Differential Grace: Tracing the Affective Salience of Second-Order Theological Reflection*

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Abstract

This article explores the affective salience of Christian grace-talk. Developing Stanley Cavell's account of language and Simeon Zahl's generative work on the "affective salience of doctrine," I analyze how the conceptual dynamics internal to Christian arguments over grace and difference structure possibilities of thought and feeling. I deploy a threefold framework for tracing these dynamics, exploring the ways in which Christians have argued over 1) how grace makes a difference to creatures, 2) differential grace, or how grace makes a difference to the differences between creatures, and 3) how these operations of grace modulate one another. Each of these shapes of contestation illuminates the deep conceptual and affective significance of Christian grace-talk. Taken together, they also frame an account of grace as recursively transforming the character of "difference" itself through the work of theological reflection.

Keywords

grace, affect, doctrine, formation, gender, supersessionism, Black Theology

* In no particular order, I am grateful to Rachel Sauls, Tiffany Green, David Kelsey, Shelly Penton, Morgan Bell, Emily Theus, Christine Chang, Jane Nichols, Linn Tonstad, Kathryn Tanner, and Willie Jennings for their critical feedback on various drafts of this essay. I am also grateful to two sets of peer reviewers, whose comments made this a much stronger argument. Finally, I am especially thankful to Nancy Levene for making it possible for me to articulate to myself why I care so deeply about theological concepts. All Bible citations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

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HTR 119:3 (2026) 500–526

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781602610128X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Introduction

In his "Excursus on Wittgenstein's Vision of Language," Stanley Cavell argues that when we first learn language, we are not given names for things we already know and merely lack the words to express. In a significant number of cases, we learn what things are by how we learn the language for expressing them. In learning language we learn "not merely what the word for 'father' is, but what a father is; not merely what the word for 'love' is, but what love is."[1]

Cavell expresses the affective density of this argument in a paragraph on love and trust. He writes:

> And we can also say: When you say "I love my love," the child learns the meaning of the word "love" and what love is. *That (what you do)* will *be* love in the child's world; and if it is mixed with resentment and intimidation, then love is a mixture of resentment and intimidation, and when love is sought, *that* will be sought. When you say "I'll take you tomorrow, I promise," the child begins to learn what temporal durations are, and what *trust* is, and what you do will show what trust is worth.[2]

If I learn what love is by learning language, the love I learn is interwoven with incalculable aspects of that language; in learning the words "love" and "trust," I learn the worlds of thought and feeling in which these words live and move and have their being. As Cavell puts it, "in learning language, you do not merely learn the pronunciation of sounds and their grammatical orders, but the 'forms of life' which make those sounds the words they are."[3] So it is that "what we learn is not just what we have studied; and what we have been taught is not just what we were intended to learn."[4]

What is true of language in general is true of Christian language in particular. When a pastor, priest, or parent first teaches me that "Jesus loves you," I learn what love is and who Jesus is. And if this teaching is mixed with intimidation—perhaps because of *how* I am taught that I cannot deserve this love; perhaps because I am taught that being Jesus's beloved demands incessant self-scrutiny—then love is not just intimidating, but divinely so. In Christian formation too, I learn more than my teachers intend.

Cavell's account primarily concerns "first-order" experience. How I learn what love is is shaped by the interpersonal communication of resentment and

[1] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 177.

[2] Ibid. (italics in original). For in-depth explorations of affect, language, and learning, see Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). See also Donovan O. Schaefer, *Wild Experiment: Feeling Science and Secularism after Darwin* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022) for a recent account of the relationship between thought and feeling.

[3] Cavell, *Claim of Reason,* 177–78

[4] Ibid., 177.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781602610128X Published online by Cambridge University Press

intimidation. Situating this account in the context of Christian formation draws out the fact that "second-order" theological reflection can also shape the affective density of how I learn what love is.[5] Delores Williams has shown, for example, that if I learn to think of Jesus as fundamentally a surrogate figure whose love consists in taking humanity's deserved punishment upon himself, then this learning can entrench self-sacrificial surrogacy as the proper form of Christian love.[6] If I learn what love is when I am taught to speak of Jesus in this way, I can learn that love *is* self-sacrifice. This learning can then bestow a veneer of holiness on black women's surrogacy, whether the surrogacy of enslavement or the surrogacy of "voluntary" self-sacrifice—and through this, it can frame affective possibilities of shame and subjection, insofar as one learns that Christian love is incompatible with prioritizing one's own well-being against demands for self-sacrifice. Indeed, many of my students have reflected that Williams gives voice to the precise logic according to which they have learned to reflexively feel shame when tending to their own well-being.

Simeon Zahl has broached the affective significance of Christian theology in terms of "the affective salience of doctrines," focusing on how doctrinal articulations can be oriented towards catalyzing "the right sort of emotional outcome in . . . piety and practice."[7] When situated in the context of doctrinal theology's role in Christian formation, Zahl's approach opens up opportunities for exploring the affective salience of the second-order logics according to which divergent renderings of specific doctrines invite specific conceptual implications whilst blocking others.[8]

To give an example of what this exploration might look like, Kathryn Tanner notes in *The Politics of God* that belief in predestination can be rendered in various ways with various affective consequences.[9] This belief can inspire "terror over the inefficacy of works . . . *or* comfort in the assurance that one's failing may be remedied by God."[10] It can inspire "quietistic resignation in the face of a destiny one cannot influence . . . *or* concern for good works as the appropriate consequence of one's election."[11] This "variation in attitudes and actions"[12] is then grounded in

[5] By "second-order theological reflection," I mean both attempts to coherently articulate Christian beliefs together and critical reflection on the soundness and significance of these attempts.

[6] See especially Delores S. Williams, "Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption," in *The Strength of Her Witness: Jesus Christ in the Global Voices of Women* (ed. Elizabeth Johnson; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016) 199–214.

[7] Simeon Zahl, "On the Affective Salience of Doctrines," *Modern Theology* 31:3 (2015) 428–44, at 431.

[8] See David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 28 for a rendering of "the logic of belief," as opposed to "the logic of coming to belief."

[9] Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2022) 19.

[10] Ibid. (italics in original).

[11] Ibid., 19–20 (italics in original).

[12] Ibid., 21.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781602610128X Published online by Cambridge University Press

different ways of rendering belief in predestination and different ways of combining this belief with other beliefs. Whether one experiences quietistic resignation or intensified concern for good works depends on whether one holds that "God's election and damnation exclude by definition any place for human working."[13] Terror or comfort follow from different ways of combining belief in election with "a belief about God's offer of salvation in Christ."[14]

The crucial point here is that different ways of rendering and combining predestination are patterned by specific conceptual relations of entailment and contradiction, with concrete affective implications. Quietism is made most cogent by conceptual frameworks within which the efficacy of God's will dissolves the significance of human merit; terror is made most cogent by holding that God's inscrutable will is conceptually independent of God's being-in-Christ.[15] Without entailing that doctrinal articulations absolutely determine affective reflex, both the availability and the intensity of any given affect are informed by the conceptual principles through which divergent beliefs in predestination are articulated. By the same token, how I learn these principles when I learn the language of predestination shapes the doctrine's affective salience for my life. Systematic relations pedagogically inform structural possibilities of thought and feeling.[16]

This article explores the affective salience of second-order theological reflection by tracing how Christians have contested matters of grace and difference. I aim to show that this approach to systematic theological reflection is a powerful way of discerning the affective salience of Christian grace-talk. I will do so by tracing the affective salience of "differential grace," here understood as shorthand for grace as making a difference to differences. Thinking within a threefold framework for navigating Christian grace-talk—namely, in terms of 1) the difference grace makes to creatures, 2) differential grace, and 3) how these two operations of grace modulate one another—I seek to show that Christian arguments over differential grace can fundamentally inform and delimit affective possibilities. Regarding grace itself, I argue for a vision of differential grace as working through theological reflection to recursively transform the conceptual frameworks which inform affective possibility.[17]

[13] Ibid., 20.

[14] Ibid., 21.

