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## “While We Were Yet Enemies” *Some Particularly Protestant Reflections on Grace*

*Philip G. Ziegler*

University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

*p.ziegler@abdn.ac.uk*

### Abstract

A distinctive contribution of Protestant dogmatics is its account of the interrelation of divine grace and human sin in which saving grace comes upon fallen, sinful humanity. What is most evangelically interesting and significant to Reformed faith is that God graciously acts precisely for creatures who are turned away from and pitched against divine goodness, against divine vocation, and against divine love. Thus, to ask and answer the question of ‘nature and grace’ as such is not yet to have set the question of grace in its most significant and telling register. In conversation with insights from the *Didache*, the apostle Paul, and early modern Reformed doctrines of sin, this essay argues that we do not win the measure of divine grace unless and until we meet it in connection with our godlessness and enmity, that is, in God’s saving confrontation with radical human sinfulness.

### Keywords

grace – sin – justification – depravity – redemption – *Didache*

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No, infinite humiliation and grace, and then a striving born of gratitude—  
this is Christianity.

SØREN KIERKEGAARD<sup>1</sup>

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1 Søren Kierkegaard, *Journal and Papers* 1:434 (X.3 A 734), n.d. 1851.

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Set your hope fully on the grace coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

1Peter 1:13b

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## 1 Introduction

Invited to join in the long-running ecumenical gift exchange taking place in Christian dogmatics concerning the theme of divine grace, what distinctive house present might a contemporary Reformed theologian bring?<sup>2</sup> The confessional cupboard is not bare, of course: on the shelf just there above sin, guilt, and self-loathing—that traditional Calvinist “triumvirate motivating forces governing human behaviour”<sup>3</sup>—lie election, covenant, regeneration, perhaps even “union with Christ,” ready to hand. Those who dwell in dour Scottish Reformed houses—where on winter nights, as one of our poets says, “In darkness we cradled our sorrow / And stoked all our fires with fear / ... While the north wind delivers its sermon/ Of ice and salt water and stone”—are not left empty-handed when it comes to the question of grace, ecumenical expectations perhaps notwithstanding.<sup>4</sup>

And yet it may still be true that one of the distinctive contributions of Protestant dogmatics is to be found precisely in its account of the interrelation of divine grace and human sin. For if Reformed faith knows anything, it knows that saving grace comes not upon humanity as such, but upon fallen, sinful humanity. What is most evangelically interesting and significant to Reformed faith is that God graciously acts precisely for creatures who are turned away from and pitched against divine goodness, against divine vocation, and against divine love.<sup>5</sup> On such a view, to ask and answer the question of nature and grace

2 For the idea of ecumenical encounter and engagement as the giving and receiving of distinctive confessional gifts see Margaret O’Gara, *The Ecumenical Gift Exchange* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998).

3 From the glossary provided by Bill Duncan, *The Wee Book of Calvin: Air-Kissing in the North East* (London: Penguin, 2004).

4 From Karine Polwart, “Follow the Heron,” *Scribbled in Chalk*, Audio CD, 2006.

5 Here and throughout I use ‘evangelical’ in its primitive sense to refer to that which pertains to the gospel of God.

on those terms only is not yet to have set the question of grace in its most significant and telling register. For we do not win the measure of divine grace unless and until we win it in connection with our godlessness and enmity, that is, in its saving confrontation with the depth and breadth of human sinfulness. Karl Barth, reflecting on the holiness of God, explains this theological intuition in this way:

The revelation of God, just because it is a revelation of God’s love and grace, means the revelation of God’s opposition to humanity, i.e., of God’s opposition to the opposition in which humanity exists over against God. Only in this opposition is God known in the divine being as love and grace. For only in this relationship of opposition does God actually create and maintain fellowship between Godself and us, and turn towards us. Only in this tension, as we experience and recognise it as such, and subject ourselves to it, do we truly believe in God and yield the right which God has against us and over us: the right in which we can then place our confidence. If God is not present to us in this tension, God is not present to us at all. If we refuse to recognise and, as is right, to suffer this divine opposition to us, we are also repudiating God’s grace.<sup>6</sup>

The nature and dynamism of the grace of the God of the gospel is to be discerned just where “the antithesis is between Christ and Adam, [and] not God and humanity.”<sup>7</sup> To adopt a term from John Barclay’s important recent study on the theme, reflecting on grace with specific and sustained reference to *this* antithesis—between grace and sin—allows for its most full-orbed evangelical “perfection.”<sup>8</sup>

Of course, this perspective is not an exclusively Reformed affair. Eberhard Jüngel, in the course of his vigorous defense of the Lutheran account of the doctrine of justification, observes:

if we are speaking of grace and salvation in the strict sense of the words, then we should not only think of the relationship between grace and nature, and only of the relationship between salvation (*Heil*) and its opposite (*Unheil*). We should—at the same time—be thinking about the rela-

6 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 362, translation altered.

