"Finish then thy new creation"
A metamorphosis of glory

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"Love divine, all loves excelling" is a glorious hymn of Charles Wesley, beloved in churches far beyond Methodism. In verses two and four, Wesley succinctly outlines a theology of the transforming work of God in the lives of people of faith.

Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit
Into every troubled breast!
Let us all in Thee inherit,
Let us find the promised rest;
Take away our bent to sinning;
Alpha and Omega be;
End of faith, as its beginning,
Set our hearts at liberty.

Finish, then, Thy new creation;
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see Thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in Thee:
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.

Wesley recognizes two things: we are not yet finished, though we may profess Christ as Lord; and we must have the aid, the very breath of the Spirit, to be "changed from glory into glory." This transformation will not occur by sheer effort alone, although spiritual discipline offers welcome space for the work of grace.

What does it mean to be unfinished? It simply means that we have not yet arrived at our true identity; we do not yet fully

reflect the image of God within the communion of saints. Our lives are still hobbled by a selfishness that "neither regards God nor humanity" (Luke 18:2, 5). Regarding both God and humanity is ingredient to being finished as God's new creation.

How do we become what God created us to be? Only by working collaboratively with the Spirit of God do we begin to strip away our false selves and undergo the transformation that is our destiny as people joined to Christ. Only within the *koinonia* of other Christians are we formed after the likeness of Christ, for it is in the participatory communion created by the indwelling Spirit that we become fully ourselves.

"Beholding" is more than simply seeing. It is a deeply attentive, faithful act that allows the beholder to perceive the presence of the holy in the ordinary.

In this article, I will construct a theology of spiritual transformation, to suggest how the Spirit of God works with receptive human partners. I will use Wesley's hymn, selected biblical texts, and a familiar short story as points of reference for this interpretation. I hope readers will come to a deeper understanding of the comprehensive transformation that God is beckoning from our lives.

Unveiling our faces

In 2 Cor. 3:17–18, the apostle Paul encourages believers to remove the veil that has kept them from seeing clearly the full compass of the saving work God has brought through Christ, in the power of the Spirit. A long history of interpretation stands behind his instruction about "beholding God with unveiled faces." This text draws from the well of ancient understanding about Moses' encounter with God at Mount Sinai, to which Paul is adding his own rabbinical flourish.

Traditional interpretations revolved around the idea that after God delivered the law to him, Moses' face glowed with such incandescent splendor that he had to put a veil over his face so that others would not be afraid to approach him (Exod. 34:29ff). When Moses went before the Lord, he removed the veil; in the sight of the Israelites he put it back on, apparently to protect them from the glorious radiance he reflected. Was it because when they viewed the transforming power of God in the visage of Moses, they feared such change in themselves?

The apostle now gives that idea a radical twist: he suggests that Moses put on the veil in order to cloak the fact that the luminous radiance was fading (2 Cor. 3:13), just as the splendor of the law fades in comparison to the new covenant in Christ. Further, Paul views the veil as a deliberate unwillingness to accept God's self-disclosure in Christ. As long as people fear encountering God, they will hide themselves behind a barrier, a veil that cloaks their identity and obscures their vision of God. With this resistance hanging between them and God, they lack understanding, because they cannot see the Lord.

But how can one look on God? Does not the Scripture explicitly warn against demanding to see the Holy One? Surely the apostle knows of that other tradition in Exodus: Moses is not allowed direct encounter, face to face, but can only observe the divine back passing before him (Exod. 33:18–23). Martin Luther was so fascinated with this episode that he preached a whole sermon series on "the hind parts of God." The church folk of Wittenberg got homiletical variety from their professor/monk!

