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Transformation

as the Remedy for Disharmony in the Church

BY IRA J. JOLIVET JR.

According to Paul in Eph 2:13–16, one of the primary reasons for Christ's death was to unite all people in one harmonious body, the church. Today, differences of opinion on doctrinal issues; tensions created by increasing cultural and ethnic pluralism in the church and in the larger society; and attitudes and perspectives shaped by the norms of a culture that values competition, individualism, and personal autonomy more highly than cooperation, community, and self-sacrifice for the common good have caused great disharmony in the body of Christ. But those familiar with Paul's writings know that the harmony that God brought about in Christ has always been difficult for humans to maintain. In the letter to the Romans Paul deals with the serious problem of disharmony that arose from the judgmental attitudes and boastful claims of the Torah-observant Jewish members of the church at Rome and the resentful reactions of the Gentile members who were the targets of those attitudes and claims.

Several of Paul's key arguments converge in Rom 12:1–2, in which he states:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.¹

An analysis of this passage will show that at this point in his argument, Paul is recommending a radical mental and spiritual transformation as the remedy for the disharmony that threatened the unity of the body of Christ at Rome. In concluding, I will suggest that this same transformation is still the only effective remedy for the disharmony that threatens the church today.

The Nature of Sin

Before we can accurately analyze Rom 12:1–2, we must understand that in the worldview Paul shares with his intended audience, sin is not merely the transgression of some specific legal injunction. Indeed, singular acts of injustice and immorality are symptomatic of an underlying diseased condition that is characterized by ignorance of the true will of God, the inability of the reason to control the passions, and disharmony with God, self, and other human beings. Paul depicts the progressive moral decline of the Gentile sinners in 1:18–32. In 1:21–23, for example, he states:

For though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles:

Here Paul claims that these people initiated disharmony with God by rejecting the knowledge that nature reveals about him and by not worshipping him or giving him the glory that the Creator deserves. Subsequently, they became so foolish and ignorant that they descended into idolatry.

As we see in 1:24–25, God himself initiated the next stage in their moral descent.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

By claiming that “God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts,” Paul shows that as a result of being out of harmony with their Creator, they were also in a state of internal weakness and disharmony in which reason no longer ruled over the “passions of dishonor” (1:26), as it should in rational beings. Stated another way, we may say that God put the Gentile sinners in the position of being out of harmony with their very own nature.

Paul begins the description of the final stage of the descent of the Gentile sinners in 1:28, in which he states: “And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done.” The expression translated here as “debased mind” is more precisely rendered as “undiscerning mind,” or a mind that is incapable of judging good from evil. As a result, they

were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice ... envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, ... gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. (1:29–31)

That most of the vices listed here involve injustices against other people indicates that the Gentile sinners were out of harmony with their fellow human beings, with their Creator, and their own nature.

Further along in Paul’s argument, we see that sin is a nondiscriminatory disease, for it strikes not only Gentiles but pious Jews who strive to adhere to the letter of the law of the Torah, as well. Paul shows

this to be so in 7:14–20, where he writes:

For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

Here Paul dramatically demonstrates that the Jew under the law is, on his own power, too weak to overcome sin, which he depicts here as a powerful slavemaster. He is ignorant because he does not know what he is doing. And because he wills one thing but does the exact opposite, he is in a state of internal disharmony. Ultimately, because he does not “do the good,” and because he unwittingly serves sin, he is in a state of disharmony with God, whom he so desperately seeks to please.

From Paul’s descriptions of the moral decline of the Gentile sinners and futile attempts of the Jews to keep the letter of the law, we see that sin is a condition of the soul marked by weakness, ignorance, and disharmony. With these insights we are prepared to analyze Rom 12:1 and 12:2 in turn.

Analysis of Romans 12:1

Romans 12:1 reads as follows: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” This verse poses two obvious questions: (1) How exactly does one present one’s body as a living sacrifice? and (2) What does Paul mean by “rational” (a more accurate translation of the Greek) worship? Answers to these questions emerge when we observe that Paul’s exhortation to “present your bodies as a living sacrifice” is the last in a series of three very similar imperatives that begin in chapter 6. The first appears in 6:13, which reads: “No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have

been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness." The second is in 6:19b, in which Paul states: "For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification."

Paul fixes these first two imperatives in the context of the argument in which he answers the following self-posed questions: "What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?" (6:1-2). His answer is:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (6:3-4)

The last clause (v 4) functions as one of several allusions to two promises God made to the people of Israel during the Babylonian exile, the period immediately after God executed the death penalty upon them for "the blood that they had shed upon the land, and for the idols with which they had defiled it" (Ezek 36:18). The first is in Ezek 36:26-27:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

The second promise is in Ezek 37:13-14, where God tells the dead house of Israel:

...you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act.

The phrase "newness of life," then, means that the descendants of Israel in the church at Rome who had participated in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ in baptism had received a new heart and a

new spirit and were alive spiritually in God's sight. This explains Paul's command in 6:13 to "present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life" (literally, "from dead ones living"). And it also explains the qualifying adjective "living" in the phrase "living sacrifice" in 12:1.

