



Applying Paul's Theological and Ethical Teachings in Romans 12:1 to an African Context

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Abstract

Abstract: One of the key challenges facing Christianity in contemporary Africa is ineffective discipleship. The African church has won many converts in recent times and yet, the continent is among the least performing continents in terms of socio-economic development. The reason for this observation is that many African Christians consider Christianity as a religion of the heart and consequently, do not care so much about what they do in the public arena. In a context like this, Paul's concept of the transformed life (explained in Romans 12:1) has the potential of correcting misconceptions about Christianity and empowering African Christians to engage the public sphere with their faith. The purpose of this paper is to conduct a textual analysis of Romans 12:1 to develop Christian ethics for (Africa) believers. The paper used a literature-based research approach and collected data from such sources as commentaries, articles and dissertations. The main thesis is that living a sacrificial life involves a total dedication to God in response to his gracious mercies manifested toward the believer. The paper contributes to Christian ethics, Pauline studies and African Christianity.

Keywords: Africa, Bodies, Sacrifice, Paul, Transformed life

Introduction

Evangelism, conversion, discipleship and (spiritual and numerical) growth of the church is an important subject in every theological discourse because the church's main task is mission. In Africa, the church has experienced unprecedented growth in the 20th and 21st centuries. For this gain to be sustained and be improved upon, there is the need to effectively disciple Christian converts in Africa. Effective discipleship will raise believers of resilient faith who contribute to the development of their societies, combating evil and promoting righteousness. Thus, for the predominantly Christian African continent to benefit from Christian ethical teachings and praxis and therefore make Christianity relevant to the public arena, believers must confront the world with their faith.

Encountering the world with the Christian faith requires a total dedication of one's life to God in response to God's gracious mercies manifested toward the person. This thesis statement is developed in this article through the application of Romans 12:1 to the African context. The paper shows a close relationship between indicative and imperative, demonstrating that being precedes doing. Believers are urged to present themselves as living, holy and acceptable sacrifices to God in response to what he has done for them, including making them righteous, offering them forgiveness, redeeming them, and reconciling them onto himself. Their new position in Christ equips them to live to please God.

The paper gathered secondary data, analyzed them and made deductions for contemporary (African) Christianity. A textual analysis of the text was conducted using data gathered from commentaries, articles and dissertations. After presenting the historical background and literary context of the text, the paper examined selected portions words and phrases of the text and then applied the findings to contemporary Christian discipleship based on three thematic areas: Priesthood of all believers, non-transactional approach to worship and continual undivided loyalty to God.

With the above introduction, the paper proceeds to examine the background of the text under consideration.

Background to the Text

Most New Testament scholars attribute the book of Romans to Paul because in addition to identifying himself as the author in the first verse (1:1), the literary, historical, and theological style are characteristically Pauline. In addition, most of the early Church Fathers support Pauline authorship.¹ Paul used Tertius as his scribe in writing this letter (see 16:22). Paul was not the founder of the church in Rome; it was probably established by Christian converts from Palestine and Syria (cf. Acts 2:10).² While the date of writing cannot be known with certainty, it is believed that the letter was written between 57 and 58 AD.³ This letter was written to facilitate good Jewish-Gentile relationship in the church (cf. Rom. 3:20-31; 11:17-32), to explain key Christian doctrines (see 1:16; 3:8 and 9:1-2) and to seek financial and material support for Paul's intended mission to Spain (15:24, 28).⁴

Many scholars consider Romans 12:1-2 as part of Paul's paraenesis (moral teaching) in Romans 12:1-15:13. Paraenesis is a statement of exhortation about life, derived from traditional wisdom of a society, and presented by people of higher ethical standards.⁵ Paul found it necessary to include paraenesis in his letter because he was writing to a young congregation whose members were new in the Christian faith, and so needed instructions on how to practicalize their recently-acquired faith.⁶ Paul, therefore, was indirectly telling his audience that the Christian faith is a practical one, not the mere acquisition of knowledge. Paul's use of paraenesis is also found in some of his other letters such as Galatians (5:1-6:10), Colossians (3:1-4:6) and Ephesians (4:1-6:20). In these books, the paraenesis comes at the end of the letter after doctrinal issues

¹ Geraldine C. Uzodimma, *An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Concept of Reconciliation in Romans 5:1-11: Envisioning A Transformative Human Relationship* (Licentiate of Sacred Theology Degree Thesis: Boston College University, 2018), 32.

² Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Letter to the Romans," In Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy (eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, pp. 830-868 (Ibadan: Society of St. Paul, 2011), 830.

³ Mark A. Powell, *Introduction to the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 258.

⁴ Powell, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 259; Fitzmyer, "The Letter to the Romans," 830; Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* 5th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 433-434.

⁵ David E. Aune, *Westminster Dictionary of New Testament and Early Christian Literature and Rhetoric* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 34.

⁶ Frank J. Matera, "Romans" In *Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament*. Edited by Mikeal C. Parsons and Charles H. Talbert (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 283.

have been discussed. Paul uses paraenesis throughout 1 and 2 Corinthians and Philippians, and the whole of 1 Thessalonians is paraenetic. The different ways in which Paul uses paraenesis are thus evident—at the end of a letter, throughout a letter in a scattered manner or as the main subject in a letter.

Paul's paraenetic teaching in Romans 12:1 - 15:13 is meant to show the believers in Rome how their state of spiritual transformation can be lived out in their community through "the renewing of their minds, which God has made possible in Christ."⁷ In other words, the goal of Romans 12:1–15:13 is to show the intimate relationship between faith and practice. Here, Paul persuasively uses topics that his audience were familiar with and then reminds them of the need to use the gift of love received from God to build their community. Based on information he had gathered about the Roman Church, Paul discusses such topics as paying taxes to the Roman government (chapter 13) and the tensions between members of weak faith and those of strong faith (chapter 14).

Romans 12:1-2 flows from and is grounded in the preceding text (1:1–11:36); it also sums up Paul's teachings that follow in 12:3–15:13.⁸ Paul opens the letter by introducing himself and his audience (1:1–17). He then argues for the legitimacy of God's wrath upon all people (whether Gentile or Jew) as none has taken God's law seriously (1:18–3:20). The universality of sin and God's provision of righteousness apart from "works of the law" is also discussed (3:21–4:25), followed by a discussion on the experience of salvation in the light of God's righteousness (5:1–8:39). The destiny of Israel in the light of God's righteousness is then discussed (9:1–11:36) followed by the paraenetic unit (12:3–15:13) which is also followed by the closing part of the letter (15:14–16:27).

Romans 12:1 falls within the immediate context of 12:1–13:14 which is the first half of Romans 12:1–15:13. Romans 12:1–13:14 focuses on love and obedience in the new age, and may be divided into six units.⁹ The first unit (12:1–2) serves as the foundation of all that follow and exhorts readers to present their bodies as acceptable sacrifices to God through the renewal of mind; the second (12:3–8) explains the new community that the renewal of mind may yield and the third (12:9–21) explains how the renewed mind can transform the community. The fourth unit (13:1–7) is about how the believer is expected to relate to the

⁷ Matera, "Romans," 284.

⁸ Matera, "Romans," 283.

⁹ Matera, "Romans," 284-286.

state; the fifth (13:8–10) further explains the fourth, and the sixth (13:11–14) highlights the eschatological dimension of the moral life that the new age has made possible. Paul provides an example of how a renewed mind results in a new kind of community life (12:3–8). In Romans 12:1–2, he shifts from his indicative exposition of divine saving acts in chapters 1–11 to the imperative of the Christian life in chapters 12–15. Romans 12:1 makes an appeal to believers based on what God has done for them. The appeal is to live a sacrificial life, a life of holiness that pleases God and constitutes an authentic/proper Christian worship.

With the brief background outlined above, the article continues to analyze the text under consideration (Rom. 12:1).

Analysis of the text (Rom. 12:1)

The Greek text reads: *Παρακαλῶ οὖν ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρισμῶν τοῦ θεοῦ παραστήσαι τὰ σώματα ὑμῶν θυσίαν ζῶσαν ἁγίαν εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ, τὴν λογικὴν λατρείαν ὑμῶν.*

The author's own English translation is: Therefore, I appeal to you, (my) brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a sacrifice, (that is) living, holy and acceptable to God. This constitutes your proper worship.

