Of course, this mixing of Greek and Jewish religious traditions would have appealed to the mixed congregation and made Paul sound like a peacemaker.

The doxology signals that Paul’s theological presentation is basically over. This long and powerful acclamation of God’s greatness is a literary climax and suggests that Paul has now finished the prolonged theological argument that began in chapter 1.

Questions for reflection:

Can we affirm that God’s ways are mysterious and yet make fundamental observations about what God must be doing if he is loving and is the only God? Does praising God cause us to think about him differently? What are the implications for everyday life of the claim that all things come from God and exist for him?

40. Romans 12:1–2

Paul turns to exhortation. In the previous eleven chapters he focused on doctrine. For the next few chapters, by contrast, he will give practical advice on daily living. To be sure, Paul has occasionally given practical advice already (e.g., 6:12–14), and the distinction between doctrine and exhortation which is so natural for us to make today was not as clear in the first century. Nevertheless, there is a discernible change in tone beginning at 12:1.

As we shall see, however, chapters 12–15 will continue Paul’s balanced treatment of the relationship of Jews and Gentiles. In chapters 1–8 Paul stressed that God’s salvation is for the Greek as well as the Jew and, therefore, Jews must not judge Gentiles. Then in chapters 9–11 Paul stressed that God originally chose the Jews and especially intends to save them.
all. Hence, the Gentiles must not despise them. Now in 12–15 Paul will stress that Christian Jews and Gentiles must accommodate one another, and the Gentiles must be especially deferential toward the scrupulous consciences of their conservative Jewish Christian brothers and sisters.

Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, through the mercy of God to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice to be holy and well pleasing to God, worship that is appropriate for you as spiritual people. Do not conform to this world; rather, be transformed by reshaping your minds so you can discern what God’s will for you is, what is good and pleasing to him and perfect. (12:1–2)

As a preface to his long section giving practical advice, Paul reminds his readers that they can choose either to follow the ways of the present world or those of God, and he urges them to do the second. If his readers choose, they can simply conform to the behavior of this fallen age. Or they can offer themselves to the service of God and seek to do what is pleasing to him. If they do so, they will be transformed and become part of the renewed world, which God through Christ is calling into existence. Not surprisingly, Paul challenges his audience to choose the latter option.

Paul also reminds his readers what is the foundation that will lead to right living: We must begin with receiving God’s mercy. As Paul has already shown at great length, we cannot become righteous by our own power and earn God’s approval. Instead, we must begin by accepting God’s unmerited forgiveness. Hence, Paul now appeals to us to make use of God’s mercy.

After we receive God’s mercy, we must respond by offering ourselves to his service. Our gratitude for God’s undeserved kindness towards us calls us to dedicate our lives to doing his will. Hence, Paul insists that we must present ourselves as a living sacrifice to God.

Once we have offered ourselves to him, we allow God to transform our minds by the power of the Holy Spirit. As we have seen, for Paul the Holy Spirit is primarily God’s mind, and
the Spirit changes us by inviting us to think and feel differently. Hence, Paul challenges us to allow God to reshape our minds.

Through this transformation we begin to discern what God's specific will for us is and gain the power to perform it. In chapter 1 Paul emphasized that after the Pagans refused to worship God, they lost the ability to know who God was, and as a result, fell into gross sin. Now Paul presents the complementary idea that when we worship God properly, we gain new insight into who he is and what he requires. Hence, we are able to know what is right. After our minds have been renewed, we are also able to offer our "bodies" to God's service and, as a result, actually do what is right. Earlier Paul emphasized that the Holy Spirit overcomes inner division and enables us to implement the moral decisions that our "spiritual" self makes (see, for example, the discussion of 8:1-11 above).

As Byrne suggests, Paul gives us here a biblical rationale for creative ethical reflection to respond to scientific breakthroughs. In modern times it has become apparent that we should not woodenly apply the moral guidelines of the biblical era to our own world of computers and genetic engineering. Instead, we need to resist the temptation to twist biblical texts to give us authoritative rules for dealing with situations that the biblical authors could never have imagined. We need to think creatively. Of course, in this very letter Paul warns us of the dangers of trying to live by an ancient code. Here he assures us that if we worship God and allow him to transform our minds, we will indeed be able to discern for ourselves what is good. This assurance is most comforting as Christians today wrestle with the daunting challenges of how we can make ethical use of revolutionary technologies.

Paul suggests that when we offer ourselves to God and obey his will, we are engaged in the best kind of worship. Ordinary worship can be mere ritual, or to use Paul's image, ordinary worship can be non-spiritual. In Paul's day conventional worship included the ritual slaughter of animals for sacrifice. Paul calls for a different worship, one founded on life rather than death, one that is suitable for rational beings. The way to
engage in such “spiritual” worship is to give our full selves to God and allow him to transform us. Such worship makes us a living sacrifice and thereby glorifies God most fully. In emphasizing the importance of spiritual renewal and the unimportance of mere ritual, Paul follows in the footsteps of the Old Testament prophets (e.g., Amos 5:21–27).

