

*The Nils Alstrup Dahl Memorial Lecture 2013*

Pure Grace?  
Paul's Distinctive Jewish Theology of Gift

John M.G. Barclay

*Abstract:*

Paul's theology of grace has been "perfected" (drawn to an end-of-the-line extreme) in many different ways during its history of reception, as super-abundant gift, prior gift, gift to the unworthy, gift without return, etc., often with the consequence that Judaism is figured as a grace-less religion. If we distinguish and disaggregate the many possible meanings of "grace," we find in Second Temple Judaism not a single or simple concept, but a variety of distinct voices, and even debate, concerning the construal of divine beneficence. Paul does not stand apart from Judaism, but in the midst of this debate. The hallmark of his theology is the interpretation of the Christ-event as an incongruous divine gift (given without regard for worth) – a notion developed in and for his mission to the Gentiles. Judging from experience that the Torah is not how God evaluates worth, Paul locates the believers' symbolic capital only in Christ, with socially radical consequences from which we could still take inspiration today.

I count it an enormous honour to have been invited to deliver this year's lecture in memory of Nils Alstrup Dahl, a scholar I met only once but whose influence has been immense, and whose work I have read and reread since my student days. Dahl had the extraordinary ability to put his finger on critical questions which could open up a well-worn subject in a novel way. He also had a truly independent mind. At a time when scholarship was often circumscribed by schools of thought, Dahl was always refreshingly original. He understood Bultmann and Käsemann better than anyone outside of Germany, but he was not awed by their reputations, and offered some of the most penetrating criticism of their work: his review of Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament* is still the best and most rounded critique of the whole Bultmannian project.<sup>1</sup> Two of Dahl's essays, in particular, have shaped my preparation for this lecture. The first, his fine, probing piece on "The Neglected Factor in New Testament Theology" asks why New Testament scholars have paid so little attention to what is

said in the New Testament about *God* (as opposed to Christ, the Spirit, salvation, etc.).<sup>2</sup> The second, his seminal essay on “The Doctrine of Justification: Its Social Function and Effects,” explores the correlation between Paul’s theology of justification and his social practice in the Gentile mission.<sup>3</sup> In fact, it was Dahl’s capacity to combine social-historical with theological questions, and to show their interconnection, that made Dahl such an interesting thinker. Inspired and instructed by him, let me offer here some remarks about Paul and grace which attempt to approach that familiar subject afresh.

### 1. *Pure Grace?*

Paul’s comments on the grace or mercy of God are notable for their rhetorical force and their antithetical formulations. The grace of God is not just *present* in the Christ-event, it is *abundant*, indeed super-abundant, overwhelming the human deficit of sin with the gift of righteousness and life (Rom 5.12-21; cf. 2 Cor 9.6-13). God does not just have mercy, he has mercy *on whomever he wills*, without regard to birth, ancestry, or behaviour, good or bad (Rom 9.6-18). The choice of the remnant is “by grace and not by works, for then grace would not be grace” (Rom 11.5-6). Here and elsewhere Paul draws the motif of grace (that is, divine gift or favour) to an end-of-the-line extreme, developing its meaning to a maximum, exploiting the concept to its fullest possible extent. The literary critic, Kenneth Burke, labelled this kind of manoeuvre “perfection,” drawing out a motif to its nth degree, much like we might speak of a terrible concatenation of events as “perfect storm” or a complex and extremely inconvenient obstacle as a “perfect nuisance.”<sup>4</sup> It is not just the adjective “perfect” that signals this tendency. In the wake of Paul and inspired by Paul, Christian theology has coined a whole set of phrases and epithets to perfect the topic

of grace. Grace is spoken of as “pure grace” or “sheer gift”; salvation is *sola gratia* (by grace alone). The grace of God is free, sovereign, totally gratuitous, indiscriminate, unconditional, unconditioned, uncontingent, unmerited, unstinting, and a whole set of other “un”-adjectives; definition by negation is characteristic of the tendency to perfect an idea.

It is common in the Christian theological tradition to multiply these perfections, and to purify the notion of grace from as many potential alloys as possible. Usually something is at stake here not only theologically but politically, because the perfection of a theological motif constitutes a claim to theological correctness, and thus to true inheritance of the Christian tradition: if others do not perfect grace the way “we” do, they have not just an inadequate but a false understanding of the heart of the gospel. One may observe this tendency right from the beginning of the history of reception of Paul. Inspired by Paul, and by a philosophical conception of the goodness of God, Marcion in the mid-second century thought it crucial to recover the authentic Pauline gospel by distinguishing clearly between the God of justice, who judges, punishes, and causes the suffering rife in this poorly created world, and the God of love and mercy revealed in Jesus Christ, who is not only *bonus* but *optimus* (supremely good) and whose perfect goodness (*perfecta bonitas*) is clear in the fact that he is good and nothing but good, with a generosity that could not possibly judge or condemn.<sup>5</sup> Two-and-a-half centuries later, Augustine read Paul very differently on this point, but with an equal concern to perfect the Pauline theme of grace. Impressed by the depth of human sinfulness, down to the deepest inclinations of the heart, Augustine perfected the *incongruity* of grace, the utter mismatch between the favour of God and the fittingness or worth of the human recipient. The more he thought about this, in repeated rereadings of Paul and ever

