

Romans 12:1-8, A Turning Point

Unity with Diversity

ABSTRACT

At a key turning point in the cornerstone epistle of Romans Paul prepares his audience for the rest of the book. Chapters 12-16 are about love and unity in different aspects, “love is the fulfillment of the law,” 13:10. A powerful introduction gives us the means of accomplishing the mandate of love and unity and often neglected conjunctions beginning verses 3 and 4 explicitly tie the section together. Simple love must come to characterize His church in the new era we have entered. It will make us powerful.

¹Therefore I urge you, brothers *and sisters*, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship. ²And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may ^dprove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

³For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. ⁴For just as we have many parts in one body and all the body’s parts do not have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually parts of one another. ⁶However, since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, *each of us is to use them properly*: if prophecy, in proportion to *one’s* faith; ⁷if ^aservice, in the *act of serving*; or the one who teaches, in the *act of teaching*; ⁸or the one who ^aexhorts, in the *work of exhortation*; the one who gives, with ^bgenerosity; the one who is in leadership, with diligence; the one who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. ¹

INTRODUCTION

Building on what has been written before, Paul turns another corner in Romans with 12:1-8. This section introduces the more pragmatic, consequential final section of the main body of Romans text. 12:1-8 takes us through the how to and goal of the will of God (verse 2), which is unity in Christ, the end product of love, the New Commandment, John 13:34.

¹ [New American Standard Bible](#) (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 2020), Ro 12:1–8.

This is the same will, the same desire of the heart of the Lord Jesus laid bare in the final pastoral prayer of John 17, his last will and testament before the cross. “That they may all be one, just as we are one.”²

THE ENGINE

Love and unity are easy to talk about. How do you do it? How does one make it happen?

In 12:1, Paul begins with a polite command³, in verse one, not grammatically so but linguistically, “I urge you to present your bodies.”⁴, followed by “and”, meaning *so/and so* to begin verse two, with two commands, one negative and one positive, “do not be conformed . . . but be transformed.”⁵

How could we understand and experience the will of God, in verse two, unless He has control? “Presenting” our bodies describes willing submission to him, giving up control to serve or for inspection or sacrifice, as pictured here. The word for “present” is used in different contexts, with different nuances. Here it is used to describe our act of worship, a sacrifice, giving ourselves completely to him in worship. Paul follows with the logical, natural consequence of this sacrifice, nonconformity and transformation (verse two). Sanctification would be another word for this, becoming different than our age, distinctive and, by flipping terms, conformed, rather, to the image of his Son (8:29), rather than to the world (literally, “age”).

The passives used in these commands should produce some painful humility as we are reminded that more powerful forces than ourselves are at work on us and in us. This is true whether we are talking about the world’s efforts to conform us to the age we live in or to the need for our Lord to effect transformation “into the image of his Son.”⁶ The mental dynamic mentioned, in verse two, is explicit in transformation and implicit in nonconformity, implicit by contrast in the text to transformation as the remedy. Not being conformed to this age is the flip side to being transformed, both joined by a strong contrastive, “but”.⁷ Transformation “into the same image” comes as we reflect on and think about the glory and character of our Lord.⁸ The knowledge of

² [New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update](#) (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Jn 17:21. All references are to the NASB95 unless specified.

³ So, Cranfield (C. E. B. Cranfield, [A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans](#), International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 597.), Dunn (James D. G. Dunn, [Romans 9–16](#), vol. 38B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1988), 708.) and Moo (Douglas J. Moo, [The Letter to the Romans](#), ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Second Edition., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 767.).

⁴ Παρακαλῶ plus infinitive, παραστῆσαι.

⁵ Both the negative and positive commands are middle/passive in form but should be taken as passive.

⁶ Rom 8:29

⁷ ἀλλὰ

⁸ 2 Cor 3:18

God gained in this way is invaluable (Paul: "surpassing value"⁹) for everything important,¹⁰ especially our personal growth.¹¹

This brings us to the discovery of God's will, what is important to Him.¹² This is the end game, the purpose of verses 1-2, "so that . . . will of God". This is where 1-2 leads. "Understand what the will of the Lord is (Ephesians 5:17)." Paul shows us something different than what we have come to call the will of God, which in modern context is determining which among a selection of choices we should make. Here Paul is showing us the will of God is the culmination of a process that begins with the sacrifice of presenting ourselves, our bodies, very personal, to our Lord. It continues, as a logical result¹³, with very personal change from conformity with our times to transformation into someone distinctive from them, "into the same image" (2 Cor 3:18) of the "divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4). Presenting, giving ourselves, is where a powerful Christian life begins, transformed by renewing our minds in the knowledge of God and results in discovering His will, His heart. Again, this hinges on giving our bodies, ourselves, to him (also, Rom 6:13, 16). That is the "prime directive" of this section.

