

The Purpose of Holiness: The Triumph of God's Will

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In 1978 Eta Linnemann acclaimed student of Rudolf Bultmann, honorary professor of New Testament of Philipps University, Marburg, Germany, and internationally recognized author, shocked the academic world with her testimony of personal conversion to Jesus Christ. Her colleagues were puzzled on several accounts: was she not already a Christian and needed no such thing as a conversion? Did such things as conversions have any meaning in the modern, intellectual world? Or was she psychologically sick, driven to wild religious notions because her nerves had cracked under prolonged academic strain?

If anyone asked Eta Linnemann herself, she joyfully told them that she had met the living Christ, whose atoning death had brought her into fellowship with the God of the Bible. Not the god of the universities of Christendom, overshadowed by science, disdained by philosophy, abstracted by theology, and domesticated by culture to be the lapdog of those inclined to keep religious pets. But the awesome God of the ages, Creator of the universe, Redeemer of humanity, and miraculous Savior to those who put their trust in Christ.

She did not come to this faith easily. For what faith she carried into her academic career was snuffed out by scholastic approaches to Scripture, which sought not the living God but theologies about God which brought nods of approval from the academic world. Sharp distinctions between truth and error were lost in the indiscriminate greys of academic inquiry, more bent upon unique findings and creative constructs than the saving truth. Jaded by life without luster, Miss Linnemann had sunk into addictions to television and alcohol. With her life in a downward spiral, she encountered vibrant Christians who pointed her to Jesus as Savior and Lord. She found pardon and restoration and the beginning of a walk with God, who became more personal with each new discovery of truth in Scripture and in each answer to her prayers. She had experienced a real spiritual conversion.

Within a few weeks she was led by the Spirit to what I would call her intellectual conversion. She puts it this way: "I found myself faced with a momentous decision. Would I continue to control the Bible by my intellect, or would I allow my thinking to be transformed by the Holy Spirit"?¹ She could

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The Purpose of Holiness: The Triumph of God's Will

no longer endorse an approach to Scripture which called Christ into question. If the accepted scholarly norms denied the Lord who had saved her, she would have to choose between an academic system and loyalty to Christ. She took all the books and articles she had written prior to her conversion and threw them into the trash basket. And in print she invited her readers to do the same with her writings. She realized that being a Christian meant a revolution of the mind. From this point on, all questions of truth would have to begin with the framework of Scripture.

This led naturally to her next phase of conversion, what I would call her vocational conversion. She decided she could not continue to teach theology in a university system which took people headed for careers in ministry and so dulled their faith that they were graduated unlikely candidates to be ambassadors of the gospel. She went instead to a missionary Bible school in Indonesia where she is helping to train native pastors to build Christ's church in that land.

Eta Linnemann's story is a 20th century model of holiness, for it declares the triumph of God's redemptive will. God's saving purpose is to triumph in all aspects of the human person. In bringing us into a relationship with Him, God wants to renew our mind so we think like godly people who have received the mind of Christ. He also wants us to redeem our time and our talents, so that our primary vocation in life is to work for the kingdom of God. And so we are asked to present our bodies as living sacrifices to God so that his will might be done on earth as it is in heaven. Holiness, then, when viewed under the microscope of Romans 12:1-2, is to think as God thinks and to serve as Christ serves.

But what in specific terms does it mean to think and serve like Christ? One thing we can do is to locate our text in the overall development of Paul's letter to the Romans. Another approach is to look for exhortatory applications in the rest of the passage in Romans 12. I want to do some of both as we endeavor to understand God's will in regard to holiness.

I would suggest, first of all, that we identify Paul's theme for Romans in chapter one verses sixteen and seventeen:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous man [person] shall live by faith."

If I might excerpt key phrases from these verses, Paul exults in a gospel which is mighty to save for it delivers God's own righteousness to people of faith, as they move from one stage of faith to another. In Romans this is the summary definition of God's will or God's purpose.

Secondly, we need to see how this will of God is unfolded and how this plan is developed in the ensuing sections of Romans. I am suggesting four divisions of the book, each dominated by certain questions about this saving plan of God.

