
livingbasics



1 God's big plan – Change!

Change. I wonder what goes off in you when you hear that word? For some, change is the most exciting thing in the world. It offers new challenges, new experiences, new horizons. For others, change is more scary! What will it involve? What will it require of me? Where will it lead?



*What sort of person would you say that you are in this area? How do you personally respond to **change**?*

Change lies at the very heart of the Christian faith – though few in the West would think so. For most people, Christianity is about anything but change; rather, it seems to be about keeping to the same old things from a distant and dusty past. However, nothing could be further from the truth.

*God's ultimate plan is to **change everything**! But his plan for **changing everything** begins with his plan for **changing you**. From start to finish, the Christian faith is all about **change**. And because God lies behind this change, it is an adventure that none of us need fear and that all of us can get excited about!*

Let's read just one passage from the Bible that sums up the complete change that God is going to bring to this world at the very end of human history.

Read:

Revelation 21 v1-5

What, from this passage, are some of the things that are going to be made new or changed at 'The End'?

God wants to start this process of change right now, however. As a new Christian, you are **a living demonstration** of the change that can happen when **an individual** puts their faith in Jesus and is born again. As Christians together (the church), we are a living demonstration of the change that can happen to **a group of people** when they live together as Jesus wants them to.



*Whether new Christian or old, whether individually or together, **we are all in the process of change** – moving towards that final and fantastic goal that God has got for us.*

This booklet in the 'Basics' series is designed to help you explore some of the areas that God wants to change in your life. Some changes will come easily, others will need working at. Some will come quickly, others will take a lifetime! Some you will love, others you will hate! (Well, at least at first!)

Are there areas of life where you can already see that God has been saying that things need to change?

The important thing to remember is this: **we are**

all in this process of change together. None of us has **arrived**; all of us are still **on the way**. And we are here to help each other in the process. Best of all, God himself is here to help us too, bringing change within us as little steps on the way towards his ultimate plan of changing all things.



A new creation

1. The old ... and the new

Read:
2 Corinthians 5 v17

What do you think the writer meant by the following expressions:

"in Christ"

"the old"

"the new"

This is what has happened to you if you have been **born again**. The trouble is, it can sometimes seem like there is still lots of the **old me** left in there and that there is a lot of catching up to do for it to come in line with the **new me!** But God can, and wants to, change us.



No matter what we have done or been, God can change us. The key issue is: will we let him?

Let's look at one church that was full of people who had been involved in all sorts of things before God changed them.

Read:

1 Corinthians 6 v9-11

What does this passage show us about what these people used to be like?

What does the first sentence of v11 bring home to us however?

Christians do not become perfect overnight

– but then, you have probably discovered that already! In fact, we could even describe the church like this:

The Church is a community of people who still sin, but who are being changed by the power of God.



2. Partners with the Holy Spirit

This giving of ourselves to be changed is what is known as **sanctification** – the process of co-operating with the Holy Spirit so that more and more of **the old** can pass away and more and more of **the new** can come – in reality, and not just in theory.

The best news is: this process is not about our **self-effort**. It is about **being partners with the Holy Spirit** so that, little by little, we can be transformed to become more and more like Jesus.

Read:

2 Corinthians 3 v18

What words here indicate that changing as a Christian is a process?

Who lies behind this change?

*Without the Holy Spirit, all our attempts to change will be both **frustrating** and **fruitless**.*

(Remember this key thought as we continue through this booklet, and bring the Holy Spirit into every aspect that we look at.)



3. The struggle and the solution

Paul, one of the key leaders in the early church, acknowledged the struggle that still goes on within all of us at times in this process of change. But he also knew that God has an answer for it.

Read:

Romans 7 v15-25(a)

Can you identify with this sort of struggle? Can you share any areas where this struggle is going on for you at the moment?

