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Is God's Grace Really a Gift?

Unraveling a Pseudo-Problem

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To be is to be gifted. One's very being is an unrequested gift. Sheer presence is a gift. Life is a gift. Every new possibility is a gift. The divine promise of forgiveness and resurrection is an unmerited gift of the same fundamental order.¹ Our very creation is a gift, and our justification by God's grace marks the gift of new creation.

But, theologians must ask: is this all wrong? What if there is no such thing as a gift? What if every relationship is indelibly corrupted by reciprocity, return, repayment? Does this render the gifted character of our creation and new creation null and void? Should theologians discard the idea of gift and replace it with the "art of the deal"?²

If it is in fact the case that all gifts come with strings attached--meaning that no pure gift exists -- then we must ask: does this obliterate the doctrine by which the church stands or falls? Have the bulwarks of *Ein Feste Burg* collapsed? No. The problem of the so-called "pure gift" is a pseudo-problem. The philosophical formulation of the problem does not apply to the concrete life of the person of faith who enjoys living daily in God's grace. To apply a definition of "pure gift" to the life of faith would commit the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. The philosophical concept of "pure gift" is an abstraction, an idea, an ideal. What is concrete is the historical event of Jesus Christ combined with the indwelling of the

¹ "Gabe" ist ein Urwort der Theologie," says BAYER 2009, 21. Creation understood as gift becomes the inclusive locus of Christian theology. BAYER 2009, 20: "Schöpfung durch das Wort geschieht ex nihilo (aus dem Nichts) als unverdiente, kategorische Gabe; ich bin, was mir gegeben wurde."

² TRUMP 1987, 1: "I like making deals, preferably big deals. That's how I get my kicks."

resurrected Christ in the person of faith. This concrete phenomenon is theologically described by terms such as *grace*, *favor*, *mercy*, *agape*, and even *gift*. Overdefining a term such as *gift* so that it no longer describes concrete actuality may be an interesting exercise in sophistry, but it ought not cause a theologian to lose sleep.

To engage in a discussion about *gift* is akin to dumping a bowl of cooked spaghetti on the table and then attempting to straighten out each strand. To the task of straightening out those strands we now turn.

The abstract question: is a gift really a gift?

Is a gift really a gift? Risto Saarinen registers doubt: "There is no free gift. If somebody offers you a gift, this person is increasing his or her social status and putting you in his or her debt. It belongs to the idea of gift that this is not said but, on the contrary, explicitly denied."³ If Saarinen is right, then this turns a purported gift into a lie. When we give, we deny that strings are attached; yet, our reputation in the eyes of the recipient is enhanced not only by the gift itself but also by our denial of the strings attached. If we are the recipients, we contribute to the self-justification and delusion of magnanimity on the part of the gift-giver. The strings attached to a gift may be at first invisible. We do not notice them until we find ourselves entangled.⁴ When we find ourselves entangled in a gift's strings, we realize that it is not a gift at all.

Does this apply to God? Recall, 1 John 4:11: "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another". Are we mistaken to think of God's love for us as a gift? Should we think of our love for one another as sharing that gift? Or, should we think of God's love coming to us with strings attached, with the imperative to love one another? If we are commanded to love one another, does this make God's love a non-gift?

³ SAARINEN 2005, 18. MORRIS 2009, 330: "In the ecumenical movement, it is important to consider whether a proffered gift is actually a Trojan horse, i.e., an attempt to impose one's view or practice on others. The model for ecumenical giving should not be an 'exchange of gifts', as Saarinen explains, but the Pauline idea of the body of Christ, where members use their gifts in service of others." It is not Saarinen's agenda to "impose" his views on ecumenical colleagues.

⁴ This treatment extends two previous analyses of the concept of gift: PETERS 2015; 2015b.

Saarinén draws out the implication. "Even God giving freely to the creatures is, in terms of this interpretation, attempting to win support or exercise power over creatures through creating relationships of obligation and dependence."⁵ Have we as Jesus' disciples unwittingly entangled ourselves in God's manipulative strings that have ensnared us? Should we become more suspicious of divine narcissism than we have been?

This anxious hand-wringing over the possibility or impossibility of authentic gift-giving keeps Reformation Lutherans awake at night. Have we Lutherans misled ourselves and our beloved followers by telling them that out of divine grace God is bestowing on us the gift of creation and new creation? Are we misleading when we proclaim that the forgiveness of sins, justification, and reconciliation are divine gifts apart from any human work, merit, or deserving? Are we Lutherans misleading our followers because the very idea of the gift is incoherent, impure, and corrupt? If justification is the article by which the church stands or falls (*iustificatio* – *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae*) then should we fear 1 Corinthians 9:16? "Woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel" rightly!

Is Jesus Christ really God's gift to us?

Twenty-first century disciples of St. Paul and Martin Luther are so accustomed to using the friendly word, *gift*, that such skepticism comes as a shock. Was it a mistake for the *Mannermaa School* at the University of Helsinki to remind us that the very presence of Jesus Christ is given to us as a gift of divine grace in faith? After all, Luther is now remembered for emphasizing that "Christ lives in us through faith."⁶ Saarinen himself adds, "Through receiving Christ by faith, we have union with Christ. The gift is given for us, but also to us."⁷

⁵ SAARINEN 2005, 18.

⁶ LUTHER 2015, 1:103 (Proofs of the Thesis Debated in the Chapter at Heidelberg 1518).

⁷ SAARINEN 2005, 51. Saarinen's own position begins with the perspective of God as giver tied to the indwelling model of the Mannermaa interpretation of Luther. "If...the perspective is shifted to God as giver, the human person ceases to appear as agent and becomes the recipient of the word and Christ. In this new, seemingly passive perspective he or she reappears, again paradoxically, as vivid and animated partner." SAARINEN 2017, 202–203.

