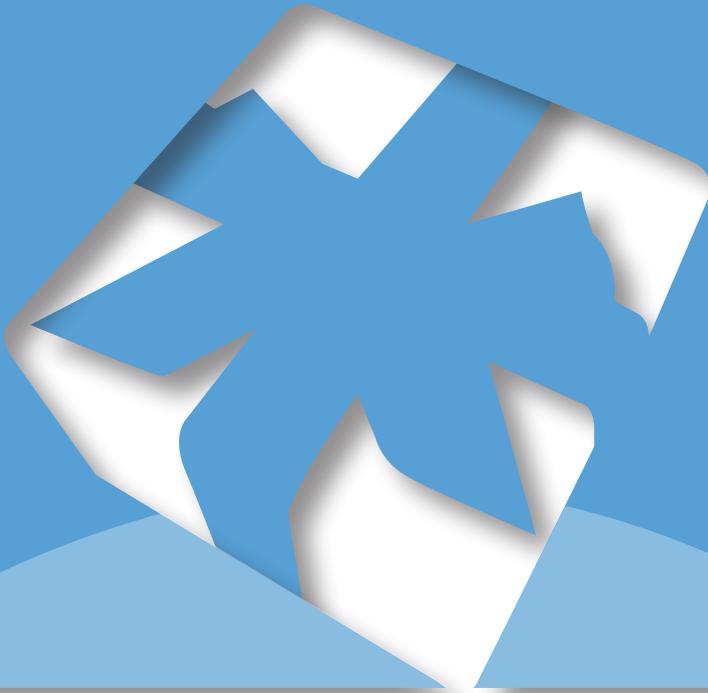


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Paul and the Subversive Power of Grace



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Contents

1	Grace and Gift	3
2	Paul, Grace and the Jewish Tradition	8
3	Galatians and the Gift of Christ	13
4	Romans and God's Creative Gift	17
5	Grace, Mission and the Formation of Innovative Communities ..	21
	Appendix: A Selection of Texts on God's Mercy and Grace.....	25
	Notes	28

To the memory of
Elspeth Kelman and Leith Fisher,
two Glasgow friends from whom I learned
the down-to-earth beauty of gift and grace

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1

Grace and Gift

What Do We Mean by ‘Grace’?

Everyone knows John Newton’s hymn, *Amazing Grace*. It features a motif central to Christian thought from the very beginning, that God’s mercy reaches into human lives to transform them. ‘I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.’ Of the New Testament writers, it is Paul who parades this motif most often and most prominently. All of his letters bear the greeting, ‘Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’ (Rom 1.7; 1 Cor 1.3, etc.), and almost all finish with a grace-blessing (1 Cor 16.23; Gal 6.18 etc). In between Paul frequently highlights the superabundance of God’s grace (Rom 5.12–21) and celebrates ‘the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (2 Cor 8.9).

For Paul, God’s grace is not only bountiful, but also powerful

For Paul, God’s grace is not only bountiful, but also powerful, reshaping the way that believers act. ‘By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary I worked harder than all of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me’ (1 Cor 15.10).¹ It is not easy to unravel here who is the agent. Grace, or I, or rather grace...? Ever since Augustine (AD 354–430), the transformative power of grace has been a central theme in Western theology, although its precise relation to human agency has been much disputed. Protestant Reformers challenged the view of their Catholic contemporaries that God’s grace is an entity ‘infused’ into the heart of Christians, insisting that it is, and always remains, the unmerited divine favour by which they stand before God. Nonetheless, on both sides of this divide, the very personal way that Paul speaks about grace here and elsewhere (Gal 1.15; 2.20) has had a profound effect on Christian spirituality down to this day.

But what do we mean by ‘grace’ and, more particularly, what did Paul mean? Writing in Greek, Paul frequently used the term *charis*, the normal Greek word for a gift, favour or benefit. *Charis* is not a technical term, nor a special theological word, but was in regular, everyday use to describe all kinds of favours, gifts and good turns. In fact, Paul mixes it with other regular words for gift, as when he speaks of God’s ‘indefinable gift’ (2 Cor 9.15). Gifts normally induced the recipient to express gratitude or to give gifts in return, and *charis*

can also mean ‘thanks.’ Thus *charis* operated in a kind of circle, gifts circling back to the giver in one form or another. Not accidentally, the gift-relation was represented in antiquity by the image of the Three Graces, three young women dancing in a ring. *Charis* was translated into Latin as *gratia*, from which we get our English words ‘grace,’ ‘gratuity,’ and ‘gratitude.’ Thus when Paul speaks of the event of Christ as *charis* he describes it with the regular language of ‘favour’ or ‘gift,’ just as he speaks of God giving his Son (Rom 8.32) or of Christ giving himself (Gal 1.4; 2.20). He uses the same term for the generous gift he expects of the Corinthians (2 Cor 8.7).

What Kind of Gift is Grace?

But what kind of gift is grace? Gifts (in the broad sense of benefits, services and favours) were a very common phenomenon in Paul’s world, as they are today. People gave gifts to family and friends, did favours for their neighbours, gave financial benefits to fellow citizens, and gave religious offerings as part of a friendly relationship in which God (or the gods) could be expected to give reciprocal blessings.² Gift-relations ran alongside relationships of commerce and pay, but because they were voluntary, personal and enduring they were the most important means of tying society together, and they permeated nearly every sphere of life. But there are various kinds of gift-relationship: bountiful gifts and stingy gifts; gifts to the deserving and gifts to the undeserving; gifts which expect a return and gifts which (ostensibly) do not. So how should we characterize the gift or grace of God? God can be presumed to give gifts in the most perfect form, but what exactly is that (Jas 1.17)? From the beginning Christian theology has tended to radicalize the notion of God’s grace, to draw out the gift-character of God’s gifts to an end-of-the-line extreme. Grace, we insist, is a ‘free gift’ or a ‘pure gift.’ Salvation is by ‘grace alone’ (in the Reformation slogan, *sola gratia*) and ‘totally gratuitous.’ The grace of God is ‘unconditional,’ ‘unalloyed,’ or ‘unmerited.’ But what do these descriptors mean?

