

A Thomist Reading of Paul? Response and Reflections

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I am enormously grateful to all five of my respondents and to the editor for commissioning this enriching dialogue. I am truly honored to have my work read in such depth and with such generosity by this range of experts, who genuinely advance the discussion that I had hoped to evoke. The theological interpretation of Scripture is as important to me as its historical elucidation, and the interdisciplinary nature of these exchanges is a delight. Since many of these responses represent a distinctively Catholic approach to Paul, I will focus on that dimension of our dialogue. Both the agreement and the push-back in my response spring from my deep appreciation for the thoughtfulness that has gone into this symposium.

A theme running through these essays is appreciation of the way that *Paul & the Gift* disaggregates meanings and “perfections” of grace, and in particular the distinction I make between incongruity (gift to the unworthy) and non-circularity (gift that expects no return). As Isaac Morales notes, there is a touch of the scholastic *distinguo* in my method, and if that serves to clarify confusions and to challenge the modern idealization of the “gift with no return,” so much the better. I am glad to receive Bradley Gregory’s endorsement of my thesis that even gifts to the poor in Second Temple Judaism operated by a kind of circularity, so long as one factors in the promise that the return will come not from the poor themselves, but from God. I would hesitate, however, to put so much weight on the notion of charity as *loan* to God. Proverbs 19:17 is, I think, unique in using that particular striking metaphor, which could be taken to suggest that God is indebted by our giving and under contractual obligation to make a repayment. Widespread through the wisdom literature (Proverbs, Sirach, etc.) and on through Tobit into the New Testament, one finds the notion

that God will ensure that gifts to the poor are reciprocated, in one form or another, in this life or in the next. This is normally expressed in metaphors of harvest (you will reap what you sow), of return gift (what you give will be given back to you), of pay (there will be reward/wage [*misthos*] in return for work), or of investment (gifts constitute treasure laid up in heaven). In all cases, God is the overseer and guarantor of this return. But the particular concept of the loan (where one gives directly *to God*, who is then figured as a debtor, under legal obligation to give us what is owed *by right*) is rarely, if ever, carried through in our Second Temple or New Testament literature, even where Jesus says that those who give to the least give, in effect, to him (Mark 9:37; Matt 10:40; 25:31–46). In other words, one can have a robust sense of a proper and fitting return that is underwritten by God without the specific metaphor of the loan. But, on the fundamental point, we are fully in agreement: our texts factor God into human systems of gift, and promise divine reciprocity for gifts that are not, or cannot be, reciprocated on a human level (Matt 6:4 and Luke 14:14 are classic cases in the Gospels). And as some of the other essays note, at the deepest level, both John and Paul figure this divine return not merely as “payback,” but as the fulfilment of human potential that derives from *participation* in God’s generosity toward the world.

Several of my interlocutors highlight the extent of resonance between my reading of Paul and that offered by Thomas Aquinas, both in his *Summa* and in his commentaries on Paul. At times, my readers may be a little over-eager to find (or inclined to exaggerate) these resonances, but they certainly include: the *transformative* power of grace that is designed to turn its unworthy recipients into fitting, congruous children of God; the coinherence of faith and love, by which the trusting receipt of grace finds its necessary expression in recalibrated values and reordered relationships; the notion of the *habitus* (although, in my case, more in the sociological sense derived from Bourdieu than in the Aristotelian sense adopted by Aquinas); and a noncompetitive account of divine and human agency (which I learned from Aquinas via Katherine Tanner). Morales, Fr. David Meconi, and Michael Dauphinais gently suggest that my reading of Paul would have been deeper, at some points corrected, and certainly more systematic, if it had been more in line with Aquinas, and that is a challenge that, with some hesitation (given my inadequate knowledge of Aquinas), I wish to address here.