[15] The language of "cogency" is taken from Schaefer's work in *Wild Experiment.*

[16] This is not to say that systematic relations entrench one-to-one correspondences between theological beliefs and possibilities of thought and feeling, nor that holding a particular theological position necessitates any particular affective state. There is, in Tanner's terms, a "logical gap here (see *Politics of God*, 15). I am nonetheless arguing for a stronger relation than the "compatibility" or "coherence" that Tanner argues for—a relation in which theological formation *makes possible* the coherence of a number of affective states, without absolutely determining which among a number of coherent possibilities will actually take place.

[17] In framing things this way, I distinguish between grace-talk and "grace" itself. This risks potential ambiguity insofar as it may be unclear when I am speaking of the former and when I am speaking of the latter. My primary focus throughout this essay is the conceptual efficacy of Christian

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Stakes, Complexities, and Risks

Grace has been a central theme in Christian theology from Paul onwards. Indeed, in Roger Haight's words, grace is "the presupposition of all Christian spirituality."[18] Grace has also been a prototypical object of desire in Christian theology. By and large, theological expressions that truly communicate the character of grace are desirable, whilst those that do not should be corrected or rejected.

Centrality and desirability have invested concepts of grace with significant power. This power can be effected in life-giving ways—the claim that God's grace is the source and shape of creaturely goodness has been a bedrock of faith for many Christians, grounding the hope (which I share) that knowing oneself and the world under the aspect of grace enables creative realizations of an infinite good.[19] At the same time, theological reflection on grace has been fertile soil for fatal practices. Supersessionist logics emerge when grace is cast as effecting a sequential distinction between the Church and Israel.[20] Catherine Keller illustrates how theologies of grace can entrench an "identification of God as absolute Owner and Origin,"[21] which both produces and legitimates patriarchal dominance. These are not necessary consequences of thinking through grace. But neither are they merely consequences of distorted thinking, as if matters would be remedied by offering a better conception of grace and then saying, "Well, this is how Christians should think." As Marcella Althaus-Reid has shown, the material efficacy of theological discourse cannot be dissolved by appealing to its ideal effects; "ideal" articulations of grace can have wounding and life-giving power, sometimes in the same breath.[22]

There is good reason, then, to explore the affective salience of Christian grace-talk. Any attempt to trace this salience is complicated, however, by the complexity that Christian contestation over grace has pressed into the meaning of "grace" itself. As Haight writes, "of all Christian terms, the word 'grace' is the simplest, and . . . the most complicated."[23] Precisely because the word "grace" "refers to the most

grace-talk in light of what Christians believe about grace itself. In the final section, however, I dwell on the efficacy of grace as working through grace-talk.

[18] Roger Haight, *The Experience and Language of Grace* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1979) 6. My appeal to this claim is far-reaching, insofar as I am proposing that concepts of grace are active in Christian thinking even when unmentioned. For thorough analyses of Christian reflection on grace, see John Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020) and Stephen J. Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace: Perspectives in Theological Anthropology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007).

[19] Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005) and Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace* (Maryknoll, MN: Orbis, 1979) offer two representative examples of this train of thought. See also Gerald McKenny, *The Analogy of Grace: Karl Barth's Moral Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[20] See below for an analysis of grace in relation to supersessionism.

[21] Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 89.

[22] See Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), esp. 11–46.

[23] Haight, *Experience and Language*, 6.

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basic and fundamental of Christian realities," it has also "acquired so many different secondary meanings in technical theology . . . and in common understanding that it is almost impossible to say what exactly the word 'grace' means."[24] General expressions of grace can be offered, including Haight's own assertion that "the fundamental Christian doctrine of grace is that God's love for humanity is absolutely gratuitous."[25] Arguments over grace nonetheless problematize the meaning of the constitutive terms on which these expressions rely. The apparent simplicity of grace's "primary" significance is irreducibly complicated by the diversity of its "secondary" meanings.

Given this complexity, I here narrow my focus to Christian contestation over how grace makes a difference to creatures.[26] I am not aiming to show that Christians have argued over grace and difference: this is more or less self-evident. I am seeking to illuminate the conceptual frameworks which bind divergent accounts of grace together. The work of illuminating these frameworks will then ground a polyvalent approach to tracing the affective salience of Christian grace-talk.[27]

Within this work, I offer a threefold framework for navigating the shapes of Christian contestation over grace and difference. I first explore this contestation in terms of 1) how grace makes a difference to creatures, then in terms of 2) how grace makes a difference to the differences between creatures, or "differential grace." Finally, I explore the question of 3) how these operations of grace should be understood as interacting with one another—of how the difference grace makes to creatures should be cast as both modulating and modulated by differential grace.[28]

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 16. Haight emphasizes a basic thread of commonality across uses of "grace," writing that "the word 'grace' has the special connotation of everything that pertains to a gift of love; it is totally gratuitous or unmerited and undeserved" (ibid., 6). In this regard, I am reading Haight against himself somewhat.

[26] There is a risk of distortion in this approach, since creaturely difference is not always the primary focus of Christian grace-talk (this is illustrated by John Barclay's monumental work in *Paul and the Gift* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015]). Different renderings of grace nonetheless almost always have implications for how creatures are made different from themselves and each other. Focusing on this aspect of grace also has the further advantage of making the conceptual operations of "difference" an explicit question alongside matters of grace.

[27] As Tanner has argued, doctrinal expressions of Christian belief do not emerge in isolation—they are products of "constantly renewable processes of negotiation and periodically recurrent struggles over meaning" (Tanner, *Politics of God*, 18). These struggles over meaning are not simply disagreements over which choice to make from a predetermined set of possibilities. They are struggles over the systematic principles that inform which possibilities are available for Christian belief. Struggles over meaning can as such produce novel theological principles of conceptualization at the same time as producing novel renderings of old beliefs. Divergent principles of conceptualization are then set in concrete relationship with one another across fields of theological debate; adopting one such habit of mind on the basis of one's theological formation can exclude or invite other such habits. Insofar as these principles frame divergent possibilities of thought and feeling, then dwelling on how they stand in relation to one another can offer a more multifaceted account of the affective salience of Christian grace-talk than dwelling on singular articulations of grace.

[28] This framework does not cover how grace makes a difference to the differences between

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In like fashion to grace writ large, Christian conflicts over grace and difference have taken too many forms to cover in a single essay. Instead of attempting to exhaustively map these levels of contestation, I sketch examples that clarify the conceptual dynamics at work in each. This article is, as such, closer to a notebook of preparatory sketches than a gallery exhibition. By the same token, it frames a hypothesis for further experimentation rather than offering a conclusive demonstration.

There are several limitations to this approach. On the one hand, sketching illustrative examples risks over-simplification. For reasons of scope and scale, I render most disagreements in binary terms. Each example can be described in more multifaceted and expansive ways, whilst alternative readings can be offered of the figures involved.[29] On the other hand, I risk trying to cover so much that I cover nothing well. I therefore aim to say something true of each example without presuming to say everything that could be said.

On yet another hand, most of these preparatory sketches describe what should occur if conceptual consequences followed mechanistically from the normative logic of doctrinal claims. Without seeking to dissolve the normative aspects of doctrine, this essay ultimately posits that the mechanical character of these consequences is itself a matter of contestation. Descriptions which have this character are thus provisional and preliminary, with clean lines traced to illustrate how arguments have been made, not because they evince an adamantine necessity.

Finally, I focus on an eclectic set of second-order discourses, *not* concrete situations in which these discourses become effective. Though I have chosen theological arguments which either have had significant historical effects on shared Christian life or speak directly to matters of visceral significance such as race and gender, this approach risks abstracting the logics of theological reflection from the worlds in which these logics are lived.[30]

This essay involves a high level of abstraction, some of which is quite complex (for me, at least!). Even at its most abstract, however, second-order theological

creatures and God, for reasons of space. Though deserving of independent attention, this theme can be provisionally broached within the question of how grace effects differences in creation with fewer detrimental effects than neglecting these other shapes of contestation. For an alternative way of framing Christian disagreements over grace, see Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 66–78.

[29] In writing about John Calvin, for example, I do not dwell on alternative readings of Calvin's theology of Israel, but draw out a line of thought which has been operative in influential forms of Calvinism. I focus on a possible reading of Calvin, grounded in his writings, but not the only necessary reading. In several places I also read secondary accounts of specific theologians—Haight's reading of Luther and Aquinas, for example—rather than the theologians themselves.

