CHAPTER 4

Proclaiming and Receiving the Incongruous Gift

Amor Dei non invenit sed creat suum diligibile . . . 1

1 Introduction: The Root of Human Unworthiness

For Philo, humans are unworthy to receive divine benefactions when they live lawlessly, without virtue, contrary to right reason. But why do humans live like this? As we have seen, the foundation of piety is a proper conception of God as the Cause of all good things. 2 However, one can erroneously locate causation in oneself or in something created; this is the height of impiety, because it results in not giving God his due gratitude. 3 Deviation from a proper conception of God precipitates immoral living, the ramification of which is retribution. Thus, the end (τέλος) for those who adopt “polytheistic opinions” (πολυθέοι δόξαι)—or, really, anything but proper monotheism—is ungodliness (ἀθεότης). 4 The atheist receives no gifts. A similar picture emerges in Romans 1, where God’s wrath is revealed against “all ungodliness and injustice (πᾶσαν ἀσέβειαν καὶ ἁδικίαν) of humans who suppress the truth (ἀλήθεια) in unrighteousness” (1.18). God has revealed what can be known of him “since the creation of the world” (ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου; 1.20), his “eternal power and deity” (ἀΐδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις καὶ θειότης). Humans are therefore “without excuse;” although they “know God,” they have not honored or given thanks to him (ἐδόξασαν ἢ ηὐχαρίστησαν; 1.21). 5 Rather, they “exchanged” God’s glory for the “likeness of the image of perishable” created things (1.23); they worshipped the created rather than the

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1 M. Luther, “Disputatio Heidelbergae Habita (1518)” (WA 1; Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1883), 354. Translated: “The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it.” For commentary, see G.O. Forde, On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 112–17.
2 Cf. chapter 1, sections 2.1–4 for discussion and texts.
3 Cf. Post. 33–39 on Cain.
4 Praem. 162. Also, Sacr. 54–57.
5 J.A. Linebaugh, “Announcing the Human: Rethinking the Relationship Between Wisdom of Solomon 13–15 and Romans 1.18–2.11,” NTS 57 (2011): 228: “we . . . learn that to be human in history is to be a rebel against this creational revelation.”
Creator (κτίσει παρὰ τὸν κτίσαντα; 1.25). Consequently, God “has handed them over”—they live immorally, not doing the things they should and doing the things they should not (1.24, 26, 28). They know what God requires (τὸ δικαίωμα τοῦ θεοῦ), but they do things that are worthy of death (ἄξιοι θανάτου; 1.32).

Broadly construed, for both Philo and Paul the root of human unworthiness is either ignorance of God or an improper perception of who God is as Creator and Giver, which results in ingratitude and dishonor. However, while the root problem is similar, the prognosis is not. If for Philo this issue can be resolved by humans following the path of Abraham—moving from ignorance to a sure conception of who God is—for Paul the problem is insurmountable. Sin and death are the inescapable reality for all who have been “handed over” and are unable to regain a proper perception of God to honor him rightly and thus act fittingly. For Philo, since God is the cause of all good things, including virtuous human agency, works cannot be distinguished from grace; grace grounds and makes possible human works that constitute one as virtuous. For Paul, grace is focused in Christ and human action is excluded as grounds by which one may be fitting to receive from God. If “in Christ all will be made alive,” Paul’s logic is that “in Adam all die” (1 Cor 15.22); and, to borrow a phrase, “the dead do not improve.” The God who handed sinful humans over to their own devices (Rom 11.32; cf. Gal 3.2) is the God who gives an unfitting gift to those same humans. Philo’s world is the moral testing-ground of humans who can fittingly receive gifts from God; Paul’s sin-enslaved world is disrupted by the Christ-gift that is inexplicably received by those who do not deserve it, given by a God who gives no thought to typical canons of worth.

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how three aspects of Paul’s theology of divine gift converge in the person of Paul himself. First, Paul’s testimony is paradigmatic, a concrete instantiation of the truth that all receive grace unfittingly. Second, Paul’s association—or identification—of grace and apostleship reveals how his apostleship is interlocked with the Christ-gift. Paul is not merely an unworthy recipient of the gift but more specifically an unworthy apostle who proclaims the gift. As Satake states, “χάρις manifestiert sich für

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6 As S.J. Gathercole, “Sin in God’s Economy: Agencies in Romans 1 and 7,” in Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural Environment (ed. J.M.G. Barclay and S.J. Gathercole; London: T&T Clark, 2008), 159 states, “Whichever category is used, this suppression/exchange is a kind of meta-sin in Romans 1.”


8 Of course, Paul, like Philo, does not do away with human agency, but he removes it from the equation of how one receives grace; see further next chapter.