**Questions for reflection:**

When we are struggling to do something that is right, do we reflect on God’s mercy and allow the Holy Spirit to transform us, or do we attempt to act on our own power and earn approval? How does the way we attempt to do what is right affect the outcome of our efforts? Do you agree that if we allow God to transform our minds, we will indeed be able to discern what is good even if there is no “rule” to rely on? What are the implications of this ability for contemporary life?

When we act ethically for the sake of God, do our actions praise him? Is the kind of worship we engage in always appropriate for spiritual people, or is it sometimes mere ritual or superstition?

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**41. Romans 12:3–8**

*Through the grace which has been given to me, I tell everyone of you not to have an unjustifiably high opinion of yourselves, but to think sensibly in proportion to the amount of faith God has allotted to each. For just as we have many parts in a single body, and all the parts do not have the same function, so also even though we are many people, we are one body in Christ, since all of us are members of one another. We have different gifts in accordance with the grace that has been granted to us. Let us prophesy in a way that is consistent with our faith. Let us exercise our gift of service when we serve. Let those who have the gift*
of teaching use it when they teach, and those who have the gift
of encouragement, when they encourage, and those who have
the gift of sharing use it with unbegrudging generosity, and those
who lead do so with diligence, and those who have the gift of
performing acts of mercy do so with cheerfulness. (12:3–8)

Paul stresses that Christians must be one body in Christ.
Here he touches on a theme that he expounds at length in
1 Corinthians 12. Each individual Christian has a different set
of gifts, and no individual has them all. Hence, we must coop-
erate in order that all the gifts may be available to the congrega-
tion and that the church may be fully effective.

An important philosophical implication is that we can
become individuals only through community. It is in the con-
text of the group that each person is able to make his or her
unique contribution. Without the community the distinctiveness
of the members would serve no purpose.

In accordance with one of the major themes of the letter,
Paul stresses that we must use each gift with humble faith. As we
have seen, Paul keeps returning in Romans to the theme of
faith—trusting in God. In this section Paul emphasizes that
Christians must allow God to transform every natural gift.
Ideally, the use of any gift should be a sign of one’s trust in God.
Of course, the great enemy of faith is pride, since pride militates
against obedient trust. Hence, Paul prefaces his remarks on gifts
by urging his readers not to think too highly of themselves.

Only if we use our gifts with humble faith will they build
up the community. If we do not have a humble faith, we will
not use our gifts primarily to help others but to draw attention
to ourselves. Consequently, the community will suffer. By con-
trast, if we allow God’s grace to transform our natural gifts, we
focus on the needs of others and lose our self-preoccupation.
Consequently, our sharing becomes “unbegrudging” and our
mercy is bestowed with “cheerfulness.”
Questions for reflection:

Do you agree that one can become an individual only through participating in a community? If, contrary to what Paul advises, we conform to the world do we become individuals? If we follow God do we become individuals? How do we show our trust in God when we exercise our individual gifts? How does calling on God transform our “natural” gifts?

42. Romans 12:9–16

Let your love be genuine. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Love one another with the affection which brothers and sisters have. Take the initiative in honoring one another. Be diligent; be bubbling with the Spirit; serve the Lord. Rejoice in your hope; hold on in the midst of affliction; persevere in prayer. Contribute for the needs of Christians; be zealous in hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. Be in harmony with one another. Do not be conceited, but be drawn to the lowly. Do not think you are more intelligent than you are. (12:9–16)

Paul now gives a series of specific moral exhortations that seem to be only loosely connected to each another. For example, he tells us to honor one another, be diligent, and be bubbling with the Spirit.

Nevertheless, Paul suggests that all these virtues are expressions of genuine love. Thus, he begins his exhortations with “let your love be genuine.” This general principle provides the basis for the more specific recommendations that follow. A few verses later he will go on to insist that the commandment to love summarizes the entire law (13:8–10).

By “genuine love” Paul apparently means an uncalculating concern that comes from the heart and produces concrete acts
of kindness to all. In chapter 2 Paul criticized people for talking about virtue but not practicing it. In chapter 7 he pointed out that those who try to live up to moral standards by their own power do not in fact succeed in doing the good they intend. What we need is an inner transformation that allows us to respond with real generosity. As Paul will make clear in a moment, such generous love even reaches out to those who persecute us.

Of course, Paul believes that the inner transformation that produces such goodness can only come through being centered in God. In chapter 1 Paul argued that the failure of Pagans to be centered in God led to every other sort of sin. Hence, Paul here urges us to “serve the Lord” and “persevere in prayer.”

To become centered to God we must first accept his unmerited love for us as shown by Jesus’ crucifixion and look forward to God redeeming all things. Such acceptance and expectation lead us to receive the Spirit of Jesus and live in hope. Hence, Paul exhorts us to “be bubbling with the Spirit” and “rejoice in hope.”