It turns out that one may radicalize (or in literary terms, ‘perfect’) grace in several different ways. When we call grace ‘free,’ does this mean that grace is given without any reference to prior merit, or does it mean that it is given with no strings attached—or both of these things? A lot of Christian disputes down the ages, and still today, revolve around different meanings of ‘grace,’ and it is important to distinguish between them, and to be clear which facet of grace we are talking about. I think there are (at least) six:

- 1 Almost every Christian theologian insists on the *abundance* of grace (that God gives hyper-generously), though not all have agreed that God’s grace in Christ was intended for all people.

- 2 That God gives grace and nothing but grace (what we might call the *singularity* of grace) is a popular way to radicalize grace. Ever since the second-century theologian, Marcion, this has seemed to some to exclude the possibility that God could execute judgment or wrath.
- 3 One may also emphasize the *priority* of grace, that God gives always in advance, before humans give to God. That is a notion allied by some with strong doctrines of predestination.
- 4 Different again is what we might call the *incongruity* of grace, the notion that God gives to the undeserving, without regard to the worth of the recipient. As we shall see, that is a controversial notion both in the ancient world and today.
- 5 Yet another radicalization of grace concerns its *efficacy*, its power not just to enable but to transform, and on some views even to replace, its human recipients as agents.
- 6 Finally, one might claim that the perfect gift is characterized by *non-circularity*—it is given without requiring, or even expecting, a return. The idealization of a unilateral, non-circular gift is, I think, a product of the modern West (with roots in Lutheran theology and Kantian philosophy), but it exercises a powerful hold on Christian theology and on some interpretations of Paul.

So there are at least six different ways in which one can radicalize the notion of grace, because a gift of grace could be considered perfect in each of these forms. The important point is that these are not all the same, and that they do not constitute a package deal. One can radicalize the priority of grace, but not its singularity (Augustine); one can radicalize the efficacy of grace, but not its non-circularity (Calvin). Separating them out in this way allows us to see that many of the disputes about grace through Christian history—and there have been many!—are not about different *degrees of emphasis* on grace but about different forms of radicalization. Augustine did not believe in grace *more* than his theological enemy, Pelagius; he just believed in it differently. Even today, Christians may try to outdo one another in the ways they radicalize grace (we have theological movements labelled ‘hyper-grace’), but it is not necessarily the case that the more forms of radicalization, and the more extreme those radicalizations, the better the theology of grace. We may find some in Paul, but not all. In fact, in the history of Christian theology very few have wanted to tick all six points on our checklist.

How is Grace Subversive?

Gifts are not in themselves subversive. In fact, gifts are normally a way of maintaining the *status quo*, since they usually lubricate established relationships. Christmas gifts between family members, helping out colleagues or friends, awarding prizes or rewards to those who excel—these typically maintain relationships and reinforce an already existing social order. Gifts are only subversive if they are given in certain ways or to certain types of recipient.

Gifts tie the giver to the recipient, and the recipient to the giver. Unless the gift is anonymous (which was rare in the ancient world), the recipient is under some obligation to the giver, at least to be grateful and normally to give something back. Only so will the relationship be continued. In fact, because the chief function of gifts is to create or maintain relationships, the donor is liable to be careful in choosing recipients. Conversely, the recipients, if they have a choice, might be cautious about whose gifts they accept. By giving a gift in the ancient world, you associated yourself with the recipient, and your gift reflected your values. Even today, the charities to which you donate say a lot about yourself, your values, and the things you consider of greatest worth.

It was very common in Paul's world to speak of the worth of the recipient

It was very common in Paul's world to speak of the *worth* of the recipient. Gifts should be given lavishly but discriminately, to fitting or worthy recipients. 'Worth' could be defined in different ways, according to a number of criteria—ethnicity, social status, age, gender, moral virtue, beauty or success. Just as, today, prizes might be awarded on different grounds (for musical, literary, sporting or academic achievement) but keep their value only if they are given discriminately, to people worthy of them, so the *good* gift in antiquity was normally given according to some criterion of worth. And this was true also of the gifts of God (or the gods). God would hardly waste gifts on the unfitting, or confuse the moral or social order by giving to unworthy recipients. It was obvious to ancient philosophers that God's best gifts would be given to those who are free (not slaves), to the educated, the male, the virtuous and the grateful. If you receive a divine gift, it is 'because you are worth it.'

For this reason, the most subversive gift is the gift given *without regard to worth* (what I described above as the fourth possible radicalization of grace, 'incongruity'). If you expect God to give the best gifts to the freeborn adult and educated male, but if you find that, in fact, these gifts are given *both* to the free and to slaves, *both* to adults and to children, *both* to the educated and to the uneducated, *both* to males and to females, your whole notion of worth, and thus your system of social values, is thrown into disarray. It might be thought

exceptionally generous of God that his gifts go, as it were, all the way down these various scales of worth, but this would also make you wonder if God has any standards at all, or if God's scale of values is different from your own. And if you find, in practice, that God has singled out people at the 'bottom' of your system of worth, it undercuts all that you have taken for granted as symbols of value. If the Pope takes time from meeting 'important' people to visit prisoners in a Philadelphia jail (as in September 2015), that challenges your assumptions as to who counts as 'important.' If an Oscar is given to an older actress, common notions of the superiority of youth are undercut. And if a literary prize is given to someone who has written only in Urdu, that overturns widespread assumptions about the cultural superiority of the West.

Note here that the category of 'worth' is wider than simply works (moral achievement), although it can include moral virtue. Worth (or what anthropologists call 'symbolic capital') can be of many different kinds—moral, social, ethnic, financial, gender, physical—all the various ways in which we rank people and place ourselves in comparison with one another. The point is that an important (and especially a divine) gift given *without regard* to one or all of these forms of worth puts into question the whole system of worth by which we judge one another, and thereby scrambles our values and norms. As we shall see, Paul believes that the gift that has determined the history of the world, the gift or grace of Christ, is precisely this form of gift, a gift given without regard to worth.

