

Spiritual Formation in Romans 12:1–2: A Socio-Rhetorical and Theological Analysis of Transformative Christian Living

Emmanuel Actor Oyewole¹ , David Bumsu Kim² , Maiherling³ 

Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo, Nigeria¹, Global Gateway University, United States², Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Injili Indonesia Samarinda, Indonesia³

oyewoleemmanuelactor422@gmail.com¹, yongguang7j@gmail.com², mmaiherling@gmail.com³

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Description

Romans 12:1–2 presents spiritual formation as a grace-grounded, Spirit-empowered, embodied, eschatological, cognitive, discerning and communal transformation in response to God's mercies.

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Abstract

Romans 12:1–2 marks Paul's transition from theological exposition to Christian living, yet scholarship has largely treated its key concepts in isolation. This study interprets the passage as an integrated Pauline account of spiritual formation. It combines socio-rhetorical analysis of the Greek text (NA28), examining its inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, and ideological and sacred textures, with theological synthesis. The analysis shows that Paul grounds formation in God's mercies, defines worship as the offering of embodied life (logikē latreia), sets conformity to "this age" against transformation by the renewal of the mind (a renewal that, in Romans, is the work of the Spirit and is directed towards conformity to Christ, 8:29), and makes discernment of God's will the outcome of formation within the community of Romans 12:3–21. The study contributes a seven-dimensional model of formation – grace-grounded, Spirit-empowered, embodied, eschatological, cognitive, discerning and communal – for Pauline studies and discipleship practice.

Keywords: Romans 12:1–2; spiritual formation; socio-rhetorical analysis; renewal of the mind; living sacrifice

INTRODUCTION

Romans 12:1–2 occupies a strategic position in Paul's Letter to the Romans. After an extended argument on sin, justification, union with Christ, life in the Spirit and God's purposes for Israel and the nations (Rom 1–11), Paul begins a sustained exhortation (Rom 12:1–15:13). The opening verses therefore function not as general moral advice but as a theological hinge at which doctrine becomes embodied practice. Moo (2018, pp. 766–769) observes that the exhortation is the logical consequence of Paul's exposition of God's saving mercy, and Schreiner (2018, pp. 618–626) regards the passage as the foundation of the letter's ethical section. For contemporary churches, including those in Africa and Asia, where theological writers have called for discipleship that

renews thinking and reshapes social life (Boaheng, 2023; Sumual & Rahayu, 2026), the passage raises a pressing question: what kind of formation does Paul envisage for people who have received God's mercy?

Scholarship on the passage has developed along three main lines. First, exegetical studies and commentaries have examined its key expressions in detail: the presentation of the body as a living sacrifice, the meaning of λογικὴ λατρεία and the renewal of the mind (Jewett, 2007; Moo, 2018, pp. 769–775; Schreiner, 2018, pp. 626–631; Wright, 2002, p. 704). Specialised studies have debated whether λογικός should be read as “spiritual”, “reasonable” or “reasoning” worship, and how the phrase was received in later interpretation (Choi, 2024; Scott, 2018; Summers, 2017), while others have related Paul's language of body and mind to his philosophical and religious context (Keener, 2022). Second, theological and ethical readings have emphasised the relationship between worship and ethics in Romans 12 (Havenga, 2020; ten Klooster, 2023) and the place of Romans 12–13 in early Christian moral instruction (Stewart, 2021). Third, contextual and missional readings have applied the passage to the renewal of church and society in African and Indonesian settings (Andrean & Ming, 2020; Boaheng, 2023; Wa Gatumu, 2025).