Paul stresses that “genuine” love never leads to struggles to gain prestige at the expense of others. The love that he is discussing is “the affection which brothers and sisters have.” In the ancient Mediterranean world that Paul knew, people constantly battled with their friends and neighbors in order to gain honor, and the normal way to gain such honor was by putting others to shame. It was only within the family that people were accepted without having to prove anything. Paul urges his readers to have this familial love. Instead of seeking honor at the expense of others, they are to take the initiative in honoring one another. They are also to contribute to meet the needs of others and to be hospitable and gladly support others both in times of sorrow and joy.

Questions for reflection:

Are the different virtues basically distinct or all they somehow all expressions of love? What do you think makes love
“genuine”? Is competition for prestige still a major problem within the church? When is it legitimate to seek public approval? When does such seeking become a problem? Does a deep sense of hope for the transformation of our own lives and those of others make it easier to love?

43. Romans 12:17-21

Do not get back at anyone. Take thought for the things that all people hold to be good. If possible, to the extent it depends on you, be at peace with all people. Beloved, do not get even but let God’s wrath have its opportunity. For, as it is written, “Vengeance belongs to me; I will pay them back” [Deut. 32:35], says the Lord. On the contrary, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; because by doing this, you will pile burning coals on their heads” [Prov. 25:21-22]. Do not be defeated by evil, but defeat evil by good. (12:17-21)

In his exhortations it is striking how much space Paul devotes to enduring persecution patiently and not to descend to responding to hate with hate. He has already insisted that we must bless those who persecute us. Now he emphasizes at length that we must not try to get even, but do good to those who abuse us. If we allow the wickedness of others toward us to make us wicked to them, we have let ourselves be dragged down to their level and been defeated by evil. Hence, Paul insists that we must defeat evil with good.

This emphasis on the importance of patient endurance and not giving in to hate undoubtedly reflects the fact that the church in Rome was experiencing persecution and that previously Roman Christians had sometimes responded with violence. The Pagan historian Suetonius tells us that the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome since they were always making trouble at the instigation of “Chrestus” (sic) (Claudius 25.3). Luke confirms that Claudius expelled the Jews from
Rome (Acts 18:2). He discretely declines to discuss why but does indicate that among those expelled were Priscilla and Aquila who then joined with Paul in his missionary work in Corinth. Apparently, they were already Christians, since Luke says nothing about Paul converting them. From what Suetonius and Luke tell us, it seems that when Christianity arrived in Rome the Jews became divided between supporters and opponents of the new faith. There were violent disturbances within the Jewish community. The Roman civil authorities became alarmed and ordered an expulsion. Suetonius got a garbled version of these events and assumed that “Chrestus” (i.e., Christ) must have been the ringleader. Although we cannot know for certain, it seems probable that the Christian Jews must have taken part in the violence. Had they simply suffered persecution from their fellow Jews passively, the Roman authorities would have had little reason to intervene. Mindful of these events, Paul urges his readers not to take vengeance.

It is noteworthy that Paul grounds his appeal not only in practical considerations, but also in the prerogatives of God. Of course, Paul does emphasize that being good to one’s enemies can turn their hearts. Indeed, giving our enemies food and drink piles “burning coals on their heads” and allows us to defeat evil with good. Nevertheless, Paul also stresses that taking vengeance usurps the privileges that belong to God alone. God—not we—is the judge, and only he has the right to pay people back. As so often in Romans, Paul ultimately bases his appeal on monotheism and looks forward to the final judgment when God’s will make his sovereignty complete.

In emphasizing that Christians should do good to their persecutors, Paul is also repeating the teaching of Jesus and, to a lesser extent, the teaching of the Old Testament. Jesus too stressed that we must treat our enemies with love (Mat. 5:38–48), and Paul is able to justify his plea not to take vengeance by citing both Deuteronomy and Proverbs.
Questions for reflection:

Is the church itself often to blame for the bad treatment it must endure? Do we fully realize that God will judge the world and, therefore, there is no need to get even now? When does doing good to those who abuse us help them to repent? When does it merely encourage them to become more oppressive?

44. Romans 13:1–7

Let every soul be subject to the ruling authorities, for there is no authority except by God’s will, and those that exist have been appointed by God. Hence, whoever resists authority has also opposed what has been decreed by God, and those who do oppose will receive judgment on themselves. For those who rule are not a deterrent to right actions but to bad ones. Do you want not to be afraid of authority? Do what is right, and you will have its commendation. For a ruler is God’s servant for your good. But if you do evil, be afraid, because he has the power to punish. He is God’s servant, punishing in God’s behalf those who commit evil. Therefore, it is necessary to be subject, not only because of punishment, but also because of conscience. Accordingly, pay your taxes, for rulers are God’s servants who devote their time to this very matter. Give to all what is their due, tribute to those who demand tribute, customs to those who collect customs, deference to those who expect deference, honor to those who expect honor. (13:1–7)

Paul stresses that his readers must submit to the governing authorities. Paul is emphatic. Anyone who resists the civil authorities resists God’s will. Hence, Christians must obey public officials not merely to escape civil punishment but also for the sake of conscience.

Paul emphasizes the need to be submissive because previously many members of the Roman church had gotten into