

# PRESENTATION AND TRANSFORMATION: AN EXPOSITION OF ROMANS 12:1-2

*D. Edmond Hiebert*

“**I** urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:1-2).

These verses clearly mark the transition from the doctrinal to the practical emphasis in this matchless epistle. The first 11 chapters “fairly revel in the great mysteries of the plan of redemption. But when we come to chapter twelve the tide turns. Now it is the practical, the everyday.”<sup>1</sup> It is a clear reminder that true Christianity involves both “believing” and “behaving” the gospel. The history of Christendom reveals the tragic results when the vital relationship between doctrine and conduct is lost. As Nygren well remarks, “A doctrine, a gospel, which has no significance for man’s life and conduct is not a real gospel; and life and conduct which are not based on that which comes to us in the gospel are not Christian life and Christian conduct.”<sup>2</sup> In a living Christianity, faith and conduct are inseparable.

This connection is indicated by the opening “Therefore”

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D Edmond Hiebert is Professor Emeritus of New Testament, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno, California

<sup>1</sup> Chester E Tulga, *Studies in Romans* (Cleveland Union Gospel, 1939), 202

<sup>2</sup> Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, trans Carl C Rasmussen (Philadelphia Muhlenberg, 1949), 412

(*οὖν*<sup>3</sup>) in Romans 12:1. The doctrinal realities already unfolded form the foundation for the Christian life in all its aspects. Addressed to believers (1:6-7), Paul's order in this epistle clearly reveals the true relationship between doctrine and conduct (cf. Eph. 4:1; 1 Thess. 4:1). As Wuest asserts, "Doctrine must always precede exhortation since in doctrine the saint is shown his exalted position which makes the exhortation to a holy life, a reasonable one, and in doctrine, the saint is informed as to the resources of grace he possesses with which to obey the exhortations."<sup>4</sup>

The intended scope of the backward look conveyed by the word "therefore" has been understood differently. Knox asserts that "the passage begins without any connection with what precedes," and he views *οὖν* as "serving only to mark the transition, and not pointing back to any specific basis of the appeal in the earlier part of the letter."<sup>5</sup> This particle may carry a transitional rather than an inferential force, but in view of the similar usage in Ephesians 4:1 and 1 Thessalonians 4:1 it is commonly accepted that *οὖν* here does have an inferential force, looking back to what has gone before. This seems clearly to be its meaning when used with the verb *παρακαλέω* ("to beseech, urge"; cf. 1 Cor. 4:16; Eph. 4:1; 1 Tim. 2:1).

Interpreters are not agreed, however, as to how far back this "therefore" reaches. Lange holds that the inference relates back directly to Romans 11:35-36, which "constitutes the organic apex of the entire doctrinal division."<sup>6</sup> Cranfield recognizes that the terminology employed may suggest "that Paul is thinking only, or, at any rate, specially of chapters 9 to 11."<sup>7</sup> He argues, however, that "it would seem intrinsically more probable that Paul thought of his exhortation as being based upon the whole of what he had so far written to the Roman Church," and he concludes that "the reference of *οὖν* is to the whole course of the epistle's argument up to

<sup>3</sup> In Greek usage *οὖν* is postpositive, never used as the first word in the sentence but appended to the term with which it is used

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth S Wuest, *Romans in the Greek New Testament for the English Reader* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1955), 204

<sup>5</sup> John Knox and Gerald R Cragg, "The Epistle to the Romans," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed George Buttrick, 12 vols (New York Abingdon Cokesbury, 1954), 9579

<sup>6</sup> John Peter Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical*, trans and ed with additions by Philip Schaff, 10 vols (1869, reprint, Grand Rapids Zondervan, n d), 5381

<sup>7</sup> C E B Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary, 2 vols (Edinburgh Clark, 1979), 2596

this point.”<sup>8</sup> This inclusive scope of the inference seems most probable and is generally accepted. Paul’s “therefore” reflects an inseparable connection between doctrine and conduct. “Doctrine is that which gives enforcement to duty; it is that which furnishes motive for service.”<sup>9</sup>

