

**Millar, J. Gary. *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation*. NSBT. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2021. 243 pp. + 29 pp. (back matter).**

This book is the fifty-fifth in the New Studies in Biblical Theology series, of which D. A. Carson, renowned New Testament scholar, is the editor. Carson notes in the series preface, “Contributions to the series focus on one or more of three areas: (1) the nature and status of biblical theology, including its relations with other disciplines (e.g., historical theology, exegesis, systematic theology, historical criticism, narrative theology); (2) the articulation and exposition of the structure of thought of a particular writer or corpus; and (3) the delineation of a biblical theme across all or part of the biblical corpora” (vii). It is the third of these three areas, the study of a biblical theme, that Gary Millar pursues in expounding the doctrine of personal transformation as taught in the canon of Scripture.

Dr. Millar has served as the principal of the Queensland Theological College in Brisbane since 2012. The college is the ministry training institution of the Presbyterian Church of Australia, where Millar teaches OT, pastoral ministry, and preaching. He came to his present ministry by way of studies in theology in Aberdeen, Scotland; ministry in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland as a pastor in church planting and church revitalization for seventeen years; and Oxford, where he earned a DPhil on Deuteronomy. Principal Millar is the author of several commentaries and other scholarly works on Scripture. He travels widely in Australia and beyond, encouraging local churches through the ministry of the Word. He also is the co-founder and chair of The Gospel Coalition Australia.<sup>6</sup> This brief biography is important to understanding the scholarly but pastoral tone of his book.

Millar’s strong pastoral connection to the real world, his fervency of spirit, and his impassioned love for Christ reveals itself throughout the book. This spirit explains the record of his tireless labors in Christian academia and for the Church. He is no armchair theologian. Reading the lines and between the lines of his book, the reader meets a skillful, warmhearted pastor-theologian, whose desire to live out what he has discovered presents itself in this carefully researched work. A serious work of theology in which the author’s heart shines with the warmth of Christ is rare, and this is a rare work. Its central topic, personal spiritual transformation, certainly lends itself to this result. The reader discerns a gracious brotherliness and worshipful tone that pulsates from the preface through the rest of the pages. Millar says, “Writing this book has made me gasp all over again at the extent of his love for us, the extravagance of his work in us and the relentlessness of his commitment to us” (x).

The chapters of *Changed into His Likeness* are organized with helpful headings throughout. The author also provides valuable conclusions at the end of each chapter (27, 53–55, 122, 172, 215–22, 242–243). These conclusions help the reader transition easily to each next chapter. The logically arranged chapters give a solid sense of progression, unity, and completeness to the work.

Proportionality provides clarity in a book because it gives greater attention to the most vital information and less attention to ideas of lesser significance. Chapter 3, “Can a Leopard Change Its Spots?,” is disproportionately long (sixty-six pages) compared to all the other chapters. In fact, it is three times the length of chapters 1 and 6, but for good reason. The author treats the whole OT

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<sup>6</sup> “Gary Millar,” Queensland Theological College; last modified Dec. 06, 2016, <https://www.qtc.edu.au/about-qtc/faculty-staff/>.

corpus on his subject in this one chapter but with a remarkable conciseness and refreshing thoroughness. Chapter 4 covers the entire NT corpus on personal transformation in forty-nine pages. This is an even more remarkable feat considering that the process of personal transformation is taught primarily in the NT, a fact Millar demonstrates convincingly. This is a prime example of progressive revelation, a feature of the Scriptures that biblical theology calls to our attention, as the author observes (223).

So, from the perspective of proportionality, that the author devotes 115 of his 243 pages, or sixty-four percent of the book, to the unfolding of the biblical information section by section, author by author in both canons on the subject makes sense. The remaining thirty-six percent shows the importance of the subject through current cultural contextualization. It further provides a discussion of the image of God in man as essential theological context for discussing personal transformation. Then it adds valuable and relevant lexical and linguistic background for the discussion. After examining the biblical material, Millar cites the significant contributions of other theologians through the centuries on personal transformation. In all, it is a well-balanced presentation of the truth on this subject of personal spiritual change.

While *Changed into His Likeness* is not a long book, it is thorough. It boasts an eighteen-page bibliography with 357 entries, an index of authors containing 283 writers cited in the book, and 514 footnotes, many of which are content notes. The work is preeminently a work of Scripture exposition, as evidenced by the 654 passages cited from fifty-six of the sixty-six books of the canon. The book is also an interaction, a conversation with current scholars whose works touch on the theme of Christian personal transformation. As a Reformed, Evangelical, Presbyterian minister, the author does not surprise the reader by showing a certain preference for and deference toward Reformed authorities, both past and present (evidenced by citations in the index of authors). But none of these authors are cited inappropriately or gratuitously. Their contributions are valuable and worthy of inclusion.

