

Intelligent Service

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The Epistle to the Romans, presents us with an orderly unfolding of the Gospel in Romans 1 - 8. First of all we are carried through an exposure of the ruin and corruption that marks the human race in all its branches, and then step by step the Divine way of blessing is unfolded: the way in which God has wrought on man's behalf in the death and resurrection of Christ; the particular application of His death and resurrection to the believer, first as regards his sinful acts and then as regards his sinful state; the consequent gift of the Spirit; the experimental process by which the believer learns to now walk in the liberty of the Spirit and free from the dominion of sin and law and flesh. This is supplemented in Romans 9 to 11 by a treatise upon the ways and purposes of God, showing how His ways, which are past finding out, are made to work out to the fulfilment of His purposes.

With Romans 12 we begin the hortatory and practical part of the epistle, and, by the mercies of God unfolded in the earlier chapters, the apostle beseeches us to present our bodies "a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God," and he adds, "which is your reasonable [intelligent, N. Tr.] service."

That the believer is converted to be a servant of God is a well-recognized fact. When once Divine life has been received, a person is desirous of going in the Divine way and of being a servant of the will of God, even though as yet he has very little knowledge of the truth outlined in Romans 6, 7, and 8. Thus it was with most of us; in the first joy of conversion we began to serve hardly knowing why we did so. We began by rendering what we may call *instinctive service*. We cannot, however, proceed indefinitely upon those lines. Our service, if it is to be sustained and efficient, must flow from an understanding of the truth, from a recognition of what has been achieved and established in the death and resurrection of Christ. It must be *intelligent service*.

In our unconverted days sin was reigning in our mortal bodies, and we were obeying it in the lusts thereof. Consequently we were yielding our members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin, and as servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity, as Romans 6 tells us. As believers now "dead with Christ" we are to reckon ourselves "dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord," and consequently sin is not to have dominion over us, but we are to yield ourselves unto God, "as those that are alive from the dead," and to yield our members "as instruments of righteousness unto God," and "as servants to righteousness unto holiness." Let this be really laid hold of in the faith of our souls, and we at once perceive that our bodies, which formerly were the vehicle for the expression of our own wills and the pursuit of our own pleasures, are now to be presented as a sacrifice to God.

The sacrifices of Old Testament times were animals devoted to God by way of death, and the thought of a living sacrifice hardly appears; it would indeed have seemed a contradiction in terms, and an impossibility. That, however, which would have been an impossible service under Judaism becomes an intelligent service under Christianity. The only right course for the believer is to present his body to God as a thing wholly devoted to His will and use and glory, and it only can be so presented as a thing which though living is yet acknowledged to be dead as viewed in the light of the death of Christ. The contradiction in terms alone remains, but then such paradoxes are common in Christianity, as Gal. 2: 20 bears witness.

It is an incontrovertible fact that the men and women of the world are largely ruled by their

bodies. Scripture speaks of man as a tripartite being. He is "spirit and soul and body," placing the three parts in that order, thus giving prominence to the spirit as the most important, since it is the essential and characteristic part which makes man what he is, and distinguishes him from the lower animal creation. The phrase has passed into common use, but people nearly always invert the order, and speak of "body, soul, and spirit," thus insensibly betraying the view they take of their relative importance. The spirit, which capacitates man for intelligent intercourse with God, is dethroned. The body, which through its five senses puts him in touch with his fellows and with the earth, is exalted. They do not wish to have to do with God, whilst they very much love and enjoy the earth. Consequently the body becomes of prime importance, and they spend their lives over questions as to what they shall put into it, and upon it, or over it in the way of shelter, and how they shall get the wherewithal to provide it with pleasurable sensations through its various senses, or stimulate its jaded nerves to further pleasing action, and of how they shall check the inroads of the diseases and disorders so frequently provoked by their vices and follies, and stave off as long as possible the approach of death.

What a whirlpool of death has the poor world become as a consequence of all this! God does not, however, leave His saints in its power. They are not to be finally sucked down into its vortex, and it is not His will that they should be meanwhile swept along by its current, for those who are in its grip are on their way to death. It is true, of course, that if a true believer gets so entangled God will extricate him before the bitter end is reached, though this may involve terrible loss, as illustrated by God's dealings with Lot in Sodom.

On the outer rim of a whirlpool the motion is but slow; as the vortex is approached the speed is greatly increased. We are not far removed from the vortex of the world's great whirlpool today. The pace at which "life," as the world terms it, moves, the speed of all great world movements, is greatly increased. Are Christians generally awake to what the situation really is?

We greatly fear that the answer to that question is in the negative, and hence we venture to pen these lines of earnest appeal and exhortation. We beseech our readers to join us in obeying that wholesome Scriptural exhortation, "Thus saith the Lord of hosts; consider your ways" (Haggai 1: 7). The very ease of our circumstances in these favoured English-speaking lands lends itself to religion of an easygoing and semi-worldly, if not wholly worldly, type. Proper Christian life, the life that pleases God, does not, indeed, consist in inward gloom and outward sanctimoniousness, "pulling a long face," as it is popularly called, but then neither does it consist in a piety, however genuine it may be, which goes hand-in-hand with any amount of "innocent" and "harmless" jollification.. Those who follow this latter type may flatter themselves that they present to the world an attractive Christianity, and announce that, "I feel like singing all the time"; yet this "joy-bells" type — as we may call it — is no nearer the thing that Scripture indicates than the other. Not thus did the apostles live.

