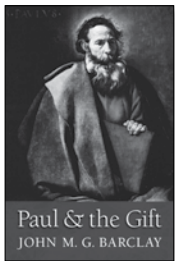


Book Reviews

Paul and the Gift, by John M. G. Barclay (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015, pp. 656 including notes)

—Reviewed by Brad Gill, Editor, *IJFM*



This 2015 book is about grace—God’s grace—and in particular its centrality to the mission of the Apostle Paul. While it’s tempting to think we’ve plumbed the depths of this subject, John Barclay will convince you otherwise. *Paul and the Gift* promises to be a turning point in biblical scholarship but should win a special place in missiology as well.

“Paul talked about grace in a missionary context”;¹ Barclay’s statement in a recent interview piqued my interest. But he really gripped my attention when he pointed out the critical shift that occurred during the Reformation, a shift that changed how the language of grace was used in its first century context. Grace became “less about converting people and more a point of dispute within the church itself.” This observation reflects Barclay’s respect for social context. In his book, Barclay clarifies just how the Reformers turned a first century missionary theology inward, focusing it toward the motives and self-understanding of Christians. For these later theologians, he says, the original context of Paul’s Gentile mission “became a matter of merely historical interest” (570). My missiological reflexes reacted to these comments and I knew I had to buy Barclay’s book.

One might expect from Durham University’s Lightfoot Professor of Divinity a rather dense, scholarly tome, one that might spark little interest outside of its theological orbit. Instead, Barclay’s book has already begun to gain substantial recognition within the rank and file of missiology. Far from being simple intellectual fodder for heavier biblical exegesis or abstract theological debate, Barclay’s surprisingly elegant prose can strum the devotional strings of any heart tuned to the grace of God. On page after page, he provides rich and elaborate language to describe the ways in which grace touches our lives, often forcing the reader to stop mid-argument to ponder the way he reshapes our Christian assumptions. Admittedly, Barclay’s treatment is quite technical and very comprehensive. *IJFM* readers wishing to gain a quick overview how it all fits within Pauline studies are referred to Scott McKnight’s excellent review (see *IOW*, p. 214).²

As for my review here, I have in mind missiological readers who wish to understand Barclay’s contribution on grace in mission contexts today. I believe this is one of those volumes that will require missiologists to deliberate just how biblical scholarship anchors our perspectives on mission. Sadly, at some 600 pages and a steep price (even Kindle is \$60), the starving missiologist might have to wait for a used edition or find the closest library. Nevertheless, I hope to provide a short abstract on the way Barclay’s study might mature contemporary missiology.

For the past four decades (while mission agencies have been championing the frontiers of mission), biblical scholarship has been wrestling with a controversial “new perspective on Paul.” Barclay has entered the fray with a new synthesis, lacing together insights from this new perspective with an older perspective—one from the Reformation, which is about to celebrate its 500th anniversary. In short, this new perspective on Paul arose from a fresh contextual study of the Judaism of Paul’s day (Second Temple Judaism). It generally concluded that the Apostle Paul’s grasp of grace was not unique in rabbinical thought. This new perspective opposed the older conviction of biblical (and evangelical) scholarship that set Paul’s understanding of grace against the Jewish understanding of Law (grace vs. works). Enter Barclay. While Barclay agrees that a study of the Judaism of Paul’s day certainly indicates a wider and deeper appreciation of grace (his study in Part II), he also challenges the way this new perspective has unilaterally jumped to conclusions and “unwittingly created a spurious uniformity within Judaism” (564). Barclay weaves a more intricate understanding of how a rabbinical Paul understood grace (post-Damascus road), and he does it in a masterful exegesis of Galatians and Romans (his study in Part III).

In Part I, Barclay begins his study of Paul’s understanding of grace from three vantage points—anthropological, linguistic and historical—each of which the missiologist can especially appreciate. The *anthropological* perspective is seldom given priority in these types of biblical studies. In his chapter “The Anthropology and History of Gift,” Barclay places Paul’s understanding of grace (“the gift”) in the broad cultural study of gift-exchange.