At the same time, the concept of spiritual formation has become central in discipleship studies. Wilhoit (2008, p. 23) defines spiritual formation as an intentional communal process through which believers grow in relationship with God and are conformed to Christ through the Spirit. In Pauline studies, Gorman (2015) describes Christian existence as participation in Christ that becomes visible in cruciform, missional life, and Chia and Chishi (2023) evaluate approaches to spiritual formation in light of the biblical goal of conformity to the image of Christ. Other recent studies highlight particular dimensions: the formative role of narrative in Paul (Hwang, 2016), the place of the emotions in discipleship (Davis, 2023; Issler, 2025), leadership formation as discipleship (Feller & Lombaard, 2018) and the work of the Holy Spirit in formation (Averbeck, 2024; Macchia, 2020). This study adopts Wilhoit's definition as its working definition and reads it through Paul's own vocabulary of transformation (μεταμορφόω), renewal (ἀνακαίνωσις) and conformity to Christ (σύμμορφος, Rom 8:29). Yet these discussions rarely ground their models in a detailed exegesis of Romans 12:1–2, while exegetical studies of the passage seldom frame their results as a coherent account of formation. The individual concepts are well studied, but they have not been sufficiently integrated with one another or with the socio-rhetorical setting that gives them force.

This article addresses that gap by asking two questions: (1) How do the lexical, syntactic and rhetorical features of Romans 12:1–2, read in its literary and social-cultural context, construct Paul's call for transformative Christian living? (2) What integrated model of spiritual formation emerges from this reading? The adequacy of the resulting model is judged by three criteria: its grounding in the textual evidence, its coherence with Paul's wider theology of transformation in Romans and its usefulness for evaluating discipleship practice. The study argues that Romans 12:1–2 presents spiritual formation as a grace-grounded, Spirit-empowered, embodied, eschatological, cognitive, discerning and communal transformation, in which believers who have received God's mercies offer their whole lives as worship, resist

conformity to the present age and are transformed by the renewal of the mind. Its contribution is twofold: it offers an exegetically grounded model of spiritual formation for Pauline studies, and it provides criteria for evaluating discipleship practices in contemporary churches. The scope is limited to Romans 12:1–2, read in relation to Romans 1–11 as its theological basis and Romans 12:3–21 as its immediate communal outworking.

METHOD

This is a qualitative exegetical study of Romans 12:1–2. The interpretive approach is socio-rhetorical criticism as developed by Robbins (1996), which reads a text through several “textures”: inner texture (repetition, progression, argumentative and sensory-aesthetic features), intertexture (relations to other texts and traditions), social and cultural texture (the social values and relations presupposed by the text), and ideological and sacred texture (the theological claims and the vision of God and community). Recent applications of this approach to Pauline and other New Testament texts show its value for connecting linguistic detail with social setting (de Waal, 2021; Ho, 2019). The approach is combined with grammatical-historical analysis of the Greek text and theological synthesis. Rhetorically, Romans 12:1–2 is paraenesis (exhortation): it opens the hortatory section of the letter (Rom 12:1–15:13), which functions deliberately by urging a way of life grounded in the argument of Romans 1–11 (Jewett, 2007; Robbins, 1996).

The object of study is Romans 12:1–2. The primary source is the Greek text of Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece* (28th ed.), with lexical analysis based on BDAG (Bauer et al., 2000) and grammatical analysis based on Wallace (1996); translations are the author’s own. Secondary sources comprise critical commentaries on Romans (Dunn, 1988; Jewett, 2007; Moo, 2018; Schreiner, 2018; Thielman, 2018; Wright, 2002), monographs on Pauline theology and spiritual formation (e.g., Gorman, 2015; Wilhoit, 2008), primary sources for the background of key terms (e.g., Epictetus, Testament of Levi) and peer-reviewed journal articles identified through Crossref searches using the keywords “Romans 12:1–2”, “*logikē latreia*”, “renewal of the mind”, “socio-rhetorical” and “spiritual formation”, with priority given to studies published between 2016 and 2026.

