

First Things Came First

- For eleven chapters Paul has explained the Gospel – our need for it as sinners before a holy God, our living in it by faith alone in the power of the Holy Spirit, and God’s plan to save a people from among the Jews and non-Jews for His “*glory forever*” (11:36). Now, Paul begins to make application to our lives.¹
- We cannot abstract morals/ethics from Christianity without the Gospel of Jesus Christ and still have them be Christian morals/ethics.² Paul does not start with a Christian ethic, but with the Christian Gospel.
- READ 2 Timothy 3:16,17. Which comes first – scriptural understanding/teaching, or good works? Paul’s letters give us this model: a thorough understanding of the Gospel truth in which we stand which bears the fruit of good works and right ethics in a believer’s life. Emphasizing good works/ethics over right doctrine will minimize the Gospel, take Jesus out of the center, and steal glory from God.
- Paul, having given us a robust eleven chapters teaching about the Gospel, now gives us a high calling for life in light of that truth.

¹ Chapters 5-8 had many commands to live a certain way in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, but chapters 12-15 place application of the Gospel more obviously at the forefront.

² “Means and methods used for the improvement of society and the establishment of righteousness among men can be truly and permanently helpful only when they are rooted in the regeneration of the individual by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ” (*Baptist Faith & Message 2000*, XV). “Christian-ish” laws, ethics, and morals will not save a single soul. Only the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ does that.

True Worship (12:1)

12:1 *Therefore I urge you, 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.*

The Sacrifice

Presentation

- 12:1 sets up an understanding of new covenant worship while using language from old covenant worship.³
- This “presentation” language has been used before in Paul’s letter to the Roman congregation:
 - In telling us to live out our baptism (6:3,4), Paul admonished us to present ourselves to God alone. READ 6:13,16,19.
- All human beings worship, or present (offer/sacrifice) themselves to something. All unbelievers (and, sadly, some professing Christians) present themselves as slaves to that which is against God, His Word, and His glory in Christ. Are you different?

Our Bodies

- Unbelievers have been given over by God to the sin they worship, “*so that their bodies would be dishonored among them*” (1:24). Believers, on the other hand, are commanded “*do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts*” (6:12).⁴
- All three adjectives (“*living*,” “*holy*,” and “*acceptable*”) apply to the type of sacrifice we are to make in new covenant worship.

³ The infinitive “*to present*” is used this way in several other places in the N.T. (Luke 2:22; Ephesians 5:27; Colossians 1:28).

⁴ See also 1 Corinthians 6:13,15; Philippians 1:20; Hebrews 10:22.

Living

- We are “*living*” sacrifices because we are “*alive to God in Christ Jesus*” (6:11) and are to “*present yourselves to God as those **alive** from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God*” (6:13). We are alive by faith in the Gospel, not by any righteousness in ourselves (see 1:16,17).⁵

Holy

- The adjective “*holy*” was applied to the Old Testament sacrifices – they were for the LORD and His purposes alone.⁶ Is your holiness unto the LORD in all things a guiding reality for your life as a believer?

Acceptable to God

- The idea of “*acceptable*” sacrifices is also based on the O.T. sacrificial system.⁷
- **Christian obedience is not paying God back for redeeming us!** “...*who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again?*” (11:35).
- Paul begins and ends this letter speaking of the “*obedience of faith*” (1:5; 16:26). True, saving faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ results in obedience to God, since believers are filled with the Holy Spirit Who conforms us to the image of Christ (Who was perfectly obedient to the Father).⁸

⁵ For more in Romans on true life, READ 6:3-13; 8:5-13; 9:26; 14:7.

⁶ Leviticus 2:3,10; 6:17,25,29; 7:1,6; 10:12,17; 14:13; 23:20; 24:9; Numbers 6:20; 18:8,9,17,19.

⁷ Exodus 28:38; Leviticus 1:3; 19:5; 22:19,21,29; 23:11; Ezra 6:10; Psalm 20:3; Isaiah 56:7; 60:7.