The verb here rendered “I urge” (*παρακαλῶ*) is a favorite term with Paul (used about 50 times) and has been characterized as “one of the tenderest expressions in all the Bible.”<sup>10</sup> The compound verb, which basically means “to call alongside of,” pictures someone calling another to his side and lovingly presenting his message to him. Depending on the content and purpose of the message, the verb may be rendered “appeal to, urge, exhort, entreat, or beseech.” Thus instead of simply asserting his apostolic authority, Paul preferred to appeal to the inner consciousness of his readers. In writing to Philemon, Paul told him, “Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do that which is proper, yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you” (Phile. 8-9). In thus presenting his message to his readers Paul avoided using external compulsion of an objective command and instead relied on their inner realization of the rightness of the appeal being made. Paul was well aware that “many are sooner wrought upon if they be accosted kindly, are more easily led than driven.”<sup>11</sup> He knew that acceptable obedience to the appeals being made is always the grateful, voluntary response of the redeemed heart to the many mercies of God.

In saying, “I urge you” (*παρακαλῶ ὑμᾶς*), Paul directly addressed the recipients of his appeal. In explicitly identifying them as “brothers” (*ἀδελφοί*) he gave expression to their inner identity as already members of the family of God. Because they were already believers and therefore members of God’s family, Paul was prompted and encouraged to present this appeal to them. The appeal Paul made here is directly applicable only to those who by faith have personally received Jesus Christ as their Redeemer.

In Romans 12–15 Paul presented a number of spiritual directives involving varied aspects of his readers’ lives as believers; but in 12:1-2 the appeal is personal and depicted the true founda-

8 Ibid

9 Herbert L Walleth and James M Campbell, *The Teachings of the Books, or the Literary Structure and Spiritual Interpretation of the Books of the New Testament* (New York Revell, 1899), 130-31

10 J P McBeth, *Exegetical and Practical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York Revell, 1937), 229

11 Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible, New One Volume Edition*, ed Leslie F Church (Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1960), 582b

tion for the effectual attainment of the other duties that follow. These two verses, structurally forming one compound sentence, present a twofold plea. The first verse calls for an explicit act; the second commands a resultant lifelong process. These verses are a call for an act of presentation and the resultant duty of transformation.

### THE APPEAL FOR PRESENTATION

In verse 1 Paul mentioned the true motivating basis for the presentation, described the essential nature of such a presentation, and added a summary evaluation of the presentation.

#### THE MOTIVATION FOR THE PRESENTATION

Before stating his appeal, Paul held before his readers the fact of the many mercies of God that should prompt them to make the presentation he desired of them. The words “by the mercies of God” (*διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν τοῦ θεοῦ*) look back to the varied divine mercies Paul set forth in the first 11 chapters. The word *οἰκτιρμός* (“mercy”), always in the plural in the New Testament except in Colossians 3:12, basically denotes the reaction of pity or compassion for the ills of another. God’s pity and compassion have found concrete expression in His redemptive actions. The articular designation *τοῦ θεοῦ* (“of God”) stresses that the mercies in view are those of the very God Paul’s readers had come to know through the gospel declared to them by God’s messengers. McBeth identifies these mercies as those “expressed in the revelation of sin, the mercy of the atonement, justification, sonship, sanctification, union with Christ, life in the Spirit, the hope of Israel, and glorification.”<sup>12</sup> When these redemptive mercies of God are known and personally accepted by the sinner through saving faith, they form a mighty motivating force, prompting the believer willingly to do what is being asked. This flood of mercies has its source in the tender heart of God and was not due to any merit on the part of the believers addressed. As Harrison remarks, “Whereas the heathen are prone to sacrifice in order to obtain mercy, biblical faith teaches that the divine mercy provides the basis for sacrifice as the fitting response.”<sup>13</sup>

The divine mercies were given supreme expression in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of

<sup>12</sup> McBeth, *Exegetical and Practical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 230

<sup>13</sup> Everett F Harrison, “Romans,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 10:127

God. In Him is embodied the abiding challenge to believers to present themselves unreservedly to Him.

One day a young Austrian nobleman strolled into a small church in a European village. As he loitered along the aisle, his attention was arrested by a painting of the crucified Christ hanging on the wall. The soul of the artist who painted the picture had been flooded with love for his Savior because He had redeemed him from a life of sin and folly. Underneath the picture of the Sufferer the artist had written the lines, "All this I did for *thee*, What hast thou done for *Me*?"