more violent controversy with Pelagius and the Massilians, the more Augustine pressed the theme of grace in additional directions.<sup>6</sup> If we have nothing that we have not received (1 Cor 4.7) and if the Spirit is poured into our hearts to grant us the very capacity to love God (Rom 5.5), then everything in the Christian life, even faith itself, must be attributed to God's *gratia gratuita*.<sup>7</sup> Augustine's notoriously strong views of predestination and of the certain perseverance of the saints are the end result of this line of thinking.<sup>8</sup>

Grace is of course integral to every Christian theology, and there is a good case for insisting that Pelagius was also a theologian of grace, of the God who gives us all we need to perform his commandments well. Augustine did not believe in grace *more*, he simply perfected it in different and in multiple ways. This sort of clash was operative again, of course, in the Reformation, though in very different circumstances. Luther attempted to break with the whole theology of the circularity of grace, in which he had been reared. For Luther, we not do good in order to win God's grace, which then enables us to do better and merit more, since God has given us everything once and for all in Christ, in a grace that we have simply to receive.<sup>9</sup> *Sola gratia* meant for Luther not Marcion's notion of the God who could do nothing but give, but (closer to Augustine) God giving not to the deserving but to the utterly unworthy and unfit. But what emerges in Luther is also the beginning of another meaning of "pure grace." If God's grace operates outside the principle of *quid pro quo*, God does not give in order to receive a return, and our giving to others should also be unilateral, seeking no recompense or counter-gift but gladly pursuing the welfare of the other alone.<sup>10</sup> Calvin, sharing Luther's emphasis on the incongruity of grace, developed Augustinian theology also on the *priority* of grace, emphasizing God's providence and predestination in election. But he also scrutinized the operation

of grace in the ongoing life of the believer. There is for Calvin a “double grace” – the grace of sanctification alongside the grace of justification – and one must speak clearly of the efficacy of grace in the agency of the believer lest one lapse into inadequate theologies of co-operation or “synergism.”<sup>11</sup> Here one sees very clearly the tendency for “pure grace” or *sola gratia* to take on more and more connotations.

Twentieth-century interpretations show a similar tendency to radicalize or perfect Paul’s theology of grace, though in differing ways. Barth’s emphasis on grace as the absolutely free and unconditioned act of God was part of his insistence on the “infinite qualitative difference” between humans and God, time and eternity; if God acts in grace towards us it is never because of our condition but always despite it.<sup>12</sup> The same incongruity is basic to the neo-Lutheran interpretations of Bultmann and Käsemann, who set the divine gift over against the human illusion that we can gain life from our own resources and accomplishments (Bultmann) or standing on our own privileges (Käsemann). In these readings, what Bultmann called “pure gift” (*reines Geschenk*) stands in opposition to the human desire to achieve or procure for ourselves. In other more recent readings, which put Paul’s language of *charis* in the context of ancient practices of gift, an effort is often made to distinguish Paul from ancient systems of reciprocity, by insisting that God’s grace is “unilateral.”<sup>13</sup> One senses here the influence of the modern Western perfection of gift, famously drawn to its extreme by Derrida, according to whom a gift is only a gift if it requires and gets no return.<sup>14</sup> “Pure grace” on this reading means without demand and without recompense, a unilateral transaction completely free of the circular motion which was everywhere associated with gift in antiquity, as epitomised by the “Three Graces” dancing in a ring.

What is evident even from this cursory survey is that grace is a motif with many possible dimensions; the tendency to perfect the notion of “pure grace” can take many different forms. It is as if the Pauline rhetoric of antithesis and excess has spawned a multiplicity of perfections, extensions, and refinements that may themselves be a form of excess. Have we loaded Paul with more than his texts can bear? Have the pressures of ideological differentiation within the Christian tradition encumbered our reading of Paul with expectations not only beyond but even contrary to his initial impulse? To ask that question is not yet to answer it, but it is to alert ourselves to the special problems that surround the word “grace” and to approach the history of reception of this theme with critical caution. It would be salutary to go back to the beginning and to ask what we mean, and what Paul means, by “grace.”