7 Ernst Käsemann, *Romans*, 152 (translation altered).

8 John M. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), especially chapter 2, “The Perfections of Gift/Grace,” 66 f.

tionship between grace and what is against nature (*Unnatur*), about the relationship between salvation and its opposite and about the relation between salvation and the corruption of existence. For to be saved is to be rescued ... Thus, when we think of salvation we always need to think of the dramatic movement that frees us from a disastrous situation (*Unheil*) and moves us into a different realm of existence.<sup>9</sup>

So, the question of grace is, I would like to suggest, rightly asked and answered in relation to the awful reality of sin as confronted and known in and through the even more awful reality of God's gracious and salutary work of rectification. Perhaps in the context of an ecumenical gift exchange among theologians, this somewhat angular and awkward offering is not without some value or at least provocation.

What follows is a 'working paper' that ventures some few theological reflections—developed in some proximity to elements of early Christian witness—on the contours of radical saving grace as these emerge when the question is framed in this way. I begin, perhaps surprisingly, with the Didachist, who throws down a striking articulation of this vision of grace when he invites Christians to be people who pray: "Let grace come, and let this world pass away." The force of the petition can be grasped, I think, when read in conjunctions with Paul's account of divine grace in Romans 5, a passage that might be taken as a kind of extended gloss on the essential grammar of this petition, restating and elaborating it in a somewhat more anthropological register but without domesticating it in any way. Next, I want to suggest that the predominant themes of 'old school' Protestant hamartiology, as these are to be found in a sampling of traditional Reformed confessional materials and their expositors, were—and perhaps remain—well suited to serve the theological display of this view of divine grace, precisely when taken as elaborations of the quality of 'this world' of enmity to which God comes low in Jesus Christ to save. Finally, I would like briefly to reflect on the kinds of emphases that might mark an account of the doctrine of justification ambitious to elaborate and serve such vision of grace.

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9 Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith*, trans. J. Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 90–91.

2      **The *Didache*—An Originary Christian Prayer for Grace and a Pauline ‘Gloss’**

Among the very early Christian didactic and liturgical materials compiled in the work we know as the *Didache* is a prayer of thanksgiving prescribed for use at the conclusion of the eucharist (*Did* 10:1–7). Its threefold benediction is seemingly modelled on extant Jewish prayers after meals, and it ends with the delightfully pragmatic advice that the congregation should just “allow the prophets to give thanks as much as they like.”<sup>10</sup> But its penultimate verse offers up a ‘mystery’ and represents “one of the most difficult *cruces interpretatum* in the *Didache*” as a whole.<sup>11</sup> The passage, at *Didache* 10:6, reads:

<p>ἐλθέτω χάρις καὶ παρελθέτω ὁ κόσμος οὗτος. Ἦσαννὰ τῷ θεῷ Δααὶδ. εἴ τις ἅγιός ἐστιν, ἐρχέθω· εἴ τις οὐκ ἔστι, μετανοεῖτω· μαράν ἀθά· ἀμήν</p>	<p>May grace come, and may this world pass away. Hosanna to the God of David. If anyone is holy, let him come. If anyone is not, let him repent. Maranatha! Amen.</p>
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Of specific interest for present purposes are the two eschatologically charged petitions *pro adventu* that open and close the passage. The apposition of the

10      The final advice is found at *Didache* 10:7. In what follows I draw upon the following literature: Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache: A Commentary*, edited by H.W. Attridge, trans. L.M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Faith, Hope, & Life of the Earliest Christian Communities, 50–70 C.E.* (Mahwah: Newman Press, 2003); *The Didache in Context: Essays on Its Text, History, and Transmission*, ed. C.N. Jefford, *Novum Testamentum*, Supplements 77 (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Murray J. Smith, “The Lord Jesus and His Coming in the *Didache*,” in *The Didache: A Missing Piece of the Puzzle in Early Christianity*, ed. J.A. Draper and C.N. Jefford (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015), 363–406; G.C. Allen, *The Didache* (London: Astolat Press, 1903); Adolf von Harnack, *Die Lehre der zwölf Apostel nebst Untersuchungen zu ältesten Geschichte der Kirchenverfassung und des Kirchenrecht* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1991, reprint); Jean-Claude Moreau, “Maranatha,” *Revue Biblique* 118, no. 1 (2011): 51–75; C.F.D. Moule, “A Reconsideration of the Context of Maranatha,” *New Testament Studies* 8 (1959–1960): 307–310; and Dietrich-Alex Koch, “Die eucharistischen Gebete von *Didache* 9 und 10 und das Rätsel von *Didache* 10:6,” in *Jesus, Paul, and Early Christianity: Studies in Honour of Henk Jan de Jonge*, ed. R. Buitenwerf, H. Hollander, and J. Tromp. *Novum Testamentum*, Supplements 130 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 195–211, and Jonathan A. Draper, “Eschatology in the *Didache*,” in *Eschatology of the New Testament and Some Related Documents*, ed. Jan. G. van der Watt (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 567–582.