The young nobleman saw the love depicted in every feature of that divine face and was drawn to Jesus' bleeding brow and pierced hands. Having slowly viewed the varied aspects of the picture, his gaze rested on the couplet under the picture. A new revelation of the claim of Jesus Christ gripped his heart. Hours passed as the young nobleman gazed on the face of his suffering Savior. The lingering rays of the afternoon sun fell on the bowed form of Nicolaus Zinzendorf, weeping and sobbing out his devotion to the Christ whose love had not only saved his soul but also conquered his heart.

From that little church Zinzendorf went forth to become the leader of the mighty missionary activities of the Moravian church that have reached to the ends of the earth.<sup>14</sup> Theirs was the response that Paul's heart yearned for on the part of every believer, motivated by a gripping realization of the mercies of God.

#### THE CHARACTER OF THE PRESENTATION

With penetrating terseness Paul set forth the character of the presentation desired: "to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God." Young more literally renders the Greek, "to present your bodies a sacrifice—living, sanctified, acceptable to God."<sup>15</sup>

The compound infinitive *παραστήσαι* ("to offer") basically means "to place or stand alongside of," hence to place at someone's disposal. While this verb was not used in the Septuagint in connection with offering sacrifices, in contemporary Greek the term was so used. Its use as a religious term denoting "to offer" would be readily understood by Paul's readers; hence the omission of "to God" is understandable as necessarily implied.

<sup>14</sup> James H. McConkey, *The Surrendered Life Bible Studies and Addresses on the Yielded Life*, rev. ed. (Richmond, VA: Silver, 1987), 23-24.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Young, *The Holy Bible Consisting of the Old and New Testaments Translated according to the Letter and Idioms of the Original Languages*, rev. ed. (London: Pickering & Inghs, 1862).

The aorist tense of the infinitive *παραστήσαι* makes clear that Paul was thinking of a definite action on the part of the believer, an act directed by his will. With this sacrificial implication the aorist active infinitive denotes a deliberate action involving the thought of finality. A sacrifice laid on the altar could not later be retrieved; so the presentation here urged was to be made for life, not to be retracted later.

Paul explicitly identified the offering as τὰ σώματα ὑμῶν (“your bodies”). This expression seems most naturally to denote the readers’ physical bodies as the agent through which their new life in Christ is to express itself. But various commentators prefer to interpret the words “your bodies” as equivalent to “yourselves.” Thus Barnes argues that since a sacrifice was made in its entirety, “Paul evidently meant here the same as to say, present yourselves, your entire person.”<sup>16</sup> After citing different instances of Paul’s use of the word “body,” Cranfield concludes that the term here does not have a limited connotation but means “yourselves.” He quotes Calvin in support: “By bodies he means not only our skin and bones, but the totality of which we are composed.”<sup>17</sup> Thus in his translation of the letters of Paul, Way gave the rendering, “bring your lives, and set them by the altar, as a sacrifice.”<sup>18</sup>

However, in view of verse 2 such an inclusive meaning for “bodies” here seems questionable. Liddon appropriately notes, “That σώματα ὑμῶν means not ‘yourselves,’ but ‘your bodies,’ is clear from the antithesis of νοῦς [‘mind’] in ver. 2.”<sup>19</sup> After pleading for the presentation of the physical body in verse 1, Paul dealt in verse 2 with the transformation of the inner life. It seems that Paul’s usage here is best understood in the light of what was said in 6:12-13: “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.”

Christianity recognizes that the human body shared fully in the tragic impact that sin has brought on fallen humanity. But

<sup>16</sup> Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament, Explanatory and Practical*, ed Robert Frew (reprint, Grand Rapids Baker, 1963), 269

<sup>17</sup> Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2:598-99

<sup>18</sup> Arthur S Way, *The Letters of St Paul, to Seven Churches and Three Friends, with the Letter to the Hebrews*, 6th ed (London Macmillan, 1926), 139

<sup>19</sup> H P Liddon, *Explanatory Analysis of St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1961), 228

true Christianity does not therefore belittle the flesh and treat it with contempt and abuse. Rather, as the product of the creative activity of God, it is included in the redemptive program of God. Thus as Alford notes, Paul's appeal that their bodies be presented to God is "an indication that the sanctification of Christian life is to extend to that part of man's nature which is most completely under the bondage of sin."<sup>20</sup> In making his appeal Paul was concerned that "the same body through which sin once found its concrete expression now must be presented to God as the vehicle of righteousness (Rom. 6:19)."<sup>21</sup>

A body fully yielded to God is essential if believers are to make a spiritual impact on the world. Through their bodies they gain consciousness of the world around them and can communicate with it. Since the body is the vehicle that implements the desires and choices of the soul, the voluntary yielding of the body to God's control is essential for effective Christian living. Through sanctified bodies believers can render God-pleasing service.

