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Grace and Gift in Luther and Paul

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LUTHER'S MISREADING OF PAUL?

What would Martin Luther be without Paul the Apostle? Galatians was his Katie von Bora, the epistle to which he was betrothed.[1] Of the righteousness of God in Romans, Luther famously delighted, "Da riß ich herdurch," roughly "That was my breakthrough!" Paul knew the good news of God's grace, and Luther loved him for it. Luther's 1535 lectures on Galatians were among the first of his works to be translated into English. In Luther's wake, the great apostle to the Gentiles was fast becoming the guarantor of justification by faith for the growing Protestant world.

In recent decades, however, the tide of Luther's interpretation of Paul has flowed powerfully back out to sea. The stream of Pauline interpretation that has come to be called the "new perspective" has challenged Luther's reading of Paul head-on.[2] For proponents of the new perspective, Luther is no giant from whose shoulders we may see yet further; nor is he one helpful contributor among many in a collective effort to understand Paul properly. Luther was flat-out wrong. His own existential angst led him into a serious, eisegetical misreading of Paul that has mis-

[1]See Jaroslav Pelikan, "Introduction to Volume 26," in *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986) 26:ix.

[2]For the coining of this term, see James D. G. Dunn's 1982 lecture, reprinted as "The New Perspective on Paul," in *Jesus, Paul, and the Law* (London: SPCK, 1990) 183–214. The extent to which the new perspective is actually new is, naturally, a debatable matter. For some critical responses, see note 25 below.

Was Luther just wrong about Paul, as some recent New Testament scholarship claims? An examination of Luther's distinction between "grace" and "gift" might help mediate that argument.

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led the Western tradition for centuries.[3] The great apostle to the Gentiles had been tragically *misrepresented* as the guarantor of justification by faith for the Protestant world.

E. P. Sanders's *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*,[4] undoubtedly the flagship of the new-perspective fleet, affirmed Albert Schweitzer's basic insight that justification by faith is only a secondary line of thought for Paul. Preferring instead Paul's doctrine of union or participation with Christ, Sanders explained that "the real bite of [Paul's] theology lies in the participatory categories."[5] References to the righteousness of faith arise only "where a controversy with the law has to be dealt with."[6] According to this line of thinking, Paul has two sets of soteriological vocabulary, the participatory and the forensic, and it is the former that more genuinely represents his thought.

The new perspective on Paul is, of course, no monolithic movement. Major figures like E. P. Sanders, James Dunn, and N. T. Wright diverge broadly in their positive constructions of Paul's thought. It is thus all the more significant that they converge in their extreme skepticism regarding the exegesis of the Reformation. For them, Paul cannot be construed as the great proponent of justification by faith that the Lutheran tradition has understood him to be.

"Must we now choose between fidelity to the hermeneutics of the Reformation and faithfulness to the New Testament?"

Though probably unintended by many proponents of the new perspective, these developments pose very significant questions for Luther scholarship. Was Luther basically wrong about the fundamental breakthrough of the Reformation? If justification by faith were not central for Paul, how would this change the way we appreciate a Reformer who insisted that justification was central and that it ought to be for all of Christendom? Practically speaking, what might this mean for those Christian preachers and other stewards of the word who stand in Luther's shadow? Must we now choose between fidelity to the hermeneutics of the Reformation and faithfulness to the New Testament? Although this line of questioning seems to have been thrust unavoidably upon Luther's students and heirs, a different way of approaching the perceived rift between Paul and Luther may be available.

Grace and Gift in Luther

In a paper presented originally in 1996, Simo Peura argued that the twin notions of "grace" (*gratia*, *favor*) and "gift" (*donum*) express the two aspects of Lu-

[3]For the most famous articulation of this charge, see Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," in *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 78–96.

[4]E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977).

[5]Sanders, *Paul*, 502.

[6]Schweitzer, *Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: MacMillan, 1956) 220.

ther's doctrine of justification.[7] According to Peura, grace "indicates that a sinner is forensically declared righteous," and gift describes how a sinner "is effectively made righteous."[8] Though this terminology is not original to Luther, he begins his use of it in connection with Rom 5:15 and continues to employ it in a number of contexts ranging across a fairly wide period in his life. Because this distinction between grace and gift suggests that Luther's teaching on justification is not reducible to a forensic description of imputation, the texts in which he makes use of this vocabulary deserve careful attention in our present study.

