

Paul's Gospel of Divine Self-Sacrifice

In this book, Paul K. Moser explains how self-sacrificial righteousness of a reparative kind is at the heart of Paul's gospel of God. He also shows how divine self-sacrifice authenticates that gospel via human reciprocity toward God in reconciliation. A basis for this reciprocity lies in a teaching of ancient Judaism that humans are to reciprocate toward God for the sake of an interpersonal relationship that is righteous and reconciled through voluntary self-sacrifice to God. Moser demonstrates that Paul's gospel calls for faith, including trust, in God as reciprocity in human self-sacrifice toward God. Although widely neglected by interpreters, this theme brings moral and evidential depth to Paul's good news of reparative redemption from God. Moser's study thus enables a new understanding of some of the controversial matters regarding Paul's message in a way that highlights the coherence and profundity of his message.

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Paul's Gospel of Divine Self-Sacrifice

Righteous Reconciliation in
Reciprocity

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God who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for
all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?

Romans 8:32

Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed.

1 Corinthians 5:7

Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable
to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Romans 12:1

Contents

Preface	<i>page ix</i>
1 Gospel of Righteous Self-Sacrifice	1
Gospel Summary	2
A Righteous God	7
Remedy in Reparative Sacrifice	11
Human Reciprocity in Sacrifice	19
Righteous Agitation in History	32
Thy Kingdom Come	40
2 Faith Grounded in Self-Sacrifice	42
Paul on What Counts	43
Faith and Divine <i>Agapē</i>	50
<i>Agapē</i> and the Law of God	59
Access to God	67
Dying into Faith	73
3 Incarnational Ethics of Self-Sacrifice	80
Upholding the Law	81
Law Incarnate	86
End of Law	92
Lawgiver First	98
Desiderata	103
4 Hope and Fear toward Divine Self-Sacrifice	105
Toward Grounded Hope	106
Down Payment for Hope	113
Variable Hope	117
Hope and Fear	121

viii CONTENTS

	Motivational Fear	126
	Fearing God	131
	Fear, Judgment, and Love	139
5	Responsible Agency toward Divine Self-Sacrifice	151
	Divine Purpose	151
	Grace for Voluntary Faith	155
	Divine Regret	164
	Voluntary Credit in Election	167
	Spirited Life for Co-sacrifice	180
6	Assessing God's Gambit in Self-Sacrifice	184
	God's Gambit in Redemption	184
	Redemptive Interpersonal Knowing	186
	<i>Agapē</i> in Knowing	190
	Righteousness in Spiritual Wisdom	197
	Traditional Natural Theology Omitted	204
	Scandal of Self-Sacrifice	208
	Resurrection through Self-Sacrifice	220
	Select Bibliography	230
	Index	235

Preface

Paul of Tarsus, a Jewish missionary for Jesus as God's Son, offered "good news" to all people, non-Jews and Jews alike. Whatever else he was, he was a man with a message of good news. We cannot adequately understand his good news, however, without sufficient understanding of the moral character of his God behind this good news. In addition, we cannot adequately understand the moral character of his God without due understanding of his God's distinctive character of self-sacrificial righteousness.

This book explains, motivates, and grounds Paul's good news in relation to divine self-sacrifice for humans and human reciprocity toward God in self-sacrifice. It thereby honors the Jewish background to his good news while correcting interpreters' widespread neglect of reciprocal self-sacrifice between God and humans in Paul's thought. In order to capture Paul's understanding of redemption, the book uses an undervalued idea of reparative, or repairing, self-sacrifice, aimed at a reconciled relationship in righteousness. It thus restores a central feature of Paul's thought that has not been adequately developed by scholarly and non-scholarly commentators on Paul.

Divine righteousness, in Paul's perspective, is goal-directed and active, not static or abstract. It actively agitates among humans, through an undeserved divine gift of self-sacrifice and other good interruptions in experience and conscience, to bring reconciliation with God to them. Such self-sacrifice aims, for a reparative purpose, at human reciprocity in sacrifice to God. It seeks to build a righteous community on this basis.

This book explains how reparative self-sacrificial righteousness is at the heart of Paul's gospel of God. It also explains how such sacrifice authenticates that gospel via human reciprocity toward God in reconciliation. We see the beginning of this reciprocity in the

X PREFACE

following divine command from ancient Judaism: “I am the Lord who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 11:45, NRSV). According to this tradition, shared by Paul, humans are to reciprocate toward God for the sake of an interpersonal relationship that is righteous and reconciled through their voluntary self-sacrifice to God.

