

ROMANS 12:1–2 AND THE DOCTRINE OF SANCTIFICATION

by
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Romans 12:1–2 is one of the most well-known texts of Scripture. Its familiarity stems, I believe, from its perceived theological importance. This text is commonly viewed as having great import for the Christian's spiritual life, and thus it is one of the passages most often memorized by children in Sunday School and teenagers in the youth group.

Our text is seen by many as being foundational to the doctrine of sanctification because it calls for the believer's dedication or consecration. It has been argued that progressive sanctification cannot commence in the believer's life until he has experienced a crisis act of dedication or consecration. For instance Ryrie says, "There is perhaps no more important matter in relation to the spiritual life than dedication."² "Before any lasting progress can be made on the road of spiritual living, the believer must be a dedicated person.... It is the basic foundation for sanctification."³ Stanford concurs, "God asks us to present our bodies as living sacrifices to Him (Rom 12:1). Until we have done this, there is nothing else we can do."⁴ Thiessen agrees, "Where the initial surrender has not been adhered to, there is need first of a definite presentation of the life to God before practical holiness is possible (Rom 6:13; 12:1f.)."⁵

This teaching of a crisis act of dedication has become gospel when it comes to the doctrine of sanctification in many churches and Christian schools. In just one sermon, pastors and evangelists are able to cure what is wrong with many Christians and most every teenager, by

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²Charles C. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), p. 75.

³*Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁴Miles J. Stanford, *The Complete Green Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), p. 38.

⁵Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, rev. Vernon D. Doerksen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 286.

simply persuading them to come forward and dedicate their lives to Christ and thus begin the life of victory over sin, making Christ Lord of their lives.

I will argue in this essay that while Romans 12:1–2 is a significant text for the doctrine of sanctification, it has often been misused and its true emphasis has frequently been misunderstood. First, I will give a historical overview of the interpretation of our text, showing how it came to occupy such a prominent place in many presentations of sanctification. Then I will move on to an exegesis of the passage in an attempt to set forth its true significance.

HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

If we examine the writings of the church fathers, the Reformers, and of Christians before the 19th century, we find our text receives no special attention as it relates to the doctrine of sanctification. How then did it come to its present place of importance? Romans 12:1–2 gained its position of theological significance primarily because of the teaching and writing of a 19th century Methodist layperson named Phoebe Palmer (1807–1874). She developed what is called her “altar theology,” which was built upon the idea of dedication in texts like Romans 12:1–2.⁶

In 1835 Phoebe Palmer and her sister began what became known as the Tuesday Meetings for the Promotion of Holiness. These meetings started with a group of Methodist ladies who were seeking the experience of entire sanctification as had been taught by the founder of Methodism, John Wesley (1703–1791). Wesley came up with the novel idea of a second transforming work of grace, distinct from and ordinarily subsequent to the new birth or justification. This new and distinctive doctrine of sanctification was given different names, including Christian perfection, perfect love, entire sanctification, full salvation, and the second blessing.⁷ Wesley said this work happens instantly by a simple act of faith.⁸ This crisis of entire sanctification eliminates all sinful desires from the heart, destroys inbred moral depravity, and delivers from outward transgressions of the law. Positively, entire sanctification effects complete purity of intentions, tempers, and actions,

⁶Phoebe Palmer, *The Way of Holiness with Notes by the Way* (reprint of 50th American ed.; Salem, OH: Schmull Publishing, 2003), p. 43; Charles E. White, *The Beauty of Holiness: Phoebe Palmer as Theologian, Revivalist, Feminist, and Humanitarian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), p. 140.

⁷Wesley's viewpoint is set forth in his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. The first edition was published in 1766 and the 4th and final edition in 1777. See *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols., 3rd ed. (reprint of 1872 ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 11:366–446.

⁸*Ibid.*, 11:446.

stimulates perfect love of God and neighbor, and restores the moral image of God in the soul.⁹ Wesley believed this sanctified Christian is so far perfect as not to commit sin. Admittedly, however, by sin Wesley only included voluntary transgressions of known law, not involuntary transgressions, which he refused to call sin.¹⁰

Wesley himself never settled on a particular method of receiving entire sanctification, the second blessing. It was his followers who ultimately developed a definitive methodology, one based on a single crisis experience. Though Wesley's doctrine of sanctification was modified to some extent by his immediate followers, chiefly John Fletcher (1729–1785) and Adam Clarke (1762–1832), it was Phoebe Palmer's refinements that most influenced Methodist views on sanctification in the mid-19th century and ultimately became the basis of the Holiness Movement.¹¹ Her theology was adopted by Holiness denominations such as the Wesleyan Methodists, the Free Methodists, the Church of the Nazarene, the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), the Pilgrim Holiness Church, as well as the Salvation Army and the Keswick Movement in England.¹²

Phoebe Palmer's struggle to obtain entire sanctification was long and difficult.¹³ Her own difficulty was what undoubtedly led her to devise a simple prescription for obtaining this second work of grace. She called this "the shorter way" to holiness and ultimately decided that this was "the only way" to obtain the blessing.¹⁴ This "shorter way" became known as her "altar theology" and involved a threefold process: entire consecration, faith, and testimony. Consecration and faith are necessary to obtain the blessing and testimony is necessary to retain it.¹⁵

Palmer developed her "altar theology" by means of some clever exegesis—if one can call it exegesis. She began with Jesus' statement in Matthew 23:19 that the altar sanctifies the gift ("You blind men,

⁹Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1977), p. 391.

¹⁰*Works of John Wesley*, 11:396.

¹¹*Dictionary of Christianity in America*, s.v. "Palmer, Phoebe Worral," by C. E. White, p. 861; Charles E. Jones, *Perfectionist Persuasion; The Holiness Movement and American Methodism, 1867–1936* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1974), p. 5.

¹²*Dictionary of Christianity in America*, s.v. "Palmer, Phoebe Worral," p. 861; Melvin E. Dieter, "The Wesleyan View," in *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), p. 39.

¹³Harold E. Raser, *Phoebe Palmer: Her Life and Thought* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1987), pp. 34–47.

¹⁴Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, pp. 14, 44; White, *Beauty of Holiness*, p. 130.

