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General Council Bible Study
Phoebe, Bearer of the Letter to the Church in Rome,
Explains Romans 12:1-2
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For this Bible study, I will use a fictional literary device in which Phoebe, the deaconess and benefactor from the port of Cenchrea, explains the text of Romans 12:1-2. This will allow me to move more easily between the times of the Roman Empire and our current time in the 21st century.

Phoebe and Paul's Dream of Traveling to Spain by Crossing Rome

My name is Phoebe. I am originally from Cenchrea, a harbor located nine miles from Corinth. I am a minister (*diakonos*) of the community of faith in Cenchrea. Paul founded the community that meets in my house. He visits us when he comes from Corinth and he stays in my home.^[1] I am also a benefactor, or patron (*prostatis*). Paul, my friend and colleague, is one of those whom I support. He has told me about a thrilling journey he hopes to make to Spain, where he dreams of sharing the good news of the resurrected one (Romans 15:24). He needs the help of the faith communities in Rome to be able to go to Spain: economic support, interpreters and prayers. That is why he wants to travel through Rome.

Unfortunately, Paul has had serious conflicts with some of his own people who insist that the Gentiles follow the traditions of the Jews as to circumcision and obeying the Law of Moses. However, I assure you that when Paul shared the gospel with us here in Cenchrea, he spoke powerfully of God's grace. He did not force us to obey any law to be part of God's people. For Paul, it was enough to embrace the faith of Jesus—who was crucified by the Romans and resurrected by God—and it was sufficient to believe that God resurrected him from the dead. When our faith is genuine, our works of love and solidarity and the fruit they bear are visible. The Spirit of God helps us to discern what ways are pleasing to God.

Nevertheless, the problem with this group of Paul's compatriots has deepened; what is worse, some people from Jerusalem have brought bad news against Paul to Rome. They have misinterpreted Paul, and they say that Paul wants to annul the Law of Moses and some other things. This situation makes it difficult for his dream of going to Spain to come true. That is why Paul decided to write a long letter to the brothers and sisters in Rome^[2]. In this letter he explains more clearly his stance regarding the faith of Jesus Christ and the Law. I feel happy to know that he asked me to travel personally

^[1] Joan Cecilia Campbell, *Phoebe, Patron and Emissary* (Liturgical Press: Minnesota, 2009), 92. The author, however, thinks that Chapter 16, where Phoebe is mentioned (16:1-2) belonged to a letter that had been sent to Ephesus and not to Rome. I think it is part of the Letter to the Romans.

^[2] For Yewett, the trip to Spain which Paul wants to make conditions the whole letter. Cf. Robert Yewett, *Romans* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2007).

to Rome and deliver this letter to its recipients. I accepted, and I promised to help him in any and all ways in this journey, including with economic support. That is why I was happy when he asked me to go to Rome to deliver the letter and to see the situation there to prepare his journey to Spain.

An important aspect I should explain is that here in my Greco-Roman culture, it is customary to send a person to deliver a letter to the recipient with the recommendation that the person bearing the letter be welcomed with honors (16:1-2). The person carrying the letter should know the content, and should be able to explain it. So, Paul sat and dialogued with me several times about the arguments in the epistle, so that I would be able to explain them if necessary. This is not very easy, for sometimes he is hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16); but I am an educated woman and my position as a deacon bestows a certain authority upon me. This is not for my own vain glory but to share the good news of the resurrected.

Therefore, I am authorized to present in this Council of Reformed Churches what that part of Romans that some Bible experts call 12:1-2^[3] might mean for you. When Paul wrote that letter it was not customary to divide letters into chapters and verses. However, I think it has been a good idea.

Phoebe Explains Romans 12:1-2

Romans 12:1-2 is the introduction to what Paul writes in the second part of his letter (12-16).^[4] Earlier in this letter, he wrote about God's mercy for all the peoples of the world, without exception. Now, in the introduction to Romans 12:1-2, Paul speaks about how this mercy of God should be manifested in the people who welcome God's Grace. Let's get straight to the point. The core of verses 1 and 2 is an urgent call for people not to conform (*sysxēmatitsō*) to the values of the society in which they live, but to be transformed (*metamorphoō*); that is, to change radically their lives as well as their way of thinking. Paul says, "Renew your mind." It is easy to adapt oneself to the values of society that the majority follows, but sometimes these values are seductive and dishonest. That is why Paul insists on the same point by saying it in two different ways: transform your way of thinking and living, and do not adapt to the epoch in which you are living.

