

GRATITUDE and MISSION
in the Epistle to the Romans
by Paul S. Minear



The Epistle to the Romans appears to say little about thanksgiving, much less than do Paul's other letters. And in the two passages with which we deal, the presence of *eucharistein* is often overlooked. Attention centers on other concepts, perhaps because we assume that anyone can readily grasp what Paul means by giving thanks. A closer study, however, reveals both how central and how subtle Paul's thought is.

Romans 1:18-24

Let us look , for example, at this passage(near the beginning of the letter). What does the Apostle see as the deepest, most stubborn root of sin, the root from which all sinning springs? What leaves humankind without excuse? How do we all become "fools with darkened minds"? What is it which brings God's wrath against all the ungodliness of men? Why does God give them over to the lusts of

their hearts? How do men suppress the truth? The answer to all these questions is the same. And until we understand the answer, it appears to be both anti-climatic and inadequate: "They did not honor him as God or give thanks to him" (1:21;cf.14.6). It is usual for men to associate ingratitude with a breach of courtesy or simply a lack of good taste. By contrast Paul associates it with its worst fruits, and by implication views it as worse than all those fruits.

This passage, however, does more than accent the dire results of ingratitude. It makes giving thanks to God virtually equivalent to honoring God as God. To give thanks is to glorify God and do all things to his glory (I Cor.10:30f). This presupposes that all things come from God and are intended to move toward him. It is because men are indebted to God for all things that they should give thanks at all times for everything. This is the abiding will of God (see I Thess.5:18; Col.3:17; Eph.5:20). These are the basic assumptions lying behind Paul's words, but their basic thrust is to make clear the fateful and inevitable results of thanklessness: futile thinking, deceived minds, diseased relationships, enslavement to self, and the resulting malice (violence) and covetousness. In an earlier chapter on the logic of the passage (1:18-4:25), we indicated that it was the reality of ingratitude which placed Jews and Gentiles under the same divine judgment.

Romans 14:1-23

It is another passage that we find intimations of the positive power of gratitude. Here again the modern reader easily misses the radical implications, probably because for modern Gentile Christianity the dietary commands of the Torah have lost their crucial significance. In Paul's day observance of those commands had long been regarded as a clear mark of the people of God. It was then a very controversial thing to contend that the act of giving thanks for food had the power to make all foods clean. To Paul this act exerted an even greater power: it destroyed the barrier between Jews and Gentiles, a barrier which otherwise would be insuperable. One man gives thanks and eats; his brother gives thanks and refrains from eating. Their common act of giving thanks not only took precedence over their diverse behavior; it also established a covenant fellowship which transcended deeply imbedded and scripturally-supported walls of division, social, economic and religious.

The key question becomes not 'Shall I defy the Torah by eating proscribed foods or by treating all days alike?' but simply "Do I give thanks to God for this food or this day?". Here Paul had in mind much more than the routine verbal use of a table grace; he was speaking of a pervasive attitude toward every day and everything which that day contains. To give thanks is 'to live to the Lord', accepting from his hand all food and all circumstances. The question of whether we are thankful takes decisive precedence even over the question of whether we live or die. The ground of Christian gratitude is the fact that 'we are the Lord's'. Whatever we do, it is he who remains Lord, and whether or not we acknowledge his possession of us by giving thanks, the fact remains that all things do come from him (see I Cor.3.21-23).

Viewed in these terms gratitude is inseparable from faith. In the light of 1:21 and of chapter 14, we could emend 14:23 to read: "Whatever does not proceed from gratitude is sin". Like faith, gratitude is genuine only as a relation 'between yourself and God' (v.22). It is genuine only if everyone is "fully convinced in his own mind"(vs.5).It respects the fact that God has welcomed those whom we feel bound, even on religious grounds to despise (v.3). It is wholly contradicted by any action which causes 'the ruin of one for whom Christ died'(v.15). Thus can all Christian duties be subsumed under the demand to honour God as God by giving thanks.

The unity of the church can be seen as embodied in the activity of glorifying God with one voice (15:6). **And the mission of the church** can be described as the activity by which His people participate in the multiplication of thanksgiving to the glory of God (2 Cor. 4:15), through enabling others to 'glorify God for His mercy' (15:9).

Romans 1:8-17

We bring our discussion to a close by reiterating two observations. In the first place, the Apostle's sense of debt and his sense of gratitude are not only perfectly compatible but virtually identical. It is not an accident that his assertion of indebtedness to Greeks and barbarians comes within his opening *thanksgiving* (1:8-17). Nor is it a coincidence that his treatment of bitter controversy in chapter 14 should bring into conjunction the activity of thanksgiving and the actuality of mutual indebtedness. In both passages the grateful

acknowledgment of debt to Christ is channeled through the honoring of the debt to the wise and the foolish, the weak and the strong.

In the second place, it is clear that, to Paul, one's status as a debtor is immediately and totally translated into missionary motivation. The mode and motive of giving thanks can be nothing else but a participation in Christ's ministry to the world. And Christ gave to this ministry such a form that indebtedness to him can be honored only by indebtedness to those who do not as yet give thanks to God themselves. As an apostle Paul may have received obligations which could be fulfilled only through his uniquely apostolic work and not by all believers. If so, he was charged as an apostle with persuading all disciples to recognize their own obligation to extend grace 'to more and more people' (2Cor.4:15). His debt was no greater than theirs. Their obligation to serve Christ by serving others was no less inclusive, nor less demanding, than his.

Missionary motivation consequently, is not intrinsically different from the motivation expected of all love-slaves of Christ. Nor can the missionary task be segregated and assigned to a selected few within the church. If there is a difference between the church and the world, it is a difference between those who do and those who do not honor God as God, and this very difference should make those who do give thanks recognize that they are deeply and permanently in debt to the others.

And once we are converted from one side of the line to the other, the change will be most authentically indicated by the emergence of a radically new indebtedness/thankfulness. For we, too, are debtors, "both to the Greeks and barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish". Were our gratitude to God to take the form of recognizing our debt to the world, we would have to draw afresh the line between the church and the world. And with every shift in that line would come a revision in all our thinking concerning what the mission of the church is all about.

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