2

Paul, Grace and the Jewish Tradition

Old and New Perspectives on Paul

What does Paul mean by grace? That question has been central to a number of disputes during the history of Christianity, such as the heated argument between Augustine and Pelagius (fifth century), disputes between the Reformers and their Catholic opponents (sixteenth century), and wrangles within the Protestant tradition between Calvinists (Reformed) and Arminians. Many of these can be clarified (though not resolved!) by distinguishing between the different radicalizations of grace outlined in the previous chapter. One of these disputes, that between Protestants and Catholics, has spawned a tradition in the interpretation of Paul that is sometimes known (among Pauline scholars) as the 'old perspective.' This is a way of figuring Paul's relationship to his Jewish heritage and to his Jewish contemporaries that was dominant in Protestant piety and scholarship from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Its basic assertion is that Paul was unique in grasping the true (or biblical) meaning of grace, and that his fellow Jews (and, after Paul, many Christians) operated with a theology of works righteousness that effaced or distorted the proper meaning of grace. According to this common opinion, Paul believed in salvation by grace, but his contemporary Jews and his Jewish-Christian opponents believed in earning salvation by good works, a form of legalism or self-righteousness that denied or debased grace.

The roots of this reading of Paul go back to Augustine, but it gained particular significance in Luther's polemics against those who thought one could amass merit (for oneself or for others) by good works, donations, pilgrimages, indulgences and the performance of masses. Luther's opponents in fact talked

Good works as a means to salvation was, Luther thought, a devilish deception

a lot about the grace of God, but for Luther any notion that we might give to God in order to merit salvation was a denial of the grace of God. He used Paul's polemics against 'justification through works of the law' to label all those who (in his view) watered down the all-sufficient grace of God as 'works people' (*operarii*), whether they were Jews, Muslims, or Catholics (Gal 2.16). Any religious argument for good works as a necessary means to salvation was, Luther thought, a devilish deception, such that those who seemed, on those terms, the most pious were in fact the furthest from the

gospel. In Luther's terms, salvation is by faith alone, through Christ alone, by grace alone. Luther picked out the *incongruity* of grace as its essential, defining feature and resisted all talk of human merit or worth.

Luther's reading of Paul became part of the lifeblood of the Protestant tradition, and when those in this tradition came to study the Jewish texts of the Second Temple period (roughly 300 BC to AD 100), they regarded any emphasis there on law and works as a sign of a debased religion that had lost the proper (biblical) perspective on grace. Rudolf Bultmann, the most influential New Testament scholar of the twentieth century, merged his Lutheran heritage with his existentialist philosophy to create a powerful version of this old perspective. Up to the 1970s, the dominant view in New Testament scholarship was that Paul's Jewish contemporaries had lost sight of grace under the pressure of their anxious (or arrogant) efforts to make themselves acceptable to God on the basis of their own achievements in obedience to the Law.

A revolution in the interpretation of Paul began to take shape in the wake of the Holocaust, after which any Christian caricature of Judaism was subject to searing critique. Those who knew the rabbinic literature had already raised objections to Protestant descriptions of Judaism as a religion of 'works righteousness,' but it was the work of E P Sanders, published in 1977, which swung New Testament scholarship in a new direction.³ Here Sanders argued that the election of Israel *by grace* was always and everywhere assumed in Jewish texts of this period. Grace came *before* any obedience to the Law (the Jewish Torah). In the Jewish 'pattern of salvation' one 'gets in' by grace and 'stays in' by Law observance. This pattern constitutes what Sanders called 'covenantal nomism,' and since grace (covenant election) was always prior, he insisted that one could dub Judaism, just as much as Christianity, a 'religion of grace.'⁴

On the back of this new perspective on Judaism there emerged a new perspective on Paul. If Paul's polemics concerning works of the Law were not directed against legalism or works righteousness, they must have been directed against something else. But what? E P Sanders, J D G Dunn and N T Wright together shaped the following answer: 'Works of the law' are not good works in general, but those markers (or badges) of Jewish identity that distinguished Jews from non-Jews (Gentiles), practices like male circumcision, Sabbath observance and Jewish food laws.⁵ What Paul opposed, therefore, was not works righteousness but an ethnic restriction of grace, a kind of nationalism that limited salvation to Jews and to converts to the Jewish way of life. It was this narrow definition of the people of God that Paul opposed in the course of his universal Gentile mission, since this gave equal access to Gentiles, without requiring them to become Jews. The

Paul opposed an ethnic restriction of grace that limited salvation to Jews

new perspective noted, of course, that Paul spoke about grace, but this was no longer seen as the central point or radical edge in his theology, because it was not opposed to non-grace. On the subject of grace and works, it was concluded, Paul had nothing distinctive to say.

Paul in the Jewish Debate on Grace

Both the old and new perspectives on Paul have tended to assume that grace is a straightforward concept, and that it is everywhere the same. But if grace can be interpreted and radicalized in different ways (see chapter one, above), it can mean different things. The fact that God's grace is *prior* to human obedience (as in Sanders' pattern of covenantal nomism) does not at all imply that it is *incongruous*, given without regard to worth. God could select recipients of his grace on the basis of their ethnic, social or moral worth (or their potential for moral worth), even if he gives to them before they give anything back to him.

We find in the Judaism of Paul's day a variety of views about how to figure grace

What we find, in fact, in the Judaism of Paul's day is not a single viewpoint but a variety of views, even a debate, about how to figure God's mercy or grace. One reason for this debate is that the biblical material itself can be construed in a variety of forms. There are texts in Deuteronomy which

insist that Israel is not chosen for any righteousness of its own, but these point back to the covenant with Abraham as the root of Israel's election (Deut 7.7; 9.4–5). So the question arises, 'And why did God choose Abraham?' Genesis is not entirely clear on this point. One could take references to Abraham's perfection (Gen 17.1) or his obedience (Gen 22.15–18) as a clue that he was a worthy or fitting recipient of God's covenant grace, just as Noah was apparently rescued for being righteous (Gen 6.7–8) and Sodom would have been saved if more of its inhabitants had been righteous (Genesis 18).