Shall we have the courage to stand before God as God's children if we do not make a difference in this greedy, corrupt and violent world? Transformed, renewed in thought and action is the way to stand before God and the world in a genuine, authentic way, as is proper for God's children. Let me tell you that for Paul, this is the reasonable (*logiken*) way to praise God or the true spiritual way to honour God (Romans 12:2).

I can see that among you—as in my time—people have many ways of praising God, but almost always they praise by magnifying God, by showering praises on God as if God were an emperor, singing for many hours with modern, sophisticated instruments. That is good; but when these people and congregations go back home, they do not

^[3] The division of the manuscripts into chapters and verses was done several centuries later.

^[4] Yewett, p. 724.

show this transforming grace in their lives, in their families, in their societies and sometimes not even in their own congregations. Is that the reasonable or truly spiritual way to praise God? No, you do not worship only with your lips, but with your way of being, thinking and acting. In other words, this means behaving coherently and with integrity according to Jesus' teachings. When Paul says we should present our bodies as living, holy and pleasant sacrifices (*thysian*) to God, that means we are to dedicate our whole being as an offering to God and that includes our body and spirit, our entire life. Holy dedication means that the life you live should be different from the lifestyle that the Greco-Roman society of my time as well as the 21st century of your time promotes. God does not like the model of societies in which you and I live. I will tell you more later about the model that God does not like and that Paul calls "sin" (*hamartia*). Now I am only summarizing what Paul means in this paragraph in which he invites us to total renewal.

I, Phoebe, want to open a parenthesis here. I think it is interesting to see how Paul uses a sacrificial cultic figure to encourage genuine transformation in body and mind. Besides, you must remember that in Jerusalem the temple still functioned that time, around the year 57 or 58 CE, when Paul wrote this letter. The Romans had not yet invaded Jerusalem and had not destroyed the temple. They did so twelve years later. However, Paul and others had seen the death of Jesus on the cross, a sacrifice that relativized the sacrifices that the law demanded in the temple for purification and the forgiveness of sins. I think it is interesting that Paul also invites the followers of Jesus the resurrected one to present our bodies as a sacrifice, but not for the forgiveness of sins or as victims to show the injustice of a world that condemned Jesus to the cross. Instead, we should do it so that the life of our communities and our own lives would be dedicated to God to renew God's creation. However, Paul does not allude to sacrifice as the Romans sacrificed animals to their deities, with no relationship to the ethics of justice and solidarity among people.^[5] We are to present ourselves as an offering to God through a radical transformation that is capable of changing this corrupt and violent world into another possible world which God may find pleasing. For me, Phoebe, it is remarkable that Paul's perspective keeps a distance from the sacrifices practiced by the Jews as well as from those of the Romans. I told him so when he was explaining the details of his letter to me and he said, "That is good, Phoebe!" Here I close the parenthesis.

The paragraph I am discussing (verse 2) closes by expressing that all of this has an objective: to achieve the capacity to discern (*dokimatsein*) the ways that God finds pleasing (*euareston*), those that God finds good (*agadon*) and wholesome (*teleion*) and coherent. Hear me out, coherent means having consistency between what is believed, said and done.

Well, I have spoken about Romans 12:1-2 and about what this part of the passage may mean. It is a beautiful text, but it is not enough. It needs more historical and contextual content. If we do not speak in concrete terms about why we need transformation, those values to which we should not conform, and what is important to discern, there

^[5] Roman piety (*eusebeia*) was reflected in the perfection of the ritual of the sacrifice of the animal, with no ethical implications.

is the risk that each one will interpret what they want according to their own mental frameworks. There is also the risk that these words will become abstract, devoid of content that would challenge us to show that we have truly been justified by the faith of Jesus Christ and that we have expressed God's justice through our attitudes, thoughts, practices of justice and mutual care.

Phoebe Explains the Importance of Knowing How to Discern the Ways of the Lord

Let's start by looking at "how to discern." The liturgy has already helped us to understand the importance of "knowing how to discern" the ways of the Lord. But, Oh Lord, how difficult it is today to discern the true ways to please God! In your society, it is fashionable to launch ungrounded statements to support your own interests. It's outrageous! It was like that in my time, when the truth was imprisoned by injustice and lies, as Paul said well in Romans 1:18. The point is that in my time, in my society, the emperor was called a saviour and prince of peace.^[6] Can you believe that? This was at the same time the emperor had his military all over the provinces of the empire, legions waging war here and there, collecting taxes, suffocating possible rebellions. How can this be? For me, the true Saviour and Prince of Peace is Jesus Christ. They pretended to pass off lies as if they were truths. Don't say now that it does not happen in your society. I have been told that there are thousands of refugees and thousands who have drowned here in our Mediterranean Sea, fleeing from war and hunger. Those who go around the world making peace and liberating people have done nothing but turn the Mediterranean into an immense grave. Besides, poor you, so many false preachers who only think of their own wellbeing and go around confusing people. I wonder why people do not feel they are covered and empowered by the grace of God. They want to exchange their money for blessings; or if they are rich, they want to exchange their capital for bigger blessings. What a huge challenge you have in the 21st century!

