

SERVANTHOOD AND MERIT

by RICH LUSK

One major aspect of the current “justification controversy” revolves around Christ’s “merit.” Everyone involved in the discussion agrees that the death of Christ has infinite worth. After all, he was the sinless Son of God who willingly offered himself for the sake of his people. There is nothing deficient in his person or work. He did everything necessary to accomplish our salvation in full.

Some theologians want to refer to this “worth” as “merit,” others object. Why? The term is not a biblical one, but has had a wide currency in historic theology. However, there is no agreed upon definition of merit or system of merit theology. Even in the Reformed tradition, there has been very little detailed study of the concept of merit and very little widespread agreement as to how merit should factor into our exegesis and theologizing.

Those who insist on the term merit usually do so for one key reason. They believe that God originally set up a meritorious covenant with Adam in the Garden of Eden. Adam was to *earn* eternal life for himself through his continued obedience to God. If he passed the test of obedience, he could have rightly demanded a higher level of glorification. There is no grace, or free favor, or gift, involved in the transaction between Adam and God in the beginning. It is a legal matter. Whatever qualifications are brought in to soften the “deservedness” of Adam’s reward, it remains axiomatic that the reward is earned by works, not bestowed as a gift. Indeed, merit’s theological function is to safeguard the legality and justice of the reward Adam would have received if he had been obedient. There are obviously various permutations of this basic model, but this is the gist of it.

Others reject this paradigm, insisting that Adam was already God’s favored son in the Garden. Yes, Adam was supposed to obey perfectly and perpetually, and thereby mature into a more glorious state, but this obedience would not be meritorious in any strict sense.¹ After all, if Adam obeyed, he would need to give God credit, rather than taking credit for himself. An obedient Adam could have claimed a higher level of glorification, but he would do so as a way of claiming a promised inheritance by faith, not using his obedience as leverage to demand

¹ Some merit theologians recognize that *strict* merit between Creator and creature is impossible, so they soften and qualify their notion of merit. But once merit is no longer “strict,” are we really still talking about merit? The more consistent merit theologians insist on a full antithesis between “gift” and “merit.” If Adam’s reward was to be merited, then there is absolutely no sense in which “grace” or “gift” can play a role. I have dealt with the major theological and exegetical problems of “strict” merit theology in other places.

that God glorify him. Adam's obedience would have been yet another gift God piled upon the gifts Adam was originally given at creation. Had Adam matured into eschatological maturity and glory, he would have given God thanks and praise for all eternity.

Most theologians who reject the merit paradigm point out that Adam makes an early transition from one state of glory to a higher state of glory in Genesis 2:21-25. Through a type of death and resurrection experience, Adam is given a perfect mate. He celebrates this new condition with a song – a form of glorified speech. In the same way, presumably, Adam would have passed through another death and resurrection and thus been made fit for access to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil – and the kingly investiture it represented.

Both of these pictures agree that Jesus came as the “second Adam” to do what the first Adam failed to do. But because they view the vocation of the first Adam differently, they inevitably interpret the work of the second Adam differently. In the first picture, Jesus comes to acquire the merit that the first Adam failed to attain. That merit is then transferred to his people by faith. In this way, God's people are made legally right with him. The requirements of the first covenant are satisfied. The merit of Christ acts as leverage to secure God's favor and blessing. In the second picture, the second Adam lives the life of faithfulness God originally required as the “truly human” vocation. He then offers himself unto death, the sinless one for his sinful people, in order to reconcile them to God and secure their adoption into God's family. The issue is not merit, but reconciliation (in all its legal and familial dimensions). The Son came not to acquire merit that could then be transferred from himself to others, but to restore a ruptured relationship by acting as and for his people, doing for them what they should have done but could not do for themselves.² On this model, the fundamental fruit of Christ's work is not a storehouse of merit but restored union and communion with God.

