
Communicating Grace

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In a remarkably poetic and poignant excerpt from Judith Butler's post 9/11 book on mourning, interdependence, and state sovereignty, the brilliant theorist of *Gender Trouble* flounders at the edge of language. Describing the effect of loss on the understanding of our selves, Butler writes,

It is not as if an 'I' exists independently over here and then simply loses a 'you' over there, especially if the attachment to 'you' is part of what composes who 'I' am. ... Who 'am' I, without you? ... On one level, I think I have lost 'you' only to discover that 'I' have gone missing as well. At another level, perhaps what I have lost 'in' you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as *the tie* by which those terms are differentiated and related.¹

While Butler admits she has "no ready vocabulary" for this sense of self, as a theologian steeped in Gospel stories that commend a certain relieving yoke of relation (where, for instance, "you are in me, and I in you," alongside passionate letters that ask "What do you have that you did not receive?"), I suspect that such constitutive interdependence might have a great deal to do with grace.²

For good reason, grace is one doctrine most dear to Lutherans; many readily recall the healing and saving power of unconditional grace from God and neighbor. However, the common theological articulation of grace also has been and can be twisted to maintain relationships of control and abuse. In contemporary Lutheran theology and practice, forensic justification, or the forgiveness of sin and removal of God's wrath intended for the sinner, has been the nearly exclusive model of grace articulated. This declared grace is unilaterally and unconditionally announced as an exterior force on our passive bodies and souls.

The language we use about grace and how God relates to and acts in the world is important. Theologian Elizabeth Johnson insists that all theological language "functions."³ Anything, even the most beautiful, can be abused and misused, but some Protestant understandings of grace are particularly vulnerable to reinforcing sexist gender power dynamics.⁴ Building on feminist critiques of

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strict active/passive binaries, Protestant soteriologies and theologies of grace have also come under criticism by ecotheologians, who draw parallels between the reformer's active God working on passive humans and modern concepts of human activity working on feminized, passive nature. In both dynamics the parties only relate externally toward supposedly life-giving aims. If predominant Protestant articulations of grace are vulnerable here, are there alternatives? Can a Lutheran understanding of grace as free or unconditioned survive such shifts?

We find ourselves at another precipice of language. Less than a century after Luther's death, Descartes and then Newton issued in an era of radical human separation from the non-human. Like never before, humans were imbued with unique characteristics authorizing their distinction from and mastery over the other-than-human world. A strict separation between human and non-human allowed humanity to stand outside nature to draw verifiable and reliable scientific conclusions about the world, while authorizing nature's unrestricted use for human progress.⁵ Just as Luther struggled to find language to express an epochal shift in grace, and as early feminist theologians fought to articulate a life-giving view of God and reality with the patriarchal language they were

flict hurt in order to liberate its object from itself and to raise it above itself.' It is this love that is the 'innermost, the deepest reality in God.'" Karl Holl, "What Did Luther Understand By Religion?" as cited by H. Gaylon Barker, *The Cross of Reality: Luther's Theologia Cruces and Bonhoeffer's Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 61.

5. See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Marie-Louise Mallet, ed., David Wood, trans. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008) and Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 2010).

1. Judith Butler, *Prearious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 22.

2. Matt 11:29, John 14, and 1 Cor 4:7, respectively.

3. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992), 4.

4. See, for example, Karl Holl's description of idealized divine love: "Love is now understood as a power that does not hesitate to in-

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given, so now we endeavor to convey an understanding of grace that does not cleanly, patriarchally, and destructively divide reality between human and “non,” active and passive, self and other, commodity and consumer.

The Finnish Lutheran interpretation emerges as a potentially advantageous alternative to exclusively forensic interpretations of justification. The Finns emphasize the importance of God’s work and presence *intra nos* accompanying God’s actions *extra nos*. Here external relations are no longer idealized, disrupting the active/passive binary. Unfortunately, the potential bridge between Lutheran grace and eco-feminist concerns remains unconnected, with their ontological insights curtailed by an assumption that re-emphasizing ontology entails a return to substance metaphysics.

