformed way when we become a new creation in Christ.

Nick Vujicic, a Christian evangelist and motivational speaker, was born without arms or legs. Growing up, he struggled with depression, anxiety, and feelings of isolation.

However, at the age of 15, Nick had a profound encounter with God. He realised that he was not defined by his physical limitations, but by his identity in Christ.

This transformation completely changed Nick’s perspective on life and relationships. He began to see others through the lens of God’s love and compassion.

Despite his own physical challenges, Nick started reaching out to others, sharing his story and the gospel. He founded the non-profit organisation “Life without Limbs” and has since travelled the world, inspiring millions with his message of hope and redemption.

Nick’s relationships with others are now characterised by empathy, kindness, and understanding. He sees the inherent value and worth in every person, regardless of their background or circumstances.

Nick’s story is a powerful testament to the transformative power of Christ. Through his relationship with God, Nick has gained a new perspective on life, enabling him to relate with others with compassion, love, and acceptance.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nick_Vujicic)

Indeed, we are to so regard others and ourselves with this transformed perspective as a new creation in Christ.

- We regard ourselves and others as having value, dignity, potential, and possibility.
- Thus, we dare not write off people, even ourselves, because Christ has regarded us as worthy to lay down His life for our sake.

Paul in Scripture teaches us how we can be a new creation witness for Christ in our world today. Firstly, we can be a new creation witness for Christ in our world today by regarding others from a transformed perspective.

Secondly, we can be a new creation witness for Christ in our world today by ...

II. Reconciling others to God as transformed representatives (vv. 18-21).

Paul says in vv. 18-19 that we are given the ministry and message of reconciliation by God.

- We are not only privileged to be forgiven by God, but also given the responsibility of being involved in the ministry and message of reconciliation.
- In other words, God expects us to be living vessels pointing people to Him in Christ; He expects us who have been saved in Christ to be involved in His work of salvation in Christ.
- That's the "packaged" deal that God has given to us—to be both recipients of His saving grace as well as representatives of His saving grace to others.

Thus, God is sending people like you and me to be reconcilers entrusted with the message and ministry of His reconciliation.

- That is why God is putting you in the office where you work; in the school where you study; in the family where you have been born into, so that you might be His representative reaching out to others with the message of His reconciliation—i.e. Jesus Christ has come to die for the sin of fallen humanity so that those who believe in Him will receive forgiveness and be reconciled to God.
- So, we go to people not with a holier-than-thou attitude, but letting them know that we ourselves are imperfect; that God has already done something about our own imperfections; that He understands our human problem with sin; that He has dealt with us in His love, grace, and forgiveness in Jesus Christ.
- This is our assigned message of reconciliation we are to share with others as we relate with them as transformed representatives in Christ; this is our assigned ministry of reconciliation as transformed representatives in Christ.

Paul says in v. 18 that God “who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation”.

- The word “ministry” is often a scary word to many of us because we tend to separate our lives into the secular and the spiritual—i.e. we tend to think that livelihood labour is outside the church (secular), and ministry task is inside the church (spiritual).
- This implies that ministry is viewed as only fitting for the “spiritual” Christians in church, and not for the ordinary believers who only come to church for some respite after a hard week in the outside world.

But the word “ministry” that Paul uses in v. 18 is not a narrow term, but a wide one that includes all believers wherever they are. After all, Paul was writing to all the believers in the city of Corinth and who collectively formed the church of Christ in that locality, and not to just a small group of spiritual Christians.

- These believers could be in their church.
- These believers could be in their neighbourhood.
- These believers could be in their family.
- These believers could be in their workplace.

Yes, Paul was writing to all believers in Corinth wherever they were, telling them that God who reconciled them to Himself in Christ had given them the ministry of reconciliation.

- When understood in this way, ministry is not narrowly restricted to doing God’s work inside the church, but should include doing God’s work outside the church.
- In fact, the word “ministry” in Greek simply means “service”, and Paul here wants us to understand ministry as service to God and to others in His name.
- This implies that ministry is about God’s people doing God’s work (the work of God’s reconciliation) in wherever they find themselves to be—e.g. church, neighbourhood, home, workplace, school, community/social circle.

