

## The Apostle Paul and the Call to a Holy Life

Time is not on my side in surveying biblical themes that have importance for our article of faith on sanctification. We have looked at the biblical story as a whole in terms of holiness lost, promised, and offered in Jesus our Lord. We have looked more particularly at the ministry of Jesus and his critique of the way holiness was understood and experienced in the first century. Our concern has been to see **what** the Scriptures say about sanctification, **how** they say it (i.e., what is emphasized and what is not), and then to ask how the Scriptures shed light on our efforts to promote holy living among our people.

The Apostle Paul, from whom so much of the NT comes and to whom the church has looked as primary interpreter of the claims of Christ, had much to say about holiness. But, like Jesus, he too speaks of holiness from within social and religious contexts that must be kept in mind. Time permits no more than a quick survey of several important points.

Paul was born and Paul died a Jew. His conversion to Christ had not changed his Jewish, biblical world view. As a follower of Jesus, the Christ, he understood himself as a fulfilled or “completed” Jew. Only in light of the Christ could God’s great acts and promises in history be understood and embraced. Thus, he could say that all the promises of

God are “Yes” in Christ, to which we say, “Amen!” (2 Cor.1:20) He could say, “In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that matters is faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). The authentic Jew, he claimed, is “inwardly a Jew; real circumcision is a matter of the heart, it is spiritual, not literal” (Rom. 2:28-29). Therefore, “God has made Christ Jesus the source for life, wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

For Paul, then, authentic Jews are holy because they trust Jesus as Messiah, and because the Spirit of God dwells in their hearts generating a new life of love. **They** are, in fact, the holy people of God. In other words, the Scripture’s vision of holy living is lived out by followers of Jesus. Precisely because of their faith in Jesus they have become holy people. And, in view of their faith, God calls them to live as holy people in an unholy world. (Incorporated into the People who be definition are holy, they therefore must live holy lives! See 1 Corinthians where Paul makes just this affirmation.)

Therefore, Paul accepts the first covenant’s vision of holiness and applies it to the church. The church and its members are to live differently from the world—in unquestioning dependence upon God, and in radical response to God’s love shown them in Christ. As holy people the church

lives in striking contrast to its culture. To name a few of the ways: they give ultimate allegiance to Christ, not Caesar; they reject the gods of their world and refuse to worship them; they abstain from sexual activities common in the ancient world (fornication, homosexual use of boys, sexual rites associated with pagan temples; adultery, and divorce); they rejected their culture of violence and hatred; they withdrew from social structures that compromised total commitment to Christ and faithfulness to his mission; and they commit to truthfulness and integrity, especially in speaking what was true and refraining from unwholesome speech and slander.

This in general is Paul's vision of holy living for believers in Christ. Now, how do we actually live out this vision? Turn with me to Paul's letter to the church at Rome (read 8:1-11).

Notably, Paul declares the freedom of believers in Christ. We are free from the condemnation our former way of life brought us. Once immersed in sin, now we are immersed in Christ. We are free from one kind of immersion for another. Just as for Christ there is no condemnation—there is nothing that a holy God can find to condemn—so there is no condemnation for people now immersed in Christ. Union with Christ sets one gloriously free from **all** that could bring judgment. Praise the Lord! V. 2, “The law (here probably better translated “the rule

or domination”) of the Spirit of life in Christ has set you free from the law (rule, domination) of sin and of death.

How? God did for us what we could not do for ourselves. V.3, “For God did what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do, by sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh.” Jesus became flesh (though without sin) to deal with sin in the flesh, through his atoning death on the cross. And, in so doing, God through Jesus condemned sin in the flesh. Here is the result: V.4, so that the just requirement of the law—what the law was getting at, aiming for all the time—might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Let me summarize what Paul is saying: in ourselves, living according to the flesh, we stand condemned. But in Christ there is no condemnation. Why? Because God has dealt with sin in the flesh by becoming flesh himself, by giving his life for us, and by empowering us to live in a way that pleases God, which fulfills the very reason God gave the law in the first place. We can live a God-centered and God-pleasing life in Christ, by walking according to the Spirit. Paul then goes on to describe this life as a resurrection life empowered by the Holy Spirit. V. 10 says, “The body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of God’s act of righteousness (Jesus’ death, resurrection, and gift of Spirit).

Consequently, v. 11, “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead

dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.” This is not a statement on the future resurrection of our bodies alone, but upon the power of the spirit transforming “dead” bodies into vessels capable of “life,” a new or holy life.