Who does Paul say is the answer to this struggle? (v25)

So, there can be an inward struggle at times in this process of changing. But God has an answer for the struggle. He sent Jesus, and still sends his Spirit, to help us.

Where do I need to change?



1. *Probably everywhere!*

The short answer is: **probably everywhere!** But thankfully, God does not go for everything all at once – if he did, it would blow us apart! Nor does he always get to work on **the same things** in all of us in **the same order** or at the **same time**. (Remembering this stops us looking down on other people!) What he tends to do is to start with those things that are especially spoiling our own life and are threatening to our friendship with him.



Take a few moments to reflect before going any further. Ask God to show you just one or two things that he particularly wants to work on in your life at this time. (The things that start to rise up in your thinking are probably the ones!)

*Remember: when God points things out to us it is not to condemn us or to remind us **how bad we are**, but **how good he is** in being willing to work on those areas and to bring change to them.*



2. *It's not about lists!*

When we become a Christian, **God does not give us a list** of the things that we cannot do now, as though he were some heavenly **spoilsport**. Rather, he gets to work by beginning to write on our heart the things that please him. God wants a relationship with us that is **based on the heart, not on rules and regulations**. And if we have seen how much he loves us, and have truly committed ourselves to loving him, then these things will not be a burden to us but a delight. We will **want to do** what pleases him.

One of the prophets of the Old Testament, who lived some 600 years before Jesus, looked forward to the day when people would live right, not because they **had to obey** some laws carved on stone tablets, but because they **wanted to obey** out of what God had done so powerfully in their hearts.

Read:

Jeremiah 31 v31-34

What does the word 'covenant' mean?

Where does God promise to put his law? (v33)

What would be the results of responding to this 'inner law'? (v33-34)

It is this inner law, written on our hearts, that God uses to underline the things that need to change in us.

3. **The external plumb-line**

Since our hearts can be very good at deceiving us when they want to, however, God also gives us an external **plumb-line** to check that what we are sensing within is right.



This is where the Bible comes in (which we look at more closely in the booklet GrowingBasics). The Bible is **the record** of God's dealings with men and women who wanted to walk with him, and **the revelation** of those things that both please and displease him. Doing what pleases him will always bring blessing and fulfilment – no matter how hard it might seem at first. Doing what displeases him will always be to our ultimate harm and loss.

Whenever our hearts tell us that something is OK that the Bible says is not OK, we can be sure there is something wrong!

What do you think we should do if –

- a) we feel we want to do something that is contrary to what the Bible teaches?*
- b) we discover something in the Bible that God says is wrong, but that we have been doing?*

Some areas to consider

Having seen how eager God is to change us, so that we can become more and more like Jesus,



let's look now at some practical areas where change is needed.

1. *How I think*

One of the biggest, yet perhaps one of the least obvious, areas where we need to change is our **thinking**. For years, most of us have had our minds filled with stuff that had little, if anything, to do with God. Yet **our thinking shapes everything we do**. If we want to change our behaviour, therefore, we need to start by changing our thinking.

Read:

Romans 12 v1-3

In what ways can we so easily be 'conformed to the pattern of this world'? (v2)

What does Paul say is the key to being 'transformed'? (v2)

But how do we get our minds or our thinking renewed? Let's use an illustration.

When a large building is to be erected, it is usually made from reinforced concrete. Steel rods are first fastened to one another, and around these, wooden 'formers' or boxes are placed and the concrete is poured in. When the concrete has set, the formers can be removed, because something is now firmly in place and they are no longer needed. The building can stand firmly in its own right.

If we are going to change our thinking, we need to provide **formers** in our life, into which the Holy Spirit can pour his life for something new to take shape. At first these may seem clumsy or strange. But eventually they will produce a structure that carries life.



These **formers** will vary for each of us, but they

may include things like:

- not reading certain things any more
- avoiding certain films or TV programmes
- choosing not to share in certain attitudes to things or people
- deciding not to use certain language or to tell certain jokes
- not clinging on to worries

What other things could you add here (including things that may be especially relevant to yourself)?

