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The Life of Worship: Rethink, Reform, Renew

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The Starting Point

Romans 12:1-2 is a significant and foundational passage on the subject of worship. This passage could very well be the heart and soul of worship theology—and practice—but it is often overlooked or disregarded. In the books on worship found on my library shelves, I have located only a few references to the passage, and even less definitive commentary on it in regards to our worship. I am not sure why this is the case and would like to begin to remedy this situation, especially because we consider ourselves to be Christian people desiring to model Christianity based upon the New Testament.

I would like to present the concepts found here as *primary* for the foundation which should support our entire perceptual framework concerning worship. Not only is this the starting point, but we also must consider it the corner stone of the structure itself. The ideas Paul presents in Romans 12 establish the characteristics of both personal and corporate worship. Using this passage as a jumping point for all other developments of worship theology gives us a solid foundation on which to build. It also provides a reference for balancing all of the facets of worship into a unified whole.

Let me clarify right at the outset that the word “worship” has been so overused and ill defined that its definition today has become muddled. That being said, it remains an excellent word for the topic under consideration because it is the Biblical word. You will notice, however, that I will often qualify the word worship by the use of “personal” or “corporate.” In a broader sense I will use the phrases “life of worship” or “worship as a lifestyle” or something similar to

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indicate the breadth of ideas presented in Scripture. This idea of a “lifestyle of worship” includes the more limited and popular approach to discussing worship—that of the worship service, or corporate worship—but includes it **only as a portion** of the overall concept and life of worship itself. As you read, be sure to pay close attention to the differences in meanings of these qualifiers and which of these I am discussing. What I am attempting to build is an idea of worship as a lifestyle in which personal worship and corporate worship are two parts of a larger whole. Corporate worship, in fact, being the smaller of the two.

Romans 12:1-2

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. (Romans 12:1-2)

Note that Paul begins this statement based upon God’s mercy. If you were to back up a few verses to the end of Romans 11, you would find several verses exalting in the greatness of Who God is and what He has done. “*Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!*” Paul writes, “*How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!*” (Romans 11:33) It is God’s mercy and love, toward us who do not deserve it, which allow us to present ourselves to Him in worship. One commentator notes that these verses bridge a gap in our understanding:

...the chasm that always exists, at least potentially, between doctrine and living. Mere acquaintance with “the mercies of God” does not create for the Christian the ability to discern, embrace, and verify God’s will in daily affairs, for this knowledge becomes effective only when its yokefellows are total dedication and daily growth. Conversely, a desire to live according to God’s will gains power and relevance only when grounded in “the mercies” and the commitment appropriate to them.⁶

Without the work of God—through Christ upon the cross—our attempts at associating with, living for, or worshiping God would be futile. It is His movement toward us (not us toward Him) that establishes the relationship between God and man. This is one of the main emphases of the entire book of Romans, and Paul tells us that we “*fall short*” of drawing ourselves toward Him and that we consistently seek everything other than God. Romans 3:9-11 says that “*both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, ‘There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God.’*” When Paul uses the phrase “*Jews and Greeks*” he is not referring only to those nationalities, but in a broad reference to all people of every nationality.

Let us always remember this: it is God that moves toward us in mercy, and we respond by His mercy. Both His mercy toward us and our response to Him are His gifts to us. Not only is this the message of Romans, it is also encapsulated in Ephesians 2:8-10,

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for

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good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

If we keep this point at the core of our discussion we will recognize His gift of salvation through the cross of Christ, and His ongoing work in us through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Paul continues in Romans 12 by telling us to “*present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God.*” Our faith is more than a faith of intellectual assent. We are not believers if we only agree to the **propositions** of the faith, and do not also conform our **actions** to a life of faith. There must be an external representation of our internal convictions. James is clear in emphasizing this point as well when he writes, “*Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself*” (James 2:17; see also James 2:14-26 for the complete context). James rightly says that we cannot show our faith without works, for works are the externalizing of our faith. These works come **after** our salvation, as a result of our faith. Our salvation is holistic, encompassing body, mind, and soul.

