

Commentary on Romans 12:1-2 & Ephesians 4:17-20, the Spiritual Formation Concepts of Paul

Introduction

Spiritual formation has come to explain and define many different views in the Church body today, but as we take a closer look at Romans 12:1-2 and Ephesians 4:17-20, the Apostle Paul can guide us through what it means to transform our relationship to God into one of spiritual growth or spiritual formation. In these two letters by Paul we can look at two sections, often titled *Dedication to Service*, and *The Christian's Walk*, in some translations, where Paul presents the concepts of spiritual formation; life being that of a living or Holy sacrifice that then moves into a conduct of life lived out in a way worthy of who that life represents. Though the scriptures do not speak of the concept of spiritual formation directly, indirectly the entirety of scripture teaches us that we should strive to conform to the image of Christ while at the same time becoming un-conformed to the ways of the world and of those things, sensualities as Paul puts it, in our culture that control us and pull us away from the beauty of God.

Spiritual formation in the Church today is a popular topic, much like the growth of the concept of “small groups”, but it is not a concept specifically written about in those exact terms. Similar to the idea of small groups, a student or layperson interested in spiritual formation cannot thumb through a biblical index for the term of spiritual formation. That does not invalidate the concept of small groups or spiritual formation but it does require a more than superficial examination of how the biblical text deals with the concept and how that concept can be applied to the believer's life. Romans 12:1-2 and

Ephesians 4:17-20 are essential parts of the Biblical text that allow us to glean a better understanding of the concept of spiritual formation and how it applies to our lives.

Commentary of Romans 12:1-2

Paul often divided his letters into two sections, a section on doctrinal issues and a section on practical use. Romans could be seen as slightly different from his other letters in the fact that his doctrinal section of Romans was far longer than half of the book.

Some commentators have noted this and discern that chapter 12 of Romans starts off a third and final division for the letter¹, which emphasizes that duty of the follower of Christ.²

In verses 1-2, Paul speaks about the relationship we have with God, and he presents this as the start to the practical side of his letter to the Romans. This transition is shown from the first words of verse one, “I beseech” (KJV) or “I urge”, which Paul often uses to separate one section from the other.³ He then calls on “God’s mercy” (*oiktirmon* meaning compassion) to extend over the Roman followers in what becomes an emotional appeal. This call for God’s mercy upon the Romans is one that relates to grace and compassion, not one of doctrine or law his audience should apply, as was customary in Old Testament Judaism. Paul then calls everyone to “present” (as to yield) [their] bodies as a living and Holy sacrifice. (NASB) Here, the Greek word Paul uses, *παρίστημι*, as “present” (or to offer in the KJV) your bodies, is the same root word he used back in

¹ As noted in J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, Vol. IV, V vols. (Pasadena, CA: Thru the Bible Radio, 1983), 728, the three divisions of Romans are decided as chapters 1-8 pertaining to doctrinal specifics and chapters 9-11 pertaining to dispensational specifics.

² McGee, Vol. IV, 728.

³ The word “therefore” as seen in many translations was not the first word used in the Greek text but also indicates a transitory step in the letter from doctrinal to practical.

6:13, and again in verses 16 and 19, and is an appeal to the will, meaning to yield the will of our spirit (our whole bodies) to God. That Greek word is used in relation to the word animal sacrifice, “due to the use of θυσία” which explains how we are to offer up our lives, as living sacrifices to God.⁴ A living sacrifice, referring to the law on Holy animal scarifies, was made to God by the Jews in order to cleanse their sinful nature. Paul explains that the body is Holy. The body is the temple, and offering or placing the entire person; the body, mind and spirit, as “a living sacrifice”, brings the person back in harmony with God. An offering only made possible because the believer’s body is the “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6:19-20).⁵ Then, when we sacrificially place the full and complete will of our body over to God, it becomes our “reasonable service” (KJV) or our “spiritual service of worship” (NASB).

Next, Paul connects the exhortation of his audience in verse one to the action of verse two; “I urge [exhort] you... to not be conformed [action]”. In Paul’s call to action he tells us not to conform to the world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Some translations use the phrase “to the pattern of this world”, which goes back to verse one in relation to the will of the body. Renewed to the will (an inward expression) and not changed by the pattern of our world today (an external expression). This is done to “prove what is good and acceptable to God” (NASB), so we will know His will. Paul reminds us that as we continue to transform our minds, the will of God is made more apparent, we are made to be more like Christ, and then we discover God’s

⁴ Michael H. Burer, *Towards a Biblical Definition of Spiritual Formation: Romans 12:1-2*, 02 02, 2009, <http://bible.org/seriespage/towards-biblical-definition-spiritual-formation-romans-121-2> (accessed 09 11, 2009).