Now, how does Paul think that this happens? How does he encourage his fellow believers to live such a new, holy life? He declares the possibilities of grace, and then urges full surrender to God and ongoing transformation. Romans 12:1-2 represents a classic expression of this, which I want to examine in some detail. (I am indebted here to Dr. George Lyons, whose treatment of this passage in *Holiness in Everyday Life*, I have used and adapted for this presentation in pp. 5-17)

The possibility of a living a holy life, of entire sanctification, is not our human aptitude. Apart from God’s grace we all would be hopeless sinners. But His grace has reached us. We have been given a fresh start. We enjoy our new life in Jesus Christ, thanks to God, who “is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20, RSV) So, Paul makes an appeal.

Because God is who He is, He does not sanctify us without our permission. He gives us life. It is ours to decide what we will do with it.

Thus, Paul makes his appeal: “Offer your bodies (the “dead” bodies made “alive” by resurrection power—the dead bodies now energized for new or holy life) as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.” **Why** should we do so? And **what** does this really mean?

**Why?** “Through, in view of, the mercy of God.” In fact, in the original the noun is plural, “In view of the mercies of God.” That phrase actually gathers up most of what Paul says in chapters 1-11.

Let me summarize: Brothers and sisters, we have to do with the creator and sustainer God who made us and showers upon us blessing—whether good or evil—that’s mercy. Even though humanity as a whole has, as have all of us as human beings, rejected God from the beginning, God has responded with kindness and patience toward us—that’s mercy. We humans make a mess of things, in the world, in our lives, and God offers to help—that’s mercy. Yes, God responds to our rightly earned guilt and insecurity with an offer of forgiveness and acceptance—that’s mercy! God wants us free from destructive ways of life, from things that enslave body, mind, and spirit, that can only harm us and others—that’s mercy! In fact, God offers a new life, energized by his Spirit—that’s mercy! God offers us a future that is certain, even though we must live in a bad news world that causes us to groan and suffer—that’s mercy!

And, when we're slow to catch on, or simply uninterested, God doesn't give up on us and write us off, but finds a way when there is no way to attract and draw us to new life—that's mercy!

This is the God who knows us better than we know ourselves, who knows all the reasons why we should be disqualified—the God who's got the goods on us! And, armed with all that ammunition, spreads out his arms to die for us on the cross to say, "Welcome!"

Then, he extends those same arms, wounded by love, to pour out his Spirit so that we might learn truly to live. That One in all of the universe who if for us makes all that can be against us puny and powerless—that One, God, **is** for us! That is mercy upon mercy upon mercy, mercies multiplied.

WHY a radical offering? Apart from such mercy where would we be? In view of more mercy than we know, offer your bodies, Paul urges us.

**What would this mean?** What does it mean to offer our bodies to God as living sacrifices? And what's to make us think that the issue here is sanctification? After all, the terms *holiness* and *sanctification* appear nowhere in Rom. 12:1-2.

What does God want me to do in offering myself to Him? What does God want with my body? The Christian life is lived out on this earth, not in heaven, and in bodies, not as disembodied spirits. This calls for some serious reflection on how we are to live out our lives in the face of competing loyalties. Every day we live we are dying. We are exhausting our lives and time and talents on something. We are, as it were, offering ourselves up as “living sacrifices.” We may not choose whether or not we will die. But thanks to the freedom we enjoy in Christ, we may choose for what and for whom we will live.

The language Paul uses here is clearly figurative, appealing to the imagery of sacrifice. What he means is simply this. As a thank offering to God, I give up my claim of a right to myself – a mistaken claim, since the life I enjoy is His twofold gift, by creation and redemption. I offer myself as a thank offering freely, fully, and finally to my rightful Lord.

And, what’s to make us think that the issue here is sanctification? Turn to Romans 6. Let’s read verses 10-14, 16-22.

**Romans 6:10-14** <sup>10</sup> the death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. <sup>11</sup> So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. <sup>12</sup> Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. <sup>13</sup> No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. <sup>14</sup> For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

**Romans 6:16-22** <sup>16</sup> Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of

obedience, which leads to righteousness? <sup>17</sup> But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, <sup>18</sup> and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. <sup>19</sup> I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification. <sup>20</sup> When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. <sup>21</sup> So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. <sup>22</sup> But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life.

