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Conformed or Transformed?

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Psalm 138; Romans 12:1-8

I can recall from childhood days how exciting it was to be taken to see the dinosaurs at the museum. My recollection of the museum itself is a part of that memory. What stood out, more than the towering arches and the impressive statues and inscriptions, more than the fact that it was a stone building, or that it was a big building, is this: It was a **black** building. Children notice such things, and they do not necessarily question them. They see the simple fact of the matter. The museum is a big **black** stone building. Fast forward to today: The building is still stone. It is still big. But it is no longer black. It is the pale grey color of natural stone. Something happened in the intervening years to turn the dark stone into light stone. That something is akin to the new life in Christ that we read about in the eighth chapter of Romans.

When Paul asks the Christians in Rome to present their bodies as living sacrifices, he is speaking spiritually and metaphorically. They would have understood the idea of sacrifice as connected to worship, whether their background was Jewish or Gentile. One goes to the temple, one takes some item or other to be sacrificed there, to appease or please the deity. Why? Because one knew that something needed adjusting or correcting in their lives in order to be in good standing with the deity. Habit, routine, and expectation was that you would sacrifice something in order to make the gods or the one true God happy. It was not something that God needed. It was something that the worshiper needed.

In fact, one could say that faithful worship centered upon sacrifice. "*What shall I **take**, what shall I **give**, in order to make things right?*" It would be fine to take some grain offerings, or some little birds, or some other first-born farm animals. So the practice went. But Paul takes us to a whole other realm. He says: Take your bodies, the "who-you-are," and make *that* your sacrifice. Put your whole self "in" — into the hands of a God who will receive your gift of yourself, and will transform that gift into something good and right and acceptable for God's purpose. Take a **big, black stone building**, and let it become clean and sparkling and new again. Take a life that has become encrusted with the accumulated soot of life, and let it become fresh and new. Take a heart and mind and body and soul and spirit, and give these aspects of who you are a newness — a new life, in Christ.

Notice that Paul is not writing to **one** person in Rome. Paul is writing to all of the Christians in Rome. So, he sees this as an act of faith that will benefit all. It is personal inasmuch as each person has this chance to be transformed. It is also corporate, so that all of them, together, can be what God intends them to be. What was true then, is true now. The changed Christian can change the community. The changed Christian can change the world.

If we look at the world, there are some things that we take for granted. It is just like that. Are people forgotten, neglected, disrespected? "Well, that is just how it is," some might say. Just as some might say that a big black building is just that way. Are some of them seeking fairness, and safety, and hope, but finding none of these? "Well, it is just that way," some might say. Just as someone might say that the accretions of soot and grime on limestone are inevitable and unchangeable. We know that would be incorrect, because we can drive over to Oakland any old day and see that the museum is no longer black. And we have this same calling to be transformative people — each of us and all of us.

So, if, for instance, some practices of some police are uncalled for in their severity and their bias, that can and should be changed. And, for instance, if a person out jogging does so in fear of his life, that can be changed. And if there is inequity based on ignorance and hate that have been institutionalized and accepted, or shrugged off or explained away, these things, also, can be changed.

The question becomes, in what kind of a world do we want to live? Do we want to live in a world where things are conformed to grime and greed? Or do we want to live in a world where things have been transformed by the renewing of our minds?

It takes intentionality, doesn't it? We have to resolve to make things more along the lines of our Lord Jesus Christ. They do not just happen.

Smoke-filled skies do not become clear and sunny without effort. I think they called it Smoke Abatement back in the first phase of Pittsburgh's renaissance — words chosen to communicate the intentional effort. Abatement — an interesting word — means a reduction, a decrease. There are things that have to be decreased and reduced in order for good to prevail. We would do well to ask what those things are, and to work to reduce them. And renaissance? Renaissance means recovery and rebirth and regeneration. We would benefit from finding as many ways as we can to help our community to recover and to experience a new birth.

Abatement and renaissance. Don't you find it fascinating that those terms were part of an intentional movement to make sooty buildings clean, and make polluted skies clear, back in the 1950s? We are the beneficiaries of those efforts. It did not happen overnight. In fact, it may have started when the first Smoke Inspector of Pittsburgh was named, back in 1906. Back then, it was a far-reaching vision — maybe even a dream. It took work to bring it about, and it took sacrifice. The reality is, people back then did it. Some of them were your parents and grandparents. They made it happen, so you could enjoy it.

Wouldn't it be grand if that was all it took? Relying on the past, being thankful for how far we have come? Feeling as if we did not have to do anything more?

But, you see, it takes each generation doing what needs doing. Just as they did, so shall we. The issue at hand may be different, but the goals are the same: that your children and grandchildren might live in a world that is better than the world into which you were born — because you presented yourselves as living sacrifices. "Well, that is fine for the activists among us," someone will say. "But that is not who I am." Do we need to look again at what Paul wrote to the Romans? Oh. Here it is:

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Paul is pointing out the gifts that differ. He is aware of that difference. But, notice that, even with those differences, all are called to work, together, for the well-being of all.

If we had the luxury and the joy of conversing at the church door after worship today, I believe at least one of you, and perhaps many more, would tell me that the museum was not the only black building in Pittsburgh, back in the day. Yes. I know that. There were plenty of others — even some churches. I remember ... even this church.

The meaning of faithfulness has not changed. Worship — true worship — is still centered upon sacrifice. "*What shall I **take**, what shall I **give**, in order to make things right?*" I hope you will put a plan into action, each of you, and all of you, to be at work for Christ in these days — to be a voice for justice, to be a force for goodness, to be a person of influence, to be a people of grace — so that today and each day, you may live the new life in Christ.