It is certainly notable that, as several of these responses note, Aquinas’s rich account of grace was not part of my survey in chapter 2, headed “Interpreting Paul on Grace.” Matt Thomas reads this as a kind of Protestant myopia, to which I plead only partly guilty. Augustine (who *was* included)

can hardly be regarded merely as a “proto-Protestant,” given the enormous influence of his theology of grace throughout the medieval period and his constant presence in the work of Aquinas. More importantly, I was not attempting to offer in that chapter “a history of interpretation on Pauline grace” (Thomas), but a survey of “Shifting Patterns of Perfection” (the subtitle of the chapter). “Perfections” are not just any readings of grace, but readings that draw one or other element of this motif to an end-of-the-line extreme. Hence, to take one example, although I was very conscious of the theology of John Chrysostom on this topic and often use his work in class, what is notable is how often he *refuses* to perfect grace in some of the ways that other Christians did or do. That is, of course, both interesting and important, and it might have been noted in the book, but the examples chosen in that chapter are all notable for the “perfecting” tendencies in their theologies of grace, and my point was to indicate how different these can be and how relative to particular theological contexts and purposes. But it is still the case that Aquinas (at least) could and should have been in the survey, since he does interestingly and carefully “perfect” grace in certain respects. I will try to make amends for that omission if there is ever a second edition of the book.

But the bigger question here is what would have been gained by fuller engagement with Aquinas in my reading of Paul. Behind that lurks the more fundamental question of what constitutes a good reading of Paul. A reading that situates Paul well in his first-century historical and cultural context is certainly one part of the answer, and in that respect, historical scholarship has moved on considerably since the thirteenth century. But I am not so enthralled to a “historicist” method as to believe that that is the whole of a “good reading” of Paul. In some cases, modern, historically informed readings of Paul are seriously deficient in elements that may be considered to make a reading “good.” A reading that respects the flow and dynamic of Paul’s letters as rhetorical arguments is another part of an answer, although opinions will divide on what textual frame should be considered (each individual letter? the whole Pauline corpus? the whole biblical canon?).¹ And beneath the question of the textual frame is the question of the theological (or other) basis on which one decides what is most central in Paul or what the “principles” are that undergird his theology. On a number of grounds, I doubt that there is, or ever will be, *one* final, complete, and fully “adequate” reading of Paul (or indeed of any

¹ There are complexities behind each of these potential answers that we cannot discuss here. It is notable, for instance, what difference it makes that a Catholic biblical canon includes Wisdom of Solomon while a Protestant canon does not.

text, sacred or secular). There will be some that are (on historical or textual grounds) impossible, but among the many *possible* readings of Paul, some will be better or worse, from a theological perspective, according to how well they *recontextualize* Paul's theology and render it theologically relevant and powerful in their own day. That is why I do not look to any figure in the past as definitive for our reading of Paul today and why, conversely, although I have my differences from Luther in his reading of Paul, I recognize his reading as "a brilliant re-contextualization of Pauline theology in the conditions of the sixteenth-century church" (*Paul & the Gift*, 572). Could the same be said of Aquinas in the context of the thirteenth century? I believe so, and in many respects, not least in his harvesting of the rediscovered Aristotle in order to fashion a theological system capable of embracing, within a single scheme of interpretation, both creation and salvation, both nature and grace. But, of course, the tendency of philosophy is to regard itself as "timeless," such that Aquinas's *contextual* rereading of Paul can be presented as universally and timelessly true. But, to my mind, there is much in Aquinas's (and Aristotle's) metaphysics that is time-bound and simply impossible for us today, eight centuries later, just as there is much in Luther and Calvin that we cannot merely repeat if we are to fulfil our contemporary responsibility in offering a theological reading of Paul. And this follows partly from the *nature* of Paul's theology, which was born *in and for mission*. A *missionary* theology that announces and explains the Gospel has to make itself contextually clear with a responsibility that is answerable both to the text of Scripture and to what constitutes life-giving "good news" today (and thus to the Spirit who speaks through Scripture). Thus, as a provisional response to my generous readers, I would like to reflect with them on some of the gains and losses that ensue from reading Paul through Aquinas. For the sake of simplicity, and to take up central themes in these essays, I focus here on just three areas of interest.