The patriarchal narratives leave gaps and ambiguities concerning the reasons for God's choice of the patriarchs, but Jewish interpreters were under pressure to find some *reason* for God to have chosen Abraham, Isaac (not Ishmael), and Jacob (not Esau). The last thing one wanted was for God's choice to seem arbitrary or unfair. If there is justice in the world, if there is a moral order by which the universe is governed, it is crucial that there is proper recompense of evil, and it is equally important that God's favour is given to those who are worthy of it. This is the structure of thought in *The Wisdom of Solomon*, a Jewish text probably known to Paul, and this line of reasoning is also a strong influence on the Jewish Alexandrian philosopher Philo, a contemporary of Paul's. In one sense, Philo insists, nothing is great or good enough to be worthy of God. But in another sense there must be a rationale for God's decisions of

grace, a proper fit between God's gifts and the worth of the recipients, otherwise God's gifts could hardly be considered good at all.⁶

Not everyone agreed. The hymns found among the Dead Sea Scrolls (known as the *Hodayoth*) are full of praise that God's goodness and mercy have been given to those of *no* material, moral or social worth—a fact that can only be explained by a mysterious divine decision before the creation of the world. In one sophisticated text, which we know as *Fourth Ezra* (written at the end of the first century AD), there is a deep and complex debate between Ezra and the angel Uriel about the grace of God. On the day of judgment, will God exercise mercy on undeserving sinners, or only on the righteous, few as there are? In other words, can God's grace be incongruous (given without regard to worth) or would that be to undercut the justice of the universe? Ezra and Uriel disagree about that, and argue it out at length.

When talking of God, it was common for Jews of Paul's time to talk of the grace of God. But they did not all understand the same thing by that. Sanders was right to say that grace was everywhere in Second Temple Judaism, but he was wrong to imply that grace was everywhere the same. The *priority* of grace (election by grace before obedience to the Law) is not the same as its *incongruity* (grace given without regard to worth). Paul stands in the midst of Jewish debate on this matter. He does not stand for grace against Jews who did not believe in grace. Neither is he saying just the same as every other Jew. As we shall see, the hallmark of his theology is the notion that the grace of God in Christ is given without regard to human criteria of worth. He is not alone in figuring God's grace as given to the unworthy, but this was an unusual and risky position to take, because it raised difficult questions about the justice and order of the cosmos. What is special to Paul is the way he ties *this* configuration of grace to the event of Christ and the way that this theology is correlated with his Gentile mission, in which he insisted that Gentiles did not need to adopt the Jewish criteria of worth in order to be acceptable to God through Christ.

We shall explore this correlation more fully in the next two chapters, but for now we may note how this view of things gets us beyond both old and new perspectives on Paul. Paul did not oppose a graceless religion of works righteousness. Judaism spoke (and speaks) freely and deeply about the grace of God. Paul did not believe in grace *more than* his fellow Jews, but he did believe in it differently, because he experienced in his own life, and in his mission among Gentiles, the incongruous grace of God in Christ. On this view, Paul did have something distinctive and radical to say about grace, but it was not because others did not also believe in grace. The new perspective is right to repudiate old caricatures of Judaism and to resist the notion that Paul was contending against works righteousness. But it is wrong to regard grace as an

uncontroversial topic, and thus to identify the root of Paul's radical practice elsewhere, such as a generalized commitment to universality, inclusion or equality.

We have recovered here the proper insight of Augustine and Luther that Paul is a dangerous thinker in radicalizing the incongruity of grace—but without their conclusion that Judaism was a religion of no grace. We have also incorporated the proper insight of the new perspective that Paul is speaking to and from the particular conditions of his Gentile mission. But we have identified the root of his controversial mission practice to lie in his theology of grace, since it is the incongruity of grace that brings into question not only ethnic and moral criteria of worth (such as Jewish ethnicity and righteousness as defined by the Law) but also *any* preformed criteria of worth which turn out to have been blithely ignored by God's incongruous gift in Christ. Two of Paul's letters make this point particularly clear: Galatians and Romans.

3

Galatians and the Gift of Christ

What is at Stake in Galatians?

Paul writes the Letter to the Galatians in a highly agitated state, because he fears that the future of the congregations he founded is in peril. The presenting issue is the demand by some influential Jewish Christians (possibly visitors from churches in Antioch or even Jerusalem) that the male converts in Galatia should get properly converted and adopt the mark of covenant allegiance, that is, circumcision. This would be a symbolic gesture, but a highly significant one. It would make clear that the new Christian movement, even those parts of it established by Paul, were developments of the Jewish tradition and were to remain within the cultural boundaries of Judaism. It was well known in the ancient world that male circumcision was particularly associated with the Jewish people—it identified a man as a Jew, either by ancestry or by conversion. As far as Paul's opponents were concerned, the Messiah Christ had come to fulfil the covenant with his people. Their mission could include Gentiles in line with the promises to Abraham, but only on the terms of Genesis 17 (male circumcision) and in line with the Torah (the Jewish Law) given through Moses.⁷

Paul had faced this issue before. In Galatians 2 he gives an account of a conference in Jerusalem at which some pressed that male Gentile believers should be circumcised, but it was agreed that this was not necessary in the mission conducted by Paul and Barnabas (Gal 2.1–10). But the question of the cultural identity of the Christian movement was not resolved at a stroke. Paul recounts another controversy, this time in Antioch, in which Peter, under pressure from Jerusalem, withdrew from sharing common meals with Gentile believers unless and until they adopted Jewish food customs (Gal 2.11–14). As Paul puts it, he had been willing for a while to 'live like a Gentile,' but he was now in effect requiring Gentiles to live like Jews—putting them under pressure to adopt Jewish ethnic characteristics in order to be part of the Christian community. As far as Paul was concerned, this was not just a social *faux pas*; it was an outright denial of the good news of Jesus Christ (Gal 2.14).

