

The Supreme Doxology

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1Ti 1:17) Every song that begins with genuine thanksgiving (1Ti 1:12) must end with praise to God, doxology. Preeminently Paul's parenthesis takes us from the intimately personal God who involves Himself in the salvation of the "chief" of sinners to the transcendent God who fills immensity and eternity. For every preacher whose divine assignment requires that he speak regularly to people about God and His personal involvement in our lives, there is an endless challenge. Do you wholly ignore any personal reference to self and to God's activities in your life? Or do you make God's grace in your life the centerpiece of your preaching? We've seen men who tried both strategies, typically with limited success—and limited benefit to their hearers. How then do you strike the balance? How do you discover when and how to use personal experience to confirm the greater truth of Scripture? When do you leave self out of the formula and focus your hearers' attention on God alone? We celebrate "Amazing Grace" by John Newton, former slave trader, for its high praise to God for surprising and undeserved intervention and salvation. Yet we also acknowledge the Pauline theme, "We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake" (2Co 4:5). This philosophical comment by Paul raises a certain tension in our minds as we reflect on the rare occasions, such as 1Ti 1:12-16 in this chapter, when he uses his past experience to emphasize a greater truth in the gospel that he preaches. When Paul mentions his personal experience, does he violate his allegation that he "preaches not himself"? My answer is no. While Paul occasionally uses his personal experience, especially his exceptional meeting with the risen Christ on the Damascus road, he does not "preach" himself. Rather he illustrates the truth of the doctrine that he preaches through his personal life. His "example" in salvation and faith do not call on us to worship Paul, but underscore the truth that doctrine must connect with life, with our personal life, or it is mere philosophical conjecture. When Paul mentions his personal experience, he never makes Paul the hero. Always his experience becomes the lens by which we see God's grace more clearly. Preaching one's personal experience for the sake of the experience easily slips into superficial emotive fog. On the other hand, never mentioning God's dynamic involvement in our lives leaves us at times cold and wondering; does this whole thing have nothing to do with us as individuals? We celebrate Newton's theme because he uses his personal experience, much like Paul, to exhibit God's "Amazing Grace," not because he makes Newton the hero of the plot. What does this staggering doxology tell us about our God? Let's break it down and look behind it at the God whom Paul praises.

He is eternal. R. Kent Hughes defines this term, "God is the King of all ages who sovereignly governs every age before creation, after creation, to the final age, and on into eternity.^{5[1]}" God transcends time. He is not subject to it or a creature of it. He created it.

He is immortal. Hughes explains this term, "God is not subject to decay or destruction and therefore is in the most absolute sense 'imperishable, incorruptible, and immortal.'" Vine defines the word as "...not liable to corruption or decay, incorruptible (*a*, negative, and *A*, No. 2), is used of (*a*) God, Ro 1:23; 1 (A.V., "immortal")..."^{6[2]} God doesn't grow old or become less God through the passage of time.

He is invisible. The physical eye can't see Him. Later in this letter (6:16) Paul will describe God in similar terms, "Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom *be* honour and power everlasting. Amen."

He is the "only wise God." First and foremost He is the only God. Repeatedly in Scripture God

declares His utter exclusivity as God. There is no other God. Men cannot, and will not become gods. Secondly He is wise. Wisdom is an integral attribute of His Person. He is not a foolish god. Everything He does grows out of His wise character. He cannot and will not deny Himself or His essential character. There is no schizophrenia in God. Having established the supreme character of God, Paul now moves to the only appropriate response. He is to receive honor and glory forever, now and throughout eternity. Paul does not suggest that He is deficient without our praise. Rather he affirms that He shall receive honor and glory without question.

Fee describes 1Ti 1:12-17 as a “diversion” from the problems at Ephesus.^{7[3]} I prefer to view them as altogether an integrated part of Paul’s objective to confront and to correct the problem. Obsession with personal ideas, particularly “myths and endless genealogies,” can only detract from the true gospel’s primary objective, to honor and to glorify God. These teachings detract people from the gospel’s essential purpose. Who is right? Who is wrong? What is the truth? Why is your interpretation different from his? Paul warns us that these false teachings lead to endless questions. Not only do they lead to endless questions about what truth is, they also lead to endless questions about the personalities involved. We live in a dangerous era related to this precise point. In the marketplace of ideas, even the sub-marketplace of Christian ideas, we literally face thousands of different options. Sincere and studious men, even scholars, differ on major theological and textual points. All cannot be right. Many believers become confused and disenchanted, eventually giving up on discovering Biblical truth. They simply replace Scripture with their personal sincerity. Personal opinion becomes the final authority. This option is far more akin to the New Age religion than to Biblical or historical Christianity. “My truth” and “your truth” may be contradictory, but it doesn’t really matter. If not checked, this attitude is frightening for the future of Christianity. No individual believer is capable of comprehending the totality of God. Paul makes that point for us. However, Paul rejoiced—indeed, he worshipped God—precisely because of His transcendence. We should follow Paul’s example. Didn’t he make that point in this context?

I am grateful for a heritage that is fiercely devoted to Biblical supremacy for our source of knowledge and spiritual truth. I am also grateful that my heritage reached outside its walls and celebrated truth, regardless of the denominational affiliation of the writer. My uncle preached in my fellowship for over forty years. When I inherited his library, I was at first somewhat surprised that he had more titles from non-Primitive Baptists than from our own writers. To be sure, he referred to some of these titles to clearly understand error from its source, not secondary sources, but he also had many titles that presented the doctrines of Scripture positively from outside our fellowship. Heaven will not be subdivided into small denominational compartments, as if any particular denomination will think that they are the only people in heaven. The Biblical description of heaven describes a uniform gathering under the throne of the one God Who is “*eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God.*” Paul does not exhort us to praise him forever and ever. He specifically affirms that He shall have honor and glory forever and ever. There is no question or doubt. For Paul, as well as for us, God’s certain honor and glory are specific cause for a doxology that stretches our words and minds. To Him be the glory.

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