

EXPLORE



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The Uniqueness of Christian Service

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Serving is not, of course, uniquely Christian. Indeed, the language of service has popped up everywhere in our society. To access the Internet, for example, we must have a network service provider. In business, there is a service sector. We get bills for professional services rendered. In our stores, there is customer service. When the gas gets low in our cars, we head for a service station. In our nation, we have the armed services. Wealthy households pay for domestic service. The rest of us wonder if we can afford lawn service.

So, does any of this help us to understand Christian service? The short answer is “no.”

Christian service is unique for three reasons. First, it is unique in its source. That source is our redemption in Christ. Second, it is unique in its objective, which is to model, as far as is possible, Christ’s kind of servanthood. Third, it is unique in its character, for it is motivated by God’s holy-love. Although these are each important, it is on the third that I must focus here.

First, then, I need to explain what I have in mind by the term holy-love. Second, I will explore its connection to our service.

God’s Holy-love

Light breaks down into its rainbow colors when it passes through a prism. In a similar way, God's love and His holiness are also broken out into different aspects in Scripture. Within His love, for example, we can distinguish mercy, forbearance, kindness, and compassion. And within His holiness, we can see righteousness, faithfulness, justice, judgment, and wrath. God's holy-love is shorthand for His entire character.

What this hyphenated language does is remind us that God's character is whole. The God who "is love" (1 John 4:8) is always, everywhere, and at the same time, the God who is a "consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29) and the One who is "light" (1 John 1:5). When we meet God, we meet Him in the wholeness of His character. His judgment, for example, is always preceded by His patience. It is always shadowed by His mercy. His love, in its bond with what is true and right, always accompanies, is always a part of, His holiness.

We are tempted to want one side of His character without the other. We want His love without His wrath, His compassion without His judgment, His mercy without His righteousness. Indeed, the liberalism that has now brought down the mainline denominations did this. It insisted that Christ's death was only about God's love and never about His wrath. That meant that Christ's death was only an example and never an atonement. The reality, of course, was entirely different. God's love provided in Christ's death what God's holiness required. Thus, Christ's love took Him to the place where He stood in our place of judgment. His death was an atonement, not just an example. We never know God's love except in its union with His holiness.

How This Works Out

Christian service is about how our redemption in Christ comes into flower in this world. It is what puts hands and feet and lips to God's holy-love. Once we had as our life's goal only ourselves. Our self-interest defined our worldview. Now this has changed. Now we are living a new

kind of existence (2 Cor. 5:17). It is not one that is self-focused but one that is God-centered, not one that is self-pleasing but one that is open to others. And it is God's holy-love that motivates this new direction even as it is Christ's death that makes it possible.

We take the gospel to others because, Paul says, "the love of Christ controls us" (2 Cor. 5:14). But that is not our sole motivation. A little earlier he had said, "knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others" (2 Cor. 5:11). In other words, it is God's holy-love that motivates us. It is love that feels the painful breakdown in life that sin has brought. It is holiness that understands how wrong this is. It is love that draws us to the side of another. It is holiness that yearns for the day when the world will be cleansed of all that is dark. And the gospel connects with both of these things. It is a message about deliverance from God's coming judgment, and it is a message about His redemptive love in human life now. This love touches our sin as grace. Love and holiness thus walk hand-in-hand.

There are a thousand ways in which we can serve Christ. Some serve in places of high visibility and others in places of obscurity. It matters not. What matters is that in our service to Christ, another world is seen to be breaking into our everyday life. From this other world come shafts of light, of love in its union with what is holy, love as an expression of what is holy. In this sense, everyone who belongs to Christ is an outpost of eternity in this world. God calls His people so to live, so to serve, that they are themselves the evidence that the age to come is already dawning. That evidence is the presence of holy-love.