

STUDY 19

The Priestly Service of the Gospel

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One of the characteristic marks of New Testament worship language is the way in which Old Testament worship vocabulary is transformed to apply to relational categories. We can see this pattern in a number of places (e.g. Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 9:12; Phil. 2:17; 4:18; 1 Pet. 2:5; etc.) and we know that it reflects (or, better, shares in) the life of God as seen in the Son (as in Mark 10:35–45; cf. John 13:5; where Jesus' service of the Father is bound up in the serving of his people). In all that Jesus did he glorified the Father's name, and his earthly ministry in all its parts was the manifestation of his love for and adoration of God.

In examples such as those from the Pauline letters mentioned above, we see words and phrases normally associated with the priestly service in the temple and the offerings made there, now applied to the attitudes and actions of New Testament believers. The whole community is shown to be participating in the priestly service of God, in different ways according to their respective gifts and callings, with Christ himself as the High Priest over the household of God, both interceding for them and leading their worship as their head.

I think an argument can be made for seeing a strong thematic link (albeit by way of contrast) between Romans 1:18–32 and Romans 12–15. Paul explains the nature of human sin and rebellion in terms of the exchange of worship, where the Man (the image of God on earth) serves the creature rather than the creator. This reverses the creational order and dehumanises Man, as he degrades himself through the demeaning worship that has now gripped his heart, mind and soul. By the nature of the case, this worship cannot unify humanity or dignify its relationships, for behind it lies the Serpent, who has come to steal, kill and destroy. In all this, humanity is deeply culpable, for he worships that which comes from his own imaginings, and compounds his guilt by suppressing the truth of God. In so doing, he experiences the wrath of God in heart, mind and conscience, as he is given over by God to the things on which he has set his heart in an inescapable reverse exchange. This leads to relational breakdown on every level.

By contrast, a new situation is in view in Romans 12. Here, Paul has declared a new situation in place through the gospel. His pastoral exhortation is 'by the mercies of God'. The construction (*dia* + genitive) normally means 'through', or 'by means of', rather than simply 'in view of'. The latter may encourage mere imitation, whereas the former emphasises actual participation. In other words, the new worship is all in and through mercy, even for its day-to-day operation. In 1 Thessalonians 1:9 Paul speaks of the believers there having 'turned to God from idols'. Such repentance is only possible by the mercy of God. Here, the reversal of the terrible exchange of Romans 1 is likewise

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by the mercies of God. The believers have been united to Christ by grace, and in him received all the blessings (and mercies!) of God. However, their day-to-day life is likewise to be lived in and through the mercies which they have received and in which they now stand. This is not simply ‘good advice’, but the actual *vocation* of the worshipping community.

Thus, as they have been shown mercy in the Son, they are to live in the Son’s mercy with one another. As they have experienced the forgiveness of their sins, they are to forgive as they have been forgiven (i.e. freely!); as they have been loved, so they can now love by the Spirit, who has shed the love of God abroad in their hearts; as they have been served by God in Christ, so they can serve and honour one another in him; and so on! As they thus go on walking in the Spirit the just requirement of the law is fulfilled in them, which eradicates idolatry (for it includes the fulfilment of the first and greatest commandment of all!). In all these ways the redeemed people of God participate in the calling of God for the blessing of the world.

In Romans 15:15–16 Paul defines his apostolic ministry as the priestly service of the gospel so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Spirit. The words he uses are significant: ‘minister’ is not *diakonos* but *leitourgos* which always refers to an especially religious activity in the Old Testament. In the preaching of the gospel he is doing ‘priestly service’ for Jesus Christ. Whether it is his offering the Gentiles to God, the Gentiles’ gift for the Jerusalem church, or both, there is an offering being made and it is sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

In Romans 1:5 and 16:26 Paul speaks of his apostolic commission to bring about the ‘obedience of faith’ among the nations. This phrase may mean a couple of things, both of which are related. In some places we read of the obedience which faith is (e.g. Acts 6:7; cf. 2 Thess. 1:8; Rom. 10:16; etc. The gospel must be obeyed!), while in other places we read of the obedience which flows from faith (e.g. Heb. 11:8; cf. Rom. 6:17). These two cannot be separated. As we believe the gospel we obey, and the obedience we render (e.g. in walking in the good deeds that the Father has prepared beforehand for us to do) is the obedience that flows from faith. Indeed, anything that does not flow from faith is sin.

God’s purpose has always been that the nations would be blessed in Him, in living by faith in His promises. The covenant made with Abraham has the blessing of the nations as its goal, and this is particularly significant when we see where Genesis 12 lies in relation to the primordial history of the nations. God’s response to the nations’ continued rebellion is Abraham! The fulfilment of the covenant promises to him would be at the one time the victory of grace over the rebellion of the nations. They would be rendered docile under the gracious gift of the Seed who would come from Abraham’s line.

In my mind there can be no doubt that Paul saw himself (in his apostolic ministry) as bringing the blessings of Abraham to the nations (see, for example, Gal. 3:14), and that the power to subdue the nations lay in the preaching of the gospel. The verb ‘priestly service’ was used in particular for the presentation or offering of sacrifices. In this unusual choice of language, Paul indicates that the role of Israel among the nations is now expressed in the action of the gospel (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9–10). Thus Romans 15:19, he has ‘fulfilled the gospel’. All of this accords with the command of Matthew 28:18–19 as the fulfilment of the command of Genesis 1:28. By means of the gospel the earth is ‘Edenised’ as the rebellious nations are subdued by grace.