The basis of the appeal

The Greek connective particle “*oun*” (“as a result” or “therefore”) underscores that Paul is about to make conclusions/deductions based on what he has already said.¹⁰ The premise upon which Paul gives his practical teachings is all that he had said in the first eleven chapters of this letter. Thus, Paul's submission in chapters one to eleven forms the basis for the practical issues discussed in chapters twelve to fifteen.

The word “*parakalo*” (“urge” or “appeal”) in the first-person singular is indicative of the writer's tone. Paul is beseeching his audience, appealing to them with all courtesies rather than forcing them. The appeal not only sets

¹⁰ Matera, “Romans,” 286; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans: The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, edited by D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 432; Royce G. Gruenler, “Romans” In *Baker Commentary on the Bible*. Edited by Walter A. Ewell, pp. 923–957 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 950; Everett F. Harrison, “Romans,” In Frank E. Gaebelin (ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 10, pp. 1–172 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 127.

out the basis of all Christian conduct and relationships, but also underlines the necessary balance between personal commitment and divine empowerment. Clearly, admonishment from the believer must be done gently, not harshly. Thus, Paul gently exhorts his Roman audience “not as one assuming authority but as one gifted to exhort.”¹¹ Every ethical system makes some appeal to moral laws and rules. Immanuel Kant’s Categorical Imperative “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law”—for example, appeals to “oughtness” of moral conduct.¹² But Paul does not appeal to any moral principle; he appeals to *ton oiktirmon tou theou* (“the mercies of God”).

Paul uses the Greek word *oiktirmon* (“mercies”, “compassion” or “great mercy”¹³) in 2 Corinthians 1:13 to describe God’s nature, and in Philippians 2:1 and Colossians 3:12 to denote an attitude Christians should strive to have. The expression “the mercies of God” underscores a theological tie between what Paul has discussed in the preceding chapters and what he is about to discuss.¹⁴ “The mercies of God” refers to God’s gracious dealings with humankind—even when humankind does not deserve his favor—as evident in the salvation history. In the African context, the mercies of God include not only spiritual provision but also physical and psychological provisions such as food, shelter, clothing, fellowship with other human beings, gift of life, abundant harvest, prosperity, healing, protection, and fertility, among others.

In Paul’s opinion, “the mercies of God” constitute a strong motivation to compel the believer to be obedient to what he is about to encourage them to do. Paul is making his request on the basis of the compassion that God has shown toward humanity by making his only Son, Jesus Christ, die on the cross to redeem the human race.¹⁵ Thus, from a Pauline perspective, “Christian morality is the response to all the mercy of God.”¹⁶ Given that Christian morality is a response to God’s merciful dealing with humanity, it stands to reason that the believer’s

¹¹ Craig S. Keener, *The mind of the Spirit: Paul’s Approach to Transformed Thinking* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 144.

¹² James R. Edwards, “Romans,” In *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992), n.p.

¹³ Harrison, “Romans,” 127.

¹⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 598.

¹⁵ Matera, “Romans,” 286.

¹⁶ C. H. Dodd, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1932), 190.

ethical behavior comes freely without compulsion. In line with this assertion, James R. Edwards says, “If Christian morality were simply a deterrence of divine wrath, then it would not be morality at all, for it would not be free. It would simply be some sort of moral ransom rooted in fear.”¹⁷ Thus, in Christianity one acts ethically not in fear but as a response to God’s gracious mercies in his/her life.

The appeal to offer our bodies as sacrifice

Paul then continues to reveal his appeal, that is, “present your bodies as sacrifices.” The word “bodies” (*somata*) denotes the totality of a person, implying every aspect of human life—including one’s life, time, plans, activities and wealth (cf. Rom. 6: 6, 12).¹⁸ The believer worships God with the head, hand, heart, eyes, ears, and feet, among others. The NIV and other translations speak of “living sacrifices,” and qualify this with the expression “holy and pleasing to God.” However, this is not consistent with the Greek. The Greek text mentions a sacrifice and describes the sacrifice with three adjectives; namely, “living,” “holy” and “acceptable to God.” Following the Greek structure, this paper treats the sacrifice of the body separately from the three modifiers (see the author’s English translation of Rom. 12:1 above). As noted earlier, the appeal to offer their bodies as sacrifices “follows from the logic of the gospel rather than from Paul’s apostolic commission as such.”¹⁹ The gospel reveals God’s mercies toward sinful humanity and appeals better than Paul apostolic authority. The appeal is reminiscent of Paul’s exhortation that the Romans should no longer present the members of their bodies as instruments of evil in the service of sin but present themselves to God and his course (6:13).

