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Gift and Grace in Philippians, 2 Thessalonians, and Ephesians: A Response

John M.G. Barclay

john.barclay@durham.ac.uk

I am immensely grateful to Wendell Willis, Jerry Sumney, and Margaret MacDonald for their very interesting papers, which use themes from *Paul and the Gift* to raise a set of important questions and observations about texts I did not discuss in that book. It is encouraging to see the theme of gift/grace become, in a new mode, central to the discussion of Pauline texts, and in these comments on each paper I wish, in response, to underline some matters, to raise a few questions, and to develop further some promising lines of thought that have been opened up here in fruitful ways.

1. *Paul, the Gift, and Philippians*

Wendell Willis rightly insists that Paul's gift language extends much further than the use of χάρις and its cognate verb χαρίζομαι. Thus, while he begins at that point, the bulk of his analysis of Philippians is focused on a text (Phil 4:10–20) which is clearly about gift but does not use χάρις-vocabulary at all (but not, as he says, because it was somehow inappropriate). Neither of us wishes to confine analysis of the topic of gift to word-studies: the theme is much broader than any single set of vocabulary. Willis also emphasizes one of the motifs central to *Paul and the Gift*, which is that wherever we see “gift” we should think “reciprocity.” Of course, reciprocity can take many different forms, but against our Western instincts we should expect gifts to be part of cycles of gift-and-return even when that is not apparent at first glance. As Willis says, the “reciprocity system of benevolence” was taken for granted in antiquity (as in most places today), and although Paul nuances this in important ways, he does not repudiate or escape it. Our default setting, in other words, should be that

every gift we encounter in our texts is *either* already a return gift *or* is given in the expectation of a return, in some form and at some time. Reciprocity is present in gift-giving, as well as (differently) in commerce; it is not contractual or guaranteed, and is not enforceable by law, but gifts are meant to tie people together and they do so by creating bonds of gratitude, obligation, and return-gift. If we have an instinctive feeling that Paul must be different on this matter, this may be the effect of our modern Western assumptions about the superiority of the unilateral gift. Or it may be that Paul *is* different, not, however, by repudiating reciprocity but by placing human reciprocity in a larger theological frame, in which the gifting agency of God is the primary force at work.

As Willis rightly notes (and it is rare to see this highlighted so clearly), in the middle of the Philippian hymn we find reference to a divine gift, but a gift given to Christ:

“Therefore God highly exalted him, and gave him (ἐχαρίσατο αὐτῷ) the name that is above every name ...” (Phil 2:9). On the principle outlined above, we should ask: if this is a gift, is it a return gift, or a gift expecting a return? The διό at the start of this sentence (Phil 2:9) encourages to view this action by God as a response to the previous outline of the action of Christ—his self-emptying, self-humbling, and his obedience all the way to the cross (Phil 2:6–8). This is the set of actions that Paul elsewhere describes with the language of self-gift: this is how Christ “gave himself for our sins” (Gal 1:4) and how the Son of God “loved me and gave himself” for me (Gal 2:20; cf. Eph 5:2, 25). Christ gives himself—and God, in response, gives to him; the one gift evokes another. Even if Christ did not give himself directly “to God,” but “for us,” this was still an act of gift that God would recognize and reward. If there is any merit in this way of figuring the line of thought, there may be an additional nuance in the notice at Phil 2:6 that Christ did not consider being equal to God ἄρπαγμός. Without entering here into the complex debate about the meaning of that term, it may be significant that words from that root are normally used for theft or robbery—in other

words, for taking (by force), which is *the very opposite of giving*. The point of that opening line in the “hymn” may be to characterize all that follows as: Christ did not take, he gave. And if Christ did this *because* (not “although”) he was in the form of God,¹ then what is being suggested here, in an allusive but highly significant way, is that Christ expresses the very “form” of God in self-giving, and that the divine self-gift (in the incarnation and the cross) is recognized and returned in his installation as Lord—recognized, that is, as the *telos* and the government of the whole cosmos, from top to bottom (Phil 2:10–11). It is a step from here, but not a huge one, to talk of gift-giving relations within the Trinity. But the primary focus is undoubtedly not on the relation between Christ and God, but on the event that becomes the shape of the whole of reality in the self-giving of Christ.