## 2. *Grace and Judaism*

Accompanying the history of reception of Paul has been a widespread tendency to mark a clear distinction, on the subject of grace, between Paul and his Jewish contemporaries. Although there was dispute among interpreters from early in Christian history over whether by “works of the law” Paul meant distinctively Jewish customs or good works in general, even those who took the latter view considered Judaism to be in some measure the antithesis to Paul’s theology of grace. Luther took Paul to attack *operarii* – works-people of all kinds – but his list of such people generally began with “Jews” and in the German revival of Lutheranism at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Pauline antitheses were taken to be directed particularly against Paul’s fellow Jews. Bultmann knew that a Jew would “contradict the proposition that justification by works of the law and justification by divine grace appropriated in faith exclude each other” but he took this contradiction to be Paul’s “decisive thesis.”<sup>15</sup> In

fact, for Bultmann Paul's analysis of sin reached its acme in his attack on Jewish works of the law, since the very effort to keep the law expressed the human attempt to secure salvation by our own strength. When Käsemann wanted to explain that Paul's target was the illusory self-confidence in every human being, he saw fit to express this as "the hidden Jew in all of us."<sup>16</sup> Thus the multiple perfections of grace in Paul have tended to serve as the foil to a denigrating portrayal of Judaism, right up to the recent and otherwise stimulating interpretation of Paul by Alain Badiou.<sup>17</sup>

E.P. Sanders' extensive analysis of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* attempted to end that tradition, and with large effect.<sup>18</sup> Sanders emphasized that the structure of Judaism – including most of the literature contemporary with Paul – was covenantal, that is, that one "gets in" by divine grace in covenant election, even if one "stays in" by observing the Law. As Sanders puts it, "the notion that God's grace is in any way contradictory to human endeavour is totally foreign to Palestinian Judaism. The reason for this is that grace and works were not considered alternative roads to salvation. Salvation is always by the grace of God, embodied in the covenant."<sup>19</sup> Sanders thus concluded that on the subject of grace and works there is really no difference between Paul and his fellow Jews, however they might differ on Christology or other matters. Starting from this point, the "New Perspective on Paul" identified Paul's target as national exclusivism or ethnocentricity, developing an old Enlightenment trope which contrasted Jewish particularity with Christian universalism.<sup>20</sup> But the "new perspective" found nothing of particular significance in Paul's theology of grace, a topic on which there has been rather little research in the last generation of scholarship.

Sanders is right that there is grace everywhere in Judaism, including the Judaism contemporary with Paul. But grace is not everywhere the same. Grace can

be perfected or not perfected, and if perfected, perfected in a number of different ways. Philo, for instance, says much divine grace, with equal if not greater emphasis than Paul on the super-abundance of divine generosity. It is crucial for Philo to insist that God's grace is always prior, since God is the cause or origin of all good things. But he is wary of the notion that God's gifts could be given to the unworthy. In one sense, everything and everyone is unworthy in comparison with God. But God is not an indiscriminate or unfair benefactor, and his gifts, such as his covenants, are generously but discriminately given to the *axioi*, the fitting or appropriate recipients.<sup>21</sup> There are good reasons for this caution, not least the need to uphold the justice of the cosmic order. Divine gifts must be presumed to undergird, not disrupt, the moral and social order of the world; in fact, they are *good* gifts only if they do so. The gift to the fitting is not pay; it is not earned or contractual, nor the product of a temporary relationship like wages or a commercial transaction. But a gift, like a reward, is not given to just anyone, and one might expect a generous God, like a generous human benefactor, to be lavish but discriminate in the giving of gifts.

This topic is in fact one which divides opinion among Second Temple Jews. Sanders' common structure of "covenantal nomism" is over simplistic; it masks the fact that the grace or mercy of God was a matter of debate among Jews and capable of many kinds of nuance. In *The Wisdom of Solomon*, for instance, the gracious work of Wisdom, which anticipates the human recipient, is fully celebrated (e.g. *Wis* 3.9; 4.15). But the catalogue of those whom Wisdom has saved (*Wisdom* 10) is carefully calibrated to bring out the *righteous* status of each, including the patriarchs and heroes up to the Exodus generation, who are saved from the ungodly Egyptians precisely as fitting recipients of divine grace. In extolling this phenomenon, *Wisdom* 11-12 offers a long and fascinating discussion of the relation between divine justice, divine power,



and divine mercy, emphasizing God's love for all creatures and the lengths to which God has gone in giving even incorrigible sinners the chance to repent. But mercy has to be correlated with justice, otherwise the cosmic order to which *Wisdom* is so strongly committed, would collapse. Mercy cannot exclude or overrule judgment, even if it modifies, delays, or extenuates its operation. Few texts in antiquity put such consistently heavy stress on the goodness, the love, and the benevolence of God: but this is not finally perfected as *incongruous* grace to the unworthy, lest the fairness and symmetry of the cosmos collapse.

There are other Jewish texts that *do* perfect the incongruity of grace, most notably the hymns in the Qumran *Hodayot* (1QH<sup>a</sup>). Here the author goes to even greater extremes than Paul in depicting the depravity of the human being: both physically, as a conglomerate of filth and dust, and morally, as a sinner full of error and deceit, the "I" of these prayers indulges in unrelenting self-deprecation. At the same time, these hymns extol the mercy and the righteousness of God, his bountiful mercy and everlasting *hesed* which graciously grant knowledge, favour and forgiveness to the worthless human. These hymns perfect the incongruity of grace in a way that neither Philo nor the *Wisdom of Solomon* would have dared to do. Such incongruity is given a deep rationale in the predestination of the elect, such that the choice of these creatures of filth is built into the pre-planned order of the universe.