Done on their own, these things would just be attempts to change ourselves by **self-effort**. But done with **the help of the Holy Spirit**, inviting him in to **fill** each area, it becomes a life-changing force.

Of course, change comes not just by **avoiding** things that do not help, but by **pursuing** things that do.

*What sort of things do you think could be positive **formers** to change the way **you** think as a new Christian?*

As we make these decisions, and ask the Holy Spirit to come into them, we find that our thinking begins to change. And when our thinking starts to change, our living starts to change also.



*Are there areas of **your** thinking that you recog-*

nise need to start changing? If you are studying this in a group or with someone else, can you share one or two things with them so that you can pray with one another about these?

2. **Where I go**



Jesus wants his followers to be influencers for him in every part of life and society. Too often the church has withdrawn into a **holy huddle** rather than getting involved in life, as Jesus himself did.

However, for some of us there will certainly be places that it would now be wiser if we **did not go to** because of what those places meant to us before we became a Christian. Some of those places will be wrong places for any Christian to go to at any time; some will be wrong for some of us to go for a certain time. The key will be:



Will going to this place help or hinder my growth as a Christian and my developing friendship with Jesus?

Let's think through this further with the help of the following list of examples.

*Put a tick in the appropriate column, depending whether you think going to the things listed would be **wrong always** or only **wrong sometimes**. If you put **sometimes**, discuss together under what circumstances that might be.*

*Stop and ask God if there are places that are not helpful for **you** to go to now as a Christian; or places where you should perhaps only go back to with a mature Christian. If you feel there are, or might be, then make sure you share this with one of your church or group leaders.*

3. What I speak

Our words frequently reveal much about us – through both what we say, and what we do not say. The Bible describes the tongue as a powerful little thing that needs to be controlled well if it is to do more good than harm.

Read:

James 3 v1-16

What pictures does James use to describe the tongue, and why are these images so powerful?

Why is it wrong to use our tongue for evil? (v9-10)



| | Always wrong | Sometimes wrong |
|----------------------------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Hiring a video | | |
| Going to the pub or club | | |
| Going to a prostitute | | |
| Going to cause 'trouble' | | |
| Going to a 'gossip session' | | |
| <i>Add others of your own...</i> | | |
| ... | | |
| ... | | |

Consider the following **wrong uses** of the tongue. As you read through the list, reflect on how you think Jesus would feel about each of them:

- criticising others
- belittling others, making fun of them, or making hurtful comments
- getting angry with people





- not telling the truth (even **white lies** are wrong!)
- being deceitful (in personal and work life)
- flattery
- spreading rumours or gossip
- talking too much, and not listening
- swearing
- coarse joking

Are any of these areas in which you need to change?

A wise saying from the Bible: "When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise." (Proverbs 10 v19)

But as well as warning us to be careful in what we **do not say**, the Bible also tells us to be positive in **what we do say**. It tells us to use our tongue for good, in such areas as –

- worshipping God (Psalm 72 v22-24; Acts 2v4)
- praying (Acts 4 v24)
- encouraging one another in our faith (Ephesians 5 v18-20)
- bringing wisdom or wise counsel into situations (Psalm 37 v30)
- speaking the truth into situations (Ephesians 4 v15)
- telling others about Jesus (John 4 v28-29)
- teaching others about God and his ways (Proverbs 31 v26)



This is by no means a complete list! But it is enough to stand in stark contrast to the negative

uses of the tongue we have already looked at.

*Am I changing in this area of **what I speak**? Is the positive starting to replace the negative?*

4. *How I live*

One of the most powerful ways we can show others that Jesus has truly changed our lives is by the way we live, where the old things just aren't as important to us any more, because something far more exciting has taken their place.

