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Living in the Peace of God: Perspectives from Romans

MARK LOVE

I thank God for the progress we're making in managing conflict among our churches. A few years ago, the elders for the church I ministered with invited an expert in conflict management to help us learn to deal with the inevitable skirmishes that pop up in congregational life. We learned a great deal. We learned that if you want to have less conflict, you must have more—at least more open conflict with clear lines of communication and “rules of engagement.” We learned that conflict has many levels and that the most significant issues are often unspoken ones beneath the surface. We learned how to deal fairly and effectively with disgruntled members. We learned how personality types influence the way people behave in the midst of conflict. For all of this, I am thankful and I know that this information made our elders better shepherds of the congregation.

Conflict is inevitable in life; therefore, I think it is necessary and invaluable for church leaders to know how to handle conflict effectively. However, there is more to living in the peace of God than learning skills for effective conflict management. There is more, much more, to the notions of peace that accompany the gospel—notions that demand nothing less than a reorientation to life in the salvation offered to us by God. Peacemaking in the Christian community is not so much a discreet set of skills as it is a way of existence. Peacemaking is not something we reserve for those times when members are in conflict. It is a pervasive outlook. Peacemaking is not so much what we think about, but a perspective from which we think.

THE CHALLENGE OF INDIVIDUALISM

Many of our cultural clues leave us with impoverished perspectives that distance us from the peace the gospel would encourage. In our Western, modern culture we are above all individualists who have a hard time thinking in the communal terms necessary for peacemaking to be a pervasive outlook. Our individualism expresses itself unmistakably in our identity as consumers. Our culture teaches us early on that our identity is rooted in what we consume, that we are an extension of our expressed needs, and that goods, products, services, even people and churches exist to serve our expressed needs. That this perspective is pervasive can be seen when church leaders are confronted with disgruntled members, rarely offering anything other than better customer service. “You are dissatisfied with our worship, our children’s ministry, our youth ministry, the preaching? We’ll change. Give us time; we’ll do better.”

That people shop for churches is not a news bulletin. Church growth experts have long tried to con-



vince us that ministry in our consumer culture needs to be savvy about marketing to needs. Given the marketplace of churches, it is extremely difficult for churches to appeal to anything other than needs, knowing that the disgruntled members can simply move down the road to another church. That individualism reigns

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in our culture needs no further evidence than that for many people, there is no rationale for remaining with a church that trumps the dissatisfaction of unmet needs.

An individualistic culture is inherently a culture of conflict. Where private judgment reigns, conflict emerges as a natural byproduct. Most understandings of knowledge since the Enlightenment have assumed that the individual functions as the final, and almost exclusive, arbiter in matters of determining truth. Our tradition arose from this perspective wherein each member was encouraged to go to scripture privately to discover truth apart from the pollutions of history, tra-

dition, or community. Our movement is certainly susceptible to the charge that we have been contentious. While there may be various causes for our propensity for conflict and division, the belief that the individual decides what is right creates a congregational culture of competing perspectives wherein the private opinion of the individual need not, indeed should not, yield for any other perspective. Where private judgment reigns, conflict is inevitable.

Recovering biblical perspectives on the peace of God must come through fresh readings of texts that call into question our cultural assumptions. This essay hopes to provide a fresh reading of Romans that challenges our individualistic cultural assumptions about church in favor of communal understandings. Read from this perspective, Romans paints a vivid picture of what it means to live in the peace of God.

WITH ONE VOICE

Of all the peaks that rise to form the impressive theological landscape of Romans, none is higher than Romans 11:33. Here, the long theological argument of chapters 1–11 builds to a doxological climax. “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” This oft-cited verse punctuates a section of teaching often overlooked because of the myriad of sticky theological issues addressed (chaps. 9–11). How many sermon series from Romans have gone from chapter 8 directly to chapter 12 to avoid these problematic chapters? Yet, while sticky issues do exist in 9–11, the thrust of this section is fairly basic and extremely significant both theologically and pastorally. Romans 9–11 is not a theological digression in the overall argument of Romans. It is the climax of Paul’s theological argument that allows him to turn and address congregational issues in chapters 12–15.