Combating Dualism

In this way Paul is dismantling a certain dualism in our culture and thought that may creep into our life of worship. (Dualism, in simplistic form, is a belief that the “inner” or spiritual part of man is good, and that the “outer” or physical part is evil.) He tells us to present our **bodies** as a **spiritual service**, mixing the spiritual and the physical. Have you ever wondered why he does not advise prayer, or Bible reading, or any other internal “spiritual discipline” as what we should present to God in worship? Western Christians seem to understand the “spiritual disciplines” (i.e., Bible reading, prayer, meditation, fasting, worship, etc.)

as those elements of our faith that are internal by nature, rather than physical. It is in this philosophy of the Christian life that we see a dualism glaringly apparent in our Christian walk. Many believe that the internal or “spiritual” things we do are more presentable, holy, or worshipful to God and the physical aspects of life are considered less honorable, and not necessarily spiritual by nature.

This dualistic view of life has caused a rupture in the very core of what Paul refers to as a “*spiritual service of worship*.” It is only in a unified, holistic approach that worship can be understood correctly. ***Presenting our bodies is spiritual by nature and acceptable to God as worship.*** As Nancy Pearcey notes,

It is only when we offer up everything we do in worship to God that we finally experience His power coursing through every fiber of our being. The God of the Bible is not only the God of the human spirit but also the God of nature and history. We serve Him not only in worship but also in obedience to the Cultural Mandate. If Christian churches are serious about discipleship, they must teach believers how to keep living for God after they walk out the church doors on Sunday.⁷

Paul moves on to juxtapose the offering of our body in worship with an essential non-conformity with the world and its supposed “pleasures,” which are often bodily in nature. The “world” being spoken of is not the “earth” or the many God-given pleasures we enjoy in creation and within relationships with others, but “world” refers to the system, or culture, of the world enslaved to Satan and turning away from God. John in his first epistle notes the general breadth of this:

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Do not love the world, nor the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. (1 John 2:15-16)

Paul actually gets very specific in Galatians 5:16-21 by listing the “*deeds of the flesh*” which describe the worldly lusts and desires (a life “conformed” to the world):

Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

And then he lists the “*fruit of the Spirit*” in Galatians 5:22-24, which describes a life “*not conformed*” to the world:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

These verses are the meat on the bones, so to speak, of the phrases we find in John’s epistle, as well as in Romans 12:1-2.

Balancing Mind and Body

Next, Paul balances the idea of presenting our physical **bodies** with the idea of presenting our **minds** to God (Romans 12:2). Once again, our actions of worship (i.e., our lifestyle of worship) are inseparable from our thoughts and beliefs about worship. As Horrace Stoessel so succinctly points out,

The aspect of Paul's use of [mind] which reveals the nature of the "common mind" in Romans 12:2 is the *objective* aspect, by which is meant that [mind] always includes the idea of an external standard. Sometimes "standard" is the primary idea; in these passages [mind] is virtually equivalent to "theology," that is, the ideas or principles which are the springs of action.⁸

As God's word transforms our minds (in all of its facets) individually and as a community, we are able to "prove" or "discern" what the will of God is. As quoted above, we understand "the ideas or principles which are the springs of action." In other words, we will know more readily how to present our bodies as a "*spiritual service of worship*" when we understand more intimately the character of God and His desires for us as revealed in Scripture.

Note how Paul intertwines the working of the mind with the actions of the body by drawing on parallel terms in "*living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God,*" and "*that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*" Our mind is internal, our bodies are external, and we as people live in both realms. Since our actions flow from our inner thoughts, we must make it a serious matter to "renew" our minds to conform to God's character and desires for our life. This is the life of worship.