Paul's appeal is that believers present their bodies as "a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God" (*θυσίαν ζώσαν εὐάρεστον ἁγίαν τῷ θεῷ*). The New International Version renders the singular *θυσίαν* ("sacrifice") as plural to correspond to the plural "your bodies," but Paul's singular individualizes that thought, thereby stressing that each believer must personally acknowledge God's claim on his own body to be presented to Him as his own "sacrifice." The ritual terminology conveys the appeal "to devote themselves to God, as if they had no longer any claim on themselves; to be disposed of by him; to suffer and bear all that he might appoint; and to promote his honour in any way which he might command."<sup>22</sup> While believers may be prone to speak about "making sacrifices for the Lord"—an expression not found in the Bible—Paul's appeal goes vastly beyond such a view of Christian responsibility.

Paul added three adjectives to characterize the sacrifice in view; all three stand after the noun. English versions, by placing the first adjective before the noun, "a living sacrifice," tend to suggest to the reader that special emphasis is being placed on the sacrifice as "living," while the other two are added as an afterthought. But the original order suggests that all three aspects of this sacrifice should be kept together.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers*, 2 vols (Boston Lee and Shepard, 1872), 2 109

<sup>21</sup> Geoffrey B Wilson, *Romans A Digest of Reformed Comment* (London Banner of Truth, 1969), 198

<sup>22</sup> Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament, Explanatory and Practical*, 269-70

The first adjective, “living,” used in connection with the familiar Old Testament term “sacrifice,” recalls the story of those sacrifices. Yet it emphatically marks the contrast between the two kinds of sacrifices. All the animal sacrifices offered to God under the Law were dead sacrifices; the victims were all slain before they were placed on the altar to be offered to God. But now God desires “living” sacrifices. As Brown remarks, “The death of the one ‘Lamb of God, taking away the sin of the world,’ has swept all dead victims off the altar of God, to make room for the redeemed themselves as ‘living sacrifices’ to Him who ‘made Him to be sin for us.’”<sup>23</sup> But the “living” in view here does not simply mean that believers are now to live for God as long as they remain alive in their old sin-stained body here on earth. Rather, their lives are to be lived under the impact of that “newness of life” (Rom. 6:4) which the Holy Spirit imparted to them in regeneration. Because of that new life, their bodies, yielded to Christ, are now living sacrifices and are destined to share in the blessed eternal life in the first resurrection (Phil. 3:20-21).

Having been offered to God as a living sacrifice, the believer’s body is consequently to be characterized as “holy” (*ἁγίαν*). This adjective basically means “separated from” or “set apart.” The Greeks used it of something separated from common usage and devoted to the service of their gods. In the New Testament the term carries a moral and spiritual significance, separated from the sphere of sin and devoted to God and His service. The believer must persistently recognize that he or she is no longer at liberty to use his or her body in sinful and unholy ways. The term stresses the ethical character of the believer’s services and practices. “Since God is the sort of God He has revealed Himself to be, to belong to Him involves the obligation to strive to do and be what is in accordance with His character.”<sup>24</sup> This call for holiness, which relates to the believer’s body as well as his spirit, shows that this ethical character of the body and its functions must not be ignored. By way of application one can readily see that sexual vice in all its forms, so prevalent in Paul’s day and the present, contradicts the criterion set forth here.