¹⁵Kevin T. Lowery, "A Fork in the Wesleyan Road: Phoebe Palmer and the Appropriation of Christian Perfection," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 36 (Fall 2001): 193.

which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering?”).¹⁶ Then Palmer observed that Exodus 29:37 says that whatever touches the altar is holy (“For seven days you shall make atonement for the altar and consecrate it; then the altar shall be most holy, *and* whatever touches the altar shall be holy.”).¹⁷ Since the altar sanctifies the gift, whatever touches the altar is holy. And, according to Hebrews 13:10, for NT believers Christ is their altar (“We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat.”).¹⁸ Therefore, if one places himself on the altar, that person will be holy. And the prescription for accomplishing this is found in Romans 12:1 (“Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God....”).¹⁹ One places oneself on the altar by a once-for-all consecration involving a complete surrender to God, especially one’s will.²⁰ “Thus entire consecration guarantees entire sanctification.”²¹

Phoebe Palmer’s “altar theology” also influenced those who were not brought up in Methodist circles. Individuals like William E. Boardman (1810–1886) and Hannah Whitall Smith (1832–1911) embraced much of Palmer’s theology and spread it outside of Methodist circles in what became known as the Higher Life Movement. Boardman, a Presbyterian minister, became a frequent attendee at Palmer’s “Tuesday Meetings for the Promotion of Holiness” and in 1858 wrote his influential *The Higher Christian Life*.²² Mrs. Smith along with her husband, Robert Pearsall Smith (1827–1899), also spread the Phoebe Palmer’s Holiness theology. Mrs. Smith is chiefly known for her widely read volume promoting Holiness theology, *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life* (1875).²³ Higher Life teachers moved away from the Wesleyan view that sin is eradicated from the believer in the second blessing, preferring to speak of the believer’s dominion or victory over sin that results in deliverance from all conscious sinning.²⁴

¹⁶*Way of Holiness*, p. 43. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible*, 1995 edition.

¹⁷*Way of Holiness*, p. 43.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰White, *Beauty of Holiness*, p. 136.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 140.

²²*Dictionary of Christianity in America*, s.v. “Boardman, William Edwin,” by W. S. Gunter, p. 170.

²³*Dictionary of Christianity in America*, s.v. “Smith, Hannah Whitall,” by R. A. Tucker, p. 1096.

²⁴B. B. Warfield, *Perfectionism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1958), p. 238. This is a condensed edition of vol 2. of Warfield’s *Studies in Perfectionism*

It is universally acknowledged that the Keswick or Victorious Life Movement was the immediate successor to the Higher Life Movement.²⁵ Historically, Keswick began as an outgrowth of a series of breakfast meetings designed to promote Holiness teaching during Dwight L. Moody's 1873 London campaign.²⁶ These meetings were led by Robert and Hannah Smith, and included other Holiness leaders like William E. Boardman and Asa Mahan (1799–1889). The spirit of these meetings was continued by the Broadlands conference in 1874 and a meeting at Oxford a few weeks later. An even larger gathering was held at Brighton from May 29 to June 7, 1875. Moody threw his support behind it and said, "Let us lift up our hearts to seek earnestly a blessing on the great Convention that is now being held in Brighton, perhaps the most important meeting ever gathered."²⁷ One of the converts to the Victorious Life at these meetings was Rev. T. D. Harford-Battersby, Vicar of St. John's, Keswick, a parish in the lake district of northwest England. He organized a conference for July of 1875 that was held in a tent on his church grounds with about three or four hundred attending. Annual Keswick conferences have been held each summer ever since.²⁸

Keswick theology teaches that the average Christian is a carnal Christian. He is justified but there is little or no sanctification, no spiritual growth, no victory over sin in his life. He needs, as John Wesley and Phoebe Palmer taught, a second, transforming work of grace—the second blessing. This comes in a crisis act of dedication or total surrender that is spoken of in Romans 12:1–2. For instance, Evan Hopkins (1838–1918), who was a key leader at the Keswick Convention for forty consecutive years (1876–1915) and widely considered to be "the theologian" of Keswick,²⁹ insisted that the believer must "first

(New York: Oxford University Press, 1931).

²⁵J. C. Pollock, *The Keswick Story: The Authorized History of the Keswick Convention* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1964), pp. 12–46; Steven Barabas, *So Great Salvation: History and Message of the Keswick Convention* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1952), pp. 15–27; Charles Price and Ian Randall, *Transforming Keswick* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: OM Publishing, 2000), pp. 14, 21–33; *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*, s.v. "Palmer, Phoebe Worrall," by H. E. Raser, p. 503; *Beacon Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. "Higher Life," Melvin E. Dieter, p. 257; *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, s.v. "Higher Christian Life," by W. S. Gunter, p. 526. *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, s.v. "Keswick Movement," by B. L. Shelley, p. 613.

²⁶Pollock, *The Keswick Story*, pp. 18–19; *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, s.v. "Keswick Movement," p. 612.

²⁷Quoted in Barabas, *So Great Salvation*, p. 23.

²⁸David Bebbington suggests Keswick Conventions lost their distinctive "Keswick" teaching in the 1960s (*Holiness in Nineteenth-Century England* [Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Press, 2000], p. 90).

²⁹Herbert F. Stevenson, ed. *Keswick's Authentic Voice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,

yield in a spirit of entire submission.”³⁰ To prove his point Hopkins expositors Romans 12:1, focusing on the once-for-all nature of the believer’s consecration as demanded by the aorist tense of the verb “present.”³¹

Keswick teaching was first spread in America through Moody’s Northfield Conferences in Massachusetts.³² In 1910 Charles G. Trumbull, the editor of the *Sunday School Times*, became a convert to Keswick beliefs, and he used his editorial energies to promote Keswick teaching in America. He along with his assistant at the *Sunday School Times*, Robert C. McQuilkin (founded Columbia Bible College in 1923), began an “American Keswick” conference in 1913, which permanently settled at Keswick Grove, New Jersey in 1923.³³ Numerous well-known authors spread Keswick theology, including A. T. Pierson. F. B. Meyer, Andrew Murray, H. C. G. Moule, W. H. Griffith Thomas, C. I. Scofield, Lewis Sperry Chafer, J. Hudson Taylor. J. Oswald Sanders, J. Robertson McQuilkin, Alan Redpath, Ruth Paxson, and W. Ian Thomas.

Keswick theology was linked with the founding of a number of evangelical Bible schools and missionary agencies, such as Moody Bible Institute, Wheaton College, Columbia Bible College, Prairie Bible Institute, and Dallas Theological Seminary.³⁴ Books written by many of the early faculty members of these schools helped spread this theology into most of evangelicalism and fundamentalism.³⁵ Though not often recognized as such, Keswick, Higher Life, and Holiness teaching that emphasizes the importance of total consecration as essential for sanctification is still taught in numerous classrooms and heralded from many pulpits.

1959), p. 16. Price and Randall call Hopkins the “formative theologian of Keswick” (*Transforming Keswick*, p. 39).

³⁰Evan H. Hopkins, *The Law of Liberty in the Spiritual Life*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Sunday School Times, 1952), p. 66.