From the very start of the letter, Paul figures himself and the Philippians as bound together in *κοινωνία*, a term that reverberates through this letter from Phil 1:5 through to 4:15.² This *κοινωνία*, however, is not just a shared enterprise, a partnership of pooled resources: it is a *κοινωνία εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον* (Phil 1:5), which means that he and they are *συγκοινωνοὶ τῆς χάριτος* (Phil 1:7), sharers in (drawing down from) a common resource, the grace of God. In other words, the grace that has impacted and now rules the universe in Christ is the source and frame of the relationship between Paul and the Philippians: they each draw from it and are oriented towards it, and they are bound together in giving and taking what they receive from this source. In this sense, while Willis (with Fowl and others) speaks of the Philippians’s gift to Paul as a return for *Paul’s gift* of the gospel, the gospel was hardly Paul’s to give. Whatever Paul did in proclaiming Christ and preaching the good news was

¹ For an argument interpreting the participle along these lines, in relation to the parallel statement in 2 Cor 8:9, see my essay “‘Because he was rich he became poor’”: Translation, Exegesis and Hermeneutics in the Reading of 2 Cor 8.9’, in *Theologizing in the Corinthian Conflict: Studies in the Exegesis and Theology of 2 Corinthians*, eds. Reimund Bieringer, Ma. Marilou S. Ibita, Dominika A. Kurek-Chomycz and Thomas A. Vollmer, BTS 162 (Leuven: Peeters, 2013) 331–44.

² Besides the literature on this topic cited by Willis, see J. Ogereau, *Paul’s Koinonia with the Philippians*, WUNT 2.377 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

merely opening up to the Philippians the grace *of God* in which they both now share. And while Paul may speak of this elsewhere as a work that deserves its “wage” return (1 Cor 9:3–14), he can also refuse any return himself, on the grounds that what he did was obligatory and therefore not a gift (1 Cor 9:15–18).³ Thus while Paul may speak in general terms in Phil 4:15 of a relationship of “give and take,” it is not entirely clear what he has “given” to the Philippians, and thus in what sense their gift to him is a *return* gift. Of course, as a gift it invites a return, and that is what Paul promises in Phil 4:19, but “outsources” to God.

We are thus taken deep into the complexity of a human reciprocity (between Paul and the Philippians) that is founded on, and framed by, the gift-giving of God—a complexity to which Willis explicitly draws our attention. Reflecting this complex duality, he speaks, for instance, of a gift that is “directly” to one recipient but “indirectly” or “really” to another, but at another point (and better, I think, in relation to Pauline theology) of gifts that are “simultaneously” to two recipients at once. Since human givers and recipients are hardly on the same level as, or in competition with, God as the agent of giving or receiving, we do not have to represent a gift to Paul as “really” or “actually” a gift to God, as if one representation is less true than the other. It is really *both things at once*, because Paul takes part in the divine momentum of grace and is therefore a participant in the giving-relationship between the Philippians and God. Every human gift can be figured by Paul at two levels. At one level, it is a benefit given by one human being to another (in this case by the Philippians to Paul). But at another level, since it is God who is at work in believers, completing his own good work (Phil 1:6; 2:12–13), it is also a divine gift given *through* a human agent, and a gift returned to God *through* a human recipient. Hence when Paul receives the gift, he thanks God (Phil 1:3–

³ A gift in antiquity, as today, has to have something voluntary about it, even if is suffused with obligation; in 2 Corinthians 8–9 Paul expends much effort to get the Corinthians not just to give, but to *want* to do so.