We are now going to read a fairly lengthy section of one of Paul's letters, in which he outlines **the sort of change that shows we have really changed**. Having spent the first half of his letter to the Christians at Ephesus explaining what God has done for them through Jesus, he then uses the second half to show them what sort of changes should now be happening in their lives.

As we read this passage, think about what you are reading and let God speak to you through it. Note how it begins with a strong contrast to the sort of life they used to live.

Read:

Ephesians 4 v17 – 5 v21

Look at v22-24. What picture lies behind what Paul says here? What do you think that might mean in practice?

List some of the things that Paul says we should simply not want to do now that we have come to know Jesus.



From this passage it ought to be clear that...

*...no area of life is excluded from the change that God wants to bring to us. If Jesus has really changed **you**, then it should lead to change in **everything about you**.*

God's desire is that we should be a people of **integrity**; that is, a people whose lives increasingly match on the inside and the outside.



5. **What I do**

Much of western life focuses around **feeling good**, which is generally seen as life's highest goal. To this end, billions of pounds are poured into everything from drugs to decor, from getting drunk to getting dressed! If only we could **feel good**, the argument goes, we would be such **nicer** people.

The Bible turns this philosophy on its head, however. Rather than saying, **If you feel good, you'll do good**, God tells us –

*If you **do good**, you'll **feel good**!*

Do the right thing, and you'll get the right feelings! Why? Because when we do things God's way (walking **by faith** rather than **by feelings**), we are operating as we were designed to, and therefore **get the maximum out of life** and **give the maximum into life**.

Let's look at some of the areas of **doing** where God wants to bring about change. While many of these things may seem at first sight to produce anything but good feelings, the testimony of millions of Christians is that putting these principles

into practice really works!

a) **What I do with my body**

If we relegate our Christian faith to just the **spiritual** areas of life, then we have missed something! God is the God of the whole of life – and that includes our bodies. This means that –

- what we do with our bodies is important to God
- our bodies can be used to glorify God
- when we mis-use our bodies, we mis-use **me** and dishonour the unique creation of God that I am

The Bible has a very high view of our bodies (in contrast to many pagan religions and philosophies of both Bible times and today). What I do with my body can affect my relationship with God, my relationship with others, and how I see myself.

Read:

1 Corinthians 6 v12-20

What three attitudes does Paul say are inappropriate to God's people? (v12-13)

How does v14 show that the body is important to God?

Why is sexual immorality (that is, sexual relationships with anyone other than your marriage partner) wrong, according to v15-18? (There are three different reasons given.)

What do v19-20 tell us is the main reason for caring for our body and using it properly?

We can misuse our bodies in many ways – through

over-eating, through laziness, through over-attention to how we look, through drug or alcohol abuse, through sexual immorality (sexual relationships before, outside of, or instead of marriage). But who would want to do so once they have seen that this body of ours is **a temple of the Holy Spirit** which God wants to use to bring glory to him? This is why Paul writes:



Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. (Romans 12 v1)

*Are you taking seriously the Bible's call to **honour God with your body** and to make it a **living sacrifice** for him? Are there issues about how you use your body that need to **change** now that you have become a Christian?*

b) What I do with my possessions

If you have read ChurchBasics, then you will perhaps remember having seen how the early church discovered a new-found freedom in the use of their possessions. They saw that possessions were not things to be –

- guarded selfishly
- handled carelessly
- dispensed with glibly

Rather, they were to be **used wisely**, not only for our own enjoyment, but also for the blessing of others.

Read:

Acts 4 v32-37

God does not necessarily expect us all to go out

and **sell a field** straight away. But he will certainly challenge all of us at some point about what is truly the most important thing in life for us. In Matthew 19 v16-26 we read an account of someone whom Jesus challenged in this area of possessions and money, but who could not face up to that challenge.

Why do you think Jesus focused in on this young man's money, when he clearly did not do that with everyone?

Jesus taught that, when we put God first, we will not need to worry about possessions or money, as God knows all our needs.