Nature and Grace

Aquinas's great achievement was to offer a theological vision that was both comprehensive and cohesive, embracing not just salvation and eschatology (the rescue and perfection of humanity) but also creation, or nature (including the design of humanity and of the world, before salvation, and even before the corruption of sin). This required not only an Aristotelian sense of God as the Prime Mover of all things, including all human agency, and an ontology of substance (including the rationality with which humanity is endued), but also a strong reconstruction of what humanity was like and was capable of being in its state of "integrity" before it was spoiled by

sin. On this basis, Aquinas could trace a crucial continuity between divine design and human fulfilment in salvation in which the grace of Christ exceeds, elevates, and perfects nature as something *superadditum* and *supernaturale* but does not destroy, counteract, or contradict creation or human nature as they once were and are designed to be. There is no doubt that this provides an integrative framework for theology that continues to prove its worth (not least in Catholic social teaching) and that is able to draw richly on the whole biblical canon. But does it constitute a good reading of Paul?

One could certainly point in support to the cosmic Christology of Colossians and Ephesians and to those hints in Romans 1–2 (including 2:14–15, if this is read as an allusion to “natural law”) that suggest that Paul’s soteriology has some connection to categories of “creation.” But much here has to be supplied *to Paul* from (Aristotle-inspired) speculation about the original human state of “integrity.” Paul himself appeals very little to the category of nature (or to “the image of God” in humanity), and where he does (e.g., in 1 Cor 11), he seems to use it to legitimate gender hierarchies that are in-built into ancient (including Aristotelian) versions of “nature” but are clearly cultural constructs and deeply unhelpful today. More to the point, Paul’s theology revolves around the great, stark *antitheses* between human sin and divine grace, between flesh and Spirit, between “the present evil age” and “the new creation” (Gal 1:4; 6:15). Paul seems to know only two kinds of human, the fallen human and the saved, not a third, pre-fall human whose rationality and morality is still partly intact in the midst of sin. Paul’s theology of inversion and contradiction, of the God who “raises the dead and calls into being the things that do not exist” (Rom 4:17), of the structuring symbols of Cross (death) and resurrection (*newness* of life), is not easily squeezed into a Thomist mold, or if so squeezed, it would be in danger of losing its creative, radical edge. One may protest that Paul’s vision, if taken on its own, is too narrowly focused on soteriology and on the great reversal of the broken human condition and that its horizons *need to be* expanded by the more comprehensive Thomist vision. But it may be that the sharp Pauline edges of *discontinuity*, *change*, and *reversal* (dangerously dualistic as they may sometimes seem) may be precisely what we need to hear in a contemporary context of mission and of increasing global dysfunction, where the wisdom of the Cross is needed to “destroy” the wisdom of the world (1 Cor 1:19). A subversive questioning of taken-for-granted norms and of the social order (which usually poses as “natural”) may be Paul’s greatest gift to contemporary theology. I have argued in *Paul & the Gift* that Paul’s theology of incongruous grace stood at the root of the creative social experiments that took place in his churches because it had the capacity to bring traditional, engrained value

systems into question. We would not want that voice to be muffled by its integration into a larger whole.

A Cosmic Order of Justice

Dauphinais makes an eloquent case for a theology of cosmic order, aligning Paul *with* (not, as I do, against) Wisdom of Solomon and locating a deep resonance with Aquinas if one traces through Paul the transformative power of grace, leading believers from incongruity (grace to the ungodly) to final congruity (godly and fitting heirs of eternal life). There is no doubting the appeal of this nonarbitrary justice in which human free will (and thus moral responsibility) is maintained, grace makes us pleasing to God (*gratia gratum faciens*), and one can speak of a human merit that God in justice properly, even necessarily, rewards. There are some overlaps, of course, between Calvin and Aquinas in their visions of an overarching cosmic justice: they disagreed on merit, but both spoke of “sanctifying grace,” both stressed final judgment, and both traced significant continuity between the old law and the new. And there is something profoundly satisfying in a Thomist account of this matter: does the unexpected, incongruous gift of Christ expose, as Dauphinais puts it, a “deeper harmony,” a cosmic order of wisdom to which the incongruous gift grants entry?

It would be foolish to deny that Paul can be read that way, especially if one places particular weight on Romans 2 and its image of just deserts at the final judgment. My reading of Paul is significantly different, however, for at least four reasons.