In the text, Paul uses sacrificial language—indicative by such the words as “sacrifice”, “offer”, “holy”, and “acceptable”—rooted in Old Testament sacrificial tradition. Just as the Old Testament believers made sacrifices, so New Testament believers are to offer sacrificial worship, though with a different conception

¹⁷ Edwards, “Romans,” n.p.

¹⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 252; John A. Witmer, “Romans,” In John F. Walwood and Roy B. Zuck (eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, pp. 435-504 (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1983), 487; Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 433.

¹⁹ James D. G. Dunn, *World Biblical Commentary: Romans 9-16*. edited by BM Metzger et. al. (Texas: Word books publishers, 1988), 708.

and focus.²⁰ The worship life of Israel in Old Testament times centered around priesthood and sacrifices. God provided priests to offer sacrifices on their (the priests') own behalf and on behalf of the other Israelites. God appointed Moses as the first priest and Moses consecrated Aaron and his descendants as priests forever (Exod. 29; Lev. 8:10-13). The priests mediated the divine-human relationship, representing God before the people and the people, before God.

The sacrificial system God instituted for the Israelites was a typology of the ultimate sacrifice Jesus offered on the cross in the fullness of time. Among the various sacrifices offered to God was the daily burnt offering. Each Israelite brought his burnt offering, laid his hand on its head, killed it before the priest and offered its blood on the altar at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting (Lev. 1:1-5). The hand-laying ritual was meant to identify the offeror with the sacrificial victim so that the sacrificial victim could be substituted for the worshipper. The animal was not eaten either by the priest or the offeror; the whole body was burnt on the altar and the flames ascended to God as a pleasing/acceptable aroma. Thus, the sacrifice was offered in its purest form, a valuable offering given up wholly to God. It was not every animal that could be offered as a sacrifice. Animals that were blind, fractured, maimed or are suffering from running nose or eczema were unacceptable for a sacrifice (Lev. 19:1ff; 22:22; Mal. 1:7-10).

Africans are familiar with religious sacrifices because sacrifices are a major component of African primal religious practices. In the African context, sacrifices are made for one or more of the following purposes: To fulfill a vow; to thank a deity; to unite the worshipper with a deity; to appease an angry god; to seek protection against calamities; to seek good health, long life, peace, prosperity, and safety in traveling and to purify the worshipper.²¹ In all these sacrifices, the sacrificial object is selected carefully to make the sacrifice acceptable to the supernatural entity receiving it. Samuel Ngewa lists three factors that make an object suitable for sacrifice.²² First, the sacrificial object (animal) must be

²⁰ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 543.

²¹ Sunday Awoniyi, "Ethical Guidelines for Sacrifice in African Traditional Religion: A Social Cultural Approach," *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(11) (2015):63-72, 68-69; Frimpong Wiafe, Benjamin Anson and Deborah Sogbey Enam, "The Biblical Concept of Sacrifice and the Ghanaian Worldview: Relevance for the Modern Ghanaian Christianity," *The International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Invention*, 3(8) (2016):2519-2526, 2519-2520.

²² Samuel Ngewa, "Colossians," In Tokunboh Adeyemo (ed.), *African Bible Commentary*, pp. 1475-1484 (Nairobi: WolrdAlive, 2006), 1529.

acquired through a noble means; that is, it should not be a stolen item. Second, the sacrificial object must be of a uniform color; multicolored animals are not suitable to be offered to a deity. The uniformity in color signifies purity, especially if it is all-white. Third, the object must be without defect. One may add that the value of the sacrificial object is informed by the issue the sacrifice is expected to deal with, the expectation of the offerer, and the person offering the sacrifice. Whether in the African context or the biblical context, sacrificial objects are supposed to be perfect, without defect, acquired through a noble means and given willingly by the worshipper.