The analysis proceeds in five steps. First, the inner texture is examined: the text, its structure, the sequence of verbs and the key terms *παρακαλέω*, *οἰκτιρμός*, *παρίστημι*, *θυσία*, *λογικὴ λατρεία*, *συσχηματίζω*, *μεταμορφόω*, *ἀνακαίνωσις* and *δοκιμάζω*. Second, the intertexture is examined, especially the relation to Romans 1–11 and to Israel’s sacrificial and worship traditions. Third, the social and cultural texture is analysed with reference to the values of honour, status and conformity in the Roman world and to the immediate communal instructions of Romans 12:3–21. Fourth, the ideological and sacred textures are examined: the values the text promotes and its vision of God, the Spirit and the community. Fifth, the findings are synthesised into a model of spiritual formation and compared with existing scholarship. The same categories are applied consistently to each unit of the text, and recurring themes are organised following the principles of systematic thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021),

adapted here to textual rather than interview data. This method is chosen because the passage's formative force lies precisely in the interaction between its language, its argumentative position and its social setting, which neither purely lexical nor purely thematic approaches can capture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Inner Texture: Text, Translation and Structure

The Greek text of Romans 12:1–2 (NA28) and the author's translation read as follows:

Table 1. Romans 12:1–2 (NA28) and the author's translation

Teks Romans 12:1-2 (NA28)	Author's Translation
Παρακαλῶ οὖν ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν τοῦ θεοῦ, παραστῆσαι τὰ σώματα ὑμῶν θυσίαν ζῶσαν ἁγίαν εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ, τὴν λογικὴν λατρείαν ὑμῶν· καὶ μὴ συσχηματίζεσθε τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ, ἀλλὰ μεταμορφοῦσθε τῇ ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοός, εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν ὑμᾶς τί τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ εὐάρεστον καὶ τέλειον.	"Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, through the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, which is your reasonable worship. And do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of the mind, so that you may discern what the will of God is – the good, pleasing and perfect."

Two textual details deserve mention. First, the NA28 apparatus records witnesses that read infinitives (συσχηματίζεσθαι, μεταμορφοῦσθαι) in place of the imperatives. Since -εσθε and -εσθαι were pronounced alike in the Koine period, the variation is easily explained as itacistic confusion; the imperatives are preferred because they give verse 2 the direct hortatory force that suits the paraenetic context, whereas the infinitives would make it a further complement of παρακαλῶ. Second, later witnesses add ὑμῶν after τοῦ νοός, a natural assimilation to τὰ σώματα ὑμῶν in verse 1. Neither variant substantially alters the meaning of the exhortation (Jewett, 2007; Moo, 2018).

The inner texture shows a clear progression. A single main verb of exhortation (παρακαλῶ) is grounded in God's action (διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν); its content is first expressed by an aorist infinitive (παραστῆσαι) that presents the offering as a whole and then unfolded in two antithetical present imperatives (μὴ συσχηματίζεσθε ... ἀλλὰ μεταμορφοῦσθε) that lead to a purpose clause (εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν). The adjective εὐάρεστον appears in both verses, describing first the sacrifice (v. 1) and then the will of God (v. 2), so that the life offered to God and the will of God that is discerned are bound together. Table 1 summarises this structure. The aspectual contrast should not be overstated: the aorist does not in itself mean "once for all", nor does the present imperative by itself prove continuous action (Wallace, 1996). Nevertheless, the shift from a summarising aorist to present imperatives, together with the contrast between "this age" and renewal, supports reading verse 2 as describing a process rather than a single event.

Table 2. Rhetorical Structure of Romans 12:1–2

Element	Greek expression	Form	Function in the argument
Exhortation	Παρακαλῶ οὖν	Pres. act. ind. 1 sg. + inferential particle	Links ethics to Romans 1–11
Ground	διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν τοῦ θεοῦ	διά + genitive plural	Formation rests on divine mercy
Offering of the whole self	παραστῆσαι τὰ σώματα ... θυσίαν ζῶσαν	Aor. act. inf. (perfective aspect); plural bodies, singular sacrifice	Embodied, communal worship
Interpretation	τὴν λογικὴν λατρείαν ὑμῶν	Appositional accusative	Whole life as worship
Negative command	μὴ συσχηματίζεσθε τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ	Pres. mid./pass. impv. 2 pl.	Resisting the ongoing pressure of the age
Positive command	μεταμορφοῦσθε τῇ ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοός	Pres. pass. impv. 2 pl. + dative of means	Ongoing divine transformation
Purpose	εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν ... τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ	Articular infinitive of purpose	Discernment as outcome