The intertextual work that Paul demonstrates in this passage, carrying into the next chapter, is nothing short of stunning. Humans can only "see" God in human form; thus, the Spirit conceives and brings forth the Son. So that we can be changed "from glory into glory," God reveals the divine glory in the humility of one who took our form (Phil. 2:8), Jesus the Christ. As God wears a human face, we can begin to see glory "after our likeness." Transformation occurs when we behold the glory of the Lord, with unveiled faces; this glory is revealed to us "in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

Beholding the true icon

"Beholding" is more than simply seeing. It is a deeply attentive, faithful act that allows the beholder to perceive the presence of the holy in the ordinary. This quality of attention is what John referred to: "We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son" (John 1:14). In the visage of the one whose own did not receive him, we meet God. Jesus is the "image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), the true icon.

The Eastern Church has long known the power of visual depictions of Christ, his mother, the apostles and saints. These

images, or icons, function as windows into heaven. They are not worshiped, but are venerated as helpful in learning to behold the glory of the Lord, who comes to us in the media of earth. We are invited to become like, to reflect, what we behold.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Great Stone Face" offers a wonderful portrayal of transformation into another's likeness through beholding. Hawthorne tells the story of Earnest, who lived in a small village across the valley from a magnificent, almost divine visage that jutted out from the rock face of the mountains. As a child, Earnest heard the prophecy that some day a great man who bore a close resemblance to the expansive, generous face would come to the village. Earnest took the story seriously and spent much time contemplating what sort of man this might be, as he gazed reflectively across the valley.

Transformation requires effort, even as it depends on grace. The battle of "holy obedience," of great intentionality, cannot be accomplished quickly; rather it is only in the span of our lives (and perhaps beyond) that we come to our true selves.

The years passed, and three men of renown came to the village, each acclaimed by the people as the one who fulfilled the prophecy. Each time Earnest was profoundly disappointed, both by the gullibility of the townspeople and by the visitors' lack of resemblance to the kind and loving figure with whom he conversed daily, deliberately emulating the beneficent character he observed in the great stone face.

Earnest continued to mature, and became a preacher whose wisdom and profound perceptions about people were known far beyond his close-knit community. One day a poet came to the village, intent on meeting Earnest, whose reputation had reached him far away. By fortuitous circumstance, Earnest had read much of the writer's poetry and was immensely grateful for the artistry that shone through his works. After pleasant, mutually appreciative conversation, the poet accompanied Earnest to his usual place of preaching, an outdoor gathering place where the villagers eagerly awaited his thoughtful remarks. As Earnest stood in his pulpit, with the great stone face on the mountain behind him, the poet suddenly exclaimed: "Behold! Behold! Earnest is himself the likeness of the Great Stone Face!"[1] All the people,

who earlier had deluded themselves into thinking others fulfilled the prophecy, now realized that Earnest was the one who truly bore the image. Earnest was less convinced, and walked homeward slowly, "still hoping that some wiser and better man…would by and by appear."[2]

From this lovely story, we can draw theological impressions about transformation: (1) it is a lifelong process; (2) attentiveness to the true icon is a necessary discipline; and (3) great humility allows one to be receptive to the Spirit's work. Let us examine these in turn.

Transformation is a slow, almost imperceptible process that requires lifelong vigilance. As *The Rule of St. Benedict* advises:

> *We must prepare our hearts and bodies for the battle of holy obedience…. What is not possible to us by nature, let us ask the Holy One to supply by the help of grace. If we wish to reach eternal life, then—while there is still time, while we are in this body and have time to accomplish all these things by the light of life—we must run and do now what will profit us forever.*[3]

Similarly, John Wesley suggests that one will not become a saint unless one intends to become one.[4] In other words, transformation requires effort, even as it depends on grace. The battle of "holy obedience," of great intentionality, cannot be accomplished quickly; rather it is only in the span of our lives (and perhaps beyond) that we come to our true selves. This is why many theologians will not speak of the image of God as something we already possess or reflect, but as the goal or destiny of our lives. Paul describes the fulfillment of our salvation as "being conformed to the image of God's son" (Rom. 8:29).