Francis Schaeffer, founder of *L'Abri Fellowship* and an influential mid-20th Century Christian thinker, makes a

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similar point in reference to the overall Christian life—what I am calling *the life of worship*. He states it in this way,

So here we move on in our understanding of true spirituality in the Christian life. Basically it is a matter of our *thoughts*. The external is the expression, the result. Moral battles are not won in the external world first. They are always a result flowing naturally from the cause, and the cause is the internal world of one's thoughts.⁹

Schaeffer shows that the pattern is always the same: thought first, then action. Here in Romans 12, Paul is using this same pattern. It is not enough for us to only give assent to the right knowledge (doctrine), nor is it enough to merely act in the right way (worship methods). Our practice of worship must flow from a solid theological and biblical foundation.

I appreciate the way Stoessel summarizes by saying that Paul “refers to a process embracing two distinct though not independent steps: (1) receiving and affirming a basic theology; (2) discerning and acknowledging the implications of that theology for my personal situation.”¹⁰ Here we find our pattern for a framework and foundation for worship. Worship is revealed as a complete life that honors God, whether individually in our daily lives or corporately in our worship together.

Our worship (the presentation of our bodies) should flow naturally from the cause (our thinking/worldview of worship). It is not enough to do the actions. It is not enough to think the correct thoughts. ***Our activity of worship—both individually and corporately—must derive from correct and biblical thinking about worship, and then flow out into activities that are offered to God as worship.*** When you set this as the foundational principle of worship, as I hope this book will help you to do,

then asking questions in regard to what we do in worship, or in order to worship, will also include the question of why we are doing it. If we are worshiping ignorantly, not knowing why we do what we do, then the actual quality and authenticity of that worship is in question.

Stoessel also notes that this idea of being “*renewed in the spirit of your mind*” is “part of a thorough reorientation of life in accordance with the truth learned in Christ. However, the Christian [mind] is primarily determined by the acknowledgment of the Lordship of Christ crucified, from which comes acceptance of the cross as a way of life.”¹¹ This gives a unique and far-reaching meaning to the words of Jesus: “*If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me*” (Matthew 16:24). These words of Jesus show the center point of a lifestyle of worship, and the overall commitment to His way of life.

Worship in Life

Returning to Romans 12, another key to understanding the significance of this passage in reference to worship is found in the next few verses. Paul does not leave us in the dark as to how we are to present our bodies as a “*spiritual service of worship*.” In fact, he gets very specific in detailing exactly the kinds of activities he is talking about. Believe it or not, it is much more extensive than what you generally experience in church on Sunday. Actually, there are people worshiping God right now and they are not singing, praying, or listening to a sermon. Let us find out what Paul means.

Commentators see Romans 12:1-2 as a transition from doctrinal considerations to how this set of beliefs works in daily life (or “practical” application). This becomes glaringly apparent as quickly as verse three where Paul encourages “*sound judgment*” in our thought life about ourselves in

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comparison with others. “God,” he says, “*has allotted to each a measure of faith.*” And with that statement he sets the stage for us to comprehend the variety, unity, and complexity of worship within the Body of Christ (i.e., remember that the “body of Christ” is one of Paul’s primary pictures for the church—the community of believers. (See also 1 Corinthians 12; Colossians 1:18)

Paul then explains some of the basics of the proper functioning of the Body of Christ. There are many members (individual Christians, vs. 4) and yet only one body (the church, vs. 5). Each individual has been given a measure of faith (vs. 3) to serve others (vss. 5 and 6). The grace and faith given, however, is not in equal measure for some have more, some less, but just as much as is necessary for the individual (see vs. 6), and each member has a different function, or a different job to do (vs. 4). With these differing and numerous functions, or gifts, we serve one another, and the gifts Paul lists are set in the context of use within the community of believers, for he uses the phrase “*one another*” three times before the end of the chapter.

This is the full circle of worship in Romans 12. We are to present our bodies for service to the community of believers based upon our renewed and transformed minds. In so doing, we worship individually by exercising our spiritual gifts, and we worship corporately as the community works together to serve each other and the people around them. When a local representation of the Body of Christ functions in this way it is a marvelous thing—and it is extremely effective. Paul says, in Ephesians 4:16, that “*the proper working of each individual part* (i.e., the Christian serving in his or her giftedness), *causes the growth of the body* (i.e., the Church) *for the building up of itself in love.*” Of course it would be this way: God thought of it after all!