That such different views on divine grace could be a matter of debate among Jews is illustrated by *4 Ezra*, which in its dialogues between Ezra and Uriel, and especially in its profound and moving third dialogue, sets out alternate ways of configuring divine grace (*4 Ezra* 6.36 – 9.25). The angel Uriel, viewing life from the perspective of the final judgment and of the perfect world to come, insists that divine mercy cannot be exercised on sinners in the end, or the demands of justice would lose

all seriousness. There will indeed be mercy, but mercy on the righteous, and if it turns out that there are extremely few of these, that is just the way it is: anyone would prefer a tiny scrap of gold to a large mass of useless dust. Ezra, contemplating the fate of the majority of humanity, makes vivid appeal to divine mercy: did not God declare himself (in Exodus 34) as the one who is gracious and patient, and will he not be rightly called merciful if he has pity on those who do *not* have any works of righteousness (*4 Ezra* 7.132-40; 8.20-36)? Ezra would define grace as an incongruous gift, mercy on those who have *no store* of good works. Uriel will allow that mercy might operate thus in *this* life, but it cannot be the final blueprint of the universe, effectual at the judgment. Uriel still talks of mercy, but only on those who “rule over their minds and discipline their hearts” (14.34). The author of *4 Ezra* wrestles as a Jew with the definition of mercy or grace, and makes clear that this is not a simple nor a univocal concept. Second Temple Judaism speaks much of the grace of God, but it speaks of this subject in varied and sometimes contradictory ways. There are many distinctive Jewish voices on this subject.

### 3. *Paul, Grace, and the Gentile Mission*

On this fuller and more nuanced reading of Second Temple Judaism, it is possible to place Paul *among* his fellow Jews in his discussion of divine grace, not *apart from* them in some unique or antithetical position. At the same time he stands in the midst of a *debate*, not as a spokesman for a single, simple, or uncontested notion. Romans 9-11 shows that Paul takes part in this Jewish discussion of grace on traditional Jewish terrain. Like other Second Temple Jews he probes the criteria by which God has governed the history of his people, and like them he seeks illumination from a plethora of scriptural texts and incidents. It is characteristic of many of such Jewish

discussions – one may compare, Philo, Ps.-Philo, or Jubilees – to go back to the patriarchal narratives to find there the secret of God’s *modus operandi*. On numerous occasions the Pentateuch declares that God is patient and merciful to his wayward people is only because of his promise to the patriarchs (e.g., Exod 32.13-14; Deut 7.1-11; 9.4-14) so the question will naturally arise: and why did God choose *them*? Was there something about their character or their behaviour, their quest or their obedience, that made them fitting recipients of the divine favour and the covenant promises? Philo was anxious to find some such rationale, lest God’s choice appear arbitrary and unjust. What is striking about Paul is his refusal to identify any criterion of fit in God’s election of the patriarchs. Abraham had no grounds of worth (or possible basis for pride, Rom 4.1-6); Isaac was chosen not on the basis of his birth (Rom 9.6-9); Jacob was preferred over Esau not because of anything he had done or not done, nor by reference to the primacy of the first-born (Rom 9.10-13). Time after time, Paul strips away possible criteria of worth, in order to highlight what is for him the centrally significant feature of the grace or mercy of God: its *incongruity* with the fit or worth of the recipient. Like Ezra in the third *4 Ezra* dialogue, Paul identifies this as the core characteristic of the mercy of God; against Uriel he would insist that this is *definitive*, not just a temporary measure for the present world.

What makes the incongruity of grace definitive for Paul is his interpretation and experience of the Christ-event. The death of Christ was “for our sins,” indeed “to rescue us from the present evil age” (Gal 1.4). It was while we were still weak that Christ for the ungodly – an incongruity that Paul parades as truly extraordinary (Rom 5.6-8). With an analysis of the human plight at some points comparable to the gloomy anthropology of the Qumran Hymns, Paul finds no point of compatibility or fit between the worth of the human and the gift of God. God’s mercy is not