Having done this, what will we find? What will we discover? What is the will of God? Certainly we see it in the final prayer of our Lord before going to the cross (Jn 17), a prayer for unity. Here, in Romans, Paul assures us it is "good and acceptable and perfect" (verse 2). The will of God is revealed as He continues, through Paul, to explain in verses 3-8.

THE LOGICAL CONNECTIONS, "FOR"

There are two explanatory statements, in 3-8, each beginning with "For," γαρ. The first of these statements in verse 3 explains the reason for 1-2 that is humility, sound judgment in thinking. The second, beginning in verse 4, explains the need for sound judgment that is the intertwined relationships we have in the body of Christ (verses 3-8). These two conjunctions are critical since they are what tie the whole passage together. Most commentators see the unity of the passage but give little credit to the logical conjunctions "For," γαρ. Exceptions are Cranfield, p. 611 and 616, Moo, p. 778 and Kruse, p. 467 and 469, where single sentences are devoted to this.

Paul's concern for the unity of the church is seen in devoting this much space to the subject at the beginning of chapters 12-16, detailing the implications of the first 11 chapters. The unity and

⁹ Phil 3:8

¹⁰ 2 Pet 1:3

¹¹ 2 Pet 3:18

¹² Paul explains that the natural consequence of allowing God and His Spirit to do this transformative work in our lives is a growing ability to discern and approve God's will. Steven E. Runge, [High Definition Commentary: Romans](#) (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), 214.

¹³ καί, with implication of result, explanatory, see Daniel B. Wallace, [Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics - Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House and Galaxie Software, 1996), 673.

flow of the passage mirrors the subject discussed and is provided by the two little conjunctions at the beginning of verses 3 and 4. Without them there would be three paragraphs loosely connected by their content but not explicitly so by the structure of the specific wording.

It took grace for Paul to instruct others about humility, “so that you too will not be tempted”¹⁴. But Paul goes on to instruct about “sound judgment” in one’s thinking about oneself, to keep a “level head” and not to think too highly for unity’s sake (verse 3-5). Thinking too highly and thinking with sound judgment are contrasted with the conjunction, “but”.¹⁵ Each side of the contrast informs on the other. The overly elevated thought life on one side is to be avoided. Thinking too highly is not proper (lit; necessary) thinking. It is bad judgment. Properly balanced thinking, on the other side, sound judgment, is to be embraced. It is more lowly, not too elevated or high, and humble, more appropriate, the way one “ought to think”, in consideration of relationships with others and God Himself. This thinking is, also, encouraged in Philippians 2:3-5, “the same mindset as Christ Jesus.”¹⁶

This is not so easy. It takes a “measure of faith (verse 3),”¹⁷ which God has given to each person in the body of Christ. This phrase takes its place in the text as a means of enablement, so we are reminded of the power given to each of us through the Spirit to “live by faith” that is in and from Christ. Faith always requires less of our efforts and more of h

is, and so the death and life process of growth and accompanying suffering are in view here. This transformation is necessary to rely on the power of God in Christ. There is a “measure of faith” God has allotted to each of us. This is how each of us gets the grace Paul mentioned at the beginning of verse 3. No it’s not so easy to “think with sound judgment.” Only the “mind of the Spirit,” “the mind set on the Spirit,” the mind empowered, generated and protected by the Spirit¹⁸ can do it. It is not humanly possible of ourselves.

Now verse 4, the second explanatory sequence introduced by “For”. This provides support for verse 3 by explaining the need for thinking with sound judgment, the working plural unity of the body, “We . . . are one body in Christ,” (the main verbal sequence in verse 5). Building his point, Paul compares the physical body, verse 4, with the body of Christ, verse 5, “just as . . . so,” like the one, so the other. “Just as we have many members, . . . so we . . . are one body.” He doubles down on this plural unity with a fascinating appositive phrase (there is no “and/και), “individually members one of another.”¹⁹ This is explanatory of “one body.” It is a dramatic

¹⁴ Gal 6:1

¹⁵ ἀλλὰ

¹⁶ NIV, Php 2:5.