11      Koch, “Die eucharistischen Gebete von *Didache* 9 und 10:6,” 195, 205–207; Niederwimmer, *The Didache*, 161.

Aramaic *maranatha* petition—“[our] Lord, come!”—with the invocation of grace is not unique here. It also occurs at the close of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 16:22b–23), and then again with the specific addition of the name of Jesus at the end of Revelation (22:20–21).<sup>12</sup> We can be confident that, as with the writer of Revelation, both Paul and the Didachist employ ‘*maranatha*’ in these contexts with reference to “the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>13</sup> We may also be confident that the formula solemnly invoking grace in these cases—“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you”—is not merely “an edifying phrase” but rather represents “an effectual communication of grace,”<sup>14</sup> or, we might say more sharply, the invocation of effectual grace. One might even venture to discern something of this same pattern of apposition in the striking and unusual blessing embedded in the conclusion of Paul’s Letter to the Romans: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (Rom. 16:20).<sup>15</sup>

What is eye catching in all these cases is the way in which juxtaposing prayer for the advent of the Lord in saving judgment with the invocation of the grace of God charges the latter with a certain eschatological urgency, to say the least. The meaning of ‘grace’ in our passage from the *Didache* is importantly informed by these close associations, even to the point of the term *χάρις* becoming exchangeable with other terms. The petition “May grace come and may this world pass away” certainly parallels—and may even stand as a paraphrase of—the clauses “your kingdom come / deliver us from evil” in the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:2–4; Matt. 6:9–13; *Did* 8:2).<sup>16</sup> And the Coptic fragment of the text of the *Didache* even contains a variant of 10:6 that substitutes “the Lord”

12 “Maranatha! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you,” and “Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints,” respectively. The passage at Revelation 22:20 does not have the untranslated Aramaic, but what is evidently a Greek equivalent—see Jürgen Roloff, *Revelation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 253.

13 Pace Milavec, *The Didache*. Smith, “The Lord Jesus and his Coming in the *Didache*” makes the case—and the corresponding case for witness to a “remarkably high” Christology here, especially 381–384.

14 Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. G.W. MacRae and trans. J.W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 301.

15 Romans 16:20 is associated with 1 Corinthians 16:22 by some commentators; see Ernst Käsemann, *Romans*, ed. and trans. G.W. Bromiley (London: SCM Press, 1980), 418–419. For extensive discussion of this passage and its possible relation to Genesis 3:15 and (more likely) Psalm 110:1, see Derek R. Brown, *The God of This Age: Satan in the Churches and Letters of the Apostle Paul*, WUNT second series, vol. 409 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 102–110. The close juxtaposition of grace and divine dominion is, of course, not exclusive to Paul; see, e.g., 1 Peter 5:10–11.

16 For the latter claim, see Allen, *The Didache*, 18.

for “grace” at just this point, a move some commentators adjudge theologically insightful if editorially presumptuous.<sup>17</sup>

The coming of grace, the arrival of God’s reign, the advent of the Lord Jesus Christ—this implored event has as its necessary consequence and corollary the utter displacement of ‘this world.’ This verb ‘pass away’ features in the New Testament when the Synoptics report Jesus’s saying that “heaven and earth *will pass away*, but my words will not *pass away*” (Mark 13:31, par.), where Paul writes, “If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation; the old *has passed away*, behold the new has come” (1 Cor. 5:17), and with reference to the “day of the Lord” on which “the heavens *will pass away* with a loud noise and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and works that are upon it will be burned up” (2 Pet. 3:10), or again, when the seer glimpses the advent of “the new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth *had passed away*” (Rev. 21:1). It seems that it is only here in the *Didache* that this verb is predicated of what Niederwimmer calls “the central apocalyptic concept” of ὁ κόσμος οὗτος (‘this world’).<sup>18</sup>

So just what world is it that the Didachist and his fellow worshippers pray will be ended and set aside by the coming the grace of the Lord, or the coming of the Lord of grace? Perhaps something like the utter conflagration of creation as such is in view (akin to what seems to be envisaged in the citations from 2 Peter and Revelation) so that the prayer imagines and invites the simple divine annihilation of all things.<sup>19</sup> But not only does the tight association of ‘grace,’ ‘the Lord,’ and ‘the kingdom of God’ tell against this, but so too do the obvious New Testament valences of ὁ κόσμος οὗτος. Used as a kind of ‘term of art’ in both John’s Gospel (8:23, 12:31, 14:30, 16:11) and in parallel with the phrase τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου in Paul’s letters (Rom. 12:2, 1 Cor. 3:19, 7:31, 2 Cor. 4:4, Eph. 2:2), it denotes the world *in its opposition and enmity toward God* because *under the effective sway of sin, death and the devil*. To speak of *this* world is to call to mind what elsewhere is styled as this “present evil age” (Gal. 1:4; Ti. 2:12).