Since both Paul and his contemporaries used the normal vocabulary of gift, favor and benefaction in speaking of (what we call) “grace,” we have located their discourse on this topic within the social domain that anthropologists label “gift.” This conceptual frame has provided no templates, but it has alerted us to features of ancient gift-giving that modern Western eyes are apt to miss or to misconstrue. It also has afforded some analytical distance from the special connotations that have become attached to the term “grace.” (562)

This is a remarkable beginning to any work of biblical scholarship, indicating the author’s belief in the influence of cultural conditions on even the great apostle. Barclay expects that

Barclay's linguistic perspective distinguishes him from the "new perspective" on Paul which claimed that grace was understood everywhere in "Judaism." Yes, it was everywhere, but it was not everywhere understood the same.

Paul will construct the language of grace from the language, intentions, and meanings of reciprocal gift exchange in human society. But Barclay is no determinist, and he will prove in the arc of this study that Paul's understanding of grace overturns and shocks the normative ways of understanding gift-exchange in the first century. Unlike the new perspective on Paul, Barclay will isolate Paul as a radical minister of grace who counters both the Roman and Jewish expectations of grace.

Barclay's *linguistic* perspective distinguishes his scholarship from a new perspective on Paul that claimed that grace was understood everywhere in "Judaism." Yes, Barclay agrees that grace was everywhere, but it was not everywhere understood the same. He makes it clear how Jews and Christians can "discuss this common concept, using identical vocabulary with very different connotation" (563). In the chapter "The Perfections of Grace/Gift" Barclay introduces grace as a polyvalent symbol, a term that has multiple ways to perfect its meaning. He introduces six dimensions, meanings or aspects of grace: superabundance, singularity, priority, incongruity, efficacy and non-circularity.

Each of these perfections configure gift in some maximal form, but none are necessary features of the concept, and crucially, none requires or even implies another. They are distinguishable perfections and do not constitute a "package deal." (563)

Each aspect becomes clearer to the reader as Barclay reviews and illustrates the use of these facets of grace throughout history. Suffice it to say that Barclay will demonstrate how Paul's understanding of grace (the Christ-Gift) will perfect one particular aspect, the *incongruity* of grace, in a manner that will surprise, aggravate and reverse the typical understandings of God's grace in the first century.

Here Barclay has done something remarkable for missiology. His comprehensive treatment of Paul's understanding of the meanings of grace is a thorough case study that can inform our study of all terms of polyvalent meaning in cross-cultural communication. His linguistic (and biblical) vantage point can be applied laterally to other mission contexts (one immediately thinks of more recent controversies on the nature and use of filial terms in translations into languages of Muslim people³).

In his "Interpreting Paul on Grace," Barclay takes the reader on a 110-page *historical* review of how key theological figures have perfected the meaning of grace in Paul. "Interpreting Paul on Grace" includes a treatment of Marcion, Augustine, Pelagius, Luther, Calvin, Barth, Bultmann, Kasemann, and Sanders (the New Perspective on Paul). His extensive treatment of Luther and Calvin clarifies the brilliant re-contextualization of grace

that transpired in the sixteenth century, and just how these Reformers each parsed the language of grace a bit differently from one another. However, Barclay makes it clear that the way Luther and Calvin spun Paul's understanding and application of the Christ-Event failed to fully appreciate Paul's primary usage in the first century. Barclay's appreciation for grace-in-context is what encourages missiologists to imagine how Paul's understanding of grace should impact those frontier settings that still remain today.

While biblical scholars may consider Barclay's thorough treatment of the new perspective as his seminal contribution ("Divine Gift in Second Temple Judaism," Part II, 139 pages), I refrain from any assessment here. I only wish to emphasize that this scholarship provides the backdrop for Barclay's excellent exposition of Galatians and Romans (Part III). Again, Barclay's ability to "disaggregate" the polyvalent meaning of grace allows him to delineate just how Paul's understanding of grace in Galatians and Romans sets the apostle apart from Second Temple Judaism. Barclay's linguistic precision prevents the broad brush of a New Perspective from glossing over Paul's distinctive understanding of grace.

So, while the reader must be patient and wait until Part III for his treatment of Galatians and Romans, all of Barclay's preliminary perspectives allow the reader to ascertain Paul's meaning of grace with fresh sensitivity to culture, linguistics and historical context. Again, there is a rich panoply of missiological vocabulary across this part of Barclay's study, but maybe the most important is captured in the title of his exposition of Galatians 1-2: "The Christ-Gift and the Recalibration of Norms." I don't think I have ever heard the role of the gospel described in those terms: "recalibration" and "norms." But Barclay will rehearse again and again, in multiple ways, the significance of this phrasing for Paul's pioneering context.

