

## [Romans 12:1-2](#)

Artificial Intelligence – or AI for short – has been much in the news lately. It's a form of technology that seeks to think better than humans and act more skilfully (or at least quickly) than humans. Even as I type the words of this sermon, the word processor is periodically predicting which words I am typing, or even which are the next words I am typing. If I like what I see, I can hit the Tab button on my keyboard and it will confirm the suggestion.

If you want to experiment and have a bit of fun with this, then you can find an AI tool on the Internet called [ChatGPT](#). I registered the other day, and decided to play by giving it a specific task: write me a sermon for a Methodist Covenant Service.

You know what? It did. What a time-saver!

But I had a reservation. It used the words of the Covenant Prayer as the text for the sermon, whereas a Christian sermon must have Scripture as its text. So I tried it again, using these verses from Romans.

It worked again. I am sure some of you would like the results. But it was only a three-minute sermon. Even my Catholic friends, who are used to homilies, not sermons, might consider that too short. It made the odd good general point, but didn't flesh it out to make it practical.

So for the time being I will not be replaced by a computer, and you will have to accept the three points I want to make about our commitment to Christ from Romans 12:1-2.

**Firstly, *why*** does God call us to commitment?

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy  
... (verse 1a)

'Therefore': we need to refer to what Paul has written up to now in the letter. In view of the first eleven chapters. But fortunately Paul sums up those eleven chapters as 'in view of God's mercy'.

Paul has been talking about God's merciful plans and actions towards a human race that has spurned his love and his laws. Despite all human beings having grounds to believe in God's existence and despite his chosen people being given his laws everyone has sinned.

But God has given up his Son, even to death, that we might be forgiven our sins and put right with him. And God has given us his Spirit, so that we can live a new life. God has done all this for us in his mercy.

In fact, strictly what Paul says here is not 'God's mercy' but 'God's *mercies*', because time and time again God is merciful to us. We respond to his mercy by giving our lives to him. But then we fail and sin again. Yet he continues to forgive us when we come in repentance. If Jesus teaches us to forgive 'seventy times seven', how much do we think God will forgive when we seek his mercy?

He shows mercy upon mercy. Truly, his mercies are new every morning.

Yes, of course God is our Judge. Of course, God is holy. But he has shown his intentions towards us in his deeds of mercy. When we renew our covenant with him today, we are responding to his mercy, not his severity.

Today is a day when we rejoice in how merciful God is towards us, and we say that because of his mercy, we joyfully give ourselves to him all over again.

**Secondly, *what*** kind of commitment does God seek from us?

... to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. (Verse 1b)

In the original Greek of the New Testament, it's not just the adjective 'living' that applies to the word 'sacrifice', it's all three adjectives: living, holy, and pleasing [to God].

Somebody once said that the problem with living sacrifices is that they keep crawling off the altar. And maybe that's a clue to what this is about. We need to offer ourselves daily to God. Jesus spoke about taking up our cross daily and so each day we say afresh to God, 'Here I am, please use me for your kingdom today.'

Then we are a holy sacrifice, because we are offering ourselves not only to do God's work but to do God's work in God's way. We'll never say that the means justifies the ends. We'll avoid manipulating people. We'll examine our motives the best we can. And our goal will be God's glory, not our own.

And it's also a pleasing sacrifice to God. This is our invitation to put a smile on the face of God. It is to ask ourselves, what can we do that we know will please God? The Bible is full of thoughts about what the Lord loves: if we look those

up we will start to have a good idea of ways in which we can lay down our lives, our talents, and our possessions to bring God joy.

**Thirdly** and finally, **how** do we work out that commitment?

<sup>2</sup> 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.

On Friday, I read a brilliant essay<sup>1</sup> by James Cary, who is a TV comedy scriptwriter and also a Christian. He begins with a quote: 'Politics is downstream from culture' and explains how our politicians only really put policies into practice that derive from our wider culture.

The problem, he says, is that our culture is now hostile to Christianity, because the Church has abdicated the rôle she had centuries ago as a patron of the arts and culture, especially since the Reformation, when only the word mattered, and visual things became under suspicion.

So it's very dangerous today for the Christian in Paul's words to 'conform to the pattern of this world', because if we do we will take on values that are opposed to Christianity. Yes, Christians need to start influencing our culture again by producing artistic works that are shaped by the Gospel, but even before that we need to make sure that our own thinking and living is shaped by the Gospel. We need to heed Paul's call to 'be transformed by the renewing of [our minds].'

It's absolutely urgent that we let the Gospel shape our minds. That's why we need to be reading our Bibles daily and pondering what we need to do in response to its teaching. That's why we need to read good quality, thoughtful Christian literature rather than trashy magazines or watching junk TV. It's why younger generations need to reduce their intake of social media in favour of prayer.

I'm not saying we should never consume lighter forms of art and culture. But I am saying that it is crucial we take deliberate steps to renew our minds according to the ways of Christ. If we're not deliberate about it, then we shall end up no different from the wider world.

And every day that goes by, it becomes more crucial to renew our minds. How about we make 2023 the year when we make major strides in that cause?

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<sup>1</sup> James Cary, *Getting Upstream (Or A Call To 'Once Upon A Time')* n.d., available for a donation towards his writing at <https://jamescary.substack.com>.