[30] I could have chosen other examples, such as the exchange between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner on what grace entails for revelation, or some aspect of the recent resurgence in interest over questions of "nature" and "grace." I have selected the examples broached here in part because they illuminate the conceptual significance of Christian grace-talk without requiring the reader to know the ins-and-outs of highly technical contours of these debates, in part because they center on the significance of second-order Christian grace-talk for terms that many Christians encounter in the course of their church life.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781602610128X Published online by Cambridge University Press

reflection can always be thought in relation to how it informs possibilities of life. When a daughter and a son learn to say that grace impels women's subordination and heterosexuality, each child is given a position relative to various conflicts over what grace is and how it can be lived out. This position will incline these children to hold certain things as necessarily true of grace, others as impossible or inconceivable. If what they learn of grace is central to their lives, this learning will inform how they contort themselves when they fall in love with others (whomever they might fall in love with), whilst how they are remade in love will be informed by how they move through or remake the currents into which they have been thrown. The principles of their performances of life will be encoded by conceptual dynamics forged in systematic theological debates over grace, dynamics which can encode whether flesh should feel itself compelled to choose between subordination or damnation, between well-being or redemption. These children might never learn of these debates. They might never become aware of the alternatives. What grace is in their worlds will nonetheless be shaped by conceptual relations between contesting accounts of grace—and how these children think and feel and navigate their own and each other's fundamental worth will be at least partially informed by how the languages they have been taught impress these conceptual relations into bodily practice, even and especially if they seek one day to leave behind what they have learned. The abstract threads which bind systematic reflections on grace together are woven into the sinews of experience.

My focus on abstract discourse is motivated in large part by a belief that systematic reflection on the conceptual dynamics of doctrinal contestation enables a kind of spiritual co-perambulation across the affective terrain of Christian God-talk. Thinking with Ludwig Wittgenstein's image of language as an old and ancient city, the first task is to develop a sensibility for how the conceptual logics of Christian God-talk inform how certain alleyways connect to main thoroughfares, how one set of structures has been built on the foundations of another, or how seemingly innocuous expressions have been woven into raw nerves of pain and desperation. The second task is then to investigate how navigating this topography illuminates possibilities for healing and transformation.[31] Even the most abstruse considerations can illuminate how the affective dynamics of theological conceptualization course through the lives of those who have learned to think themselves as Christians. Even reflections which evoke proverbial questions of angels and pinheads can add to one's power for deep theological listening—a listening which remembers that at the conceptual level too, what we learn is not just what we have studied, and what we have been taught is not just what we were intended to learn.

[31] See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2009) §18.

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The Difference Grace makes to Creatures

Christians have tended to agree that grace makes a difference to creatures, often articulating this difference through concepts such as justification, sanctification, regeneration, and deification.[32] In Pauline terms, grace transforms believers from those who "were living in the flesh" to those who live "in the new life of the Spirit" (Rom 7:5–6). Christians have also tended to disagree about *how* grace makes a difference to creatures. John Barclay expresses this in terms of how theologians have sought to perfect grace's "efficacy," or its capacity to effect change in its recipients—"perhaps God's grace creates a newly configured self; perhaps this self can choose only the destiny determined by God; or perhaps grace replaces human agency such that God alone can be said to act in the performance of virtue."[33]

Conflicts over how grace makes a difference to creatures have numerous conceptual-affective implications. These arguments can be bound up with different conceptions of the kind of thing grace is, for example. These different conceptions then carry divergent implications for the kind of differences grace *can* make. As such, these different conceptions also carry divergent implications for the coherence of various affective responses to grace. For example, Haight writes that Martin Luther casts grace as a justifying relation between God and creature, whereas Thomas Aquinas casts it as an accidental quality that substantially transforms human nature.[34] For Luther, graced relations can therefore leave the creature's nature in some sense unchanged, such that "the basic unworthiness that is manifested in concupiscence . . . remains."[35] As a result, "sin and grace are not exclusive or contradictory terms."[36] By contrast, Aquinas casts "sin and grace [as] exclusive realities."[37] To receive grace for Aquinas is to be raised up as "a son of God, where 'son of God' takes on a precise meaning of a new divine nature and life, a new level of being."[38] This "new level of being" must then fundamentally differ from the nature characterized by concupiscence, such that it is "metaphysically absurd that a person be in sin and grace at the same time. . . . Sin and grace are contrary states ontologically; logically they are contradictory; they are mutually exclusive."[39] Luther and Aquinas's accounts of grace thus ground competing visions of how grace can transform creatures. For Luther, grace can change us without fundamentally changing our sinful nature; for Aquinas, this claim is conceptually incoherent.

[32] Kent Eilers and Kyle C. Strobel, *Sanctified by Grace: A Theology of the Christian Life* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014) comprises a series of explorations into the differences grace makes to creatures.

[33] Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace*, 16.

[34] See Haight, *Experience and Language*, 90.

[35] Ibid. This is not to say that Luther articulates grace as making *no* essential difference to creaturely existence; grace is not merely "forensic."

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid., 91.

[38] Ibid., 89.

[39] Ibid., 91.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781602610128X Published online by Cambridge University Press

These different renderings then frame divergent frameworks for hope and fear. Put schematically, in this rendering of Luther it is most cogent to hope for absolute intimacy with God apart from my own perfection, but also to fear that my subjection to sin cannot be ameliorated in this life. By contrast, in this rendering of Aquinas it is most cogent to hope that I can move beyond the violences of sin, but also to fear that my imperfections are evidence that I am not yet a child of God.

Contestation over the difference grace makes to creatures also frames divergent paradigms of "difference." These paradigms can then inform divergent ways of experiencing the tensions that characterize a desire for transformation. Karen Kilby, for example, argues that Roman Catholic and Protestant approaches to grace incline each tradition toward distinctively paradoxical accounts of transformation by grace. Very broadly speaking (Kilby works with ideal types), "Catholic thought on grace tends to [pair] grace with nature,"[40] with grace cast as realizing something in human nature toward which we are essentially oriented but which we cannot attain by our own power. By contrast, Protestant thought pairs grace with sin, with grace cast as fixing the damage caused by sin in ways that God alone can accomplish. Each approach then leads to a distinctive way of framing difference in itself. Catholics cast the difference grace makes in terms of actualizing our natural impulse toward self-transcendence—transformed by grace, one is "simultaneously creaturely and raised to something beyond the creaturely; one is beyond oneself without ceasing to be oneself."[41] This "difference" connotes an actualization that fundamentally transforms our nature without dissolving it. Protestants hold that any change effected by grace must leave the creature's continued dependence on grace unchanged; grace as such "makes all the difference, but at the same time there is a pull towards insisting that on some level grace makes almost no difference."[42] This "difference" connotes a repair of one's relationship with God that leaves both the structure of this relation and one's nature unaltered. As Kilby argues, these divergent framings of difference then give rise to distinct paradoxes. For Catholics, the paradox emerges from desiring to transcend myself without losing myself; for Protestants, it emerges from conceiving a restoration that leaves my continued need for restoration unchanged this side of the eschaton.[43]

The affective salience of these divergent paradigms of difference can now be traced in terms of how these distinct paradoxes frame the tensions of desiring transformation. On the one hand, desiring to be made genuinely new as myself invites specific tensions regarding what it means both to remain and to lose myself; on the other hand, learning to inhabit one's existence as *simul justus et peccator*

[40] Karen Kilby, "Paradox and Paul: Catholic and Protestant Theologies," *IJST* 22.1 (2020) 77–82, at 79.

[41] Ibid., 80.

[42] Ibid., 81.

[43] Ibid., 80.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781602610128X Published online by Cambridge University Press

poses the felt challenge of finding peace in my absolute dependence on God without giving in to an absolute despair of self.