An example of this interplay of individual worship based upon spiritual gifts and service to the Body of Christ would

be my act of writing this book. Right now, as I work on this paragraph, I am sitting in a library in a corner by myself. I am singing no “Praise and Worship” songs, no hymns, and as far as I can tell there is no sermon being preached anywhere nearby. And, no, I am not witnessing to the person in the cubicle beside me either (actually, there is no one in that cubicle). I am here writing this book. So, given the limited ideas of worship that many people have, they would not describe me as being involved in “worship.”

In the more encompassing approach that I have described above, however, I am quite involved in worship. In fact, I consider the activity I am involved in at this moment to be one of my more significant acts of personal/individual worship. Why? How can I say that? Because in my worldview of worship I am applying the gifts God has given to serve the Body of Christ. He has allotted to me some creativity, an enjoyment of studying and teaching, and an ability to write down my thoughts effectively. So, as I use those gifts (His mercies and grace to me, in a measure appropriate for the task), I develop these ideas and write this book in order to offer it to encourage, teach, and foster dialogue in the church, the Body of Christ.

For me, this is where the “rubber meets the road” in worship. This is worship beyond Sunday and infiltrating into my daily life. It is the presentation of my body as a “*spiritual service of worship*.” In its truest form, this is the widest ranging idea that we can consider as “worship”—***a lifestyle in which God is honored and we serve Him daily, moment by moment.***

There may be some of you who are authors, or could be, so you may actually join me in this form of worship. However, even then our work will be unique, as God has gifted us with mercy and grace appropriate for the task, and we both can serve the Body of Christ in this way. Diversity in unity is a key factor in the operation of the church.

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Others may have no inclination to write, or research, or do anything of the sort. What is it that God has given you to do? I have a friend who loves to see the church building clean. It is like his mission in life. He is passionate about vacuuming and loves clean windows. There may be others who can vacuum, and some who can clean windows—even I can do that! But his internal joy at doing it, and his gifting from God, works to produce actions that go beyond average. This is worship at its best as he serves God by serving the Body of Christ with his gifts. To use a popular phrase, my friend in his cleaning has a “heart of worship.”

“As exhilarating, burden-lifting, and life-transforming as worship in our services can be,” T.D. Jakes writes, “this is only a part of the meaning of worship for the believer. Worship comprises the very essence and foundation of our life in Christ. Worship is the complete consecration of our lives to God. It is the attitude we walk in, speak from, and meditate in at all times. Our life is completely and totally His.”¹²

Holistic Worship

It is only as the individual holistically presents body and mind to God in worship that the community can then operate properly, and worship as a group (i.e., corporate worship). This connection between the proper functioning of each part of the Body of Christ through spiritual giftedness and the worship of the community is too often missed, yet appears quite clearly in Romans 12. The truest form of worship is when each Christian, and thus each community, is doing and acting as God created it to do and act (further comments on that concept found in the discussion of Psalm 19 in Chapter 4).

Ronald Allen and Gordon Borrer state it this way:

All of life, for the believer, is to be an act of worship. Throughout Scripture this is emphasized. The Jewish nation again and again was commanded to remain pure before God in worship and loyalty. Work was to be an act of worship; marriage, interpersonal relationships, community dealings, and, of course, the entire religious-sacrificial system were to be purely observed to God's glory.¹³

In Romans 15, Paul underscores this idea and points to service (vs. 2), unity (vs. 6), and variety (vs. 7) as core elements of the success of the community to "*glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*"

It is within this broad framework in Romans 12 that we can then form a foundation which will hold true to both the core of what worship means for the community, and the variety that its members can bring to the public setting (as exemplified in the diversity of spiritual giftedness). Christianity is unique in this ability to grasp firmly the core of its belief system, yet provide a wide enough framework for cultural and stylistic differences to flourish. This idea may seem threatening to some, yet it is the very essence that has allowed the Church to flex with all that it has experienced throughout the centuries.

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