selectively distributed according to any criterion of gender, age, social class, moral achievement or ethnic identity (cf. 1 Cor 1.26-29). This is a problematic, indeed dangerous, configuration of grace, but it fitted Paul's experience both of his own life and of his mission among the Gentiles. Paul was an excellent, tradition-observant Jew, faultless in his observance of the Torah, but it was not for that reason that he was "called" (Gal 1.13-16). In fact, his zealous loyalty to his traditions led him to persecute the church, but he was not for that reason not called. Why was he "called in grace" (Gal 1.15)? Neither his positive nor his negative tokens of worth could offer an explanation. The Gentiles to whom he preached the good news were on multiple grounds unworthy. They had the wrong ancestry, the wrong ideas about God, and a habit of immoral practices; but God saw fit to call them, and to give them the gift of his Spirit (Gal 3.1-5; 4.8-11; 1 Cor 6.9-11). The gift of God in Christ was neither endorsement nor reward for living like a Jew; it was an incongruous gift that bore no relation to the fittingness of the recipient. It is this that Paul declares as the hallmark of the Christ-gift, with disruptive and subversive effect. For if this gift was unconditioned, all previous criteria of value are rendered questionable or void; the incongruous gift of Christ shatters the taken-for-granted norms of worth. My gospel, says Paul, is not about pleasing people (Gal 1.9), because it is not attuned to normal criteria of reason or value: it is not *kata anthrōpon*, not "according to human norms" (Gal 1.10).

Here, as so often, Dahl put his finger on precisely the salient point: Paul's theology of justification (and, we may add, grace) is worked out in the context of the Gentile mission, and largely for its sake.<sup>22</sup> It is not an abstract doctrine about God, nor is its focus primarily the condition of the individual: it has a social function, and multiple social implications. Paul preached to Gentiles without requiring that they

adopt the Jewish symbols of identity, not because he had signed a charter of universal equal rights, but because no-one's status is taken into account by God. In this negative universality, grace pays no regard to ethnic worth. At the same time, the experience of the Gentile mission, and critical moments of conflict in Jerusalem, Antioch, and Galatia (Gal 2.1-21) established the conviction that the gift of God cannot and should not be framed by the value-system of the Torah. To borrow the language and concepts of Pierre Bourdieu, this is a question of "symbolic capital." To consider "the works of the law" as the criterion of righteousness (that is, in Jewish terms, worth) is to assume the validity of a form of symbolic capital that has been shown in the Christ-event to be of no significance to God (Gal 2.16). To make the Gentiles "Judaize" (Gal 2.14) is to invest in that capital, but believers know that that counts for nothing before God. To take the works of the law as the measure of value is to bank on an outdated or irrelevant currency, like collecting Deutschmarks when the currency has shifted to Euros. So what is the new currency? Hardly some other human capacity or some hidden, inherent token of worth, but what Paul calls "faith in Christ" – that is, the acknowledgement that there is no human currency that God counts of value, since the only thing of worth is Christ himself.<sup>23</sup> Faith for Paul is not some alternative human achievement or a refined human spirituality, but a declaration of bankruptcy, a radical and shattering recognition that the only capital in God's economy is the gift of Christ, crucified and risen.

It is important to be clear about what is, and is not, here implied about the law (the Jewish Torah). Paul is not declaring the Law to be evil or sinful, and his gospel is not "Law-free" in the sense that he renders it impossible to be a believer and still observe the Law. The Law does not betoken or promote a sinful attitude of self-righteousness or self-dependence, and Paul does not deny the value of "works of the

law” because they foster the illusion that one can procure salvation from oneself. Paul’s focus is not, in fact, on the inner attitude and self-understanding of the “worker,” as analyzed so powerfully in the Lutheran tradition. His point is in some ways simpler, though extremely far-reaching. The Torah (and by “works of the law” he means practice of the Torah, not just certain tokens of national identity) is simply not the criterion by which God judges value or worth. Jewish believers may indeed continue to observe it, Sabbath, food-laws and all, but only inasmuch as they can do so “to the Lord,” that is out of loyalty to Christ (Rom 14.4-6).<sup>24</sup> For this reason they may not insist on others (Gentile believers) also observing this law, if they can genuinely practise their loyalty to Christ in other forms. In other words, the Torah itself is no longer the final arbiter of value, and that not because it is particularistic or misleading but because the Christ-gift, given without regard to previous norms of worth, has relativized its standards of value. “In Christ neither circumcision counts for anything (*ti ischuei*: has value or worth), nor uncircumcision, but faith working through love” (Gal 5.6). Neither circumcision *nor uncircumcision*: Paul is not validating an alternative, non-Jewish or anti-Jewish, token of value, like the Greeks valued the beautiful male, unblemished body. If the Christ-gift is wholly incongruous, it declares the ultimate insignificance of all previous forms of symbolic capital, including Gentile hierarchies of gender, age, education, social and legal status (Gal 3.28). The goal of Paul’s mission is the construction of communities which attempt to disregard these old values, and the contests for honour that surround them, even if these communities are imperfectly formed and their goals imperfectly articulated by Paul himself. What he wants is not deracination or the obliteration of all previous identities, but a radical disinvestment in such identities as bearers of symbolic worth. If what really counts for worth among Pauline believers is what they

have been made in Christ, they can use or disregard these other identities as fits the purpose of the good news and the interests of the community. To live, as he puts it “under grace” (Rom 6.14-15) is to be subordinate to a new authority, a new standard of worth that reshuffles and recalibrates all previous systems of value.