³¹Ibid., p. 67. This is a common emphasis among Keswick speakers. For the same argument by a Keswick speaker, based on the aorist tense in Rom 12:1, see J. Oswald Sanders, *Christ Indwelling and Enthroned* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1949), p. 55.

³²*Dictionary of Christianity in America*, s.v. “Keswick Movement,” p. 613.

³³George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 96.

³⁴*Dictionary of Christianity in America*, s.v. “Keswick Movement,” p. 613; Edwin W. Tait, “The Cleansing Wave,” *Christian History & Biography*, Spring 2004, p. 25; *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, s.v. “Chafer, Lewis Sperry,” by J. D. Hannah, p. 238.

³⁵For example, Lewis Sperry Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967).

In a review of a somewhat recent volume comparing and contrasting five common views of sanctification (Wesleyan, Keswick, Pentecostal, Augustinian-Dispensational and Reformed), Turner is led to conclude, “There may only be *two* views of sanctification presented in this volume.”³⁶ This is because the Wesleyan, Keswick, Pentecostal, and Augustinian-Dispensational views, as presented, are in general agreement, all emphasizing the requirement for total consecration. The so-called Augustinian-Dispensational viewpoint presented by John Walvoord, who followed Chafer as president and professor of theology at Dallas Seminary, is misnamed since dispensationalism has nothing to do per se with any particular view of sanctification, though it is often mistakenly identified with Keswick theology.³⁷ Walvoord’s view, as he himself is quick to admit, is essentially the same as Keswick.³⁸ And earlier Dallas professors like Chafer, Walvoord, and Ryrie were prominent in spreading Keswick theology and the need for entire consecration in much of evangelicalism and fundamentalism in the twentieth century.³⁹ This emphasis on the requirement of entire consecration from texts like Romans 12:1–2 was not limited to Dallas Seminary but could be found throughout evangelicalism and fundamentalism.⁴⁰ Anecdotal, a colleague of mine recently pointed me to the web page of a theology professor at a fundamental/evangelical seminary whose résumé included not only the date he was born again, but also the date of his “dedication,” obviously emphasizing the once-and-for-all nature of the event. Recent articles by two fundamentalists continue to laud the theology of Keswick.⁴¹ The idea of an act of total consecration as

³⁶David L. Turner, review of *Five Views on Sanctification*, by Melvin E. Dieter, Anthony A. Hoekema, Stanley M. Horton, J. Robertson McQuilkin, and John F. Walvoord, *Grace Theological Journal* 10 (Spring 1989): 98.

³⁷See Jonathan R. Pratt, “Dispensational Sanctification: A Misnomer,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 7 (Fall 2002): 95–108; Mark A. Snoeberger, “Second-blessing Models of Sanctification and Early Dallas Dispensationalism,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 15 (Spring 2004): 93–105.

³⁸Responding to the Keswick presentation by McQuilkin, Walvoord says, “Those holding to the Augustinian-dispensational perspective on sanctification will find little with which they need to take issue in J. Robertson McQuilkin’s presentation of the Keswick perspective” (“Response to McQuilkin,” in *Five Views on Sanctification*, p. 194). Similarly, responding to Walvoord’s view, McQuilkin says, “Many Keswick teachers and the basic Keswick approach are in harmony with John Walvoord’s presentation” (“Response to Walvoord,” in *Five Views on Sanctification*, p. 236).

³⁹Another Dallas teacher, J. Dwight Pentecost, has said, “Experiential sanctification...begins with the act of presenting oneself unto the Lord Jesus Christ” (*Things Which Become Sound Doctrine* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965], p. 118).

⁴⁰It is only fair to mention that this Keswick emphasis has dissipated at Dallas and some other evangelical schools in more recent years.

⁴¹John R. Van Gelderen, “Keswick—A Good Word or a Bad One?” *Revival*, May–August 2006, pp. 14–16; Robert Delnay, “What Happened to Keswick?”

essential for sanctification is alive and well.

In this essay I will argue that this emphasis on entire consecration is wrongheaded, and this use of Romans 12:1–2 is really a misuse. This text is no doubt using the imagery of dedication, but it cannot and does not support the theology of sanctification through a single, once-for-all act of dedication. It does not teach that sanctification begins and depends upon such a dedication. In truth sanctification begins at the time of justification and is the *normal* and *inevitable* result of regeneration.⁴²

DEDICATION IN ROMANS 12:1–2

Romans 12:1–2 begins the final section of the letter. Paul shifts his focus from instruction to exhortation, from what we might call the indicative—what God has done for us—to the imperative—what we are to do in response.⁴³ Moo explains, “If we take to heart the truth of the gospel that [the apostle] has presented, we will have a transformed worldview that cannot but affect our lives in uncounted ways. Paul has made this clear already in chapter 6, where he shows how our union with Christ in his death and resurrection leads to our ‘walking in newness of life’ (v. 4).”⁴⁴ Now in this final section, Paul urges Christians to manifest the power of the gospel in specific areas of day-to-day life.

Those who embrace the gospel, who are united to Christ, are rescued from the devastating effects of sin. Believers are justified, declared righteous in God’s sight, and thus have a secure hope for salvation from the wrath to come. They have been delivered from the penalty of sin and are no longer under condemnation (5:1). But, as Romans 6 makes clear, all those who have been delivered from the penalty of sin have just as certainly been delivered from its dominion. Union with Christ in his death and resurrection provides for both justification and sanctification. Paul’s commission as an apostle was to “call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith” (1:5, NIV). “Jesus Christ is the Lord; and thus to believe in him means at

Revival, May–August 2006, pp. 17–18. *Revival* magazine is published by Preach the Word Ministries, P.O. Box 429, Exton, PA 19341, www.ptwm.org.

⁴²For a fuller treatment of sanctification, see my “The Disjunction Between Justification and Sanctification in Contemporary Evangelical Theology,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 6 (Fall 2001): 17–44.

⁴³Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 744; Everett F. Harrison, “Romans,” in vol. 10 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), p. 126; Grant R. Osborne, *Romans*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p. 323.

⁴⁴Moo, *Romans*, p. 744.

the same time a commitment to obey him.”⁴⁵

Beginning in chapter 12, it is this obedience, made possible by the transforming power of the gospel, that Paul calls upon believers to render. “The ‘imperative’ of a transformed life is therefore not an optional ‘second step’ after we embrace the gospel,”⁴⁶ but instead has its roots in our initial response to the gospel itself. What Paul calls upon believers to do in Romans 12:1–2, the imperative of the gospel, is an indispensable element of the gospel; it is a natural and expected result of the gospel. Romans 12:1–2 can be viewed as essentially summarizing the demands of the gospel for believers living in a secular world.⁴⁷ What does God want from those of us who are the recipients of his grace? Paul tells us that God demands our transformation—an ongoing transformation that is from the inside out so that we might conform ourselves to the will of God. While it is all too easy for believers to be satisfied at times with only superficial, outward obedience to God’s will, what God requires is nothing less than a continual, life-long transformation of our character into the image of his beloved Son.