Romans 1-5 constitutes the first section. Here all people, both Jews and Gentiles, are brought under the judgment of the universal sentence of sin. Then all are shown God's way to mercy through Jesus Christ. What is so revolutionary about this section is Paul's declaration that the law fails to bestow salvation, and thus righteousness is available by grace alone through faith in Christ. Negatively, the law fails to keep Jews from sinning so that they are condemned as sinners just as the Gentiles are who don't have the benefit of the Old Testament law. Nor can the law make either Jew or Gentile righteous before God and thus deserving of eternal life.

But the "righteousness of God" (note the expression) is conferred by grace through faith in Christ. This is the good news to sinners shut up in the tomb of death. God has penetrated this gloom and opened a cross-shaped door from this prison house of death. Through this door shines the light of pardon, release, and life. What a deal! It sounds too easy. And Paul's Jewish opponents raise the objections that many religious people have raised ever since. Those questions and Paul's defense of the gospel of grace shape the remaining three sections of Romans.

Chapters six through eight answer the objection that salvation by grace will lead to antinomianism. People could abuse grace to indulge sin. And lest we dismiss these objectors too readily, let's at least try to sense the seriousness of the problem. Suppose, for example, the five o'clock news reported an unprecedented move by the legislature and governor of the State of Kentucky. All legal codes for the state will terminate at six o'clock. All prisoners will be released, and all law enforcement officers will lose their jobs at the same hour. The state will no longer use a legal system to keep its citizens in check. From now on people will be guided only by the preaching of the gospel and the prayers of the churches. I ask you, "How many of you would still be here for the session tomorrow morning?" For a first century Jew, righteousness apart from the law was every bit as unthinkable as the scenario I have just sketched. If there is no legal restraint, what will keep people from sin?

Paul's answer is threefold. First, the conditions are different. It is like

The Purpose of Holiness: The Triumph of God's Will

passing out of one era of time and into a totally different one in which a whole new set of circumstances determine one's behavior. To use an Old Testament illustration, it is the difference between the Jewish people in Egypt before Moses and the Israelites in Palestine under the rule of David. One is a condition of slavery in which the master determines a subject's life. The other is the condition of liberty where one enjoys the rights of citizenship and everything that guarantees to sons of the covenant.

One does not go on sinning because one has been set free from the mastery of sin and has entered into the freedom of the sons and daughters of God; or to change the image, one has escaped the hold of the tomb which uttered an imperious "no" to every possibility of life and godliness and now lives in the resurrected life in which all the divine promises find their "yes" and their "amen". (2 Cor. 1:19-20) We simply do not expect people living under such vastly different conditions to act the same way. Thus Paul's key word in 6:1-11 is reckon (consider). You died to sin in Christ's death and you rose to righteousness in his resurrection. The conditions of your existence are fundamentally altered.

Most thoughtful people would grant the point. But this is not the end of the matter. For we know that one might live in Davidic Palestine and choose to indulge a lifestyle of Egypt. Thus, Paul enters a crucial second argument: Christian choices are determinative. It is possible to yield our body parts to sin which results again in slavery and eventual death. Or we can yield our bodies to God's righteous service and have fruit unto holiness and in the end eternal bliss.

Perhaps an illustration could make Paul's argument more vivid for us. Imagine a person who was born in slavery and lived under cruel servitude into adulthood. Then a kind person has compassion for the slave, purchases his freedom, and makes him his adopted son and heir. Now suppose the liberated slave meets his former master about town and is commanded to run chores for the old master. Habit and experience will incline the person to cringe and to obey. However, his liberator reminds him that he is no longer a slave and has no obligation to obey the former master. His obligation now is only to his father and such work as he asks him to do. The adopted son cannot be compelled to obey the old master, though he could yield out of ignorance or free choice.

Paul says this is precisely the case of the sons and daughters of God. Sin is no longer a necessity (Romans 6:14), but it is always possible as a choice. Thus, Paul employs a second key term, "yield" (present). It is the same word that shows up in our text in Romans 12:1. Choice is absolutely crucial if one

is to live in Canaan enjoying its blessings and not return to the oppression of Egypt.

