The Personology of Grace: A Study of Pauline Anthropology

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What does it mean to be a person living under grace? What did it mean to Paul the apostle? Is there any correlation between the Christian personology of a Paul and our living today? These are mammoth and momentous questions which cannot be adequately answered in the few pages at my disposal. I wish, however, to try to indicate the direction that I think such a discussion should follow and to share a perspective which I have found helpful.

If Paul is to speak to our times, we need a bridge which can join Paul’s side with our own, a bridge between the way Paul thought about human persons under Christ and the way we think in the twentieth century, between his mythical description and what today can include sociological and psychological expressions. Such a bridge I want to suggest is the approach of sociology of knowledge made popular and accessible to us in the book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, although their heritage goes back to Alfred Schutz and others. I choose this as a bridge for a number of reasons, all of which I cannot defend here. I have found this perspective important because it helps me to come to grips with two very important features of Pauline personology: the strong “before/after” description (conversion) and the strong noetic basis for personology.

According to Berger and Luckmann, the world in which we live—the society, the values, the institutions, the relational structures, the cultural expressions—is a socially constructed world. That is, *the world is what we think it to be*. We are given this world from the day of our birth—at least it begins to be constituted for us then—through the medium of our significant others. Once we can deal with language, the concepts of reality which determine that phenomenon—with its at times horizon-opening and at *times* horizon-limiting parameters—are embedded in us, and we are on the road to a blind acceptance of truth, which as long as we do not question it, becomes Truth.

Thus we grow up into a world, the world of parents and siblings, of school and business, of politics and piety, which we assume to be ontologically real. In actuality we have no access to any proof of its reality, but normally we never even stop to doubt. And, it is crucial to note, our religions belong to that socially constructed world as much as political systems and ethical values.

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1 I have coined the word “personology” to replace the traditional term “anthropology.” For some people anthropology can mean a description of males. It has the same ambiguity that “man” in English carries. Thus, despite the greater awkwardness, I prefer to use a term which does not carry connotations of sexism.


3 The following paragraphs are indebted particularly to ibid., 129-63.
Ultimately to live in any given world is to live by faith that that world is true and good and beautiful. That faith, however, may become jolted and disturbed. For whatever reasons, questions may begin to rise in our thinking about whether our world is true after all. We may be challenged by an alternative world, which invades our reality with its own claims to be true and good and beautiful. When that happens, we may be tempted to leave the world that has been given us, and in which we have lived for so long, and to risk entering a new world which may seem very scary indeed, but which may promise us more reality, more truth and beauty than the world of our past. That is, we may have, however inchoately, concluded that our old world was false, and our vision of what seems more real lures us into a different country.

There are many words for this shift of world, of perspective. The traditional religious word is, of course, “conversion.” If we continue to use this term, we should be aware that it means a “turning around,” a complete shift in the place one stands. Berger and Luckmann term it an “alternation,” presumably in that it opts for an alternative world. Another set of authors calls this change a “radical perceptual shift,” again with the insight that it means looking at reality in a totally different way. I like to call it “world-switching,” since it means that one leaves one world and enters a new one.

There are important ramifications of this way of looking at “reality.” First, for personology. When we are given our world, we are given the definition of ourselves. We are a part of the world in which we live. Thus we understand ourselves in relation to that world. But since that world is a socially constructed world, based on primal perceptions about reality, we are who we think we are. That is, our basic self-definition (which may be below our conscious awareness) is part of our basic definition of our world (which may also be below consciousness). If I am an ancient Greek, I may see myself as an immortal soul entrapped in a messy body. As an ancient Israelite, I may see myself as a body empowered by energy (soul). As a contemporary existentialist, I may see myself as someone who is defined by what I do, rather than what I am. In each instance, I am who I think I am.

The second ramification I want to stress is the place of our understanding of God in the total “world” which we inhabit. For a religious world, the understanding of God determines the rest of the system. And that means that how we understand God determines how we understand ourselves. Thus to switch worlds means to change in some radical way our understanding of God. The crucial corollary here is that our understanding of God brings with it a new self-understanding. Of course it is possible to reverse the process and to say that our understanding of ourselves determines our understanding of God. I am not interested in arguing the chicken and egg issue, but in saying that these three realities are inextricably connected: what our world is, what our God is, and what we are as persons. One can at least say this, that a true world-switching means a radical redefinition of the meaning of God. This is certainly true in Paul’s theology.