The petition, then, goes up from those gathered for instruction and worship amid the pressing reality of a world still suffering under sin’s captivity. But it goes up from those who already know something of the advent of grace, some-

17 Smith, “The Lord Jesus and His Coming,” 383, n. 71, itself citing Draper, “Eschatology in the *Didache*,” 571; cf. Niederwimmer, *The Didache*, 162, nn. 77 and 78, where the literature is summarized. The Coptic version is a fragment containing text corresponding to 10:3a–12:2a only.

18 Niederwimmer, *The Didache*, 162, n. 79.

19 Harnack seems to have something like this in is view when he sees here “ein Gebet um die baldige Ankunft Christi und den Weltuntergang,” Harnack, *Die Lehre der zwölf Apostel*, 34.

thing of what the coming of the Lord has already meant: only those who have already been dislodged and displaced by the Spirit from ‘this world’ in faith, as it were, can suffer this interim, lament this continuing contradiction, and so plead for its total resolution, dissolution, and end. The prayer’s urgency and ambitious scope reflects a yearning horror at the ongoing contradiction of the righteousness of God’s reign in the time of the church. Compressed into its few words are both the prayerful patience and the insurgent impatience of the saints for the welcome catastrophe of grace. And a catastrophe it is and will be: for the passing away of the usurpatious rulers and wisdom and powers and schemata of ‘this world’ entails the dissolution of its all-too-comfortable forms and patterns, the unwinding of its deeply inhabited—if inhumane—structures and habits of life. It entails, in short, the disorienting “loss of a cosmos,” an event for which Paul did not think the language of death and crucifixion too extreme, testifying that in the outworking of grace on the “cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” the “world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14).<sup>20</sup> To bid the reign of grace welcome is at one and the same time to bid farewell to this sinful world, to be alienated from it as a work of salvation.

So faith longs to see fulfilled what it acknowledges and trusts even now—namely, the outworking of the liberating power of grace that is the presence and reign of Christ upon the world. Indeed, those who herald and pray for the eschatological advent of grace in faith do so only because they—themselves nothing but creatures fully “of a piece” with *this world*—have already been knocked sideways and made to stand in grace precisely by grace (so Rom. 5:2). In series of repeated parallel remarks in Romans 5, Paul gives voice to the path and power of divine grace when he observes that “While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (v.6), that “God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (v.8), and that “while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (v.10). In the death of the Christ, God in grace comes upon and for human beings in all their enmity, sin, and godlessness, overrunning their resistance. The privative notion of sin involved in talk of our “weakness” is insufficient here, as the reality of sin is rather shown to be an “aggressive enmity between us and God.”<sup>21</sup> The depth of the problem of sin—its virulent enmity—is illumined precisely (and only) by the light of the eschatological advent of saving divine love in Christ. Concomitantly, the fullness of divine grace finds its expression, as Paul says,

20 On this see J. Louis Martyn, “Apocalyptic Antinomies,” in *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), especially 114–119.

21 Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification*, 92.



precisely “in that” it meets and overtakes inhuman enmity with a boundless divine amity that makes for peace (Rom. 5:1).

It is in this sense that I want to suggest that Romans 5:1–11 can be read as an extensive theological gloss on the Didachist’s prayer: “Let grace come, and let this world pass away.” For the grace of which Paul testifies finds its object precisely in *this inimical and godless world* and, having found it, shatters the schemata and structures of enmity that lord it over us and with which we find to our shame and horror we have been complicit. We might say, still keeping with Paul, that the full measure of divine love poured “in our hearts through the Holy Spirit” in this way is understood to overflow, burst, and so utterly disrupt the parameters of “this world,” interjecting “another logic ... the logic of grace” itself.<sup>22</sup> Divine grace—adventitious, incongruous, sovereign, salutary—visits and enters fully into the sin-wrecked world for the sake of the redemption of those who are both caged in and also fully at home in ‘this world.’

### 3 ‘This World’ of Pravity and Enmity—Some ‘Old School’ Protestant Hamartiology

Classical Protestant doctrines of sin may also be understood to give voice in their own way to the theological grammar of the Didachist’s prayer with their insistence that those whom grace seeks and finds and wins are “enslaved by sin” and “hostile to God” (John 8:34, Rom. 8:7). In this, sinners are, as Susan Eastman has recently argued, understood to be fully “embedded in [their] environment ... constrained and shaped by the worlds to which [they] belong,” being at once “both captive and complicit.” The picture, informed by Romans 7, is of the human being “as occupied territory, his subjectivity colonized by an oppressive foreign power, his members mobilized for actions contrary to his deepest wants,” a person *of this world*, at home within it, “victimized by sin as a resident power stronger than the law.”<sup>23</sup> As another New Testament epistle puts it, nicely connecting our themes: “to be a friend of the world is enmity with God” (Jas. 4:4).

Authoritative Lutheran teaching emerging from the disputes of the sixteenth century contends that all human beings who come into the world are from the first captive to “sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in

22 Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace: Justification by Faith from a Latin American Perspective*, trans. S.H. Ringe (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 131.

23 Susan Eastman, *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul’s Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 101, 111, 114.