Alongside these more immediate structures of feeling, however, learning the language of grace through this divergence also initiates people being formed as Christians into a wider conceptual field structured by the principles according to which these paradox-inviting conceptions of difference are differentiated from one another. Put otherwise, people are formed to think and feel the implications of grace according to the underlying principles according to which divergent renderings of grace are set in relation to one another. This might involve, for example, learning a paradigm within which 1) a conception of "nature" as open to substantial transformation without loss of identity is cast as incompatible with 2) a conception of "nature" as incapable of retaining identity across this kind of transformation. Learning to think within this paradigm then inculcates a principle of differentiation according to which repair of relation must be distinguished from transformation of substance, a principle which in turn rests upon a fundamental distinction between conceptions of "substance" as relational and conceptions of "substance" as that elemental aspect of being which inheres independent of relation. These paradigms and principles can then shape how divergent renderings of difference are felt and thought in relation to one another, and so which possibilities of thought and feeling are rendered conceivable from different pedagogical starting points. Less immediately perhaps than first-order experience, but no less powerfully, the habits of mind inculcated by learning an implicit conception of one's deepest reality as unchangeable and yet in need of change can enable distinctive shapes of despair and hope (perhaps a hidden loathing of self as ineradicably sinful, for example, combined with a hope that God can make me something fundamentally other than I am). Learned habits of mind can also render alternative ways of thinking difference and their affective possibilities as either incompatible with or inconceivable from one's learned perspective.

It is hard to articulate the conceptual principles which ground these possibilities of thought and feeling. But fundamental principles need not be made explicit in order to be communicated and felt. It is possible for teachers to impress a principle of differentiation into their students by emphasizing the incompatibility of "Catholic" with "Protestant" renderings of grace (whichever rendering the teacher favors), solely by virtue of the fact that this principle implicitly structures the shared conceptual field according to which these renderings are cast as incompatible.[44]

[44] It is worth noting that many Catholic and Protestant theologians have come to the mutual conclusion that the positions traced in this subsection can be complementary rather than mutually exclusive—and that alongside ecumenical reconciliation, this work can have the effect of transforming the principles of differentiation which govern the field of available possibilities.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781602610128X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Differential Grace

A second way that Christians have contested questions of grace and difference centers around how grace transforms the differences between creatures—around, that is, how grace transforms the ways that creatures should be distinguished from one another in terms of gender, race, nationality, or economic class. This is contestation over differential grace.

I am going to explore the significance of these conflicts by tracing a set of contesting interpretations of Gal 3:28–29. To begin with an overview of these verses, in the course of arguing that justification is by grace rather than "by the law," Paul asserts that insofar as believers are baptized in Christ "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise." On the one hand, Paul thus articulates grace as *effacing* a series of societally foundational distinctions; on the other, he articulates grace as *effecting* a distinction between Abraham's offspring "according to the promise" and those "according to the flesh." Both articulations are collision points for Christian conflicts over differential grace, and though they can be broached independently, their intersections illustrate the depths of Christian grace-talk's affective and conceptual significance.[45]

Much like the difference grace makes to creatures in themselves, Christians tend to agree that grace effaces the differences between creatures in some sense. Few are willing to read Paul as asserting that the differences he names are entirely dissolved—that gender distinctions, for example, cease to exist in any sense for Christians. Barclay nonetheless expresses a representative view when he claims that though grace does not erase "the differences indicated by these categories [Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female]," it does "alter the worth associated with these labels."[46] Again, however, Christians have also disagreed about how grace effaces the differences between creatures. Regarding American racial slavery, for example, abolitionists argued that Galatians proclaims slavery's theological illegitimacy. Pro-slavery theologians by contrast argued that it proclaims the soteriological irrelevance of distinctions between master and enslaved, undercutting theological grounds for opposing slaveocracy.[47]

[45] Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza offers an influential account of how Gal 3:28–29 was read in early Christian communities in *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (Spring Valley, NY: Crossroad, 1994) 205–36. See also Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989) 181–201.

[46] Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace*, 57 (italics removed).

[47] Albert Barnes argues that because free and enslaved peoples are "alike sinners and alike saved by grace" (*Notes, Explanatory and Practical, on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians and the Epistle to the Galatians* [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1846] 351), so too Christians should be impelled towards total emancipation. Phillip Schaff argues that because civil freedom is "only temporal at best, and not to be compared with the spiritual freedom which elevates the humblest Christian slave far above his heathen master" (*Slavery and the Bible: A Tract for the Times* [Chambersbyrg, PA:

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781602610128X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Similarly structured arguments are still rehearsed regarding gender. I am going to focus on an example from American evangelicalism, in order to draw out the deeper conceptual implications of these arguments.[48]

Arguing for hierarchical complementarianism, Richard Hove distinguishes "theological" from "sociological" readings of Gal 3:28. In Hove's view, those who argue that women can hold positions of spiritual authority on the basis of this verse posit that the "new age [inaugurated by Jesus] has not only wrought theological changes, i.e., the inclusion of the Gentiles . . . but [also that] these theological changes are manifested in sociological changes."[49] Rebecca Groothius, for example—whom Hove engages directly—argues that Gal 3:28 proclaims a spiritual equality between men and women which dissolves any ground for excluding women from spiritual authority. In her words, "things under the new covenant are different than . . . under the old covenant. Something has changed; there is a new . . . equality between believers."[50] This new equality is grounded in the fact that "with the redemption offered by Christ, all believers are to be recognized as having full spiritual status without regard to human distinctions."[51] Full spiritual status is then incompatible with excluding women from church leadership. The new covenant entails that "free Jewish male believers no longer have special religious status and privilege; they no longer have cause to recite the ancient Jewish prayer in which they gave thanks to God that they were not born a slave, a Gentile, or a woman. *This is the difference grace has wrought*."[52]

M. Kieffer & Co's Caloric Printing Press, 1861] 25), questions of eternal grace are irrelevant to temporal slavery. The fact that "all earthly distinctions and blessings vanish into utter insignificance when compared with the eternal realities of the kingdom of heaven" (ibid.) deflates theological grounds for contesting slavery.

[48] These arguments can be explored in a number of ways, including through Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox strands of theological debate. My choice of American evangelicalism is motivated by the fact that many of my students first learned to be themselves in American evangelical communities. I feel a responsibility to take seriously what it means to have been formed in this world, which here motivates exploring the affective salience of grace-talk as it has been expressed by theologians whose arguments might otherwise deservedly go unremarked upon in academic theology. The theological frameworks which have the deepest effects on people's lives are not, after all, necessarily those most otherwise deserving of critical academic engagement. I have chosen Richard Hove and Rebecca Groothius as sources, meanwhile, precisely because their thinking is representative rather than original—in my experience at least, the underlying logics of grace and gender expressed in their arguments are very much operative in Christian communities, evangelical and otherwise.

[49] Richard W. Hove, *Equality in Christ? Galatians 2:38 and the Gender Dispute* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999) 97. Though Hove does not use the term "grace" in the passages I cite, the character of grace is fundamental to his engagement with Galatians.

[50] Rebecca Merrill Groothius, *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997) 30.

[51] Ibid., 33.

[52] Ibid., 35 (emphasis added).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781602610128X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Against this position, complementarians such as Hove "see Paul's emphasis as primarily theological."[53] Under Hove's view, "Galatians 3:28 is primarily about the inclusion of all peoples in the blessings of God in Christ. To use this verse for other purposes is illegitimate."[54] His distinction is not, however, ultimately between "theological" and "sociological" approaches, but between different ways of deriving "sociological" implications from "theological" claims. After all, Hove too asserts that theological change effects sociological change—even though Paul's teaching "is not a decisive break from the Old Testament, the new era does bring about something new," and "since all believers are now 'in Christ,' relationships between them will be transformed."[55] He just articulates these changes differently to Groothius. Rather than inaugurating new forms of "sociological" equality, "in the new era the husband is told to love his wife as his own body . . . and the wife is told to submit to her husband and respect him."[56] Spiritual equality thus perfects existing natural hierarchies. It does not dissolve their spiritual significance.[57]

In all, Hove and Groothius both therefore cast grace as transforming the differences between creatures by instituting a new spiritual equality. Both can concur with Barclay's assertion that what counts "ultimately and fully [in the light of grace]—the only true symbolic capital—is not one's ethnicity, gender, or legal status, but one's solidarity with Christ."[58] Abstract consensus nonetheless becomes material conflict when it comes to deriving practical inferences for how grace effaces differences between creatures. Hove casts spiritual equality as perfecting hierarchical ways of organizing creaturely difference; Groothius casts it as undercutting any such hierarchical organization (in spiritual terms, at least).