The letter to the Romans is a pastoral letter. While Romans does serve to introduce Paul to Christians he had never met, and while the letter is one of the most detailed and systematic treatment of some issues related to salvation, the letter is not primarily a résumé or treatise on basic doctrine. This letter speaks to real issues faced by the church in Rome.¹ These issues have ethnic roots. That is, they have their source in tensions that existed between Jewish and Gentile Christians.² For Paul, the burden of the gospel is the creation of a new humanity where the wall between Jew and Gentile have been broken down. But the attempt to secure one’s righteousness through keeping the law cannot accomplish this. Only a righteousness that comes by faith in Jesus can bring Jew and Gentile to a common place around the throne of God. The long theological argument of Romans is designed to undercut any arguments for privilege on the basis of ethnicity, whether Jew or Gentile.

If this reading of Romans is accurate, then Paul’s doxology at the end of chapter 11 might model the pastoral intent of the letter. Paul has brought the reader, whether Jew or Gentile, to a place where together

they can offer praise to God. Paul returns to this picture of unified praise in 15:5–6, revealing his pastoral intent:

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may *with one voice glorify* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This portrait of worship directly proceeds what I see to be the pastoral climax of the letter. In verse 7, Paul urges strong and weak Christians to “welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

So, how does 9–11 contribute to Paul’s goal of unified worship? According to Romans, both Jew and Gentile participate in the righteousness of God through faith. While faith provides common access to salvation for both Jew and Gentile, Paul takes great pains to keep the priority of the Jews in view—“to the Jew first...” (cf. 1:16, 2:10, 3:9). The salvation of the Gentiles necessarily travels through the story of Israel. Israel’s election by God is not for her own sake, but for the sake of the nations. The salvation of the Gentiles depends on God’s prior election of Israel.

To Paul’s critics, however, the inclusion of the Gentiles through faith seems to diminish the importance of the law and the priority of Israel in the blessings of God. Though his argument is somewhat complex and convoluted, Paul argues to the contrary, and in 9–11 sees the inclusion of the Gentiles as the very hope for the salvation of his people, the Jews. Just as the Gentiles were saved through the story of the Jews, so now the inclusion of the Gentiles requires that the Jews be saved through the story of the Gentiles (cf. 11:11–32). Mutuality seems to be the point with regard to the doctrine of election. If the defining human characteristic is egocentrism, then it is necessary for a person to be saved through the story of another. In light of this, Paul marvels at God who, in his unfathomable wisdom, has brought both Jew and Gentile to a place of mutual dependence before God.

To live in the experience of salvation offered by God requires a multi-cultural experience. Paul’s understanding of salvation stands against the church growth principle of homogeneity whereby churches are encouraged to “same-ness” for the sake of growth. To choose homogeneity is to live apart from the salvation of God. Paul would shudder at the fact that Sunday worship is the most segregated hour in

America. The experience of our salvation requires a community—a diverse community that calls into question our cherished understandings and markers of identity. Our churches, catering to the marketplace of individual consumers, have left us far from the experience of the peace of God envisioned in our salvation.

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LIVING IN THE PEACE OF GOD

If this reading of Romans is salient, then all the ethical material in 12–15 might very well fall under the heading of peacemaking. This may seem to be a claim that exceeds its reach. For example, the variety of exhortations found in chapter 12 might be classified as paranetic material—a designation of New Testament scholars to indicate a series of exhortations not held together by any apparent theme or structure. Still, reading these exhortations in light of Paul’s concern for mutuality brings a certain coherence to these verses.

In a very insightful study, L. Gregory Jones demonstrates how the Christian commitment to forgiveness calls forth a variety of other commitments. To “embody forgiveness” means to live in practices that create and maintain a community of repentance. Baptism, the Eucharist, confession, prayer, and practices of bless-

ing and healing are necessary for a community to participate in the forgiveness made available by God in Jesus Christ.³ In the same way, I would like to suggest that the experience of the welcome of Jesus Christ envisioned in 15:7 calls forth the various commitments and behaviors described in 12:1ff. Living in the

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peace of God requires more than the skills necessary for dispute resolution. Living in the peace of God requires spiritual practices that draw us to God through the life of others.