God, and with concupiscence,” the latter itself a “disease” that, as defection from righteousness, “is truly sin.”<sup>24</sup> Reformed doctrine consistently reiterates the ‘captivity’ motif, often combining it with claims about the alteration of human nature under the condition of sin. So to take only three representative examples: the 1560 *Scots Confession* teaches with particularly intensity that in the fall, “the image of God was utterly defaced in man, and he and his children became by nature hostile to God, slaves to Satan, and servants to sin.”<sup>25</sup> The Dutch Reformed synod meeting in Dordrecht in 1619 also spoke of human beings as those who in Adam “are by nature children of wrath, incapable of saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto,” being “neither able nor willing to return to God, to reform the depravity of their nature, or to dispose themselves to reformation” apart from the regenerating work of the Spirit.<sup>26</sup> And in answer to its fifth question, “Can you keep all this [law of God] perfectly?” the widely influential *Heidelberg Catechism* of 1563 taught the infamous answer: “No, for by nature I am prone to hate God and my neighbour.”<sup>27</sup>

Notable across these three instances of Reformed hamartiology is, first, how this instruction conceives of sin not solely as privation, but also as a busy and positive enmity. The quality of sin lies not in the act itself, but rather in its positive contradiction of God—and the holiness of God in particular. Polanus comments that “sin is evil at war with the law of God”<sup>28</sup> and goes on to argue from a definition of sin as ἀνομία (1John 3:4—“sin is lawlessness”) that it is not merely the absence of good but also something positive, “an active quality opposed to the good, an *actuosa privatio* or *vitiositas*, the absolute opposite

24 *Confessio Augustana*, 11.

25 Art. 3. G.D. Henderson, ed., *The Scots Confession 1560* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1960), 62.

26 “Canons of Dort,” in James T. Dennison, Jr., ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th centuries in English Translation* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 4135 (third and fourth heads of doctrine, article 3). “... inepti ad omne bonum salutare, propensi ad malum, in peccatis mortui, et peccati servi et ... ad Deum redire, naturam depravatam corrigere, vel ad ejus correctionem se disponere nec volunt, nec possunt.”—“Dordrecht Canones 1619,” in E.F. Karl Müller, ed., *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche* (Leipzig: Georg Böhme, 1903), 851 (*tertium et quartum doctrinae caput*, 111).

27 “The Heidelberg Catechism,” in *The Book of Catechisms: Reference Edition* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001), 115 (Q5). “5. Frag. Kanstu diß alles vollkomlich halten? Antwort. Nein: denn ich von natur geneigt Gott und meinen Nechsten zu hassen.”—“Heidelberger Katechismus 1563,” in Müller, *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche*, 683–684 (Q5). For discussion, see Eberhard Busch, *Drawn to Freedom: Christian Faith Today in Conversation with the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. W.H. Rader (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 63–82.

28 “Peccatum est malum quod Legi Dei repugnat.”—Polanus, *Syntagma theologiae Christianae*, vi.3, cited in H. Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. G.T. Thomson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), 320.

of righteousness.”<sup>29</sup> So Wollebius similarly emphasizes how the condition of original sin understood as “the innate evil of all [hu]mankind, engrafted into all” Adam’s posterity, “consists not only of inability to do good, but also of a tendency [*proclivitas*] toward evil; nor is it merely the loss of the good originally given, but also the addition of the corresponding evil.”<sup>30</sup>

Also notable—and for present purposes particularly so—is how this Reformed instruction does not shy away from the idea of the ‘naturalization’ of sin, as it were. The concept of depravity carries the freight here: one confessional dogmatician observes how in effect “sin is natural in us, i.e., because by nature it is in us and so in our nature, not as it was created from the beginning upright by God, but as it has now been depraved.”<sup>31</sup> It is apt to speak of sin thus as a kind of second nature, since “the evil which has succeeded to the place of original good is that innate corruption or pravity, by which the whole nature is rendered unsuitable for good and merely prone to evil” and it “comprehends every disposition and every outlook opposed to the law of God, even in the higher part of the soul, in the most intimate recesses of the mind.”<sup>32</sup> As another confessional commentator concludes, the state of sin has “an adventitious quality, which is yet called natural” because “it holds its own in ward by a hereditary right and it inheres in human nature in its natural forces and faculties and is innate in man himself.”<sup>33</sup> Interesting here is the figuring of sin as a governing warden, a further outworking of the theme of human captivity to sin.

29 Polanus, *Syntagma theologiae Christianae*, VI.3, as cited in Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 323. On this motive, cf. G.C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Sin*, trans. P.C. Holtrop (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 63–64.

30 Johannes Wollebius, *Compendium Theologiae Christianae* x, 2 and proposition 8, in John W. Beardslee III, ed., *Reformed Dogmatics: Seventeenth-Century Reformed Theology through the Writings of Wollebius, Voetius, and Turretin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 70. Cf. similar emphases in earlier Reformed confessional texts; see Arthur Cochrane, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (London: SCM Press, 1966), for example the First Helvetic Confession 1536, chapter 8 (102), and the Second Helvetic Confession 1566, chapter 8 (235).