The third adjective declares God’s assured response to the believer’s offering his body to God: it is “acceptable to God” (*εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ*). This is the evaluation by God, whom believ-

<sup>23</sup> Robert Jamieson, A R Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, 6 vols (New York Revell, n d, reprint, Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1945), 5 263

<sup>24</sup> Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 601

ers have come to know through the gospel; this assurance is essential since no offering could have meaning or value that was not “pleasing” to Him. The compound adjective, made up of *ἀρεστός* (“acceptable, approved, satisfactory”) and *εὖ* (“good, well”), “speaks of something which is well approved, eminently satisfactory, or extra-ordinarily pleasing.”<sup>25</sup> God’s assurance that the offering of the body would be highly pleasing to Him should be a further motive prompting believers to make the sacrifice. “That any creature should be able to offer what could ‘please’ the infinite Creator, is wonderful; but that such wretched, fallen ones as the sons of men should do so, is a marvel of which only the gracious God Himself knows the depth!”<sup>26</sup> Believers who may be able to offer to God only a body that has been deformed, mutilated, or limited, and/or heavily sin-stained, are yet assured that their presentation of their bodies will be “well-pleasing” to Him. But more than the physical condition of the body is involved. The Scriptures make it clear that no sacrifice was acceptable to God unless the motives and character of the sacrificer were also acceptable to God. The believer’s presentation to God of his body “is acceptable to Him as the expression of giving God His true place, and of man, the believer, taking his.”<sup>27</sup>

#### THE EVALUATION OF THE PRESENTATION

The added words, “which is your spiritual service of worship” (*τὴν λογικὴν λατρείαν ὑμῶν*), standing in apposition to the whole preceding clause, set forth the divine response to the believer’s act of presentation. They indicate what makes this sacrifice well-pleasing to God. The pronoun “your” makes clear that God’s evaluation relates not merely to their physical bodies but includes the whole person. He takes note of the inner volitional response made to the appeal for the surrender of their bodies to Him.

The exact force of these words is difficult to convey and English translations offer varied renderings.<sup>28</sup> The rendering “spiritual worship” suggests that the believer’s conscious presentation of his body to God is accepted by Him as “spiritual” worship, in contrast to the ritual offerings of the dead bodies of irrational animals under the Mosaic Law. Thus Reapsome comments that a

<sup>25</sup> Wuest, *Romans in the Greek New Testament for the English Reader*, 205

<sup>26</sup> William R Newell, *Romans Verse by Verse* (Chicago Moody, 1938), 449

<sup>27</sup> William Kelly, *Notes on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (1878, reprint, n p ), 239

<sup>28</sup> *The New Testament from 26 Translations* (Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1967), 705, has no less than 10 different renderings of this phrase

believer's action is "spiritual" "in the sense that it is the offering of his spirit, his will, his ego, the inner self where a person's real desires and motivations lie hidden from view."<sup>29</sup> The inner spiritual motive of the believer in presenting his body to God and His service imparts its own character to the offering made.

However, the word rendered "spiritual" is not the term usually rendered by the word "spiritual." The adjective *λογικῆν* occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in 1 Peter 2:2, and does not occur in the Septuagint. It is the term from which the English word "logical" is derived. Accepting this import of the adjective, the meaning here is that the action in view is the rational and logical response to what God has already done in Christ. This is represented in the King James Version by the words "your reasonable service." Vine comments that "the presentation is to be in accordance with the spiritual intelligence of those who are new creatures in Christ and are mindful of 'the mercies of God.'"<sup>30</sup> McBeth points out that the definite article with the words here used "marks the sacrifice as the only logical service and as the only Christian service. Thus to present the bodies is logical and reasonable."<sup>31</sup> Such an action is consistent with a proper understanding of the matchless, love-prompted revelation in Jesus Christ. It is fully in accord with the spiritual intelligence of those who have become new creatures in Christ.

The noun *λατρείαν* ("worship") is associated with the sacrificial ministries of Israel under the Old Covenant as denoting its "temple worship" (Rom. 9:4; Heb. 9:1), the ritualistic services which the people attended. With their personal acceptance of the perfect sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, the believer's offering of his body to Christ is worship, an inner spiritual service rendered to God. Such a definite yielding of the body to God is a God-pleasing "religious service" enabling the believer to lead a life of acceptable service to God. A life of service through a consecrated body is the true sequel to its presentation to God as an act of worship. This offering of the believer's body as an act of spiritual worship does not preclude further participation in "worship services," but that participation should be continuous with the commitment that has been made.