Spiritual practices greatly assist the metamorphosis of glory, which the Spirit superintends. Specifically Christian behaviors or practices, once thought to be the exclusive preserve of monastic communities or more sectarian communities, are once again in the foreground for constructive theologians[5] and for Christian interpreters of spirituality.[6] Practices both express our understanding of our faith and form us more fully in it. Over time, our lives begin to demonstrate what these "transforming initiatives"[7] evoke.

Attentiveness to Christ, beholding the glory of the Lord, allows us to be changed into his likeness. Just as Earnest gave himself to constant observation of the beloved countenance that seemed to follow his every step, so we must orient our lives by "looking to Jesus" (Heb. 12:2). This sounds too simple, perhaps, like a grown-up version of wearing a WWJD [What would Jesus do?] bracelet. But simple it is not, for transforming change is often wrenching. Attending to the ways of Christ calls us to daily death—death to our presumption, death to our sense of goodness, death even to our illusion that we can determine how we will die.

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A couple years ago my husband and I made a radical choice about where we would live. We moved from the comfortable, secure sanctity of a suburb to a noisy, threat-filled neighborhood up against the inner city. We were proud of our downward mobility. We could live more simply, give more away, make our home near the seminary where I teach, and try to be anchors in an area where nothing seems to stay put.

We had not been here long when our determination to be mature disciples (or was it a vaunted sense of *noblesse oblige?*) was put to the test. One neighbor began to demand that we buy some of her property to address her need for extra cash. Another neighboring household has a revolving door, with many members of an extended family inhabiting too little space. Spilling out of their yard into the neighborhood, the children need more watchful eyes than weary, sometimes absent parents provide. Two houses down lives a retired African-American couple; their anger regularly boils over at some presumed slight.

How would Jesus care for these neighbors? How would Jesus welcome these children? How would Jesus respond to the racial tensions that are never far from the surface? The questions are no longer abstractions for us, but pressing demands. Our sense of goodness ebbed as we realized the cost of authentic discipleship in our new place. We are being called to transformation as we learn to live differently.

Our neighborhood church also lives daily with cruciform challenges. Once a thriving congregation, it has more building and bills than it can easily manage. Seeking to be welcoming of those who live nearby, it knows the strain of trying to worship in ways that are sufficiently varied to be inclusive. It knows that many who come cannot help with financial stewardship. It knows that it cannot, must not, remain in its idealized past. It, too, must face deaths to be transformed.

These places from which we attempt to "behold the glory of the Lord" make clear that we will likely meet him as he comes to us in the distressing guise of our neighbors. The true icon of God, the disfigured suffering servant, is never far away. We must not look for him in all the wrong places; rather, as we are attentive to these God has placed near us, we are learning "to behold."

Remarkably, others may more easily recognize the transformation of our lives into the likeness of Christ than we do. Just as Earnest refused to claim that he had fulfilled the prophecy, so we must remember that although Christ has begun "a good work within us" (Phil. 1:6), it is not complete. Humility recognizes that our lives "do not yet gleam in glory" (as one of Martin Luther's prayers bluntly states), but we are "being purified." According to Benedictine writer Joan Chittister, humility is the "lost virtue."[8] Transformation requires our patient receptivity to the searching light of the Spirit. It is a humble undertaking in which we allow others to be formative agents in our lives.

The first winter I spent in Kansas City was bitterly cold, at least to my southern bones. When a brief mid-winter thaw came, some of my students suggested that I go down to the banks of the Missouri and "watch the river breaking up." I expected to see jagged floes clogging the river, but instead I was amazed to observe large round discs traveling in concourse down the middle of the river, spinning as they went. It seemed to me to be a parable of the transformative work of Christian community. The rough edges of the ice were being rounded off as the pieces bumped into each other in their journey toward the Mississippi. Our lives, too, are formed by our shared vocation in the community of Christ, as we sculpt our sisters and brothers into the likeness of the human face of God.

