

New Life in Christ

Romans 12:1-8

¹ 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. ² 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.

³ 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. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

The apostle Paul has spent a great deal of paper and ink to instruct the Christian Church of Rome about what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. They were living in a time when he and they faced life-and-death challenges, but he assured them of their security in their relationship with God. We have spent time since June learning and understanding about:

- the power of the Gospel
- our relationship depends on faith
- we are justified by our faith
- our baptism shows the world that we have died with Christ and now live with him
- our lives are now instruments of righteousness
- we no longer follow the ways of the world, but the ways of God
- there really are two ways of living and we live as children of God
- we now are alive in the Spirit and have life in the Spirit
- we have victory in Christ
- we are God's elect
- God offers salvation and mercy to all.

In light of our new and secure relationship with God, Paul turns to instructions about what it means to have this new life in Christ.

Paul says we are like members of the body. This has gotten me to thinking about our bodies. For most of us, the body is the thing that takes up our thoughts, our time, and our money. If you watch commercial television, you know there are resources for our body from head to toe. There are all kinds of shampoo and conditioner for our hair. There is cleanser for our face...be in oily, dry, or something in between. There are body wash and bars of soap for our skin care. There are vitamins for every condition...brittle nails, hair loss, memory loss. Walgreens and CVS not only supply our prescription medication, but they have all kinds of over-the-counter medications and remedies for all kinds of conditions. These are to make you look and feel great! There are programs that bring healthy food right to our door. They can re-grow our hair and help us lose half our body weight. We can purchase the latest shoe and clothing fashions. If these do not make us look and feel fabulous, there are specialist who can help reshape our body by surgery or special clothing that will hide and tuck. If we don't like our complexion there are cosmetics to give a blush or glow to our skin, remove our wrinkles, make our eyes appear larger, and enhance the appearance or color of our lips. There are medical doctors that can help us with every ailment with medication or surgery. As you see, we think a great deal about our bodies.

The variety and complexity of Paul's use of the concept of "body" offers us the opportunity to think about this metaphor with reference to our new life in Christ and what it means to us as individuals, the congregation, and the church as a whole. Paul said, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice." Most of us twenty-first century worshipers have no point of reference for presenting a dead sacrifice to God. Sacrificing animals by way of atonement for sin or as a gift of thanksgiving is far removed from our experience.

In our time “sacrifice” in popular usage usually connotes something negative. Parents of Olympic athletes make economic sacrifices for the training of their children. Employees are asked to sacrifice raises or benefits when a company falls on hard times. A heroic soldier sacrifices his life to save his comrades, which may mean death or severe injury.

Paul calls on believers to present our bodies as *living* sacrifices. This does not seem to indicate a "take up your cross" expectation that we will need to die physically in the course of our discipleship, though it does not rule it out. Paul indicates that we need actually to *do* things that will put us outside the norms of behavior for our society, wrapping our minds around what we do day to day in our lives that expresses God's will.

He spells out some of these things in our text. We are called, each according to our gifts, to use our bodies as prophets, ministers, teachers, exhorters, givers, leaders, and in acts of cheerful compassion. Our "sacrifice" may come when we admit to ourselves, and then live out in our lives, the reality that the world does not revolve around us as individuals. "It is not about you," Paul seems to be saying, "and that includes your body."

This does not mean that some other person can control our bodies, or that following God means letting another human being abuse our bodies. For Paul, "sacrifice" is a positive term of consecration—of dedication to the will and the work of God that results in the use of gifts through the body—not the abuse of the body as a sign of submission to God or anyone else.

Paul then expands the body metaphor to describe the church, in a passage reminiscent of 1 Corinthians 12; as he asks us to consider ourselves parts of a human body in which each part has different functions, each part has value, and each part is as intimately connected to the other as the head, neck, and torso of a human body are. Each part of the body works, not to bring glory to itself or to meet

only its needs, but to ensure the healthy functioning of the whole system. The gifts of each member are to be used for the common good. Paul says we have a common need for one another—and our gifts are to be used not for our own glory but for the health of the community. The instruction not to think of oneself more highly than one ought helps foster an atmosphere where communities may work together harmoniously and productively.

While there are certainly us church members who may think *too* highly of ourselves, there are also those of us with obvious gifts or skills who may not think highly *enough* of ourselves, assuming we are not "good enough" to contribute. Paul's body metaphor challenges us to consider that *everyone*—every member of the body of Christ in the church—has a gift to contribute to the functioning of that body. This implies that everyone's gifts are not only present but *needed* for the living body of Christ to function in the world, as it seeks to discern and live out the will of God. In this case, the "transformation of the mind" may mean that someone ceases to deny her or his gifts and steps out in faith, taking a risk to serve.

As members of the body, it may be our task to shed new light on a subject. Last week a committee met to explore how we would do a ministry that we have done for many years. However, because of the pandemic, this ministry will need to be done differently this year. The ideas of the group helped up to come up with a plan that will bless us and those we seek to assist. When new members are added to the fellowship, we need to allow them to use their gifts for the common good. Maybe they bring an idea that had not occurred to you. For me there by only one way to do a task, but another member of the body has another idea. From the beginning of its existence, the church has manifested the body of Christ in a great variety of ways. And from the beginning, different communities have structured their worship life, their governance, their teaching in various ways.

Too often we allow differences to mean competition, conflict, and even hatred between Christians. To apply the words of Paul means each of us in our individual roles in the body of Christ brings gifts that enhance our new life in Christ and we support God's will in the world today. Paul's framework of body metaphor brings hope and possibility to what too often seems an enterprise fraught with struggle.

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In our new life in Christ, Paul tells us to practice love in households of faith and toward the public at large. In just eight verses Paul communicates weighty, useful truth about what the faithful must do in order not to be conformed to this world but transformed by the renewing of their minds: godly sacrifice, radical commitment, sacred mindfulness, transformative grace (vv. 1-2); intentionality, communal unity, and vocational awareness (vv. 3-8). This new life is the result of God's gracious activity. As transformed individuals we become the transformed community where we can truly say: "we, who are many, are *one body in Christ*" and we recognize that we need one another as we confess: "and *individually* we are members one of another," v. 5. By God's grace, we are given gifts. When we accept that individuals receive *different* gifts from God, we become a vibrant sacred, transformed community. "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" (vv. 6-8). Seek to discover your gift or gifts and use them to the glory of God in your new life in Christ! **Kirk Byron**

Jones

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