The believer's sacrifice should be "living," "holy" and "acceptable" to God

Paul urges his audience to present their bodies as "living sacrifices". By conventional Jewish and African understanding, the phrase "living sacrifice" sounds like a contradiction because, in both Jewish and African socio-religious contexts the sacrificial animal becomes a sacrifice through death. Therefore, it seems contradictory to describe a sacrifice as living. However, rather than a contradiction, Paul uses the phrase "living sacrifice" as a metaphorical oxymoron to grip attention. Pauline theology acknowledges the Jesus's sacrifice dealt with sin once and for all, and that there is no need for repetitious sacrifices to atone for sin (Rom. 5:12-21; cf. Heb. 7:27). Given this fact, Paul's point here is that in the post-resurrection era, God requires no animal sacrifices but requires that those redeemed by the blood of Jesus live lives comparable to sacrifices offered to him. The living believer offers him/herself as a sacrifice to God. "Living sacrifice" also points to the new life that the believer has received in Christ.

Though Paul's appeal is not in line with the primarily understanding from a Jewish perspective, the metaphoric view of sacrifice is not lacking in the experience of ancient Israel. In the Old Testament, alms, and other deeds of righteousness constituted sacrifices. The idea of a living sacrifice comes to prominence in Israel's life in exile where the absence of the Temple made it impossible to offer animal sacrifices. A classic example of living sacrifice is the Qumran Community, an ascetic community of Jews that isolated themselves from towns to live in the Judean Desert near the Wadi Qumran around the first

century BCE to prepare for the Lord. The Qumranites made no animal sacrifices because they regarded themselves their devotion to the interpretation and application of the Torah as sacrifices to the Lord. Furthermore, the Greco-Roman world used the term “sacrifice” metaphorically to denote an undivided loyalty to a deity.

Paul had earlier used the term “body” in his description of humanity as using impure lifestyle to dishonor God in the body (1:24), in his description of the body as sin-dominated (6:6), in his exhortation that the Roman believers prevent sin from controlling their body (6:12) and in his assertion that the unredeemed inquires who will redeem them from the body doomed to death (7:24).²³ By reminiscing these texts, Paul strikingly contrasts the justified and the unredeemed: “Before being incorporated into Christ, the unredeemed dishonored their bodies and presented the parts of their bodies as instruments of wickedness in the service of sin, but thanks to God’s compassion in Christ, they can now offer their redeemed bodies to God as a ‘living sacrifice.’”²⁴

In Hellenistic tradition, the body was inherently evil, a prison-house; what mattered was the spirit, not the body.²⁵ People who hold this philosophical view argue that they can do all they like with their bodies because God is not interested in the body and what it is used for. Paul, on the contrary, does not see the body as inherently evil as these philosophers taught; its value depends on how it is used. Paul considers the body as an instrument that can be used for good (Rom. 6:13; cf. 8:11, 23) or for evil (Rom. 1:24; 6:6; 7:24). He alludes to the value of the body when he metaphorizes it as God’s temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16). Following Jewish tradition, Paul considers the human person as a unit, the body serving as “the vehicle that implements the desires and choices of the redeemed spirit.”²⁶ His assertion about the usefulness of the body to the service of God, therefore, derives from Jewish tradition and contradicts the philosophy of the ancient Greeks.

The believer’s sacrifice is not only living but also holy that is, “consecrated” or “dedicated” to God and given over entirely to him alone and pleasing to God. Jewish sacrifices/offerings could be described as “holy” to God (e.g., Lev. 6:17,

²³ Matera, “Romans,” 287.

²⁴ Matera, “Romans,” 287.

²⁵ Harrison, “Romans,” 127.

²⁶ Harrison, “Romans,” 127.

25; 7:1; 10:12), and when Israel served God, their offerings were “acceptable” or “pleasing” to him (Ezra 6:10; Psa. 20:3; Isa. 56:7; Jer. 6:20; Mal. 3:4). Paul draws on these concepts to explain to his audience the qualitative features expected of their sacrifice. Believers imitate Christ when they offer their bodies as sacrifice because it was Christ whose death served as a bodily sacrifice (Rom. 3:25; 5:9; 8:3). The sacrificial life of a holy believer is acceptable to God and constitutes a proper worship.