6), and hence, when the Philippians give to Paul, they are also, at the same time, making an acceptable offering, pleasing *to God* (Phil 4:18).

This double dimension of gift-giving in Christ means that Paul has a lot of flexibility as to how he figures gifts and return-gifts, according to the theological and rhetorical needs of the situation. At times he can foreground the human giver: he wants his Gentile converts to know that they are obliged *to Jerusalem* for the spiritual goods they have received from there (Rom 15:26–28), and he plays up what Philemon owes *to him*, for the sake of winning a massive benefit for his *alter ego*, Onesimus (Phlm 15–20). But at other times, he can occlude the human giver, or the human recipient, since they are merely brokers or media through which believers draw from, or invest in, the divine flow of gift.⁴ Paul cannot promise much to the Philippians from his own resources in return for their gift to him, but since their gift is part of this larger economy, he is confident that God will “fulfill [their] every need according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:19). This ability to shift from one dimension to another is not an inconsistency or a mere rhetorical convenience: it derives from the recognition that the gifts that pass between believers in Christ are part of their solidarity *in grace* (Phil 1:7).

Gift-giving, in other words, is not a by-product of salvation, but the necessary expression of participation in Christ. Paul’s sole but greatest gain is to be “found in Christ” (Phil 3:9), that is, to participate in the self-giving richness of God. I think this is why, as Willis points out, Paul considers it a gift that the Philippians not only believe in Christ but also suffer for him (Phil 1:29). It is not a gift to suffer, as such; but it is a gift to suffer “for Christ,” because there believers are caught up into the self-giving momentum of the Christ-event, sharing, as Paul says, in Christ’s sufferings so that they might share also in his resurrection (Phil 3:10–11). To participate in Christ is to participate in the richness of the

⁴ For the model of brokerage and Paul’s position as broker, see D.E. Briones, *Paul’s Financial Policy: A Social-Theological Approach* (London: T & T Clark, 2013).

Christ-event, a paradoxical richness indeed (2 Cor 8:9), but one that is headed towards the resurrection of the dead (Phil 3:11, 21). In the meantime, with limited resources, and against many temptations to do otherwise (Phil 2:3–4), believers have the privilege of participating in the momentum of grace through mutual love and gift, in whatever material or non-material form that might take place.

2. *We are Obligated to Give Thanks*”: *Aspects of Grace in 2 Thessalonians*

It is fascinating to watch Jerry Sumney work his way through 2 Thessalonians with the aid of the analytical tools derived from *Paul and the Gift*, and I have found his treatment of this text very illuminating. He offers a rare and highly welcome analysis of the theology of 2 Thessalonians undistorted by the obsession in modern scholarship on the question of authorship. If we do not have to ask at every point whether this letter was written by Paul or not, we will be less inclined to interpret the text one-sidedly, either to *distinguish* it from the authentic letters or to *identify* it with them. Yet, it seems to me clear that 2 Thessalonians has an intimate intertextual connection with 1 Thessalonians, whatever we decide about authorship: much the same motifs; many of the same terms, and even whole phrases appear in both letters, even while 2 Thessalonians adapts, reworks, and supplements them for a new purpose. This is a literary observation, which neither determines the question of authorship, nor is dependent on one’s answer to that question. The extensive intertextuality here present (even greater than that between Ephesians and Colossians) suggests that a reading of 2 Thessalonians without regard to its twin (1 Thessalonians) will miss significant dimensions of its meaning. Thus, while I appreciate Sumney’s insistence on reading 2 Thessalonians in its own right, and while, with him, I will keep the authorship question off the table, I do not think that we can bracket out its subtle inter-connections with 1 Thessalonians, which can greatly enhance our reading of its theology.

