

The intentionality and significance of gift-giving can differ greatly depending upon the culture and customs of a particular people group. Such intricacies and social nuances are notable and should be specifically considered when working to understand Paul's letter to the Roman church regarding the gift of grace. In this chapter, the author, John Barclay, sought to inform and expand our understanding of the term gift through an ethnographic lens.

Early in the chapter, Barclay made important distinctions about the definition of a gift. He suggested that gifts were given of one's own volition, with apparent benevolence, denoting a distinctive bond between the giver and the benefactor, while involving a consistent expectation of exchange. As the author continued the analysis of gift giving, a warning of cultural bias was issued. Understanding the culture this letter was written in, while understanding the culture from which Paul came, is equally important when examining the intention of his wording.

While expounding on the concept of gift giving, Barkley focused on the expectation of return in various cultures. In some of the highlighted cultures, gifts were often given with an expectation of reward for the effort. The reward was not always in kind; compensation could come in the form of homage, appreciation, future favor, and assistance. Interestingly, when examining gifting in the Jewish heritage, the reward differed significantly. Instead of expecting gratitude, honor, or a tangible reward from the giftee or community, the giver anticipated their repayment to come from God in the afterlife. In contrast, the Western understanding of gifting is devoid of the expectation of exchange. Purity and absence of personal interest were paramount.

The concept of gift giving is complex. When investigating Paul's word choice, the reader must be aware that their understanding is informed by their cultural backgrounds. These backgrounds cannot be treated as reliable standards of measure when analyzing the term 'gift of grace.'

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The hallmarks of a perfect gift are not universally accepted across time periods or cultures. These characteristics are further complicated when theologians examined the perfection of God's gift of grace. To understand the complexities embodied in their historical viewpoints, John Barclay established a six-part taxonomy as framework. The "Six Perfections" described by Barclay are: superabundance, singularity, priority, incongruity, efficacy, and noncircularity.

Superabundance describes the immensity, importance, longevity, and extravagance of the gift of grace. The beauty of God's grace can be understood as overflowing, unyielding, and endless. Singularity addresses the very nature of God or the giver. It attributes goodness and benevolence to the benefactor. Historically, some of the Grecian philosophers have stretched this understanding further. In singularity, the giver is incapable judgement or detriment. Priority suggests that the giver is at will to extend generosity; the reward is not a result of petition. Incongruity highlights the disproportion between the value of the gift and the worthiness of the recipient. The endowment is procured without weighing the meritoriousness of the giftee. The dynamics of efficacy dictates a tangible advantage to the benefactor. They may inherently change because of this perfection of grace, perhaps even becoming capable of integrity and uprightness. Lastly, Barclay addresses noncircularity as a sixth perfection of grace. Noncircularity suggests a gift is bestowed without an expectation of return or exchange. It denotes a noble selflessness on the part of the giver.

Historically, theologians embraced various combinations of these perfections when interpreting God's gift of grace. Barclay was careful not label their differences as greater or less faith in this gift; these theologians simply believed differently. Understanding these historical debates about the gift of grace should remind interpreters that their own understandings are subjectively informed. There should be no presumption of absolute accuracy.

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As John Barclay continues to call for the analysis of our highly subjective interpretations of the gift of grace, he also challenges readers to re-examine the longstanding and widely accepted beliefs about legalism in Judaism, by citing some of the work of E. P. Sanders, as well as guiding readers through some Second Temple texts.

Contrasts between justification by grace alone through Christ, and the works demanded by the Law of Moses, are found throughout Paul's writings. Barclay stipulated that many historical interpretations of this comparison often characterized Judaism as a works-righteousness religion. Adherence to the Law was assumed necessary to earn salvation. New Testament scholar, E. P. Sanders sought to invalidate this long held notion by examining ancient Jewish texts. After completing his research, Sanders rebranded Judaism as a faith substantiated by grace. He argued that God initiated the covenantal relationship with Israel by grace, and that Jews remained in this community by observing God's decrees. In other words, obedience to Mosaic Law was not a means to earn salvation, it was method of remaining in community.

