

Choose Metamorphosis

Summer means pleasant temperatures, the occasional thunderstorm, and several movies based on comic books from forty years ago. This summer we have a *Fantastic Four* sequel, another *Spiderman* movie, and *Ghost Rider*. A recent small-screen addition to this genre is the television show *Heroes*, which had its first season on NBC this past year. There are a few interesting differences between this show and other comic-book TV shows and movies. Certainly the writing's better than most. This series interests me, though, because it is a show about transformation.

The plot stipulates that a quantum step in human evolution is taking place. (Ignore the scientific flaws in this premise.) As a result, a number of individuals around the country begin developing unusual abilities or powers, including instantaneous healing, seeing the future, reading thoughts, walking through walls, etc. The characters learn to use their new powers as they are drawn together in fighting a great evil.

Some of the gifts described in the New Testament bear superficial similarity: Peter heals a lame man; Philip tells of being "teleported" by the Holy Spirit; Philip's four unmarried daughters are able to prophesy; the secrets in the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira are revealed to Peter.

On a deeper level, though, all Christians have something in common with *Heroes*, because we represent the next step in God's "evolution" of mankind. With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, God is working a change in his people which will make us as different from our fellow men and women as if we were a new species. As Paul says in 1 Cor 15, "As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven."

That is in store for us at the resurrection, but God is not content to wait. In this life he desires nothing less than the transformation of our natures. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

We open ourselves to change by the various means of Christian growth such as prayer, bible study, worship, outreach, etc. In the language of John 15:5, when we abide in Jesus, the true vine, we will bear much fruit. We "work out our salvation with fear and trembling" at the same time acknowledging that "it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil 2:12-13).

The claim that our very natures are being changed may seem far-fetched. Are we really "being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory" (2 Cor 3:18)?¹ I submit that we often do not believe this. If we did, wouldn't we *expect* ourselves to change, anticipating what the Holy Spirit will do next in us? Even if we allow that Paul is referring to change that takes decades, do we truly think that at the end of our lives we will be radically different in nature from the way we are now, rather than just

¹ Note that the verb for "transformed," *metamorpho*, is the same as that used by Mark and Matthew of Jesus' transfiguration.

older and more tired? If we are shy about sharing our faith, it's no wonder. It's embarrassing to share a Gospel we don't really believe.

Reading the headlines and looking around at American Christians, it's not surprising that we aren't always convinced. In the Jan/Feb 2005 issue of *Books and Culture*, Ron Sider presented results from surveys of the behavior of Christians in key ethical areas including divorce, giving to the poor, sexual ethics, and racism. (See also Jul/Aug 2007, p. 20.) Christians are identified from among those surveyed in at two ways. In the first case, "Christians" are roughly 40% of the population who agree to a minimal set of beliefs regarding commitment to Jesus and the afterlife. The surveys showed no significant difference between these self-identified Christians and the rest of the population. However, surveyors also considered those with a "biblical world view," defined by half a dozen more comprehensive beliefs. This smaller group, a little under four percent of the adult population, demonstrates behavior genuinely different from the surrounding culture. To quote Sider,

They are nine times more likely than all the others to avoid 'adult-only' material on the Internet. They are four times more likely than other Christians to boycott objectionable companies or produces and twice as likely to choose intentionally not to watch a movie specifically because of its bad content. They are... twice as likely to volunteer time to help needy people... In a 2000 poll Barna discovered that evangelicals are five times less likely than adults generally to report that their 'career comes first.' And there is accumulating evidence that theologically conservative Protestant men who attend church regularly have lower rates of domestic abuse than others... When we can distinguish nominal Christians from deeply committed, theologically orthodox Christians, it is clear that genuine Christianity does lead to better behavior, at least in some areas.

The four percent who don't resemble the general culture hold to a more biblical set of beliefs. This distinction between nominal and committed Christians appears to be crucial. This is consistent with Paul's instruction in Rom 12:2 to "not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

Our transformations might not occur as quickly as those in *Heroes*, but they are just as radical. And just as in *Heroes*, we have a mission. Our goal is the spread of God's kingdom, with all the richness that entails. Jesus calls us to be salt and light in the world and to leaven this fallen society with the goodness of God's people. N. T. Wright argues persuasively in *Evil and the Justice of God* that the people of God are a central part of God's plan for suffering and evil in the world, a plan reaching even back to his promise to Abraham. Confronting evil in the world—what could be more heroic than that?

~Tim Collins