This methodological point is important in relation to the language of “worth” which Sumney rightly highlights as part of the theology of grace: in 2 Thess 1:5, the Thessalonians are said to have been made/considered worthy of the kingdom of God (εἰς τὸ καταξιωθῆναι ὑμᾶς τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ), and in 1:11 there is a prayer that God may make/consider them worthy of their calling (ἵνα ὑμᾶς ἀξιώσῃ τῆς κλήσεως ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν). The ἀξιο- root is quite rare in the Pauline corpus, and we can trace in these two verses a strong echo of the appeal in 1 Thess 2:12 that the Thessalonians should walk “worthily” of the God who calls them into his kingdom and glory (εἰς τὸ περιπατεῖν ὑμᾶς ἀξίως τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ καλοῦντος ὑμᾶς εἰς τὴν ἑαυτοῦ βασιλείαν καὶ δόξαν). Being “worthy” is, in our 2 Thessalonian texts (1:5, 11), twice attributed to God (in the first case by being put in the passive, in the second explicitly), and it is linked to the same two themes (kingdom of God and calling by God) as are combined in 1 Thess 2:12, only now divided out into two statements (2 Thess 1:5 on kingdom; 1:11 on calling). Whoever wrote 2 Thessalonians was evidently seeking to develop the thought of 1 Thess 2:12, that there is meant to be a proper “fit” between the character of believers and their ultimate destiny in the kingdom and glory of God.⁵

Does this congruity contradict the notion of incongruity that is the hallmark of the Pauline theology of grace as I traced it in Galatians and Romans? Hardly so. In relation to Romans I have noted how the incongruous love of God, in justifying the ungodly and reconciling the sinner, is designed not to leave believers in their present state, but to *transform* them, albeit imperfectly, into “slaves of righteousness,” with bodies and behavior that are holy and pleasing to God through the Spirit-induced renewal of the mind (Rom 6:12–21; 12:1–2, etc.). This does not mean a shift from an initial incongruity to a final congruity, because whatever is said of the transformed fit, righteousness, or worth of the believer is

⁵ The δόξα motif in 1 Thess 2.12 is picked up in the language of glorification in 2 Thess 1:10, 12 and especially in 2 Thess 2.14, on which Sumney’s comments are very helpful.

predicated on, and the expression of, the incongruous new life that they derive from the resurrection of Jesus.⁶ Thus 1 Thessalonians speaks of the believers being presented “blameless in holiness” at the coming of Jesus (1 Thess 3:13; 5:23), a fitting completion of the work of God who called them from idolatry to worship the true and living God (1 Thess 1:4, 9–10).

Sumney is therefore quite right to point out how 2 Thessalonians emphasizes the fit that operates in the judgment of God (parallel to that in Rom 2:1–11): those who persecute the believers will get their fitting punishment, and those who hold to the truth of the gospel will receive relief from persecution and co-glorification with Christ (2 Thess 1:3–12; is there an echo here of Phil 1:28?). Sumney is right to point out that 2 Thessalonians does not describe how, or whether, that congruity for believers is predicated on the *incongruous* calling or love of God. It certainly makes much of the “calling” of God, both in 2 Thess 1:11 (as we have seen) and in 2 Thess 2:14. Associated with that, there is strong emphasis in our text on the love of God (ἠγαπημένοι ὑπὸ κυρίου, 2:13; ὁ πατήρ ἡμῶν ὁ ἀγαπήσας ἡμᾶς, 2:16) and on God’s election (2:13). As Sumney notes, it is not spelled out here, as it is in Galatians and Romans (and, to some extent, in 1 Thess 1:9–10), that the objects of this love were unworthy of it and that God’s election did not correspond to any criteria of ethnic superiority or moral achievement. That is a notable *silence* in 2 Thessalonians, but I am not inclined to attribute that silence to a significant difference in its theology of grace. That it postulates a congruence between the condition of believers and the characteristics of the kingdom of God seems to be exactly what we find all over the Pauline corpus (Rom 2:1–11; Gal 5:19–21; 6:7–10; 1 Thess 2:12; 3:13; 4:3–8; 5:1–10, etc.).