My purpose here is not to examine Genesis 1-3 (or related texts) to see whose view has better exegetical grounding. That has been done more than adequately elsewhere. Rather, I want to look at one particular area of dispute, namely, the Bible's “servant” theme.

Pro-merit theologians stress that a relationship of servanthood implies merit. This link occurs again and again in their writings, but is almost never argued for.

² Even if we were to concede that Jesus in some sense merited God's grace for us, we still have to ask: What merited the sending of Jesus? The merit model ends up with an infinite regress. At some point, we are left with the “groundless mercy of God,” to use Luther's phrase. Merit theologians need to reconsider the doctrine of divine simplicity, over against their dialectical theology.

Anti-merit theologians tend to place the Bible's servant theme within the wider framework of sonship. Servanthood does not imply merit; indeed, it represents a favored position under the rule of a gracious Lord.

Michael Horton is a good example of using the category of "servant" to suggest merit. In his article, "Déjà vu All Over Again" (<http://www.modernreformation.org/default.php?page=articledisplay&var1=ArtRead&var2=204&var3=main>), Horton takes aim at me (among others) for rejecting the "merit paradigm" of classic Reformed theology, as he understands it:

Lusk affirms Jesus' sinlessness, substitutionary atonement, and "the infinite value of his obedience," but denies that his own obedience is in any way a meritorious feat that is then imputed to us. In this system, "the covenant is not intrinsically Trinitarian. Jesus is regarded as a dutiful servant who has to earn favor." (There is a prominent Servant theme in the Old Testament, isn't there?)

It is obvious from this quotation, taken in context, that Horton believes Jesus *was* a "dutiful servant who has to earn favor" from his Father. The parenthetical reference to the "prominent Servant theme" in the Old Testament is used as a quick proof of the meritorious nature of Christ's work. Christ was a servant; therefore, his works accumulated merit. In Horton's view, servanthood and sonship are antithetical; Jesus acts as a servant insofar as he lays aside enjoyment of the relation of sonship. Servants have to earn what they get, whereas sons get free gifts. Jesus came as a servant to merit our salvation. For Horton, to be in a Master/Servant relationship with God is to be in a meritorious "covenant of works."

But does the Old Testament notion of servanthood *really* imply a meritorious relationship? Is servanthood really opposed to sonship? According to Horton, if Jesus is a servant of God, then he stands in a meritorious relationship with God. And so, of course, "services rendered" will constitute merit.

I do not question that Jesus is indeed the unique "Servant of the Lord" promised in the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g., Isa. 40-55). Whatever more proximate fulfillments may be found within the scope of the old covenant, Jesus is ultimate "Servant" who brings this biblical theme to full realization.

But even minimal reflection on the notion of servanthood shows that it actually weighs heavily against merit theology, rather than supporting it. Consider the following:

1. We need to start with the concept of slavery/servanthood itself. In the nature of the case, a servant already owes all his labor to his master. Thus, even when he does all that has been required, he is “unprofitable” (Lk. 17:10).³ A servant, by definition, can never get any leverage (that is, merit) against his master. When he works for his master, he is only doing what he should do; no merit attaches to the work. To put it another way, while servants are supported with sustenance by their masters, they are not given paychecks as such. They cannot, strictly speaking, purchase their freedom with resources that accrue from their labors. Whatever they have is given by their masters, and they owe everything they have to their masters. A master/servant relationship is not intrinsically meritorious. Furthermore, it is obvious from the Torah that Hebrew slave-owners were not to treat their slaves on the basis of merit. This becomes even more evident when Paul addresses the master/slave relationship in his epistles. Faithful masters will remember that they are slaves of the Lord and will treat their own slaves as the Lord treats them (ultimately granting freedom after a seven year maturation period, per Exodus 21:2). This is a relationship characterized by mutual love and respect, not earning favor (or withholding favor until it is earned).