In this chapter, Barclay called for the consideration of four Second Temple texts to further inform our understanding of Paul's perspective of the gift of grace. In these pieces of literature, God was often revealed as a gracious, demonstrator of love, and merciful, but His magnanimous nature was not devoid of judgment on the wicked. Superabundance and expectation of return were the common thread amongst the highlighted texts. Some of the texts emphasized priority, while others underscored the incongruity of the gift of grace. Going further, these Jewish texts and understandings could have significantly shaped how Paul recognized the gift of grace. The inquiry remains, with all these various understands on this gift, how did Paul intend to construct and communicate God's gift of grace to the churches in his letters?

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The gift of grace, and the perfections therein, are skillfully developed and expounded upon by Paul in his letter to the church at Rome. Barclay underlines Paul's explanation of the disproportional relationship between God and man, the Giver and giftee, as well the impacts and effects of this gift on the lives of all beneficiaries. Barclay also denotes the efficaciousness and reciprocity of the gift of grace as well.

In these chapters, Barclay suggests that incongruity is a significant facet of God's grace according to Paul's letter. God's grace is bestowed upon humanity without regard to individual accomplishment or distinction. This grace, both inconceivable and abundant, is extended mercifully, and without regard to the worthiness of the recipients. Paul emphasizes this perfection of God's grace and impartiality, not only by explicating the moral bankruptcy of humanity, but also by eliminating ethnicity as a prerequisite for receiving God's grace. This gift has been extended through God's mercy, both to Jew and Gentile alike.

Additionally, Barclay illustrates that both efficacy and reciprocity are evident in Paul's theology. The gift of grace has an observable effect on the elect; they are made alive in Christ. Reciprocation is also an anticipated result of this gifting. Obligation to obedience is anticipated due to this gifting. A beneficiary, brought from death to life in Christ, is obligated to a life of holiness. The gift of grace is both unmerited and necessitating.

Paul's message is consistent in demonstrating the incongruity of grace. He establishes that justification is made known and accessible only through Christ Jesus. Paul also makes clear that the God's gift of grace is obtained by faith in Jesus. The divine generosity known because of this gift is irrespective of individual merit. This gift also effects change (new life) and requires obedience on the part of the recipients. The gift of grace is astonishing, intricate, and perfect.

The imputation of Christ's righteousness to sinners as the means of justification before God has been a longstanding and fundamental belief of reformed evangelical Christians. It is believed that the sins of mankind are imputed to Christ, and His moral righteousness is transferred to believers because of their faith in Jesus. Although this centuries old understanding is staunchly defended, not all New Testament scholars subscribe to it. Dr. Shellrude has highlighted a concern with the translation of the word righteousness from Pauline texts. The Greek word for righteousness, *dikaiosune*, does not simply refer to morality, but also to a status of salvation. He challenges the former understanding of righteousness by examining how Paul used *dikaiosune* in other instances.

*Dikaiosune* can be understood as both moral righteousness and a soteriological status. Context must be derived by looking at the other instances Paul used this term throughout his letters. Shellrude contends that the righteousness subjected in Paul's letter to Rome should be understood as justification/acquittal, not as the imputation of the moral righteousness of Christ to believers. Dr. Shellrude noted other instances where *dikaiosune* was used by Paul, and he reports that the forensic reality of this term describes the gift of justification. A believer in Jesus is gifted a right standing with God, an acquittal of all charges against them, because of the work of Christ. Some have argued that our sins were imputed to Jesus, and thus His righteousness has been imputed to us, but Shellrude debunks this claim as it was not made explicit by Paul in his letters.

Shellrude takes issue with the most English translations for this New Testament letter. When a distinction is not made between ethical behavior (righteousness) and the concept of right standing (justification) with God, misinterpretations are common. With each examination of the term *dikaiosune*, Dr. Shellrude made clear with contextual evidence that this term describes the justified and acquitted status gifted to all person that put their faith in Jesus Christ.

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Calvinism is doctrinal system characterized by five major points: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. With a strong emphasis on determinism, predestination and freewill, Calvinism has garnered sharp criticism. Both Dr. Glen Shellrude and Dr. William Lane Craig offer critiques on some of the tenants of this reformed theology.

One major contention with Calvinism is seen in their assumption of determinism. Calvinists believe that God has already determined all events and human actions, as well as their responses. Shellrude suggested that this understanding is derived from a limited number of texts, which are not analyzed in historical framework. This practice would severely constrict interpretative efforts of The Bible as a whole.