Grace as the Ground of Formation (Romans 12:1a)

The verb παρακαλῶ (present active indicative) introduces an apostolic appeal rather than a bare command; Paul addresses the Romans as ἀδελφοί, which frames the exhortation within a relationship of kinship. The inferential οὖν signals that what follows is the consequence of the preceding argument, and the prepositional phrase διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν τοῦ θεοῦ names the basis of the appeal. The plural οἰκτιρμοί evokes the compassion of God celebrated in Israel's scriptures and summarises the mercy expounded in Romans 1–11, especially the climactic statement that God has mercy on all (11:30–32). This intertexture shows that Romans 12 is not a new programme but the response called for by the gospel already proclaimed (Moo, 2018, pp. 766–769; Schreiner, 2018, pp. 626–627). The term οἰκτιρμοί belongs to the Septuagint vocabulary of divine compassion (e.g., Ps 24[25]:6, “Remember your mercies, O Lord”; Ps. 50[51]:3, “according to the abundance of your mercies”), and in Romans 9:15 Paul quotes Exodus 33:19 with both ἐλεέω and οἰκτιρέω. The choice of οἰκτιρμοί in 12:1 therefore links the exhortation directly to the argument of Romans 9–11.

For spiritual formation, the implication is that formation is grace-responsive rather than merit-producing. Believers do not present themselves in order to obtain mercy; they present themselves because mercy has been shown. This conclusion agrees with theological readings that treat worship in Romans 12 as the primary ethical act of those addressed by God (Havenga, 2020), and it guards against discipleship models that make spiritual growth a means of securing acceptance. It also corresponds to the characteristic Pauline relationship between indicative and imperative: believers are exhorted to become what God has already made them

(Rom 6:1–14; cf. Phil 2:12–13, where working out salvation is grounded in God’s working within).

Embodied Worship: The Living Sacrifice and Λογικὴ Λατρεία (Romans 12:1b)

The aorist infinitive παραστῆσαι has a wide semantic range (“to place beside, present, offer”; Bauer et al., 2000); in a context that names θυσία it acquires sacrificial connotations, and within Romans it recalls 6:13 and 6:19, where believers are told to present their members to God as instruments of righteousness. The intertexture with Romans 6 indicates that the offering of the body is the practical form of union with Christ. The object τὰ σώματα ὑμῶν, read against the holistic anthropology of the Hebrew Bible rather than a body–soul dualism (Dunn, 1988; Jewett, 2007), denotes embodied existence, not merely the physical body in contrast to the soul (Moo, 2018, p. 769; Wright, 2002, p. 704). Keener (2022) shows that Paul’s view of body and mind in Romans offers an alternative to philosophical views of his day that disparaged the body, a finding that strengthens the reading of σῶμα as the whole person in concrete relationships. The plural “bodies” combined with the singular “sacrifice” (θυσίαν) may also suggest that many lives together form one offering.