Requiring Gentiles to live like Jews was an outright denial of the good news of Jesus Christ

Why did Paul think that so much was here at stake? What was it about the good news that was being contradicted by such a policy? The following paragraph (2.15–21) features a contrast between ‘the works of the Law’ (that is, the observance of the Jewish Torah) and ‘faith in Christ’ (that is, the recognition that what God has done in Christ is the definitive saving event). But why cannot these be combined? Why should not everyone express their faith in Christ by observing the Mosaic Law? This paragraph finishes by insisting that full identification with the death and resurrection of Christ constitutes a new person (‘it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me,’ Gal 2.20) and that this requires ‘dying to the Law’ (2.19). This sense of break, or dislocation, is later generalized as being ‘crucified to the world,’ and the world being ‘crucified to me’ (6.15). So what is it about participation in the Christ event that dislocates and relocates the believer, such that the old structures of existence, even the normative structures of the Mosaic Law, are no longer of ultimate authority?

Reconstitution by the Gift Given Irrespective of Worth

We get a clue towards answering our question at the end of the paragraph that draws out the implications of the Antioch dispute (Gal 2.15–21). There Paul says, ‘I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the Law, then Christ died for nothing’ (2.21). There is a similarly weighty reference to grace later in the letter when Paul warns those who want to get circumcised that Christ will be of no benefit to them (5.2): ‘You who want to be justified by the Law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace’ (5.4). Both of these verses identify grace with Christ, since Christ ‘gave himself for our sins’ (1.4) and ‘gave himself for me’ (2.20). But why should this gift (or, for Paul, *the* gift) have such a radical and dislocating effect?

The traditional answer to this question is that the gift is something you simply receive (by faith), while getting circumcised or doing the works of the Law is something you do, an achievement, a way of earning or eliciting the favour of God. But that does not seem to fit. Peter was not pressuring the Gentile believers to do something to earn salvation. He was pressurizing them to live like Jews, to live their Christian lives within a certain cultural frame (2.11–14). They were going to eat, one way or another. The question was whose cultural rules they were going to obey in eating. Similarly, Paul says twice in this letter that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision are worth

The gift of Christ is an incongruous gift, given without regard to worth

anything (5.6; 6.15). He is not against circumcision as something one *does*, but against giving it (or its opposite, being uncircumcised) ultimate cultural value. And here we see the significance of the gift. The gift of Christ is not

just a gift, but an *incongruous gift*, a gift given without regard to worth. And because it corresponds to no previous criteria of worth, it dissolves them all, and therefore resists all attempts to package and confine it within any social, cultural or ethnic system of value.

Paul tells elements of his autobiography in Galatians 1, not to entertain the Galatians but to present himself as a paradigm of the transformative effect of grace. He reminds his Galatian converts that they were ‘called in the grace of Christ’ (1.6) and then tells a narrative about himself, which climaxes in the fact that he, too, was called through God’s grace (1.15). According to this narrative, Paul was an exemplary Jew, full of zeal, a first-class student advanced in Judaism beyond his contemporaries (1.13–14). He was also, in that zeal, a key figure in persecuting the church, fully justified in so doing by ‘the traditions of my ancestors’ (1.14). But then he was encountered by a revelation of Christ, since he was set apart from before his birth and called by grace (1.15–16). That grace was no reward for his excellence in Judaism. In fact, that excellence, he now realized, had led him in entirely the wrong direction. And it was clearly no reward for persecuting the church! The grace of God was given to him, Paul saw, without regard to either his merits or his demerits. God took no account of who he was or what he had done. Neither his ethnic identity nor his moral successes or failures had any bearing on the definitive gift of God. The same logic is crystal clear in Phil 3.2–11, when Paul lists all his attributes of worth (ancestry, cultural excellence and personal achievement), only to count these ‘gains’—these elements of symbolic capital—‘loss’ (worthless) ‘because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord’ (Phil 3.7–8).

This grace propelled Paul into his Gentile mission, and there is good reason why he pursued this in such a controversial manner, insisting that Gentiles did not need to live like Jews when they became members of Christ’s body. Paul understood the Christ gift to be given without regard to worth (Gal 1.15–17). Gentiles had no worth at all in Jewish eyes. They had the wrong ancestry, they were idolaters who did not know or worship the true God, and their morals were abominable (Gal 2.15; 4.10–12). Paul knows all that, but yet experiences the fact that when even this sort of people receive the gift of Christ in faith they are given the Spirit and adopted into God’s family without regard to their previous worthlessness (3.1–5; 4.1–7). So what is God doing here? He is making clear that the gift is not given to fitting or worthy recipients as judged by any previous criteria. In fact, by refusing to follow and thus to confirm these criteria, God is subverting the very criteria by which one might judge worth. It was not because Paul was a good Jew (though he was) that he was called. And Gentiles were called despite the fact that they were not righteous by Jewish standards. Both were

Grace propelled Paul into his Gentile mission

called by an incongruous grace, a gift that failed to match, and therefore to endorse, any such criteria of worth.

In baptism, at the moment when believers put on Christ and enter the body of Christ, these previous hierarchies of worth are rendered insignificant (Gal 3.26–28; Col 2.9–11). In Christ ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal 3.28). These differences are not erased, but they no longer matter, and they can neither divide nor stratify the new Christian community. This enables the good news not only to cross ethnic boundaries, but also to be embedded within different cultures, relativizing each one while refusing to accept any one as the dominant or proper expression of the Christian faith. In other words, grace enables the creation of Paul’s multicultural and cross-cultural churches where worth is no longer defined by cultural standards of ‘decency’ or ‘civilized’ behaviour. It enables—in fact requires—a Christian community not just to *include* both slaves and free people, but to *regard their differences in status as insignificant*, treating them no longer as markers of differential worth. It even enables communities to be, to a large degree, gender blind (see chapter five).

As Galatians indicates, Paul’s gospel drives towards the creation of communities where mutual love and mutual service are enacted in an atmosphere free of the normal hierarchies of worth, and free of the competitive spirit which seeks to prove one’s superiority over another (Gal 5.13–6.10).⁸ Here Paul combats the honour culture prevalent in his Roman social context, since it is not just Jewish norms that the gift subverts, but also the competitive spirit that governed social relation in the Roman world. Because the gift is not given to high achievers on the basis of their success, because it is not given to those of social significance or superior ethnicity on the basis of their status, because it is not given to the wise or the articulate on the basis of their education, all the normal ways in which symbolic capital is acquired and measured in the ancient world are stripped of their significance (1 Cor 1.26–31). Thus the incongruous gift of Christ founds communities whose value systems can be markedly different from those of their surrounding cultures.