Read:

Matthew 6 v25-34

How much change do I feel is needed in my life in this area of attitude to possessions?

You might like to memorise verse 33.

c) What I do with my money

Closely linked to this whole area of possessions, but worth closer examination in its own right, is the area of money. Probably no area shows more clearly whether we are truly walking with Jesus than this one!

The biblical principles that follow are not dependent on **how much money** we might or might not have; they are to do with **how much heart** we have and how that affects the little, or the much, that we might have at any time.

The Bible has some basic wise counsel to all of us on how to handle our money. We can sum this up in the following way –





■ Get your money honestly

Read:

2 Thessalonians 3 v11-12

Ephesians 4 v28

Paul tells his Christian friends to **earn the bread they eat** – in other words, to get it honestly, not dishonestly – and not to steal.

What are some of the (less obvious!) ways that it is all too easy to 'steal' in modern society? Do you think these things matter to God?

As you list some of these, be aware of any that you may have fallen into yourself and be ready to let God change you in that area.



■ Use your money wisely

The Bible tells us we should be wise in how we handle our money. (Actually, it is not even our money – it is God's money once we belong to him. All the more reason to handle it well!) Some of God's wise ways for using money include:

- providing for ourselves and our family (e.g., 1 Timothy 5 v8)
- paying all our dues, including taxes (e.g., Matthew 22 v15-21)
- not squandering our resources (e.g., Luke 15 v11-31)
- planning carefully (e.g., Luke 14 v28-30) – for us, this probably involves drawing up a budget, so that our outgoings and commitments do not exceed our income
- providing for our future wherever



we can (eg, Luke 16 v9; Proverbs 6 v6-11)

One of the greatest traps in western society today is the trap of **debt**. We are constantly encouraged to buy things on credit; but a far more accurate word for **credit** would be **debt**. The Bible has many warnings about the dangers of getting into debt, and it sees the clearing of debts as a real priority in using our money (e.g. 2Kings4v7).



Have you asked God if he thinks you are using your money wisely? Are there things that have stirred within you as you have thought about this section? Are there debts that you need to take steps to clear?

■ **Handle your money faithfully**

God calls us, not to be **owners** of all we have, but **managers** (or **stewards**) of it, as though he were the boss and we were handling it for him. Handling something ordinary like money in a faithful way is, the Bible says, a necessary first step to God entrusting us with **real treasure**, that is, spiritual resources and opportunities.

The gospel writer Luke seemed to have a particular interest in Jesus' teaching about money. The following two passages bring home some important points to us.

Read:

Luke 16 v10-13

How would you sum up the key point of this section?

Read:

Luke 19 v11-27

What is the key idea behind this parable? (A parable is a story that carries a hidden meaning.)

■ **Share your money generously**

God wants his people to be a generous people. In Old Testament times, there were many laws to **enforce** a generosity of spirit (e.g., Exodus 23 v10-11; Leviticus 25 v8-17; Deuteronomy 14 v27-29).



God no longer wants to **enforce** these things; he wants these sort of things to arise **spontaneously from our hearts**. We have already seen the spontaneous generosity that characterised the early church. Now let's read some passages from one of Paul's letters where he encourages the church to let that generous attitude to be an ongoing part of their everyday lives.

Read:

2 Corinthians 8 v1-15; 9 v6-15

What do you think is the key to having a generous heart?

What does generosity do –

(a) for others ?

(b) for us?

■ **Stretch your money amazingly**



Ever wondered how to make your money go further? Most of us have! Well, the Bible has an amazing secret into how to do this – although at first sight it looks as if it would achieve the very opposite!

