

Paul and the Gift: A Mirror for Our Protestant Faces

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John Barclay's *Paul and the Gift* is a monumental work, one that will represent a landmark for later generations of scholars who tell the story of how the Apostle's theology has been understood.¹ In a book replete with valuable Pauline analysis and insights, there are three points in particular that have left an enduring impression on me, the first two of which I believe are major achievements. First, Barclay shows that while E. P. Sanders is right that grace is everywhere in Second Temple Jewish sources, it is not everywhere in the same way; as Barclay's study makes eminently clear, it is essential to understand *how* grace functions in different sources, not simply to note that it is present. Second, Barclay demonstrates that contrary to modern notions, ancient conceptions of gift do not imply noncircularity, and to project this onto Paul is anachronistic; the difference between wage and gift is not circular versus noncircular, but that gift implies (and creates!) relationship with the giver.

The third point is a curiosity, and it is the one that I wish to reflect on here. No doubt the first two points will be rightly recalled by posterity as more significant, but it is the third that has recurred to me most often in the months since finishing *Paul and the Gift*.

Imagine an academic volume of Church history, one that tells the story of Christian thought by examining key figures in the faith. Say that in

¹ For full disclosure, I admit from the outset my positive connections with Barclay: I was his teaching assistant at Regent College in 2012, and he has played a formative role in shaping my own work, eventually serving as the external examiner for my dissertation at Oxford in 2016. Unless otherwise noted, parenthetical citations of page numbers in the remainder of this article are from John Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

covering the first fifteen hundred years of Christian history, this volume engages precisely two figures, and that these two figures are Marcion and Augustine, those most commonly identified by later claimants as proto-Protestants. Imagine that this history then devoted the vast majority of its space to covering the five hundred years since the Reformation, featuring nine key players and a host of minor ones, and that apart from the occasional atheist, all of these were Protestants as well.

Within the field of ecclesiastical history, to label such a volume as a Christian history at all would be impossible; it might be a confessional or denominational work of some sort, but with such a scope no one could regard it as actually representative of Christian thought. But if one does quite the same thing in the field of biblical studies, hardly anyone blinks an eye—for in its lengthy historical survey of Christian interpretation on Pauline grace, this is precisely the framework that Barclay's volume adopts.

Modern academic biblical studies operates under an assumption of confessional neutrality, in which our judgments are thought to be characterized by a disinterested fairness to all sides. And Barclay himself is well-attuned to how this is often an illusion, with our standard evaluative standpoints actually reflecting smuggled-in theological assumptions. For example, in responding to common objections that Second Temple Jews diluted grace by including "recompense," Barclay astutely notes that such critiques take for granted a particular understanding of grace: "What is not considered is whether grace and recompense may be a perfectly normal combination in antiquity (gift to the worthy, gift as reward). As we have seen, this is not a self-contradiction; it simply entails that grace is not perfected *as an incongruous gift*, as espoused by Augustine and in the Protestant tradition" (169; italics original; see also 211). Barclay similarly defends Philo against his scholarly detractors by shedding light on the Protestant framework that underlies their judgments:

If we rid ourselves of the assumption that divine grace is, by definition, given to the *unworthy*, an assumption that (for ideological reasons) makes one perfection of grace its defining characteristic, it is perfectly possible to hail Philo as a profound theologian of grace, even though he does not perfect its incongruity. As we have seen, there are good reasons why Philo finds God to give to the 'worthy,' reasons that have nothing to do with 'synergism,' 'legalism,' 'works-righteousness,' or other such categories. (238; italics original)

Likewise, Barclay pinpoints the confessional paradigm that leads to scholarly critiques of 4 Ezra's conception of grace according to equity: "There is no reason to dub this fitting reward as a form of 'legalism' or 'works-righteousness'—terminology that reflects distinctly Augustinian and Protestant theologies, and that presumes as natural or necessary a perfection of grace as an incongruous gift to the unworthy" (306).

Barclay's perceptiveness of latent Protestant frameworks makes it all the more surprising that his reconstruction of the history of interpretation on Pauline grace takes the shape that it does. For the five hundred years since the Reformation, the reader finds in-depth treatments of Luther and Calvin; Barth, Bultmann, Käsemann and Martyn; Sanders and the "new perspective"; various Protestant reactions to the "new perspective"; and Alain Baidou and (later) Brigitte Kahl. For the fifteen hundred years between Paul and the Reformation, the reader is presented with Marcion, for whom we possess no writings, and Augustine. Outside of this history are the great early interpreters: Irenaeus, whose sustained Pauline exegesis places Paul "at the centre of Christian theology" (so James Dunn²); Tertullian, whose fifth book *Against Marcion* presents in short form our earliest commentary on Galatians (a far more complete witness than any we have from Marcion); Origen, whose Romans commentary lays the interpretative foundation for all later commentators.³ Outside is Chrysostom, the definitive expositor of Paul for the Eastern half of the Church, whom the Catholic Fr. Lagrange similarly identifies as holding antiquity's greatest insights into Paul's thought in Romans and Galatians.⁴ Outside is Jerome, "undoubtedly the greatest biblical scholar that the Latin church ever produced" (so Gerald Bray⁵), whom Augustine himself confesses as his superior in knowledge of the Scriptures.⁶ The Spirit sleeps a familiar

² James D.G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making, Vol. 3: Neither Jew nor Greek* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 722.