4

Romans and God's Creative Gift

The Grammar of Grace

The normal grammar of gifts works by the logic of 'because' or 'therefore.' *Because* Samuel is my nephew, I give him a gift on his birthday. Jennifer got the best marks in her exams; *therefore* she was awarded the top prize. *Because* I rate human welfare high on my scale of values, I donate to a developing-world charity (and not to a sanctuary for abandoned dogs). That is what most people in the ancient world expected (and still expect) of the gifts of God. *Because* people are good, pious and generous, God will reward them with blessings or gifts, in this life or the next. Everyone gets their just deserts. This is not a mentality of works righteousness. It is simply how gifts normally and properly work. In fact, for God to act otherwise would not only seem bizarre, but would threaten the moral and social stability of the cosmos. If God gives to the *unrighteous*, has not the world become utterly chaotic?

Paul's Letter to the Romans sets out, on a large scale, the scheme by which God has given his definitive gift (the gift of Christ), and its grammar is shockingly different. The grammatical structure here is not 'because' but 'despite,' not 'therefore' but 'nonetheless.' In the opening chapters Paul paints a picture of the human condition as deeply and universally infected by sin, marked by a wilful refusal to honour God and a relentless habit of egotistical behaviour. There were other Jews of Paul's time nearly equally pessimistic about the human condition (for instance, the author of Fourth Ezra), but they generally found some small proportion of humanity, some fragments of gold in the worthless dirt, who could count as righteous and therefore worthy of God's gifts. Paul finds none (Rom 3.10–18). Even those who bear the covenant sign (circumcision) and who possess the Mosaic Law are as vulnerable to the power of sin as others, and God's justice allows no favouritism (Rom 2.1–29). *Nonetheless*, God has acted in Christ, in a definitive gift that gives worth to the worthless, through the death of Christ (Rom 3.21–26). The divine gift in Christ has a peculiar and distinctive shape. It shows no match with the condition of its recipients. On the contrary, it creates something worthy and magnificent out of this worthless material. As Luther would say, 'The love of God does not *find* but *create* that which is pleasing to him.'⁹

The divine gift in Christ shows no match with the condition of its recipients

This grammar is crystal clear in the summary statements about the good news in Rom 5.1–11 and in Paul’s large-scale survey of its effects (Rom 5.12–21). It is rare, he points out, for anyone to die for another, although perhaps one might give one’s life for the sake of a good person (that would be a fitting gift Rom 5.7). But God shows the distinctive character of his love in that ‘*While we were still sinners* Christ died for us’ (Rom 5.8). Other terms to describe this mismatch are equally applicable: we were ungodly, weak, and enemies of God (Rom 5.6–10). This gift operates despite and not because. It accords with no reasonable expectation, and fits no normal systems of worth. On the contrary, it operates when everything looks hopeless, dysfunctional and doomed.

Across the largest canvas, Paul traces the human momentum of sin that moves inexorably from sin to death, from transgression to condemnation, a movement not halted but in fact exacerbated by the arrival of the Mosaic Law (Rom 5.12–21). The only thing that can not only halt but actually reverse this movement is a gift, and not just any gift, but the incongruous gift of Christ.

If the many died through the one man’s [Adam’s] trespass, much more surely have the grace of God, and the free gift in the grace of the one man Jesus Christ abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. (Rom 5.15–16)

Even if we do not share Paul’s assumption that there was a single historical Adam, we can see the surprise he announces here. If condemnation follows one sin, what will follow many sins? Surely more condemnation. Only an unconditioned gift, a gift that disregards the wholly unworthy condition of its recipients, could bring anything other than condemnation. Such a gift in Christ creates new creatures, believers joined to Christ, who are worthy to be considered righteous. This is an event so surprising, and so counter-intuitive on the ancient scene, that Paul has to guard at once against the notion that this is a recipe for moral chaos: if sin increased and grace increased even more to overcome it, does this mean that sin is (absurdly) a good thing (Rom 6.1–2; cf 3.7–8)? Paul will counter that conclusion (see below), but the fact that he even asks it shows how counter-intuitive is this extraordinary story of the incongruous gift of Christ.

The Grace-Shaped Story of Israel

One of the special contributions of Romans is to show how this grammar of grace has governed the story of Israel from the very beginning, is operative in it even now in Paul’s present, and can be relied upon to continue right through

to its conclusion. In Romans 4 Paul, like many of his Jewish contemporaries, goes back to Abraham, at the very start of the covenant story, to find out the character of the whole. But what he finds there is a story shape very different from the readings given by most of his contemporaries. The key moment for Paul is not Abraham's migration from Haran, nor the covenant of circumcision, nor even his obedient offering of Isaac. *The* moment that defines the shape of the Abrahamic story is when God makes an impossible promise (that Abraham and his barren wife, Sarah, will have a son of their own, through whom the covenant promises will proceed) and 'Abraham believed God and he reckoned it to him as righteousness' (Gen 15.6—cited and echoed throughout Romans 4). This reckoning might sound like a kind of wage, but it was not; it was a gift, and what is more an incongruous gift, evoking Abraham's trust that God does the illegal and impossible and 'justifies the ungodly' (Rom 4.4–5). This is faith in the God who 'gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist'—a miraculous life-giving that works 'despite' and 'nonetheless' (Rom 4.17). Because that is the shape of Abraham's faith, the promises made to him apply also to Gentiles, who have neither ethnic worth nor the covenant sign of circumcision to make them fitting recipients of such gifts. They also are included 'despite' and not 'because.' This is the character of the powerful gift that brought Isaac to birth and started the covenant people, and this, says Paul, is the same God and the same shape of gift that operates among all, both Jew and Gentile, at the definitive moment of gift in Christ (Rom 4.19–25).