I. PAUL’S PERSONOLOGY OF THE WORLD OF SIN AND DEATH

As stated above, the perspective of sociology of knowledge is particularly useful when
interpreting a personology, such as Paul’s, which involves two radically different views of the person: that of the fall, and that of the transformed self restored by the Christ-event. As a good Jewish theologian, Paul also doubtlessly knew of a view of the person before the fall, but since he does not choose to deal with it, we can only hunch what it may have looked like.6

We are accustomed to think of the fall as an “event” which centers around Adam and Eve, and it is true that in Romans 5 Paul contrasts Adam with Christ as the eschatological reversal of Adam. I do not think, however, that that topos is the best or most profound place to go to understand Paul’s view of the distorted world of sin and death in which people now find themselves. Paul’s real description of the fall is, I think, Romans 1:18-23. While this passage is commonly thought to refer only to gentiles, with the Jew not being placed in scene until 2:17, I would argue that both Jew and gentile are here included. Paul is describing what has happened to the world from its beginning; indeed the entire movement from 1:18 through 3:20 is to demonstrate the life of sin and death that infects all the world, including the Jew (cf. 3:19-20). Paul clearly affirms that life under the law is a life of death (Rom 7) and that it is as well an imprisonment by the powers and principalities which enslave the gentiles (Gal 4:8-9).

Romans 1:18-23 is so remarkable and so full of language which points to the distortion of basic perceptions about world and God that I translate it in full (somewhat freely) and italicize the words which point to the noetic basis of the shift.

For the wrath of God from heaven is being revealed against all impiety and wickedness of people who suppress true reality by wickedness. For [true] knowledge of God is manifest among them, since God has manifested [himself] to them. From the beginning of the world his unseeable attributes, that is, his eternal power and deity, are perceived, being comprehended in the things that have been made, that they might be without excuse. Thus although knowing God they did not praise or give thanks to him as God, but instead became foolish in their reflections and their uncomprehending heart became darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became foolish, and exchanged the revelation of the immortal God for the likeness of an image of a mortal person and birds and animals and reptiles.


Here the fall is described as a radical perceptual shift from true reality or knowledge to falsehood. The true world is available to humankind; the true perception of the reality of God is present to be perceived, which would then lead to the honoring of God as God, that is, faithful obedience. Thus Paul sees that the basis of one’s world is the perception of God. When God is not honored as God, false gods emerge, but as a result of this exchange, the reality of persons living in this world changes as well. Paul states with as much incisiveness as he can that such persons no longer are able to comprehend reality and truth. He piles up descriptions of this inability: their reasoning is fatuous; their heart (which has noetic functions in Jewish psychology) is uncomprehending and darkened; they have, in short, become stupid, unable to see themselves, their world, or God in true reality. A few verses later (1:28) Paul sums up the perceptual incapacity of the world by the phrase, adokimos nous, which can best be translated, “a
mind which does not have the capacity to reach accurate conclusions about reality,” however 
awkward such a translation sounds.

The greatest irony in all of this is that the world is not at all aware of its condition. People 
think they are wise. The think they are, in fact, living in the true world, the world of beauty and 
light, the world of religious worship and duty. However much from Paul’s perspective they live 
in the false world, they themselves are far from aware of that fact. Doubtlessly they would think 
that it is Paul who is living in the false world. Paul seems aware of that reverse judgment in 
Romans 4.

The remainder of chapter 1 then indicates another irony, this time from God’s view. 
Since they think they are living in reality, but are actually in falsehood, God’s judgment upon 
this world is just to let it remain where it is. Verses 24, 26, and 28 contain the repeated refrain, 
“God gave them up,” “handed them over”—to punishing angels? No, to themselves and the life 
they have chosen. A life of falsehood, alienated from the true God and the true world he has 
created, is punishment enough.

The reality of the self. Is it possible to determine more precisely what the self in this 
distorted world is like? Judging from the vice catalogue in Romans 1:29-31 (which is Paul’s 
longest and fiercest) one might conclude that the self becomes a violently wicked and rapacious 
person. Such catalogues are, however, stereotypes and should not be mined as if they reveal the 
deepest thoughts of the author. Certainly Paul is more profound elsewhere.

The apostle’s own participation in the life of sin and death had been as a Pharisaic Jew, 
and it is reflection on that experience in which we should expect him to be most revealing of the 
essential quality of life of the person who does not know who God really is. It is hardly a life out 
of control. In fact Paul can boast that as a good Pharisee he was “blameless” under the law (Phil 
3:6; cf. also Gal 1:14). Thus it is not in the external actions that the essence of the distorted life 
lies. As already suggested, the false world does not know it is living in falsehood; thus it can 
compliment itself on its cultural edifices, including religious and ethical.