Romans Lectures (WA 56:318; *LW* 25:305–306)[9]

The terminology of grace and gift appears first in the Romans lectures of 1515/1516. In this early work Luther's brief remarks on Rom 5:15 center around two concerns. First, he emphasizes that grace and gift, properly understood, are inseparable. The apostle joins them together "as if they were different," but they belong together and are given together. Second, he insists that both are given freely without human merit but only by the merit and grace of Christ. In the single paragraph that Luther spends on this verse, he repeats several times that what is given to the sinner is given "by the personal grace of Christ."

Preface to the German translation of Romans (WA,DB 7:8, lines 10–29; *LW* 35:369–370)

In Luther's 1522 preface to the German translation of the Epistle to the Romans, Luther again takes up the terminology of grace and gift from Rom 5:15 (now *Gnade* and *Gabe* instead of *gratia* and *donum*). In contrast to the emphasis on the near identity of grace and gift in the earlier Romans lectures, Luther signals a shift toward distinguishing between them in this Romans preface. He continues to define "grace" as the gracious disposition of God, but now a new place for "gift" seems to have emerged as a consequence of this grace. As a result of grace, God is disposed to give something else to the believer, namely Christ and the Spirit with his gifts. Furthermore, these gifts are not merely "accounted" or even just "given," but they, with the Spirit, are "poured into us" (den geyst mit seinem gaben ynn in uns zu gissen).

In the lines that follow, Luther continues to distinguish gift from grace quite deliberately. And he does so in this context primarily by their different degrees of completion. By grace God forgives a sinner entirely and reckons her entirely righteous, but the gift is not as completely effective. A sinner may only be partially healed of sin, but she is completely forgiven. The gifts are "daily increasing"

[7]Simo Peura, "Christ as Favor and Gift (*donum*)," in *Union with Christ*, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 42–69. This article is just one example of Peura's work, and Peura is just one piece of a larger movement in Finnish Luther scholarship. For an introduction to that literature and for bibliography, see *Union with Christ*.

[8]Peura, "Christ as Favor and Gift," 42.

[9]WA refers to *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 60 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1883–1980); *LW* refers to *Luther's Works* (as in note 1).

(teglich zu nehmen), "incomplete" (noch nicht volkommen), and "just beginning" (angefangen), but the grace and justification are complete ("Gott...nympt uns gantz und gar auff ynn die hulde").

Finally, at the end of this short section of the Romans preface, Luther connects his understanding of grace and gift in Rom 5:15 with the declaration of "no condemnation" in Rom 8:1. How can it be that St. Paul portrays himself as a sinner in Rom 7 and claims that there is nothing to condemn in Rom 8:1? How can the work of the gift be incomplete and leave nothing for condemnation? Luther guides the reader of Romans to understand that sin may yet remain alongside the unfinished gift-work of the Spirit, but that sin is not condemned in the believing sinner, because she stands *completely* under grace.

Against Latomus (*LW* 32:226–247)

That the comparison between Luther's lectures on Romans in 1515/1516 and his preface to Romans in 1522 proves so interesting is due in no small part to Luther's intervening controversy with the Louvainian theologian Latomus in 1521. Luther spent the lion's share of his reply to Latomus formulating the argument that real sin does indeed still exist in the baptized Christian even though that Christian is wholly accepted by God. Luther depends in this argument on a clear distinction between grace and gift, and he develops here in greater detail the themes that appear in more abbreviated form in the Romans preface.

Luther begins his use of the grace-gift combination in *Against Latomus* by employing his own typical vocabulary of gospel and righteousness in ways that seem atypically "effective." "The gospel...deals with sin so as to remove it, and thus most beautifully follows the law."[10] After describing the gospel as thus removing (not "forgiving") sin, Luther goes on to describe the twofold work of the gospel: "It does this so that we may seek to be freed and to sigh after grace, for the gospel also teaches and preaches two things, namely, the righteousness and the grace of God. Through righteousness it heals the corruption of nature."[11] Luther uses "the gospel" as the larger category under which both grace and gift are subsumed. In this case he uses the term "righteousness" to describe the effective gift ("heals the corruption of nature"), and the companion of righteousness he calls, not surprisingly, "grace or mercy, the good will [*favor*] of God."[12] Luther's rather surprising use of righteousness to describe a transformative, sanative power is striking enough, but it is all the more remarkable that he even identifies this effective righteousness as the righteousness of faith named in Rom 3:21, 28, and 5:1, texts usually understood as exegetical pillars of Luther's forensic doctrine of justification.

Although Luther's use of the concept of grace and gift is quite consistent from *Against Latomus* to the Romans preface, his rhetorical situation in *Against Latomus* clarifies for us his emphasis on the different degrees of completion. In the disputa-

[10]*LW* 32:226.

[11]*LW* 32:227.