31 “Unde etia in nobis naturale est, hoc est, q. natura, non ut ab initio recta creata est a Deo, sed ut est ja depravata ...”—Polanus, *Syntagma theologiae Christianae*, VI.3, as cited in Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 330.

32 “*Malu quod in locu boni originalis successit, est corruptio seu pravitas illa innata, qua tota natura nostra est inepta reddita ad bonu, & pronatum ad malu ... etiam in parte superiori animae, in ipso intimo metis recess, omne dispositione omnemque motum adversus Legem Dei comprehendit.*”—Polanus, *Syntagma theologiae Christianae*, VI.3, as cited in Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 336–337.

33 Bucanus, *Institutiones Theologiae*, XVI, 28, as cited in Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 339, with appeal to Eph 2:3.

Even before the emergence of the Reformed confessions noted above, John Calvin's *Geneva Confession* of 1536 treats of sin in two successive articles under the rubrics of 'L'homme en sa nature' and 'L'homme en soy damné,' speaking bluntly of the human as "naturally deprived and destitute in himself of all the light of God, and of all righteousness" and "by nature blind, darkened in understanding, and full of corruption and perversity of heart."<sup>34</sup> To speak of sin as 'nature' in this way here, as elsewhere, is to conceive of it as an inalienable condition within which we are powerless: "il n'a aucune puissance ..." Sin constitutes a veritable world from which human beings can neither find nor win independent egress.

Calvin himself elaborates upon these emphases in the *Institutes* (II.1.8–11) when he writes of sinners as "vitiating and perverted in every part of our nature," having been "enveloped in original sin"—indeed, "overwhelmed, as by a deluge"—such that taken as such, "the whole human being is nothing but concupiscence."<sup>35</sup> While the situation of depravity is certainly one of loss or deprivation—Calvin writes of our "degeneration from our original condition"—sin is all the more also a matter of vigorous enmity, marked by a malicious "power and energy" (*vim atque energiam*) that proves "so fertile and fruitful of every evil that it cannot be idle." Again, while sin is adventitious, coming upon created nature as a "deadly wound," yet such is its reality that after its desultory advent we must speak of sin as "natural": for sin has seized humanity and "holds it fast" such that "because of his vitiating nature, [humanity] is naturally abominable to God ... depraved and faulty" in keeping with the apostolic word that "we are all by nature children of wrath" (Eph. 2:3).<sup>36</sup> In short, the misery of sin is the situation of depravity, captivity and total corruption, which is to say, the state of utter alienation from God.<sup>37</sup>

34 "Das Genfer Bekenntniss von 1536," articles 4 and 5, in Müller, *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche*, 112; cf. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, 121.

35 All citations from the Calvin's 1559 *Institutes* taken from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J.T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles, *Library of Christian Classics* volume 20 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), translation altered.

36 Cf. *Institutes*, II.3.2 "homo naturaliter esse deo abominabilis, non etiam inepte dicitur naturaliter pravus et vitiosus."

37 Cf. article 9 of the French Confession of 1559 which deploys all this language in its short compass—"Confessio gallicana 1559," in Müller, *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche*, 223–224; Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, 147. On this theme in a different idiom, and with special and sustained reference to Romans 1:24, 26 and 28, see Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "God Handed Them Over," in *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 113f.

Crucially, it is on the basis of the “renewal” of humanity by grace, Calvin observes, that the nature of sin is illumined and shown up for what it is; the evangelical testimony that it is “only God’s mercy [that] can deliver” reveals the “ruin and destruction of our nature” and the fact of its “utter loss” to which talk of a “universal condition of human depravity” gives fitting expression.<sup>38</sup> Eberhard Busch has argued that it is for this reason that the Reformed tradition speaks of sin with emphasis upon the human condition of *misery* in tight coordination and diametrical opposition to mercy (*miser cordia*), the latter understood as “the basic concept of the gospel.” As he explains the point:

In light of the mercy of God, in which our misery goes to God’s heart (*cor*), this misery that God wants to have mercy on, and already has mercy on, is revealed. This is why the Reformation, in discovering anew the greatness of God’s mercy also saw once again the depth of human misery ... Whoever does not know the greatness of the mercy of God, in which God alone saves us, also does not know the depth of the misery that we cannot help ourselves out of in any way.<sup>39</sup>

These distinctive elements of this ‘old school’ Reformed doctrine of sin also have the benefit of emphasizing the propriety of thinking and speaking of sin and its effects as a systematic whole, the totality of our ‘being-in-Adam,’ as it were.<sup>40</sup> For we are invited to concern ourselves theologically with ‘this world’ of sin, and so with an unholy—indeed diabolical—nexus of enmity, pride, hatred, inhumanity, violence, lovelessness, diminishment, and dissolution. What the Reformed confessional texts and early expositors concisely called ‘misery’ is thus amenable to analytical elaboration in the notion of the ‘hamartiosphere,’ as José Maria González Ruiz memorably conceived the ongoing actuality of the world of sin, in as much as it “objectively conditions the progress of human history itself.”<sup>41</sup> Here it becomes clear how the problem of “my sin” is immediately and inextricably connected with both structures and systems of sin, as well as

38 Calvin, *Institutes*, II.1.9, II.3.2 and II.3.4.

39 Eberhard Busch, *Drawn to Freedom*, 63–64.

40 Recalling Romans 5:12f., Bonhoeffer considers the concept of our “being in Adam” the most biblical and “pointed ontological” characterization of our ‘*esse peccator*’ and builds his analysis in *Act and Being* around it in dialectical opposition to faith’s ‘being in Christ’—see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, DBWE 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 135.

