

Romans Chapter 12, Verse 1: A Much Used (and Abused) Verse

As our title suggests, Romans 12:1 is preached on very frequently in Evangelical circles in the modern West, but other important companion verses in that chapter are often simply ignored in those sermons. Why should this be so and what are the results of this sort of concentration on just one verse? We will try to throw some light on both these questions.

The general ideas of Romans 12:1 will be well known to all of us but for the actual words I will use the little-known but very useful paraphrase version by Charles Williams in 1958:

I beg you therefore brothers through these mercies God has shown you, to make a decisive dedication of your bodies as a living sacrifice, devoted and well-pleasing to God, which is your reasonable service,
and my main concern is with the take-home message after the average sermon on this verse – what are most people being invited to carry away with them in their hearts and minds and lives? The outcomes will be mixed – on the one hand they will probably have just heard lots of good things from the Apostle Paul's letter but on the other hand they will often have been led in a direction which is totally opposite to the direction Paul wanted his original readers to go. What happens today is that the modern context (which is shaped by the dominant spirit within modern Western congregations) completely overwhelms the ancient context of the Apostle and what he was saying to the Roman Christians, and that ancient context is not allowed to be considered or heard.

I will explain the distortion which takes place. When I listen to otherwise sound Evangelical preachers using this verse I often imagine three believers – Tom, Dick and Harry. They are treated very much as individuals, with individual lives and individual responsibilities for those lives. They are typical modern Westerners. On the basis of Romans 12:1 they are each encouraged to dedicate their own body and their whole life as a 'living sacrifice' (rather than as a dead sacrifice as in so much ancient religion). So far so good, but overall these believers are considered in isolation – the emphasis among us today is very heavily if not entirely on the individual, and the effect of such sermons is to thrust these believers further apart from one another. The NIV version of the Bible in fact goes further down the same track and says: 'offer your bodies as living sacrifices' which tends to cement this focus on individuality and separateness and rules out any possibility that there may, for instance, be many bodies willingly offered together as **one single sacrifice**, which is much more in line with what Paul actually wants to see happen.

The importance of context

Now the importance of context is both blindingly obvious and routinely ignored:

Who cares what Paul was saying to the Romans? All that matters is what I want to say to my congregation when I preach to them next Sunday! My concern is with the living and the life they have to live among these people, in this place, today. Yesterday's problems belong to ancient history and I have neither time nor energy to study it – as it is I don't have enough time or energy to do all that I have got to do!

My response to this very common feeling among preachers is that you are actually selling your people short if you do not study the context of the Bible passages you are using – you are in fact depriving them of some of God's food, and also you are not giving proper honour to the original writer – you are appropriating his words but may well be putting them to a use which is quite opposite to what he intended. You must give equal attention to both parties involved here – on the one hand your people and their present needs and on the other hand the ancient writer whose words and thoughts you are using.

So what is the context of what Paul is saying in Romans 12:1? We will briefly look at the overall letter, long and difficult as it is, and then look more closely at the immediate context of 12:1.

The wider context in Romans

Rome was of course a Gentile city and the capital of a mighty empire. As well as its Roman citizens and the many slaves from various conquered nations it also housed at times perhaps 30 thousand resident Jews. When Paul writes to the Christians there he does not use the word for 'Church' until the final chapter when he seems to refer to various house churches in Rome at that time. Now Paul himself was a 'centralist' who liked to have the Christians in any town organised and with recognised elders and leadership, but Paul has never been to Rome, its Christians were not his converts and had no formal relationship to him, and it may be that there was no 'church' as such in Rome that he could write to. Reading between the lines in Romans you can easily feel that there were Gentile households which could be called 'house-churches,' and Jewish ones as well, and one of the background pastoral problems in Rome seems to have been that the Christians were divided by this Jewish–Gentile line and they simply did not feel comfortable or welcome in those other households.

So one of the most important themes in Romans is Paul's concern with the very vexed question of the Jewish-Gentile relationship, a huge question with many different sides to it. It is this question which dominates more than half of the NT and which makes that collection of documents so difficult for us today to understand fully and really appreciate. Most of us know no Jewish people, even though we may have met one or two without realising it, so we do not have a 'Jewish question' but Paul certainly met

with it all the time, and it is found throughout Romans. Its first expression is in Romans 1:5 where Paul speaks of his own commission from Christ to be the sole (Jewish) Apostle to the Gentile nations; it continues through his discussion of how both the Jew and the Gentile has hopelessly fallen into sin and stands in need of God's grace through Christ, and how the God of Israel who has opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles has not then locked the same door against his own ancient and unbelieving people, the Jews. This last question has occupied the great chapters 9, 10 and 11, and they are what lead directly into 12:1 which we are mainly concerned about in this essay.