2. If servanthood implies merit, then we must say that *everyone* stands in a meritorious relationship with God. In some sense, all of creation exists as God’s servant. Furthermore, there are a number of figures who are identified as God’s “servants” in the Hebrew Bible, including, Job, Moses, Caleb, Nebuchadnezzar, Isaiah, and others. Prophets and kings are regularly described as the Lord’s servants, as is the nation of Israel as a whole. Even more importantly, in the New Testament, Christians are variously identified as “servants.” Paul calls himself a bondservant. Peter uses the same language to describe the church in 1 Peter 2:16. The apostles are often called “servants of Jesus Christ.” Surely these references to servanthood do not imply a meritorious relationship! Surely they do not imply that believers are in a meritorious “covenant of works”!

3. All of this goes to show that the categories of “servant” and “son” are fully compatible. Indeed, the category of “servanthood” must be squeezed into the broader notion of sonship. Israel’s king, for example, is identified

³ The repudiation of a meritorious theology of servanthood could not be stronger than it is in this text.

as both God's "servant" and as God's "son" with no apparent tension. The same is true of the nation as a whole. More specifically, it becomes evident in the New Testament that servanthood and sonship are not at all incompatible. Indeed, even the word "servant" itself becomes a term of endearment. Thus, Paul can say that Christians are both "free" and "slaves" (e.g., Rom. 6) depending on perspective. "Servanthood" and "sonship" are two perspectives on the identity of the church. Neither implies merit of any kind.⁴

4. On Horton's scheme, services rendered to God must involve merit. But this leads to conclusions that every humble believer must reject. For example, Paul says believers do works of "service" (e.g., Eph. 4:12, Phil. 2:17). Paul describes his own labors in the gospel as "service" (Rom. 15:17). In none of these cases is merit involved; indeed, to link service to merit in these cases would be a blatant and heretical repudiation of the gospel.

If these considerations hold weight, then Horton's appeal to the category of "servant" to establish merit theology (over against myself and others) is clearly misguided. How might Horton respond? Horton might claim that Jesus is the Servant of the Lord in a unique way, and then claim further that an aspect of that uniqueness is the merit basis of the relationship. But the category of "servanthood" as such will not do this work for Horton. He is wrong to imply that it does so with his parenthetical remark in the "Déjà vu" article. He will have to build his case for merit on other grounds. If he wants to prove that Adam had to *earn* God's favor by meritorious works, rather than receive it by means of faithful obedience, he will have to develop a compelling argument from Genesis 1-3 (something he has not done). If he wants to argue that Jesus was a dutiful servant who earned his Father's favor, he will have to do so exegetically, and not by mere assertion.⁵ I am still not convinced this project can be accomplished.⁶

⁴ When Paul describes himself as Jesus' "bondservant" in Romans 1:1, he probably means he is a kind of "home-born slave" per Exodus 21:5-6. This kind of servant stood in an intimate and permanent relationship with his master, almost like an adopted son. He had his ear "circumcised" at the doorpost, recalling the blood put in the same location at Passover, and showing that his ear is open to the word of his lord.

⁵ Horton's appeal to Philippians 2:5-11 in the "Déjà vu" article does not establish this claim, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, e.g., <http://www.trinity-pres.net/essays/opc-report-response.php>. In that text, Paul says the Son assumed the posture of a servant; that is to say, as the Word-made-flesh, he humbled himself in obedience to his Father's assigned vocation and mission, even to the point of death. As a consequence, the Father graced him with the greatest of names (in fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:2). The passage teaches a humiliation-exaltation pattern, but it does not teach a merit theology. Indeed, given the fact that

There is a further issue here, one that takes us up into matters of theology proper. Merit, in the final analysis, is a doctrine-of-God issue. Horton's view assumes a dichotomy between God as Lord (which is a matter of merit and justice) and God as Savior (which is a matter of pure grace and undeserved gift).⁷ But this is a false dichotomy. To be sure, God's various attributes can be distinguished from one another, but Horton's understanding of divine lordship is seriously misguided. To put it bluntly, God is not like Gentile master who lords it over his subjects (Mk. 10:42). Horton ironically depicts God's lordship in way that would legitimate the Gentile style of rule.⁸ He views God as a pagan-style king. In Horton's paradigm, God is a master who treats his slaves (even his own eternal Son!) in a way that he forbids in his own Scriptures.