The Believer’s Response to God’s Grace Should Be to Offer Himself as a Sacrifice to God (v. 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.

Paul begins with an exhortation: “I urge you, brethren.” It is agreed that the verb translated “urge” (παρακαλέω) in the context of our passage has a meaning somewhere between “request” and “command,” between a mere beseeching or urging and a more authoritative exhortation.⁴⁸ Most believe that Paul’s emphasis lies closer to exhortation. Cranfield argues the verb “has all the urgency and earnestness that it has when it is used in the sense beseech, but also something more—the note of authority. It denotes the authoritative summons to obedience issued in the name of the gospel.”⁴⁹ The inferential

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 745.

⁴⁷David L. Olford, “Romans 12:1–2: The Gospel and Renewal,” in *Faces of Renewal: Studies in Honor of Stanley M. Horton*, ed. Paul Elbert (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), p. 21.

⁴⁸BDAG, s.v. “παρακαλέω,” pp. 764–65; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975, 1979), 2:597; Moo, *Romans*, pp. 748–49.

⁴⁹*Romans*, 2:597. Also, Moo, *Romans*, p. 749; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 642; Osborne, *Romans*, p. 318; Olford, “Romans 12:1–2: The Gospel and Renewal,” p. 24.

conjunction “therefore” (οὖν⁵⁰) and the phrase “by the mercies of God” tie the exhortation of v. 1 (and those that follow in 12:3–15:13) to the theology of chapters 1–11.⁵¹ The preposition “by” indicates the ground or basis of Paul’s exhortation and thus could be translated “because of” or “in view of.”⁵² The plural “mercies” may refer to the different concrete expressions of God’s mercy in the preceding chapters, but it is more likely that the plural Greek term (οἰκτιρμῶν) is due to the influence of the LXX, where it always appears in the plural as the translation of a Hebrew term (רַחֲמִים), which only appears in the plural.⁵³ Thus, Paul’s exhortation for the believer to offer himself as a sacrifice to God has its basis in the mercy of God that has been so wonderfully set forth in the preceding chapters. As Stott rightly observes, “For eleven chapters Paul has been unfolding the mercies of God. Indeed, the gospel is precisely God’s mercy to inexcusable and undeserving sinners, in giving his Son to die for them, in justifying them freely by faith, in sending them his life-giving spirit, and in making them his children.”⁵⁴ God’s mercy that has been manifested in the Holy Spirit’s work of inward renewal or regeneration does, in fact, impel us toward the obedience that the gospel demands.⁵⁵ But it is not automatic, so Paul exhorts us “to present [our] bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God.” Moo observes, “We experience God’s mercy as a power that exerts a total and all-encompassing claim over us (5:21). It is therefore entirely fitting that our response is to be one that is equally total and all-encompassing: the presentation of our entire persons as a sacrifice to God.”⁵⁶

The heart of Paul’s exhortation is for believers “to present [their] bodies” to God.” The word “present” (παρίστημι), when used with

⁵⁰BDAG, s.v. “οὖν,” p. 736; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 673.

⁵¹C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p. 230; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans*, 2 vols., Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 198), p. 708; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 432; Osborne, *Romans*, p. 318; Moo, *Romans*, p. 748; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:595; Harrison, “Romans,” p. 127.

⁵²*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “διδό,” by Albrecht Oepke, 2:67–68; Moo, *Romans*, p. 749; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:596; Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 643.

⁵³HALOT, s.v. “רַחֲמִים,” 3:1218–19; *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, s.v. “Mercy, Compassion,” by Hans-Helmut Esser, 2:598; Dunn, *Romans*, 2:709; Moo, *Romans*, p. 749; Harrison, “Romans,” p. 127; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:596;

⁵⁴John Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 320.

⁵⁵Moo, *Romans*, p. 750.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

the word “sacrifice” (θυσία), was a technical phrase in Paul’s day for offering a sacrifice.⁵⁷ Over the years, advocates of Holiness and Keswick theology have attempted to support their view that believers must come to a crisis, once-for-all act of dedication by appealing to the fact that the Greek verb translated “present” (παράσῃσαι) is in the aorist tense.⁵⁸ For instance Evan Hopkins, who is considered the formative theologian of Keswick, commonly stressed this point in his speaking and writing.⁵⁹ And this emphasis was continued among evangelicals in the twentieth century.

The familiar exhortation found in Romans 12:1, to “present” ourselves to God, is the same word [as in Rom 6:13] in the aorist tense, again a definite act of yielding to God.⁶⁰

Initial dedication (Rom 12:1–2). Initial dedication is a crisis and once-for-all matter.... The tense is aorist (which indicates an unrepeatable event).⁶¹

The presentation of Romans 12:1 is viewed as a once-and-for-all presentation because of the tense of the verb in the Greek.⁶²

Numerous other examples could be cited.⁶³

This interpretation represents a misunderstanding and abuse of the Greek aorist tense.⁶⁴ No Greek grammar has ever suggested that the

⁵⁷BDAG, s.v. “θυσία,” p. 463; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:598; Dunn, *Romans*, 2:709; Olford, “Romans 12:1–2,” p. 25. The infinitive παράσῃσαι is used here in indirect discourse following παρακαλῶ to represent an original imperative (Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 604).

⁵⁸Randy Maddox, “The Use of the Aorist Tense in Holiness Exegesis,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 16 (Fall 1981): 106–18.

⁵⁹Evan H. Hopkins, *The Law of Liberty in the Spiritual Life* (reprint ed.; Philadelphia: Sunday School Times, 1954), pp. 66–67. See also Alexander Smellie, *Evan Hopkins: A Memoir* (London: Marshall Brothers, n.d.), pp. 95–96.

⁶⁰John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), pp. 197–98. See also Lewis S. Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, rev. John F. Walvoord (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), p. 118.

⁶¹Charles C. Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), p. 96. To be fair, Ryrie has removed this language from his updated edition (*The Holy Spirit* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1997], p. 160).

⁶²J. Dwight Pentecost, *Pattern for Maturity* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), p. 129.

⁶³William D. Lawrence, “The New Testament Doctrine of the Lordship of Christ” (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1968), p. 197; Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right: An Expository Study of Romans* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1977), p. 138; Curtis Vaughan and Bruce Corley, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), p. 137; Harrison, “Romans,” p. 127.