Determinism severely limits the concept of freewill, shatters belief in a loving God, and distorts the understanding of God as just. Freewill, though substantiated in Scripture, is largely ignored by Calvinists. In their view, God has already determined all the inclinations, thoughts, and actions of humanity. This notion would make humans incapable of exercising their own volitions because it eliminates choice. A portion of humanity, incapable of exercising preference, would be some assigned rebellion and sin against God, making Him the creator of their wickedness. The eternal punishment and separation of mankind from God could no longer be seen as just; it could only be cruel. Determinism suggests a God that is not loving, unkind, and willing to let people perish. None of which is remotely corroborated in the Word of God.

With Determinism comes an absolution of ethical accountability for humans; they would be pawns. Reality would also be a mockery, as only God would have sole capacity to make all determinations. Scriptural support for such claims was challenged and deemed severely lacking by both Shellrude and Craig. Calvinism and Determinism leave little room for hope in God.

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When analyzing the theological framework and essential tenants of Calvinism, election and predestination are at the forefront, and determinism is at the core. It is believed that mankind and his response to The Lord, including all human inclinations, thoughts, and actions, are explicitly planned by God, each works in accordance with His will. Dr. Shellrude has challenged this theology by examining other doctrine found in the New Testament. He argues that Determinism is incongruent, erroneous, and unsubstantiated when assessing Biblical exhorts, God's purpose for believers, His will and work in their lives, Scriptural critiques of sin, as well as Christian statements of faith.

Ethical exhortations are found throughout the New Testament. Followers of Jesus are implored to exercise high moral character, which is expressed by being faithful, loving God, loving all people, being honorable, and living a life worthy of the calling. Believers are repeatedly reminded that obedience to The Lord is paramount as they each resist sin and press on with repentance. As the various verses from the New Testament were referenced, Shellrude indicated that expectations are made possible by God's grace, but, when viewing these doctrinal points through a Calvinism, Determinism paints a different picture.

If God determines all aspects of human lives, then their willful disobedience is not an act of their own volition, it would be God's will at work. Meaning, God would have chosen some for divorce, debauchery, murder, strife, hate, and rebellion. It would also mean that The Lord wills for some to suffer damnation for all of eternity. Shellrude argues that these understanding go against Biblical references to God's love for all humanity and His desire that none should perish. Determinism supposes that God orchestrates evil, plans for His children to reject His edicts, and suffer unimaginable abuses; people would be chosen to live and die at enmity with God. The examination of the selected verses did not substantiate the beliefs of Calvinism. Dr. Shellrude

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implored believers to recognize that freewill, powered by the grace of God, is referenced throughout scripture, and it is this gift that brings humans into communion with God.

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The Sovereignty of God, especially when investigating the workings of His grace, mercy, and judgement, are complex and much debated. Calvinists subscribe to a deterministic stance when analyzing Biblical doctrines, and Romans chapter 9 is often cited as justification for their beliefs. Dr. Shellrude asserts that these passages of scripture do not entirely support Determinism; consequently, he reexamines these verses as a libertarian.

Paul teaches that God chooses those whom He will pardon and those whose hearts He will harden; God is at liberty to dispense both mercy and judgement in according to His perfect will. Paul addresses the incredulity of his fellow Jews and the incapability of Mosaic Law to lead to salvation. He implores the Jews to respond to the grace of God. Shellrude questions why Paul would implore obedience when their responses would have been made God. Jews would be incapable of coming to faith or obediently following Christ unless chosen by God for mercy. Shellrude also suggested that Paul may have been answering a protest about God not supplying sufficient grace to believe on The Lord Jesus for salvation. Paul made plain the sovereignty of God to choose His people. The Lord is under no obligation to be gracious based on ethnicity. God is free to confirm His people and extend mercy if they respond appropriately to the grace.

Objects prepared for wrath and mercy are also referenced in this chapter. Shellrude highlights the objects of mercy were prepared by God, while the preparer of the objects of wrath was not evident. This intricacy supports a defense against determinism; it is possible that God may not be choosing some for damnation, while He does choose others for mercy. Jewish opposition to The Gospel could be attributed to their unbelief. If their responses change, they could become objects of mercy, and grafted in again, just as the Gentiles could be cut off. In total, Paul makes plain the freedom of God to dispense both pardon and punishment. These insights do not slant deterministically when analyzing context throughout Paul's letter to Rome.

