**Some marks of the church**

Romans 12:9-21

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

September 3, 2017

9Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

14Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” 20No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” 21Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good[[1]](#endnote-1).

 In this chapter of Romans, Paul invites us, as members of Christ’s church, to *be transformed by the renewing of our minds* in contrast to being *conformed to the world.* I am grateful to Paul that he provides concrete ways of expressing that transformation, and in our passage today we have twelve.

In this passage, we hear echoes of Jesus’s Beatitudes that we have been looking at together. Paul is, after all, a disciple of Jesus. We are called to *weep* or mourn, to *associate with the lowly*, to *live peaceably with all*. He acknowledges the reality of a persecuted life.

And, of course, there are strong echoes from the rest of the Sermon on the Mount: to *bless those who persecute you*, to *never avenge* or *pay anyone evil for evil*, to love your enemies, to *persevere in prayer* and *patient in suffering*.

But there are some new invitations that seem perfectly consonant with Jesus’s teachings, too. We are told, for example, to *outdo one another in showing honor*. I am remembering that James and John took Jesus aside one day to ask for special honor for themselves. I wonder what Jesus would have said if they had asked Jesus to honor Peter or Thomas instead of themselves? There are lots of invitations for a *community* of people: help the poor among you, help strangers who come by, rejoice and weep together. *Live in harmony with one another*. *Love one another*—that seems to be the watchword over all!

These are marks of *the good* that we are to hold on to. Adding a contrasting note, we are to *hate what is evil*. The evil things mentioned in this passage include *cursing* (in the sense of declaring a curse on someone), lack of zeal, being *haughty*, claiming to *be wiser than you are*, repaying *evil with evil* and vengeance in general, and even being *overcome with evil*.

John Roth has described Mennonite churches as often being either concerned with *purity* or with *justice*. I find it interesting that, in the marks of the church Paul describes, both personal virtues and justice are mentioned. On the justice side, we are to welcome strangers, and confront, and even overcome, the persecutors with love and service. But even the personal virtues are often connected with how we treat others: we hang out with the lowly, help one another out, honor one another. The evil we are called to avoid here are things like evil pride rather than sexual impurity (although this is also important to Paul, as he discusses elsewhere).

This week had two pieces of news I want to reflect on.

One was the release of the Nashville Statement, a statement of several affirmations and denials about what the statement writers called “homosexual immorality” and “transgenderism.” It is a harsh and classic “purity” document, put out by a largely white American, male group of evangelical Christians, mostly Calvinist or Baptist in orientation. In other words, it is a statement from a relatively narrow set of Christians. An influential set, in the American evangelical context, but narrow one. I don’t want to criticize these brothers (and a few sisters) especially, but I do want to claim that there statement bears very little resemblance to the community that Paul describes. There is no self-reflection in the statement about the failures of the evangelical church to welcome the stranger, or to be anything but *conformed to this world* with respect to its own marriage and divorce statistics. There is very little welcome for the stranger, or showing honor for Christians and others who are sexual minorities. If I were a gay man who believed God was calling me to celibacy, I certainly wouldn’t want to be in the kind of church where the Nashville Statement was upheld as the last word on queer sexuality, to say nothing of what I’d want if I were a gay man who believed in God’s blessing on same-sex marriage!

The other news was the destruction caused by Hurricane Harvey in southern Texas. What terrible devastation we have seen! And, despite some sideshow stores about Joel Osteen and whether he and his church were doing enough to help in the storm’s aftermath, what great examples we have seen of people helping one another! Seeing the “Cajun Navy” show up, seeing people of all stripes helping one another has been a beautiful thing. It is both a good reminder, and a good example, of how to not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil by good.

We, as the church, are called to do this every day, under extraordinary circumstances and under extraordinary circumstances.

What are some ways you have been encouraged to live out Romans 12?

1. [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](https://ref.ly/logosres/nrsv?ref=BibleNRSV.Ro12.9&off=28&ctx=+the+True+Christian%0a~9%C2%A0Let+love+be+genuin). (1989). (Ro 12:9–21). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)