These contesting ways of articulating differential grace have severe implications for how we learn who we are through the languages of grace and gender. To hold that gender hierarchy is bound up with salvation can impress the weight of redemption into how one walks, how one dresses, how one dreams. At the same time, however, the immediate affective density of these implications and the urgency of matters of gender and power (as well as enslavement, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism, to name some of the concerns bound up with Gal 3:28) can occlude the fact that Hove and Groothius engage "difference" at a conceptually superficial level. Explicitly, at least, they merely broach whether certain differences should be maintained or abolished, valued or ignored, organized one way or another—not what these differences are or how they are formed.

[53] Hove, *Gender Dispute*, 102.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid., 120.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Hove deploys Ronald Y. K. Fung's distinction between "slavery as a social institution created by sinful men [which] can and should be abolished" and "the male/female distinction [which] has its roots in creation itself and continues to have significance in the realm of redemption" (ibid., 103) to explain why enslavement should be abolished and gender distinctions perfected.

[58] Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace*, 57.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781602610128X Published online by Cambridge University Press

When set alongside questions of how grace *effects* creaturely differences, however, the deeper conceptual operations implicated in their debate come into focus. This can be drawn out by analyzing how Christians have argued over the second part of Gal 3:28–29—that "if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

Across the sweep of Galatians, Paul distinguishes "heirs according to the promise" from "heirs according to the flesh." The former are allegorical descendants of the free woman Sarah, who recognize that salvation is "by divine grace, appropriated by faith;"[59] the latter are allegorical descendants of the slave woman Hagar, who believe that salvation depends "on one's own works."[60] In Romans, Paul then uses this language to articulate a distinction between true and false belonging to Israel—as he puts it, "not all Israelites truly belong to Israel. . . . It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants" (Rom 9:6–8). The vast majority of Christians over time have interpreted Paul as asserting that the church is the "new spiritual Israel" which has "superseded the old carnal Israel in God's election and design."[61] As reflected in Hove and Groothius' shared appeals to a new age in Christ, the Church's mooted supersession of Israel has likewise been seen as coinciding with the institution of a new historical epoch in which "the Old Law of works [has] finally yielded to the New Law of grace."[62] Some of the most persistent and violently consequential conflicts in Christian theology have thus revolved around how to articulate sequential distinctions between the Church and Israel as at once effecting and effected by an historical transition from the old aeon to the new.

To sketch two paradigmatic approaches to this conflict: figures such as Marcion and Valentinus represent an overarching view in which the distinction between Church and Israel is one of absolute difference.[63] In Kendall Soulen's words, this broadly "gnostic" approach asserts that "the Father of Jesus Christ was wholly separate from and opposed to the God of Israel. The God of Hebrew Scriptures was an inferior demiurge whose works—creation, the election of the Jews, the law—pertained exclusively to the material realm. In contrast, the God of Jesus Christ ruled the highest realm of spirit."[64] Different gods then ground different covenants, and

[59] Judith L. Kovacs, "Grace and Works: Clement or Alexandria's Response to Valentinian Exegesis of Paul," in *Ancient Perspectives on Paul* (ed. Tobias Nicklas, Andreas Merkt, and Joseph Verheyden: Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013) 191–210, at 195.

[60] Ibid.

[61] R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996) ix.

[62] Ian Christopher Levy, *The Bible in Medieval Tradition: The Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001) 3.

[63] See Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 80–85 on Marcion. For Valentinian thought regarding grace, see Judith L. Kovacs, "The Language of Grace: Valentiain Reflection on New Testament Imagery," in *Radical Christian Voices and Practice: Essays in Honor of Christopher Rowland* (ed. Zoë Bennett and David B. Growler; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 69–85.

[64] Soulen, *God of Israel*, 41.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781602610128X Published online by Cambridge University Press

different covenants ground different peoples. As Rosemary Radford-Reuther puts it, "the Mosaic and the Christian covenants have no common inheritance. They are like carnal man and spiritual man, intertwined within history in the same people perhaps, but now separated in the eschatological sorting of the 'wheat from the tares.'"[65] Christian history thus instantiates the simple replacement of an inferior "carnal" people by their "spiritual" superiors.

Against this approach, theologians such as Justin Martyr and Ireneaus of Lyons developed what Soulen calls the "standard canonical narrative." Within this narrative, the "Old Covenant" and its peoples have the same basic substance as the "New." The difference is that the New Covenant instantiates the full reality of this substance, whereas the Old merely prefigures it.[66] John Calvin expresses the logic of this "standard" narrative with utmost clarity, arguing that "the proclamation of the grace manifested in Jesus Christ"[67] fundamentally "confirmed and satisfied whatever the law had promised, and gave substance to the shadows."[68] As a result, Christians must hold that "the covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same, [differing only] in mode of dispensation."[69] The difference grace makes between Israel and the Church should therefore be characterized in terms of fulfillment and consummation. Before Christ, the Old Testament "showed but an image and shadow in place of the substance;"[70] after Christ, the New Testament "reveals the very substance of truth as present."[71] Mutual exclusivity is then transposed into the relationship between contemporary Jews and Christians. Whereas the Jewish people of the Old Testament are brought into eternal life—for "who . . . dares to separate the Jews from Christ, since with them . . . was made the covenant of the gospel?"[72]—contemporary Jews are distinguished from Christians as those who have forfeited their own essential truth. Evoking Gal 3:28, Calvin thus asserts that "the Gentiles not only were made equal to the Jews . . . but . . . were, so to speak, taking the place of dead Jews."[73]

[65] Rosemary Radford-Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury, 1974) 103.

[66] Soulen, *God of Israel*, 29.

[67] John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion (*2 vols.; ed. John T. McNeill; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 1:425. For a thorough account of Calvin's relationships with Judaism, see Achim Detmers, "Calvin, the Jews, and Judaism," in *Jews, Judaism, and the Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (ed. Dean Phillip Bell and Stephen G. Burnett; Leiden: Brill, 2006) 197–217.

[68] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:427.

[69] Ibid., 1:429.

[70] Ibid., 1:453.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ibid., 1:431.

[73] Ibid., 1:462.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781602610128X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Christians have developed other ways of thinking the relationships between the Church and Israel.[74] These approaches are nonetheless sufficient for illustrating how divergent articulations of grace as *effecting* the difference between Jews and Christians can modulate conceptions of grace as *effacing* the differences named in Gal 3:28.

As Soulen and Radford-Ruether emphasize, both the "gnostic" and the "standard" narratives share an overarching framework—they both "draw a line across history at the time of the birth of Jesus that is treated as though it coincided with the transition from 'sin' to 'grace' . . . from outwardness, carnality, and unfaith to inwardness, spirituality, and the age of faith."[75] Within this framework, divergent ways of distinguishing "heirs according to the promise" from "heirs according to the flesh" then inform divergent ways of distinguishing "carnality" from "spirituality." Where the difference between the Church and Israel is characterized as mutually exclusive and the actualization of this difference as a matter of simple replacement, "carnality" should be conceived as having no positive relationship to "spirituality"; just as grace/promise is antithetical to sin/flesh, so the spiritual negates and replaces the carnal. By contrast, where the difference between Church and Israel is characterized in terms of substantial identity and the actualization of this difference as a matter of consummation, "spirituality" should be conceived as realizing the essential truth of "carnality"; just as the promise of grace is the truth of the "Old Covenant," so spiritual consummation fulfills the truth of carnality.

We can now see the claim that Judaism evinces "all that is 'old' and 'carnal' while Christianity evinces spiritual and eschatological 'newness'"[76] as entailing that grace effects a distinction between two discrete *principles of difference*. On the one hand, we have a "fleshy" principle of difference which organizes peoples according to "the carnal distinction[s] between Jew and Gentile,"[77] male and female, slave and free. On the other, we have a "spiritual" principle of difference in light of which these carnal distinctions lose "whatever theological significance [they] previously possessed,"[78] and in light of which creatures can be differentiated from one another on the basis of a more fundamental spiritual reality. Crucially, however, how one distinguishes between carnal and spiritual principles of difference is itself shaped by how one frames the difference between "spiritual" and "carnal" in terms of the Church and Israel. How one conceives the difference between these two principles of difference, and so how one renders grace as *effacing* carnal distinctions, depends on how one conceives of grace as *effecting* the difference between the Church and Israel. If grace fulfills Israel through the Church, then spiritual difference

[74] See Kendall Soulen's *Irrevocable: The Name of God and the Unity of the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2022) and Willie Jennings's *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017).