Discerning the ways that are pleasing to God is a gift that God grants us when we have embraced God's justice, that justice we have seen in Jesus' journey. As Paul says, in the gospel—that is Jesus Christ—the justice of God is revealed (Romans 1:17). In embracing that justice, we are justified by God's love, and we journey in the newness of life (6:4) as new people guided by the Spirit of God. Thus, thanks to the confidence we have in God and in God's Spirit, we can discern what is good, what is wholesome, that which pleases God (not what pleases the powers of this world). So, all of you that are justified by faith should control your greed and keep your vision clear. Do not be contaminated by the wrong values of this world: avarice, corruption, lies disguised as truths, contempt for that which is different and violence, especially against women and children. Don't ignore what is happening with nature; don't become accomplices by littering the planet and turning your back to global warming. Read the scientific reports that speak in catastrophic terms of what will happen if we do not stop greed. Do not listen to the businessman/president Trump who rolled back the tepid efforts of his predecessor for the wellbeing of the planet. Do not listen to corrupt politicians. Take the groans of the planet very seriously: droughts, floods, thawing, landslides that

^[6] An inscription of Priene's from the year 9 BC speaks of the birth of divine August that brought the gospel of peace.

kill entire towns. Show compassion for the poor who suffer the most due to ecological tragedies. Ask the Holy Spirit to wipe your eyes clean and give you courage to swim against the current, since the ways of the Lord nowadays, as in my time, go against the current.

Discerning is not easy. Why? Well, let's see. Before speaking about God's justice, Paul tells us about the problem of injustices, sin and the Law, serious but also relevant topics for all times.

Phoebe Explains the Dangers of Greed that Lead to Structural Sin

For Paul, sin does not come out of the blue; it is human beings who create it. In the first three chapters of his Letter to the Romans, before speaking about sin (*amartia*) Paul speaks about the injustices of all peoples. First, he speaks about the injustices of the Gentiles; then he speaks about the injustices committed by Jews, because there is no difference for God. All human beings of all races, ethnic groups, and social classes commit injustices: stealing, murdering, oppressing; they are greedy and insensitive to pain. With or without the Law, human beings are vulnerable to all these evils due to their human condition. Greed is part of the human condition, and if it is not limited, it is the spark that makes human beings commit all kinds of injustices and lose interest in caring for others. For Paul, injustices become systemic and develop into systems that turn the values of society upside down. That is why truth is hidden behind lies and people tell lies disguised as truths. Thus, human beings and communities are enslaved under this systemic power that Paul calls sin. Therefore, sin should not be taken lightly; it is an enslaving power that forces human beings to do things that they do not want to do in their minds, but they are seduced by coveting desire (*epithymia*) or by the pressure of the sinful environment. It is structural sin and all peoples and persons are accomplices.

Let me give you a personal example. Here in my society, patronage is inherent to the imperial Roman system. I am a benefactor, a patron. I do favors for people, and in return they should always repay me with honors; if they do not show respect for me, it is shameful and everybody tries to avoid that. My society is ruled by patronage and the paradigm of honor and shame. However, when I first came to know the gospel through Paul, I realized that there is another way to behave, with values that are different from Greco-Roman society. These are the values of people who live according to God's reign and not the emperor's. For instance, Paul always says, "no one should think more highly of himself or herself than he or she ought to think" (Romans 12:3), and he said it just after exhorting everyone to be transformed and not to conform. For a Roman, it is crazy to say that no one should think of himself or herself more highly than others. Our society is highly stratified; the one who is rich, who has power and belongs to nobility, expects to be honoured and glorified. It is shameful for the wealthy to mix with the poor.^[7] Our faith communities are made up of slaves and the poor; there are well-to-do people like myself, but most people are not. That is why outsiders criticize us. It is not easy for me as a benefactor or patron to behave as God wants me to act, because everybody expects me to behave as my neighbours who are also patrons. I am

^[7] Cf. Letter to Plinius the Young, (VI)

criticized because I mix with the slaves and the poor; for example, my slave calls me sister and I call her the same. It would be easier to follow the values of the society in which we live. I strongly recommend not doing so; try not to be influenced by those values based on discrimination.