It is the gift of Christ's presence that effects justification and, at the same time, changes the ontological status of the sinful person. The presence of Christ is the gift (*donum*) itself which effects justification. Luther "does not separate the person (*persona*) of Christ and his work (*officium*) from each other. Instead, *Christ himself*, both his person and his work, *is* the Christian righteousness, that is, the 'righteousness of faith'. Christ – and therefore also *his entire person and work* – is really and truly present in the faith itself (*in ipsa fide Christus adest*)."⁸ The person of faith should feel he or she is the recipient of a divine gift (*donum*) which results from a divine disposition of favor, mercy, love – that is, from the divine disposition we name, *grace*.

Mannermaa and his disciples are not the only ones to see this in Luther. Roman Catholic theologian, David Tracy, sees it this way too. "Grace though faith is both God's *favor* through the righteousness of Christ imputed to us as forgiveness and *donum* (pure gift, i.e., passive incipient righteousness, which, through the Holy Spirit can increase until the ultimate *donum* of our graced glory after this life). The righteousness we receive is Christ's own active righteousness which endows upon us passive righteousness."⁹ Similarly, American Evangelical Matt Jenson reports, "Luther stresses that faith is a divine gift mediated through the Word. Faith is not a human accomplishment, something to be mustered; it is given to us by God as he nourishes us on his Word throughout our lives."¹⁰ Even retired Pope Benedict XVI assumes Christians have come to know "the astonishing experience of gift."¹¹

So, just what is wrong with this picture? It seems clear that God is gracious and loving and disposed to give good things to his creatures. One gift is his Son, Jesus Christ, who died on Calvary. A second gift is his Son, Jesus Christ again, whom the Holy Spirit makes present to us in faith. Are there any strings attached which would nullify God's graciousness in gift giving? One might observe that the sixteenth century Reformation debates regarding justification, grace, faith, hope, and love were an indirect attempt to answer these questions.

⁸ MANNERMAA 2005, 5. Mannermaa's italics.

⁹ TRACY 2015, 108.

¹⁰ JENSON 2015, 155.

¹¹ POPE BENEDICT XVI 2009, 34.

Does God's grace and mercy lead to a genuine gift?

It seems reasonable to apply terms such as *love*, *grace*, *favor*, and *mercy* to God's disposition. These are traits of the divine, kataphatically speaking. *Grace* refers to God's favor, while *gift* refers to what we receive.¹² We might then ascribe *faith*, *hope*, *charity*, *neighbor love* (*Nächstenliebe*), and *good works* to human activity, to the human response to divine grace. Might such distinctions help us untangle the spaghetti noodles?

What does Luther think? On the one hand, Luther seems to distinguish grace from gift. "Grace must be sharply distinguished from gifts," he writes. "A righteous and faithful man doubtless has both grace and the gift. ...but the gift heals from sin and from all his corruption of body and soul. ...Everything is forgiven through grace, but as yet not everything is healed through the gift. ...for with the gift there is sin which it purges away and overcomes."¹³ Because God's justification declares a person just while still in a state of sin, the person of faith begins the arduous process of overcoming that sin. The sin prior to and following justification is the same, argues Luther; but our status before God is different. Prior to justification sin warrants wrath, condemnation, death. Subsequent to justification, sin is not counted, so to speak. While we strive to purge sin from our daily life, "it is called sin, and is truly such in its nature; but now it is sin without wrath, without the law, dead sin, harmless sin, as long as one perseveres in grace and gift."¹⁴ Note how this applies "as long as one perseveres in grace and gift."

¹² Grace is not a thing, a substance, an object. The term *grace* applies to God's disposition to be generous, to *divine generosity*, according to GREGERSEN 2009. For others, *grace* includes the entire divine-human interaction. LODBERG 2015, 247: "Grace is understood as the unexpected kairotic moment of change, where the future opens up to new possibilities of reconciliation in situations of conflict, war, and hatred. It is a moment you cannot plan for, but you always hope it will happen; and simply hoping for and trusting in the possibility of a gracious moment can influence your gratitude and behavior in the present."

¹³ LUTHER 1955, 32: 229 (Against Latomus).

¹⁴ LUTHER 1955, 32: 229. Gift with response seems to be the structure of grace and reconciliation in the work of Karl Rahner. RAHNER 1961, IV: 257 (*The Word and the Eucharist*): "For God's salvific action on man is not merely a forensic imputation of the justice of Christ. And it is not merely the announcement of a purely future act of God. Nor is it constituted merely by man's faith, however this is to be further interpreted. It is a true, real, creative action of God in grace, which renews man interiorly by making him participate in the divine nature—all of which, being the condition of possibility of a salutary action on the part of man, is prior, at least logically, to such *action* of man." Is the renewal a human response to the divine gift or is it the gift itself?

Yet, on the other hand, Luther elsewhere equates grace and gift. "But 'the grace of God' (*gratia Dei*) and 'the gift' (*donum*) are the same thing, namely, the very righteousness (*Iustitia*) which is freely given to us through Christ."¹⁵ In our justification, grace and gift are the same thing, he says. It appears that Luther is not consistent on his use of terms.

Even if Luther is inconsistent, this in itself should not cause a theological problem. Whether grace and gift are identical or different is not an issue that should bother a contemporary theologian. What has become an issue, however, is the question: does the gift of grace come with strings attached? Does it necessarily imply reciprocity? Does the declaration of forgiveness in justification-by-faith necessarily imply effective transformation in the sinner? Does justification require sanctification before reconciliation?

The confusing interpretation of Oxford evangelical Alister E. McGrath illustrates the problem. He writes, "The *gift* of justification lays upon us the *obligation* to live in accordance with our new status."¹⁶ If he would be a German, he might say the gift (*Gabe*) comes with a duty (*Aufgabe*). What McGrath fails to recognize is that Luther and his disciples would not want to say such a thing, because they believe that the gift of justification is just that, a gift, and not an obligation. Yet, we ask: can today's Lutherans get away with this? If the concept of grace (*gratia*) refers to God's disposition of mercy toward us, and if the concept of gift (*donum*) refers to what is given to us, we must ask: are there any strings attached? Conditions? Obligations? If the gift comes with obligations, as McGrath thinks, does this make it a conditional gift and, thereby, a non-gift?

