

"THEOLOGY IN APPLICATION IN ROMANS 12"

(Romans 12:1-8)

(Frank Theilman)

In Romans 12:1-8 Paul returns to the language of Romans 1:18-32 and implies that the remedy to that situation of distorted worship, futile thinking, and violence toward others is found in the transforming power of the gospel. The gospel begins to transform both the individual believer and the church, and its transforming power leads to a community where people serve rather than compete with one another.

The Integration of the Person through the Gospel

In the long explanation of the gospel that has preceded Romans 12:1-8, Paul has occasionally described the disintegrated character of those who do not have faith in God. These are people who know what is just and that God's commands are just but nevertheless both do and applaud injustice (1:32). They are people who do the very same things they teach others not to do on the basis of God's word (2:21-23). They are like the miserable person who knows God's command and wants to do it but always finds evil close at hand, ready to take him captive (7:13-25). For this person, even zeal for God gets in the way of submitting to God (10:2-3).

Paul now describes the gospel as the solution to this problem. The gospel announces that through union with Christ and through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, the believer's mind is renewed, the whole orientation of the believer's life is transformed, and the believer is able not only to discern the will of God in the complexities of everyday existence but to act in accord with God's will (12:1-2). Wolfgang Schrage writes:

According to Paul, the liberation and new being that comes through Christ is an all-encompassing event, a fundamental transformation, a "metamorphosis" (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18). The human contradiction (Rom. 7:14ff.), the dichotomy and division within the self, is a thing of the past. The radical nature of this new being implies an undivided integrity of God's claim upon us.¹

God enables those who believe the gospel to live in the way he created human beings to live. In the church, the downward spiral of personal and societal disintegration described in 1:18-32 begins to be reversed. Rather than failing to honor God or give him thanks, believers present him their bodies as living, holy, and pleasing sacrifices. Rather than laboring under a futile and foolish worldview in slavery to evil, their renewed minds are able to understand what is good and perfect and their bodies are able to do it. The presentation of their bodies to God and renewal of their minds have set them on a toward a new creation—a place unaffected by Adam's original and disastrous disobedience against God's command.

This understanding and application of 12:1-2 needs to be nuanced, however, in two ways. First, although a "fundamental transformation" has taken place in the believer, it is not yet complete, and, second, Paul's description of transformation and renewal in Romans 12:1-2 is addressed to the church, as the second-person plurals throughout the passage demonstrate.

A Transformation Process

Elsewhere Paul describes the believer's renewal as an ongoing process: "Though our outer self is wasting away," he says in 2 Corinthians 4:16, "our inner self is being renewed [ἀνακαινύεται] day by day" (cf. Col 3:10; Eph 4:23). The wasting away of Paul's outer self in this passage is the suffering that Paul endures in the course of work as an apostle. Paul views these difficulties as exterior to himself because his inner person is in a constant



¹ Wolfgang Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 186-187.

state of renewal that will one day be complete (2 Cor 4:17-18). The believer who continues to experience something like the struggle described in Romans 7:13-25, therefore, should not be discouraged. The offering of one's existence to God as a holy and acceptable sacrifice and the renewal of one's mind so that it approves and obeys what is good and perfect become more and more natural to the believer as the renewal of the believer's thinking and way of life proceeds.

The Corporate Dimensions of Gospel Transformation

As Richard B. Hays says, "The metaphor of "living sacrifice" describes the vocation of the community: the addressees of the letter are called to present their bodies together as a single collective sacrifice of obedience to God."² Unlike Stoic philosophy, which was so prevalent in Rome at the time Paul wrote Romans, and unlike more contemporary emphases on the fulfillment of the individual, the gospel spoke of the transformation of entire groups of people so that their interactions with one another and with the wider societies of which they were a part became less self-centered and more loving toward others.

This does not mean that the transformation of the individual was absent from Paul's moral vision for the church. In 2 Corinthians 4:26 the inner transformation of which Paul speaks is certainly the transformation of an individual—Paul himself. Whatever else the "I" of Romans 7:13-25 refers to, moreover, it would be extraordinarily odd if it did not refer to the existence of an individual human being.

Still, it would be easy simply to think of Paul as describing in Romans 12:1-2 the transformation of individuals so that they personally become more obedient to God. Paul's vision is broader, however, and encompasses the church. He envisions a new society of transformed individuals that function as God's prototype for what human society will look like when his restoration of the world is complete.

God's Gifts to the Church as Instruments of Service Rather Than of Competition

This focus on the church as a transformed society explains why Paul moves immediately from his introduction in 12:1-2 into a description of the way believers should live in community with one another in 12:3-8 by using the gifts God has given them. The point of this paragraph does not lie in the precise definition of the seven gifts Paul lists in 12:6-8. The differences between the various lists of gifts in Paul's letters (cf. 1 Cor 12:8-10, 28-29; Eph 4:11) hint that none of the lists, including this one, is exhaustive.

Rather, Paul's emphasis lies on the humility and sincere inner conviction with which believers should fulfill the role within the church that God has assigned to them (Rom 12:3). The church is not the place for comparison between individuals to determine whose role is more important, nor for competition among individuals for supposedly more prestigious roles. It should instead Paul says in the next paragraph, the church should be a place where people "lead one another forth with respect to honor" (12:10). They should, in other words, provide examples to one another of honoring not themselves but others. Competition and seeking honor for one's self are no less a part of modern human societies than they were of ancient Roman society. Pauls call upon believers to be vigilant against allowing this spirit to infect the church is as relevant now as it was in his own time.

A critical component in the transformed existence of both the individual believer and the church is a spirit of humility and an enthusiasm for doing good to others. Paul calls this love, and that forms the topic of his next exhortation (12:9-21).

² Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (New York: Harper- Collins, 1996), p. 35.