Notice that here Paul uses repeatedly the very same word “offer.” He explains that because we are Christians, we ought to offer or yield, present, or commit ourselves to God. We should make available to Him our bodies, our capabilities, everything we are or ever hope to become. This yielding requires the totality of us. The result is holiness.

Bodily existence cannot be neutral. Human existence is never free in any absolute sense. We are always slaves to someone or something. But as Christians we are free to choose our master. Either Jesus Christ will be our Lord, or some unworthy master will. In verse 16, Paul explains that our character is determined by our lord. We become like the one we serve. Thus we should make ourselves available to God as His instruments, His weapons in the service of right.

Paul uses a variety of human analogies to make his point. In the next chapter he uses the imagery of marriage in yet another attempt to explain the meaning of sanctification.

More than 30 years ago, on August 16, 1975, I stood nervously before the altar of the Sugar Creek Mennonite Church, in Sugar Creek, Ohio. Beside me stood my young bride – it seems impossible that so much time has passed. In the course of the ceremony, the pastor finally came to those decisive questions, “Will you ...?”

When I replied “I will and I do” I implied “No, I don’t” to perhaps 2 or more billion other women in the world. They may not have known, or cared, but I did, and Lavone did. A wedding is once for all, but a marriage is for a lifetime.

The verb “offer” in Romans 12 implies this kind of decisive act of permanent commitment. Since we continue to live after this moment, our yielding is only the beginning of a life of yieldedness, a full surrender of self-sovereignty. Offering ourselves to God is an act implying an ongoing activity, a decisive moment of offering that begins a deeper union in a relationship that has been ongoing. In gratitude to God for His incredible love and multiplied mercies, we place our redeemed

personalities fully at His disposal, to be used as He sees fit, where He sees fit, when He sees fit.

On the basis of God's proven mercies, freely, intelligently, worshipfully, Paul urges us to offer ourselves to God as a gift to Him. And when we do, an amazing thing happens. We learn that not only is God's way trustworthy, but also His work is transforming. That transforming work represents a new powerful chapter in a lifelong process of sanctification.

It is God, not our consecration, who sanctifies the believer, although consecration is an essential prerequisite to His transforming work. People do not sanctify themselves; it is the work of God. But redeemed people are truly free to retain or surrender their "rights" to themselves. Only with our permission will God perform the transformation that renews our Christian minds.

On the authority of God's mercies, addressing an audience of Christians, Paul appeals for a decisive act of commitment to God. Connected with this basic appeal are two related actions – "Do not **be conformed** any longer to the pattern of this world, but **be transformed** by the renewing of your mind". Or put another way, having made the radical offering of one's body to God, now take the critical alternative of being transformed rather than being conformed.

1. Grammar. If I were teaching Greek, I would simply say: “Friends, the two verbs translated ‘conformed’ and ‘transformed’ are both in the present tense, passive voice, imperative mood, second person plural forms.”

And they’d say, “Aha! I see it all now.” But since that’s not what I am doing, let me explain it more completely so that you too can say, “Aha!”

The present tense tells us that Paul calls for two ongoing responses, which should take place on the basis of the believer’s decisive offering of self to God.

The passive voice requires that both of these actions are initiated from outside of us. Paul does not say, “You transform,” but, “You are transformed.” And despite the NIV translation, Paul does not say, “Do not conform,” but actually, “Do not **be** conformed” (NRSV).

The imperative mood indicates that these are commands. The action will take place only as they are allowed or encouraged; they are not automatic. These are not accomplished facts but possibilities open to those who make themselves available to God.

The second person plural indicates that the imperative is addressed to the readers, to you – “all of you.” The verbs assume that the action is not only for each individual but also for the entire group. Sanctification is not just an individual concern but a concern of the whole Christian community. As John Wesley put it: “I know no holiness except social holiness.” You cannot be holy alone.

There are two actions that Paul says must happen. One is negative: Do not be conformed. The other is positive: Be transformed. And these are inevitable alternatives. We will find ourselves either here—transformed or there—conformed.

**Positive.** Let’s look at the positive first. If the action comes from the outside, who’s the actor? Who is the transformer? God! God is the Source of this transformation, this daily inside-out renewal of the committed Christian. In 2 Cor. 3:18 we read: “And we all ... beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (RSV).

Two kinds of transformation may be found in the New Testament. One of these is the exact opposite of what we find here – “do not be conformed.” In 2 Cor. 11:14, (you may recall) it refers to Satan transforming himself into an angel of light. He’s still Satan; he only *looks* different.