Another terrible thing: I have heard that in the 21st century greed is seen as a virtue. Oh my God! How foolish! Not even in our Greco-Roman world is that so. Unlimited greed leads to committing injustices; Paul says in his letter that injustices produce systemic sin (Romans 1-3). I know there are laws to control greed, but when everyone is looking out for their own interests, laws are unable to do justice. They can be manipulated, and in most cases they legitimate sin. That is why Paul suspected the Law and laws.^[8] When laws are followed blindly, the “I” in our conscience does not discern what is right but only does what the law states. Then the person, legitimized by the law, not only commits injustices but feels free of guilt. Paul is critical of the law, not only the Law of Moses, but laws in general, because sin takes advantage of the good things to show its deadly power. (Romans 7:13).

That is why Paul contrasts God’s justice with Roman justice. While the Roman justice is ruled by its laws, God’s justice is ruled by grace. This means that instead of applying all the weight of the law against humanity, God’s justice proposes to renew God’s creation through justice, full of grace and mercy. God justifies us, embraces us with grace as a merciful mother and opens the horizon to create another possible world ruled by grace, not by vengeance or retaliation which only produces more and more violence. Jesus is the model for life. He treated women and children well. He had mercy on the sick. He touched the lepers and he even told us to forgive seventy-seven times over (Matthew 18:23). He was not like the boastful Lamech, Cain’s descendant, who sings to his two wives saying that if Cain had been avenged sevenfold, whoever hurt or wounded him he would revenge seventy-seven times over (Genesis 4:23-24). Infinite vengeance creates infinite violence. The infinite mercy of God may recreate humanity^[9] and “good living.”^[10]

Phoebe Calls for Permanent Transformation

Dear brothers and sisters, I, Phoebe, embrace Paul’s recommendation. Transform and renew yourselves; do not adapt to greedy and corrupt values of this violent society; I address you who are justified by faith and who call yourselves Christians. I am not addressing people and communities who do not know Jesus Christ. I am addressing communities that have had a long journey as Christians and that today celebrate 500 years of being Reformed. Ask yourselves, how are you living the Reformation in a world that begs for a change of course because it is destroying itself? I am not exaggerating. Ask the scientists who are experts in environmental issues.

^[8] The concept of law (*nomos*) in Romans is wide, not only restricted to the Torah.

^[9] Elsa Tamez, “Justicia de Dios y gracia sin desquite” (“God’s Justice and Grace without Revenge”), paper presented at the Lutheran University (EST) from Sao Leopoldo, Brazil, in the Third Congress of Theology in September, 2016.

^[10] From Quechua *Sumak Kawsai*, whose meaning points at a full life, an alternative to the lifestyle of Western individualistic and consumer society.

The call for transformation and renewal is an ad-intra call; that is, it is directed to the inner core of Christian churches, to the very Christian men and women who have embraced the gospel and preach about Jesus, the Christ. Paul wrote also to those who were already new creatures in Christ; he explained to them what had occurred in their conversion, but he continued exhorting them to behave in a way worthy of the gospel. Those intercultural conflicts in their communities made them forget the horizon of God's Reign. Some ate meat. Others did not because it was not customary among them. They spent all their time criticizing each other. Paul calls on them to welcome each other, especially those who feel freer in Christ; those who eat and those who do not do so for the Lord. So, let's not wear ourselves out with small things that cloud the horizon of what is truly important for God. Internal conflicts usually end up badly. We have to tolerate each other and, above all, care for each other in these societies that are far from the values of the Reign of God.

Paul calls those of you who have been justified by the faith of Jesus Christ to a new conversion within your communities. Christians must be an example; we have to know that there is a way to be different from that which is ruled by envy, rivalry and personal ambition. We have to persuade people that solidarity is more important than self-interest; that discriminating against and killing women is equal to discriminating against ourselves and is suicidal; that destroying our environment means destroying our own house. There are some sensitive and aware small groups that want to live in a different way, according to the values that Christians call the Reign of God. I urge you to pay attention to these initiatives and support them. Plan your priorities and with faith and trust in God, and of course with will power, you can begin to build the other possible world that you desire so much.

Good bye. I, Phoebe, wish the best for your meeting. Pray for me while I am in Rome and that things go well there; that brothers and sisters there welcome me as my colleague Paul of Tarso asks them to do.