Paul's notion of the incongruous Christ-gift was originally part of his missionary theology, developed for and from the Gentile mission at the pioneering stage of community formation. Since God's incongruous grace dissolves former criteria of worth, it forms the basis for innovative groups of converts, by loosening their ties to pre-constituted norms and uniting them in their common faith in Christ. The starting point is the framing of the Christ-event as gift. (566)

The key word here is "norms." Barclay understands that Paul perceived how the gospel would impact the normative criteria of worth (values) in a missionary context. He uses an arsenal of verbs to describe the impact of the Christ-event on any normative system of society: dissolve, scramble, violate, subvert, shatter, destroy, alter, subordinate, or loosen.

What shocks Paul about the Galatian believers is that by adopting the socially-ratified standards of value embodied in the Torah they were confining the gift within pre-established systems of worth. (Barclay)

But it's in the exposition of Galatians that Barclay pinpoints how the grace of God in the Christ-event impacts indigenous understanding of worth.

Paul understands the single event of Christ to bring into question every pre-existent classification of worth. In figuring believers as "dead to the world" and as expressions of a "new creation" (Gal. 6:14–15), he articulates the birth of dissonant communities that are capable of disregarding distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female (Gal. 3:28). Such social identities continue to exist, but they are declared insignificant as markers of worth in a community that is beholden to Christ and operates "at a diagonal" to the normal taxonomies of value (Gal. 1:10–11) (567).

Barclay wants to establish that in a missionary context the Christ-gift is the new Archimedean point "at odds with the normative conventions that govern human systems of value" (355). The normative understanding of gift-giving, stated simply, was for Romans or Jews to calibrate their gifts towards those who were worth receiving a gift. Gifts were generous—but selective—according to the suitability, the worth, or the appropriateness of the receptor. It was expected that there should be a certain *congruity* of value between the giver and the recipient of the gift. The Jew understood that God would only give his gifts (grace) to worthy beneficiaries. He expected that his status as a Jew, and his adherence to the Law, gave him preference for receiving God's grace.

This was what we understand the Galatians were falling into, i.e., that a certain normative system (Torah) would give them preference for God's grace. Barclay interprets Paul as one who recalibrates this normative understanding of worth, for the Christ-event establishes a shocking *non-congruity* (*incongruity*) in God's grace. Paul's message to the Gentiles, his preaching of the Christ-gift, was that grace is conditioned neither by ethnicity nor Torah practice, and the insistence of circumcision for Gentiles represented a surrender to a normative system of worth that nullified the Christ-gift. The missionary Paul was primarily concerned to perfect the nature of this Christ-gift.

The Christ-gift was not a Torah-event: it was not enacted, distributed, or experienced within the criteria of value established by the Torah. The initial and continuing gift of Christ's Spirit to Gentiles who do not practice the Torah is the phenomenological evidence that the Christ-event is not located within the framework of "living Jewishly." (2:14)

Barclay has done missiology a favor by recasting Paul's purpose in the language of worth, value and norms. Too often the pioneer mission context is viewed as a simple dialectic of dogma (worldview) and ritual (customs), but Barclay's

anthropological venture emphasizes the values that have systematized in and around a particular mission context. Paul bore witness to an event that had broken the normal criteria of worth and would embed new standards of worth in the lives of those new believers.

Barclay is concerned that this unique perspective is lost in the re-contextualization of grace in sixteenth century Europe, and he uses his exegesis of Galatians to re-establish Paul's primary intentions.

... What shocks him (Paul) about the Galatian believers is not that they are trusting in their own good works, as a subjective fault in self-understanding, which puts the self in the place of the sufficient work of Christ (Luther), but that, by adopting the socially ratified standards of value embodied in the Torah, they are confining the gift within pre-established systems of worth... to repackage this gift as given in alignment with Torah practice would be to transform it into a gift of "Judaism." (1:13, 14) For Paul, the cross cannot be thus contained without being nullified. (391)

In his final treatment of Romans, Barclay expositis how Paul continues to theologically embellish this concern that the incongruous Christ-gift nullifies "pre-established systems of worth." And that concern sets Paul apart from the subjective interpretation of grace that transpired during the Reformation. Missiologists will be grateful for the way Barclay's volume brings this missionary distinction to Paul, but they might also beckon Barclay to proceed further. They might want to probe how Paul understood the practical fallout from such a radical discontinuity of norms. Barclay can give the impression at times that norms (from the "Christ-gift") totally *replace* indigenous norms, that one system is substituted for another. On other occasions Barclay's language can suggest that it's simply a *transformation* of norms that takes place in each context. Missiologists would do well to invite Barclay into their enclaves and discuss these ambiguities. Together they might frame a "missiology of grace" for today's frontier context.