[75] Radford-Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 163.

[76] Ibid., 95.

[77] Soulen, *God of Israel*, 28.

[78] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781602610128X Published online by Cambridge University Press

should be distinguished from carnal difference in terms of consummation and fulfillment, such that spiritually effacing carnal distinctions involves purifying their inner logics. If grace rejects Israel through the Church, then spiritual difference should be distinguished from carnal difference in terms of negation and exclusion, such that spiritually effacing carnal distinctions involves absolutely rejecting the "spiritual" force of these logics. In both cases, what it means for grace to efface a "carnal" principle of distinction through a "spiritual" principle depends on how one articulates the distinction between Jew and Christian. How grace *effects* the difference between Church and Israel modulates how grace *effaces* the differences between creatures.

We can now sound out the full conceptual-affective significance of Hove and Groothius' conflict over gender. Hove and Groothius both frame the difference grace makes to gender differences in terms of how grace effects the distinction between the Church and Israel. Groothius' claim that "free Jewish male believers no longer have special religious status" hinges on a conception of differential grace within which the "carnal" considerations of the Hebrew Scriptures have no significance for Christians. Her arguments for gender equality are framed by a paradigm within which spiritual equality between men and women in Christ rests on a more fundamental inequality between those who are in Christ and those who are not. Hove meanwhile frames his argument on the basis that the "new" covenant makes substantial what the "old" signifies. His arguments against "egalitarianism" hinge on his account of how Paul announces the fulfillment of God's promises through grace,[79] positing the Church as the *telos* of Israel.

Alongside the harmful effects of supersessionism in its own right, Hove and Groothius can now be read in light of their divergent supersessionisms as presenting not just divergent accounts of how grace effaces gender differences, but also divergent ways of conceiving what these differences are. This can be illustrated using one of Calvin's distinctions between the "Old" and the "New" Testaments. As above, Calvin claims that the Old Testament "consists in figures," such that "in the absence of the reality, it showed but an image and shadow in place of the substance."[80] The New Testament, by contrast, "reveals the very substance of truth as present."[81] Insofar as the gender distinction effaced by grace is cast as rooted in the Old Testament, this distinction should therefore be conceived as a distinction between "figures"—a distinction, that is, between phenomena whose fundamental significance rests in how they stand for something else. The distinction between "heirs according to the promise" and "heirs according to the flesh" is, by contrast, a distinction between substantive realities. Put otherwise, the difference between male and female should be conceived as initially a difference between signs, a semiotic difference, whereas the difference between Jew and Christian should

[79] See Hove, *Gender Dispute*, 93–125.
[80] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:453.
[81] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781602610128X Published online by Cambridge University Press

be conceived as a difference between "meanings," here understood as realities to which signs refer.[82]

Without assuming that Hove and Groothius directly inherit Calvin's particular sense of this distinction between "image" and "substance," we can note that because Hove casts the truth of gender as resting in how grace perfects the substance of "carnal" hierarchy, so too gender differences purified by grace come to manifest a spiritual substance which they only signified before. In Hove's account, that is, a semiotic difference becomes a substantial difference. For Groothius, because grace dissolves the significance of gender distinctions, their material performance can no longer signify spiritual reality. Carnal differences between "male" and "female" still carry social significance outside the church in her account; in ecclesial spaces, however, the difference between male and female is now akin to a difference between signs which entirely lacks spiritual meaning. For both Hove and Groothius, the character of the *difference* marked by "gender" is thus implicitly grounded in how grace is conceived as at once effecting and effacing the differences between creatures.[83]

In all, without ever broaching these conceptual dynamics directly, the theological frameworks articulated by Hove and Groothius generate distinctive ways of conceiving the divergence between "carnal" and "spiritual" differences, with substantial implications for how we understand what gender differences are. Children and adults need not then learn the minutiae of Christian contestation over grace in order to frame their lives according to these divergent principles for differentiating between carnal and spiritual modes of distinction—and we need not assume an absolute conceptual determinism to note that divergent conceptualizations of difference have diverse affective consequences. I might feel the demands of gender performance as grounded in a pressure to manifest the substance of my spiritual reality. Or I might feel the particularities of my gender as lacking any spiritual significance, such that investing them with emotional attention betrays my new life in Christ.[84] Both structures of feeling have, in my experience, been viscerally experienced by Christians attempting to navigate who they are in relation to who they have learned God wants them to be. Perhaps most

[82] Amaryah Armstrong has argued that articulating grace as effecting a transition from flesh to spirit renders fleshy things as only capable of bearing "allegorical" significance, displacing their centers of semantic gravity into a putatively spiritual referent. See Amaryah Armstrong, "Of Spirit and Flesh: Race, Reproduction, and Sexual Difference in the Turn to Paul," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 16.2 (2017) 126–141, 135.

[83] It is beyond the scope of this essay to flesh out the distinction between "semiotic" and "substantial" differences, as well as how these different differences inflect fundamental conceptualizations of "gender difference." Marilyn Strathern lays the groundwork for this work in *Relations: An Anthropological Account* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), esp. 45–68 and 97–116.

[84] One of my motivations in writing this essay arose from hearing students, churchgoers, and friends express this pressure and this fear. It then tended to come up in conversation that both pressure and fear were felt in significant proximity to salvation, and through this to how they had learned "grace."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781602610128X Published online by Cambridge University Press

fundamentally, the conceptual relations out of which these structures are woven have shaped what it is possible for Christians to hope for and to desire, what it is possible for Christians to fear and to dread—not just in terms of singular logical principles, but in terms of how divergent possibilities of thought and feeling can stand in relation to one another under the aspect of grace.

Across their differences, meanwhile, Hove and Groothius share a framework within which grace effaces gender differences because of how it effects a soteriologically fundamental distinction between flesh and spirit. Both theologians hold that grace overcomes flesh in the economy of salvation. Both thus posit flesh itself—gendered flesh, Jewish flesh, non-Christian flesh, *and* Christian flesh—as something to be mastered by the spirit of grace. In both their languages of grace, how I learn to inhabit my flesh can therefore be woven through with the soteriological pressure of incarnating the difference grace makes, of disciplining (and perhaps hating or punishing) my body for redemption's sake. The shape of Hove and Groothius' contestation thus generates divergent renderings of difference which can be implicitly learned in ways that structure affective possibilities for how one inhabits gender.

Though Hove and Groothius' particular engagement is rooted in the social world of American evangelicalism, its implications are not limited to that world. Its problems cannot be dismissed as idiosyncratic to this particular form of Christianity. Christians such as N. T. Wright and Oliver O'Donovan have attempted to undermine trans-affirming theologies on the basis that these theologies constitute a "gnostic" rejection of the flesh, for example, whilst attempts to deny the salience of gender to spiritual reality risk rendering trans-ness incidental to who one is as a beloved creature of God.[85] If trans life is to be thought in terms of grace, it is imperative to think differential grace in ways that avoid both the Scylla of sacralizing hetero-patriachal social relations with the cudgel of "gnosticism" and the Charybdis of evacuating bodies of divine significance.

The question of what it could mean to conceive grace as transforming the differences between creatures apart from supersessionist accounts of the distinction between Church/Israel and flesh/spirit is meanwhile a problem given to Christian theology by the apostolic witness. It is a problem that must be wrestled with by any Christian community seeking a mode of grace-talk that can be brought to bear against the logics of difference internal to heteropatriarchy, xenophobia, and the afterlives of racial slavery, lest this grace-talk further entrench the structural conceptions of the flesh which animate these logics—namely, conceptions of flesh as that which grace must overcome, and so whose meaning must be either dominated or dissolved by the spirit's mastery.[86]

[85] See Scott Bader-Saye, "The Transgender Body's Grace," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 39.1 (2019) 75–99 for a critical exploration of these attempts.