For purposes of clarification as I mentioned before, I recommend that we use the term *grace* to refer to the divine disposition to give. "Grace is the favor, mercy, and gratuitous goodwill of God toward us,"¹⁷ says Philip

¹⁵ LUTHER 1955, 25: 306 (*Romans*).

¹⁶ MCGRATH 1988, 117. Because reconciliation is inclusive of both justification and sanctification for John Calvin, this Reformer looks like a better fit than Luther for a reciprocal gift exchange. BILLINGS 2005, 91, 92: "Thus, if one is searching for a theology of grace in which the reception of grace in salvation will not be severed from being reborn for a life of holiness through the Spirit, Calvin's theology is a good place to look. Rather than 'active reception', Calvin's reception of grace might be better called 'activating reception'. ...Calvin also makes extensive use of the language of a mutual, bilateral covenant, particularly when he wants to emphasize human responsibility."

¹⁷ MELANCHTHON 1969, 88. SITTLER 1972, 24: "The fundamental meaning of grace

Melanchthon, suggesting that *grace* belongs to the divine disposition.¹⁸ With this in mind, I also recommend that we use the term *gift* to refer to what God gives and we receive. I further recommend that we use the term *agape* to refer to gracious love – that is, love that asks for nothing reciprocal in return.

Must the obligation to reciprocity hide in every gift?

"In all societies gifts have reciprocal character," Sammeli Juntunen asserts.¹⁹ There is no free lunch. Is every gift only a mask hiding the obligation to reciprocate?

When we turn to the phenomenology of gift giving and receiving, we find ourselves in a dilemma, an aporia. The dilemma has been pointed out by philosophers such as Jacques Derrida. The dilemma looks like this: If I give you a gift, then I look good and put you in my debt. But if this is to be a genuine gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt.²⁰ The concept of the gift implies that you return nothing to

is the goodness and loving kindness of God and the activity of this goodness in and toward his creation." SAARINEN 2009, 84: "Die Gabe wird nicht materiell konstituiert, sondern die Intention des Gebers bleibt für sie wesensbestimmend. Auch an diesem Punkt sind sich die Reformation mit Seneca einig." SAARINEN 2010, 293: "Seneca's discussion of divine and parental education as paradigm of *beneficia* displays similarities to Luther; the parental favour or first gift is received in a state of ignorance and even unwillingness... Only in retrospect, that is, after receiving the proper education, can the child become grateful. But the decisive life-changing *beneficium* has nevertheless been received much earlier."

¹⁸ At the heart of Christian living is "knowing God for one self, as opposed to merely knowing or thinking *about* him... [it includes] discovering that God is gracious." WRIGHT 2009, 23. Italics in original.

¹⁹ JUNTUNEN 2004, 55. Sociobiologists employ the concept of *reciprocal altruism* in their attempt to explain inclusive fitness in evolution. Gifting is, by definition, reciprocal even when we pretend that it is not. The giver gains through an enhanced reputation, which Harvard's E.O. Wilson calls "indirect reciprocity, by which a reputation for altruism and cooperativeness accrues to an individual, even if the actions that build it are no more than ordinary. A saying in German exemplifies the tactic: *Tue Gutes und rede darüber*. Do good and talk about it. Doors are then opened, and opportunities for friendships and alliances increased." WILSON 2012, 249.

²⁰ DERRIDA 1992, cited by SAARINEN 2009, 24. In *Given Time* and *The Gift of Death* (DERRIDA 1995), Derrida reinterprets the previous anthropology of Marcel Mauss 1990, with the following result: no pure gift is possible. Every gift is corrupted by exchange. Even the reception of a gift counts as reciprocity. Death is the only gift which does not demand

me. Yet, in giving you the gift, my social standing increases; and you are required to respond with gratitude. The mere recognition of the gift by the receiver nullifies the gift as gift. Within the economy of exchange, the very condition that makes gift-giving what it is includes strings even while, by definition, it denies the strings.

If Derrida is accurate, then we must ask: does this observation regarding gift-giving in the economy of exchange apply to the gift given us in the gospel? No, says German theologian Oswald Bayer. "God's coming into the world and his existence in it is *contrary* to human experience and corresponding expectations" for reciprocity.²¹ In the case of God's gracious giving, there are no strings attached.

In opposition to Bayer, Danish theologian Bo Holm sees strings when he interprets Luther's understanding of the gospel through an economic

reciprocity. Whereas for Mauss, gift-giving is part of human exchange, Derrida believes that a genuine gift should be an interruption in the pattern of exchange. The idea of the *pure gift* in Derrida becomes ineffable, elusive, death-obsessed, and eschatological. But, according to the interpretation of Sarah COAKLEY (2008, 226), gift for Derrida is "nonetheless endlessly alluring, a remaining token of the divine." How does *gift* illuminate our human relationship to the divine? Jean-Luc MARION (1991) critiques Derrida's notion of the impossibility of a gift, replacing it with the notion of a 'saturated phenomenon' which becomes a revelation of the divine. By 'saturated phenomenon' Marion means a gift which overwhelms the receiver, surpassing his or her concepts and expectations. In John Milbank's, "Can a Gift be Given?" (MILBANK 1995), gift-exchange gets purified from self-interest and agonistic manipulation between human parties. How? Gifting becomes a circle of delayed, but appropriate human, response to the ultimate. The divine gift is characterized by asymmetrical reciprocity and nonidentical repetition. Milbank finds the divine model for this in Augustine's account of the Trinity, where the Holy Spirit is God's gift. Milbank discredits Derrida's unavoidably corrupt gifting as a chimera or will-o'-the-wisp. In contrast to Milbank, Kathryn TANNER (2005) embraces a Calvinized notion of divine unilateralism grounded in an Augustinian Trinity. This unilateralism is just what Milbank rejects as a false, modern idea of pure gift. COAKLEY (2008, 228) contrasts the two positions: "whereas Milbank's theological vision is of a circle of divine gift and human, participatory response — thereby creating an alternative social reality to that of capitalism, Tanner's vision is of a 'unilateral' and absolutely 'unconditional' divine gift by the non-competitive 'persons' of the Trinity, which, if duly welcomed, issues forth in a 'reflected' human 'horizontal' generosity of wealth to those in need: 'The good is distributed by God, and is to be distributed by us, in imitation of God.'" Is this dispute more apparent than real? This is COAKLEY's (2008, 229) question. "Are the rhetorical differences between Milbank and Tanner (between 'purified gift exchange' on the one hand and 'unilateral' gift on the other) in some respects more apparent than real?" I tend to side with Coakley, asking if this debate might be centered around a pseudo-problem.