In fact, as Sumney has noted, there is much in 2 Thessalonians, both said and implied, concerning the agency of God in bringing about this congruity in the lives of believers. When

⁶ See *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) 449–92 (“The Creative Gift and Its Fitting Result”), and 516–19.

thanks are offered *to God* for the faith, love, and endurance of believers (2 Thess 1:3–4; cf. 2–14), it is clear that the agent in these matters is not only human but also divine. Similarly, when prayers are offered *to God* that God would deem/make the Thessalonians worthy of his calling, and would fulfill “in power” (that is, God’s power) every will for goodness and work of faith (1:11; cf. the prayer of 2:16–17), it is evident that this is not just a task for believers to perform but an activity that will be enabled and energized by the gift and power of God. The piling up of the language of gift in 2 Thess 2:16 (δοῦς ... ἐν χάριτι) seems designed to place the whole trajectory of salvation, from start to finish, explicitly within the agency of God (cf. 3:16).⁷ The text expresses confidence *in the Lord* that what he has begun he will sustain (2 Thess 3:3–5), and the holiness of believers is specifically related to the Spirit (2 Thess 2:13, to be read in conjunction with 1 Thess 4:8).

As I have argued in *Paul and the Gift*, it is neither necessary nor helpful to parcel out agency in a zero-sum calculation, so that the more agency is attributed to God, the less is accorded to believers, or vice versa.⁸ In this connection, perhaps I need to say more here about the perfection of “efficacy”. I recognize now that in downplaying that perfection in relation to Galatians and Romans I was particularly resisting the tendency in some interpreters (e.g. J.L. Martyn) to play off the agency of God *against* the agency of believers, and thus I tended to define the perfection of efficacy in terms of “monergism” (that the *real* agency in the goodness of any believer’s act is that of God/the Spirit, not that of the flawed

⁷ I do not find evidence in 2 Thessalonians for what Sumney calls a ‘future gift’, at least not in the sense that this is somehow additional to the calling of God operative from the start, or a reward for a life of merit. Rather, 2 Thess 2.13–14 seems concerned to show a single trajectory of love, election, and calling that runs from start to finish (‘you were called through the good news ... to obtain glory’), much as in 1 Thess 5.9, whose language it echoes and adapts.

⁸ *Paul and the Gift*, 518–19: ‘God’s grace does not exclude, deny, or displace believing agents; they are not reduced to passivity or pure receptivity. Rather, it generates and grounds an active, willed conformity to the Christ-life’ (519).

human agent). Perhaps it might be clearer if we spread out a map of “efficacy,” at five different levels, somewhat along these lines:

- i) God’s grace creates the capacity in the soul to receive God’s gifts, and sows the seed of virtue, which we may subsequently foster or destroy.
- ii) God aids the development of that virtue by instruction, example and encouragement, boosting our virtuous effort with divine support.
- iii) God creates a newly configured self, oriented and continually induced to virtuous behavior, but with the capacity to refuse that orientation and to choose the opposite.
- iv) God creates a newly configured self (as above), which does *not* have the capacity to choose a destiny other than that already determined for it by God.
- v) God replaces human agency with the agency of his grace, such that God alone can be said to act in works of virtue (a strong form of monergism).

In 2 Thessalonians we find the “doubling” of agency that can be traced right across the Pauline corpus, and that I noted above in relation to gift. It is believers who exercise love towards one another (2 Thess 1:3), who trust in the truth and are obedient towards it (1:10; 2:10, 13), and who endure the traumas of persecution (1:4; 3:5). At the same time, as we have noted, both the prayers and the direct statements of this letter make clear that it is *God* who strengthens believers in every good work and word (2 Thess 2:17; 3:3), and who is asked to “direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ” (3:5). It is not one agency *or* the other, nor simply one *added to* the other, but the agency of God in and through the agency of believers. On the scale above, I would place our author around category iii), which is a kind of efficacy, one might say, just not perfected all the way to the point where agencies are placed in an exclusive relation to one another (as in category v).