[86] Armstrong's "Of Spirit and Flesh" compellingly shows that this conception of flesh is a fundamental problem for Christian theologies.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781602610128X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Immanently Differential Grace

Christians have argued about how grace makes a difference to creatures and about how grace transforms the differences between creatures. The shapes of these arguments illuminate how Christian talk of grace and difference can inform our fundamental thinking of difference. In each case, divergent renderings of grace give rise to divergent principles of difference, which in turn pedagogically structure divergent affective possibilities for thought and feeling.

At this juncture, one could reasonably ask what we have gained by broaching transformation, gender, and supersessionism in terms of grace and difference.[87] After all, even if we allow that each of these themes is invested with deep affective significance, and even if we allow that their affective significance is shaped by one's position with respect to grace, it does not necessarily follow that one's position with respect to grace most fundamentally shapes the affective salience of second-order theological reflection on these themes. The fact that one's position on transformation, gender, or supersessionism is systematically entangled with some position on grace could just as easily ground the claim that one's understanding of grace either should be or will be shaped by one's understanding of such matters. We could also broach each of these themes through the lens of any number of other doctrinal categories—sanctification, Christology, or ecclesiology, for example. Why, then, go to the effort of exploring the affective salience of these matters under the aspect of grace?

Though I affirm Haight's claim that grace is the presupposition of all Christian spirituality, I am not aiming to show that grace is the only (or even the best) doctrinal lens through which to explore the affective salience of second-order theological reflection. Indeed, I believe it is both possible and desirable to pursue this exploration in different doctrinal keys, on the basis that a multiplicity of perspectives will reflect the multifaceted character of theologically formed experience. At the same time, my focus on grace is not arbitrary. Across my teaching and my work in churches, not to mention my own life as a Christian, I have often found that people's most deeply felt spiritual wrestling revolves around their sense of whether they must be deserving in order to be loved, and so whether God's love is given or earned. Given that this question *is* a question of grace, broaching ostensibly disparate themes under the aspect of grace can illuminate potentially subterranean affective structures invested with considerable power. Beyond description, meanwhile, focusing on grace enables us to think the affective salience of doctrine in terms of a constructive theological participation in God's work in the world, insofar as concepts of grace enable us to think God's action in non-competitive relation to human action (to use Kathryn Tanner's terms).[88] This in turn can provide a distinctive

[87] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer not just for raising this question, but for raising it in a generous and generative manner.

[88] See in particular Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny and Empowerment?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004). Tanner's focus is on the theme of transcendence,

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foundation for more normative renderings of differential grace, renderings which empower creatures to recreate "difference" and its affective structures by reflecting on the difference grace makes.

With a view to working towards this constructive foundation, I can now ask how the difference grace makes to creatures should be conceived as modulating differential grace, and vice versa. How, that is, should these distinct operations of grace be cast as informing each other? This is a complex question, not least because it implicates each of the conceptual dynamics explored above. I am as such going to explore just one way of answering it.[89]

I have thus far focused on what might be called conceptual causality, exploring the effects that diverse conceptions of grace have for thinking and feeling difference.[90] The character of this causality—how thinking the difference between "spirit" and "flesh" inflects the character of gender difference, how thinking grace in relation to sin inflects possibilities for desiring transformation—is grounded in how thinking "difference" under the aspect of grace encodes specific conceptual relations of coherence and contradiction, inconsistency and entailment, possibility and necessity. These relations do not absolutely determine how creatures conceptualize matters of grace and difference, nor do they absolutely determine the affective implications of our conceptions of difference—we are entirely capable of generative inconsistency in these regards, whilst affects can resist discursive transformation. All the same, in virtue of this causality Christian grace-talk can both frame and be framed by conceptual fields that shape whether various positions are felt as necessitating or excluding one another. Conflicts between "Catholic" and "Protestant" renderings of grace can share paradigmatic principles of difference according to which these renderings are differentiated and felt; conflicts over how grace effaces gender can generate discrete ways of differentiating between divergent principles of difference, and so entrench a wider matrix of conceptual possibility within which gender differences are affectively inhabited.

Reflecting on how the difference grace makes to creatures modulates and is modulated by differential grace illuminates a somewhat different point of focus. It illuminates questions not just of conceptual causality, but also of whether grace can work through Christian grace-talk to recursively transform the character of this causality from within its own fields of articulation. If our attempts to think through the difference grace makes can generate distinctive ways of thinking difference,

of course. Her account not only enables a thinking of grace in terms of non-competitive participation between God and creature—it also at once frames and is animated by a rendering of grace itself. This is particularly drawn out in Tanner's *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

[89] Framing this aspect of grace and difference in terms of contestation proved too unwieldy for a single essay. Each step of the argument here is nonetheless thought in relation to the shapes of argument traced above.

[90] I am grateful to Tiffany Green for suggesting this way of putting things.

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that is, this point of focus frames the question of whether grace itself can transform "difference" through our thinking of grace.

A version of this recursive transformation can be discerned in James Cone's account of grace. Cone's account begins with a distinctive rendering of the difference grace makes to creatures. In *Black Theology and Black Power*, he writes that "to accept God's grace means that because God has acted for all, all men are . . . free to respond creatively to that act."[91] Grace, when accepted, makes all creatures free to respond creatively to grace. Because the structure of white society makes it impossible for Black people to enact this freedom, however, grace must make creatures free for this response by transforming the character of racial difference. As Cone puts it, "the structure of white society attempts to make 'black being' into 'nonbeing' or 'nothingness.'"[92] This structure thus attempts to negate the possibility of Black people wielding creative power. "The grip of white power" must therefore be removed before Black people can be free to become what they are created to be; the distinctions which give bones to this grip must be transfigured.

Crucially, Cone does not then cast grace as transfiguring racial differences through divine fiat, but through a subversive instantiation of the freedom that it calls forth. Black people who have received God's grace are called to respond by transforming the differences through which they have learned to think and feel themselves as creatures of God. Cone writes that "the Black man" is called to accept "as truth the new image of himself revealed in Jesus Christ," in the knowledge "that the definition of himself defined by white society is inconsistent with the newly found image disclosed in Christ."[93] Seeing himself through this new image, the redeemed "Black man" takes Paul's language "of being 'a new creature' in Christ . . . literally. He glorifies blackness, not as a means of glorifying self in the egotistical sense, but . . . as an acceptance of the black self as a creature of God."[94] Glorifying Blackness cannot then mean affirming a distinction already made—the structuring image of Blackness crafted by white supremacy must be dissolved, not affirmed. Glorifying Blackness instead involves transforming both what "Blackness" means and how it has been made to mean, in light of the unquestionable reality of being a creature of God. To say that grace empowers a glorifying of Blackness thus means that where Blackness has signified "nonbeing" and whiteness "superiority," the Black community is empowered to creatively transform these differences by telling a story that "both expresses and participates in the miracle of moving from nothing to something, from nonbeing to being."[95] Grace thus makes a difference to racial differences by empowering creatures to transform these differences, thereby making possible the affective response that it calls forth.

[91] James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1969) 52. In line with Cone's editorial decisions, I have left his gendered language as it was written.

[92] Ibid., 7.

[93] Ibid., 53.

[94] Ibid.

[95] James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1975) 93.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781602610128X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Across the sweep of Cone's account, the difference grace makes to creatures thus modulates differential grace insofar as the freedom that grace calls forth becomes the medium through which grace effaces white supremacist conceptualizations of race. Grace transforms the Black community by empowering it to transform the principles of difference according to which Blackness has incarnated "nothing," then makes a difference to the differences between creatures by working through creaturely story-telling to transform racial differences.