Transformation of this kind is really only a disguise, an outward change of appearance and behavior. It is by this notion of change that legalism parades itself as an inferior imitation of holiness. If you hang a bushel of apples on a fence post, does that make it an apple tree? If I “don’t smoke, drink, or chew, or go out with girls that do,” am I holy or entirely sanctified? Paul’s reply in Greek would be, “*Mē genoito*,” which loosely translated means, “perish the thought! Or No way!”

This is not the ‘transformation’ Paul commends here in Romans 12. The word he uses is one that gives us our word *metamorphosis*. This is not just a change of behavior, it is a change of character – not just *acting* but *being* completely different. This is the word used to describe what happened to Jesus on the Mt. of Transfiguration—where his heavenly glory became suddenly manifest to the startled disciples (the difference, of course, is that in Jesus it was a true revelation of who he truly was in himself) For us, it is the indwelling Holy Spirit who is God’s Agent in effecting this inside-out transformation, reproducing Jesus’ character in the lives of committed Christians (see 2 Cor. 3:17-18; 2 Thess. 2:13).

Paul identifies the means of transformation as the continuing renewal of the mind, the thinking capacity, the character, the inner disposition, the very center of our personal lives (2 Cor. 3:17-18); 4:6-7, 16; Eph. 4:23-24; Col. 3:10; Titus 3:3-7). Holiness is renewal or re-creation in the image of God, the Creator (see Gen. 1:26ff.). The transformed life is the

normal human life; it is to be the man or woman God intended us to be when He made us.

**Negative.** Now let's look at the negative action: "Do not be conformed".

J. B. Phillips' well known paraphrase puts it this way: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould." The outside agent the Christian must resist is "the world." But what is that?

The sanctified life is simultaneously a loving witness by God in behalf of the world and the lost men and women in it and a stern judgment by God against the world.

God at once loves and hates the world. And so must we (see John 3:16; I John 2:15). God loves the sinful people of this planet. But He hates the perverse systems we humans have created, the worldly values we espouse. We must resist that world that is turned away from God, in rebellion, and organized on the basis of illusion and idolatry. The sanctified life involves the paradoxical existence described in John 17 – Christians are "in the world" (v. 11), not yet taken "out of the world" (v. 15) but are "not of the world" (vv.14, 16), "so that the world may believe" (v. 22, see v. 23). So what in the world is the "world?"

The story is told of an earlier era, before the advent of television and radio. Under such primitive circumstances in many small towns, it was very common for a whistle to sound daily at noon. In one of these little

towns of bygone days, the man whose responsibility it was to sound the noon whistle was asked one day, “How do you know when it’s exactly twelve o’clock?”

“Why, every day on my way to work, I pass the jewelry shop and set my watch by the clock in his window that always has the exact time.” But the next question caught the whistle blower off guard, “But how does that one clock always have the right time? “Why I don’t know. But I’ll find out.” So the next day on his way to work, he went into the Jeweler’s shop and asked, “Say, how is it that that one clock in your window always seems to have the exact time?” “Oh, that's the one I set every day at noon when the town whistle sounds.”

To be conformed to this world is to play the adult version of a child’s game. It’s called “follow the follower.” Worldliness is not simply a list of habits that worldly people indulge in. And holy living is not simply defined by what sanctified people do and do not do. Just as worldliness is a mind-set, a value system, so holiness is a renewal of the mind. It’s not just that I do or don’t do certain things, but I live on the basis of a new authority, and I live for a new purpose. This renewal is the result of the transforming work of sanctification.

The provision of sanctification is in the trustworthy ways of God, the Sanctifier, in response to Christians' commitment of their redeemed personalities to God. This decisive commitment, from the human perspective, opens the way for the process of sanctification – saint making—to deepen and fulfill its goal to conform us fully to the person of Christ.

This is the Pauline pattern of responses to the gospel—surrender and ongoing transformation. Here is what God has done. Here is the life it makes possible. Believer, child of God, make your present bodily life, all you are and all your capacities an offering to God—NOW, entirely. Let God's grace and Spirit renovate your life from the inside out.