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<sup>29</sup> James Reapsome, *Rozell's Complete Lessons, September 1978–August 1979* (Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1978), 14

<sup>30</sup> W E Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words with their Precise Meanings for English Readers* (Westwood, NJ Revell, 1940, reprint [4 vols in 1], Nashville Nelson, 1985), 3 253

<sup>31</sup> McBeth, *Exegetical and Practical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 232

## THE DUTY OF TRANSFORMATION

Romans 12:2 begins with *καὶ* ("and"), not represented in the New International Version. This conjunction makes a logical sequence to the appeal made in verse 1. The call for presentation in verse 1 is foundational to this resultant duty of inner transformation. In setting forth this duty Paul stressed the hindrance to transformation, indicated the means of this transformation, and elaborated on the results of such a transformation.

Verse 2 contains two significant grammatical changes from the forms used in verse 1. Instead of an infinitive ("to offer," v. 1), verse 2 has two finite verbs in the imperative. While some Greek manuscripts and early versions used infinitives to make verse 2 conform to verse 1,<sup>32</sup> it is now generally accepted that the textual evidence favors the imperatives.<sup>33</sup> Also of note is the change from the aorist tense "to offer" to the present tense in the two imperatives.

## THE HINDRANCE TO THE TRANSFORMATION

In developing the duty of Christian transformation Paul first demanded that believers must recognize the powerful hindrance to transformation and must counter its force in their lives. It is emphatically stated as a negative command: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world." As Murray remarks, "The Pauline ethic is negative because it is realistic; it takes account of the presence of sin."<sup>34</sup>

The negative (*μὴ*) with the present imperative (*συσχηματίζεσθε*) forbids the practice: "Don't be doing it." A believer's continued practice of world conformity is inconsistent with having given his body to the Lord and His service. Indeed, such a practice is forbidden because it negates and seriously mars the presentation the believer has made. In the New International Version the added words "any longer," not expressed in the original, make clear that their former world conformity must now cease.

The verb rendered "conform" (*συσχηματίζω*), which occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in 1 Peter 1:14, as a compound verb seems to denote a conformity that is external and does not truly represent the believer's inner life. The noun *σχῆμα*, from which is derived the Greek verb and also the English word

<sup>32</sup> See the textual footnotes on these verses in Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, 380-81.

<sup>33</sup> For the textual evidence see Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 26th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1979).

<sup>34</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 2:113.

“scheme,” denotes a pattern of life that does not come from within but is imposed from without. The verb conveys the thought of following a manner of life that is unstable and changing rather than enduring. Paul’s prohibition is directed against a manner of life that does not come from nor is representative of what believers are in their inner being as the regenerated children of God. But Paul knew that adopting such a pattern of life inevitably mars the inner life.

The form of the verb may be either middle or passive. The passive is suggested in the King James Version, “be not conformed.” This suggests that this form of life is being imposed from without. But the preposition *σύν* (“together with”) in the compound form suggests personal involvement in the acceptance of the form. Clearly the world exerts strong pressure on believers to conform to it, but they are called on to resist that pressure. Phillips’s well-known paraphrase is, “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold.”<sup>35</sup> The present tense of the verb places on the readers the duty to resist this conformity all their lives.

The character of this persistent force is identified as “the pattern of this world” (*τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ*, literally, “to this age”). While the word “age” (*αἰῶν*) basically denotes a time period, in this verse “this age” clearly involves much that is associated with the term “world” (*κόσμος*), which most English versions use here.<sup>36</sup> Liddon well notes, “The Apostolic Christians spoke of the non-Christian world as *αἰῶν οὔτος*; the *αἰῶν μέλλων* [‘the coming world’] being that which had become partaker in the Messianic Redemption. Thus the phrase lost its chronological significance, and acquired a purely moral or religious one.”<sup>37</sup> It is the world of fallen humanity, characterized by sin, suffering, and estrangement from God. It is marked by self-will and self-seeking and is characterized by its disregard for or open rebellion against God’s will. Its ruler is the devil (2 Cor. 4:4) and thus it is characterized by its antagonism to all that is distinctly Christian. Conformity to this world inevitably hinders and perverts the spiritual transformation which is the true goal of the Christian life.

#### THE NATURE OF THE TRANSFORMATION

In contrast to the negative duty not to conform to the world, the strong adversative particle *ἀλλά* (“but, on the contrary”) marks

<sup>35</sup> J B Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

<sup>36</sup> See the renderings in *The New Testament from 26 Translations*.