The Bible tells us that if we want to see God's blessing on our money, resources and possessions, then the way to open the door to this is – **to give one tenth of it to him!**

Read:

Leviticus 27 v30-32

What two things does this passage say about the 'tithe'?

a)

b)

Millions of believers throughout the ages have found that **tithing works!** From Abraham (Genesis 14 v20) and Jacob (Genesis 28 v22) – both of whom tithed **instinctively** long before God had it written down in his laws – right through to present-day Christians like those in the church you are part of. Our experience is this:

*With God, nine-tenths goes further
than ten-tenths!*

If this doesn't strike you as **scary**, then there's something wrong. Of course it's scary – but also wonderfully **exciting!** The only way to find out is to try it and see.

Starting to **tithe** can be a bit like learning to swim. Some people just prefer to jump in at the deep end and see what happens! Others need to gently lower themselves into the water and steadily wade out to the deep end as their confidence grows. We will happily help you find the right way for you.

*What do you think would be the most common objections to tithing these days? What do you think the answer to these objections might be from a Christian **renewed mind** point of view? How do you find yourself responding to the thought of tithing?*

[Of course, God himself does not need people's tithes and never has. But tithing is a way of reminding ourselves that all our money belongs to God anyway, and of showing our complete dependence on him and our readiness to do things his way. The money we give can then be used to further Christian work in many ways (from hiring the meeting hall to paying pastors or missionaries; from producing leaflets to helping the poor, etc).]

*Look back over the main points in this section **'What I do'**. Can you share with the group any that you feel God is perhaps speaking to you about at this time? Remember: it will be different things for different ones of us.*



What will help me change?

Unless we approach this issue of change in the right way, we could find it completely overwhelming. But that is not how God means it to be at all! Not only does God tell us about the change he wants to see in us, he also **makes provision** for that change to happen.

Let's go back to one of the passages with which we began this booklet.

Read:

2 Corinthians 5 v17-18

What is the key phrase at the start of v18?

Why do you think this might be such a key?



*God does not want us to try to change through **self-effort** – in that direction lies only complete failure.*

So, what will help us?

1. Living in the Spirit

Read:

Galatians 3 v3; 5 v16-25

Paul was eager for his Christian friends not to drift away from living the Christian life in the power of the Holy Spirit, into some drab religious experience of self-effort. We too need to learn to depend on the Holy Spirit, listening to his promptings and responding to them in every part of life.



How am I seeking to keep being filled up with the Holy Spirit so that I can live my Christian life

through him, and not through my own efforts?

2. Learning as a disciple

Jesus did not go looking for **Christians** but for **disciples** – people who recognise that they are in a **life-long learning process** and who therefore keep themselves teachable. **Making disciples**, who both obey Jesus and train others to obey him, lies at the heart of the Christian way of life.

Read:

Matthew 28 v18-20

All of us need to be linked in some way to other mature Christians who can help us in our growing and in our living. **Keeping accountable** to someone else is a wonderful way to help produce growth – and to avoid mess! (Ask one of your leaders to explain how this is done in your particular church.)

Can you begin to see already those to whom God is joining you in a special way to help you live and grow?

3. Looking at our heart

At the end of the day, God will not do in us what we do not want done in us! Although he is the Almighty of the whole universe and can do whatever he pleases, he graciously waits for our co-operation, for in that way lies the surest growth and the warmest hearts.

A good thing to ask ourselves, then, from time to time is:

Do I really want to grow?



Do I really want to change?



When the answer is, "**not really**", then don't be too surprised if God is not doing too much in that area of your life! It is as we **yield** our heart to him, in growing depth and in widening areas, that he can bring the change to us that he wants to.

*How much do I **want** to change at this time?*

Conclusion



The Christian faith is all about **change**. This change happens as I make Jesus the **Lord** over every area – that is, the one who has the final word on **everything**. If you really want to go on changing, then our encouragement to you is:

*Trust him, even when things seem difficult,
even when things seem strange. His strange
ways always have a way of turning out right!*



As you trust him as your Lord, you will never be disappointed, no matter what happens; but rather, you will always enjoy to the full this new life into which he has introduced you.