The believer’s sacrifice is his/her proper worship

Paul says the presentation of the believer’s body as a sacrifice that is living, holy and acceptable to God is *logikēn* worship. The meaning of the word *logikēn* has generated various arguments. The NEB has “... offered by mind and heart”; Goodspeed has “rational”; JB says “that is worthy of thinking beings”), NAB has “your spiritual worship”, RSV, NRSV, ASV, ESV, NAB and NASB have “spiritual”, GNT has “true”, KJV says “reasonable”, and NIV says “true and proper.” Schriener argues that *logikēn* should be translated as “reasonable” or “rational” because Paul would have used *pneumatiken* if he wanted to speak of “spiritual” worship.²⁷ He reasons that responding to God’s mercies by giving the totality of one’s life to God is a reasonable thing to do.²⁸ The most unreasonable thing to do is to refuse to make God the master of one’s life after enjoying all his mercies.²⁹ Keener opines that “in Romans 12:1 the way one offers one’s body as a sacrifice to God is rationally, through reason—one’s mind dictates how the body will serve.”³⁰

On the contrary, Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida argue that though the etymological meaning of *logikēn* is “rational”, it is misleading to render it that way in Romans 12:1. They argue further that *logikēn* has been used outside the New Testament to denote “that which is in keeping with one’s true nature as a person”, similar to how the GNT captures it using the word “true”.³¹ Given the evidence on both sides of the argument the writer believes that, in the present context, *logikēn* means “proper” (“true” or “authentic”).

²⁷ Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s glory in Christ*, 252.

²⁸ Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s glory in Christ*, 252.

²⁹ Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s glory in Christ*, 252; see also Gruenler, “Romans,” 950.

³⁰ Keener, *The mind of the Spirit*, 152.

³¹ Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Handbook on Paul’s Letter to the Romans: UBS Handbook Series* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1973), n.p. (ParaText version).

The word *latreian* (“worship”) denotes any kind of service offered to God, similar to the ministry of the priests and the Levites. Paul uses this term to describe the morally-good life that stands in direct contrast with his earlier description of unredeemed humanity. The unredeemed is under God’s wrath because they “dishonored their bodies” (1:24) and “worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (1:25) but the justified worship God, offering their bodies as living sacrifices through a morally-good life.³² Proper Christian worship is that which comes from a believer in response to God’s mercies, the believer presenting his/herself as a living sacrifice that meets God’s standard.

Implications for African Christianity

Priesthood of all believers

Given that every believer has to offer his/her body as a sacrifice, it stands to reason that every believer is a priest. Therefore, the text underscores the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Every believer has the freedom and the opportunity to enter God’s presence and offer up spiritual sacrifices. In the Old Testament era, the “ordinary” worshipper could not go into the presence of God; only members of the Levitical priesthood could approach God. The New Testament era is different. The substitutionary death of Christ has reconciled all believers with God and has given them continual access to God’s presence. When Jesus died, the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies tore from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51), symbolizing that all are invited to access God directly. The blood of Jesus has cleansed “our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” (Heb. 9:14 NIV). Believers are, therefore, encouraged to enter boldly into the throne of the Almighty God to offer their sacrifices (4:16).

As a priest, the believer must always have a good relationship with Christ because it is Christ who has granted the believer the status of a priest. In other words, the priesthood of Christ is the foundation of the believer’s priesthood; therefore, the believer will lose his/her priestly status if he/she fails to abide in Christ, Christ also abiding in him/her. Peter makes this point when he describes believers as holy priests who offer “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God **through** Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5; my emphasis; see also 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev.

³² Matera, “Romans,” 287.

1:6). Peter makes it clear that the believer functions as a priest only **through** Christ. The spiritual sacrifices the believer offers to God include prayer, praise, thanksgiving, repentance, justice, kindness, and love, among others. Believers are to imitate Christ in serving simultaneously as priests and as the sacrifices: “Believers here not only are priest offering sacrifices (cf. Paul’s role in Rom. 15:16 and his doxology in 11:33-36) but are themselves the sacrifices to be offered up.”³³

Since all believers are priests, it is wrong for any Christian leader to claim sole access to God. Every believer is invited to approach God and speak to him directly. Christ is the only Mediator of the New Covenant which he established with his blood (1 Tim. 2:5). No human being must mediate the divine-human relationship. African church leaders must equip their followers to meet God directly rather than serving as intermediaries between their members and God. This does not mean that people cannot intercede on behalf of others. It is not wrong to intercede for others. However, the current trend in African Christianity where people depend on their religious/spiritual leaders for any major encounter with God contradicts the theology/ethics espoused in this paper. Christian leaders should root their followers in the word of God and equip them to have direct meaningful encounters with God.