The phrase θυσίαν ζῶσαν is deliberately paradoxical, since sacrifice ordinarily entailed death. The three qualifiers – ζῶσαν, ἁγίαν, εὐάρεστον – transfer cultic categories to daily life: the offering is continuous, set apart for God and acceptable to God. The appositional phrase τὴν λογικὴν λατρείαν ὑμῶν interprets the whole act. Its adjective has been rendered “spiritual”, “reasonable” or “rational”. Scott (2018) argues that λογικός points to worship that involves rational deliberation, a reading that connects verse 1 directly with the renewal of the mind and the discernment of verse 2. The background of the term supports this connection. In Stoic thought, the human being as a rational creature (λογικός) is called to praise God (Epictetus, Diss. 1.16.20–21), and in Hellenistic Jewish writings the angels offer “a rational and bloodless offering” (λογικὴν καὶ ἀναίμακτον προσφοράν, T. Levi 3:6). Paul shares this vocabulary but transforms it: the “rational” offering is not an inner or angelic act but the presentation of bodies. Israel’s own scriptures had already relativised animal sacrifice in favour of a contrite heart and covenant loyalty (Ps 50[51]:17–19; Hos 6:6), and the Qumran community spoke of prayer and right conduct as acceptable offerings (1QS 9.4–5). Kiuchi (2006) proposes a reading of the “living sacrifice” against the Azazel goat of Leviticus 16; this study does not adopt that reading, because the qualifiers ἁγίαν and εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ point to an offering accepted by God rather than one sent away. Studies of the history of interpretation show that the phrase was also read as a contrast between external ritual and the worship of the whole person (Choi, 2024; Summers, 2017). This study adopts the rendering “reasonable worship” in the sense of worship that is fitting for those who understand God’s mercy and engage their minds in obedience. Worship, therefore, is not confined to liturgical events but encompasses the whole of embodied life. This does not diminish corporate worship; rather, the gathered practices of prayer, teaching and the Lord’s Supper become the formative centre from which whole-life worship is sustained, a point that formation theorists rightly stress (Wilhoit, 2008).

Social and Cultural Texture: Resisting Conformity to “This Age” (Romans 12:2a)

The negative command *μὴ συσχηματίζεσθε* is a present imperative whose form may be read as middle (“do not conform yourselves”) or passive (“do not let yourselves be conformed”). Either way, the present tense is consistent with an ongoing pressure rather than a single temptation. The dative phrase *τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ* has an eschatological sense: “this age” is the present order that is passing away in contrast to the age inaugurated in Christ. Accordingly, Wright (2013, p. 567) reads the renewal of the mind as learning to think as people who belong to God’s coming age. This reading is supported by Paul’s two-age language elsewhere: “the wisdom of this age” (1 Cor 2:6–8), “the god of this age” (2 Cor 4:4) and “the present evil age” from which Christ delivers (Gal 1:4; cf. Rastoin, 2025). An older interpretation distinguished sharply between *σχῆμα* (outward, changeable form) and *μορφή* (essential form); while the contrast between the two verbs is real, commentators such as Moo (2018) caution that the distinction should not be pressed as a fixed lexical rule. The point lies in the antithesis of the clauses: one pattern is imposed by the passing age, the other is effected by God.

The social and cultural texture gives this command concrete force. The Roman world was organised around honour, status and patronage, publicly displayed in the sequence of offices (*cursus honorum*) and in the reciprocal obligations of benefaction that Seneca discusses in *De Beneficiis*. Christ-groups, moreover, lived in close urban quarters where their practices were visible to their neighbours (Maier, 2020). Schreiner (2018, p. 633) notes that Paul’s instructions in Romans 12 undermine the pursuit of honour and status, and Jewett (2007) reads the chapter against the competition for honour in the Roman house churches. A recent study of Romans 12:14–15 likewise reads Paul’s instructions on emotional solidarity as a counter-ethic to the emotional norms of imperial society (Seol, 2026). In this setting, “conformity to this age” means allowing the dominant patterns of honour-seeking, status competition and self-assertion to shape the community. Spiritual formation thus includes a critical, counter-cultural dimension: believers remain within society but must not allow its values to define their identity. The letter itself indicates that such tensions were present in the Roman house churches, where disputes between “the strong” and “the weak” (Rom 14:1–15:13) and the variety of social ranks in the greetings of Romans 16 provide the immediate setting for Paul’s call not to be conformed.

Transformation by the Renewal of the Mind (Romans 12:2b)

The positive command *ἀλλὰ μεταμορφοῦσθε* stands in sharp antithesis to the first. The verb *μεταμορφόω* denotes a change of form, not a superficial adjustment; elsewhere in the New Testament it describes the transfiguration of Jesus (Mark 9:2; Matt 17:2) and believers’ transformation into the image of the Lord (2 Cor 3:18). Read as a passive, the verb indicates that God is the agent of transformation, while the imperative calls believers to yield to this work. The present tense is again consistent with an ongoing process.