But there is one final objection: who has the power to say “no” to sin and “yes” to righteousness. It is one thing to prefer the right; it is another thing to be able to accomplish it. Paul uses all of chapter seven and the first half of chapter eight answering this difficulty. He uses the imagery of marriage to make his point regarding the law. It is an issue first introduced in chapter six in asserting the new condition of the Christian. The Christian can live free from sin because we are no longer under the law but under grace. Now this is a very delicate issue and can easily be misunderstood. One might say, “Well, of course I can live free from sin if there is no law to say that certain behaviors are sin. You can’t be a criminal if there is no law to be broken.” But Paul is not saying God’s righteous standard has been lowered or abolished, so that anything goes and nothing is wrong. No, Paul says the will of God respecting righteousness is ever the same.

The Old Testament law was not wrong in what it required. But it was weak in what it provided. It demanded rightly but it could not deliver the power to keep what it commanded. Living under the law was like living with a spouse who made perpetual demands but gave no affective power to motivate one to fulfill them. Thus the relationship resulted in insufficient performance, leading to condemnation, shame, anger, and the death of love.

In Christ, the Christian died to the powerless, accusing spouse of the law. The Christian is now free to marry a new spouse, namely Christ. He is different from the old spouse not because he demands less but because he provides more. He became what we are, took on our sinful flesh, and, as a son of Adam as well as the Son of God, perfectly fulfilled the righteous requirements of the law. Thus, when the Christian is married to Christ, becomes one flesh with him, Christ’s power to live righteously becomes his or her ability as well. For in marriage we become joint owners of what belongs to our spouse. What Paul lamented in chapter seven, the inability to keep the law, he confidently affirm is his in Christ in chapter eight. Being married to Christ, through the bonding Holy Spirit, brings the power to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law.(Rom. 8:1-4)

We have been involved in long arguments here regarding chapters six through eight. Before we leave this second section, it might be good to summarize Paul’s answer to the concern that righteousness apart from the law will encourage believers to indulge sin. Paul says not so; Christians now live in the new power of Christ’s resurrection, a vastly different condition than the Old Testament saints. Christians can choose to yield themselves to Christ’s

The Purpose of Holiness: The Triumph of God's Will

sanctifying power which results in holy living. And Christians are no longer stuck with a demanding spouse who confers no accepting love nor any power to motivate righteous living. Instead they are married to a spouse who condemns not, but instead confers power to fulfill the righteousness of God.

I will give very little attention to the third section of Romans, chapters nine through eleven. Here Paul's discussion regarding election is meant to answer the Jewish objection that if righteousness comes through faith in Christ under the new covenant, then, God has broken his covenant with Israel. In essence, Paul says God was not the covenant breaker. Rather Israel was the guilty party, for its unbelief and disobedience rendered the first covenant powerless. The covenant written on stone Israel failed to keep. But, now in Christ, those who believe have God's covenant written on their hearts. The problem with the first covenant was that stony hearts could not keep the covenant. God had remedied this as Jeremiah (31:31-34) and Ezekiel (36:25-27) prophesied by writing his new covenant upon fleshly tablets of the heart. The descending Spirit of Pentecost, in flaming reminders of Sinai, had written God's word and will upon the disciple's hearts. God has not only kept his covenant, but He has graciously changed his people's hearts, giving them the will and the power to do what he wills. God's will has triumphed not by external constraint but by internal change. Circumcision of the heart is now the sign of his covenant people and no longer the external sign of circumcision of the flesh. The new covenant fulfills what the old only promised.

This brings us to the fourth section of Romans, chapters twelve through sixteen. Here Paul's Jewish questioners were asking what would become of ethics if the law no longer rules. This is the corollary of the second section. There the questioners worried if people would fulfill their duties to God if not compelled by the law. Here they ask if duties toward neighbors will be disregarded if there is no law to constrain.