<sup>37</sup> Liddon, *Explanatory Analysis of St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 230.

the positive duty of Christian transformation: “but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

The verb “transformed” (*μεταμορφώσθε*) denotes a change more inward and complete than the preceding verb. In the Gospels this verb is used of the transfigured body of Christ (Matt. 17:2; Mark 9:2). In Romans 12:2 and in 2 Corinthians 3:18 the verb is used of believers to denote their inner spiritual transformation. The Greek term is embodied in the English word “metamorphosis,” which denotes, for example, the amazing change of a lowly worm into a beautiful butterfly. So the change in view here is not a superficial fluctuation of fashion or conduct but a vital change revealing a new life.

The present passive verb notes that this transformation is not a change produced by one’s own efforts; it is the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit, as Paul noted in 2 Corinthians 3:18. And the present tense emphasizes that this transformation is progressively realized, not a single crisis experience. Further, the second person plural imperative “be transformed” indicates that believers have the volitional responsibility to maintain the conditions under which God brings about the transformation. Believers are not powerless puppets in their experience of God’s work of sanctification; they eagerly desire and aim to promote it in complying with God’s directives for Christian living.

The phrase “by the renewing of your mind” (*τῇ ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοός*) reveals that the believers’ renewal works at the center of consciousness, a renewal that eventually makes the whole life new. The word “mind” “denotes, generally speaking, the seat of reflective consciousness, comprising the faculties of perception and understanding, and those of feeling, judging and determining.”<sup>38</sup> The Holy Spirit works to transform the evil impact that sin has left on varied aspects of the human mind. The transformation being wrought on the inner life, the soul of the individual, will reveal itself through the body as the instrument of the soul. As Barnes observes, “Christianity seeks to reign in the soul; and having its seat there, the external conduct and habits will be regulated accordingly.”<sup>39</sup> This inward transformation of the believer’s life is the only effective preservative against outward conformity to this present age.

As a believer consciously recognizes his need for inner cleansing and the resultant renewal in daily conduct and as he yields to the promptings of the Spirit, he rejoices in the reality of

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<sup>38</sup> Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, 3:69.

<sup>39</sup> Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament, Explanatory and Practical*, 271-72.

God's inner work, producing the fruit of holiness in life. This inner transformation will increasingly express itself through his body in what he says and does, and approves or rejects.

#### THE RESULT OF THE TRANSFORMATION

Paul then wrote, "that you may prove what the will of God is." This statement points to the glorious result of the believer's inner transformation. The New International Version begins a new sentence here, but the Greek continues the sentence with *εις* and an articular infinitive (*εις τὸ δοκιμάζειν ὑμᾶς τί τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ*). In this construction, as Harris notes, "Paul's point is not that the aim of the transformation of character is the discernment of God's will, but rather that the Christian's ability to ascertain God's will naturally results from the renewal of the mind."<sup>40</sup> The personal pronoun "you" (*ὑμᾶς*) naturally limits this ability to believers; unsaved individuals do not have this ability.

The transformed believer is "to test and approve what God's will is." The verb "to test" (*δοκιμάζειν*) means "to put to the test for the purpose of approving, and finding that the thing tested meets the specifications laid down, to put one's approval upon it."<sup>41</sup> The New International Version indicates this anticipated result of the testing by the words "test and approve." The thought of approving that which is tested is indicated in the indirect question (*τί τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ*, "what [is] the will of God." The present tense infinitive makes clear that this testing of what God's will is in any given situation or question must be an ongoing practice.

In every new situation in which a believer finds himself he must ask what God's will is for him. Each believer stands personally before God; he cannot leave to others the decision of what is God's will for him. With his fellow believers he confidently affirms that God's will is revealed to His followers through His inspired Word. But it may be quite another matter to discover what precisely is God's will for his own life in any specific situation. Yet the outworking of God's will for him in submitting himself to the leading of God will be in accord with what God has revealed as His will for His children. As a committed believer faithfully follows the leading of the Holy Spirit in the outworking of God's will for him individually, he comes to the devout realization that the unfolding of the divine will in relation to his life and to his ministry for the Lord is indeed "good, pleasing, and perfect."