⁸ God’s judgment through Christ is on those who “*do not obey*” the Gospel (2 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Peter 4:17).

You Are Priests

- This worship is “reasonable,” or “logical.”⁹ Because of the great compassion of God graciously shown to us in Christ, it is perfectly logical that we give ourselves fully to living for Him. Nothing else makes sense.
- In every other use in the New Testament, this word for “*worship*” (*λατρεία*) refers to the Old Testament sacrificial worship in the Tabernacle/Temple, mediated by the Levitical priests (Romans 9:4; Hebrews 9:1,6). Just as O.T. worshipers offered substitutes for themselves in worship, we spiritually offer ourselves continually to God with our whole lives.
- Now, in the new covenant, all believers in Jesus Christ are priests (1 Peter 2:5,9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).¹⁰ This is massively significant: **in the old covenant, worship occurred at the Tabernacle/Temple at specific times; in the new covenant, worship is every moment of a believer’s existence.**

⁹ The E.S.V., H.C.S.B., N.A.S.B., and N.C.V. translated this “spiritual.” The Geneva Bible, K.J.V., and the N.K.J.V. translate it “reasonable” – I think this is right (we get our word “logical” from the Greek word λογικός, which is used here).

¹⁰ “We affirm the priesthood of all believers. Laypersons have the same right as ordained ministers to communicate with God, interpret Scripture, and minister in Christ’s name...this doctrine is first and foremost a matter of responsibility and servanthood, not privilege and license. It is of course, a perversion of this doctrine to say that all views are equally valid, that you can believe anything and still be a Baptist or that the pastor has no unique leadership role” (Southern Baptist Convention position statement, <http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/positionstatements.asp>).

Anti-Conformist (12:2)

12:2 *And do not be conformed to this world [τῷ αἰῶνι, from αἰών], but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*

This Age and the Age to Come

- We are not to be conformed to this present age in which we live.¹¹
- The Bible seems to describe two ages: this “*present evil age*” (Galatians 1:4) and the age to come.¹² Believers, while living in this world now, actually belong to the age to come and should represent it now (even in our thought-life). We are not to think as the people of this age think.
- Unbelievers cannot help but “*be conformed to this age*” (H.C.S.B.); they are blinded by “*the god of this age*” (2 Corinthians 4:4, H.C.S.B.), and are being “*held captive to do his will*” (2 Timothy 2:26). In seeking and loving autonomy, independence, uniqueness, rebellion, self-determination, self-actualization, self-expression, etc., they are all blindly and completely enslaved to “*this age*,” which is under the lie of the devil. The only thing that can free them is the Spirit’s working through the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- “If all our calculations, plans, ambitions are determined by what falls within life here, then we are children of this age. Besides, this age is an evil age (cf. 1 Cor. 2:6,8; Gal. 1:4) and if our fashion is that of this age then the

¹¹ The H.C.S.B. correctly translates this as “age.” It is the Greek word αἰών, from which we get our English word “eon.”

¹² Matthew 12:32; 13:22,39,40,49; 24:3; Luke 16:8; 18:30; 20:35; 1 Corinthians 1:20; 2:6,8; 3:18; 10:11; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Galatians 1:4; Ephesians 1:21; 2:2; 1 Timothy 6:17; 2 Timothy 4:10; Titus 2:12.

iniquity characteristic of this age governs our life...we must have patterns that abide, patterns that are the earnest of and are continuous with the age to come. We do well to examine ourselves by this criterion: are we calculating in those terms which the interests and hopes of the age to come demand?”¹³

Thinking God’s Thoughts After Him

- The command “*do not be conformed*” is specific to area of our thoughts.¹⁴
- We are commanded to “*love the Lord your God...with all your mind*” (Matthew 22:37//Mark 12:30// Luke 10:27). Jesus calls this “*the great and foremost commandment*” (Matthew 22:38). We cannot love Him with “*all*” our minds if we are thinking thoughts in opposition to His revealed truth to us in Scripture.
- To be “*transformed by the renewing of your mind*,” and, as a result, think thoughts in conformity with “*the will of God*” (which is revealed in Scripture and is the only true description of reality), you must be actively seeking reality in Scripture and replacing any opposing thoughts with that reality. The first line, in fact, of spiritual warfare, is in our thought-lives (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).¹⁵
- For example, this last Tuesday our theology reading group discussed the second commandment

¹³ John Murray (1898-1975), *The Epistle to the Romans, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), pgs. 113-114.