The narrower context of Romans 12:1

Paul ended the section of text which we now call chapter 8 with a great outburst of praise to God, saying that nothing can separate the believer from the love of God and his promises to us. But then some unknown opponent seems to say: 'You Christians can't be so sure of yourselves. Look how God has ripped up his covenant with Israel and thrown them out and let you Gentiles come in. What makes you so sure he will not do the same to you eventually?' In Romans 9—11 Paul shows that God can be trusted because he has not turned his back on Israel even though the great majority of them reject the Christ whom God has sent. Rather, the hardening of Israel and the entry of the Gentiles are necessarily linked together, and so the practical outcomes of this in church life must be that the Gentile majority among the Christians in Rome should not be haughty towards those Jews who are Christians but rather to have fellowship with them and to 'welcome one another.' Paul is not in a position to give them orders – they are not his converts – so he cannot direct them to form a church as such, but he does strongly urge them to improve and increase their fellowship ties.

As we see already in Romans 1:5 Paul emphasised the unique position he held as the Apostle to the Nations and in 15:15—16 he enlarges upon this theme in a most important way. He speaks of his preaching among the Gentiles (including the Romans) 'as a priestly service to God, so that the sacrificial presentation of the Gentiles may be acceptable in his sight, since it is made holy by the Holy Spirit present among them.' So here we see that in one sense Paul sees himself as a priest bringing acceptable offerings to God, and those offerings are the surprising and previously unexpected numbers of Gentile converts who have come to trust in God through Jesus Christ, and through Paul's own preaching.

In our verse in 12:1 we find the same sort of priestly and sacrificial language, but used in a rather different way. Here the individual Christian believers are challenged to present their own bodies as an acceptable but living sacrifice to God, which is their appropriate service or ministry to God. Evangelical preachers usually get this part of things pretty right because it is basic gospel teaching. It is in the next verses they come unstuck. The first thing to notice is how closely verse two on the renewing of

the human mind is linked to verse one on the proper behaviour and use of the human body. Paul says the mind of the believer must not be 'conformed' to the pattern of this present world but 'transformed' or changed so that it sees and rejects that pattern.

So far so good, but does Paul have something specific in mind as he is saying these things, perhaps some specific area of weakness in the mind and the behaviour of the Christians in Rome? What does the context suggest? To me the context so far has suggested that the main thing on his mind is still the problem of fellowship between the Gentile and Jewish Christians in Rome. Why do I say this? Well, we just have to look at verse three: 'Don't get big-headed – don't be proud and superior! God is a God who gives things by measure and he has given a measure to each person. A single body has many members and they do not all have the same use, and in the same way we the many are one single body in Christ.' It is possible that there was no central visible church in Rome but this should not stop the believers from seeing that Christ has one single body and that they are all members of it. In their minds they had to break free from the sinful **spirit of the city** in which they lived – it ran on pride and slavery but Christianity everywhere must run on the humility and service we learn from God and see most clearly in Jesus Christ.

It is exactly this emphasis on community which can be entirely missed when preaching on Romans 12:1 today. Tom, Dick and Harry are routinely addressed as isolated individuals, each with very separate and very different lives to lead and modern preaching all too often mimics the spirit of the culture in which we live and thus amplifies its individualism. The spirit of our age tends to atomise and destroy community and body life – it is **centrifugal**, pushing things away from the centre and each other. Paul's preaching is not like that, in fact he fights hard against it. His mindset is **centripetal**, always drawing the individual atoms inward toward the centre and each other, and our centre is Jesus Christ.

The Christians in Rome will show they have passed the test by improving and strengthening their fellowship bonds across the ancient Jewish–Gentile divide. After all, if God their Father has done this already why should the Roman Christians hesitate to follow and do the same? As for ourselves today, preaching on this passage should remind us that no believer is an island unto themselves, no one an isolated atom in a vast and lonely universe. Even the most ancient and bitterest divides can be and should be overcome by 'we the many' who are a new unity in Christ.

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