Changing from glory into glory

"Glory" is not a prominent part of the vocabulary of church people today. The hymnody of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, and even the gospel songs of the early twentieth century regularly used images of glory—usually detailing the rewards or acclaim the Christian could hope to gain in heaven. In that context, "glory" evoked crowns, mansions, golden streets, and the like. Such an emphasis severely truncates the biblical understanding of glory as it describes the character of God and relates to the ongoing work of transformation. Wesley's hymn more nearly captures the reciprocal movement between God and humans.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the word "glory" (*kabod*) described the heaviness, awesome grandeur, shining majesty, and holiness of the divine presence. Only God is intrinsically glorious; humanity can only participate in glory because God shares it with us. As we have seen, the New Testament regularly speaks of Jesus sharing in the glory (*doxa*) of God. Because we are joined to Jesus, we also participate in the glorious vocation of reflecting the splendor of God, albeit in earthen vessels. We are works in progress, to be sure; however, the collaborative work of transformation continues until we can see face to face the one whose likeness we share. This work requires a radical metamorphosis, which comes about through our contemplation of God's glory. Our lives are brought to completion through a shared life, by which the Spirit burnishes us to a new brightness.

Humility acknowledges that perfection is God's alone, but our willingness to be changed allows us to draw ever nearer the shining glory of the one in whose light we live.

The idea of moving from glory to glory was a favorite theme of fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nyssa. According to his understanding, humankind was created to be made one with God. Human life is a progressive movement toward God-likeness, a growth in goodness that is ongoing. For Gregory, spiritual growth has many stages. It is a perpetual re-creation, a constant beginning again at ever more transformed levels of being. In this process, one never arrives. Each "glory" or stage of the journey, when reached, gives way to the next glory which rises up beyond.[9] For Gregory,

Moses' ascent up Mount Sinai was the metaphor of Christian pilgrimage: One can draw near but cannot penetrate the darkness of divine mystery. Only God can disclose the divine face.

Gregory's vision remains helpful, because he understands that Christian living can never be static but must continue as a journey of transformation. Humility acknowledges that perfection is God's alone, but our willingness to be changed allows us to draw ever nearer the shining glory of the one in whose light we live.

Conclusion

We live in hope that the transforming work of God in our lives will finally reach completion, when we see God's "great salvation perfectly restored," in the words of Wesley's verse. Our labor will not have been in vain, nor will God's creative and transforming work fail to reach its consummation. Our lifelong attempts to be attentive to Christ will etch his likeness in our faces. For "when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). Our beholding will have proved to be transformative, and we will reflect his glory.

And so at last we may sing with all Christians the words of the ninth-century hymn:

> *Bring us with your saints to behold your great beauty,*
> *There to see you, Christ our God, throned in great glory;*
> *There to possess heaven's peace and joy,*
> *your truth and love,*
> *For endless ages of ages, world without end.*[10]

Notes

[1] *Greatest Short Stories* (New York: P. F. Collier, 1953), 1:120.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Timothy Fry, ed., prologue to *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes and Thematic Index* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Pr., 1981), 39–44.
[4] See his generative work, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: Epworth Pr., 1952).
[5] See the three-volume work in "baptist" theology by James Wm. McClendon, Jr., especially *Ethics*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1986), 41. McClendon contends that ethics (practice!) must take methodological precedence over "foundations" or "doctrine."
[6] See the volume edited by Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), which details various Christian practices, including forgiveness, caring for the body, keeping sabbath, and hospitality,

as formative enterprises that shape Christian identity in community.

[7] I borrow this term from my esteemed former colleague, Glen Stassen. It is drawn from his text, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (Louisville: Westminister John Knox, 1992).

[8] Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 51.

[9] See *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Pr., 1979), 29. See also Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Pr., 1978); see especially the introduction by Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, 11–13.

[10] *Ubi Caritas*, Latin, 9th c., trans. Richard Proulx, in *Worship: A Hymnal and Service Book for Roman Catholics* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 1986), no. 598, verse 3.