Paradox and Paul

Catholic and Protestant Theologies of Grace

Abstract

John Barclay offers a capacious and helpful framework for reflection on large swathes of the history of the theology of grace with his notion of the six ways of 'perfecting the gift'. In this essay, I extend his analysis to a consideraton of certain typical differences between Catholic and Protestant conceptions of grace. Where Protestant theology tends toward a juxtaposition of grace with sin, Catholic theology often considers grace in relation to nature, and each side, I suggest, has its own characteristic proclivity towards paradox.

At the heart of John Barclay's *Paul and the Gift*, or somewhere near its heart, is a fresh and interesting framework for thinking about grace.[1] John suggests, drawing on a distinctive concept of perfection from Kenneth Burke, that there are six ways of 'perfecting the gift'. What distinguishes a perfect gift, a gift which is as much gift as it could possibly be, from other humdrum and ordinary sorts of gift? When God is the giver, for instance, is there something about the gift which is absolute and unrivalled? The key point is that there is not one way to answer such questions, but a number: the concept of gift can be 'perfected,' taken to an extreme, along different lines, and in different directions. Barclay proposes, in particular, the possible perfections of superabundance, singularity, priority, incongruity, efficacy and non-circularity.

One very obvious function this framework of perfections fulfils in the book is to provide an elegant way to move beyond Sanders, a way to acknowledge the partial truth of the 'new perspective' and at the same time encourage us in no uncertain terms to leave this perspective behind. It is true that the Judaism of Paul's time was a religion of grace, and so it is true that Paul does not stand out as someone who was *more* concerned with grace than his contemporaries. But because Sanders presumed he already knew what an emphasis on grace meant, he didn't pay enough attention to the various and quite different ways in which grace was 'perfected' in the writings of Paul's contemporaries, and therefore was unable to see distinctiveness of Paul's own particular way of 'perfecting' grace.

It is not only Sanders that Barclay is concerned to move beyond. Derrida and his peculiarly modern notion of pure gift is another thing from which we need to free ourselves,

[1] John Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2015).

and here the framework of the perfections is also helpful. Within the book, Derrida's position has in fact begun to look very shaky on historical and anthropological grounds before the taxonomy of perfections is introduced, but the latter allows for a succinct articulation of the issue: Derrida seems to radicalise the concept of gift, but in fact he is not radicalising it in a general or self-evident way, but radicalising in one particular direction, according to one particular 'perfection,' -- according to a 'perfection', indeed, which has in many contexts not been thought to have too much to do with gift-giving at all.

In my judgement, even if we set aside worries about both Sanders or Derrida—even if we step away from the particular polemical context of this book-- the framework, John's taxonomy of 'perfections' of gift, stands as a powerful , important and fresh tool for thinking about the theology of grace. One can imagine that when the New Perspective is so old that few are talking about it, and when no one is any longer worked up about Derrida's pure gift, John's six perfections of grace will still be making an appearance in theological literature in some form or other—perhaps with heated discussion of whether there are truly only six, or rather seven or eight.

I anticipate this longevity because the taxonomy of perfections offers an unusually helpful and capacious way of understanding, and comparing, different theological positions, both historical and contemporary: this is very clear from chapter 3, which takes us on a magisterial tour of interpreters of Paul on grace from Marcion through Barth and beyond. It is a rather Protestant tour, of course, jumping straight from Augustine to Luther and staying firmly Protestant thereafter, except for the inclusion of Alain Badiou, an atheist Maoist. This ought not be held against the book, in my opinion, but I would nevertheless like in this essay to take up a broad question about the relationship between certain typically Protestant and typically Catholic ways of thinking about grace. Using his framework of perfections, John has mapped out, and helped us to think comparatively about, a quite significant swathe of the history of theology. What happens if we try to extend the comparative thinking to include an account of Protestant/Catholic differences?

To do so I think it is best to begin by stepping outside John's framework of the perfections, at least temporarily. This is not because there is something already inherently Protestant about John's framework. It is rather that his scheme teaches us to attend to one question about grace--what *aspect* of the concept of grace does a particular thinker emphasise, insist on, draw out to an extreme—and there is a rather different question which seems to me most helpful when it comes to a Protestant Catholic comparison, namely, *in relation to what* does one think about grace –with what is it paired, to what is it contrasted?