²¹ BAYER 2007, 5: 431.

lens. What is the economy of justification? It requires a component of reciprocity, mutuality, exchange. In response to God's love, we love. We participate. "Justification is the opening of reciprocity, making realized reciprocity itself the gift of grace."²² Grace stimulates. We respond. Holm likes the sentence that connotes economic reciprocity: "*Deus dat ut dem, et do ut des* (God gives that I may give, and I give that you may give)."²³ Holm distances himself from exaggerated avoidance of all reciprocity in justification-by-faith.

On the one hand, Lutherans want to claim that God's gracious gift comes with no strings attached. On the other hand, a gift by definition has strings; a gift requires some level of reciprocity even if only in receiving it. The definition of "gift" means that even God is incapable of giving a free lunch. How can the Lutherans see their way through this aporia?

Suppose we drive a deep wedge between justification and sanctification? Suppose we deny any reciprocity to justification and attribute all human cooperative contribution to sanctification? Suppose we speak of two gifts instead of just one? Would this help clarify things?

No, argues Saarinen. There is only one divine gift at work, and this gift includes both passive reception and effective renewal. Following Seneca, God's grace is like a parent's love to a child. Whether or not the child immediately responds with gratitude or even accepts the parent's love at all does not change the fact of the parent's unconditional love. However, after the child has grown to adulthood, he or she looks back and realizes the gifted quality of those earlier years. There is only one love offered by the parents, yet it is perceived differently over time. So also with God's justifying grace.

Thus it would be artificial to claim that 'justification is not sanctification', as the operative initial gift already contains the full reality of the divine *beneficium*, including the potential of receiving the gift (*das Empfangenkönnen der Gabe*). The prolongation of this one gift sustains this potential of receiving so that we as recipients come into picture. At the same time, the beneficial act of God does not change. Thus the change from the first to the second gift only concerns our

²² HOLM 2005, 85.

²³ HOLM 2005, 86.

perspectival change while the self-giving of God in Christ remains one. It would be more adequate to say that sanctification is nothing else than the prolongation of justification.²⁴

The distinction made so frequently among Luther's disciples between justification and sanctification functions well to emphasize our passivity in justification and our involvement in sanctification. Yet, it is not necessarily the case that the person of faith experiences justification one day and sanctification the next. The two come wrapped together in a single package. What is concrete is a person's single life of faith described with terms such as *justification* and *sanctification*. To split them is to make an abstract distinction that does not reflect an empirical separation. Perhaps Saarinen is right when he avers that the difference amounts to a theological perception only.

²⁴ SAARINEN 2017, 269–270. Saarinen here is disagreeing with Ingolf Dalferth who distinguishes between justification as a pre-gift with total passivity and sanctification as a gift accompanied by passive-activity (*Passivitätsaktivität*). It is my own observation that, when interpreting Luther, Dalferth offers some brilliant ontological observations such as: God's gift makes what it gives, therefore, the receiver is made into that which is given. In addition, he avers that whatever God gives is a *good* gift. DALFERTH 2009, 49: "*Alles, was Gott uns gibt, macht uns gut*—das ist die Grundregel." Dalferth's italics. Justification, by making a new creation, does not involve reciprocity, even when justification is followed by sanctification which does include human cooperation. This is reminiscent of Thomas' distinction between operative and cooperative grace. Even though Saarinen disagrees with this two-step gift giving position, Dalferth is clear on separating out the non-reciprocal character of divine justification of the sinner. So far, so good. Yet, I believe Dalferth goes too far when he nullifies the first creation to make room for the new creation, when he says that only by placing the human being in a state of nothingness, *nihil*, can the human be created anew. DALFERTH 2009, 52: "*Wer neu geschaffen wird*, ist dagegen zuvor schon so, dass dies retrospektiv als Werden vom alten Menschen zum neuen Menschen beschreiben werden kann. Das hier zu bedenkende Werden ist daher kein Wechsel von *nihil* zu *aliquis* (Schöpfung) und auch nicht von der Möglichkeit zur Wirklichkeit (Verwirklichung), sondern eher von der Unmöglichkeit zur Wirklichkeit..." SAARINEN (2017, 269) asks rhetorically, "Why does Luther speak so emphatically of God giving himself 'to us' in *The Large Catechism*, if he thinks that 'we' do not even exist at the moment of justification?" Here is my observation: the gift of reality out of impossibility is dramatic here, to be sure. Yet, the radicality of passing again through non-being prevents Dalferth from accounting for something very important in theological anthropology, namely, human fulfillment in the new creation. By reducing the old creation to nothing and starting brand new, the tie to the old would be cut and this would nullify any plan for quenching human thirsts or fulfilling human yearnings. An alternative view would be that of John Polkinghorne, according to whom the new creation is created not *ex nihilo* but rather *ex vetere*. POLKINGHORNE 1994, 167: "The first creation was *ex nihilo* while the new creation will be *ex vetere*. ...It is a new creation but, unlike the first creation, it is not *ex nihilo*. The new creation is what the Spirit of God does to the first creation."

Justification as new creation

Does the gift look different when we look through the lens of new creation rather than today's economy? Let's try this on for size.