The dative *τῇ ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοός* identifies the means of transformation. The noun *ἀνακαινώσις* (“renewal”) is rare, occurring elsewhere in the New Testament only in Titus 3:5,

where it is connected with the Holy Spirit. The term νοῦς refers to practical reason and moral consciousness (Moo, 2018, p. 775). Its intertexture within Romans is decisive: in 1:28 humanity, having refused to acknowledge God, was handed over to an ἀδόκιμος νοῦς (a “disqualified mind”). Romans 12:2 reverses this condition: the renewed νοῦς becomes able to δοκιμάζειν. The wordplay between ἀδόκιμος (1:28) and δοκιμάζειν (12:2), noted by several commentators (e.g., Dunn, 1988; Moo, 2018), indicates that spiritual formation involves the healing of the mind that sin had corrupted. Recent readings emphasise that Paul’s view of the mind is integrated with the body rather than opposed to it (Keener, 2022), and that participation in Christ shapes both reasoning and bodily form (Hagerman, 2024). Spiritual formation, therefore, is not anti-intellectual; it is a reorientation of thought, judgement and perception. The cognate verb ἀνακαινόω expresses the same idea of inner renewal in 2 Cor 4:16 (“our inner nature is being renewed day by day”) and Col 3:10 (the new self “being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator”).

A further intertextual link is central to the theology of formation. In Romans 8:29 Paul states that God predestined believers to be συμμόρφους τῆς εἰκόνος τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ (“conformed to the image of his Son”). Romans 12:2 sets two conformities against each other: being shaped by “this age” (συσχηματίζεσθε) and being transformed (μεταμορφοῦσθε) towards the form (μορφή) of Christ. The goal of spiritual formation is therefore not an abstract moral ideal but Christlikeness, the same goal that Chia and Chishi (2023) identify as the criterion for evaluating approaches to formation.

The Spirit as the Agent of Transformation

The passive μεταμορφοῦσθε does not name the agent, but the argument of Romans does. Romans 8 describes the believer’s life as walking “according to the Spirit” (8:4), setting the mind (φρόνημα) on the Spirit (8:5–6), being led by the Spirit as children of God (8:14) and being helped by the Spirit in prayer (8:26–27). In 2 Corinthians 3:18 the same verb μεταμορφόω describes transformation into the Lord’s image “from the Lord, the Spirit”. Read in this canonical and epistolary context, the renewal of the mind in 12:2 is the Spirit’s work in which believers participate. Recent studies of Romans 8 emphasise the Spirit’s role in adoption, prayer and the embodied transformation of believers (Averbeck, 2024; Feng, 2025) and the relation between the divine and human spirits (Kowalski, 2022). Formation literature, likewise, argues that dependence on the Spirit is essential to any account of Christian formation (Macchia, 2020). Spiritual formation in Romans 12:1–2 is therefore pneumatological: it is the Spirit who renews the mind, enables discernment and distributes the gifts by which the community is built (12:6–8).

Discernment as the Outcome of Formation

The articular infinitive εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν ὑμᾶς expresses the purpose or result of transformation. The verb δοκιμάζω means to test, examine and approve after testing (Bauer et al., 2000). Its object is τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, followed by τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ εὐάρεστον καὶ τέλειον.

These adjectives can be read in two ways: (a) as attributive or appositional to τὸ θέλημα (“the will of God, which is good, pleasing and perfect”), or (b) as substantival, in apposition to the indirect question (“what the will of God is, namely what is good, pleasing and perfect”). Because θέλημα is neuter and each adjective carries its own article in the substantival construction, option (b) is grammatically natural, and several commentators prefer it (Dunn, 1988; Moo, 2018). This study adopts (b): discernment is not merely affirming that God’s will is good, but identifying in concrete situations what is good, pleasing and mature. Paul uses the same verb in Phil 1:10 (“to discern what really matters”) and Rom 2:18. Discernment in this sense is neither mystical intuition nor mere information about rules; it is the capacity of a renewed mind to recognise and approve what God wills in particular circumstances. This coheres with Scott’s (2018) reading of λογικὴ λατρεία as worship that involves deliberation, and with ten Klooster’s (2023) study of prudence and moral transformation in Aquinas’s commentary on Romans. Mature spirituality is therefore marked by practical moral judgement. In practice, such discernment is formed both personally and communally: the community is “able to instruct one another” (Rom 15:14) and its members are to think with sober judgement about their place in the body (12:3).