Paul reminds us in v. 19 “that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation”. How then do we practise this “ministry of reconciliation” today, and “not counting men’s sins against them”? Fundamentally, we practise this by living out the principles of Christian love and forgiveness in our daily life.

- Seek forgiveness from others.
- Forgive others.
- Be a bridge between people who are divided—i.e. a sort of “peacemaker”.
- Apologise when we’ve wronged someone.
- Reach out to someone who is isolated or in need.
- Demonstrate compassion and understanding towards those who are different from us in some ways.

Paul goes on to say in v. 20—“We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us ...”

- To be Christ's ambassadors is to be His stand-in representatives here on earth.
- In ancient times, an ambassador would act as the king's messenger—i.e. the king's stand-in
- Even today, an ambassador will not speak in his own name or communicate his own ideas—i.e. he cannot act in his own way because he cannot be independent of the one (or country) he represents.
- In other words, he brings the message of the one who has sent him.
- An ambassador is a representative tasked with conveying the message of the one who sent him with dignity and responsibility not only in his words, but also in his ways—he is a person who is bestowed with immense dignity and bears heavy responsibility at the same time.

It is in such a way that Paul saw himself as Christ's ambassador, pleading in His name as if Christ Himself was there. And his plea in v. 20 was—“Be reconciled to God. Accept His forgiveness of you in Jesus Christ.”

- As transformed representatives in Christ (Christ's ambassadors), this is also our plea today to those who are without Christ.
- Note that we plea or we “implore” (Paul's word in v. 20)—we do not command or condemn, but we plea with people to come to Christ and receive God's forgiveness of sin in Him.
- People tend to justify themselves because they want to be right in other's sight. But there is a much deeper need in all of us that many may not even realise or refuse to acknowledge—i.e. to be right before God.
- And this is what Christ is tasking us to do as His ambassadors—to tell people to be reconciled to God and be right before Him in Jesus Christ.

We are God's ambassadors here on earth doing the ministry of reconciliation as messengers of reconciliation. Paul exhorts us in v. 21 to witness to others with our words and ways that “God made him (i.e. Christ) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Andrew Brunson, an American pastor, and his wife Norine had been serving in Turkey for over 20 years. They had built a thriving church in Izmir, Turkey, and had become deeply embedded in the local community.

However, in 2016, Pastor Brunson was arrested and imprisoned by the Turkish government on false charges of espionage and terrorism. He was subjected to physical and emotional torture, and his case became an international sensation.

Despite the hardships and isolation, Pastor Brunson continued to preach the gospel to his fellow prisoners. He shared his faith with the guards, and even led some of them to Christ.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Pastor Brunson's story is the way he reconciled his Turkish captors to God. Despite being wrongly accused and imprisoned, Pastor Brunson chose to forgive his captors and share the love of Christ with them.

He said, "It's not an option not to forgive; we are required to as Christians. Is it easy? No. But God forgave me. As I get emotions that come back, I say, 'I forgive.'" And in his book *God's Hostage* he added—"I knew that I had to forgive, not for their sake, but for mine. I had to forgive in order to be free."

Pastor Brunson's story is a powerful testament to the reconciling power of the gospel. As an ambassador of Christ, he demonstrated the love and forgiveness of God, even in the midst of great hardship and persecution.

(<https://www.voanews.com/a/pastor-freed-by-turkey-talks-of-breakdown-forgiveness/4621583.html>)

Conclusion

Why do we exist as a church; as a community of God's people?

We so exist in order to be a new creation witness for Christ who died to save fallen humanity from sin. And we so witness for Christ in our world today by ...

- Regarding others from a transformed perspective.
- Reconciling others to God as transformed representatives.

This is indeed a call and task that bestows immense dignity and yet lays heavy responsibility upon us.

So let's seek the Lord to help us be a worthy new creation witness for Him not only in our church, but also in the highways and byways of everyday life. Amen!