The indwelling Christ is God's gift to us; and this amounts to a creation, a new creation. It is Christ from within the new creature who motivates our life of loving service. Luther likens the justified person to a tree that sprouts leaves. Is the tree obligated to sprout leaves? No. Sprouting leaves is natural to the tree. Similarly, Luther likens the justified person to the sun. Do we have to demand that the sun shine? No. The sun shines spontaneously. So also does the person of faith who has been given the living Christ. This person spontaneously loves the neighbor. In sum, this particular gift does not involve a reciprocal or obligatory character. This leads Juntunen to conclude: "I think that the idea of the *donum* being comparable to creation makes it clear that all reciprocity between the giver and the receiver is excluded."²⁵

Does the effect of justification on the life of the sinner count as obligation, as strings attached? According to Simo Peura, the indwelling Christ leads to transformation, to effective justification, and even to deification (*theosis*). Peura believes Luther's view includes "participation, change, and deification. The aim of justification is actually a complete transformation in Christ."²⁶ This transformation follows from the real presence of Christ in faith. "Luther's understanding that God the Father is favorable to a sinner (*favor Dei*) and that Christ renews a sinner (*donum Dei*) is based on the idea of a *unio cum Christo*. This same idea explains why grace and gift are necessary to each other. Gift is not only a consequence of grace, as is usually emphasized in Lutheran theology, but it is in a certain sense a condition for grace as well."²⁷ For Peura, we now have a "condition for grace." Does this condition amount to the completion of the gift exchange, a completion that requires our response, participation, and achievement? Are these the strings?

²⁵ JUNTUNEN 2009, 61.

²⁶ PEURA 1998, 60. The key to the New Finnish School of Luther Research is the real presence of the indwelling Christ. "Faith means the presence of Christ and thus participation in the divine life," writes Mannermaa (2005, 39), "Christ 'is in us' and 'remains in us'. The life that the Christian now lives is, in an ontologically real manner, Christ himself."

²⁷ PEURA 1998, 56.

Suppose we think for a moment about a Christmas gift, wrapped in such a way that the contents are hidden. We may shake it, but in itself this shaking will not reveal precisely what the contents are. We must open it. Once it is open and we can identify it, then we will put it on or use it or in some way integrate it into our other possessions. The gift may be a stimulus, but it becomes a gift in the full sense only when we receive and respond. No giver would give an expensive gift without expecting it be enjoyed through usage. This response does not amount to reciprocity, to be sure; yet the gift giver feels a sense of accomplishment only when the gift is opened, used, and appreciated. Does gift analysis help us understand divine love and divine gift giving?

Can we think of our very existence as a gift?

Let's return for a moment from new creation back to creation. Let's turn to the phenomenological observations of philosopher Martin Heidegger and the later Heideggerians. According to Heidegger, we sort of wake up at some point in our life and realize that we are here. We are here! And your or my being-here is not the result of our own decision or action. We're just here in this time and this place. We are *Dasein*, simply being here or there, anywhere specific. This being-here has the feel of having been thrown. We feel we have been thrown from non-existence into existence. We live with a sense of thrownness, *Geworfenheit*.²⁸ Might we think of our basic having-been-thrown-into existence as a gift? Jean-Luc Marion considers this and remarks: "*The gift delivers Being/being.*"²⁹

Might the way we use language indicate something relevant here? In English, we simply say "there is" when identifying something that exists. The same in French, *il y a*. The Finnish language does not need this structure, because much of the indicating of what-is or is-happening is in the suffixes and cases or specific pronouns or subjects. The "there is" does not really work unless you want to say that "something ... is there..." quite concretely, meaning "there" = *siellä*, pointing to "over there".

²⁸ HEIDEGGER 1962.

²⁹ MARION 1992, 101.

But, note what happens in Heidegger's language, German: *es gibt*. To say, "there is," we literally say, "it gives." Marion comments, "No one more than Heidegger allowed the thinking of the coincidence of the gift with Being/being, by taking literally the German *es gibt*, wherein we recognize the French *il y a*, there is... we would understand the fact that there should be (of course: being) as this fact that *it gives, ça donne*. Being itself is delivered in the mode of giving."³⁰ *To be is to be gifted*, say philosophers such as Heidegger and Marion. *To be is to be graced*, say theologians.

The theologian will ask Heidegger: who threw us into existence? Who is the giver when we say, *es gibt*? Is our very existence best understood as a gift? And, if so, how can we pay back the giver? We can't. There is no reciprocity possible. No economy of exchange is at work. The basic gift of our existence is radical, brute, impenetrable.³¹ The philosophers seem to stop with givenness. The theologian proceeds to ask: might there be a giver? Is it too soon to say the giver is God?³²

Philosopher Eric Voegelin suggests that we are thrown into existence and then retrieved by the same source. While we exist between birth and death, we experience estrangement. If we give attention to the giftedness of our existence, we become attuned to the being – the ground of being – from which our existence is estranged. "Attunement, therefore, will be the state of existence when it hearkens to that which is lasting in being, when it maintains a tension of awareness for its partial revelations of the order of society and the world, when it listens attentively to the silent voices of conscience and grace in human existence itself. We are thrown into and

³⁰ MARION 1992, 102.

³¹ Marion places both feet in the pure givenness or pure giftedness of existence without relying on the being of the giver. Thereby, Marion can think of God without being. Critics such as John Milbank want to deny this move to Marion. When you and I recognize the givenness and hence giftedness of our very existence and respond in gratitude, this counts as reciprocity. It implies a divine giver. See MILBANK 2003 and the discussion by SAARINEN 2009, 30–33.

³² What we are looking at here is the phenomenology of human experience which raises the question of transcendence and the question of God. SMITH 1958, 103. "This realization that one's existence is completely dependent upon factors beyond one's control—factors unified by the mind's instinctive drive toward simplicity, coherence, oneness—issues in the theological concept of God's sovereignty. When it is compounded with gratitude for the goodness of this life which God's sovereignty has affected and is continuously sustaining we have the germ of the concept of grace; God's free and unstinted gifts to man which not only have made his life possible but sustain and enable it at every point along the way."

out of existence without knowing the Why or the How, but while in it we know that we are of the being to which we return."³³ As a philosopher, Voegelin uses the word *being* where a theologian might use the word *God*. Heidegger and Voegelin both tell us that if we simply stop for a moment to reflect on our thrownness into existence, we will catch the first glimmer of grace in our creation. In, with, and under our very being-here is grace.