The interplay (and co-inherence) of agencies is surely related to the participatory notion of salvation which seems to be operative in 2 Thessalonians. If, following the hint in 1 Thess 2:12, believers are destined to “obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess 2:14), this will come about through the mutual co-glorification indicated in 2 Thess 1:10–12: the *telos* of history is when Christ comes to be glorified by/in his saints (ἐν τοῖς ἁγίοις αὐτοῦ, 1:10), and this will mean that “the name of our Lord Jesus Christ will be glorified in you, *and you in him*” (1:12). Believers will not just accord glory to Christ but will participate in his glory, their current shame (in persecution) turned into glory, but a glory not their own. Their final vindication will be their gathering “to him” (ἐπισυναγωγή ἐπ’ αὐτόν, 2 Thess 2:2, in echo and summary of 1 Thess 4:17), because it is in and with Christ that they become what they have been called to be. This is not, I think, “yet another gift” (Sumney), but the fulfillment of the one gift to which they have been called, and for which they are becoming (and being made) worthy in their courageous identification with Christ. Facing intense opposition, they need to be reassured that they are not just holding on to God, but God holding on to them (2 Thess 3:3–5), and that the Lord who called them is faithful and will strengthen and protect what he has begun (3:3; cf. 1 Thess 5:24).

3. *God’s Gift in Ephesians*

Margaret MacDonald takes us to Ephesians where, as she points out, the gift-language is profuse and theologically central. I fully accept that, under the pressure of the authorship question, I may have succumbed to the temptation to put too much emphasis on the *differences* between Ephesians and the undisputed letters, and, as with 2 Thessalonians, it is probably best, in the first instance, simply to watch the subtle developments and

reconfigurations of the Pauline language of grace without any presumption, either way, concerning authorship.⁹

MacDonald is right that there is heavy emphasis in Ephesians on the *incongruity* of grace, reflecting the fact that its Gentile addressees were once “dead in trespasses and sins,” and “children of wrath” (Eph 2:1, 3): the transition from death to life by “being made alive together with Christ” is explicitly traced to χάρις (2:5). She is also right that Ephesians presses further the hints in Romans and Colossians that this grace was *prior* in the sense of “before all time,” an election according to the will of God, “before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4). I think, in fact, that we can trace in Ephesians the confluence of two significant streams of thought that had emerged in the Pauline tradition up to that point: i) the strong association between gift-language and Christology; and ii) a cosmic Christology that places Christ at the center of all reality and time. If we briefly trace these two thematics, we can see how they combine powerfully at key points in the letter, not least in that important passage in Ephesians 4 to which MacDonald devotes the majority of her attention.

- i) First, the strong Pauline association between *gift and Christ* (what we may call “the Christ-gift”) is developed and strengthened at a number of points in Ephesians. The blessings for which God is blessed in Eph 1:3–10 are located specifically “in Christ,” since believers are chosen “in him” and were elected for adoption through Jesus Christ by means of God’s grace “with which he has favored us in the Loved One” (ἧς ἐχαρίτωσεν ἡμᾶς ἐν τῷ ἠγαπημένῳ, 1:6). We may note the central place of Christ here as both the object of God’s love and the means by which that love/grace is mediated to others, just as in the earlier Pauline letters he is the expression of God’s gift and the means by

⁹ For a careful treatment of the soteriology of Ephesians within the trajectory of Pauline thought, see G.P. Anderson, *Paul’s New Perspective: Charting a Soteriological Journey* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2016).

which that gift reaches the world (2 Cor 8:9; 9:15). Ephesians, in fact, clusters around the figure of Christ and the story of the Christ-event a large pool of related Pauline terms: χάρις, δῶρον, δωρεά, δίδωμι, περισσεύω, πλοῦτος, ἔλεος, ἀγάπη, etc. (Eph 1:1–7, 22; 2:4–8; 3:7–8, 16–19; 4:7, 11). In its slightly pleonastic style, it lavishes these terms onto the figure and the history of Christ, such that the Christ-event becomes clearly, and centrally, the Gift.