[12]Ibid.

tion with Latomus, Luther's burden is to defend the reality of post-baptismal sin, but he will certainly not want to argue for the damnability of the baptized Christian. Luther has set himself a tricky task; he must argue that Christians have sin but that a Christian's sin does not condemn him. Luther reaches for his interpretation of grace and gift to solve the problem: "We therefore have two goods of the gospel against the two evils of the law: the gift on account of sin, and grace on account of wrath."[13] Because of the difference in degree of completion, Luther can seal his argument, "Everything is forgiven through grace but as yet not everything is healed through the gift....while this is happening, it is called sin...but it is...dead sin, harmless sin."[14] With reference to Rom 8:1, Luther explains, "The reason why there is no condemnation is not that men do not sin...but because—as Paul says—they are in Jesus Christ....Or as is said more clearly in Rom 5[:15], they have grace and the gift through his grace."[15] Because of the complete character of grace and the incomplete character of gift, a Christian can sin without experiencing wrath.

> ***"everything is forgiven through grace but as yet not everything is healed through the gift"***

We see in this passage some hints of a causal link between grace and gift. Grace seems at first to be given a kind of priority. Christians are said to have "the gift through his grace." In the following paragraphs, Luther describes these two goods as "two foundations," and he describes the first foundation (grace) as "the stronger and more important, for although the second amounts to something, it does so only through the power of the first."[16] That the second foundation amounts to anything at all is a significant point to raise against purely forensic readings of Luther, but the priority that he assigns to grace looks assuringly familiar.

Luther, however, is never as predictable as his students might like him to be, and the matter is not easily resolved. In the very next sentence grace seems again to be at least partially contingent upon the work of the gift: "there is no condemnation if they fight against themselves and their sin."[17] Then, when Luther describes Paul's own spiritual status, he gives the primary agency to "gift," so that grace comes about because of the power of the gift, just as much as the second foundation previously amounted to something "only through the power of the first." Luther writes, "The gift makes him spiritual and places him under grace—the grace of the one man Jesus Christ."[18]

In explaining the functions of grace and gift, Luther turns also to Luke 24:47

[13]*LW* 32:228.
[14]*LW* 32:229.
[15]*LW* 32:239.
[16]Ibid.
[17]Ibid.
[18]*LW* 32:246.

and the parting command of Jesus that repentance and forgiveness of sins are to be preached in his name. Why, Luther asks, must repentance be preached? Why does Jesus not think that it would be enough to preach only the forgiveness of sins? He answers, "Is there not agreement in this: repentance is the transformation of corruption and the continual renewal from sin which is effected by faith, the gift of God, and the gift of grace is forgiveness, so that in that case the wrath against sin ceases?"[19] In this case, Luther is again clearly using the grace-gift concept to describe the twofold character of Christian salvation, but here he links it with new vocabulary and a different scriptural text. He uses terms like "repentance," "transformation," and "renewal" together with gift, and the "forgiveness" of sins together with grace, and he finds this doctrine in the words of Christ in the Gospel of Luke, outside of its usual Pauline home in Romans.

Sommerpostille (WA 21:458, lines 11–30)

Luther's use of grace and gift underwent some development from the Romans lectures through the controversy with Latomus and into the Romans preface. Now in the *Sommerpostille* ("Summer Sermons"), Luther shows another side of his teaching, not seen in the previous texts. Commenting on John 14:23–31, Luther connects grace and gift to the indwelling of Christ in the heart of the believer. Most germane are his comments on the last part of John 14:23, wherein Jesus promises the divine presence to those who keep his word: "[M]y Father will love them, *and we will come to them and make our home with them*" (NRSV, emphasis added).

Luther's use and explanation of grace and gift in this context are revealing. When Jesus promises divine presence to the obedient Christian, Luther thinks of the indwelling of the Son in the heart of the Christian and explains that indwelling in terms of grace and gift. Luther praises these words of Christ as a great and precious promise, a promise that we will actually partake of the divine nature. He celebrates this partaking of the divine nature because it means that we will not only (!) be loved by God and experience his favor and grace, but that we will receive also another gift. We receive not only the forgiveness of sins and peace with God, but the Lord himself dwells in us and the Holy Spirit works in us to create new thoughts, hearts, and lives.

In this text we observe Luther making yet another use of his understanding of grace and gift. He turns to it to explain a passage from the Gospel of John, and the point of connection in this case is the indwelling of Christ in the heart of the Christian.

Preface to the 1546 German translation of Romans (WA,DB 7:9, lines 10–29; *LW* 35:369–370)

There is no significant difference between Luther's use of grace and gift in his 1522 and 1546 prefaces to Romans. The lack of change, in fact, is what is significant. Given the opportunity to revise his prefaces, an opportunity that we know he sometimes seized, Luther was pleased to repeat his discussion of grace and gift un-

[19] *LW* 32:232.

changed. Because of this, we can trace Luther's use of this doctrine all the way through to 1546 and be confident that it represents a strand of Luther's genuine thought in both his early and late career.