Thus what we find in Paul is a highly paradoxical relationship to his Jewish heritage. On the one hand, the theology of grace that he enunciates and practises is thoroughly Jewish: it has its roots in (a reading of) Scripture, it is part of the contemporary Jewish debate about the grace or mercy of God, and it has at least partial parallels with other voices in that debate, such as Ezra in *4 Ezra* and the author of the Qumran Hymns. Paul’s construal of divine grace in Christ is not directed against Judaism, as if Judaism itself was devoid of grace. On the other hand, the way that Paul radicalizes the notion of the incongruity of grace, his connection of that grace to the death and resurrection of Christ, and the distinctive way in which he preaches and practises that grace in his Gentile mission all end up in a relativization of the Torah which seems without parallel among his Jewish peers. To say “I have died to the law in order to live to God” (Gal 2.19) sounds shocking in the Jewish discourse of the first century, yet Paul connects that statement to his insistence that he will not reject the grace of God (Gal 2.21). It is not just Gentiles who have died to the Law, but even Paul himself, as a paradigmatic Jewish believer in Christ; as he indicates in Phil 3.2-11, the law, together with the rest of his Jewish heritage, no longer represents his symbolic capital. Paul is neither anti-Jewish nor post-Jewish, but neither does his configuration of the grace of God in Christ leave his Jewish identity unchanged or his Torah-allegiance unchallenged. Scholars of every generation struggle to articulate this paradox.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the topic that Sanders

persuaded the past generation to disregard, the topic of grace, provides another way to open it up.

What may we say, then, about Paul as a theologian of “pure grace”? It all depends on what we mean by “grace” and which of its multiple possible dimensions and perfections we wish to evoke. I have argued here that in one sense – and in this sense radically and consistently – Paul *does* articulate a theology of “by grace alone,” if we mean by that that the grace of God takes no account of the worth or fit of the recipient but is in essence an incongruous gift. As we have seen, that was not a necessary or even particularly common configuration of divine gift in antiquity, because it threatened the notion that the world was justly ordered by God. Paul knows about this danger (see Romans 9) but embraces it. As in the Qumran Hymns, his emphasis on the incongruity of grace is partly explained by reference to God’s prior decision or choice. There are certainly elements of predestinarian thinking in Pauline theology (Rom 8.28-29; 9.6-26), but these seem intended to support and defend the incongruity of grace, and do not have independent significance in support of a separable concept of the sovereignty of God. If by “pure grace” we mean that God is singular in benevolence and removed from any notion of judgement, we can hardly credit Paul with that perfection: it was notable that Marcion needed to excise parts of the Pauline letters to achieve this reading of Paul, and in its modern guise (e.g., in the work of Douglas Campbell) a similar procedure is required, attributing inconvenient sections of Romans to someone other than Paul.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, if “pure grace” means that God gives, expecting nothing in return, on the grounds that gift is (in Derrida’s view of the matter) by definition without recompense or return, we would also find this an imposition on Paul, who finds no difficulty in speaking of obedience as the state of those who live “under grace” (Rom 6.12-23). Of course



many additional things might and should be said about believers as newly created agents rendered capable of obedience, but here again we must beware lest we overload Paul's theology of grace with connotations beyond its range. It is certainly the case that Paul can swing to and fro in descriptions of agency: "by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards 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).<sup>27</sup> But Paul does not press this point such as to complicate every statement of believer agency ("love your neighbour – or rather, not you, but the Spirit who loves in you"), nor does he perfect the notion of the efficacy of grace in the sense that grace is the real or primary agent in all that may be said of the actions of the believer. The concern with questions of agency which motivates the work of J.Louis Martyn, and lies behind many of arguments for the "subjective genitive" interpretation of *pistis Christou* (as "the faithfulness of Christ"), seems fully comprehensible as a reaction against contemporary forms of Christian moralism and gospel-less activism.<sup>28</sup> But it is liable to overload Paul's discourse and his theology of grace with additional dimensions and perfections beyond the horizon or the interests of Paul himself.

And here is the heart of the matter. Paul's simple and radical perfection of grace as *the incongruous gift of God*, given without regard for worth, has been often and readily supplemented with other perfections that load "pure grace" with multiple additional meanings. Paul's historical horizon, his engagement in the culture-relativizing Gentile mission, was of a piece with his conviction that the Christ-gift took no account of human definitions of worth, not even those previously defined by the practice of the law. His context is mission, the right and necessity to cross ethnic and cultural boundaries, and the creation of communities that attempt to live in

