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Advent 4 • Romans 16:25–27 • December 21, 2014

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On the final Sunday of Advent, just a few days before the glorious celebration of Christmas, these three verses at the end of the Epistle to the Romans are full of homiletical possibility. In just a few days, the people of God will join in countless hymns which all use the word “glory” (“Angels from the Realms of Glory,” “Angels We Have Heard on High,” “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” “Joy to the World,” “O Come All Ye Faithful,” and others). A preacher might prepare his people to sing these hymns by unpacking one of the earliest hymns of glory, the “doxology” at the end of Romans.

The words of Romans 16:25–27 read like a hymn and are thought by many scholars to be from the liturgy of the earliest Christians. One scholar points out, “The style of the doxology is elaborate. Three prepositional phrases depend on the infinitive *στηρίξει*; three participles in apposition qualify *μυστηρίου*; two prepositional phrases illuminate *φανερωθέντος* and two amplify *γνωρισθέντος*. There are three indirect objects including one relative. There is one dative of time. *δια* appears twice, *κατα* three times, and *εις* three times. No finite verb is expressed. All of this occurs within just over fifty words.”¹ In addition to the style of language, there is another reason to think of these three verses in their liturgical setting. Martin Franzmann notes in his commentary, “The picture of an early Christian service of worship shimmers through verses 16–20. The assembled congregation has heard Paul’s apostolic Word; the service of the Word is concluded, and the solemn celebration of the Lord’s Supper is about to begin. The church marks and expresses its solidarity in the Lord by the exchange of the holy kiss.”² Our text, then, becomes a hymn sung right before the Lord’s Supper, pointing us to what God has done for us in Christ.

With the Greek text in hand, the preacher will notice that these verses are in brackets. The reason for this is these three verses show up in different places—or not at all—in a variety of manuscripts of Romans. Some versions of Romans have only fourteen chapters and therefore have our pericope following 14:23. Some versions have our pericope at the end of both chapters 14 and 16. Other manuscripts omit the pericope altogether. Of course the Textus Receptus have our pericope as 16:25–27. Though there has been plenty of scholarly discussion in recent years regarding this phenomenon, the Sunday sermon will probably not need to wade into these difficulties. The verses certainly contain plenty of echoes of the main theological emphases of the Epistle to the Romans. Note especially the echoes in the early verses of the first chapter and in 15:1–13. The doxology in 11:36 seems to glorify God for his plan to save all Israel. The doxology in 16:25–27 would then be a counterpart for Gentile salvation.³

While the preacher might utilize a number of different sermon structures, the following main points of the text should come through clearly. God is able to strengthen and establish his people through the Scriptures. Paul drives this point home throughout his epistle from Romans 1:16 to Romans 15:4 and many places in between. God is able to do this because the “prophetic writings” and Paul’s own gospel are all centered in Jesus Christ. He is the mystery which was “kept secret” until that “O Holy Night” in Bethlehem. In Paul’s day, throughout the last two thousand years, and even up to this

very day, God's command is being fulfilled and people are being saved through Christ and through the Scriptures that testify to him. The purpose of the sermon will be to prepare God's people to sing the Gloria with the angels on Christmas Eve!

Ben Haupt

Endnotes

¹ J. K. Elliott, *New Testament Textual Criticism: The Application of Thoroughgoing Principles: Essays on Manuscripts and Textual Variation* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 322.

² Martin Franzmann, *Romans: A Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 277.

³ Larry Hurtado, "The Doxology at the End of Romans," *New Testament Textual Criticism: Its Significance for Exegesis, Essays in Honour of Bruce Metzger* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 198.