⁵ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, , *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1st Edition, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1983), 487.

will is indeed “good”. In this last section, Paul reminds us to not carve our life into what we see around us, what our culture says is good and perfect (even perhaps those in the church), but to change our way of thinking, testing the will of God, and once we do, to see that God’s will is perfect, just, and good.

Commentary on Ephesians 4:17-20

Paul, in this section of Ephesians, works through three different distinct sections, which as a whole is commonly referred to as the *Presentation of the [Old/New] Man*. First, Paul is referring to the nature of man, next to the practice of that nature, and then on to the position, or presentation of the new man. In the first section, verses 17-18, Paul starts off speaking to the Ephesians about prohibitions, negative commands, “that you no longer walk just as the Gentiles... in futility” (NASB). Paul, reminding his audience, about those unbelieving Gentiles who did not know the will of God, and as such, were not guided in their behavior by the will of God.⁶ The Ephesians were Gentile believers, but there were those among them “because of the hardening of their heart” that did not understand the ways of a follower of Christ. Here Paul brings back what he stated in chapter 2, verses 11-12, which reminded the Ephesians that they once were called the “Uncircumcised” because of their separation from God, due to their sinful nature, and without hope.

In the second section, verse 20, Paul presents the practice of those unbelieving Gentiles and paints a picture of a life given into all forms of indulgence and sin. This particular verse shows a disdain for God to the point of apathy, a life of no feeling or

⁶ Walvoord, 636.

even understanding of wrongdoing or sin, and far from repentance.⁷ Paul paints the horrible purpose of this life as that of practicing every form of sin and perversion known, and living that life to the point of numbness of mind, completely absent from God, without hope. Once this life of sin had begun and their minds were accustomed to sin, and preferring sin, they “made it a common practice to commit all sorts of uncleanness”.⁸ In this final section Paul shows us that this way of living does not come from Christ. In the great contrast between the life of a Gentile Unbeliever and a Gentile Believer, Paul shows that “if anyone is not listening to Jesus, then Jesus must not be his Savior”.⁹ This contrast is a clear line between those who believe and follow Christ and those who do not.

Applying Spiritual Formation and Conclusion

In a culture far removed from the early church, Paul still speaks to us today when he says, “do not conform to the ways of this world”. Perhaps often misunderstood by the evangelical Sunday church attendee as a call to completely remove ourselves from our secular culture, Paul reminds us that we are still part of this world but called to follow Christ, not the way of the world. As we look at how Paul’s writing here pertains to our spiritual formation or growth, we can see it is connected to the transformation of our mind, not by the abstaining from any one particular part of our culture. There is a balance here that Paul alludes to by calling believers to be transformed or renewed in

⁷ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, Vol. V, V vols. (Pasadena, CA: Thru the Bible Radio, 1983), 257.

⁸ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. VI, VI vols. (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing Company, 1985), 706.

⁹ McGee, Vol. V, 257.

verse 2. A balance that comes with being a believer not *of* the world, but *in* the world.¹⁰ Renewing our mind, not by a specific action taken but by changing how our mind “[responds] to God’s grace and mercy”, through various acts of worship, prayer, and communication with God.¹¹ These changes are in internal, first from within ones soul (mind). One can abstain from a perceived cultural impurity, only to have changed or transformed an external aspect of their life, which may or may not transform the mind. Paul understood that once the mind is transformed, Godly action would be sure to follow.

When we combine Paul’s word in Romans with a look at the verses in Ephesians, we would find it impossible to expect our spiritual formation to grow in the circumstances of sin as we see played out in verses 17-19. The concept of spiritual formation, transforming the mind through that of prayer, meditation, solitude in the Lord, fasting, and many others, can only start to refine a person’s life (or mind) when Ephesians 4:20 is taken into consideration, and Romans 12:2 is put into action.

Although the concept of spiritual formation is not an exact formulation from a specific verse, we can start to collectively understand the direction Paul is leading his audience through a study of Romans 12:1-2 and Ephesians 4:17-20. A more exhaustive study of Paul’s other letters (specifically his letters to the Corinthians), in conjunction with the Gospels, would yield a better understanding of how the New Testament church defines the concept of spiritual formation and how the 21st century church can teach the concept today.

¹⁰ John Piper, *Do Not Be Conformed to This World*, June 27, 2004, http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/10/176_Do_Not_Be_Conformed_to_This_World/ (accessed September 12, 2009).

¹¹ Burer.

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