A key theme of this book is that Paul’s gospel in his undisputed letters calls for faith, including trust, in God as reciprocity in human self-sacrifice toward God. Although widely neglected by Paul’s interpreters, this theme has roots in the Jewish scriptures. It also brings important moral and motivational depth to Paul’s good news of reparative redemption from God. The book’s main topics under this theme are as follows: Gospel of Righteous Self-Sacrifice (Chapter 1); Faith Grounded in Self-Sacrifice (Chapter 2); Incarnational Ethics of Self-Sacrifice (Chapter 3); Hope and Fear toward Divine Self-Sacrifice (Chapter 4); Responsible Agency toward Divine Self-Sacrifice (Chapter 5); and Assessing God’s Gambit in Self-Sacrifice (Chapter 6).

The expected reciprocity toward divine self-sacrifice is not just human imitation of God or Christ. It depends on humans’ experience of God’s redemptive action toward them and on their cooperative reliance on that experience for reciprocating divine self-sacrifice. Righteous self-sacrifice by humans thus includes willing obedience in response to God, that is, giving themselves, including their will, to God in response, against any contrary will. The relevant sacrifice, then, is no matter of mere ritual, external practice, physical suffering, or bodily death.

The book identifies Jesus in Gethsemane as a model of righteous self-sacrifice to God, in keeping with Paul’s focus on such self-giving obedience to God in the willing death of Jesus (Phil. 2:8). Paul drew his notion of reparative self-sacrifice from his experience and his understanding of God’s self-giving love in “the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me [παραδόντος ἑαυτὸν ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ]” (Gal. 2:20, NRSV). The book illuminates this notion from Paul’s understanding of divine self-sacrifice in the Jewish scriptures.

The self-sacrificing power of God, according to Paul, reflects and enacts divine righteousness. This righteousness, complete with distinctive “weapons” for what is good, is powerful toward introducing and sustaining divine goodness in the world, including the redemption of humans. This book explains how such righteousness contributes, in Paul’s thought, to the reparative redemption of humans in divine–human reconciliation through self-sacrifice. It identifies how faith and hope in God, according to Paul, depend on a distinctive kind of reciprocated self-sacrifice. Paul finds a practical pattern in “dying with Christ” into obedient life with God. Such dying includes a responsive repentance in turning from an anti-God will to God in cooperative trust and obedience. The book explains how this theme informs Paul’s ethics, individual and social, and his distinctive approach to the law of God.

The book finds two main themes underlying Paul’s gospel of righteousness: (i) a theme from the book of Isaiah that portrays divine righteousness to include “salvation” and “deliverance” by God for humans (Isa. 46:13; 51:5, 6, 8; 61:8), as well as divine vindication of this righteousness (Isa. 41:2; 61:3, 7; cf. Psalm 24:5) and (ii) a theme, captured in this book’s opening quotations, indicating that redemption by God includes divine self-sacrifice and an expected response in kind from humans. The book also suggests, on the basis of Romans 3:25, that Paul understood divine righteousness itself to include self-sacrifice for the sake of redeemed life with God. The role of divine self-sacrifice coupled with human reciprocity in Paul’s gospel has been inadequately explained by contemporary interpreters. This book corrects that omission by giving due attention to reparative atonement in Paul, courtesy of his Jewish heritage. It thus lets Paul be Paul.

What of the “good news” in Paul’s gospel of righteousness? The book explains how God’s giving up his beloved Son to death in self-sacrifice is, according to Paul, God’s righteous way to disable the powers of sin and death and thereby to offer all people reconciled life with God, in God’s kingdom family. Such life survives the

xii PREFACE

powers of sin and death that hinder divine–human reconciliation. (Paul thinks of sin as stemming from human obstacles to reconciliation to God, particularly from lack of trust and obedience toward God.) People still die on earth, according to Paul, but they can die under the reparative power of the divine self-sacrifice in Christ.

God vindicates Christ and God's people, Paul holds, with a powerful gift of resurrected life that survives sin and death. As a result, people can live under the power of the good news of God, without domination from sin and death. That is, they can live with God in the righteous freedom of reconciliation intended by God, with a benefit of lasting resurrected life. Paul's focus on righteous self-sacrifice, then, is for the sake of resurrection life with God, including in present life with God's family of faith.

The book explains how Paul's good news avoids being a fairy tale, courtesy of its evidential grounding in human experience of God. This experience, being morally robust, is distinctive in being sensitive to the will and values of a person. It arises from the self-presentation of God's moral character of righteous *agapē* to humans, including in conscience. It also seeks human cooperation in righteous self-sacrifice, for the sake of bringing about God's will. The absence of such cooperation thus would make divine self-presentation pointless relative to that goal. This consideration accounts for how the evidence for Paul's good news can be hidden, or veiled, at times from some people but experienced by others. It thus bears on the reality of diverse human responses to his good news.

The book's approach to Paul's gospel, as the center of his thought, enables us to see its evidential and moral resilience. It saves Paul from fideism and dogmatism, and it highlights the evidential and moral depth of his good news. The book thus recommends that we give Paul's message due attention in the light of divine righteousness and its use of reparative self-sacrifice for the sake of divine–human reconciliation. The result promises to be an illuminating interaction with Paul's good news for any people in need of such news.

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