

“Conformed or Transformed?”

Romans 12:1-8

24 August, 2008

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Romans 12:1-8

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. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Prayer.

Spiritual worship is all about presenting yourself to the service of God.

In Judaism,
Predating the Christian experience
Religious authorities asked for a sacrifice
As a vital rite of public worship;
A bird, a rabbit, or a lamb,
Such that the life of the animal
Represented the sin of the self.
By killing the animal
by sacrificial means
Jews believed,
As did many ancients,
That by the blood of their sacrifice
They were atoned for their sins.
Atonement is substitution.
Life of the animal

In substitution for
A slate wiped clean.
Where was PETA¹ then?

Paul sees the whole system of sacrificial worship
As unreasonable.
“Unreasonable service” is the phrase Wesley uses.
It is unreasonable to engage in heathen worship.
It is unreasonable to participate in animal sacrifices,
“So was the glory of the Jews,” he says.
“But a Christian acts,” Wesley continues,
“in all things

¹ People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals

by the highest reason,
from the mercy of God
inferring his own duty."²

If you want to make a sacrifice
acceptable unto God
Then give yourself.
Give yourself wholly,
And without reservation.
Give yourself perfect, and
unblemished,
Exactly as God created you.
The world seeks to conform you;
Change the very perfect essence of
what God created.
We are conformed to be competitive,
Leaving defeated foes in our wake.
We are conformed to be powerful,
At the expense of those we've
crushed.
We are conformed by wealth,
Forgetting about the hungry, the
homeless, the truly left behind.

In a book titled *Strength to Love*³
Martin Luther King, Jr included
a sermon focused on this very issue.
With typical eloquence and brilliance,
King captured this powerful text
in just two unforgettable words:
transformed nonconformity.
King observes how the pressures for
cultural conformity,
to "condition our minds and feet
to move to the rhythmic drumbeat
of the status quo," are immense.

² Wesley's commentary on Romans,
Romans 12

³ Dan Clendenin, Positively
Maladjusted: Martin Luther King and
"Transformed Nonconformity"

Nevertheless, followers of Jesus
have a higher loyalty
than conformity to social
respectability.
We are called to social responsibility.

Living in time and for eternity,
Christians need to discover ways
to live
very much
in the world
but not
of the world.
We should never abandon the world,
nor should we embrace it.
"We must make history," says King,
"and not be shaped by history."
Most people, says King,
"are thermometers that
record or register the temperature
of majority opinion,
not thermostats
that transform and regulate
the temperature of society."

Instead of being conformed by this
world,
Paul shows us a better way.
Allow your mind to be
Transformed;
Transformed only
by the will of God.

Submitting the self to God;
Suppressing the powerful attraction
Of our own subjective will,
With no other distraction;
is to discern the will of God.
Think with sound judgment,
The apostle Paul tells us,
according to the
measure of faith
God has assigned.
Think, he implores.

Think, with an active mind.
Think, with an inquisitive imagination.
Think, using the lens of sound
judgment.
Think, with every watt of available
brainpower.

Paul recognizes that every disciple's
Measure of faith is different,
And, therefore,
So too is every person's means
Of discerning the will of God.
For example,
In my experience,
Because I have been blessed
With an extraordinary education
And depth of Christian experience
The means by which
I plumb the depths of God's will for my
life
Are probably far different
Than the means you utilize.
It is not better or worse.
It does not mean
I go deeper,
Have more clarity,
Or benefit from an inside track,
Into the mind of God
(Like some boast or claim).
It only means that
we each have different tools available
By which we discern the will of God.
Personally,
I rely deeply upon scripture
As my first and primary means
Of discernment.
I listen and reflect
With far less regularity
than I am comfortable.
I'm intentionally observant
Of the Spirit's movement
In the words and actions of others,
In the events of life unfolding,
I watch,

Especially during times of crisis or
want,
For this is often the fertile ground
Which God tills.
I pray,
In my singing and in my car,
In my breaking bread and in the
company I keep,
In silence and while listening.
In prayer,
I ask God to open my mind,
To make me receptive of his will.
You don't get what you don't ask for,
I've always believed.
So I ask.
And I ask often:
Open my mind
That I may know Thy will.

This passage from Paul
Begs the question,
By what means
do you discern the will of God in your
life?
How do you know what needs done
And how to do it?
Please don't appease me
By saying
"I simply follow the Golden Rule;"
The Golden Rule is a gift,
A standard,
A tool,
That God has given to you
To discern his will.
Please do not dismiss these words of
Paul
By saying you simply listen to your
conscience.
Where do you believe
Your conscience came from?
Do you think it just was plucked from
the sky?
That it just fell into your lap?
That you inherited it in your genes?

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Oh, please!

Wake up!

God is present in your life,
Working in your life,
Influencing every aspect of your life.

The walk of faith
Is more than
Down-home cooking of beliefs and
values.

The walk of faith
Includes the transformation of the
mind
To the intimate awareness
Of God's complete entanglement
In every aspect of our lives.

It is not enough to know;
The Christ follower is called to act.
"Faith without works is dead,"
the apostle Paul rightly observes.
"Faith is not idle," Luther
paraphrases.⁴

Nothing contributes to
The perception of Christian hypocrisy
more
Than the preacher who preaches the
word
But whose feet are as clay,
And lives the life of sin and flesh.
Nothing turns the stomach
Of larger society more
Than Sunday, go-to-church Christians
Who lie, cheat, and steal
The other six days of the week.

Act, according to your gifts.
Be true to your faith.
If God has acted in your life
with extraordinary abundance,

Respond with extraordinary
benevolence
towards others.
If God has surrounded you with love
Respond by reflecting that love
Into the lives of those
who are starving for love.
If you have experienced
the nurturing, mothering character of
God,
be the nurturing disciple of Christ
towards a world hungry
for God's enveloping embrace.
Extraordinary acts of charity by some
Are not the measure of charity
By which others are judged
As per our heavenly Father.
Each is measured
According to the gift.
The widow's mite
Was far more a reflection of faith
Than the rich man's pittance.

Each of us has a role to play;
And the absence of any one of us
Diminishes the completeness of the
kingdom.
"We have gifts that differ
according to the grace given to us,"
Paul observes.
Each is vital and necessary for
The proper functioning of the body.
Without you,
The Body of Christ
Is incomplete.
Ministry, education, discernment
Are some of the gifts;
Public speaking, benevolence,
leadership, and compassion
Are others.

"So I appeal to you,
Brothers and sisters,"
Using the words of the great apostle,

⁴ Luther's commentary on Romans

Has your life been defined by spiritual
worship?
Have you kept an open mind
Thirsting for God to fill it with his will?
Do you draw from what has been
given you,
To contribute actions, and not just
words?
This is the appeal Paul is making to us
this day,
Whispered across time and space.
May it give us pause
To reflect and to grow.
Amen.