⁶⁴See the corrective by Frank Stagg, “The Abused Aorist,” *Journal of Biblical*

aorist tense means once-for-all action though it was once a popular and widespread misconception among pastors and teachers. This once-for-all idea of the aorist makes nonsense out of countless texts. For instance, when Paul told the Corinthians to “glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:2), the aorist imperative “glorify” does not mean that the apostle only wanted them to do it one time. Neither does the aorist imperative “preach” indicate that Paul wished Timothy to “preach the word” (2 Tim 4:2) only once. More recent Greek grammars generally have taken special pains to correct this abuse of the aorist so that the teaching of a once-for-all act of dedication in texts like Romans 12:1 is not as common today,⁶⁵ though it is still not unusual to read that v. 1 calls for a decisive act of consecration based on the aorist tense.⁶⁶ In actuality, the aorist tense is the least significant tense exegetically, and thus Paul’s exhortation for the Roman believers “to present [their] bodies” to God” does not suggest by the tense of the verb that Paul is calling for a crisis, once-for-all act of dedication, or even a decisive one.⁶⁷ And there is nothing in the context of Romans 12 itself to support such a view. As we will see in v. 2, the context suggests just the opposite. Paul simply exhorts us to make this offering; he says nothing in v. 1 about how often it needs to be done.⁶⁸

What believers are commanded to offer to God is their “bodies.” The word “body” (σῶμα) often refers to the physical body, and some commentators believe that is specifically what Paul means here, especially contrasting the “body” with the “mind” (νοῦς) in v. 2.⁶⁹ But

Literature 91 (June 1972): 222–31; and D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) pp. 68–73.

⁶⁵E.g., Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 557.

⁶⁶E.g., David J. MacLeod says, “The tense of the verb (aorist) points to a decisive action. The believer is called to an act of consecration that is ‘decisive, crucial, [and] instantaneous’” (“The Consecrated Christian and Conformity to the World,” *Emmaus Journal* 4 [Winter 1995]: 104); also Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), p. 231, 232.

⁶⁷“The aorist tense ‘presents an occurrence in summary, viewed as a whole,...without regard for the internal make-up of the occurrence’” (Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 554).

⁶⁸Moo, *Romans*, p. 750.

⁶⁹Robert H. Gundry, *Sōma in Biblical Theology* (reprint of 1976 ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), pp. 34–36; William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 5th ed., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), p. 350; Frederic L. Godet, *Commentary on Romans* (reprint of 1883 ed.; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), p. 425; Robert Haldane, *Commentary on Romans* (reprint of 1853 ed.; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1988), p. 562; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. in one, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965), 2:110.

In his monograph (*Sōma in Biblical Theology*), Gundry argues primarily against

most commentators understand Paul in v. 1 to be using “body” (σῶμα) by synecdoche⁷⁰ to stand for the whole person, including the body.⁷¹ As Calvin himself wisely observed, “By *bodies* he means not only our skin and bones, but the totality of which we are composed. He has used this word to denote by synecdoche all our parts, for the members of the body are the instruments by which we perform our actions.”⁷² We find the same figurative use of the term in 6:12–13 where “body” (σῶμα) must be interpreted more broadly to include the whole person. Paul says, “do not let sin reign in your mortal body...and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God.” Obviously, the “mortal body” and the “members of your body” are to be equated with “yourselves” (cf. 1 Cor 9:27; 13:3; Phil 1:20).⁷³ Because of the imagery of sacrifice in v. 1, Paul quite naturally chose the term “body” since it was the body of the animal that was placed on the altar. But Paul’s emphasis is on the entire person, a truth that will become clearer in v. 2.

From the NT we learn that Christians no longer offer literal sacrifices. Christ himself has fulfilled and brought to an end the OT sacrificial system. But because sacrifices were such a central part of ancient

the view of Rudolf Bultmann (*Theology of the New Testament*) and J. A. T. Robinson (*The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology*) that in the NT and particularly in Paul’s writings, σῶμα means the “whole person, the human personality without reference to the body. While Gundry’s work is a valuable correction to Bultmann and others who seem to eliminate any reference to the physical, he goes beyond the evidence in arguing that in most every instance Paul’s use of σῶμα refers to the physical body only. For some corrective to Gundry, see Philip E. Hughes, review of *Sōma in Biblical Theology*, by Robert H. Gundry, *Westminster Theological Journal* 39 (Fall 1976): 150; Daniel J. Harrington, review of *Sōma in Biblical Theology*, by Robert H. Gundry, *Biblica* 58 (1977): 136–37; James D. G. Dunn, review of *Sōma in Biblical Theology*, by Robert H. Gundry, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 31 (1978): 290.

⁷⁰Synecdoche is a figure of speech in which a part of something stands for the whole of it. Examples are “threads” for clothing, “wheels” for car, “mouths to feed” for hungry people. In Gen 19:8 when Lot is trying to protect the angels from the men of Sodom, he says, “Do nothing to these men, inasmuch as they have come under the shelter of my roof.” “Roof” really means house or home—a part for the whole.

⁷¹BDAG, s.v. “σῶμα,” p. 984; Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *Romans*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 639; Barrett, *Romans*, p. 231; Dunn, *Romans*, 2:709; Osborne, *Romans*, p. 319; Moo, *Romans*, p. 750–51; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:598–99; Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 644.

⁷²John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross MacKenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 262.

⁷³See *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “σῶμα,” by Eduard Schweizer, 7:1064–66; Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John R. deWitt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 114; George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 506–7; James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 58.

religion, it is natural and inevitable that Christian writers would use this imagery to express Christian truth. For example, Paul tells the Philippians, “I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God” (4:18). In his first epistle, Peter says that Christians offer “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (2:5). But here in Romans 12:1 we are told to offer our bodies themselves—God demands the giver.⁷⁴

The kind of sacrifice that believers are to offer is explained by three adjectives: “living,” “holy,” and “acceptable” (to God). With this language the sacrificial metaphor is continued. Most translations render the adjectival participle “living” or “alive” (ζῶσαν) as an attributive adjective, with the adjectives “holy” (ἁγίαν) and “acceptable” (εὐάρεστον) following as predicates, as in the familiar KJV (“a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God”).⁷⁵ However, it is more likely that all three adjectives are to be taken as predicates, as in the NET, “a sacrifice—alive, holy, and pleasing to God.”⁷⁶ That is, each has equal force modifying “sacrifice,” and as predicate adjectives each is slightly more emphatic than a comparable attributive adjective would be.⁷⁷

The sacrifice of the believer is first of all said to be “living” or “alive.” Many commentators understand the term, as Schreiner argues, to denote “the spiritual state of believers. They are now ‘alive to God in Christ Jesus’ (Rom 6:11, 13; 8:13). It is precisely those who are alive in Christ who are called to give their lives to him as a sacrifice.”⁷⁸ But as Moo observes, such an interpretation would be possible if “living” modified “bodies.” However, that is not the case—it modifies “sacrifice.”⁷⁹ Since this is so, it is best to understand “living” to refer to the nature of the sacrifice itself: “one that does not die as it is offered but goes on living and therefore continues in its efficacy until the person who is offered dies.”⁸⁰

⁷⁴Moo, *Romans*, p. 750.