accordance with a new definition of symbolic capital significantly at odds with their inherited traditions. In this context, what matters about grace is its incongruity, its disregard of worth; that is what justifies common meals at Antioch (Gal 2.11-14) and the conduct of a Gentile mission not beholden to the rules of the Jewish community. In subsequent generations, when Paul's "conversionist" phase was over or no longer the salient context for theology, when the dominant horizon was the conduct and continuation of the Christian church, when the new hearers of Paul's letters were already baptized as infants and took for granted the Christian evaluation of symbolic capital, Paul's theology of grace was inevitably developed and extended in new forms. Now it became important to understand the *interior* effects of grace, to discuss how the agency of God in grace relates to the agency of believers themselves. The Reformation reading of Paul was an attempt to re-pristiniate Paul's theology of incongruous grace in a new context, so that it shaped not only the entry-point into the Christian life, but also the form and character of the believer's continuing life of faith. The Pauline radicalism is here re-applied and *sola gratia* takes on additional meanings. Where Paul had challenged the taken-for-granted value of Jewish practice ("the works of the law") in the name of a radicalized version of the Jewish thematic of divine mercy or grace, the Reformers turned against the instrumentalization of *Christian* good works as means of procuring divine grace, and in the process opened the door to a long-lasting denigration of Judaism as a grace-less religion.

This is not to say that the extension, development, and enlargement of Pauline discourse is in principle an illegitimate procedure. It is, in fact, an essential, and not just an inevitable, element of Christian hermeneutics. What historical criticism can offer, however, is a tool by which that hermeneutical work can become self-conscious and self-critical, and an angle of approach which can open new possibilities for the

contemporary hermeneutical task. In this case, given our own historical context in an increasingly *post-Christian* environment, it is possible to find new connections to Pauline theology that are less likely to encumber his theology with additional, and now perhaps problematic, perfections of grace. As we saw, by stressing the incongruity of grace, Paul brought the normal definitions of worth into question, those prevalent both in his Jewish and in his non-Jewish social environment. If God's action in Christ is the sole source of symbolic capital, the regnant systems of worth lose their authority, and communities can be founded that can sit loose to, and even contradict, the goals and values of normal society. It is that counter-cultural potential in Paul's theology of grace, that capacity to look at social values askance from a new angle of vision, which could be reactivated and reapplied today.

In this regard, Dahl was spot on. At the conclusion to his essay on justification, he suggests that "the urgent task is . . . to rediscover the social relevance and implications of the doctrine of justification."<sup>29</sup> If we can disencumber Paul of some of the accretions to his theology of grace – some of the additional perfections that now might obscure rather than illuminate its original purpose – and if we can recover and restate its primary significance, both thoroughly Jewish and thoroughly distinctive, we might find ourselves in possession of a valuable tool for social critique. If worth is not defined by racial identity or cultural heritage, if education is not an intrinsic but only an instrumental value, if wealth is to be measured only by its usefulness for others, if autonomy loses its Western status as a self-evident value and requires to be justified by a Christian evaluation of worth, one has the makings of a vision of reality radically reconceived by incongruous grace. If, armed with this sceptical attitude to normal criteria of worth, the church can not only see the world differently, but also practise forms of community that disregard the hierarchies and

differentiations that govern society, we could find that grace brings not only balm to the soul but an impetus to social experimentation and social change parallel to the extraordinary experiments in social innovation which we call the earliest Christian churches.

John M.G. Barclay  
Department of Theology and Religion,  
Durham University,  
Abbey House, Palace Green,  
Durham DH1 3RS  
UK  
[john.barclay@durham.ac.uk](mailto:john.barclay@durham.ac.uk)

## *Bibliography*

- Babcock W.S. "Augustine's Interpretation of Romans (A.D. 394-396)," *Augustinian Studies* 10 (1979) 55-74.
- Badiou, A. *Saint Paul. La Fondation de l'Universalisme*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997. (Translated by R. Brassier as *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.)
- Barclay, J.M.G. "Grace and the Transformation of Agency in Christ." In *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities*, edited by F.E. Udoh. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008.
- Barclay, J.M.G. "Faith and Self-Detachment from Cultural Norms: A Study of Romans 14-15", *ZNW* 104 (2013) 192-208.
- Barclay, J.M.G. *Paul and the Gift*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming.
- Barth, K. *Der Römerbrief*. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1954 (reprint of 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1922).
- Baur, F.C. *The Church History of the First Three Centuries*. Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1875.
- Billings, J.T. *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Bultmann, R. *Theologie des neuen Testaments*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1948.
- Burke, K. *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954.
- Burke, K. *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.
- Campbell, D.A. *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in*