41 Ruiz as cited by Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Essential Writings*, ed. J.B. Nickoloff (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 194–195.

to what has been called “the other side of sin,” namely the suffering and inhuman diminishment of sin’s victims.<sup>42</sup>

We return at this point to Jüngel once more, who vividly calls to mind that the essential dogmatic service provided by so rigorous a hamartiology is to signal something of the direction in which grace must be perfected evangelically. The work of divine grace that saves sinners from their world of misery is rightly conceived as

rescue from an existence that is so completely incapable of and unfit for rescuing itself that it can only be rescued, be pulled out by another. Again, the extent of the misery of those who must be dragged to safety is so great, the threat of non-existence so powerful, that there is only one who can be the rescuer—the One who calls existence into being from nothing: God. In that sense, salvation is an event of the utmost dramatic significance in the face of non-existence and catastrophe (*Unheil*). For that reason we cannot speak too highly of salvation, for in the idea of salvation are included the depths of that disaster that been overcome.<sup>43</sup>

Note well the last claim—namely, that the account we give of salvation has ingredient and analytic within it, a vision of the wreckage from which we have been redeemed. This is why it is that we win the full dogmatic measure of grace only by thinking it in its sovereign polemical relation to both sin and the world overcome and usurped by sin—a world that encompasses manifold elements and structures, as well as our very own persons and relations—rather than in relation to ideas of creaturely nature as such.

#### 4 *Sola Gratia*

I have been suggesting that the rather austere Reformed accounts of sin serve to remind us that sin is a world-making power to which we find ourselves captive. We can take such hamartiology as a way of displaying some of the defining contours of the world in revolt against God, the very world whose contradiction

42 See, representatively, Andrew Sung Park and Susan L. Nelson eds., *The Other Side of Sin: Woundedness from the Perspective of the Sinned-Against* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001); Lisa E. Dahill, *Reading from the Underside of Selfhood: Bonhoeffer and Spiritual Formation* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2009), and José Ignacio González Faus, “Sin,” in *Mysterium Liberationis*, ed. J. Sobrino and I. Ellacuria (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 532–542.

43 Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification*, 91.

of divine love, holiness, and justice provokes the prayer, “Let grace come, and let this world pass away.” Divine grace when it comes finds human beings—as Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, puts it—deeply integrated into a world that is constitutionally “polemical against the truth,” and it is upon people sunk and settled in such a world of polemical untruth—a world of enmity, godlessness and self-obfuscating sin—that grace supervenes, delivering both saving truth *and* the very condition for receiving it.<sup>44</sup> All this comports well with the essential grammar of the Didachist’s simple prayer, reiterating the vision that, in view of the specific nature of ‘this world’ and its inhabitants, salvation entails the divine usurpation of the usurpatious “rulers of this age,” the divine displacement of the fixtures and furniture of ‘this world’ as it is overrun, unmade, and then remade by divine judgment and grace. The adventitious, disruptive—dare one say ‘invasive’—character of divine grace is sharply discerned when met and acknowledged in its salutary confrontation with sin’s arrogation of creaturely life. Where sin has come to constitute a world—John’s ‘world’ with its adversarial ruler; ‘*this world*’ of Paul’s under its ‘god,’ that rebellious, diminished, and dehumanizing world “in whose course” and according to whose schemata we find we exist as naturalized inhabitants—just there, God’s grace is manifest in and through the merciful and holy overthrow of “those things that now are” for the sake of the gift of that for which the term ‘new creation’ is not inappropriate.

No doubt one could and should represent this sovereign reality of divine grace faithfully in any number of theological idioms; indeed, the discussion I have offered here itself already draws together the varied idioms of the Didachist, Paul, and voices of the Reformed confessional tradition, suggesting that they share something like a common theological grammar as concerns grace in its confrontation and victory over sin. Protestant theology generally has wagered that the dogmatic idiom of the doctrine of justification by grace alone exercises a singular and invaluable service here. Republishing this doctrine in light of the reflections we have been unfolding might lead us to think again about whether Ernst Käsemann was not on to something crucial when he characterized the justifying work of divine grace as a *Herrschaftswechsel*, a change of lordship. What Käsemann espied and points up with this idea is that the gift of grace that overcomes sin is the effective presence and power of the self-giving One. As he explains, when we consider that the “peculiar content” of the gift of grace is the “power and the lordship of Christ,” then we are