This is the shape of the whole story of Israel, as Paul traces it through Romans 9–11. As is now widely recognized, these chapters are not peripheral but integral to the dynamic of Romans, because they show how what has happened in Christ is the centre of a larger narrative that can be traced right through the story of Israel (that is, the story of the Bible). This is not the place to trace the intricate line of Paul's reasoning, but what is clear is that Israel was constituted by divine mercy or grace (Rom 9.6–29), that the Christ event demonstrates the wealth of that mercy to Jew and Gentile alike (9.30—10.21), and it is on the basis of that mercy (the root that sustains the 'olive tree' of 11.17–24) that Paul has hope for Israel's future (11.1–32).¹⁰ The *leitmotiv* of this story is made explicit at the end: 'God has consigned all people to disobedience in order that he may have mercy on all' (11.32). Here again is the unmerited gift, the characteristic shape of all Paul's narratives of salvation.

What does this mean for those who belong to Christ? It means that their life in Christ, the new identity they have been given since baptism, is an unmerited gift. Whatever else one may say about them in terms of their ethnicity, status, gender or age, the core of their identity is that they are products of an unconditioned gift, who now live out of the resurrection life of Christ, medi-

ated through the Spirit. The gift is *unconditioned* but not *unconditional*, if the latter means 'expecting nothing in return.' The new life of Christ is to be put to work in the body, mortal as it is, in the gratitude and self-giving that are the proper response to the gift (Rom 6.1–13; 12.1–2). As Paul says, believers are 'under grace,' not free agents to do what they wish, but brought into line with the dynamic of God's self-giving which affects every dimension of their individual and social lives (Rom 6.14). As in all his letters, Paul's theology of grace drives towards the creation of *communities* (Romans 12–15), where the individuated gifts of God lead to mutual benefit and mutual formation, despite lasting cultural differences (Romans 14). But that is the subject of our final chapter.

Grace, Mission and the Formation of Innovative Communities

5

Pauline Churches as Mission Experiments

‘Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.’ John Newton was in tune with Paul in discerning the character of grace as an *unconditioned gift*, a gift given without regard to worth, even to those who feel themselves to be wretched. It is characteristic of Protestant theology that this is understood primarily in relation to individuals, who feels themselves undeservedly forgiven, affirmed and released from sin and guilt. As we have seen, Paul himself can speak in personal terms, but the Pauline vision is also social and communal, and his theology of grace is primarily targeted at the formation of innovative assemblies (Gal 2.20). All his letters are written to groups of believers, and even the very personal Letter to Philemon is about the integration of an individual into a community of faith. As we have seen (chapter three), grace dissolves former criteria of worth, making it possible for Jews and non-Jews to meet and eat together without one side feeling superior to the other, and without either party needing to impose its own cultural habits on the other. This cultural diversity is not a regrettable feature of church life. In many ways it is necessary in order to help all parties relativize their own traditions, recognizing that others can serve their common Lord in ways very different from their own. Christ has welcomed them all irrespective of their variant cultural traditions (Rom 14.1–11). Thus Paul can create communities no longer defined by ethnicity. Ethnic identities are not erased, but they are not determinative. They are always subordinate to a superior allegiance to Christ, and can be strategically adopted or discarded as the needs of the gospel demand (1 Cor 9.19–23).

Ethnic identities are always subordinate to a superior allegiance to Christ

Does this apply to other aspects of worth as well? Paul delights in noting that those called by God in Corinth are not the educated, well-born and socially powerful: they are mostly insignificant inhabitants of the city, whose only ground of pride (their symbolic capital) is who they have become through Christ (1 Cor 1.26–31). Because all believers derive their value from their relationship to Christ, slaves can be honoured as freedmen of Christ, and Christians who are free can count themselves slaves of Christ (1 Cor 7.17–24). This is not a charter for the emancipation of slaves (which on a global scale was unimaginable in

Paul's day), but it does mean that slave Christians and free Christians regard each other very differently, as siblings in Christ (Phile 16). Moreover, Paul's expectations of mutual support among siblings will outlaw the disdain and brutality that accompanied slavery in antiquity, since slaves are no longer a nothing but an equal somebody in Christ. And what of the ways in which women were routinely regarded as inferior in antiquity, with physical, moral and mental weaknesses that meant they could never rise to the status of men? There are passages in the Pauline corpus that look like they mirror some of these assumptions (1 Cor 14.33–36; 1Tim 2.8–13), though there are valid questions about their interpretation and whether those passages derive from Paul himself. Elsewhere, Paul gives remarkable prominence to women, who act as co-workers, deacons and even apostles (Romans 16), and he expects women to have the authority to pray and prophesy (that is, speak from God to the church) just as do men (1 Cor 11.2–16). Generally his instructions to his churches are gender blind and there is no reason why women should not be among the 'spiritual people' who correct and encourage other members of the community (Gal 6.1–2). Did God give the Spirit on the basis of gender, and does the fruit of the Spirit grow better on a male tree? The idea is absurd because (unlike most philosophers of his day) Paul does not think that gender differentials have anything to do with the way that God distributes his gifts.

Grace, as an incongruous gift, thus *negatively* subverts previous taken-for-granted systems of worth, and *positively* propels believers into systems of gift and generosity. This 'paying it forward' has a wide reach, including people at a distance and of a sort with whom they would normally have nothing to do (2 Corinthians 8–9). This is a mission theology, hammered out in and for a movement which is continually crossing boundaries, and drawing people into a new world of values and norms strongly at odds with their previous social assumptions. It is socially creative because it breaks out of previous hierarchical notions of value, so that people can relate to each other in new terms, not limited by the normal rules of social interaction that are governed by their ethnicity, their social level or their gender. Even (shockingly for the ancient world) the *unmarried* have an honoured place in these communities, because everyone's primary identity is determined by their calling in grace and their allegiance to Christ (1 Corinthians 7).

And the Church Today?

Strangely enough, all this sounds very relevant for the church today. The world church is learning what it means to live together in common allegiance to Christ even with radically different cultural perspectives, resisting attempts to impose a single cultural identity on all. If Peter was wrong, in gospel terms, to pressurize Gentiles to live like Jews, there can also be no superior Western

(or Anglophone) standard to which other churches are expected to comply (Gal 2.11–14). As in Antioch, this is not a matter of church politics. This is about allowing the gift to dissolve our cultural assumptions, in recognition that God’s grace operates in ways that bypass and disregard our expectations of the proper ways for God to give gifts. Some of the most creative churches today are multicultural churches, where learning to live with difference is an excellent way for all to discover their core identity in Christ. Mission—the crossing of ethnic, social and class boundaries with the good news—is now an urgent priority for all churches everywhere, but its demands are high, as it requires us, as it required Paul’s churches, to let go of our cherished assumptions about what it means to be God’s people. And it will frequently require us to live at odds with the social and cultural norms of our society, which no longer possess their former authority, since they have been bypassed by the gift.