¹⁴ READ Ephesians 4:20-24.

¹⁵ Darkened thought and false thinking because of sin is a reality described throughout the New Testament (Romans 1:28; Ephesians 4:17; 1 Timothy 6:5; 2 Timothy 3:8; Titus 1:15). People whose thoughts are darkened by sin don’t realize it; they profess “*to be wise*” (Romans 1:22). So how can we know the truth? Scripture alone gives us the right mental and spiritual “vision” for knowing and rightly comprehending reality.

(Exodus 20:4-6//Deuteronomy 5:8-10). This is not just a prohibition against creating idolatrous images of false gods, but, as we see later in Exodus 32:4,5; Deuteronomy 4:15-29; Isaiah 40:12-18; 46:5,6; Acts 17:29, God is also opposed to attempting to depict Him in any way. Yet we have depictions of Jesus in art, posters, movies, and images that proliferate through social media. We put up nativity scenes at Advent. We welcome images of doves (as the Holy Spirit). Do we even think about these things and whether they violate God’s clear command? He has told us how we are to depict Jesus’ sacrifice for us (proclamation, Galatians 3:1,2); He has given us visible images for Christian worship – baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Are we transgressing when we do more than Scripture commands? Why or why not? Because it is accepted and widely-practiced in “Christian culture,” does that mean we don’t have to think about the second commandment and its relevance to us?

- We are constantly barraged with statements about reality that are contrary to the true testimony about reality given to us in Scripture. Sometimes there are even competing visions of reality given from within the Christian community. Are you actively comparing propositions about reality in entertainment, politics, the opinions of other people, your own desires, etc., with the only truth which is found in Scripture? What other voices speak louder than Scripture into your life?¹⁶

¹⁶ This year is the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, whose creed was *semper reformata*, “always reforming.” We must always be about examining our beliefs and practices and comparing them with Scripture, for the enemy is subtle, looks and sounds good, and never stops trying to derail us from the truth. I love this quote and think about it often: “Perhaps the origin of Baptists is best explained as a search for a pure church. They sought a church composed of

- Jesus, in a post-resurrection time with His disciples, “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,” showing them Himself in all the Bible (Luke 24:45-49). Jesus is better than anything and everything in our lives – may we be zealous for seeing Him more and more through the means He has given us (the Bible), and letting that vision of Him “open our minds” to a right understanding of God, Who He is, what He has done for us, and how we should live in response to that. “...we have the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16).¹⁷ Claim that promise and pray for its greater and greater realization in your life by the Spirit’s illumination of His Scripture!

Concluding Counterpoint and Blessing

- By faith in Christ, we receive mercy (9:15,16,23; 11:30-32; 12:1) rather than “wrath” (1:18).
- We give our bodies to the service of the Lord (6:12,13,16,19) rather than dishonor (1:24).
- We worship God rather than the creation (1:20-25).
- We have a logical mind rather than a “depraved mind” (1:28).

Praise God for His mercies to us in Christ by living a life completely devoted to Him – may our lives be worship!

‘visible saints,’ that is, true believers, observing the gospel ordinances and obeying the commands of Christ” (H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*). That’s our spiritual inheritance as Baptists; may we, too, be constantly seeking God’s truth and rejoicing in it as we apply it to our thoughts, feelings, and practices together and as individuals!

¹⁷ This comes at the end of chapter that began with Paul asserting, “I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). The true “mind of Christ” will take us back to the cross: what that said about God, our sin, His grace, and our responsibility in its shadow.