Pertinent here is the obligation to love. Our experience of being thrown into existence includes being thrown into relationship with the obligation to love our neighbor. This is the point made by two of Heidegger's disciples – Lutheran philosopher Knud Løgstrup and Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas. According to Løgstrup, "life has been given to us. We have not ourselves created it." When we wake up to realize that we have been given a life which we did not create, we further realize that we are not alone. Someone who is other is present.

We find ourselves already in relationship with other persons, persons whom we trust and to whom we owe moral responsibility. The other person is other; and our relationship is already characterized as love for the other. "Man's relationship with the other is *better* as difference than as unity: sociality is better than fusion," writes Lévinas; "The very value of love is the impossibility of reducing the other to myself." In sum, what we have been given is existence, and this is personal existence-in-relationship-to-the-other. This relational existing is basic, fundamental. It is the givenness with which we begin to understand ourselves as individuals.³⁴ The gift of existence has an obligation to love the other – the neighbor – built in to it.

Is our creation from a gracious God?

If we turn our gaze from new creation back to creation, does the phenomenology of brute existence give sufficient evidence of a gracious God and the gift of being here? Not for Luther. Luther would not stop here. He would go on to identify the giver, God, and prompt within us a sense of gratitude for God's gracious gifts. He opens his commentary

³³ VOEGELIN 1956, 1:5.

³⁴ See citations and discussion of Løgstrup and Lévinas on gift in RINDERS 2007.

on the creed in *the Small Catechism* with the lines, "I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties... And all this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true."³⁵

First, note how for Luther the focus on you and me as individual persons. We are given priority over the universe and everything that exists. Your and my subjective identity and awareness come first; then everything else that objectively exists. God is personal. Our self or our soul provides the point of orientation from which we look out upon the world.

Second, God's grace in creation comes with strings attached. On the one hand, we are not responsible for our existence. We have been placed here by "divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness" of our own. On the other hand, we "owe (*schuldig*) it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him." We are obligated to show gratitude for the gift of existence. Whether we show gratitude or not does not change the fact that God is gracious, that God is merciful and good. But, we ask: is it necessary for us to show gratitude to God if our existence is to be a gift? Is this reciprocal response necessary for this basic gift to actually be a gift?

Here is the unresolved problem left us by the reformers. On the one hand, they stressed that the gifts of God's grace are utterly independent of any merit or worthiness on our part. On the other hand, God's gifts are concrete and specific to us in our daily lives. This specificity implies participation, transformation, and soul formation. This participation implies a response on our part, an active living out of the gift. Does this amount to merit or worthiness after the fact?

Let's return for a moment to Reformation themes such as justifying faith, loving neighbors, and sinning boldly.

³⁵ LUTHER 2000, 354-355.

Must God's gift of justifying faith be received?

Can we equate the gift of being-here with justifying faith? Is the anonymous *es gibt* the model for the divine gift of justification? Are all people of all times and all places automatically justified because of some eternal divine decree?³⁶ Does justification come automatically with creation?

Saarinen would answer negatively. Justifying faith is personal, he contends. For any gift to be given there must be a receiver; and the receiver is a participant in the gift-giving interaction. This applies especially to the gifts of God's grace in faith. "Faith does not signalize a cooperative act, but a personal participation in the reciprocity of giving and receiving. A gift cannot be given if the receiver is not there." Saarinen teases out the implications for the means of grace, the sacraments. "At least four requirements can be read from the Lutheran Confessions: (1) that the recipient is alive, (2) is faithful, (3) is a person and (4) is not just anybody, a placeholder or a representative of a larger group, but the very person to whom the sacrament is physically given."³⁷ Or, to say it another way, reception makes it possible for giving to result in a gift.

If this is the case, does the very fact that a receiver is present for the gift to be a gift entail reciprocity? Not precisely. At least no reciprocity is required according to the economy of exchange where we would be obligated to pay God back for his gracious gifts. Our gratitude does not accrue directly to God's advantage; rather, our gratitude comes to expression as our love for our neighbor.

At this point we should introduce the qualities of agape love.³⁸ Note the multiple uses of *agape* in 1 John 4:11 cited above. Saarinen, following Luther, develops the notion of agape love in the Christian life. "In Luther's account, Christians are called to imitate the divine love in such a manner

³⁶ RITSCHL 1874, 128: "We must not think of merely isolated acts of justification. These acts are only manifestations in time of the one eternal Divine decree of the justification of men for Christ's sake."

³⁷ SAARINEN 2005, 11. Bo HOLM (2009, 92) places receiving a gift into the category of reciprocity. "Receiving a gift is already a way of giving back."

³⁸ BASTIANEL 2010, 110: "Rooted in the gift of the theological virtue, in communion with God, Christian charity is a love like that of Christ: recognized in him, made possible through him, learned from him."

that they fulfill the needs and wants of others."³⁹ Agape attends to the needs of the needy, not to your or my needs as the lover of the needy. "A pure love would require a person who is not seeking his own profit but would act altruistically. Giving a completely free gift would be an example of pure love and altruism."⁴⁰ Now, to be frank, I need to ask: is it possible that agape love defined this way is possible in the human economy of exchange?

I will answer no for two reasons. The first is the philosophical reason adumbrated above, namely, *all* gift-giving in the economy of exchange is a disguised form of reciprocity. There are no gifts without strings attached. Would this apply to a gift God gives us? Let's work with the hypothetical positive answer to this to see where it might lead.