Paul, even as he faultlessly obeyed the law, belonged to that distorted world of sin and 
death.7 He belonged there because he was trying to justify himself by works of the law. 
Ultimately this means that he had misunderstood God as that

establish their own, they were not obedient to the justification from God” (Rom 10:1-3); notice again the key words of perception and knowledge. 2. A person, however, for whom covetousness is the basis of existence is also a hostile person toward the very object of his covetousness. Paul also is aware of this—“For being hostile [to God] we were reconciled to God through the death of his son” (Rom 5:10; cf. also 2 Cor 5:20). In the very act of attempted obedience lies hostility to the person who demands obedience. For many readers of this journal, the reported reply of Luther to Staupitz is probably already in mind: “I do not love God, I hate him.”

To sum up: This world of sin and death, this distorted world which knows neither itself nor God has tragically misread God to be the Father who demands and the Father who kills. As a result its personology is based upon the project that one must justify oneself, has to be in charge of its own salvation, and the self thus sets out on the various projects which it thinks will lead to that salvation. Paul, of course, highlights for his own day that one project of justification by works of the Jewish law; for the rest of his world and ours, however, the projects are too numerous to name and lie deep in the heart of all of our beings. They are also, probably, inaccessible to our consciousness, just as was Paul's project to his.

II. THE PERSONOLOGY OF THE NEW CREATION

Paul in his experience of the risen Christ switched worlds and, sooner or later, came to a radical perceptual shift which he was able to articulate in classic form for all time. And just as Paul switched worlds, so he knew that any person, Jew or gentile, who entered the Christian fellowship also switched worlds and arrived at a radically different way of perceiving reality. Paul calls this the new creation (2 Cor 5:17), although by the word “creation” he signals that the new world is the fruition of that world always intended by God from the beginning. Thus it is not an escape from creation or from history, but a restoration to that creation which God declared “good” in Genesis 1.9

But what kind of transformation is it, and is it a change in persons or merely a divine fiat from God which will take effect only in the future? Is it only forgiveness, or is it a genuine transformation of a person so that one really does live in a new reality? If a radical perceptual shift created the distorted world of sin and death, we would expect a similar radical perceptual shift in its reversal. Paul does not disappoint us and indicates that the self is transformed, due to the same kind of world-switching that accompanied the first.

Here our text is Romans 12:1-2. Paul has finished the major theological portion of the letter. In chapter 12 he turns to ethical admonitions, based on the new being in Christ. Chapter 12:1-2 is a kind of superscript of the entire following materials, indicating the basis by which the ethical act can be performed. Again I call attention to the importance of words of perception in this passage.

I exhort you, brothers, through the mercies of God, to present yourselves a living sacrifice, holy, well-pleasing to God, your rational and spiritual service. And do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, in
order that you may test and determine what is the will of God, that which is good and acceptable and mature.

The sacrificial metaphors point to a particular kind of service which is Christian service. The Greek word which modifies “service” is logikos, the adjectival form of logos. Clearly some rational, perceptual activity is intended, although the context suggests that the addition of the word “spiritual” gives a fuller sense to what Paul means. If there is any doubt about the perceptual dimension of this service, the following verse dispels it. Here clearly is a transformation (metamorphosis) caused by a making new, an eschatological reversal of the nous (mind). What is even more startling is that this renewal of the mind enables a person to seek out and determine what the will of God is. We saw that in Romans 1:28 the distorted world is ruled by a senseless mind—the phrase is adokimos nous. In Romans 12:2 the renewed nous is able to test out and fathom the will of God; and the word is dokimadzo, the same word as in 1:28, without the prefixal negative. In this way Paul points to the exact reversal of the radical perceptual shift described in Romans 1. The fall is a shift into a false world; the transformed reality in Christ is a perceptual shift back into the true, where one now has the ability to know God once again.

That the renewed mind now has the capacity to know God’s will has immense implications for Christian ethics, but I cannot discuss that here. What I must focus on are the results of the transformation for the personology of the new creation. One thing is obvious. If the basic perception of the distorted world is justification by works, that of the new creation is that God gives life to all as sheer gift. Paul calls this justification by grace.