To assist the potential reader, the ensuing discussion summarizes the method of development in Millar's monograph. It provides a synopsis of each chapter and also cites benefits and weaknesses. Chapter 1, "Clearing the Ground" (twenty-two pages), begins by citing non-Christian psychological authorities on personal change—showing that most believe it is difficult to achieve, extraordinarily complex, and lacks a clear path how to achieve it (1–8). Millar then shows that movements within evangelical Christianity either promise too much personal change too easily, which he calls "the toxicity of over-realized eschatology" (9), or they offer too little change through "the aridity of under-realized eschatology" (12). Millar then shows that believers have been changed already in Christ through the gospel—sanctified positionally (13–20)—and will be changed ultimately at glorification (21–26). True to the biblical-theological method, he quotes Scripture passages profusely to establish these truths. He concludes the chapter by explaining that it is "life in the middle," between these two states, which his theology of personal transformation develops (27–28).

In chapter 2, "On Being 'Us': Biblical Anthropology and Personal Transformation" (twenty-six pages), Millar discusses contemporary secular perspectives of human nature, both corporeal and non-corporeal. He cites the thoughts of non-Christian psychologists, neuroscientists, and quantum

physicists, demonstrating the relevance of this discussion for believers today. He shows that what Scripture has to say about man's nature, both physical and spiritual, is highly relevant (29–32).

Articulation of the image of God in man and biblical descriptions of man's spiritual and physical nature follow. Millar offers clear, non-technical, subtly sophisticated discussions that attest thorough acquaintance with the biblical languages, relevant linguistic sources, and biblical passages (32–47). He shows that in Scripture there is both a dualistic description of man as physical and spiritual and a holistic description of man as a unity, both of which should shape our view of human nature. He then warns that extreme views result in misguided practice and thought. For example, an overly holistic view of man results in a distorted missiology that gives priority to man's temporal, physical condition as a primary concern in the mission of God in the world, or it may result in the false doctrine of annihilationism since the body and the soul are so inextricably bound up together that one cannot survive beyond the other. On the other hand, an overly dualistic view of man results in a “gospel minimalism,” which “reduces human beings to ‘souls on legs’” (50–53). This attitude renders the Christian compassionless concerning the temporal needs of others. The author rejects each of these extremes and argues that man is both simple and unified in his being—distinctly physical and spiritual, based on the biblical-theological evidence (53–55).

Chapter 3, “Can a Leopard Change Its Spots?” (sixty-six pages), tackles the question whether the OT teaches continuing moral change. Millar's strategy is to first consider six case studies of major figures in the OT: (1) Noah, (2) Abram/Abraham, (3) Jacob, (4) Moses, (5) David, and (6) Solomon. He concludes that the narratives of these lives are not focused on describing positive, personal spiritual growth. In fact, all exhibit profound instances of regression and failure—calling for God's gracious forgiveness and restorative action (56–94).

While he concedes that Rahab, Naaman, Manasseh, and Nebuchadnezzar provide powerful examples of personal transformation in the OT (85–94), Millar considers these to be exceptions rather than the rule. Though mentioning their faith and repentance, he seems disinclined to emphasize these traits. He also does not emphasize the penitential psalms and psalms about the believer's relationship to the Word—psalms which result in personal transformation and are filled with repentance and faith for change. The national revivals in Israel and Judah also receive relatively light emphasis, even though the people followed godly leaders in large-scale repentance and faith. These are all profound case studies about personal transformation in the OT. Millar's casual treatment of these examples diminishes vital information to strengthen his assertion that the OT teaches little about the process of progressive personal transformation. The facts speak otherwise. God intends the OT narrative to provide examples of personal transformation for us to follow (e.g., 1 Cor 11, Heb 3–4, 11).

Next, Millar develops the thesis: “In fact, the hope and longing for change is a vital part of the overall fabric of the theology of the Old Testament, and a key building block of a robust biblical theology” on the subject (102). Working through the Pentateuch, the Psalms and Wisdom Literature, and then the Latter Prophets (especially Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Joel), Millar demonstrates that this hope and longing for change is expected and desired in the future (102–12). It is only the detailed description of the process of personal transformation in the *present* that he contends is largely absent from the OT. When compared to the NT, this conclusion is true, as the author shows later.

After answering some probable objections to his view about the paucity of clear teaching on the process of personal transformation in the OT, Millar returns to his primary contention in his closing statement of the chapter: “A careful reading of the Old Testament, then, suggests that change or transformation is both necessary and deeply desirable, but remains elusive until the new covenant (i.e., the dramatic intervention of God promised in multiple places and construed in various ways) is set up by the coming of Messiah” (122). It is his next chapter which shows how the NT addresses this need for a full process of personal transformation through the New Covenant.

In chapter 4, “On Wine and Wineskins” (forty-four pages), the author alludes to the parable of Jesus about the necessity and dangers of change. He uses this analogy to unfold the biblical theology of the NT about the process of personal spiritual transformation. He systematically works through the teachings of Jesus (123–44), Paul (144–63), Peter (163–65), James (165–66), Hebrews (166–69), and John (169–71)—following the biblical-theological method of grouping the material by author, citing Scripture profusely, and displaying distinctive elements from each author to develop the overall teaching of the NT.