(1) Historical and philological research on the phrase “the righteousness of God” has shown that this means in Paul, as in his scriptural sources, not God’s distributive justice (as the Latin *iustitia* implies), but God’s saving power to right what is wrong. And the flow of Romans 1–3 indicates that the preliminary announcement of this “righteousness” in 1:16–18 points forward to 3:21–26, where that righteousness is revealed precisely in the saving and incongruous gift of Christ.

(2) What impresses Paul as the essence of the Christ-gift is that it is given to the ungodly, not the righteous (Rom 5:6–10), and this is impossible to reconcile with the careful way in which Wisdom traces God’s saving power as distributed to the righteous throughout history.²

² For a careful elucidation of the overlaps and contrasts between these two texts, see J. Linebaugh, *God, Grace, and Righteousness in Wisdom of Solomon and Paul’s Letter to the Romans: Texts in Conversation* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). I note that Fr. Meconi’s essay at points attributes to my reading of Paul what I said, in fact, about Wisdom of Solomon, whose perspective I placed in contrast to Paul’s.

(3) Although it is true, and significant, that Paul sees God's incongruous grace as transformative and designed, through the Spirit, to create moral *congruity* between believers and the will of God, everything that is said about that congruity depends, continually, on the resurrection life of Christ, and thus on an incongruous power of grace in weak and mortal human beings. As I argued with reference to Romans 5–8: “Christian life is an impossible newness given as an unfitting gift, such that everything in this new life refers back to its source and foundation in the Christ-gift, and forward to its eschatological fulfilment as eternal life. . . . Hence, the obligation now incumbent on believers is not to ‘gain’ grace (or salvation), nor to win another instalment of grace. There is a single *charisma* of eternal life (Romans 6:23), that runs from the Christ-event to eternity (cf. Romans 8:32), not a series of ‘graces’ won by increases in sanctification” (*Paul & the Gift*, 517–18). The Pauline confidence—“if God is for us, who is against us?”—is built on the Christ-gift (Rom 8:31–35) and indicates that there is something definitive about that incongruous grace of Christ that is not simply a mechanism within a larger scheme of justice.

(4) There is a strong strand of Pauline theology, not least in Romans 9–11, that indicates that, if there is an order in the cosmos, it consists, finally, of mercy. This mercy is not answerable to some final or deeper system of justice or law; it is God's unconditioned *Love* that “moves the sun and the other stars.” This gives to the tragic story of the cosmos an irrational, and finally inexplicable, hope: God has consigned all things to disobedience in order that he may have mercy on all (Rom 11:32). That makes the order of the gift ultimately untidy and, since we do not know fully what God's mercy means, also beyond our understanding (note the apophatic conclusion in Rom 11:33–36). But it also gives us hope at such times as these, when both the church and the world (and each one of us within them) are far from displaying the consistency of virtue that could be counted as merit in any full sense of that term.

Sanctifying Grace

In critiquing some aspects of the Lutheran *simul justus et peccator*, in speaking of the transformation of believers and their congruity with God, and in stressing participation in Christ and a model of noncompetitive agency (what I call “energism”), my reading of Paul certainly resonates at points with the Thomist tradition. Among the strengths of this tradition are its refusal, finally, to play divine and human agency off against one another, its sense of God's engagement, through grace, in all the believers' works (which are also, in an important sense, their own), and its insistence that

transformation is integral to salvation, not a supplement. The question is whether Aquinas's Aristotelian anthropology maps well onto Pauline discourse, or whether Paul's paradoxical language invites a more complex ontology of relation that is also, ultimately, more accessible and more effective in our communication of the Gospel today.