Communal Formation in the Immediate Context (Romans 12:3–21)

The following verses confirm that the renewed mind finds social expression. In 12:3 Paul immediately applies the renewed mind through a fourfold wordplay: μὴ ὑπερφρονεῖν παρ’ ὃ δεῖ φρονεῖν ἀλλὰ φρονεῖν εἰς τὸ σωφρονεῖν (“not to think more highly than one ought to think, but to think with sober judgement”). This repetition of the φρον- root is strong inner-textual evidence that the νοῦς renewed in v. 2 is expressed first in a humble estimate of oneself within the community. In 12:4–8 Paul then describes the community as one body with many members and gifts. Verses 9–21 then describe genuine love, honour given to others, hospitality, solidarity in joy and grief, and non-retaliation. Stewart (2021) reads Romans 12–13 in relation to early Christian moral instruction (the “two ways” tradition), a reading that supports the view that the passage functions formatively for the whole community. Wa Gatumu (2025) relates Romans 12:1–2 to the church’s participation in God’s mission. Thus the plural “bodies” of verse 1 become the one “body in Christ” of verse 5: formation is not a private achievement but takes place in and through the community (Wilhoit, 2008, p. 23). Formation also includes suffering: believers are to be patient in affliction (v. 12), bless persecutors (v. 14) and overcome evil with good (vv. 17–21), so that the community’s response to hostility becomes part of its transformation.

Ideological and Sacred Texture: God, Spirit and Community

The ideological texture of the passage concerns the values it promotes and resists. Against an ideology in which worth is measured by honour, rank and public recognition, Romans 12 promotes an ideology of mercy received and mercy shown: the measure of a person is God’s gift (12:3, 6), and honour is something to be given to others (12:10). The sacred texture presents God as the merciful one whose compassion grounds all obedience (12:1),

whose will is good, pleasing and perfect (12:2), and who, through the Spirit, forms a people in which many bodies become one body in Christ (12:4–5). The passage thus articulates not only an ethic but a theological vision: spiritual formation is the process by which the merciful God, through the Spirit, reshapes human beings and their communities into the likeness of Christ in the midst of the present age.

Synthesis: A Seven-Dimensional Model of Spiritual Formation

The exegetical findings converge in a model of spiritual formation with seven interrelated dimensions, summarised in Table 2. These are not successive stages but simultaneous aspects of one process, although they follow a logical order: grace and the Spirit are its ground and agent; embodiment and the eschatological horizon define its scope; cognition and discernment are its means and outcome; and the community is its context and goal.

Table 3. Dimensions of Spiritual Formation in Romans 12:1–2

Dimension	Textual basis	Exegetical finding	Implication for formation
Grace-grounded	οὖν; διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν (v. 1)	Ethics follows from mercy expounded in Rom 1–11	Formation responds to grace; it does not earn it
Spirit-empowered	μεταμορφοῦσθε (divine passive); Rom 8:4–29; 2 Cor 3:18	The Spirit is the agent of renewal and gifts	Formation depends on the Spirit, not technique
Embodied	παραστῆσαι τὰ σώματα; θυσίαν ζῶσαν (v. 1)	The whole person is offered as continuous worship	Worship includes work, relationships and resources
Eschatological	τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ (v. 2); Rom 8:29	Believers live between this age and the coming age, being conformed to Christ	Formation resists the values of the age and aims at Christlikeness
Cognitive	μεταμορφοῦσθε τῇ ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοός (v. 2)	God renews the mind corrupted in 1:28	Teaching and reflection are essential to formation
Discerning	εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν (v. 2)	Renewal results in testing and approving God's will	Maturity is shown in practical moral judgement
Communal	plural σώματα; vv. 3–21	Renewed thinking produces humility, gifts and love	Formation happens in and through community