The broad pattern I'd like to suggest is this: Catholic thought on grace tends to be shaped by pairing grace with nature: much Protestant thought, by pairing grace with sin. So for a typical Catholic thinker, how the human being is as created by God is a starting point for, or at least a significant point of reference for, reflection on grace—we have some sort of understanding of grace when we understand how it takes us *beyond* the gift of nature; for at least some prominent strands in Protestant thought, by contrast, we understand grace to the extent that we understand that and how it is a response to sin—sin is the problem for which grace is the solution.[2]

On the Catholic side, grace is gift, and is 'perfected', to use John's terminology, in various ways, but *nature is also a gift.* Grace has to be understood against the background of our existence, and the existence of the whole world, as created by and held in being by God, and so as itself a gift of God's goodness. Grace is also, of course, on a Catholic account, remedial, a redress for and response to sin, but that is not for the most part the *primary* framework in which to understand it.

To underline the point that for Catholic instincts it is not only grace, but also nature, which must be received and praised as gift, we might run a Catholic conception of nature through Barclay's taxonomy of perfections. Most Catholic theologies of nature would tend to 'perfect' the gift along the lines of superabundance, singularity, priority and efficacy: creation is a superabundant gift, so that the great multiplicity of finite created beings gives glory to the simplicity of God; everything that is, insofar as it is created, is good, so there is a perfecting of the *singularity* of the giver; there is an emphasis on the unilateral *priority* of the gift of creation—this is one of the things that an adherence to creation *ex nihilo* protects. And there is a kind of *efficacy* to the gift of creation—in the mainstream Catholic tradition, there can be no question of *doubt* about whether God can bring into existence that which God wills. Two of John's six are on the other hand *not* part of typical Catholic perfecting of the gift of nature. Non-circularity is not particularly appropriate, any more than it is for many of the thinkers John treats —creatures do and ought to give glory to God, make a return to God, whether this is conceived of as a return of praise and thanksgiving, or a return of their very selves. Incongruity is interesting: on one level, creation as a gift can be neither congruous nor incongruous, because there is no possibility of comparing the gift to the recipient and the

[2] One may of course stipulate that the starting point and the point of reference for thinking about grace must be Christ. Such Christocentrism, however, can be affirmed with equal enthusiasm on both sides of the divide I am exploring – and once it has been affirmed, the question still remains as to whether, on the level of theological anthropology, grace is more naturally paired with nature or with sin.

recipient's prior worth or lack of it—the recipient is herself the gift. One might say, therefore , that it is therefore maximally incongruent—the incongruence of something with nothing. But it may be better to say that questions of congruence simply do not apply.

In any case, to return to my theme, it is possible to take this account of a Protestant/Catholic comparison (nature/sin vs nature/grace) one step further. Both Protestant and Catholic accounts of grace tend to have, or to skirt close to, a paradox—but not the same paradox. In Catholic theology, typically, there is an emphasis on the idea that nature, and specifically the human being as created by God, has its own kind of integrity, a certain wholeness, and yet it is also yearning for something more, incomplete, desiring to go beyond itself. It is whole and it is not whole. At the centre of nature is a longing to transcend nature. Or to approach the matter from the other side, grace and the supernatural are simultaneously in a sense 'natural' to us (they are what we long for, what we recognize, in encountering them, as our fulfilment, that which we were made for) and radically *unnatural* to us (they are strictly beyond us, that which we are, in ourselves, by our nature, not). To make the same point in the language of divinisation, the human being as divinized remains herself at the same time as she is raised above herself. One is simultaneously creaturely and raised to something beyond the creaturely; one is beyond oneself without ceasing to be oneself. There is a paradoxical, or close to paradoxical, affirmation of both congruity and incongruity, we might say, in much Catholic theology.

On my reading of Protestant theology, the paradoxical moment falls elsewhere. Often, it seems--at least in certain central strands of Protestant theology of grace-- one can detect three principles at work. First, the sharpest possible antithesis between sin and grace must be maintained. For grace to be appreciated and our utter dependence on it grasped, the opposition between grace and what we are apart from grace, understood as a state of sin, needs to be as complete as possible. Secondly, there is a requirement that this radical dependence on grace can never become a thing of the past. The sin/grace opposition is always now, always contemporary, never narrated as a sequence that is receding in history. If sin did not remain a current reality, something which even now, and not just in the past, radically threatens, which even now, and not just in the past, needs to be met and overcome by grace, then grace would lose something of its power. Finally, grace can never be something in our control: it cannot be caught or held; it cannot be supposed to reliably follow from anything which might lie in our power, anything that we might do, whether in sacrament and liturgy or good works or study or techniques of meditation or anything else.

