

Introducing Gospel Culture

Romans 12:1-2

Over January I read a fantastic book called *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. The whole book is an alternative history of 19th century England in which the practice of English magic is revived by two magicians (that's Strange and Norrell). It was both fantastical and fantastic, and I thought today I might start by reading the opening two paragraphs:

Some years ago there was in the city of York a society of magicians. They met upon the third Wednesday of every month and read each other long, dull papers upon the history of English magic.

They were gentleman-magicians, which is to say they had never harmed any one by magic – nor ever done any one the slightest good. In fact, to own the truth, not one of these magicians had ever cast the smallest spell, nor by magic caused one leaf to tremble upon a tree, made one mote of dust to alter its course or changed a single hair upon any one's head. But, with this one minor reservation, they enjoyed a reputation as some of the wisest and most magical gentlemen in Yorkshire.

I read that and immediately highlighted it with today's passage in mind. For it seems to me the predicament of the York Society of Magicians can very easily become the predicament for followers of Jesus Christ. For how easy it is to meet together and love talking about the gospel together, and yet to not *do anything with the gospel*.

How easy is it even to grow a reputation as people who know and defend and protect the gospel, and yet to hold the gospel at arms length from the actual day by day action of our lives.

There is something absurd about a society of magicians who do not practice magic. And the end of the letter to the Romans presses us to see the same absurdity in *a society of Christians who are not transformed by the gospel.*

For according to Paul the gospel is not just information that we receive, it is the word of “the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.” (Romans 4:17) When we believe the gospel we receive new life and new power, and belonging in a new family. Properly understood, the gospel works *powerfully for good*; first in our own hearts, then in the whole body of believers, and then through the church to the world.

To be a theoretical Christian then makes about as much sense as being a theoretical magician. For the good news of Jesus creates a new community with new *practices*. Or to put it another way, gospel doctrine creates gospel culture. And as we dig into Romans 12-16 in the term ahead, we’ll see more and more what that gospel culture is. It’s a culture of sincere love, humility and service; of joyful hope, and patience and prayer; of submission to the government and mission to the nations; of welcome and hospitality and encouragement.

But all of that lies ahead. For the opening verses of Romans 12 are simply an introduction to gospel culture. Only 2 verses, but they have plenty to say about the foundation ... and the nature ... and the necessity ... and the challenge ... and the way to gospel culture.

1. The Foundation of Gospel Culture

And so Romans 12:1; Paul begins “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, *in view of God’s mercy...*” The Mercy of God, Paul says, is the foundation of gospel culture. True Christian community stands upon God’s free gift of salvation in Christ.

Now this may seem like a fairly obvious thing to say: Gospel doctrine leads to gospel culture, surely it can’t be any other way. But the human heart is a stubborn little thing. We can know we need God’s mercy to be saved, but then go on to build our communal life upon our own efforts, our own desires, our own strength and strategies. We can strive to live the Christian life out of servile fear, or a hope for some greater future reward. But when we do that, the church will inevitably collapse into selfishness, or worldliness; pride, or disappointment; division or exclusivity. To borrow from Jesus, if we build on anything other than God’s mercy, we build upon a foundation of sand. And what we build simply will not stand.

And so rather than an obedience of fear, we are called to an obedience of faith. We are drawn towards obedience by that “sweetness of God’s favour”,¹ by which we are saved. “Keep God’s mercy in view”, Paul says, “don’t take your eyes off his grace.” In fact that’s what he does all through these chapters. It’s not like Paul leaves gospel doctrine behind to focus on more practical matters. The logic of the gospel saturates his exhortations: love *as Christ loved you*, welcome one another *as Christ has welcomed you*, serve one another *as Christ has served you*. What we see in Romans 12-16 is a picture of a church pulsating with life. But such a vital church is

¹ This phrase is from John Calvin’s commentary on Romans 12:1.

only possible when we are vitally connected with the living and powerful Christ.

So we must build upon *this* foundation of God's gracious gifts. Of forgiveness of sins, of adoption into God's family, of God's very own Spirit; and all of these things in *the* Gift of Jesus his Son, and our union with him.

2. The Nature of Gospel Culture

But what exactly are we to build on this foundation? What *is* a gospel culture? We learn something of the nature of gospel culture as verse 1 continues:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, *to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice*, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

There are two things worth pointing out there: the first is about bodies, and the second is about sacrifice.

Firstly, the idea of bodies is a big deal in the book of Romans. It comes up again and again as *the place* where we see most clearly the effects of the sin:

In Romans 1, it's the degrading of our bodies which is the clearest evidence we've turned from God to follow our own sinful desires. And then in Romans 6-8, the fact our bodies decay and die, is the clearest evidence that sin rules over this world.