Summary of Grace and Gift

1. Luther uses the distinction between grace and gift in a variety of different contexts. We find it in academic expositional lectures, in the preface to the popular German translation of Romans, in a theological disputation with an academic theologian, and in the *Sommerpostille* commenting on a lectionary text from the Gospel of John. That Luther draws on this doctrine in such a wide variety of contexts is evidence for its being representative of his thought. It is unlikely that he would make use of it in such varied contexts if he found it unnatural or peripheral.

2. Luther uses this terminology to explain a variety of scriptural texts. He discusses it not only in connection with Rom 5:15, but finds it useful also for illuminating the meaning of Rom 8:1 later in the epistle. When he talks about the gift in terms of righteousness, he thinks that this (effective) righteousness is in view in Rom 3:21, 28, and 5:1. Furthermore, he thinks that Jesus taught the same lesson in Luke 24:47, and that Jesus' promise of the divine presence in John 14:23 implies both grace and gift. Again, Luther's demonstrable tendency to find this doctrine at work in a variety of biblical texts that do not use the vocabulary of grace and gift themselves is evidence that it was at home in Luther's theology.

"Luther not only uses grace and gift in a variety of contexts and in connection with a variety of biblical texts, but he does so over a wide span in his career"

3. At the risk of belaboring the point, Luther not only uses grace and gift in a variety of contexts and in connection with a variety of biblical texts, but he does so over a wide span in his career. Thirty years pass between Luther's initial description of grace and gift in the Romans lectures and the 1546 Romans preface, the latter coming twenty-five years after the developed articulation of those ideas in his dispute with Latomus. During that time, Luther used grace and gift in a variety of contexts and articulated the same basic content in varying formulations. All of this suggests that this way of thinking was an organic part of Luther's theology and one that he regularly employed as it served his rhetorical, pedagogical, or homiletical purposes.

4. The distinction between grace and gift, though particularly well suited to answer anthropological questions (e.g., Is a Christian under grace or wrath? Does a Christian still have real sin?), is deeply christological. In the early Romans lectures Luther was at pains to insist that grace and gift are both given only by the personal grace of Christ. A few years later, in the 1522 Romans preface, he describes the gift as being the infusion of Christ and his Spirit, a description that he maintains in the 1546 preface. In the *Sommerpostille*, Luther understands the promised divine pres-

ence as the real indwelling of Christ, and he parses that indwelling in terms of grace and gift.

5. Luther's teaching on grace and gift by no means undermines the doctrine of forensic justification, but it shows Luther pairing this forensic doctrine with a doctrine of gradual, effective transformation such that both doctrines belong together in a description of Luther's soteriology. In the texts described above, the only time that Luther specifically uses the vocabulary of *Rechtfertigung* or "justification" is in the Romans prefaces, and he is quite clearly describing the grace side of the grace and gift combination.[20] The forensic reckoning of justification is front and center. Nevertheless, Luther is not opposed to the language of infusion or *eingießen*. In the Romans prefaces he defines the gift as the inpouring of Christ and the Spirit, and in *Against Latomus* he even teaches an infused righteousness by identifying righteousness with the infused, sanative gift.[21]

"Luther's teaching on grace and gift by no means undermines the doctrine of forensic justification"

Those who would see in this doctrine the commonplace distinction between justification and sanctification would not be entirely wrong. Luther is distinguishing between the forgiveness of sin and the removal of sin. On the other hand, two common ways of relating justification and sanctification are called into question by Luther's teaching on grace and gift. Neither those who want to subsume sanctification under justification nor those who relegate sanctification to a chronologically secondary phase of the Christian life can accurately account for Luther's doctrine of grace and gift, for both approaches drive a wedge between them. Rather, they are inseparable benefits of Christ in the Christian's salvation, two sides of a single soteriology. There is no more sense in asking whether grace could be sufficient without the gift than there is in asking if we can receive just half of Christ. They are the two goods of the gospel corresponding to the two evils of the law.

By raising the issue of justification and sanctification we are, of course, touching on a conversation, the contributions and contributors to which are too many even to list, much less to discuss in this essay. Perhaps, however, we might at least highlight the contributions of Wilfried Joest[22] and the development and extension of his work by Gerhard Forde.[23] Forde's drumbeat on justification and sanctifica-

[20]Because of this we may regard Simo Peura's language on p. 42 of "Christ as Favor and Gift" as a bit imprecise. He calls grace and gift "the two aspects of justification," though Luther never explicitly links "gift" with "justification." They might better be termed the two aspects of Luther's soteriology. Depending on one's views about the translation of words in this semantic field, this imprecision may be a non-issue. Luther does link gift with righteousness, which is etymologically inseparable from justification in Greek, Latin, and German.