But in order to understand what the complete expressions "living sacrifice" and "rational service" mean precisely, we must look to the further ramifications of the fulfillment of the promises in Ezekiel 36-37 according to Paul, in chapter 8. We begin with Paul's pronouncement in 8:1-4 that

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

We recall that in Ezek 36:27 God promises, "I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances." A more literal translation of the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible from which Paul quotes reads, "And my spirit I will give to you, so that in my statutes you might walk and my ordinances you might keep and do." Now we can see that walking in newness of life means fulfilling the just requirement of the law by walking—that is, living one's life—according to the Spirit of God.

In 8:5-6 Paul sheds further light on what it means to walk according to God's Spirit. For here he writes:

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

To walk, to live according to the Spirit, therefore, is "to set the mind on the Spirit." From these statements we at least know that living according to the Spirit is some type of rational activity, because it involves the mind. But it is not until we read 8:12-13 that we

finally see what the precise nature of the activity is.

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Living according to the Spirit, then, means putting the reasoning faculty, informed and strengthened by the Spirit of God, in control of the desires and passions of the body and sacrificially killing those that become unruly. As we have seen in our discussion of Romans chapter 1, this is the condition of internal harmony that is in accordance with the rational nature of the human creature. This, then, is what Paul means when he writes, “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your rational worship.”

Analysis of Romans 12:2

Romans 12:2, we recall, reads: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” The language of the first part of the verse, “do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,” shows it to be a continuation of Paul’s thought in 8:28–29, in which he wrote the following:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, ... For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.

The conformity that Paul describes here takes place on two levels. First, because Christ did not please himself (15:3) but instead died for the ungodly (5:6–7), he is the example of one who lived up to and, in fact, embodied “the just requirement of the law.” Consequently, he is the prototype upon which those who have already conformed to his death, burial, and resurrection are to pattern their lives and the *telos* (10:4) – the end, or goal – toward which they are to progress. As Paul writes in 13:12–14:

Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

As baptized believers continue to conform to the image of Christ, they develop the ability to “discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” This ability is necessary because an “undiscerning mind” precedes total moral depravity (1:28). Also, according to Paul’s argument, the pious Jews lacked true discernment because they regarded the letter of the law, which was only “the embodiment [or “form”] of knowledge and truth” (2:20), as the greatest good and the most absolute expression of God’s will. As he writes in 10:1–4:

Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened [literally, “not according to knowledge”]. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God’s righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

The ability to discern God’s will is also necessary because it figures significantly in the final judgment. Paul shows this to be so in 2:12–16:

All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires [literally, “do by nature the things of the law”], these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires [“the work of the law”] is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

The law by which all will be judged cannot be the letter of the law of Moses, because Paul claims that “no human being will be justified in his sight by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin” (3:20). No, the law that God will use as the basis of judgment is what Paul refers to variously as “the things of the law” (2:14), “what the law requires” (2:15), “the requirements of the law” (2:26), “the law of faith” (3:27), “the just requirement of the law” (8:4), “the things of the Spirit” (8:5), and, “the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (12:2). Obedience to this law requires discernment, because there is no longer a written code that tells one what to do in every situation. As Paul states in 7:6: “But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.”

But that is not to say that those who live in the Spirit do not have ethical principles to guide their behavior. On the contrary, for Paul provides such principles in 12:3–14:23. The nonprescriptive character of these principles is evident in 13:8–10:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Here Paul captures the very essence of the law and of God’s will in the love commandment. And yet one must still use discernment to know exactly how to “walk in love” on a daily basis. And that discernment comes, as we have seen in our analysis of 12:1–2, as we offer up the deeds of the body such as envy, strife, and judgmental attitudes on the altars of our minds, for this, indeed, is our rational worship.

Conclusion

The church at Rome had a problem. Its Jewish and Gentile converts were not getting along with one another. In response to this problem, Paul could have written a very straightforward letter telling the

parties involved to make up and try to get along with each other. Instead, he wrote such a complex and sophisticated document that biblical scholars today still cannot agree on what Paul was saying and why he was saying it. I believe that Paul wrote Romans in this way because he understood that the church’s problem was symptomatic of a more serious underlying condition of sin, which, if left untreated, could be fatal to the church in this earthly realm and to the individual members at the final judgment. And so he very carefully crafted an argument that would convince the parties involved of the seriousness of their actions and, at the same time, show them how to behave properly as children of God. In 12:1 he exhorted the people to offer up those desires and passions that cause disharmony with God, self, and others on the altars of their minds by the Spirit that God had given them. And in 12:2 he encouraged them to continue to emulate Christ so that their ability to discern the will of God would increase. Thus the effects of sin would be countered, and harmony with God, self, and others, naturally restored.

Many churches today suffer from disharmony. The leaders and members of these churches would benefit greatly from understanding Paul’s exhortations in Rom 12:1–2 in the context of the larger argument of the letter. They would learn, first of all, that disharmony is sin and that disharmony with others is indicative of a larger problem of disharmony with God and self. They would also learn that in order to counter disharmony, each member must sacrificially kill the desires or passions that are at the root of the problem. Here everyone must be completely honest and sincerely repentant. Finally, they would learn that each member is to strive to emulate Christ and live by the guiding principles found in Rom 12:3–14:23 and, especially, by the essence of the law and of God’s will: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

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Notes

¹ Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).