In truth, the Bible reveals two different modes of lordship and two different modes of servanthood. There is the "Gentile" model, in which fallen humans pervert and twist lordship into a kind of tyranny. Subjects have to earn everything they get. There are no gifts. The ruler is prideful

at least part of Paul's purpose in the text in paranetic/ethical, teaching that Jesus obeyed in order to acquire merit would have disastrous, anti-evangelical consequences. Paul points to Jesus as one who used his power to serve others precisely so that the Philippian Christians will adopt the same mindset (Phil. 2:1-4). They must become servants, just like their Master. If they humble themselves like the Messiah, they will share in Messiah's exaltation. Obviously, there is no room for merit in Paul's teaching here.

⁶ Isn't it obvious from the gospel accounts that the Father and Son are in the closest, most intimate relationship possible in the gospel narratives? Only at the moment of the cry of dereliction (Mt. 27:46) is their fellowship severed in some way, as the Son bears the ultimate curse of sin for his people. But otherwise, the gospels are clear: Throughout his earthly ministry, the Son is not at a distance from the Father, he is not at odds with the Father, he is not trying to earn the Father's affection. He is conscious of his Father's love throughout and even intimates his special relationship with the Father. Yes, he serves his Father – but his Father serves him in return. He is doing what any faithful son would, albeit perfectly – he is fulfilling the will of his Father.

⁷ From another perspective, merit theology creates a dichotomy between God's "soft" attributes (e.g., love) and "hard" attributes (e.g., justice). This is highly problematic. As Cornelius Van Til has shown, God's attributes are not in competition with one another, nor do they limit or counter-balance one another. Rather, each of God's attributes is coterminous with all of his other attributes. Each attribute in some way includes and permeates all the others. The infinity and simplicity of God require us to think of God's attributes in this way; anything else is bound to vitiate the simplicity and unity of God.

⁸ Meredith Kline's work is at the root of this error. Kline argued that God's covenants were patterned after the Ancient Near Eastern suzerain/vassal treaties. Thus, Klineans *explicitly* argue that the Gentile model of lordship is deployed by God. But if this is so, what becomes of Jesus' claim to be a revelation of the Father in earthly ministry (cf. John's gospel)? Jesus most certainly does not relate to his disciples in terms of the Ancient Near Eastern treaty model. But then how can his disciples call him "Lord"? How can his exercise of lordship reveal the Father's if he does not relate to his subjects on the basis of merit?

and haughty, exercising his lordship in terms of his own interests rather than those under his command. The ruler uses his power in a self-serving, self-seeking fashion. In sharp contrast to this is Lordship as defined by the Triune God and revealed in the gospel. In this model, Lordship is exercised precisely in service. Service is God's own manner and mode of life. The persons of the Trinity have existed in mutually service-oriented relationships from all eternity. The gospel of John shows us this, if we read the "economic" relations of the Father, Son, and Spirit revealed there, back into the ontological Trinity.⁹ For example, Jesus comes as a servant of his Father, committed to doing his Father's will. But he also says he learned everything he does from his Father. If Jesus serves, then the Father does too. The Spirit comes to serve as well, by drawing attention away from himself and onto Jesus, who in turn points us back to the Father.

But this life of service is not limited to God's inter-Trinitarian relations. It spills over into God's work of creation. God rules over his creation precisely in serving it. God's sovereignty takes the shape of servanthood. If God ceased serving the creation, holding it together and preserving it, it would cease existing. God's sovereignty is exercised not "over against" his creation, but in providentially caring for and supporting the creation.