[21]*LW* 32:226–229.

[22]Wilfried Joest, *Gesetz und Freiheit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1951); pages 55–82 are especially relevant.

[23]Forde's relevant work with Joest may be found in his chapter, "Justification and Sanctification," in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 425–444.

tion is the insistence that the death of the old Adam and the resurrection of the new creature is the only satisfactory way to describe genuine Christian newness without sacrificing the gospel and resorting finally again to the law. Forde's sustained polemic against a renewed nomism adds an important dimension to the current discussion while it also reminds us of the great breadth of Luther's treatment of these themes. Many more segments of Luther's work would have to be added to the narrowed focus of this study for a full discussion of justification and sanctification. On the other hand, Forde's contribution could be even more valuable to the present discussion than it already is if his dependence on the death and resurrection motifs from Rom 6 had been connected to a discussion of the union with Christ motif for which that passage is also famous. Death and resurrection is, after all, not just any death and resurrection, but it is specifically being "buried with Christ."[24] Such a discussion might have had points of contact with Luther's discussion of gift (particularly in connection with John 14:23) as well as with the participationist emphases of some new-perspective proponents.

Grace and Gift and the New Perspective

Simo Peura's suggestion that the doctrine of grace and gift offers a revealing look into Luther's soteriology raises the possibility that there may be more fruitful points of contact between Luther and the new perspective on Paul than might otherwise have been apparent. Our exploration of Luther's grace and gift texts allows us to observe both a degree of rapprochement as well as unresolved difference.

What is most remarkable is the correspondence that exists between the two relevant pairs of soteriological conceptions. The new-perspective categories of forensic righteousness by faith and participation/mysticism are similar to the combination of grace and gift that Luther appropriates and develops from Rom 5:15. The similarities are surprisingly strong on the gift side of the matter, where both proposals envision ethical transformation and a supernatural union of Christ with the Christian.

A very important difference of emphasis remains, however, in how the two proposals relate the two sides of their soteriologies. The new perspective insists that forensic righteousness by faith, though surely present in Paul, is a concern of secondary importance. The grace and gift texts in Luther offer no solid evidence for parallel conclusions about grace somehow receding behind gift. On the contrary, there is some indication that the opposite may be true. Although the causal connection between grace and gift proved ambiguous in the texts analyzed, Luther did call grace "the stronger and more important" foundation. Because the priority that Luther places on forensic reckoning of righteousness is exactly the issue that the

[24]As Forde rightly and repeatedly insists, eschatology is also implicated here as a key issue, though his discussion of the already resurrected believer stands in some tension with the famous "eschatological reservation" of Rom 6:4. For an extensive treatment of the epistemological and ontological issues involved, see Risto Saarinen, *Gottes Wirken auf uns: Die transzendentale Deutung des Gegenwart-Christi-Motivs in der Lutherforschung* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1989).

new perspective challenges most fiercely, the different relative weights that they assign to the two sides of their soteriologies remains a serious unresolved issue.

Luther's use of grace and gift by no means assimilates him into the late twentieth-century new perspective on Paul. Given the diversity within that movement, it is unclear what that anachronism would mean anyway. Nevertheless, the doctrine of grace and gift may function as a positive pilot study, suggesting that further interaction between proponents of the new perspective and those interested in Reformation soteriology may develop beyond the level of mutual reentrenchment. Such interaction will need to reckon with issues left untouched by the present study, including but not limited to: (1) an appraisal of the new perspective's recasting of the character of Second Temple Jewish religion;[25] and (2) some further discussion of key texts like Rom 6:1–4, Gal 2:15–21, and the sacramental arguments in 1 Cor 10–11. ⊕



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[25]Though his work was not without antecedents, the major foundation for this recasting was the aforementioned *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* of E. P. Sanders, whence comes the now commonly used, if not always understood, label "covenantal nomism." Works critical of Sanders's description of Second Temple Judaism include *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), and Charles Talbert's "Paul, Judaism, and the Revisionists," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 63 (2001) 1–22. Works more focused on challenging the new perspective's reading of Paul include *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine of Justification: A Challenge to the New Perspective*, by Peter Stuhlmacher (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001) and Simon Gathercole's *Where Is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1–5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). A particularly interesting and earlier response was Stephen Westerholm's *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).