This model both confirms and refines existing scholarship. Exegetically, it differs from the commentaries at three points. First, whereas commentators generally treat λογικὴ λατρεία and δοκιμάζειν as separate issues (Dunn, 1988; Moo, 2018; Schreiner, 2018), this study argues, with Scott (2018), that the rational character of worship in v. 1 and the discernment of v. 2 form one

cognitive arc. Second, it highlights the double antithesis of conformity (12:2 against 8:29), which commentaries note but do not develop as a theology of formation. Third, the socio-rhetorical reading connects the passage to the honour culture of the Roman house churches more explicitly than most commentaries (cf. Jewett, 2007). In relation to formation theory, the model confirms Wilhoit's (2008) emphasis on community and the Spirit, while adding an explicitly cognitive and discerning dimension grounded in the renewal of the mind; it confirms Gorman's (2015) participatory and cruciform account, while showing how Romans 12 locates participation in embodied worship and communal humility; and it supplies an exegetical basis for the emphasis on the Spirit in recent formation literature (Macchia, 2020; Wang, 2024). Contextual studies in Ghana, Kenya and Indonesia (Andrean & Ming, 2020; Boaheng, 2023; Wa Gatumu, 2025) can draw on this model as a textual criterion for their applications.

The model also yields concrete criteria for discipleship in African and Asian churches. First, discipleship curricula should integrate teaching that renews the mind with practices of corporate worship and service, rather than separating doctrine from life. Second, leadership formation should evaluate candidates not only by charisma or status but by the humility, service and honour of others that Romans 12:3–10 describes. Third, catechesis should explicitly address the values of the present age that compete for believers' loyalty in their own contexts, such as status, wealth and ethnic identity. Fourth, congregations should cultivate communal discernment, so that decisions are tested together in the light of God's will. These criteria are derived from the exegesis and could be tested in future empirical studies.

CONCLUSION

This study asked how the lexical, syntactic and rhetorical features of Romans 12:1–2, read in its literary and social-cultural context, construct Paul's call for transformative Christian living, and what model of spiritual formation emerges from it. The socio-rhetorical analysis shows that the passage moves from the mercies of God, through the offering of the whole of embodied life as reasonable worship, to ongoing resistance against conformity to the present age and divine transformation by the renewal of the mind, resulting in the discernment of God's good, pleasing and perfect will. The intertexture with Romans 6:13 and 1:28 shows that the offering of the body puts union with Christ into practice and that the renewal of the mind reverses the corruption of the mind in fallen humanity, while the social and cultural texture shows that Paul's call challenged the honour-seeking values of the Roman world.

The main contribution of the study is a seven-dimensional model of spiritual formation – grace-grounded, Spirit-empowered, embodied, eschatological, cognitive, discerning and communal – derived from the socio-rhetorical analysis of the passage and confirmed by its immediate context in Romans 12:3–21. This model integrates themes that previous scholarship has treated separately and offers theological criteria for evaluating discipleship in contemporary churches. The study is limited to two verses and their immediate context and does not attempt a full account of Pauline spirituality; nor does it test the model empirically. Because the model is derived from a single passage, further research should test its categories against other Pauline texts on formation and transformation (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Gal 4:19;

Phil 2:5; 3:10, 21; Col 3:10) and examine how congregations in Africa and Indonesia practise the forms of formation described here.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study did not involve human participants, interviews, surveys or personal data requiring ethical approval.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DECLARATION OF AI USAGE

The author used Claude, an AI assistant (Anthropic), to restructure the manuscript according to the journal template, to revise it in response to peer review, to edit the language and to identify journal literature through Crossref. All exegetical judgements and sources were reviewed, edited and verified by the author, who takes full responsibility for the content of this article.

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