- ii) Secondly, and in a significant development probably influenced by the Colossian hymn,¹⁰ the Christology of Ephesians is cosmic in scope, such that the Christ-event is no mere episode in history, but is staged at “the fullness of times” (cf. Gal 4:4) such as to sum up (or head up) all things in Christ (ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι τὰ πάντα ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ, Eph 1:10). Developing the thought of 1 Cor 15:20–28 and Col 1:18–20, the resurrection is interpreted as the installment of Christ at the head of the cosmos, with all things and all powers under his feet (Eph 1:20–23), and this is said to be both for the church, his body (1:22), and a “fullness” or “filling” of the whole of reality (1:23). While the language of “powers” and “names” in Eph 1:22 invites analysis of the political implications of this theology, I am not inclined to see this text as “counter-imperial” in the sense that Christ is presented as a *rival* to the pretensions of Caesar. There can be no rivalry, no direct competition, no jostling for the same space, if Christ is so far “above” every power and title in this age and in the age to come (Eph 1:21): he is not just another world ruler, but the ruler that governs, controls, and subordinates all rulers (pre-Roman,

¹⁰ I am presuming the dependence of Ephesians on Colossians, while leaving aside, for present purposes, the questions of authorship.

Roman, and post-Roman).¹¹ The notable development in Ephesians is the explosion of “fullness” language (πληρώω, πλήρωμα), which identifies in Christ, and specifically in his exaltation, a filling of all reality with Christological focus and meaning (Eph 1:10, 22–23; 3:19; 4:10, 13). Thus one may truly say, as MacDonald points out, that something like the cosmic and predestinarian theology of the *Hodayot* is found here in Ephesians. Only here, the “eternally determined design of the universe” is both focused and fulfilled in Christ.

What happens when these two streams of thought converge, when the Christologically-focused gift-language is merged with the Christological design of the cosmos? The result is that the clue to the cosmos is located in the *gift of Christ*: “God gave him to be head over all things for the church” (Eph 1:22; cf. Rom 8:31–39). Ephesians is not interested in following this up with further cosmic speculations (that way lies what we used to call “Gnosticism”): its focus remains on the church and on the individual believers within it. But here the implications of holding that all reality is focused around the gift/love of Christ are large. At the individual level, the gift of “the riches of God’s glory” is the subject of the remarkable prayer in Eph 3:14–19, where the dwelling of Christ “in your hearts” entails a grounding and epistemic reshaping in love, specifically in the knowledge-surpassing love of Christ, by which believers are filled with all the fullness of God (3:18–19). At the ecclesial level, the cosmic significance of the gift of Christ is traced in the passage to which MacDonald directs our attention (Eph 4:7–16), and to which I now turn.

¹¹ In this sense, while I appreciate the similarities with imperial vocabulary and imagery highlighted by Maier and others, I am inclined to agree with MacDonald that Ephesians envisages a kind of ‘transcendence’ or ‘third space’ that would render any *direct* comparison between Christ and Caesar a blasphemous reduction of Christ to the status of an earthly and temporary superpower.