<sup>40</sup> *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, s v "Appendix Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament," by M J Harris, 3 1187

<sup>41</sup> Wuest, *Romans in the Greek New Testament for the English Reader*, 208

In Paul's statement, *τί τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ εὐάρεστον καὶ τέλειον*, (literally, "what the will of God is, [what is] good, pleasing, and perfect"), the intended grammatical relationship of the three adjectives to the preceding word *θέλημα* has been understood in two ways. One view, reflected in the New International Version rendering—"what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will"—accepts the three terms as adjectives further describing God's will. Similarly the King James Version rendering is, "what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God."

Others, like Bengel, hold that "these adjectives are not epithets of the will of God, but abstract neuters."<sup>42</sup> Lenski says that "these adjectives are substantivized, are treated as a unit (one article), and form an apposition."<sup>43</sup> Then these three terms describe the nature of the things the believer encounters as he follows God's will. This view is reflected in the marginal rendering in the American Standard Version: "the will of God, even the thing which is good and acceptable and perfect." *The Twentieth Century New Testament* translates the clause, "discern what God's will is—all that is good, acceptable, and perfect." The Amplified Bible characteristically combines both: "so that you may prove [for yourselves] what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God, even the thing which is good and acceptable and perfect [in His sight for you]."

While it is possible to interpret Paul's words either way, the former rendering seems the more probable. The center of thought here is the will of God. As Ziesler explains, "the Greek syntax is better understood as conveying that the believer comes to discern what the will of God is, namely, that it is good and acceptable and perfect."<sup>44</sup> Fully in accord with God's will as revealed in His Word, the "will of God" here clearly denotes His active will for each of His redeemed children. His will relates to all phases of a believer's life.

The adjective "the good" (*τὸ ἀγαθόν*) indicates that the will of God for the individual believer is morally good and beneficial in its nature and its impact on his life. What God wills for His saints is intrinsically consistent with His own nature (Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19).

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<sup>42</sup> John Albert Bengel, *New Testament Word Studies A New Translation*, by Carlton T Lewis and Marvin R Vincent, 3 vols (Grand Rapids Kregel, 1971), 2 137

<sup>43</sup> R C H Lenski, *The Interpretation of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (reprint, Minneapolis Augsburg, 1961), 752

<sup>44</sup> Ziesler, cited in Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory on the Old and New Testaments*, 2 252

The second adjective, used previously to describe the believer's sacrifices, now characterizes God's will for His saints as "pleasing" (*εὐάρεστον*, "well-pleasing, acceptable"). Haldane well remarks,

That which the Lord enjoins is acceptable to Him, and surely this is the strongest motive to practice it. Nothing else is acceptable to Him, however specious it may appear to human wisdom. All injunctions that proceed merely from men in Divine things are unacceptable to God. He approves of nothing but obedience to His own commandments.<sup>45</sup>

What is acceptable and pleasing to God the transformed mind of the believer also finds acceptable and pleasing. "Dedication leads to discernment and discernment to delight in God's will."<sup>46</sup> To the unsaved mind the assertion that God's will is "well pleasing" appears to be an arbitrary, unfounded fancy.

The third adjective affirms that God's will for the believer is "perfect" (*τέλειον*) or complete, lacking nothing. It does not overlook or ignore any matter or area in the believer's life that might plunge him into sin and destruction. The will of God, the transcription of His own perfection, now is concerned with all the experiences of the believer (Rom. 8:28-29) and will attain its full realization for him when he will ultimately be transformed into the image of Christ (1 Thess. 5:23; 1 John 3:2). Then His perfect will for His saints will have attained its ultimate perfection. "This is a miracle of transformation, a readjustment to both temporal and eternal realities."<sup>47</sup>

This twofold challenge to believers in Christ is foundational to all Christian living. Their voluntary, love-prompted acceptance of the divine call to presentation and transformation results in the progressive renewal of their minds, enabling them to discern what is God's will for them and to commit themselves to personal obedience to God's good, pleasing, and perfect will, viewed in the light of God's blessed purpose for them in time and eternity.

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<sup>45</sup> Robert Haldane, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Carter, 1847), 570

<sup>46</sup> Harrison, "Romans," 10:128

<sup>47</sup> Francis Davidson, "The Epistle to the Romans," in *The New Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Davidson, A. M. Stibbs, and E. F. Kevan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 960



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