Non-transactional approach to worship

The exposition of the text shows that Paul was not asking his audience to obey his exhortation on the basis of what they will receive from God but on the basis of the mercies that God had already shown to them. God’s gracious gifts of salvation is enough to motivate Christians to dedicate their lives to him, though God’s mercies go beyond the salvation of the soul. In the Gentile world of Paul’s time, sacrifices were made to various gods in anticipation of certain benefits from these gods. This fact is underlined by the saying “Sacrifices elicit the goodwill of the gods.”³⁴ This belief is also found in Africa where people make sacrifices to their gods to entice them to grant their request(s). Also, people often do good to others with the belief that the beneficiaries will one day reciprocate the act. The Bono (Akan) people of Ghana say “The left hand bathes the right hand and the right hand also bathes the left hand.” This Bono maxim primarily underscores

³³ Keener, *The mind of the Spirit*, 145.

³⁴ Keener, *The mind of the Spirit*, 146.

the communal sense of life; that is, life requires interdependence. However, it also underlines the need to reciprocate the benefits received from a person. The transactional approach to human-human and divine-human relations, explained above, has crept into African Christianity, making people consider their good deeds as something that can compel God to act kindly toward them. Unfortunately, such a notion is promoted by some Christian leaders, especially during fund-raising activities.

Contrary to this transactional view to worship, Paul exhorts his audience to respond to God's grace by practicalizing the Christian faith and hence, making God known to the world through their deeds. Everett F. Harrison rightly states that, "Whereas the heathen are prone to sacrifice in order to obtained mercy, biblical faith teaches that the divine mercy provides the basis for sacrifice as the fitting response."³⁵ God has already done his part and the believer is expected to respond freely to God's gracious deeds. Thus, the dedication of one's life to God comes freely as one's response to God's gracious act toward him/her. This means that true Christian morality is not manipulative or egocentric, based on what one expects to obtained from God, but rather an ethic of gratitude. The transactional approach to worship, therefore, has no place in the ethical model espoused by Paul in Romans 12:1.

The place of love in developing a non-transactional approach to worship and social relationship is crucial. Love is key to the believer's transformed life. The divine love expressed toward the believer motivates him/her to love God, other humans and the environment. God's gracious love toward the believer motivates the believer to live in holiness and to please God all the time. Love is a composite principle that has both personal and social dimensions. Before his conversion, Paul demonstrated legalistic piety. However, his conversion experience made him acknowledge that true piety is motivated by one love for God and neighbor rather than duty to obey the law. In Paul's opinion, the Christian life is not defined primarily by what a person does but by who a person is. One has to be inwardly renewed to be able to produce acceptable deeds. Thus, every deed that is considered as good must be rooted in love. No deed can be good apart from love. One's love has to be genuine for him/her to be able to relate with God and human beings in a non-transactional manner.

³⁵ Harrison, "Romans," 127.

Continual undivided loyalty to God

It has already been noted that the Greco-Roman world used the term “sacrifice” metaphorically to denote an undivided loyalty to a deity. Similarly, Paul’s uses the Jewish sacrificial language to encourage his audience to offer themselves totally to God.³⁶ However, he does not use of the term “sacrifice” in the “religious” sense but rather in the “secularized sense.”³⁷ Paul’s concept has little to do with the literal and “normal” sense of sacrifices in Judaism (involving offering dead animals to God) but has much to do with the believer encountering the secular world with his faith.³⁸ Thus, Paul shifts attention “from cultic ritual to everyday life, from a previous epoch characterized by daily offering of animals to one characterized by a whole-person commitment lived out in daily existence.”³⁹ Cultic sacrifices were killed in the act of offering; but the Christian sacrifice goes on living, for Christ already accomplished the only death of this strange new cult. Unlike the usual cultic practice of offering something different from the worshipper, believers do not offer up something else, but their own persons to the worship of God. Like the Jewish sacrifice which belongs to God, the believer continually offers his/her life at God’s disposal, withholding not even a mite. All these point to the undivided loyalty that God requires from the believer (as explained further below).