If it is well grounded, mission drives us back again and again to the gift—to the life, death and resurrection of Christ given to us without regard to our human worth, positive or negative. In holy communion we are drawn back to this central gift that defines who we are, and renders the ratings that others give us, whether positive or negative, of wholly secondary importance. And if we are loved because of God’s unconditioned love (and for no other reason), we can let go of our human accomplishments or failures, we can disregard whether we are humanly honoured or disdained, and we can admit our human vulnerabilities and faults, without being humiliated. At a time when so many lack any sort of community that will grant them an unconditioned welcome, when social media plunges many people daily into crises of self-doubt, when rates of depression, self-harm, and low self-worth have risen alarmingly among the younger generation, when our culture sets crushingly high standards of beauty and success, the news of the gift given without regard to worth is good news indeed.

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Appendix: A Selection of Texts on God's Mercy and Grace

Wisdom of Solomon (First Century AD)

When the nations in wicked agreement had been put to confusion, Wisdom recognized the righteous man [Abraham] and preserved him blameless before God and kept him strong in the face of his compassion for his child...A holy people and blameless race Wisdom delivered from a nation of oppressors. She entered the soul of a servant of the Lord, and withstood dread kings with wonders and signs. She gave to holy people the reward of their labours; she guided them along a marvelous way, and became a shelter to them by day, and a starry flame through the night. (10.5, 15–17)

Philo of Alexandria (First Century AD)

These are the rewards of good people who fulfil the law by their actions, blessings which it says will be completed by the grace of the gift-loving God, who dignifies and rewards what is excellent because of its likeness to himself. (*On Rewards and Punishments*, 126)

4 Ezra (c100 AD)

I (Ezra) answered and said: 'I know that the Most High is now called merciful, because he has mercy on those who have not come into the world; and gracious, because he is gracious to those who turn in repentance to his law; and patient, because he shows patience to those who have sinned, since they are his own creatures; and bountiful, because he would rather give than take away; and abundant in compassion...; and he is called the giver, because if he did not give out of his goodness so that those who have committed iniquities might be relieved of them, not one ten thousandth of humankind could have life; and the judge, because if he did not pardon those who were created by his word and blot out the multitude of their sins, there would probably be left very few of the innumerable multitude.'

He (Uriel) answered me and said, 'The Most High made this world for the sake of many, but the world to come for the sake of only a few. But I tell you a parable, Ezra. Just as when you ask the earth, it will tell you that it provides a large amount of clay from which earthenware is made, but only a little dust from which gold comes, so is the course

of the present world. Many have been created, but only a few shall be saved...For indeed, I will not concern myself about the fashioning of those who have sinned, or about their death, their judgment or their destruction, but I will rejoice over the creation of the righteous, over their pilgrimage also, and their salvation and their receiving their reward.' (7.132–8.4; 8. 38–39)

Qumran Hymns (First Century BC)

I thank you, God, that you have acted wonderfully with dust, and with a creature of clay you have worked so powerfully. What am I that you have instructed me in your secret counsel of your truth...? I know that your command is truth, that in your hand is righteousness, in your thoughts all knowledge, in your strength all power, and that all glory is with you. In your anger are all punishing judgments, but in your goodness is abundant forgiveness, and your compassion is for all the children of your good favour. For you have made known to them the secret counsel of your truth and given them insight into your wonderful mysteries. For the sake of your glory you have purified a mortal from sin so that he may sanctify himself for you from all impure abominations and from faithless guilt, so that he may be united with the children of your truth and in the lot with your holy ones, so that a corpse-infesting maggot may be raised up from the dust to the council of your truth... (*Hodayoth Column* 19.6–17)

Paul's Letter to the Galatians

Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised Christ will be of no benefit to you. Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire Law. You who want to be justified by the Law have cut yourselves off from Christ, you have fallen from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision; the only thing that counts is faith working through love. (5.2–6)

Paul's Letter to the Romans

What then are we to say was found by Abraham our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about. But not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed in God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness' [Gen 15.6]. Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him

who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness irrespective of works: 'Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered, blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin' [Ps 32.1-2]. (4.1-8)

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. (5.6-10)

Notes

- 1 All citations are from the NRSV, unless otherwise indicated.
- 2 For detail on this, and for a fuller statement of all the key themes in this booklet, see John M G Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).
- 3 E P Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1977). See the Grove booklet by M B Thompson on *The New Perspective on Paul* (Grove Biblical booklet B26).
- 4 Sanders identified the common ‘pattern’ or ‘structure’ of religion among Paul’s contemporaries as the combination of: a) God’s election of Israel and promise to maintain that election (‘covenant’), with b) the gift of the Law and the requirement to obey it (‘nomism’). God punishes transgression, but atonement provides the means to maintain or re-establish the covenantal relationship. See Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, pp 236–237, 422.
- 5 See, for example, E P Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (London: SCM Press, 1983); J D G Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005); N T Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives* (London: SPCK, 2005).
- 6 See further Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, chapters 5 and 6. On *Wisdom of Solomon* see J Linebaugh, *God, Grace and Righteousness in Wisdom of Solomon and Paul’s Letter to the Romans: Texts in Conversation* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).
- 7 This is the majority view among New Testament scholars; see J M G Barclay, *Obedying the Truth: A Study of Paul’s Ethics in Galatians* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1988). One of the best recent commentaries on Galatians is J L Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).
- 8 See Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, chapter 14. On the Roman spirit of competition, see C Barton, *Roman Honor: The Fire in the Bones* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
- 9 Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, Thesis 28.
- 10 See Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, chapter 17. This reading stands in contrast with that of N T Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (London: SPCK, 2013).

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