Paul assures the readers that love will provide a better fulfillment of the ethical requirements than the law under the first covenant did. In these final chapters he considers relationships with fellow Christians, with non-Christian neighbors, with enemies, and even pagan government. In each case he calls Christians to let God's love rule their attitudes, their words, and their actions. Loving others as Christ loved us pushes ethics to a higher standard of conduct than the letter of the law ever achieved.

Love has an "ought" to it even as law did. But it is an ought filled with better promise of fulfillment than the mere legal obligation. Again, perhaps we best catch Paul's difference if we consider a hypothetical case. Where would you feel safer? In a prison with long lists of required behavior,

restraining bars, and armed guards? Or in a family where there are rules and expectations but no prison cells or officers of the law? The answer is obvious. Both settings involve rules and obligations. But mutual love is a better guardian of conduct than legal restraint is. Just so, the person in Christ is better equipped for ethics than the person under the law of the old covenant.

Paul has thus moved through the objections to the gospel of grace, God's power to make believers righteous through faith in Christ. He has demonstrated the triumph of holiness, God's will to make his people righteous and his power to make it real in their lives. But he never assumes that holiness is automatic, something conferred upon us apart from any action on our part.

And that is why our text in Romans 12:1-2 gives us two commands, one active and the other passive. First, we are told actively to present our bodies as living sacrifices to God. Then, we are told to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so we might overcome the conformist pressure of the world. Let's dwell on these just a bit.

We are called to the consecration of our bodies to God. Consecration is the foundational concept of holiness in the Old Testament, and it remains a central aspect of sanctification in the New Testament as well.

The call to present our "bodies" to God suggests the entirety of the consecration that God wills. That includes all our faculties and each of our members. We are not called primarily to dedicate time, resources, nor activities. For each of these is liable to division, whereby we can decide what portion to give to God and what we can devote to our own use. Paul's metaphor of sacrifice has an Old Testament offering of an animal in mind, for animal sacrifices were to be given wholly to God. If he had grain or oil sacrifices in mind, then only a portion of one's store was brought to the altar. Thus, the passage underscores total commitment, God wills that our whole life be a testimony of our love for Him.

The expression "living sacrifice" indicates the perpetuity of our consecration. An animal sacrifice obviously can only be offered once. We, by way of contrast, are to be "living sacrifices." Important as our "once for all" consecration of ourselves to God is, we are nonetheless called to ongoing consecration as we unfold additional pages of God's blueprint for our lives. As long as life endures there are new chapters in the book of consecration.

While ministering in Canada some years ago, I learned the story of Lillian, who is a beautiful illustration of this. An octogenarian widow, she was so moved by the missionary conference in her church that she stood at the last service to offer herself for missionary work. Her pastor was a bit perplexed about how to counsel her, for he knew of no mission organization that would

The Purpose of Holiness: The Triumph of God's Will

send a person of her age overseas.

Shortly after the missions conference, however, he got a call for help that brought Lillian to his mind. A young African American man was to go on trial in their city, and his mother wished to attend the court sessions. She needed a place to stay and to get meals, and she also needed transportation daily for the court proceedings. Lillian was able to meet all her needs and to give her friendship and consolation as well.

The trial ended with a sentence of imprisonment. As Lillian bade the mother goodbye at the bus station, she tearfully requested Lillian to visit her son and be his substitute mother. She promised that she would, but she delayed doing it for some time out of fear. Then she prayed and resolutely set off to the prison. As she waited in the visitation room, she worried about the reception she would receive from the young man. How would he respond to her? When the prison guard led him into the room she heard the Holy Spirit say to her, "Woman, behold thy son"! And the Spirit must also have told him, "Son, behold thy mother"! For they instinctively rushed to embrace each other.

A great relationship developed between them as she visited him repeatedly. She led him to faith in Christ, and he began to affectionately call her "grandma." Then he asked if he could bring other men with him to her Bible study sessions, men who needed both God's word and her genuine love. She consented and God gave her a productive ministry among men in that prison. All this because one Christian woman was ready to advance to a new challenge of consecration at the age of eighty. She knew what it was to be a "living sacrifice," responding to a new chapter of God's will.