But it's also in the body that we most clearly see the effects of the gospel. We see the new life of grace at work when we use our bodies not for sin but for righteousness. The world sees that Christ rules us when we offer up our bodies — our heart and mind and soul and strength — not for our own good but for the good of others and for the glory of God.

As one commentator writes:

In this tug-of-war between death and life, Christian obedience *in the body* displays that fact that a miraculous counterforce is already

at work, “putting to death the deeds of the body” by the superior power of the Spirit.²

You see all these things come together in Romans 6:12-13:

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness.

True spirituality happens as physical embodied people, come together in physical embodied communities, to serve each other in physical and embodied practices of loving and welcoming and giving and singing and eating and on and on and on. That’s what a gospel culture is.

And doesn’t that help us to understand why the last couple of years have been so challenging. I remember that first week back at church in 2020 after that first lockdown and the joy that it was to be a body in a room with other bodies, all as one body in Christ. It was overwhelming! It’s so easy to take for granted, but being physically present together opens up whole new avenues for the life of Christ to be seen in us and among us and through us. And so Paul says, “Offer up your bodies”.

And this offering of our bodies is a *living sacrifice*. Now I suspect for most of us we think Paul is using a metaphor here. True sacrifice, we think, is slaughtering an animal, cutting it up, placing it on the altar and offering it up to the Lord. And our service of one another is a kind of imitation of that, but it’s not *really* sacrifice.

² John Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace*, pp. 94-95.

But when we think like that, we get things backwards. It was the Old Testament sacrifices that are the metaphor. They are the shadow, or a picture, of the true Sacrifice of Christ. When the animal was killed and its blood was sprinkled on the altar, we see a picture of Christ, of his death on the cross and sprinkling of his blood. And when the animal was burnt on the altar and the smoke rose up into the sky, we see a picture of Christ, of his resurrection and his ascension into heaven.

Now, Christians are those who are united with Christ. And we're united with him both in his death *and* in his resurrection. We *died with him* and *we live with him*. And as we die to ourselves and live for Christ; and as we offer up our bodies to our brothers and sisters and to the Lord, that really is *true* sacrifice.³

When churches are filled with people whose hearts are set on fire by the gospel, and whose bodies are offered in service of one another, they give off the aroma of Christ himself.⁴ And God loves it. Paul says it is holy and pleasing to Him. That's what a gospel culture is. "Offer up your bodies, as a living sacrifice."

³ I was struggling to articulate this point and was greatly helped by a well-timed video from Peter Leithart which was released this week: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JyyfjwyPcSo>

⁴ See Ray Ortlund, *The Gospel*, p. 95.

3. The Necessity of Gospel Culture

And, point three, this is absolutely necessary. I hope you can sense the force of verse 1 as a whole. Notice that this section of the letter does not begin, “Oh and also, I suggest you offer up your bodies...” No, it’s *therefore, I urge you*. This is the inescapable implication of everything Paul has written to this point. If you really understand the doctrine of the gospel it will necessarily produce a culture of the gospel.

And you see it at the end of the verse too. This offering up of your bodies is your *true and proper* worship. The greek word there is *logikos*, and you don’t need to know any greek at all to get the connection. The logical outworking of the gospel is the creation of a transformed Christian community.

We said just before that you can’t build gospel culture without the foundation of gospel doctrine. That’s a disaster waiting to happen. But here we have to say it’s equally disastrous to have gospel doctrine without gospel culture. In fact, it could be far *more* disastrous. It was Francis Schaefer who said, “There is nothing more ugly in all the world, nothing that more turns people aside, than dead orthodoxy.” That dead orthodoxy is the hypocrisy that claims the truth of the gospel and yet lacks true worship of God. It’s the church that dots every theological “i” and crosses every doctrinal “t”, but is aloof and unloving. It’s the York Magical Society, that has never done anyone the least bit of good.

And so what we will consider in the coming weeks is not like the luxury add-ons to Christianity, if you can afford that kind of thing. This is our true and proper worship, and we can’t do without it. A church with no gospel doctrine is unstable, a church with no gospel

culture is hypocritical. But a church with both is powerful. Schaefer again is very helpful:

One cannot explain the explosive dynamite, the *power*, of the early church apart from the fact that they practiced two things simultaneously: orthodoxy of doctrine and orthodoxy of community, in the midst of the visible church, a community which the world could see. *By the grace of God*, therefore, the church must be known for both its purity of doctrine and the reality of its community. Our churches have so often been only preaching *points* with very little emphasis on community, but the exhibition of the love of God in practice is beautiful, *and it must be there.*

4. The Challenge of Gospel Culture

But of course, that sort of dynamite community does not come easy. And we see the challenge of gospel culture as we keep reading into verse 2. For with Paul's urging also comes a warning:

“Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world.” You could say, “don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould” (J.B. Phillips Paraphrase). As Eugene Peterson observes:

The present age prepares roles for people and expects us to fit into them. These are roles in which we are asked to smoothly function: as good consumers, as indulgent hedonists, as proud owners, as ruthless competitors, as satisfied customers.