My second reason has to do with theological anthropology. According to the Augustinian tradition on human nature – the tradition to which Luther belongs – the human ego cannot in this life be de-centered. Everything that we do – whether we are baptized or unbaptized – is an expression of the ego for the sake of the ego. There can be no human action which is totally selfless or ego-free. Every one of our attempts to love our neighbor with agape love is compromised if not contaminated with a self-serving motive. Even the pursuit of a transformed soul would betray a self-serving motive, thereby disqualifying what action we take as pure agape. In sum, pure agape is impossible for us.

Here is Saarinen on Luther: "Luther shares this skepticism with regard to pure love and genuine altruism. For Luther, human reason is inevitably egoistic and thus incapable of pure giving. ...Luther is always and tirelessly making the point that all human efforts to do good and to live a good life are contaminated by egoism."⁴¹ If this skepticism obtains, then why ask us to respond to God's grace by graciously loving others? Are we being asked to do the impossible?

Trying to label every one of these spaghetti strands poses a challenge. To try to unravel it all in order to find a single strand of pure self-sacrificial love would be both tedious and unnecessary. Plunge ahead with daily life,

³⁹ SAARINEN 2005, 56.

⁴⁰ SAARINEN 2005, 52.

⁴¹ SAARINEN 2005, 52.

Luther would say. Sin boldly!⁴² Don't let the spiritual spaghetti tie us up and restrict our bold attempts at loving our neighbor.

Might the idea of "pure gift" be a pseudo-problem?

We have been working to resolve a dilemma or aporia. If we define a gift as what is given without any strings attached, then, in the ordinary economy of human exchange, no pure gift-giving can practically exist. Every gift implies a gain given to the gift-giver, a gain due to the obligation of the receiver to offer thanks and to define the gift-giver as someone who is a gift-giver. To be defined as a gift-giver is to be noble, generous, and good. In short, the act of gift-giving including its reciprocal response serves the function of self-aggrandizement for the gift-giver. If this obtains, God looks less than fully gracious, because God's gift-giving becomes an expression of divine narcissism. In addition, the command for us to love God and love our neighbor with agape love – to give to God and give to neighbor – becomes a fiction, an incongruent demand. In daily life, loving and gift-giving without strings attached simply does not take place, at least in pure form.

Here is my hypothesis: this is not a real problem. It is a pseudo-problem. The difficulty arises from the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, to use the term of Alfred North Whitehead.⁴³ Tracy offers a variant: "though life is reflected upon through general ideas, it is always lived in the details."⁴⁴ There is a confusion at work among the philosophers of gift, a confusion between what is abstract and what is concrete, between what is general and what belongs to details. Or, to say it another way, the apparent impossibility of pure reciprocity-less gifting along with pure selfless loving confuses an

⁴² LUTHER 1955, 48:281–282 (Letter to Philip Melanchthon, August 1, 1521): "If you are a preacher of grace, then preach a true and not a fictitious grace; if grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world. As long as we are here [in this world] we have to sin. This life is not the dwelling place of righteousness... Pray boldly — you too are a mighty sinner."

⁴³ WHITEHEAD 1929, 7.

⁴⁴ TRACY 1987, 70.

abstract generality with the concrete details of our daily life. It confuses the dog with the tail.⁴⁵

Please recall how I suggested we define our terms: *grace* should refer to the divine disposition to give; *gift* should refer to what God gives and we receive; and *agape* should refer to gracious love. Each of these is an ideal definition, an abstraction, a general idea, a concept. None of these describe with precision what actually happens in your or my daily life. Nor do any of these describe with precision what actually happens in God's relationship to us. We need to begin with what actually happens – *the concrete* – and then reflect theologically – *the abstract* – on what happens. What happens is the dog; and our reflective wagging represent the tail. The tail should point us to the dog, not the reverse.

In this case the dog is the event of Jesus Christ. What does this event mean? It means that God has entered the created order, become present in our souls, forgiven us our sins, justified us by grace; and we have begun to live with faith, hope, and love. An interaction has taken place in the history of the world and in the biography of our individual lives. That's the dog, the concrete dog.

In my extended metaphor, the dog's wagging tail consists of our attempt to understand the dog abstractly by proffering theological ideas and religious descriptions about what the dog means. Theological reflection is second order discourse, one step removed from concrete experience. Our theological attempt to define terms such as *grace*, *gift*, and *agape* is tail wagging. Let's avoid confusing the tail with the dog, confusing the abstract descriptions from the concrete reality toward which they point.

God's interaction with the world and with our individual souls is messy. It's not neat. It's equivocal and ambiguous. On the one hand, God comes with grace and beauty and glory. God comes in light. On the other hand,

⁴⁵ Saarinen almost concedes that this is a pseudo-problem. He abstracts the tail from the dog. When defining "pure gift" he does not isolate an actual event of pure gift. Rather, he points to one dimension of any gift, namely, the intention of the giver. SAARINEN 2017, 235: "Purity is found in the clarity and depth of their intention and purpose." Or, purity can be "manifest" in the "unconditional attitude of the giver." SAARINEN 2017, 233. Or, the tail can be manifest in the dog, even if the dog as a whole is more than the tail alone. Here is my contention: the gift is a single event (the dog) from which we theoretically extract or abstract one aspect (the tail), namely, the intentionality of the giver. It is not the gift that is pure, according to Saarinen, it is only the intention of the giver that is pure. This, if I understand Saarinen correctly.

the world greets God with selfishness and ugliness and tragedy. The world's darkness snuffs out the light. Where we find ourselves is at the point of collision, experiencing two realities at once. To posit pure concepts such as grace, gift, or agape is to posit abstractions, to imagine ideals that simply do not exist in pure form at the collision point. Such purities do not exist either for us or for God.

When St. Paul wrote the letters to the Romans and Galatians, he tried to persuade these communities that our justification is the result of God's grace and not of our works. The Reformation took up the same mission, reiterating that we are saved by God's grace and not by any merit on our part. So far, so good. Once this point has been made, what does it add to speak of a divine gift that is so pure that it avoids contamination by reciprocity? What does it add to speak of agape love that is so pure that no ego or self is involved? Speaking this way only *adds abstractions that may become distractions*. We live everyday responding to God's love with our own love; and this takes place in a world already messy with ambiguity. This observation led Luther to throw in the towel on the purity question and simply tell us to "sin boldly."