⁷⁵ASV, ESV, HCSB, NIV, NKJV, NRSV.

⁷⁶Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, pp. 618–19; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:600; Moo *Romans*, p. 751; Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 644; Morris, *Romans*, p. 434.

⁷⁷Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, pp. 618–19.

⁷⁸*Romans*, p. 644. Also Calvin, *Romans*, p. 264; Murray, *Romans*, 2:111; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:600.

⁷⁹*Romans*, p. 751. Those commentators like Murray who understand “bodies” in the strictly physical sense (rather than a figure for the whole person) face a special problem when they also take “living” with body: “It is the body alive from the dead that the believer is to present” (2:111). Jack Cottrell explains, “But if ‘bodies’ literally means *bodies*, this cannot be, because the body as yet does not participate in this new life (8:10–11)” (*Romans*, 2 vols., College Press NIV Commentary [Joplin, MO: College Press, 1998], 2:311).

⁸⁰Moo, *Romans*, p. 751. Also, Godet, *Romans*, p. 426; Charles Hodge,

The sacrificial language is continued with the adjective “holy,” which is the common way to describe sacrifices—they are reserved for God and God’s service.⁸¹ Believers are to offer themselves to God, which means they are set apart from all that is profane and are dedicated to God’s service.⁸² Finally, Paul says such a sacrifice is “acceptable” or pleasing to God because it is a proper kind of sacrifice that he will accept.⁸³ The word (εὐάρεστον) recalls the OT concept of sacrifices that are pleasing and fragrant to God (e.g., Lev 1:9; Exod 29:18; Num 15:7).⁸⁴

At the end of v. 1, Paul adds an appositional phrase that qualifies the whole exhortation he has just given.⁸⁵ Offering ourselves as a sacrifice is called our “spiritual service of worship” in the NASB. This phrase has been notoriously difficult to translate. Most modern versions have rendered it something close to “spiritual worship” (ESV, HCSB, NIV, NRSV) through the NET has returned to the reading of the KJV (and NKJV), “reasonable service.” The adjective “spiritual” (λογικός) is never used in the LXX and occurs only one other time in the NT at 1 Peter 2:2. There Peter encourages his readers to “long for the pure λογικόν milk,” which is usually rendered “spiritual milk.”⁸⁶ Peter is seen as drawing a contrast between “spiritual” or figurative milk and that which is literal.⁸⁷ Thus, some commentators see Paul’s emphasis in Romans 12:1 as a contrast between the Christian’s inner “spiritual” worship and the literal, external forms of worship prescribed in the OT.⁸⁸ But this contrast may be overdrawn since the Christian’s

Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (reprint of 1886 ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 384; MacLeod, “The Consecrated Christian and Conformity to the World,” p. 108.

⁸¹BDAG, s.v. “ἅγιος,” pp. 10–11.

⁸²Moo, *Romans*, p. 751; Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 644; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:601.

⁸³Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:601.

⁸⁴Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 644; Osborne, *Romans*, p. 319. Compare the similar use in Phil 4:18, “But I have received...from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God.”

⁸⁵So most commentators: Moo, *Romans*, p. 751; Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 644; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:601; Dunn, *Romans*, 2:711; Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, p. 353. *Contra* Hodge (*Romans*, p. 384) and Barrett (*Romans*, p. 231), who restrict it to θυσία only.

⁸⁶So ASV, ESV, HCSB, NET, NIV, NRSV, and most commentators (e.g., Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], p. 95). The translation of the KJV (NKJV, NASB), “milk of the word,” apparently comes from the connection between λογικός and λόγος as well as the context where the “milk” is a figure for the Word of God, but λογικός does not mean “word” here or anywhere else.

⁸⁷So BDAG, s.v. “λογικός,” p. 598.

⁸⁸F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans*, 2nd ed., Tyndale New Testament

worship is not just internal but, as we have seen, involves the whole person, including his body (σῶμα).⁸⁹ Still, there is truth here since the inner attitude is critical to Paul's thought, as v. 2 indicates by stressing "the renewing of your mind."⁹⁰

Our term (λογικός) was a favorite expression of philosophers since the time of Aristotle.⁹¹ It was particularly used by the Stoics for whom it meant "belonging to the sphere of the λόγος or reason" and thus "spiritual" in the sense of beyond the physical senses.⁹² Epictetus used it in connection with the worship of God: "If I were a nightingale, I should be singing as a nightingale; if a swan, as a swan. But as it is, I am a rational [λογικός] being, therefore I must be singing hymns of praise to God."⁹³ Most likely in v. 1 the term means something like "reasonable" or "logical," and Paul is stressing the need for worship that is appropriate to those who have rightly understood the truth of the gospel as it has been revealed in Christ.⁹⁴ This might be called "intelligent," "understanding," or "informed" worship. As Moo explains, "We give ourselves to God as his sacrifices when we understand his grace and its place in our lives. We offer ourselves not ignorantly, like animals brought to slaughter, but intelligently and willingly. This is the worship that pleases God."⁹⁵ Paul told us in 1:25 that men outside of Christ have "exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator." In contrast the believer's offering of himself to God constitutes true, understanding worship (cf. TNIV, "this is true worship").

The noun "worship" (λατρεία) can also mean "service."⁹⁶ It is normally connected with the service a priest renders as part of the worship of God (Rom 9:4; Heb 9:1, 6), and in v. 1 the focus seems to be on dedication as an act of "worship."⁹⁷ In Philippians 3:3, Paul uses

Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 213; Matthew Black, *Romans*, New Century Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 151; Barrett, *Romans*, p. 231.

⁸⁹Moo, *Romans*, p. 753; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:604; Cottrell, *Romans*, 2:312.

⁹⁰Moo, *Romans*, p. 753.

⁹¹BDAG, s.v. "λογικός," p. 598;

⁹²*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "λογικός," by G. Kittel, 4:142.

⁹³*Discourses* 1.16.20–21.

⁹⁴Godet, *Romans*, p. 426; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:605; Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 645; Olford, "Romans 12:1–2," p. 30; David Peterson, "Worship and Ethics in Romans 12," *Tyndale Bulletin* 44 (November 1993): 275; MacLeod, "The Consecrated Christian and Conformity to the World," p. 109.