Endnotes

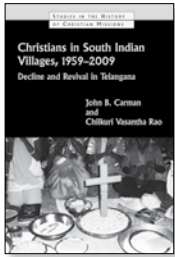
¹ "What's So Dangerous About Grace?" Interview of John Barclay by Wesley Hill in *Christianity Today*, December 31, 2015 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/january-february/whats-so-dangerous-about-grace.html>.

² "The Unexamined Grace," a review of Barclay's *Paul and the Gift* by Scot McKnight in *Books and Culture*, January-February 2016. <http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/2016/janfeb/unexamined-grace.html>.

³ See the Independent Bible Translation Review of WEA <http://www.worldvangelicals.org/translation-review/>.

Christians in South Indian Villages, 1959–2009: Decline and Revival in Telangana, Studies in the History of Christian Missions, by John B. Carmen and Chilkuri Vasantha Rao (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014, pp. 242 + xxiv)

—Reviewed by H. L. Richard



This is a follow-up study fifty years after an analysis of church life in rural Andhra Pradesh resulted in the book *Village Christians and Hindu Culture* (Luke and Carmen 2009/1968). As a stand-alone study there is much of value in this book; as a comparative study of the present and a half century ago it provides an invaluable look at transformations in Indian church life.¹

The first study focused on the Church of South India (CSI), which was by far the dominant church in the area. That is one of the changes fifty years later—the sprouting of many independent Christian congregations and the decline of the CSI.

The first significant development, then, is the decline of the older congregations. The second development, equally significant and perhaps more surprising, is very different. Since 1985, many new independent churches have been started, some in villages with an older CSI congregation and some in villages where there were previously no Christians. While almost all members of the CSI congregations belong to the two Dalit castes, the Malas and the Madigas, more than half of the newer churches have a majority of members belonging to the “higher” non-Dalit castes. (7)

The caste issue will be addressed later in this review. It should be noted that in the context of this discussion, urban CSI churches are growing, both in number and in financial commitments. The major factor in both the decline of the old and the growth of new congregations seems to be leadership.

The core of rural CSI life was once unordained “evangelists.”

The first study took place at a time when the former two-tier system of pastoral care was still working, though with some difficulties. The evangelists were unordained teacher-pastors living in houses whose veranda and courtyard served as the place for teaching children, leading night prayers, and conducting the Sunday evening service.... Now, there is no longer a lower tier of unordained pastor-teachers. (83)

Perhaps it is a positive development that mission-controlled evangelists and Bible women no longer exist, since into that vacuum has come the independent Christian evangelist. CSI pastors are urbanized due to the focus on proper

training for the ministry; urbanized pastors do not fit well in rural India, where untrained evangelists feel at home (28, 90). The new independent churches are often self-supporting as well. An obvious negative side to this picture is the poor teaching present in many of these churches. (An appendix gives eight sample sermons from both CSI and independent churches, some of which are inept at best.)

The great point of commonality between the two studies is the centrality of healing in bringing people to Christ. It is particularly black magic from which healing is now sought.

One feature to which we give more attention is black magic or witchcraft, which seems to have increased in the past fifty years. Healing from the effects of such sorcery is a major reason given by those who have decided to become Christians. (10)

Neither more widespread education nor the ending of epidemics has lessened the belief in magical powers that seem to many villagers stronger than traditional remedies or modern medicine, stronger even than the local goddesses. (191)

Certainly, fear of magicians and of jealous neighbours who pay the magicians to cast a spell is so widespread as to affect the quality of normal village life. Neither counter-magic nor modern medicine seems to be effective against this black magic; only Jesus can break the magician’s spell. (212)

Modernity is certainly impacting Indian village life, and generational change is noted in this study. Literacy is now common in the new generation, and there is also a shift towards more standardized Telugu language rather than the local colloquial (79). There is a change also in viewpoints regarding untouchability.