Can we think of God as both giver and gift?

Luther stressed the graciousness of God by generously slathering the concept of gift over many theological expositions. Take the Trinity, for example. The three persons of the Trinity give themselves to one another, making each both a giver and a gift within the divine life (*ad intra*). In turn, each person gives to us, making the divine both giver and gift for us (*ad extra*). "The Father gives himself to us," writes Luther. "But," he adds, "this gift has become obscured and useless through Adam's fall. Therefore the Son himself subsequently gave himself." It does not end there. "The Holy Spirit comes and gives himself to us also, wholly and completely."⁴⁶ Saarinen comments that this amounts to a specifically Lutheran emphasis: "the trinitarian creed is rewritten from the perspective of God's self-giving."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ LUTHER 1955, 37: 366.

⁴⁷ SAARINEN 2005, 46.

Similarly, the Mass or the Sacrament of the Altar must be understood as a divine gift to us and for us.⁴⁸ The reformers rejected the idea that on the church's altar a sacrifice is performed that propitiates God's wrath and renders satisfaction on our behalf. The priest at the altar cannot offer a sacrifice as a gift to God, because Christ's death on the cross has put an end to all human sacrifices. Rather, it is God who renders satisfaction in Christ and offers the benefits to us. "For the passion of Christ was an offering and satisfaction not only for original guilt but for all other remaining sins," we find in the Augsburg Confession. "Likewise, Scripture teaches that we are justified before God through faith in Christ... The Mass, therefore, was instituted so that the faith of those who use the sacrament should recall what benefits are received through Christ... For to remember Christ is to remember his benefits and realize that they are truly offered to us."⁴⁹ Every leak in the bottom of the spiritual boat is plugged by reference to God's self-giving and our receiving.

With this in mind, we must avoid seeing faith as an efficacious product of human achievement. I weep when I read Matt Jenson: "many evangelicals begin with the gospel only to settle into a toilsome life under the law."⁵⁰ Jenson's description is accurate. The tragedy is that where the gift of faith should liberate, for "many evangelicals" it incarcerates.

We must receive faith as a gift if it is to exert liberating power. Or, perhaps better said, our faith is our act of unwrapping the gift that the Holy Spirit gives, namely, the presence of Christ. The indwelling Christ is due to both the giving of Christ and Christ as gift. "Through receiving Christ by

⁴⁸ "It is frequently alleged that Martin Luther's doctrine of justification by grace through faith posits absolute human passivity vis-à-vis God and, on account of the past completion of Christ's sacrifice, disconnects Christians from the cross," acknowledges Piotr Malysz. So, he takes issue with this view. Specifically, he disputes "the claim that, through his doctrine of justification, Luther became an unwitting advocate of the conceptual juxtaposition of gift and exchange and thus also an ideologue of the shift from an organic to a contractual view of society. "Instead," he argues, "Luther's eucharistic theology anticipates the concerns of Radical Orthodoxy's critique of gift and sacrifice. It does so, however, in a more forceful manner, in that for Luther gift and exchange are so bound together in his doctrine of justification that the eucharist, instead of being a *mere paradigm* for social relationships (as Radical Orthodoxy would have it), radically restructures those relationships in the *all-embracing* unfolding of its participatory gratuity." See MALYSZ 2007, 294.

⁴⁹ *Augsburg Confession*, XXIV, BC, 2000, 71.

⁵⁰ JENSON 2015, 63.

faith, we have union with Christ. The gift is given for us, but also to us," says Saarinen rightly.⁵¹

In sum, the generous use of the language and conceptuality of gift becomes one of the ways we emphasize the priority of God's grace in our creation, redemption, and daily lives. There is no pill we need to take to relieve the intellectual constipation brought on by the philosophical debate over the nature of gift. Our employment of gift language is an attempt to explicate the significance of the gospel message; we are not trying to shave the gospel to fit a predetermined concept of gift.

Conclusion

Risto Saarinen is well aware how Martin Luther and his followers emphasize that our justification and hence our salvation is a gift from God, a gift from a gracious God. To tease out what this could mean, we have sorted through the spaghetti strands served by up philosophical discussions of gift giving. For the most part, phenomenologists find that no pure gift giving exists in the human economy because gift givers commonly receive an indirect return in the form of enhanced reputation and even adulation. In addition, for a gift to be a gift it must be received – that is, some level of the recipient's participation in the phenomenon of the gift belongs to the very definition of gift.

How should the theologian respond to this philosophical discussion? Certainly not with anxiety.

It is simply not necessary for a Reformation theologian to wring his or her hands out of fear that justification-by-faith is defective because it falls short of a "pure gift" measurement. To talk about a "pure gift" is to postulate an abstraction from the concrete history of God's gracious work in human history and in human spirituality. Pressing the very concept of "pure gift" would turn God into an untouchable and immutable monad. It would isolate God. The God we have come to know through the benefits of the gospel is relational, both internally relational as Trinity (*ad intra*) and relational to the world of creation and redemption (*ad extra*). I recommend

⁵¹ SAARINEN 2005, 51.

that Reformation theologians yawn, label the sophist's wish for a pure gift a *pseudo-problem*, and then retire for a night of sound sleep.

Having said this, we do not want to rid ourselves of gift language. Gift language still helps us explicate the meaning of our fundamental biblical symbols such as Jesus' cross and Pauline affirmations of justification-by-faith. Here is the point: biblical symbols are not slaves to the gift language of the philosopher. The concept of gift illuminates God's gracious action, to be sure. But divine action comes first and our theological reflection in light of the concept of gift comes second. What we can expect from the gift of the Holy Spirit who places the living Christ in our souls is power, excitement, transformation, and vigorous activity on behalf of loving our neighbor.

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