

An Odd People

Romans 12:1-8

Charles L. Campbell

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

Chapter twelve is a turning point in Paul's letter to the Romans. In the first eleven chapters (to oversimplify quite a bit), Paul announces God's radical grace in Jesus Christ. "Wherever sin abounded," he proclaims, "grace abounded all the more." It is extraordinarily good news, and Paul proclaims it boldly.

In chapter twelve, however, Paul changes gears. He turns to address the calling of Christians in *response* to that grace, and he begins to discuss how we as believers are to live in light of the mercy we have received in Jesus Christ. The opening verses of the chapter are striking. Paul wastes no time getting to his point: "I appeal to you, *therefore*, by the mercies of God." *Therefore!* Everything in the letter has been leading to this point, this *therefore*. And as Walter Brueggemann has said, "whenever you see a 'therefore' in the Bible, you'd better duck."

Paul's words are no exception. "Therefore," Paul proclaims, "Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds." The mercy of God should make you different, odd, unusual in the world! God's grace should transform you—"metamorphosize" you. This is radical, life-changing stuff. And when I hear these words, I sit up on the edge of my seat. I'm ready to be told to do something dramatic and bold; I'm expecting to be sent forth into the world to become a great hero of the faith whatever the cost might be. "Here I am. Send me!"

So I have to confess that the rest of what Paul says strikes me as a little disappointing. In the first place, I discover that Paul does not primarily address me as an individual. Rather, he writes to the church. Our life *together* is to be odd, not conformed to the world. "Present your bodies" (plural) "as a living sacrifice" (singular), he writes. In our life *together*—as a people—we present an offering to God. "Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds." That is not a word for individual heroes, but a word for the community of faith.

And second, what Paul asks of us doesn't sound all that extraordinary. After Paul's grand words about transformation and renewal, we find that very familiar text about gifts. "Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought to think." (Now that's a tough word for someone who was expecting to become a "hero" of the faith!) "We are one body in Christ, and we all have different gifts given to us by the grace of Christ." Then Paul provides some examples of those gifts: prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhorting, giving, being compassionate and cheerful. And that's just a partial list; he could have gone on with many more examples.

I have to admit that a part of me wants to ask, "That's *it*?" Paul's stirring call to "be transformed" leads to *this*—this old and seemingly very moderate text about gifts? At first glance, something seems terribly wrong. So, I've been asking myself, "How does this word about gifts make us *odd*—not conformed to the world, but transformed by the renewal of our minds?"

And although initially I was disappointed, recently I have come to sense the radical character of Paul's familiar words. The world Paul lived in was a world of divisions—

a world of insiders and outsiders—Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free. It was a world shaped by hierarchies, with some people on top and others on bottom, some winners and others losers, some honored and others shamed. Relationships in Paul's world—*community* in Paul's world—depended on these divisions and hierarchies. Without them there would have been chaos; things might have fallen apart.

But in contrast to this world, Paul envisions the church as one body with many gifts. Paul announces to God's people, "We're not going to live in that old world any more. We're going to view people in terms of the gifts God has given them, rather than through society's categories of honor and shame, insider and outsider, winner and loser. In the grace of Jesus Christ, we are going to live as one body with many equal parts." And heard in this way, that old familiar text about gifts seems a bit more startling, a bit more earthshaking.

And our world is not much different, is it? All those divisions remain: age, race, gender, class, sexual orientation. Divisions, divisions, divisions. It seems like groups have to have outsiders in order to feel good about themselves as insiders. And the church is no exception.

And with the divisions inevitably come the hierarchies: superior and inferior, dominant and subordinate, honored and shamed. Indeed as someone has noted, the primary metaphor that shapes much of our society is the metaphor of winner and loser. "We're number one!" is not just a chant at sporting events; it is a cry that reflects the underlying competition that drives much of our culture.

The "Statement of Faith" of the Presbyterian Health, Education, and Welfare Association describes this world in which we live; it is, the statement says,

an age when the church is caught up in the evil and sin of persecution,
unrighteous name calling,
trial and judgment,
and sectarian division;
. . . an era when the world is bent on warring factions, seeking "ethnic
cleansing,"
fueled by segregation and divisiveness,
built upon casting out the different
and working for disharmony.