Although Ephesians 4 clearly builds on the earlier Pauline passages about gift in the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12–26; Rom 12:3–8), it surprises us with the way it figures this theme. “To each of us is given grace according to the measure ...”: we know that line from Rom 12:3 and from that base we expect to find some reference to “the measure of faith” (μέτρον πίστεως, Rom 12:3). Instead, here in Ephesians, we find “according to the measure of the gift of Christ” (κατὰ τὸ μέτρον τῆς δωρεᾶς τοῦ Χριστοῦ, 4:7). Commentators are inclined to read the second genitive as designating source (“according to the measure of the gift given by Christ”), but it could also be read as explanatory: “according to the measure of the gift *which is* Christ”. This would pick up language from 2 Cor 9:15, where Christ is described as the ἀνεκδιήγητος δωρεά of God, and combine it with the motif of the gifts in the church and of the church as the body of Christ: it is because of the Christ-gift that the gifts of God cascade into the cosmos and, specifically, into his body, the church. Hence the description of the body-gifts is prefaced by the Christological statements in Eph 4:8–10, with their remarkable adaptation of the psalm-quotation. It is because Christ has traversed the whole of the cosmos, down to its depths and right up to its height, that he has “filled” all things (cf. Eph 1:22–23). His exaltation matches his descent (whatever exactly that refers to), such that all reality, from top to bottom, is infused with and governed by Christ-as-gift. The psalm makes the connection between gift and ascent; its interpretation identifies the subject as Christ, and takes the ascent to bring about the ultimate “filling” of all things (τὰ πάντα, Eph 4:10; cf. 1:10, 23; 3:19; 4:6). And since, according to Eph 1:22, the gift of Christ over all things is “for the church,” the first place to trace the impact of this Christ-gift is in the church, in the gift of leaders who themselves equip the saints, for the purpose of “building up the body of Christ” (4:12).¹²

¹² The complexities of these verses cannot be treated here, but Lincoln is surely right to insist that ‘the key concept in the flow of thought is gift’ (A.T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42; [Dallas: Word, 1990], 241). I am not wholly convinced that there are echoes of a

This fascinating development of earlier Pauline thought builds on the concept of the church as “the body of Christ,” indeed as “one body” which may be identified in some sense *as Christ* (1 Cor 12:12). Thus the gifts that are distributed around the body are not just the after-effects of the gift of Christ, dispatched, as it were, into the non-Christ sphere of the world: they are the operations of the Christ-gift in his own body, giving expression to the fullness of this gift as it permeates the whole of reality. Hence the long, winding sentence of Eph 4:11–16 seems to climax in statements where the church, at one level a merely anthropological phenomenon, is viewed simultaneously in Christological terms. The growth of the church is oriented towards “the perfect human” (cf. 2:15), that is, towards “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (4:13; echoing 4:7). In the church, in other words, there takes place the filling out of all things with the gift of Christ. Again, it grows in every respect (τὰ πάντα, echoing 4:10) “towards him, who is the head, Christ” (4:15), from whom the whole body is joined through the provision (ἐπιχορηγία, another gift term) which enables its growth in love (4:16).

The Pauline link between χάρις and χαρίσματα (cf. 1 Cor 1:4–7) is here thought through using a wide array of gift-terms, building on its associations with the body, and developed with intense focus on its Christological core, in its full cosmic scope. What fills the cosmos? The Christ-gift. Where is that gift manifested in the present? In the gifts that energize and build the church, and in the heart of each individual believer. As the love of God in Christ is known and passed back and forth within the body, it fills the world and brings all things to completion and summation in Christ (Eph 1:10). The Christ-gift constitutes the inner dynamic of the cosmos, and believers are not only beneficiaries of that gift, but participate in it.

triumphal procession here, as MacDonald suggests (following Maier), although there clearly are in Col 2.15. Certainly, in the interpretation that follows the quotation, nothing is made of the ‘captivity’ made captive, or of enemies subdued; the accent falls, rather, on the ascent and on the distribution of gifts.

Let me conclude by thanking again our three main contributors, who have produced such stimulating papers on our theme, and who have encouraged us to think more deeply about the theology of their texts. Let us hope that others will follow their lead with regard to other Pauline letters, not least the Pastorals, and that we will continue to recover, with greater nuance and understanding, some of the riches of Paul's theology of grace, whose implications, as we have seen, cover the whole span of Christian theology, Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, and ethics.

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