There are things which really are life, and these are not connected with the earth or the world, and they cannot be purchased with money. For the Christian the possession of money frequently means the death of spirituality, as 1 Timothy 6 shows. Not money but the love of money is the root of the mischief, and yet it is most difficult to possess money without the love of it creeping in, and then money becomes a master and not a slave, and the possessor of it spends it for his own gratification and not for the will of God. And yet money and all the luxuries it procures are not really life. If any of our readers be rich we beseech them to remember that their wealth is to be used in such a way that they be "rich in good works . . . laying by for themselves a good foundation for the future, that they may lay hold of what is really life" (1 Tim. 6: 18, 19, N. Tr.).

The plain fact is that all the things in which the flesh and the world move are but death. Romans 8

tells us that there are the things of the flesh which are minded by those after the flesh, and the things of the Spirit which are minded by those after the Spirit, and that while the mind of the flesh is death, the mind of the Spirit is life and peace. It also tells us very plainly that "if ye live according to flesh, ye are about to die; but if by the Spirit ye put to death the deeds of the body, ye shall live" (verse 13, N. Tr.). In these words the apostle speaks of things according to their essential character. Death lies at the end of a life lived according to flesh, and whoever lives that life, no matter who he may be, or what God in mercy may do before the end is reached, is making straight for death, and may be said to be "about to die." On the contrary, whoever goes forward in the energy of the Spirit putting to death the deeds of the body has life, in its full and proper sense, before him. For such an one "the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness" (verse 10), i.e., the body is held as a dead thing, for if it gains the mastery of us, so that we are swayed by its desires, only sin is the outcome, whereas when the Spirit controls so as to be the internal means of life, righteousness is the outcome.

We are to present, then, these living bodies of ours to God as things devoted to Him through death, as vehicles for His will because of the acceptance of death as regards the will of the flesh. What this involves is unfolded to us in the succeeding verses, and that by means of a series of exhortations and instructions.

Before coming to the positive side of things we are shown in one brief sentence what it means on the negative side. "Be not conformed to this world." The word used here for "conformed" is elsewhere translated "fashioned," and that for "world" is more literally "age." "Be not fashioned according to this age" is what the apostle has to say to us. This age is a Christ-rejecting age, and we are called to represent Christ in the midst of it. Can there be accord between us and it? And if there is no inward accord, should there be outward conformity? Never!

How many of us are living our lives in defiance of this injunction? How many of us are content to take our cue from the world, and run after its fashions, and be carried unresistingly with its tide, and do things just because "everybody's doing it"? The fact that "everybody's doing it" ought to be to us a pretty plain intimation that it is a highly desirable thing that we should not do it. We are separated and distinct from the world, if in truth we are the children of God. Let us not then ape the ways of the world and so become guilty of the form of hypocrisy to which Christians are liable, viz., that of pretending not to be what we are.

When we turn to the positive side of things we do not find reformation urged as the opposite to conformation to this world. It is rather transformation that we need. Here the apostle uses a word which is only used on three other occasions in the New Testament. Twice it is used of the transfiguration of our Lord, and the third occasion is in 2 Cor. 3: 18, where it is translated "is changed." The consideration of its use in these passages may help us to grasp its significance here.

Moreover the exhortation is to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind," for it is always the Divine way to work from the within to the without. Our bodies are controlled by our thinking faculties, and our very thinking faculties need to be renewed; a striking witness this of how deeply and fundamentally the fall has affected us, and of how impossible it is for us even to think aright except as the fruit of God's work. The reference here, however, is not to the new birth, for that has been accomplished in the case of every true child of God, and is consequently never a subject of exhortation, but to that progressive and daily renewing wrought by the Holy Spirit as our minds are enlightened by and brought into subjection to and into harmony with the Word of God.

At this point again some serious questions suggest themselves. How many of us give sufficient time and place to the Word of God and prayer to get our minds renewed in any thorough fashion? How

many of us really want to get them renewed? Some of our Christian acquaintances may tell us with considerable emphasis that they see no harm in this, that, and the other, and that they mean to go on and enjoy themselves, when, if only a little renewing took place, they would not only see the emptiness of these things that charm them, but they would lose all taste for them. Are there any of us secretly afraid to give more than a perfunctory surface reading to the Scriptures, lest too much light should shine into the conscience and disturb it? Alas! if so it should be.

Oh, let us earnestly seek that our minds be so enlightened and renewed that we not only see what is the will of God, but come to delight in it. Then, our renewed minds controlling our bodies, they will be presented as a living sacrifice to God, and we shall be transformed into the character of Christ. The will of God *is* good and perfect, no matter what our attitude may be; but then we shall know it to be not only good and perfect but acceptable also, and we shall not only know it to be all this, but we shall prove it to be so. The will of God will be practically wrought out to the point of demonstration in our lives.

The rest of our chapter works out in detail for us what the will of God is. The very first indication of the mind being renewed, and the work of transformation being wrought, is that we cease from high thoughts of ourselves, as verse 3 shows. Nothing is more deeply ingrained in the natural mind than self-esteem. One of the first marks of a renewed mind is humility. Then we begin to think soberly, and to know that our real measure is not to be judged by intellect or money or social status, but by faith; it is, "according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith."

The second indication is that we begin to think of others. The natural mind is self-centred. The renewed mind becomes enlarged. We discover that we are not the only child in the family of God, or so many isolated units, but rather are intimately connected with all other believers. It is with us just after the analogy of the human body; though many we are "one body in Christ, and every one members one of another." This delivers us from selfishness. We begin at once to recognize that what God may bestow upon us is not for our own use and benefit alone, and still less for our own glorification, but is to be utilized for the good of all the members of that one body.

From this it flows that we shall not all be doing the same things. There is unity, for there is but one body. There will be diversity, however, for there are many members. Hence, as the latter part of the chapter shows, we must see to it that we know what is the work or service which is allotted to us each in the will of God; then we are to give ourselves to it with all diligence, and be careful that it is done in the gracious spirit of Christ Himself. Thus we shall be carrying out in detail that intelligent service to which we are called.