¹⁷ Too much has been made of Cranfield’s thinking about this, p. 616-617. The context following is more concerned with what precedes “measure of faith”. The majority view is taken here and presented well by Kruse, p. 469 and Moo, p. 779-780.

¹⁸ Rom 8:4-6 Gk and sense of the passage.

¹⁹ The appositive immediately follows, “One body in Christ.” The intervening “and” in English is not sourced in και from the original but is an emphatic δε. The second, appositive phrase is expansive/explanatory.

statement explaining how intertwined our unity is. We are one by mutually indwelling one another.²⁰ It indicates how important it is for us to “think with sound judgment”, not thinking too highly of ourselves but to have “humility of mind.”

*Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves;
do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.*²¹

So now we have the reason for verses 1 and 2, the proper function of the church, the body of the Lord Jesus Christ, in both its multi-faceted and united nature. This plural unity is reflective of the divine nature, the true image and functionality of the God head. This simple complexity would normally be conflictive and competitive, not workable, not even possible. But in Christ this plural unity is actually the divine image of the Trinity. The impossible is true. These realities are not competitive but symphonic and complementary, a beautiful image of divinity in combination with humanity. Paul deals here with the difficulty and, yet, the possibility of making this beauty workable and functional. It involves nonconformity and transformation because making this divine image work requires divine power and wisdom. It is not humanly possible of ourselves.

SPECIFIC DIVERSITY

There is no sentence break in verse six, but the sentence of verse five continues.²² Paul continues by returning to the diversity of verse four that used the physical body as an illustration of our plurality. Now turning to the actual plurality in the body of Christ that results from differing grace, Paul lists some of these gifts of grace. It takes three verses to complete this list. Seven gifts are listed with the emphasis, from 6a, on differences and degrees between them and within them. Certainly there are seven separate gifts listed, indicating the differences *between* gifts. There is also implication, from 6a and the modifying phrase, with the first four gifts, that there are differences *within* the gifts, “according to the grace given.”²³ This variety would allow room for differing ministries and effects, 1 Cor 12:4-6. The seven gifts are tied together, interlocked, by varying structures over the three verses, forming a structural unity of the differing gifts.²⁴ The

²⁰ This is roughly the same language used to describe our union with Christ and that of the Father and Son. It is human perichoresis that is only possible because of the perichoresis, mutual indwelling, that occurs in Christ. See Jn 14:10-11 and 17:21-23, “that they may all be one; even as You, Father, *are* in Me and I in You.”

²¹ Phil 2:3-4.

²² The sentence continues with a present participle, expanding/explaining the oneness just mentioned.

²³ “According to the proportion of his faith;” and, “in his serving”, etc. The individual’s uniqueness seems to be preserved.

²⁴ The unity of the list is especially enhanced by the presence of $\epsilon\iota\tau\epsilon$ with the first four gifts. These conjunctions, along with general statements in the modifying phrases of 2-4 (in the performance of the gift) and a statement of means as the modifying statement of the first gift (according to the proportion of his faith), set the first four gifts apart from the last three. Those modifying statements are about the manner of application, how they should be practiced, attitudes. However, overlapping, identical structure with $\epsilon\upsilon$ in the last 6 gifts unify the list again. The last five gifts are given as participles, while the first two are nouns. About the time there appears to be common

space given and careful structure of these last three verses of Rom 12:1-8 speak to their importance, often overlooked, in this section on the will of God for the church.

To help recap and summarize the key passage of Rom 12:1-8 on the effective function of the church, the body of Christ, a main verb condensation might be useful. To see this section by condensing it to the principal flow of the main verbs, phrases that are peripheral are left out, in the following:

*I urge you to present your bodies and do not be conformed but be transformed so that you may see what the will of God is. For I say to everyone not to think too highly of himself but to have sound judgment. For we are one body in Christ, having gifts that differ.*²⁵

Love and unity must characterize the church in the new age we have entered. We can no longer go through the motions or tolerate a divided reality or appearance. The pressures of western culture will demand authenticity and power and truth from God's people. We must practice the love of Christ in the body of Christ for the world to see. We are not there. We must grow into it. "Present your bodies . . ." and "be transformed." "Do this and you will live."²⁶

structure, it breaks down and another, overlapping, small scale structure appears. So there are common but overlapping structures that reinforce the message of plural unity.

²⁵ Based on the NASB95.

²⁶ Lk 10:28