That means that in this new creation God is known to be different from the God of the distorted world. God is no longer the righteous Father who demands deeds: God is the loving Father who bestows life before a good deed is ever performed. Paul’s insight has redefined God, and in redefining God has redefined the self. The self is no longer the person in desperate pursuit of salvation; the self is now the person who basks in the warmth of God’s acceptance and love and who because of that awareness of warmth and acceptance becomes a totally different self than before.

Is it difficult to imagine that a self living out of life as sheer gift is a totally different person from the one who has to earn salvation? Surely the change in basic perception of God, world, and self permeates into every nook and cranny of existence. If we are who we think we are, then the renewal of our mind has renewed our total reality, the sense of who we are before God as well as the sense of who we are in relation to others.

Fortunately for us, Paul is very clear about his description of the transformed person in Christ and in the community of the faithful. Even statistically four words stand out: freedom, peace, joy, and love. The transformed person is freed from the old world, from all of those things and values which bind one in restricted ways to external values—even ethical ones. And yet there is a freedom for the neighbor as real person, a perception about him that never existed.
before. There is peace, which means one is no longer hostile toward a God now proved to be false, a serenity in the knowledge that the true God will not kill but will continue to hold us in the palm of her hand. There is joy, a kind of exuberance which overflows into the love for others because we are filled with love and acceptance from God. There is love, which is not to be taken in some masochistic way (in whatever Christian garb it is clothed) which insists that love is only toward the unlovely (although that is sometimes true). Paul’s basic understanding of love is reciprocal. We love, yes, but we can be confident that we are loved in return. For example, both times that he cites “love your neighbor as yourself,” he interprets it to mean “loving one another” (Gal 5:13-14; Rom 13:8). Thus not only does the believer know God’s love; he and she also know the love directed caringly toward them by other members of the community.

There are other dimensions. Of primary importance is that this reality is not a postponed one; thus the postponement principle no longer applies. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature” (2 Cor 5:17). There is a definite strand of realized eschatology in Paul, however much he also anticipates a consummation outside of history. The eschatological realities of freedom, peace, joy, and love are here now, as one stands before the true God who bestows life, not as a promise of future reward, but as the reality of faith in the present. The new reality established by the radical perceptual shift is the reality of salvation.

Also of importance in this reality is that all people are equal to each other. In a citation of a baptismal formula, Paul writes: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:27-28, RSV). Here in the rite of passage that leads one from the old world into that of the new creation, the most serious and divisive barriers between people the ancient world knew are destroyed. Of course, Jews remain Jews, and Greeks, Greeks; there are still slaves and free, male and female. Yet in

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the Christian community all status and value judgments based on such distinctions are destroyed. If God gives us all life as sheer gift, then we are all equally graced and thus equal to each other.

Eventually there were no more Jews in the church; eventually the slave system was replaced. Male and female remain, fortunately; unfortunately the later church rejected the baptismal formula and the theological underpinning of justification by grace. But for a while, and certainly throughout Paul’s ministry, women were active church leaders and existed as co-equals with men in the congregations.11

One implication of this egalitarianism is that the personology of the new age can never be defined in terms of one person-self for women and another for men. Just as in Christ male and female are equals, so the old sexist distinctions about the “nature” of women versus the “nature” of men fall to the ground. There is in fact ONE new person in Christ and this is neither male nor female.

Paul describes this new person in one of his catalogues. Previously I stated that in catalogues of vices one need not be too sure the views of the author are contained in them. The occasional catalog of virtue, to the contrary, may be different. In Galatians 5:19-23 Paul contrasts two catalogues: one of vices under the heading of the “works of the flesh,” the other, of virtues under the “fruit of the Spirit.” In this latter is contained, I believe, Paul’s truest guide to the personology of the new creation. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience,
kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” Consider what a wonderfully non-macho image this person in Christ has. As I have said elsewhere in a complete exegesis of this passage, such a picture of the transformed person in Christ is much closer to the old views of what a woman is supposed to be than that of a man.12

Speaking of reversals and transformations! What a delicious irony (delicious at least for some) that despite all the centuries of the repression of women in the church, the apostle who has repeatedly been paraded by church leaders as the prime example of sexism not only turns out to be on the side of equality but actually states that the “image” of the woman is far closer to what a person in Christ is to be like than the old “image” of the male. But then there are many surprises for all of us as we switch worlds, many challenges, many releases, many new possibilities. Paul invites us all, in faith, to leave that distorted world of justification by our deeds and to enter that new creation where life is always and only sheer gift. In faith I think it can be said, all the surprises are delightful.