And, for Paul, these responses to grace shape God's people into a new kind of community (or "fellowship") and empowers them for a mission. Under the shaping power of saving grace, God's people surrender to the Spirit who sanctifies them so that, cleansed from their sin, filled with His love, they are bound together to bear witness to Christ in the world in deed and word. Read through the remainder of Romans 12 and note the sort of community the church becomes and the kinds of relationships they model and responses they make to a world that does not know Christ.

Here are the critical points for our consideration of a statement on Sanctification.

We have looked at the whole biblical story as the story of a holy God creating and then redeeming a people who would mirror his holy likeness.

We've looked at the gospel story of Jesus and its message of holy living to see what he emphasized in calling his disciples to a different or holy way of life.

And, we've looked at Paul as representative of the larger NT witness to God's call to a holy life.

We have seen:

- God's plan from the beginning of our awakening to new life is to make us holy. That work begins from day one. Wesleyan's have always taught this.
- Holiness of heart and life is a life-long deep relationship or walk with a holy God. It is **that** relationship with God that makes us different or holy. We truly experience this relationship or walk, but it is not so much an experience that we seek and have and celebrate, as it is an ongoing relationship, a continuing walk with the Lord.
- The biblical witness to holy living places emphasis on this sanctifying relationship, that fills us with God Himself and God's

- love, that drives out sin both as behavior contrary to God's will and character unsubmitted to the Lordship of Christ, and that repairs the damage caused by life-long cooperation with sin.
- Just as at the beginning of our life in Christ, there is the reception of new life—conversion—that often we remember as an event, so as our life in Christ becomes wholly sanctified there is a climax of surrender where self is yielded entirely to God and God's Spirit has unhindered access to our lives. But both moments of decision or crisis, as important as they are, are best seen within the lifelong walk with God that makes us like Christ, or holy.
  - The sanctified life has an important communal dimension. God sanctifies the church as well as its members. There is no holiness that is alone or independent.
  - And the sanctified people of God, dead to self-centered living, filled with Christ like love, are a serving and witnessing community in the world, through whom God's redemptive plan will be accomplished.

The proposed article on *sanctification* expresses these major biblical themes well and far better than the current article on *entire sanctification*. The proposal does not quarrel at all with the heart of our classic view of entire sanctification. Rather, it speaks of the whole work of sanctification of the believers that sets their entire sanctification in its

proper relational context. The article as proposed anticipates the more specific treatment of entire sanctification in chapter three of the *Discipline*.

The proposed article uses thoroughly biblical language that draws us to the text of the bible, unlike our current statement (the concepts are biblical on the whole but much of the language and many of the phrases come from other than biblical texts).

For example, Holy Spirit recreates us, see Eph. 4:24; changing them from one degree of glory to another, see 2 Cor. 3:18; conforming them ..., see Rom. 8:28-29; surrender in faith; Rom. 6:13, 16, 19-22; 12:1, and many other places; die to self (or self-centeredness), see Rom. 6; Col. 3; Eph. 4; Spirit fills us with love, see Rom. 5:5; Eph. 3; ; purifies from sin, see 1 Jn. 1:7.

The current article's focus on the *experience* of entire sanctification has suggested among us that God sanctifies all people in just the same way, which we do not find in Scripture. It's focus on a second definite work of grace can be found in Scripture we believe, but not as clearly and easily as our article suggests (which raises an integrity issue with some our people who wish to be thoroughly Scriptural), and **that** focus is not one the Scriptures emphasize.

The language of the current article spoke well to 19<sup>th</sup> century holiness pioneers in North America. God used them and their teaching to bless. It does **not** connect as well or at all with 21<sup>st</sup> century people. For example, 21<sup>st</sup> century believers are painfully aware of how complex the human mind and heart are, and how deeply sin has affected them. In such an environment, it is no longer most people's experience that they are cleansed "in one moment" from all inward sin. Most people experience a number of moments along the way to complete surrender and cleansing. Yet, our statement implies a kind of simplicity and entirely that does not correspond to the experience of most. We believe we should be more Wesleyan at this point. Scripture teaches the reality of entire sanctification, but does not focus on and emphasize the process so specifically as does our current article. Therefore, we will be more faithful to the emphasis of Scripture and more helpful to our people in pressing on toward holiness.

Finally, the best way to honor our forefathers and mothers who championed the cause of holiness and walked the way of holiness so well, is not simply to adhere strictly to their precise formulations and vocabulary, but to find biblical ways of speaking that call our people to holiness in a way that will be as compelling and powerful as our forebears did to their generation. We believe this reformulated article on Sanctification will contribute to this end.