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44 Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 14–15 at 15.

led to acknowledge that “the new Lord cuts us off from what we were before” as grace “acquires power over our hearts and enlists us in its service.”<sup>45</sup> Where the Didachist’s prayer that grace might come is answered, Christ exercises his rightful claim upon concrete human lives, freely and lovingly rescuing human beings from the false and inimical lordships they have suffered and served in their sin-governed misery. In this is made manifest, as Käsemann says, that “God’s love is more than an action that makes good our deficiencies. It is the almighty power which effects salvation, brings forth creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), and puts an end to wrath,” and it is just this divine power that “produces and maintains eschatological justification.”<sup>46</sup> The grace of the God of the gospel is always and ever *Gnadenherrschaft*—a sovereign grace and gracious sovereignty that “has the character of a power that determines existence.”<sup>47</sup>

Justification describes how it is that those who are *godless, weak, enemies, and sinners*—namely, those who have been governed by sin—find themselves “standing in grace” (Rom. 5:2). To confess that this occurs *sola gratia* is to acknowledge that this rescue, this reclamation, this new world is owed to the effective and adventitious reality of God’s sovereign grace, and nothing else besides. In thinking about grace in its salutary movement upon and against the inimical world of sinful misery, perhaps we have simply been offering an expansive conceptual gloss upon Paul’s claim that “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 5:20b–21). Divine grace “superabounds” precisely where the misery of sin is great, and captivity desperate. And the superabounding (*ὑπερεπερίσσευσεν* (*hypereperisseusen*)) grace of God of which Paul speaks here announces the origin and means by which Christ’s ‘super victory’ (*ὑπερνικῶμεν* (*hypernikōmen*)) declared in Romans 8:37 is secured on behalf of those creatures who have become and been God’s own enemies. The triumph of grace is *hyper*—precisely because it does not engage in the contest in keeping with the terms and conditions provided by the world of enmity, but rather by dissolving those very terms and conditions and displacing them sovereignly and lovingly with its own.<sup>48</sup>

45 Ernst Käsemann, “The Righteousness of God in Paul,” in *New Testament Questions Today*, trans. W.J. Montague (London: SCM Press, 1969), 172–176.

46 Ernst Käsemann, *Romans*, 138. John Barclay provides a fine concise account of Käsemann’s thinking about the gift of grace in *Paul and the Gift*, 140–146.

47 Ernst Käsemann, *Romans*, 163.

48 The commentary offered by the early Quaker leader George Fox on Romans 8:7 demon-



At the outset, I submitted that the grace of the God of the gospel is best discerned in that “the antithesis is between Christ and Adam” and that reflection upon it with specific attention to the antithesis between grace and sin might afford a rounded evangelical “perfecting” of the concept. John Barclay has proposed that the idea of grace might be perfected along six distinctive lines. The reflections offered here recommend an account of grace keenly alert to the contradiction of the reign of God by the world that is “passing away” and by the inimical depravity of sin’s captives to whom grace comes sovereignly to claim and save in Jesus Christ. Conceived in this connection—as the advent of saving sovereign grace upon those of *this world* who “were yet enemies” of God—the incongruity, superabundance, singularity, priority, efficacy, and noncircularity of grace are together at issue and variously perfected. A remark of the twentieth-century Swiss theologian Jacques de Senarclens winsomely distills the distinctive Protestant sensibility I have hoped to offer up here to the ecumenical gift exchange concerning the theme of divine grace, when he writes:

The doctrine of grace, with the bondage of the will as corollary, reflects adherence to God’s own self-demonstration by the Word ... [but] grace is more than a message. It is a victory over all obstacles, the achievement of restoration, the accomplishment of revelation. In it everything is effected: sin is conquered, the new [human] is created, life re-established, God and [humanity] reconciled. Grace is the consummation in [the human] of everything which needed to be done. Thus the starting-point, content and perfection of all Christian truth are to be found in this wholly gratuitous act to which we must look to the exclusion of every other reality.<sup>49</sup>

It is the abiding task and service of Protestant theology to recollect, republish, and elaborate the doctrinal and ethical consequences of the evangelical truth of the scope and power of the grace of God made manifest precisely in its saving confrontation with the depth and breadth of our godlessness and enmity.

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strates this vision clearly when he writes, “Such as are more than conquerors see the end of wars, and that which causeth wars. He that is a conqueror may be in the war; but he that is more than a conqueror, is in that which takes away the occasion of wars, and is come to that which was before wars were” (*Great Mystery* 3:160); I cite this intriguing passage in the context of reflections on Romans 8 elsewhere, see Philip G. Ziegler, *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 43–44.

49 Jacques de Senarclens, *Heirs of the Reformation*, trans. and ed. G.W. Bromiley (London: SCM Press, 1963), 99. On the central place of the theology of grace in Senarclens’s work, see Gabriel Widmer, “La théologie de Jacques de Senarclens (1914–1971),” *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 23, no. 3 (1973): 209–220.