- Paul*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.
- Dahl, N.A. "Rudolf Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament*." In N.A. Dahl, *The Crucified Messiah and Other Essays*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974; originally published in German in 1954.
- Dahl, N.A. "The Doctrine of Justification: Its Social Function and Effects." In N.A. Dahl, *Studies in Paul*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977; originally published in Norwegian in 1964.
- Dahl, N.A. "The Missionary Theology in the Epistle to the Romans." In N.A. Dahl, *Studies in Paul*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977.
- Dahl, N.A. "The Neglected Factor in New Testament Theology." In *Jesus the Christ. The Historical Origins of Christological Doctrine*, edited by D.H. Juel. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991; originally published in 1975.
- Derrida, J. *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (translated by P. Kamuf). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Dunn, J.D.G. *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005.
- Gerrish, B.A. *Grace and Gratitude. The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.
- Harrison, J.R. *Paul's Language of Grace in its Graeco-Roman Context*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003.
- Holm, B.K. *Gabe und Geben bei Luther: Das Verhältnis zwischen Reziprozität und reformatorischer Rechtfertigungslehre*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006.
- Johnson Hodge, C. *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Käsemann, E. "Paulus und Israel." In E. Käsemann, *Exegetische Versuche und*

- Besinnungen*. Volume 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965.
- Mannermaa, T. *Two Kinds of Love. Martin Luther's Religious World* (translated by K. Stjerna); Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.
- Martyn, J.L. *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Bible 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997.
- Matlock, R.B. "The Rhetoric of  $\pi\iota/\sigma\tau\iota\eta$  in Paul: Galatians 2.16, 3.22, Romans 3.22 and Philippians 3.9," *JSNT* 30 (2007) 173-203.
- Oberman, H.A. *The Dawn of the Reformation. Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986.
- Patout Burns, J. *The Development of Augustine's Doctrine of Operative Grace*. Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1980.
- Sanders, E.P. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. London: SCM Press, 1977.
- Sechrest, L. *A Former Jew. Paul and the Dialectics of Race*. London: T & T Clark, 2009.
- Watson, F. *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective*. Second revised edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.
- Wetzel, J. "Snares of Truth: Augustine on free will and predestination." In *Augustine and his Critics. Essays in honour of Gerald Bonner*, edited by R. Dodaro and G. Lawless. London/New York: Routledge.

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Dahl, "Rudolf Bultmann's *Theology*," 90-128, 175-177.
- <sup>2</sup> Dahl, "Neglected Factor," 153-163.
- <sup>3</sup> Dahl, "Doctrine of Justification," 95-120.
- <sup>4</sup> Burke, *Permanance and Change*, 292-95; *Language as Symbolic Action*, 16-20.
- <sup>5</sup> See Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 1.6.1; 1.23.3; 5.5.6. For discussion of Marcion's perfections of grace, and those of others in the history of reception of Paul, see Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, chapter 3.
- <sup>6</sup> See Patout Burns, *Development of Augustine's Doctrine*.
- <sup>7</sup> The process of radicalization began in Augustine's *Ad Simplicianum* (396 CE); see Babcock, "Augustine's Interpretation of Romans," 55-74.
- <sup>8</sup> See Wetzel, "Snares of Truth," 124-41.
- <sup>9</sup> See Oberman, *Dawn of the Reformation*; Holm, *Gabe und Geben bei Luther*.
- <sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Luther's *Freedom of the Christian Man*; for discussion, see Mannermaa, *Two Kinds of Love*.
- <sup>11</sup> See Billings, *Calvin, Participation and the Gift*; Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*.
- <sup>12</sup> This is especially the case in Barth's *Römerbrief*.
- <sup>13</sup> Harrison, *Paul's Language of Grace*, 100-101, 266, 345-349.
- <sup>14</sup> Derrida, *Given Time*, 7-24.
- <sup>15</sup> Bultmann, *Theologie des neuen Testaments*, 259-260.
- <sup>16</sup> Käsemann, "Paulus und Israel," 194-197.
- <sup>17</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*.
- <sup>18</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.
- <sup>19</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 297.
- <sup>20</sup> See Dunn, *New Perspective*. For the connection with post-Enlightenment thematics (e.g., Baur, *Church History*, 1.72), see Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles*, 40-47.
- <sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Philo, *Deus* 86-110; *Leg* 3.65-106; *Migr* 56-58; *Ebr* 94; *Mut* 52.
- <sup>22</sup> Dahl, "Doctrine of Justification," 95-120; "Missionary Theology," 70-87.
- <sup>23</sup> I remain unconvinced by the new reading of the ambiguous Greek phrase *pistis Christou* as "the faith/faithfulness of Christ" (as championed by Hays, Martyn, Campbell, and others). In Gal 2.16 (its first occurrence in the Pauline correspondence) Paul removes the ambiguity by glossing it at once with the verb, "we have believed in Christ Jesus". See Matlock, "Rhetoric of *pistis*," 173-203.
- <sup>24</sup> See Barclay, "Faith and Self-Detachment," 192-208.
- <sup>25</sup> For recent, and very different, attempts to grapple with this issue, see Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs* and Sechrest, *A Former Jew*.
- <sup>26</sup> See Campbell, *Deliverance of God*.
- <sup>27</sup> See Barclay, "Grace and the Redefinition," 372-389.
- <sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Martyn, *Galatians*, 263-275.
- <sup>29</sup> Dahl, "Doctrine of Justification," 119.