Aquinas's language of the "infusion" of grace, as if it were a substance that becomes immanent to the life of a believer, seems to stray beyond the range of possible meanings for Paul's Greek. *Charis* is the favor of the giver or the benefit or favor given, but it is not a substance that can be absorbed within the essence of its recipient, and there is a danger here that the "otherness" of God's intrusion into human life in grace is obscured. Even at those moments when Paul speaks of God's grace operative within his Christian life (e.g., 1 Cor 15:9–10 and 2 Cor 12:7–10), he seems at pains to highlight the notion of grace as a power that *comes upon* a believer. The "newness of life" in which believers live (Rom 6:4) is, and remains, the life of the resurrected Christ, without which they, in themselves, are simply dead or dying. In *Paul & the Gift*, I spoke of the believer's "eccentric" existence, trying to take seriously Paul's paradoxical expression that "it is no longer I that live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:19–20). How we interpret these verses in Galatians reveals, perhaps best of all, how we understand Paul's anthropology.³ Aquinas's tendency to see here a distinction between Paul's "soul" and his "flesh," with the latter understood as the body's sensual desires, maps an Aristotelian anthropology onto an author who persistently defies such categories. "The flesh," in Paul, is not reducible to "the physical body" or its desires, but often represents the whole self, in its entirety, as turned away from God: it is not a *part* of human existence, but a *mode*. The dialectics that run through Paul's anthropology (e.g., Gal 5:17 and 2 Cor 4:10) suggest that the believer's life is defined relationally: if one may speak of an ontology here, it is an ontology not of substance, nor of mere subjectivity, but of *relation*.⁴ And a believer's relationship with the grace of God seems, in Paul, neither stable nor linear: there is a drama about the way he speaks of the Christian life, a dynamic of interruption and event that suggests a constant and repeatedly renewed experience of dependence on grace. Indeed, the experiential (and affective) dimensions of Paul's language at this point are readily accessible and powerfully evocative today. At a time when mental health seems increasingly fragile

³ For the history of reception, see J. K. Riches, *Galatians through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

⁴ For a fresh approach along such lines, see S. Eastman, *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul's Anthropology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017).

and when our young people are suffering crises of self-worth of epidemic proportions, a voice that persistently and repeatedly affirms our worth before God on the basis of his grace alone—a voice from *outside* and *beyond* ourselves—is good news indeed.

If Paul's anthropology is configured in terms of *relation*, the believer's state is one of *participation in the life of Christ*. Morales presses me to spell out the *content* of the Christ-gift, and if I had to choose one Pauline phrase to sum this up, it would be "being found in Christ" (Phil 3:9). Morales is right that the metaphor of adoption is a central Pauline expression of this reality, though its comparative rarity in Paul's letters (in the undisputed letters, only in Galatians and Romans) makes me hesitate to grant this metaphor the status to which he elevates it. However, its (necessarily) metaphorical language is unusually rich, since it evokes not only an analogy between the believer's and the Son's relationship with God but also, in some respects, a *sharing* in that relationship (believers cry, like the Son, "Abba, Father," according to Gal 4:6 and Rom 8:15). But precisely what that status of "son/child" means and what it means to "participate" in Christ are questions that need careful handling. Fr. Meconi utilizes a rich range of terms and phrases: "assimilation," "imitation," "transformation," "divinization," "partaking of the divine nature," "deification," "*theosis*," "becoming gods," "incorporation in Christ's body," "continuation of Christ's Incarnation," and even "becoming God." The current fascination with such language across several confessional traditions can mask deep differences in meaning arising from incompatible assumptions about humanity and the ontological structures of reality. We can all agree that the believer, in Paul's theology, is in some sense "transformed." But what kind of change are we talking about? It seems that the Pauline language of participation and transformation can spawn a huge variety of readings, some of which are in danger of pulling his theology out of shape. Paul appears, in fact, rather little interested in God's "being," or "essence," or "nature," and much more concerned with God's actions and activities: to be "found in Christ" is not to be absorbed into Christ's being, but to have one's self remade and redefined relationally, both in relation to God (in obedience and faith) and in relation to others (in love). Perhaps more can be said than that, but unless we are able to articulate and defend a theologically robust anthropology, we need to be cautious in what we claim.

Let me conclude by expressing again my gratitude for these essays and for the enormous stimulation they have evoked. For too long, the modern study of Paul has been the preserve of Protestants (as Matt Thomas complains), and I sincerely hope that this dialogue will be just the opening stage of a new phase of engagement between Pauline scholarship and Cath-

olic theological interpretation. Even if there will be no ultimate, definitive reading of Paul, we have much to learn from our varied traditions of scriptural interpretation. And that is part, at least, of what it means to live in an age of receptive ecumenism.

N.V.