⁹⁵Douglas J. Moo, *Romans*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), p. 395.

⁹⁶BDAG, s.v. "λατρεία," p. 587.

⁹⁷*Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "λατρεύω, λατρεία, ας, ή," by

the cognate verb to designate believers as those who “are the *true* circumcision, who worship [λατρεύω] in the Spirit of God.” True worship is no longer confined, as in the old economy, to priestly activities; instead, it “involves honoring God by submitting to his sovereignty in every sphere of life.”⁹⁸

The Believer’s Dedication Is Realized in His Life-long Transformation (v. 2)

And do not be conformed to this world, 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.

In v. 1 Paul has called upon believers to offer themselves up to God as the natural and expected result of having received God’s grace in salvation. But v. 1 is actually a metaphor using the image of sacrifice. In that sense it has been preliminary to the real thrust of Paul’s exhortation in v. 2. In v. 2 Paul explains the metaphor of sacrifice in v. 1 by giving the concrete steps by which the imperative of v. 1 is to be worked out in the lives of believers.⁹⁹ “We can present ourselves to the Lord as genuinely holy and acceptable sacrifices only if we ‘do not conform to this world’ but ‘are transformed by the renewing of the mind.’”¹⁰⁰ The aorist tense verb “present” in v. 1, is now explained by the two present tense verbs “conformed” and “transformed,” which stress the progressive, ongoing nature of believer’s participation that is required in his dedication to God.¹⁰¹ The sacrifice that Paul urges on the Romans in v. 1 is no one-time act.

In v. 2, Paul begins with the negative: “Do not be conformed to this world.”¹⁰² Since the prohibition (μὴ συσχηματίζεσθε) is in the present tense, it could be understood, as some scholars suggest, to mean that Paul wants his readers to “stop being conformed” to this

H. Balz, p. 345.

⁹⁸Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 253.

⁹⁹Moo, *Romans*, p. 754; Cottrell, *Romans*, 2:313; Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 646.

¹⁰⁰Moo, *Romans*, p. 754.

¹⁰¹“The aorist tense ‘presents an occurrence in summary, viewed as a whole,...without regard for the internal make-up of the occurrence.’ This contrasts with the present...,which portray[s] the action as an ongoing process” (Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, pp. 554–55).

¹⁰²As Dunn notes (*Romans*, 2:712), the imperative is probably passive, not middle (*contra* NIV). The NET BIBLE argues that the passive form is more likely. A middle form would have to be a direct middle (“conform yourselves”), and such middles are quite rare in the Greek NT. See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, pp. 416–17.

world.¹⁰³ Although the grammar will allow such an interpretation, it is not certain this is Paul's emphasis in v. 2 since prohibitions using the present tense are often only general precepts with no indication whether the action is going on or not.¹⁰⁴ Moo rejects the "stop being conformed" understanding, arguing that "Paul's generally positive attitude toward the Romans' spirituality (cf. 15:14) makes this doubtful."¹⁰⁵ Moo may well be correct, but I am inclined to agree with Cranfield, who sagely observes that "the pressures to conformity are always present, and always strong and insidious—so that the Christian often yields quite unconsciously.... The Christian has always to confess that to a painfully large extent his life is conformed to this age."¹⁰⁶ What the Christian is not to be conformed to is "this world" (αἰών), literally "this age."¹⁰⁷ Although this term can refer to the physical world, it almost always has a temporal sense, denoting our present age in the history of the world. Paul calls it "this present evil age" (Gal 1:4), seeing that it is characterized by the dominion of sin and Satan (2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2). On the one hand, Christ died so that "He might rescue us from this present evil age" (Gal 1:4), and in Romans 6 Paul has made it clear that those who have been justified are no longer under the dominion of sin and death; nevertheless, we must still battle sin every day, which includes, as the PHILIPPS translation so aptly puts it, resisting the pressure to be "squeezed into the mold" of this world and the pattern of behavior that so typifies it.¹⁰⁸

Instead of being conformed to this age, believers are to "be transformed." Older scholars (and some more recent ones), following the seminal arguments of J. B. Lightfoot, believe that there is an important contrast between the first imperative "conformed" and the second imperative "transformed," based on the different roots of the particular Greek words. They argue that the imperative "conformed" (συσχηματίζεσθε) refers to the outward form only and thus speaks of a change that is only external and superficial, while the imperative "transformed" (μεταμορφουῖσθε) indicates an internal and genuine transformation.¹⁰⁹ Morris explains, "Paul is looking for a

¹⁰³Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:607; Dunn, *Romans*, 2:712. Some older scholarship incorrectly believed that the present imperative in a prohibition *always* "demanded the cessation of some act that is already in progress" (H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* [Toronto: Macmillan, 1955], p. 302). Wallace has a helpful analysis of that error (*Greek Grammar*, pp. 714–17).

¹⁰⁴Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 724.

¹⁰⁵*Romans*, p. 755.

¹⁰⁶*Romans*, 2:608.

¹⁰⁷BDAG, s.v. "αἰών," p. 32.

¹⁰⁸Moo, *Romans*, p. 755.

¹⁰⁹J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (reprint of 1913 ed.; Grand

transformation at the deepest level that is infinitely more significant than the conformity to the world's pattern that is distinctive of so many lives."¹¹⁰ But Barrett nicely counters, "Conformity to this age is no superficial matter."¹¹¹ More significantly, recent scholarship has mostly rejected any important difference in meaning between the two word groups because of the lexical data and the use of the words in other contexts.¹¹² For instance, in Philippians 3:21 Paul seems to use the two word groups synonymously when he says that Jesus will "transform" (μετασχηματίσει) the believer's present body into "conformity" (σύμμορφον) with the Christ's glorious body.

This transformation, Paul now explains, takes place by means of "the renewing of your mind." The word "mind" (νοῦς) in the NT obviously involves man's "faculty of intellectual perception" and in our context deals more specifically with one's "way of thinking, mind, attitude," or "disposition."¹¹³ There is often a moral element involved that might be called "practical reason" or "moral consciousness."¹¹⁴ The only other use of the word "renewing" (ἀνακαινῶσις) in the NT indicates that this process of transformation begins at, and essentially depends upon, regeneration: "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). The new life that is implanted by the Holy Spirit at regeneration motivates and enables the believer to present himself as a living sacrifice to God. However, if this sacrifice is to continue to please God in the ongoing trials and temptations of everyday life, the believer must *continually* be transformed by the renewing of the mind.¹¹⁵ The believer's mind needs to be, in effect, reprogrammed so that his thinking is in accord with this new life in the Spirit (cf. Rom 7:6). We are, as Paul says in Col 3:10, "being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him."¹¹⁶ Using the same verb

Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), pp. 127–33; Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, p. 353; Black, *Romans*, p. 151; William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 2:405.