Even in these villages, moreover, it is widely recognized that Dalits, whether Hindu or Christian, should no longer be treated as serfs of the wealthy landowners or as despised village servants. (180)

Woven throughout this study are discussions related to contextualization. A rather straightforward positive example is the embracing of the concept of *bhakti* (devotion).

Devotion, or *bhakti*, in its Hindu forms has seemed to some Christians to be akin to their own love of God, especially to their loving relationship with Jesus. For other Christians, *bhakti* is simply an Indian word that they use to express their love of God. It is also possible to regard both this word and many of its devotional forms as part of the legacy that Indian Christians have received and naturally incorporate into their own religious life. (70)

Contextualization issues raise many controversies, and often it is underlying assumptions that determine how one views various ideas and practices. The root of controversies in India is well defined.

In India, where the dominant culture is “Hindu,” Christians are divided, along with other Indians, as to whether that Hindu culture, either as a whole or in some of its variations, is a religion

Christians are divided as to whether Hindu culture, either as a whole or in some of its variations, is a religion competing with their faith or a national culture to which all Indians belong and owe a patriotic allegiance. (Carmen and Rao)

competing with their faith or a national culture to which all Indians belong and to which they owe a patriotic allegiance. Many village Christians do not see these different views of Hindu culture as exclusive alternatives, but as extremes between which they must negotiate in practical ways. (190)

This type of question underlies the distinctly Indian controversies related to “conversion.”

Christians have long used the term “conversion” to refer both to the transformation of mind and heart (*metanoia*), which ideally is expected of every Christian, and to the movement of individuals and groups into the Christian community and, by extension, into any religious community. In the latter sense, the term was politicized in India during British colonial rule, especially when Christians were put into a separate category for provincial elections. (171)

The earlier study found the difference between “Hindu” and “Christian” communities greater than the more recent study.

The Christians as a whole are distinguished from the entire village not so much by their customs or attitudes, as by the fact that they form a distinct religious community, with a distinctive time and manner of worship and with their own religious leaders... (Luke and Carmen [1968] 2009, 201)

The study currently under review says that these rural Christians “have . . . not formed communities as distinctive and separate as those of many urban Christians in India” (86). In fact there is an intriguing pattern of interreligious marriage among these rural Christians.

When it comes to marriage alliances, these newer Christians, like the members of the older congregations, seek a family in their own caste, but they try to find other ways to represent and to realize their unity in Christ. (116)

In rural intermarriages the bride is integrated into the bridegroom’s family, but there is concern that in too many cases Christian pastoral care is weak and “many of the women from Hindu families are never fully integrated into the in-law Christian families and therefore do not always raise their children as Christians” (7).

This all leads to a much more integrated society where “many Christians continue to observe some Hindu practices, especially those connected with lifecycle rituals” (78). The emergence of multi-caste churches is noteworthy in this regard. The study reveals that “the largest church brings together members from 7 castes, and the 2 other churches have 9 castes represented” (100). “The newer congregations are made up of individuals and families from different castes who affirm their separate caste identities” (177).

Whether this pattern of “Christian” identity can endure is a question raised in the book itself.

For Christians, conversion has meant a spiritual transformation, but they have differed among themselves as to what changes in behavior should be expected of Christians and to what extent they should still participate in the traditional caste system. (188)

It is in the complexities of existential life that genuine contextualization either develops or is stifled. An interesting side note in this study is a case of accidental contextualization related to baptism:

... general Christian usage in India has followed the western European precedent of simply transliterating the Greek word, thus in Telugu, *baptismamu*. By mispronouncing this word, some of these village Christians actually invented a more meaningful term, for they said *baptirthamu*, which picks up the Hindu term *tirtha*, in its meaning of “sacred bath.” (158)

Always and everywhere the challenges are similar; what does it mean *practically* to be in the world but not of the world? These rural Christians in central India are, perhaps unconsciously, pressured by Christian history and also by a rapidly changing society. New church patterns have emerged, but both old and new are still rather tenuous. The local responses outlined in this book certainly do not provide a blueprint for other disciples of Jesus, but recognizing trends and struggles from this context stimulates ideas that can prove fruitful in other fields. To that end, this book is highly recommended, and it is essential reading for understanding current issues in Indian church and mission. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹The new study provides adequate summarization from the original to make insightful comparisons; but the original study remains very worth reading and contains many insights not noted in this new study.

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