Offering a sacrifice to a deity amounts to expressing one’s loyalty to that deity. Similarly, sacrificing one’s body and life to God is a declaration of one’s loyalty to God. Such loyalty must be complete, not partial because it is unethical to serve God and Mammon at the same time (Matt. 6:24). To have another object of worship in addition to God amounts to betraying God. In fact, the divided heart cannot please God. The believer’s continual undivided loyalty to God that is, the living sacrifice offered by the believer is a life one lives not to please him/herself but to please God. Such a life requires the believer to forfeit worldly pleasures and to focus on heavenly treasures “So, living as a living sacrifice means living a restricted life to please God.”⁴⁰ The believer’s life is “restricted” in the sense that though he/she can do all things, not all things are beneficial to him/her (1 Cor. 10:13). The sacrifice of the believer’s life to God must be done freely, wholeheartedly and without any strings attached.

³⁶ Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s glory in Christ*, 252.

³⁷ C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Continuum, 1991), 212.

³⁸ Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 213.

³⁹ Dunn, *World Biblical Commentary*, 710.

⁴⁰ Louis Amponsah Yeboah, Personal Conversation the author on WhatsApp (27th December, 2022).

Every aspect of one's life is to be presented holy and pleasing to God. This means the totality of one's life must be under God's control as a form of thanksgiving to God for not only making and forming the believer but also for offering himself for the believer in Christ. Believers are to offer themselves totally for God's purpose. The offering of living sacrifices contrasts both the African traditional and Old Testament sacrifices. The believer has died with Christ, been buried with him and has resurrected to live in the power of the Holy Spirit. The power of sin that held people captive and prevented them from pleasing God has been broken by the atonement. The believer willingly response to God's grace by acting ethically through the power of the Holy Spirit. Gordon D. Fee, therefore, rightly asserts that "Rather than the sacrifice of the dead carcasses ('bodies') of animals, one now gives oneself wholly back to God in the form of a 'living sacrifice' (hence 'bodies'), as those 'alive' from the dead" (Rom. 6:11, 13).⁴¹ The new life in Christ is a life of holiness.

Against the backdrop of the foregoing, African Christian leaders should make efforts to raise believers who are determined to live for God regardless of the price they have to pay. God prefers a holy minority to an unholy majority. Therefore, the African church must not be content with the numerical gain; the church must strive toward achieving a corresponding qualitative gain. The qualitative growth of the church is expected to yield reduced incidence of armed robbery, domestic violence, and bribery and corruption, among others. James D. G. Dunn asserts that "If 'the holy place' is where sacrifice is to be offered, precisely in its set-apartness from the commonplace of everyday usage, Paul in effect transforms the holy place into the market place," underscoring that true and authentic sacrificial worship must be demonstrated in the public arena.⁴² In other words, the altar on which sacrifices are made to God is located everywhere the believer is—whether public or private. Paul actually "secularizes" the sanctuary by sanctifying the activities of each day. Christianity must have both spiritual and social ramifications. Therefore, Christian principles should be the basis for formulating public policies and laws. The transformation of the believer must lead to the transformation of other believers and the society at large through the power of the Holy Spirit.

⁴¹ Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 599.

⁴² Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 544.

Conclusion

The examination of Romans 12:1 leads to the following conclusions. First, the Christian faith is a public faith demonstrated in daily activities. Christianity is not only a matter of heart but also concerns how one appears to the public eye. Second, disciples of Christ are believers-priests, identified with Christ who is the Great High Priest. They must, therefore, maintain their relationship with Christ to maintain their priestly status. Third, the Christian lives to please God. Once God is pleased, it does not matter what people think about one's life. That is, the believer lives to primarily meet God's standard not human standard. Four, proper worship requires presenting a sacrifice in proportion to the amount of God's love experienced. Finally, the life of the believer cannot be successful without the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

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