With these three principles taken together, we are not too far from the territory of paradox. On the one hand, the purpose of such a theology of grace is in large part to reinforce trust in and gratitude for what God does in Christ, to properly honour and praise it. On the other hand, because of the second principle, because our need for grace, our need for delivery from sin, must always continue to be emphasised, we have to be very careful in talking about any change to who-we-are-in-ourselves being accomplished by grace. It is not just that sanctification needs to be distinguished from justification, but that sanctification is somehow a source of real ambivalence, attended by a degree of nervousness. For this strand of Protestantism, there is something like a double affirmation always to be made: grace is really working, it is powerful, it makes all the difference; and grace is needed just as much today as it was yesterday, because we remain ultimately, in ourselves, unchanged, still sinners. One must be very careful about ever supposing that one has moved away from the starting point. One *must* insist that grace makes all the difference, but at the same time there is a pull towards insisting that on some level grace makes almost no difference. If the Catholic tension tends to be around the simultaneous congruity and incongruity of grace with nature, the Protestant tension tends to be around the simultaneous efficacy and inefficacy of grace over against sin.

How then do the two broad schemes proposed here, sin/grace and nature/grace, relate to Paul? To me it seems clear that there is something broadly Pauline in the sharply contrastive tendencies of much Protestant theology of grace: the sin/grace patterning is a way, with Paul, of keeping the incongruity of grace constantly before our eyes. Barclay makes clear that Protestant thinkers are not doing this in exactly the same way that Paul did, given the different social and ecclesial contexts into which they introduce the incongruity. But they are nevertheless, at the level of the broad patterning of thought, somehow attuned to Paul, somehow faithful to him.

What about the nature/grace patterning? Can we find that in Paul? It seems clear, at least, that nature-and-grace debates are less obviously resonant with his thought. This is why, in my view, it should not be held against John Barclay that he offers a largely Protestant history of the interpretation of Paul on grace. If one is hunting for theologies of grace that are centrally, strikingly shaped by Paul, then I think one *will* find oneself pulled towards a Protestant-shaped history.

From this it is not, however, necessary to jump to the conclusion, that Catholic theology of grace is ultimately grounded in philosophy, or in natural theology-- that it is just less Biblical than its Protestant counterpart. To be less relentlessly Pauline is not in itself to

be unbiblical. A Catholic instinct might be to suggest that Paul is one of the voices we must listen to in the Bible, but not the only one; that the sharp contrast between sin and grace is one of the ways we need to think of grace, but not the only way; that-- more generally-- the acknowledgement of the utter incongruity between the gift of grace and all else needs to be *a moment* in our thinking about grace, but not the whole of it. Paul and his distinctive emphases must have their place in an account of grace, but that does not mean they must be its beginning and end and sole source.

And yet one might worry that the distinctive voice of Paul cannot in fact be heard at all, if it is absorbed, if it becomes one element, one moment only, in something larger. Does taking a Pauline pattern of thought on grace and blending it into a larger whole domesticate it? Is hearing it as one element, one element mixed together with and balanced out by others ,tantamount to not hearing it at all?

What shall a Catholic do? How can Paul's voice really be heard in Christian theology, without it being the only thing to be heard? We can take a clue, perhaps, from a comment towards the end of Barclay's *Paul and the Gift* about the socio-political moment in which the Church currently finds itself, and the renewed relevance at this moment for Paul's theology of grace. There are, precisely, particular moments, particular contexts where we need to hear again, and to voice again, the pattern of Paul's thinking on grace, with its radical, shocking contrasts.

Man does not live—this would be a Catholic instinct-- by shock alone, nor theology, or even church, fulfil its mission by pure interruption. And yet on the other hand we do not outgrow the need to be shocked by the Gospel, to be shocked by grace: we do not get beyond the need to hear, at certain moments, the Pauline voice afresh. Like many others, then, I am immensely grateful for John Barclay's extraordinary book, which helps us do precisely that.