³ See the work of Thomas Scheck, *Origen and the History of Justification: The Legacy of Origen's Commentary on Romans* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2008).

⁴ M. J. Lagrange, *Épître aux Romains* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1916), viii; Lagrange, *Épître aux Galates* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1926), viii, noted in Maurice Wiles, *The Divine Apostle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 3–4.

⁵ Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 91. See also Lightfoot, identifying Jerome's as "the most valuable of all the patristic commentaries on the Epistle to the Galatians"; in J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Macmillan, 1914), 232.

⁶ Augustine to Jerome, Ep. 73, AD 404; see *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John Rotelle, vol. 2/1 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2001), 275.

slumber for the eleven hundred years from Augustine to Luther, and none are able to wake him; neither the encomiums of grace in William of St. Thierry's Romans commentary, nor the clarion commentaries of Aquinas are of any avail; while the old couplet states, "if Lyra had not played, Luther would not have danced," here Nicholas makes no sound, and Martin dances alone. With such a foundation, is it a surprise that once the Spirit is roused at the Reformation, no later Catholic or Orthodox interpreters are found necessary to tell the history of grace?

The obvious defense of Barclay is that he is only following in a tradition; many of the later Protestant interpreters he engages choose one another as their conversation partners, and so the limited guest list is in some ways set for him. This is at least partially true, but for two reasons is not entirely sufficient. The first is that his hundred-page history of Pauline grace does not claim to be a confessionally circumscribed project, but rather a real history of interpretation.⁷ We would rightly object if an Orthodox scholar, writing from an academic standpoint, identified the only significant historical interpreters of Paul as his fellow Orthodox. The second is that Barclay himself is keenly aware of the consequences of a limited historical viewpoint. Thus Barclay begins his history of interpretation: "To understand our past is to understand ourselves. No contemporary interpreter of Paul can afford to remain ignorant of the history of interpretation, which influences us at levels deeper than we tend to recognize" (80). Here Barclay certainly speaks well, but his counsel is only partially followed. If we construct for ourselves a warped view of the past by examining only Protestant or quasi-Protestant interpreters, remaining uninformed of the mainstream of interpretation throughout most of Christian history, then it will scarcely be possible to accurately understand the past, or to understand ourselves in relation to it.

Just as much as its profound insights into the variegated and reciprocal nature of grace, then, this for me has been the enduring value of Barclay's book: as a mirror by which we in the discipline can see our own Protestant faces. There is no questioning Barclay's acumen as a scholar, nor his sensitivity to hidden confessional biases, and it is for these reasons that the way his study is circumscribed is all the more striking. Within academic biblical studies in general and Pauline studies in particular, ours is a

⁷ See e.g. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 5. On 79, Barclay offers as source criterion that "it would be hard to deny the significance and influence of each of the authors here discussed." And this may be so; but it is a narrow Protestant few who find Käsemann more significant than Chrysostom, and Baidou more influential than Aquinas.

discipline that is deeply and unconsciously rooted in Protestant pre-judgments. It is witnessed in our curiously selective engagement with historical and contemporary interpreters; in our assumed framework of “authentic” *Hauptbriefe*—governed in essence by Romans and Galatians—and “deutero-Paulines,”⁸ which we forget was constructed in the context of contra-Catholic polemics in the nineteenth century;⁹ in our identification of a reading tradition as “the old perspective,” which we demonstrate by including one interpreter from the fifth century, two from the sixteenth, and one from the eighteenth.¹⁰ The scope of Barclay’s book, though a limitation, can be of serious value in helping us recognize who we are as a discipline, and help us to move away from assumptions of a detached fairness or neutrality. Without such a recognition, even our best biblical scholars are likely to remain unfamiliar with the great interpreters of the majority of the Church’s history, and our own scholarship will continue in isolation from the bulk of non-Protestants, who will recognize from the guest list in our histories of interpretation that ours is a discipline that need not interest them. And this would be perhaps the greatest loss of all: because Barclay’s *Paul and the Gift* is a masterpiece of Pauline scholarship, a true gift that merits to be encountered by readers of every confession.

N.V

⁸ I write as a pot amongst kettles, as my own dissertation, like Barclay’s book, focuses its analysis on Romans and Galatians. On the “deutero-Pauline” designation, note the recent reflections in N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (London: SPCK, 2013), 56–61.

⁹ See the excellent recounting of the *Hauptbriefe*’s origins in chapter 2 of Benjamin White, *Remembering Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 20–25. White’s comments on Pervo’s recent work hold true for the discipline at large: “[Pervo] never connects the fact that the ‘real’ Paul discourse of the nineteenth century is part and parcel with the Lutheran reading of Paul. This is regrettable. The standard historical narrative that moves from Galatians (Paul) to Ephesians and Acts (pseudo-Paul) to the Pastoral Epistles (really pseudo-Paul) is ultimately built upon Luther being read through Baur” (65).

¹⁰ See Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The ‘Lutheran’ Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003). The parochial quality of our categories becomes clear when we try to articulate them for non-Protestants: try telling an Orthodox priest that the “old perspective on Paul” is Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and John Wesley!