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Chaplain's Office
University Passage Resource

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Conforming or Transforming Romans 12:2

Paul uses a word in his discourse that can be translated as either “world” or “age.” He could be speaking of all the inhabitants of the known lands, an interval of time, or both at the same time. In any case, the “world” or “age” does not have a very good reputation in the lessons of Paul. For convenience, we will use the term “world” from this point on. For Paul, the world is a corrupt sphere of influence, full of death, depravity, and decay, and ruled by Satan. “Worldly” people have a mindset that excludes God—their wills and behaviors are controlled by “the flesh.” They are enslaved by sin that is rooted in the flesh, and this is the same as being enslaved by Satan. In Paul’s thinking, “the flesh” is not the physical body, but rather a mindset that is hostile toward God and opposed to God’s will. People of the flesh or the world are arrogant. They think they are self-ruled and self-sufficient. They have given themselves over to greed, lust, and idolatry. They are prone to theft, violence, and murder. They are unrepentant sinners. They are conformed to this world.

When Paul says, “Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind,” he is drawing a contrast between two diametrically opposed realms. He is also issuing a summons to cross over from one realm to the other. The direction of the crossover is always from the realm of the world to the realm of the spirit. The human mind is the prize in this contest between the realms.

Paul sometimes uses the terms “heart” and “mind” interchangeably. At other times, he seems to suggest that the “heart” is the seat of the emotions, and the “mind” is the seat of reason. Paul’s reference to “the mind” in this verse seems interchangeable with his reference to the heart. Paul will also use the term “mind” interchangeably with “spirit.” He uses the same term for both the human spirit and the spirit of God (or Holy Spirit). It seems that his reference to the mind could have also been a reference to the human spirit. The transformation that Paul describes is definitely a spiritual one. The spirit of God is always the agent of transformation. This transformation is not an act of the will, it is a work of the Holy Spirit.

The purpose of transformation by renewal of the mind is to know the will of God. It is also so that we will know what is good, acceptable, and perfect. The will of God is good. Our submission to God’s will makes us acceptable, and our life before God will be perfect. Paul shows us that the key to transforming the external circumstances of our lives is first to be transformed within.

1. How would you describe the state of “the world” today?
2. What challenges or opportunities does the church face in the world today?
3. Is there still hope for human transformation today? Why or why not?