¹¹⁰*Romans*, p. 435.

¹¹¹*Romans*, pp. 232–33.

¹¹²E.g. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "μορφή," by J. Behm, 4:743–44; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:605–7; Moo, *Romans*, p. 756; Schreiner, *Romans*, pp. 646–67.

¹¹³BDAG, s.v. "νοῦς," p. 680; *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "νοῦς," 4:958.

¹¹⁴*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "νοῦς," 4:958; Moo, *Romans*, p. 756; Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 518–19.

¹¹⁵Peterson, "Worship and Ethics in Romans 12," p. 282.

¹¹⁶Here Paul uses the verb form (ἀνακαινῶ) of the noun "renewing"

translated “transformed” in Romans 12:2 (μεταμορφώω), Paul captures this renewing process with a vivid metaphor in 2 Corinthians 3:18: “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed [μεταμορφούμεθα] into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.” The reprogramming of our minds is not accomplished in a short period of time but is a slow, steady process that takes place over our lifetimes in order that our thinking might more and more resemble the way God wants us to think, which is, of course, like him.¹¹⁷ And to think like him, to know and conform to his thinking, means that his truth, his Word must be the standard that informs and regulates our renewed minds.¹¹⁸ Mind-renewal is ultimately a process of internalizing the Truth.

In the opening chapter of Romans, Paul has explained how that people’s rejection of God has resulted in God giving them over to a “depraved” mind, what the KJV calls a “reprobate” mind. The word translated “depraved” (ἁδόκιμος) speaks of an “unqualified, worthless” mind, one that “does not stand the test.”¹¹⁹ Such a worthless mind has been *disapproved* because it is incapable of correctly assessing the truth about God and the world he has made.¹²⁰ Unbelievers cannot think rightly about God. Instead they pervert the truth of God (Rom 1:21–28). Now in v. 2 of our text, Paul contends that “the purpose¹²¹ of our being transformed by the renewing of the mind is that this state might be reversed,” that we may be able “prove what the will of God is.”¹²² While the unbeliever has a mind that is disapproved (ἁδόκιμος),

(ἀνακαίωσις) in Rom 12:2.

¹¹⁷Moo, *Romans*, p. 757.

¹¹⁸For Paul, the “mind” (νοῦς) “always includes the idea of an external standard” (Horace E. Stoessel, “Notes on Romans 12:1–2,” *Interpretation* 17 (April 1963): 164. Stott says, “Although Paul does not here tell us how our mind becomes renewed, we know from his other writings that it is by a combination of the Spirit and the Word of God. Certainly regeneration by the Holy Spirit involves the renewal of every part of our humanness, which has been tainted and twisted by the fall, and this includes our mind. But in addition, we need the Word of God, which is the Spirit’s ‘sword,’ and which acts as an objective revelation of God’s will. Here then are the stages of Christian moral transformation: first our mind is renewed by the Word and Spirit of God; then we are able to discern and desire the will of God; and then we are increasingly transformed by it” (*Romans*, p. 324).

¹¹⁹BDAG, s.v. “ἁδόκιμος,” p. 21.

¹²⁰Moo, *Romans*, p. 757.

¹²¹The Greek construction used here, εἰς τό plus the infinitive (δοκιμάζειν) probably denotes purpose (e.g., Moo, *Romans*, p. 757; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:609; Osborne, *Romans*, p. 322), though result is also possible (e.g., Sanday & Headlam, *Romans*, p. 354; Hendriksen, *Romans*, 2:406; Cottrell, *Romans*, 2:316).

¹²²Moo, *Romans*, p. 757.

disqualified from thinking rightly about God, the believer's mind is being renewed so that he can "prove" (δοκιμάζω) or "approve" what God's will is. The term (δοκιμάζω) in this context means to give approval to what one has discerned. It is used similarly in Ephesians 5:10, "trying to learn (δοκιμάζω) what is pleasing to the Lord." Moo notes, "'Approving' the will of God means to understand and agree with what God wants of us with a view to putting it into practice."¹²³ By the "will of God," Paul means, of course, what Murray calls God's "will of commandment," his preceptive not his decretive will since the latter "is not the norm according to which our life is to be patterned" (cf. Deut 29:29).¹²⁴ Although the process of mind-renewal begins at conversion (Titus 3:5), believers do not immediately understand what is pleasing to God ("the will of God"). Believers will face diverse and sometimes conflicting choices with regard to how they are to act and live. But as their minds are being renewed, they are able to put these choices to the test of God's Word and approve what is the appropriate will of God for them.¹²⁵ Schreiner explains, "As the mind is renewed, believers bow to God's rule in their lives."¹²⁶ And, truly, a renewed mind will conclude that the will of God is nothing less than "that which is good and acceptable and perfect."

CONCLUSION

Contrary to how our text has frequently been understood by those who have knowingly, or unknowingly, drunk from the well of Holiness/Keswick theology, it cannot be used to support the requirement for a special act of dedication as a necessary requirement for sanctification. Of course, Paul does call for the believer's dedication in Romans 12:1–2, and since obedience to every NT command is necessary for progressive sanctification, dedication is undoubtedly essential for the believer. But, unfortunately, what Paul means by dedication has too often been misunderstood to mean a decisive, often one-time decision, a special offering of the believer to God that instantaneously moves him to a new level of spiritual development. But as we have seen, this completely misses Paul's emphasis.

Romans 12:1–2 can be viewed as basically summarizing the demands of the gospel for believers who are living in a secular world. What God wants from us who are the recipients of his grace is not so much a specific *act* of dedication, but a *life* of dedication. Paul's

¹²³Ibid.

¹²⁴*Romans*, 2:115.

¹²⁵Cf. the NIV: "Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is" (also NET BIBLE).

¹²⁶*Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, p. 253.

metaphor of dedication is the model for the normal Christian life. What God desires from his children is that they continually resist conformity to this age while they are, at the same time, being transformed into the very image of Christ. This transformation involves the whole person, an ongoing, lifelong transformation that is from the inside out so that the spiritual renewal begun at regeneration continues until the day of glorification. This transformation depends upon the continual renewal of the believer's mind in order that he might always be able to discern God's moral will for his life, to agree that it is good and acceptable and perfect, and to seek to put it into practice. This process of mind-renewal is somewhat of a virtuous circle. As the believer grows in his understanding of and obedience to God's truth, his mind will be renewed so that he will be able to discern and obey God's moral will for his life. And as he continues to obey God's will, he will continue to be transformed. The process Paul sets forth in Romans 12:1–2 is essential if the believer is to live a life of obedience, and obedience to God is the path to progressive sanctification.