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Gems from Greek: The *Morph-ing* of the Local Church

Recent research has sought to define the church in terms of metaphors and illustrations. Something as mysterious and transcendent as the church is hard to get our arms around and define. Two important works have been seminal in my thinking about the nature of the local congregation, showing both the New Testament images used (Minear, 2004) and the process of transformation at the heart of Paul's concept of ministry within that context (Thompson, 2006).

Based on this, allow me to suggest that the work and the presence of the local church is constantly *morph-ing*. Too often we have static views of the nature and essence of the church and wonder why we get frustrated when things keep changing. But I want to make a case for the amorphous nature of the body of Christ. The process of change and transformation is more fundamental to the nature of the church than its polity, tradition of worship practices, etc.

This is emphasized by Paul's choice of language in his letters. It is highlighted in the New Testament by the *morph* root words he uses. Look at the passages below:

Philippians 2:6-7: Jesus originally was in the form (*morph*) of God but humbled himself to the form (*morph*) of a servant.

Galatians 4:19: Paul expresses his personal agony and inner angst like that of the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed (*morph*) in his readers.

Romans 12:2: Paul admonishes his reader not to live conformed to the pattern of this world; rather they are to be transformed (*morph*) by the renewing of their minds.

2 Corinthians 3:8: Turning to the Lord lifts the veil on the heart so that believers can reflect the Lord's glory. In this process Paul's readers are being transformed (*morph*) into the likeness of Jesus with ever-increasing glory.

As we can see from the above Scriptures, Paul envisioned spiritual formation, transformation, and renewal to be at the heart of community life in Christ. Rigid concepts of how people ought to behave and how programs ought to function and how budgets ought to be spent all run counter to this notion. Instead of seeing the church as a business to run, people to manipulate, and programs to put on, we need to be countercultural in our perspective of the local congregation. Since Jesus is the greatest example of *morph-ing* we have, it makes sense to think that his followers would be living examples of *morph-ing* also. But practically, what does this mean for ministers, elders, deacons, teachers, ministry leaders, and members of the local church? Allow me to suggest the following:

- Servanthood itself takes on a diversity of shapes.
- We do not allow the world to squeeze us into its mold.

- As faithful Christians and disciples we are changed from the inside out: heart and mind.
- We are daily being changed into the likeness of Jesus.

No wonder the local church seems to be constantly changing! It is inherent in the DNA of congregational life. Lives are constantly changing because of circumstances. But on a deeper level we are changing because we are in the process of being *morph-ed* daily. This prepares us for the amorphous nature of relationships, problems, life situations, etc.

This helps us take on more ownership of the changing of our brothers and sisters in Christ. This is why Paul could agonize like a woman in childbirth. Instead of pulling our hair out because the organizational, institutional aspect of church life is not happening, we trade that for agonizing over lack of change (*morph*) in the lives of our fellow believers.

At the very core this means we believe that only God can change the human heart and transform it by the working of his Spirit. The Spirit of God takes the raw material of clay and molds it into the image of Christ. This takes on a lovely diversity of appearance as each one is gifted differently. We try to encourage one another not to be fashioned like the culture around us. Ultimately, the inside *morph-ing* process will show itself on the outside. Changed hearts and minds slowly *morph* into the likeness of Jesus.

Remembering all of this frees us from two fears: the fear that things will change and the fear that they will not. *Morph-ing*—praise God for his work of transformation in our congregations!

Resources:

Minear, P. S. (2004). [*Images of the church in the New Testament*](#) (2nd ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Westminster/John Knox Press.

Thompson, James W. (2006). [*Pastoral ministry according to Paul: A biblical vision*](#). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.