We can now note two things which illustrate the force of Cone's rendering of grace. The first is that thinking grace as transforming racial differences involves transforming our paradigms and principles of difference. Much as divergent ways of pairing grace with nature or sin give rise to discrete conceptions of "difference," and much as divergent ways of thinking grace as effecting the difference between "flesh" and "spirit" generate discrete principles of differentiation, so too thinking grace as empowering transformations of racial difference can effectively act back upon our possibilities for thinking "difference" as a fundamental category. As Nahum Chandler has shown in his readings of W. E. B. Dubois, after all, the question of the possibility of the color line both implicates and unfolds a concrete iteration of "the question of difference [as such],"[96] to such an extent that DuBois' critical subversion of racial difference enacts a creative rethinking of difference as a paradigmatic social force.[97] By the same token, rethinking race through the difference grace makes can implicate the character of "difference" in-itself. In Hortense Spillers words, this mode of theological reflection can thus be a practice of making meaning "that riddles sense."[98]

The second thing we can note is that Cone casts the reality of grace in this work of transformation as given shape by creaturely activities of story-telling. If glorifying Blackness means transforming what Blackness means in white society, and if the acceptance of grace is realized in the freedom to creatively effect this transformation, then the actuality of grace in this work is bound up with the creature's own transformative creativity. Cone can thus be read as arguing that Black

[96] Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014) 85.

[97] I am conscious that I am gesturing to rather than giving an account of this recursive work. For the fullness of Chandler's argument, see Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *Annotations: On the Early Thought of W. E. B. DuBois* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023) and idem, "*Beyond this Narrow Now," Or, Delimitations of W. E. B. DuBois* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022) for the full development of his account. For theological accounts of how Christian thought generated the racial differences which must be transformed, see Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011) and Jay Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[98] Hortense Spillers, "Black, White, and in Color, or Learning How to Paint: Toward an Intramural Protocol of Reading," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003) 291. See Ed Watson, "Rethreading the Fabric of Mystery: Thinking Myth, Counter-Myth, and Christian Theology With Hortense Spillers," *Literature and Theology* 36.2 (2022) 137–64 for an account of Spillers' significance for theological reflection.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781602610128X Published online by Cambridge University Press

communities are called to craft graced ways of crafting differences through which the work of grace itself takes shape, and through which the differences between creatures can become media for realizing each other's humanity.[99] Creaturely activity is internal to what grace is; what grace does is given in what creatures do.

We have seen how different ways of thinking grace and difference can give rise to conceptual fields which delimit possibilities of thought and feeling. Taking 1) the argument that rethinking racial difference under the aspect of grace involves reconfiguring our fundamental paradigms of difference together with 2) a vision of grace as working through the creature's own graced creativity now offers a vision within which these conceptual fields can become sites for the transformation of creaturely possibility. Grace can be conceived as empowering creatures to transform differences through their Christian grace-talk in ways that also transform the conceptual fields through which this talk is first learned and felt. Thinking through the relationship between these two operations of grace then makes visible a way of thinking grace as modulating its own conceptual operations in ways that recursively transform the character of "difference."

I am here arguing for the plausibility of an hypothesis, not demonstrating a decisive conclusion. Significant work would need to be done to substantiate this rendering of grace. Insofar as this reading of Cone is plausible, however, it suggests a conception of grace as making a difference to creatures by empowering us to think our principles of difference *differently*, thereby transforming the conditions of possibility for thought and feeling generated by the logics of Christian grace-talk. Insofar as grace is thereby cast as both working through and making possible this recursive deployment of Christian grace-talk, it can be rendered as "immanently differential grace." Grace can be conceived as transforming the differences between creatures through (rather than by suppressing) creaturely autonomy, then as working through Christian grace-talk to transform the conditions of possibility for how we think and feel "difference." The affective salience of second-order Christian grace-talk thus rests in how this talk can graciously transform our learned affective possibilities.

This hypothesis has an echo in Scripture. Paul writes in 1 Cor 7:31 that "the present form of this world is passing away." In Rom 12:2, he then exhorts his hearers, "do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds"—an exhortation translated in Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* as "[do not] fashion yourselves according to the present form of this world, but according to its coming transformation, by the renewing of your mind."[100] Paul here calls creatures to fashion their minds according to how grace is transforming the world, as opposed to forming our minds according to the forms of the world.

[99] This is in line with Cone's assertion that "human beings are made for each other and no people can realize their full humanity except as they participate in its realization for others" (*God of the Oppressed*, xiii).

[100] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968) 437.

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Put otherwise, we are called to think difference according to how grace subverts and transforms the forms of difference into which we have been pedagogically initiated—and in this "thinking of the thought of grace,"[101] we are called to be a part of grace's working in the world.

I am conscious that I have not here offered any normative ground for preferring one particular rendering of grace over any other beyond the requirement that grace be cast as working through how creatures conceive difference in light of grace. More work needs to be done in this regard, lest "making a difference" be cast as the final end of theological reflection—an end which could easily incline us toward a formal rather than a rich and ethical perspectivism.[102] Cone himself can nonetheless be read as concretizing the ethical and pastoral import of Paul's exhortation. Cone's particular vision of grace as empowering the transformation of racial difference through the novel crafting of differences can be articulated in terms of transforming the fields of conceptual possibility within which our thinking and feeling of "difference" takes place. Where the conceptual logics of white supremacy have ossified the conditions of possibility for affectively inhabiting our differences, a thinking of this thought of grace can be oriented to transforming these conditions of possibility, enabling us to learn in hitherto unimaginable ways what it is like to be a creature of God. The affective salience of doctrinal reflection can thus be cast in terms of creative transformation as well as formal description.

Conclusion

When I am taught the language of grace, I do not just learn what the word "grace" means. I also learn what grace is. This learning is informed by matters of first-order experience. The affective salience of Christian grace-talk is also, however, shaped by the second-order logics of theological reflection. These logics can both frame and impress divergent conceptions of difference, which in turn invite or block specific affective possibilities. When we are taught the languages of Christian grace-talk, we learn fundamental habits of mind that shape our possibilities of thought and feeling.

In tracing how Christians have contested 1) how grace makes a difference to creatures and 2) how grace makes a difference to the differences between creatures, I have sketched how this shaping takes place in particular instances. In each case, divergent renderings of the difference grace makes encode divergent conceptions of difference at the level of both paradigm and principle. At the same time, divergent conceptions of grace and difference must share a conceptual space if they are to *meet* in their divergence. The affective salience of Christian grace-talk is then generated by how various shapes of contestation over grace and difference entrench and transform the fundaments of this conceptual space, thereby structuring possibilities of both thought and feeling.

[101] Barth, *Romans*, 437.

[102] I am grateful to the reviewers who charitably and constructively noted this particular limitation of my argument.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781602610128X Published online by Cambridge University Press

This conclusion is, to my mind, interesting in its own right, on the basis that it suggests a relationship between doctrinal reflection, foundational practices of conceptualization, and the depths of religious feeling. It also suggests that systematic theological reflection possesses a particular kind of pastoral importance. Being able to understand and speak words of comfort to our neighbors will always depend on being willing to listen with care and conscientiousness, over and above theological erudition. All the same, listening carefully to how my neighbor's self-understanding is framed by fundamental theological claims and discerning how their articulations of these claims systematically invite particular conceptual practices whilst precluding others can aid this work of understanding. This listening can help to make sense of how matters of faith are interwoven with how one has learned to make sense of oneself. It can help to make sense of how certain possibilities have been made unthinkable, or why their becoming thinkable leaves our deeper structures of feeling untroubled. This essay has offered a theoretical grounding for this approach (I should note that I have found this approach effective in practice).

I have also, however, suggested that this approach frames a constructive approach to grace itself as making a difference to difference, both regarding how "difference" operates as a principle of conceptualization and how differences exist in the world. Distinguishing between 1) how grace makes a difference to creatures in themselves and 2) the operations of differential grace enables us to clarify 3) how grace can be conceived as modulating its own operations. When the relationship between these two dimensions of grace and difference is framed in terms of empowering creatures to transform differences, grace can then be conceived as working through Christian grace-talk to recursively transform conceptions of difference in ways that alter this grace-talk's own conditions of meaningful expression. Insofar as there are firm theological grounds for this rendering of grace, there is reason to hope that thinking through the conceptual implications of Christian contestation over grace and difference can become a medium for transforming our conditions of possibility for thought and feeling. More work needs to be done towards articulating whether and how specific renderings of grace should be seen as preferable to others in this work. Transformation can be for better or for worse. When offered in the spirit of prayer and out of love for one's neighbor, we can nonetheless hope that grace will empower our thinking to participate in grace's own healing work.

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