By treating the corpus of each NT author on personal transformation, Millar demonstrates each author’s different emphases while developing the same theme. Christ’s teaching in the Gospels, the foundation of all else, is that his life through the gospel daily gives the believer the grace to live the beautiful life of conformity to the law of God and bear fruit for God’s glory (127–28). The author shows that Paul is the most detailed of the NT writers in the specifics that bring about and characterize personal transformation. The author concludes insightfully, “It is important that we realize that when it comes to real-time change God makes through the gospel as, by the Spirit, we are united to Christ, the New Testament articulates a doctrine of transformation that is multi-faceted, extravagant and immeasurably rich” (172).

In chapter 5, “Pursuing Change” (forty-four pages), the author “steps sideways to engage with how a range of ancient and modern theologians have dealt with this subject, in confidence that this will further enrich both our understanding and expression of the biblical material” (172). Under the heading “The Inner Life and Biblical Change,” Dr. Millar expounds the thought of Augustine of Hippo (174–77), Thomas Aquinas (177–79), Jonathan Edwards (179–81), Thomas Chalmers (183–86), C. S. Lewis (187–90), and James K. A. Smith (191–92). Millar sees value in Augustine’s trinitarian emphasis regarding personal transformation (175). He argues that the Reformers were indebted to Aquinas for teaching that the happiness of God is the ideal disposition we should conform ourselves to by grace (178–79). He lauds Edwards for his teaching about the inner experience of joy in God (180–81). He commends Chalmers for his insight into self-examination (184). He concedes that Lewis is not a theologian but sees him as a man of deep insight into humanity, spiritual nature, and personal spiritual warfare (187–88). On the other hand, Millar warns that Smith “has to a large degree, lost the centrality of the gospel, which itself has the power to change people” (192). Smith may write incisively about cultural problems, but he wrongly believes that introducing new liturgies for worship is the answer for the internal poverty of Christians spiritually.

Under the heading of “Christology and Biblical Change,” Millar draws heavily on Calvin to develop the idea of our union with Christ as central to any change in the believer (193–97). Calvin and

the author are in complete harmony with Scripture in this emphasis. Without Christ we can do nothing. He alone in us is the source of all grace for change.

Next, the author develops “Piety and Biblical Change,” showing how preeminent theologians and pastors of the past have emphasized the public and private means of grace for change (i.e., the Word, prayer, and worship). John Owen, John Newton, John Wesley, and B. B. Warfield are cited extensively and convincingly, demonstrating the strong emphasis they gave to personal piety for personal transformation (197–211). Surprisingly, Millar then briefly discusses the growth and value of the modern biblical counseling movement, particularly when it manifests the theological emphases of the Reformed tradition (212–14).

Before articulating a concise theology of personal transformation in his final chapter, the author observes that while no theologian he has cited has articulated such a theology, they have contributed to what he has come to understand about this truth from Scripture. First, “Biblical change is complex” (215–16). Second, “Biblical change is God’s work” (216–17). Third, “Biblical change is trinitarian” (217–18). Fourth, “Biblical change flows from our union with Christ” (218–19). Fifth, “Biblical change is word driven” (219–20). Sixth, “Biblical change requires biblical piety” (220). Seventh, “Biblical change is comprehensive” (220–21).

In chapter 6, “Changed into His Likeness” (twenty-one pages), the author unfolds the biblical theology of personal transformation at which he has arrived by examining Scripture. He develops it by briefly underscoring that personal, progressive transformation is a NT reality (223). He places God at the center and as the prime actor in the process, not diminishing the responsibility of the believer who must cooperate and obey. These are the actions of God to change us: (1) “God transforms our relationship with him” (225–27). (2) “God transforms our knowledge of him” (227). (3) “God transforms our desire for him” (227–28). (4) “God transforms our character (our resemblance to the Lord Jesus Christ)” (229–30). (5) “God transforms our experience of life (with him)” (230–31).

Next, Millar emphasizes that God changes us through the gospel. By this he means through the Word by the Spirit beginning at salvation and continuing throughout the Christian life. The author questions the Reformed teaching of the Lord’s Supper and baptism as additional means of grace—acknowledging that this teaching, though propounded by Calvin, has virtually vanished from Reformed teaching. He does not suggest that these ordinances carry grace in themselves, but that personal transformation is effected through obedience and fellowship in their practice (232–34).

Finally, Millar says that God changes us by enabling us to respond in repentance and faith as we are convicted by His Spirit through the Word (235–37). He explains that the process of change is not accomplished alone, but through the fellowship of the church—as believers build up one another, hold each other accountable spiritually, and encourage one another to love and good works (238–41). We must persevere for there to be transformation wrought by God (241–42). Millar concludes that the change in us will be life-long, arduous, and sometimes painful. The pilgrim’s path of transformation is progressive and often mysterious. It leads to the throne of God, where we will experience complete transformation as faith becomes sight and we see his face.

The depth, breadth, and solidly biblical-theological character of this work commend it. The gracious pastoral tone and clear, concise expression also commend it. Most of all, the interesting and

thorough development of a theology of personal transformation commends it. *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation* is a book worth reading, worth thinking through, and worth internalizing for growth in Christlikeness. It is biblical theology at its best. We owe a debt of gratitude to our brother Gary Millar for his great care and sacrifice in writing it.

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