A third aspect of our consecration to God is its *rationality*. The last phrase of Romans 12:1 can be translated various ways, but I prefer "reasonable" or "rational" because it fits the context more naturally. Our consecration is to be an intelligent response to the abundant mercies of God. Romans 11:33,34 discusses the "mind of God," and 12:3 calls us to sober thought and clear judgment. Too often consecration is made to be a thing of sentiment; it needs to also be a matter of clear thought.

We must be clear about the "why" of consecration. God is omnipotent and could coerce our compliance. But in His love for us He does not force our service. Rather He shows mercy to undeserving sinners and rebellious children, because He wants our love to motivate our consecration. This love, however, is more than a momentary rush of the "warm fuzzies." It is a deep conviction of "ought" that commits us to serve God even when the circumstances of that service are anything but pleasant. It was the kind of bond to Christ that carried Paul through long journeys, sleepless nights, beatings, stonings, shipwreck and

imprisonments. It is love anchored in convincing reasons to serve the Lord of glory. It is the kind of discerning love that faces things we are called to do and to endure and says, "It is worth it for Christ's sake."

We must also be certain about the "how" of consecration. In verses 3-8 Paul calls all Christians to seriously assess their God-given gifts. Our service can never please God fully unless it is in the way He has fitted us to serve and according to the "measure" of faith He has given us. Since Christians have different gifts they are called to exercises of service that differ as well (v. 3). As members of the one "body of Christ," we dare not neglect our function nor try to do that which is the proper task of another member of the body. In either case we are not serving rationally as we were made to serve. So our consecration must be with knowledge of that which is fitting, both for ourselves and before God. Mature Christians reflect an ease and a joy in service that comes from finding their proper niche in the kingdom of God.

Consecration is the active part in sanctification. By itself, however, this is not sufficient to make us pleasing to God. For we are subject to pressures that can both retard our service or distort it. Here in Romans 12:2 Paul names this pressure generally as the "confirming mold of the world." We live in a world where the majority are not servants of the kingdom. Expressed wishes of those near to us and cultural expectations of our society in general often conflict with the will of God for our lives. As social beings we are prone to let these pressures shape our lives.

In other sections of Romans, chapters six through eight in particular, Paul explains a more subtle reason why we are vulnerable to the molding of the world. We are moved from within our own hearts to desires that conflict with God's will. Paul describes this condition as a "mind set of the flesh" (Romans 8:4-8), an orientation to do those things that gratify desires of our mind and body in ways that are sinful.

If we have witnessed the molding of metal pieces or a potter making a jar, we will understand better what Paul is saying. Force must come from two sides in order to shape an item. Metal molds often come in two parts, pressing in from both sides while the liquid metal cools into shape. A potter uses both hands to shape the vessel. Sometimes she brings the two hands together on opposite sides of the clay to mold the basic shape of the jar. Then she puts one hand inside the jar and the other on the outside to finish the molding process.

In like manner we are liable to the molding pressures of evil. When we are pushed from the outside by cultural influences, we are in danger of conforming because inner desires may conspire with these exterior pressures. Thus our minds must be transformed, literally reshaped, by the greater power

The Purpose of Holiness: The Triumph of God's Will

of the mind of God at work in our life. The Spirit must uncover the workings of the "fleshly mind" within us and thus put them to death (Romans 8:13). God's Spirit must write His laws upon our hearts and minds (Hebrews 10:15,16), so that we begin to think as God would have us to think and live. The Spirit of Pentecost must break the chains of habit, the grip of desire, and the constraints of peer pressure. As was true of Old Testament sacrifices, the fire of God has to visit our altars of consecration. Biblical holiness involves not only our consecration but also God's ability to purify and to empower through the work of the Holy Spirit.

God's will triumphs when we consecrate ourselves to the service of Jesus Christ. His purpose in holiness is realized when we are transformed in mind to conform to His will. This is the holiness we need and that the Scripture declares. No wonder Paul delighted in proclaiming the gospel, for it is the power of God to make us righteous people!

Endnotes

¹Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 19.