Paul is calling us here to not fit into these roles, to maintain the sharp edges of being a living sacrifice. We should be the square pegs that don't fit in the world's round holes. But as Peterson says, there's this constant pressure to dull those sharp edges, and just fit in.

The massive energies of journalism, entertainment, education, and advertising pour over us like powerful, persistent flowing water over rock, working to erode us into smooth secularised surfaces.

The challenge of gospel culture is that we live in this present age, in that tug-of-war between death and life, between love of self and love of God, between the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of heaven. *And there is no neutral space.* Everything from the CEO's office to Saturday morning sport, from the school yard to social media is a part of that powerful, persistent flow to conform us to the pattern of this world. The challenge of gospel culture is to *resist*.

5. The Way to Gospel Culture

But how? “How do we keep our recovered, original, sharp-edged identity in a world in which the pressures to conform are so powerful?”⁵ And so persistent?

Let’s read the rest of verse 2:

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

The way to transformation is the renewing of our minds. Now, I reckon we need a little help here, in order to feel the full force of what that actually means. Because if you’re anything like me you probably read “mind” and think “brain”. And if that’s the case it would be easy to narrow “renewing of our minds” down to “growing in knowledge”, as if the way to be transformed is to have more *information*. But 2000 years ago, the idea of the mind was much fuller. Your mind is not just your brain, it’s your whole way of thinking, and the way that you view everything in the world around you. For your mind to be renewed is not just to have new information, it’s to have a new imagination. To return to verse 1, we don’t only know the mercy of God, we *keep it in view*, and that completely changes the way we see everything else around us.

And so here’s an illustration to conclude. Imagine that you’re on a boat. Can you go on cruise ships anymore? Anyway, *imagine*. All of a sudden you feel the boat lurch, you hear alarms sound, and you see everyone rushing to the lifeboats. As you run out of your room you stuff your backpack with some supplies, a bottle of water, a can of spam, and you escape the ship.

⁵ Peterson again. From *On Living Well: Brief Reflections on Wisdom for Walking the Way of Jesus*.

Now here is the first scenario: after floating for hours on the open water the mist clears and you see land. But it's dark and foreboding, sheer cliff faces, hardly a sign of life, waves crashing against the rocks. And right at that moment, the person next to you taps you on the shoulder and says, "hey mate, do you have anything to drink?" What do you say?

Well, here's a second scenario. You're on the boat, the alarms sound, you rush to the lifeboat and you grab your water and your spam and for hours you float along the ocean. Again, the sunshine breaks through the fog and you see land. But this time you see a lush, green tropical island. There are coconuts on the trees, there's a waterfall in the distance, you can see schools of fish in the crystal clear water. And at that moment, the person next to you asks, "hey mate, do you have anything to drink?"

Now in which of those scenarios are you more likely to open up your backpack give your new friend a drink. It's the second one right? And it's not like you have discovered some inner reserve of moral courage that makes you more generous. No, you have a new vision of the future. Instead of picturing yourself shivering on a rock, trying to shelter yourself from the wind. You can already taste the coconut, you can already smell the fish roasting on the fire. So *of course* you crack open the spam and offer it up to those with you on the boat. You have a new *imagination*. You have a renewed mind.

And as we keep God's mercy in view this is what happens in the church. In view of God's mercy, the world is not a place of random chaos, but a generous gift of our Creator.

In view of God's mercy, every brother and sister in our church, regardless of their age, or gender, or wealth, or ability or any other measure of status, is worthy of my honour and service. In view of God's mercy, my frail body is a place where the miraculous power of God can be seen. In view of God's mercy, I owe everything to God's grace and so I refuse to boast in anything but Christ. In view of God's mercy, everything I have is given so I can serve the church and the world. In view of God's mercy, I can leave judgement to the Lord and persevere in patient love. In view of God's mercy, the government is neither my greatest threat, or my greatest hope, and so I can cheerfully submit to their authority. In view of God's mercy, the story of my life is predestined, called, justified, glorified. And so I can give freely and generously knowing that my future is one of glorious abundance.

And everything we do as Christians is to keep God's mercy in view. It's what church is all about, it's why we read our Bibles, it's what happens when we devote ourselves to prayer.

And as our mind is renewed, and our vision is changed, and our imagination is shaped by the gospel, we will see God's good and pleasing and perfect will come into sharper focus. And we will know more and more what it means to be a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to the Lord.

And so gospel doctrine creates gospel culture. And as the risen Lord Jesus transforms us more and more it will be beautiful, and powerful; you could even say, *magical*.

Let's pray.