Romans 12–15 is a call to become living sacrifices (12:1–2). Sacrifices have no rights. They live for the sake of something other than self-preservation or self-interest. The decision to live as a sacrifice is a decision to live by someone else's mercies—here, the

mercies of God. The posture of living sacrifice is a prerequisite to the renewal of the mind—a renewal required to discern the will of God—and to discern our lives in relation to others.

The call to be a living sacrifice is immediately followed by Paul's appeal "not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned" (12:3). This exhortation may be the most difficult in all of scripture. We are such poor judges of ourselves. It is so difficult to gain perspectives on our lives, to view ourselves apart from our wounds and failings, or our wishes and fantasies. To gain true perspective requires fixed points of reference outside ourselves. We need others, but should also be cautious about their perspectives. These perspectives can be as warped and controlling as our own and lead us into the destructive patterns of codependence. Our community of reference must be one assigned by faith, where people are seen in relation to gifts that God has given for the good of the body of Christ. Though we might define ourselves in many different ways, in Christian community, we define ourselves as people claimed by grace in relation to others.

The seeming shotgun pattern of exhortations that follow in verses 9–21 all call believers into the lives of others. From the call to "love one another with mutual affection," to the admonition not to "be haughty, but associate with the lowly," to the plea not to "repay anyone evil for evil," Paul is urging the Romans to "live peaceably with all."

Living in the peace of God requires more than just skills for conflict resolution. Living in the peace of God requires the development of a pervasive frame of reference—a worldview.

Paul has demonstrated in Romans that neither Jews nor Gentiles are chosen for their own sake. Likewise, in chapters 12–15, he instructs Roman Christians: "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord" (14:7–8). This attitude expresses itself in the dispute between the strong and the weak in mutual forbearance "not to please ourselves. We all must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor" (15:1–2).

The inescapable impression of the ethical exhortations of Romans 12–15 is that the call to live within our salvation is a call to mutual dependence. We are called to God not directly, but through the lives of others, especially those whose lives are different.

CONCLUSION

Often, we live a long way from the kind of salvation described in Romans. For Paul, salvation is never a private affair—something between only God and me. We are saved in and through community wherein we learn that we do not live or die to ourselves. When I hear of churches worshipping in different assemblies as

an accommodation to personal taste and style, I imagine Paul shuddering. The goal of the gospel is to bring diverse people to a place where they can glorify God with one voice. From the perspective of Romans, the power of the gospel unto salvation is best expressed, not in choosing a style of worship that suits the tastes of individual worshippers, but in creating a worship experience that brings together a diverse group of people to praise God with one voice.

Living in the peace of God requires more than just skills for conflict resolution. Living in the peace of God requires the development of a pervasive frame of reference—a worldview. This worldview requires the development of attitudes and practices that move us away from our consumer mentality and into the life of a diverse community. It might be tempting to read the exhortations of Romans 12–15 as a list of things good people do to please God. But this list represents something more and greater. It is an invitation to live within the salvation of God—to live within the peace of God. As we practice hospitality, contribute to the needs of the saints, weep with those who weep, and feed our enemies, we move beyond our limited stories and into the communal story of the grace of God. In these practices, we develop dispositions of peace that not only help us mediate conflict, but also help us foster a community of salvation where the world can see and taste the righteousness of God. O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!

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NOTES

- 1 See James Thompson's excellent essay on developments in Romans scholarship that suggests that recent readings of this letter emphasize Paul's pastoral concerns. "Reading Romans Today," *Leaven* 8/4 (2000): 197–200.
- 2 For an excellent discussion of the ethnic realities Paul confronts in Romans, see James C. Walters, *Ethnic Issues in Paul's Letter to the Romans: Changing Self-Definitions in Earliest Roman Christianity* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1993).
- 3 L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).