Most importantly, God establishes his redemptive kingdom through service. The Father serves his Son by equipping him with the Spirit so the Son can fulfill his mission. The Father serves his chosen people by sending the Son to do for them what they cannot do for themselves. And, of course, the Son becomes glorified Lord precisely by passing through the ultimate path of self-humiliation, dying a cursed death on a tree. He is a king enthroned upon a cross, a king who reigns through sacrificial love.

These two forms of lordship – the perverted lordship exercised by would-be autonomous men, and the sacrificial, servant-oriented lordship demonstrated in God's life and work -- are found contrasted throughout the Bible. For example, the book of Exodus contrasts Israel's plight under Pharaoh's harsh lordship, to the nation's state under the gracious lordship of YHWH after the Passover and Red Sea crossing. At the beginning of the book, the Israelites are abused by a harsh "Gentile" master. By the end of the book, they have been made YHWH's house slaves – an incredible privilege! This latter form of slavery is an entirely different type of servitude! They have moved from Pharaoh's oppressive forced labor, making bricks without straw, to YHWH's sweet covenantal labor,

⁹ See, e.g., Royce Gruenler's fine book on John, *The Trinity in the Fourth Gospel* for a detailed argument.

building a glorious dwelling for the Lord in their midst. They have moved from making a house for Pharaoh's name to making a house for God's name. The former was drudgery, the latter is delight (if their hearts are right).

The contrast between two kinds of lordship is seen elsewhere. Israel's kings were supposed to be humble shepherd-rulers, not Gentile-like tyrants. Biblically speaking, the ultimate act of kingship is for the king to give himself on behalf of the people he rules. The faithful king always uses his power and privileges to serve the good of others, not just for the sake of self-aggrandizement. Israel's history shows good kings who serve others and evil kings who (like Gentile rulers) try to suck up power and glory for themselves at the expense of others.

This reconfigured understanding of lordship also explains why the most basic confession of faith in the New Testament is "Jesus is Lord." This confession of lordship does not focus on Jesus as an autocrat, issuing commands for his subjects to obey. Certainly, it includes lordship in the sense of sovereignty, rule, and command. But just as fundamental, his lordship includes his act of self-giving, sacrificial love on the cross. His lordship is never oppressive, never self-seeking, never characterized by brutality or raw force. Those who first confessed Jesus as Lord found him to be a radically different kind of King than the world had ever known. He established his kingdom though dying for his subjects.

This is also why the New Testament makes it clear that leadership in the new covenant community is to be characterized by humble service. Church officers are to rule as Jesus rules, and as his Father rules, treating those under their care with love, mercy, and grace. They are not to relate to others on the basis of merit or just deserts. They are to put themselves at the disposal of those they rule. In this way, they picture God (and Jesus) for the church as a whole. They pattern their ministry after God himself. When God commands leaders to be humble and sacrificial, he's not asking them to do anything he's not already doing himself. Leaders who lead this way are in a good position to call on their followers to live sacrificially as well.

On Horton's view, Jesus is the dutiful servant who must earn his Father's favor. The Father demands Jesus merit love and blessing. But this means Christians in positions of authority (pastors, statesmen, fathers, etc.) cannot imitate the way God the Father exercises authority. On Horton's view, God demands that his favor be earned. God relates to Jesus on the basis of strict justice; at most Jesus is in a position of neutrality until he has

completed all the work his Father gave him to do. If the Reformed church has by and large adopted Horton's theology of merit, is it any wonder the Reformed church simultaneously faces a crisis of leadership? Perhaps our leaders are becoming like the God they worship, a God of merit, a God of self-serving power, a God who rules like a Gentile king.

Against all of that, we need to remember that Jesus redefined greatness in terms of service, not because service accrues merit, but because service directed towards others is the most God-like activity we can undertake. In union with the Servant of the Lord, let us live as servants of the Lord.