This is the world we live in. And it is not so different from Paul's world. In such a world Paul's vision of one body with many gifts—all given by the grace of God—Paul's vision would not only transform us, the church, but also the world. It might just change the cries from "We're number one! We're number one!" to "We are one."

Just imagine. What if we viewed people first and foremost in terms of the gifts God has given them?

What if we saw people not in terms of gender or race, but in terms of the gifts they possess for building up God's people?

What if we saw others not as "too old" or "too young," as "abled" or "disabled," but in terms of the gifts they have to offer to the body of Christ?

What if we viewed people not through world's recent, artificial categories of homosexual or heterosexual, but according to the grace of God that spills over in gifts for the church?

And what if all these gifts, no matter how small, came from the grace of Jesus Christ? That's what Paul says: gifts—plural; grace—singular. All the gifts with one source—Jesus Christ. If that were the case, then no gift would be valued more highly than others. All would be equal—no winners and losers; no honored and shamed. The old divisions and hierarchies that divide us might just come crumbling down as we begin to celebrate the offerings that each person brings to the community. And our churches would be richer. And they would certainly be *odd*—not conformed to this world, but transformed by the mercies of God in Jesus Christ.

In my office sits a treasured piece of pottery, which was given to me years ago by friends. The piece is appropriately called “Circle of Friends.” Some of you may have seen a piece of pottery like this one; its shape consists of a group of people standing in a circle with their arms around each other. In the center is a candle. It's a striking image, but when you turn off the lights and light the candle and look at the ceiling, it is transformed into something fantastic. For as the candle flickers, those figures all dance together upon the ceiling, moving in wonderful harmony.

I think that piece of pottery is an image of the church. And I think it's similar to the image of the church Paul gives us in our text. I think Paul might point to that piece of pottery and say, “This is what the church can be when our life together is shaped, not by the world's categories, but by the light of Jesus Christ. This is what the church can become as we move beyond our society's divisions to discern and embrace the gifts in our brothers and sisters. This is the kind of people we can be as we reject the categories of superior and inferior, winners and losers, and recognize the source of everyone's gifts in the grace of God.”

And in a world full of hostility and hatred and violence, what an amazing witness that would be. What an alternative the church could offer to the world. These old familiar words about gifts are quite transforming.

That kind of transformation happens even today when the Spirit gets to work on us. That kind of transformation happens when we begin to see people in terms of their gifts, rather than through the categories of the world. When the Spirit moves among us, we start to appreciate people in an entirely different way. And community forms where we never thought community was possible before.

Several years ago I took a group of students to attend worship at the Metropolitan Community Church of Atlanta. The Metropolitan Community Church is a denomination made up primarily, but not exclusively, of gay and lesbian Christians, many of whom have been alienated by the mainline denominations. A few days before our visit, one of the students came to talk to me. “I'm very uncomfortable about visiting this church,” he admitted. “When I was younger, I was literally a ‘gay basher,’ and I'm still not sure how I feel about homosexuals in the church. I just really don't want to go to that worship.” Then he paused for a moment and continued. “But I'm going,” he said. “For some reason, deep inside I feel like I have to go.”

On the morning of the visit, the student did indeed show up. He was tense as we entered the sanctuary. He stayed with the group and went directly to his seat. As the lively and engaging worship got underway, he loosened up a bit and seemed to feel more comfortable. Then, however, it was time for communion. In this congregation, participants take communion by walking to the front of the sanctuary and receiving the elements from a member of the church. At this point in the worship, I didn't think this

student was going to make it; he turned pale and he started to sweat. But then he stood up and began walking to the front of the sanctuary, laboring to put one foot in front of the other. When it was his turn to receive communion, he walked to the appropriate place. A gay man gave him the bread and the cup. Then the man laid hands on the student, prayed for him, and blessed him. When the student returned to his seat, there were tears in his eyes, and those tears remained for the rest of the service.

Through that encounter at the table, the student began to change; he began to be transformed by the renewal of his mind. In the days that followed that encounter, he developed friendships and a genuine sense of community with gay and lesbian people, which would have been unthinkable to him even days earlier. And he joined his voice to those who are seeking a voice within the church. All because he had begun to see people in terms of their gifts, rather than through the categories of the world.

Friends, the gospel still transforms us, as individuals and as a church. And when that happens we become an odd people, no longer bound by the divisions and hierarchies of the world. We become an odd people, presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God—not conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewal of our minds.