Recent developments in the sciences—particularly where gender and queer theories are engaged in an interdisciplinary manner—suggest language where Butler’s faltered and the Finns’ curtailed. The new ontologies of biologist Donna Haraway and physicist Karen Barad disrupt separative individualism, conceptions of external relations, and the assumption that other-than-human creation passively awaits human activity.

These ontologies appear better suited than substance metaphysics (dominant in Luther’s time and still influential today in common-sense understandings of reality) to account for Luther’s biblically inspired but under-recognized sense of communing relationality as inspired by christological difference in unity. Animated by new relational ontologies, I suggest we creatively and constructively engage Luther’s unique interpretation of the christological *communicatio idiomatum* to find language for an understanding of grace that will address the most pressing needs of humanity today. Rather than purely active power on passive sinful bodies, communicating grace unfolds as participatory, symbiotic, and indwelling communication of divine life and love. As such, God’s redemptive work might be better expressed from a Lutheran perspective, using Barad’s terminology, as “exteriority within.”⁶ Just as declared and unilateral grace has influenced material relations in the past, communicating grace might come to function in the world by presenting alternative and life-giving modes of relation for all, especially women and the other-than-human world.

6. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).

The Finnish interpretation: *intra nos* and *extra nos*

While forensic justification has been the nearly exclusive model of grace in Lutheran orthodoxy, the Finnish school suggests that other aspects of Luther’s articulation of justification were lost after the reformer’s lifetime. Before Lutheranism solidified into orthodoxy, Luther held that the “medium of spiritual existence was not the event of “forensic justification” but the divine person of Christ.”⁷

The initiator of this Finnish interpretation, Tuomo Mannermaa, came to his key insight when he retranslated Luther’s phrase “*in ipsa fide Christus adest*” as “in faith itself Christ is really present.”⁸ In the predominant interpretation, “Christ for us” (*pro nobis*), associated with grace and forgiveness, is separated from and prioritized over “Christ within us” (*Christus in nobis*), associated with sanctification. The Finns point out that Luther did not distinguish between justification and sanctification, nor did he hierarchize them. Instead, they suggest these be interpreted as two aspects of justification: Christ for us as forensic justification and Christ within us as effective justification.

Mannermaa and others also highlight the neo-Kantian move away from ontology, such that union with God shifted from union of being to a union of wills.⁹ Where the German-Kantian interpretation of Christ’s presence is merely “a subjective experience of God’s ‘effect’ on the believer,” the Finns emphasize a “‘real-ontic’ unity between Christ and the Christian.”¹⁰ Consequently, rather than an emphasis on God’s work on us from the outside, which never really becomes part of us, the Finns emphasize that God’s gift in Christ is union with Christ, *in nobis*, so that “we participate in the whole of Christ, who in his divine person communicates the righteousness of God.”¹¹ The language used to describe the relation between Christ and the person is significant. Where emphasis on forensic justification has avoided and, in some cases, explicitly rejected language of participation, here it is highlighted. Here Christ both *is* and *gives* the gift of grace. It is not given from pure exteriority because what God gives is Godself, present in the fullness of God’s essence—a union between Christ and the Christian.

Remarkably, the Finns also propose this union creates space for a Lutheran understanding of the ancient teaching of *theosis*, or becoming divine, which the Eastern Orthodox Church has maintained throughout its history. However, more than ecumenical relations are at stake. When we articulate that God shares part of

7. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds. *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 105.

8. *Ibid.*, viii. See also, Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther’s View of Justification*, Kirsi I. Stjerna, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

9. Braaten and Jenson explain that “faith as volitional obedience rather than as ontological participating is all that a neo-Kantianized Luther could allow,” *Union with Christ*, ix.

10. Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2004), 46.

11. *Union with Christ*, viii.

Godself with us and does not just give the gift of grace as a pure exteriority, a different model of relations is idealized. The internal/external binary is disrupted, as are corresponding binaries of activity/passivity and the Cartesian-Newtonian subject/object dualism. Where grace is not a separative gift, separative relations are also deemphasized in favor of a community of being-with.

Grace as *unreciprocal* gift continues to idealize unilateral relations between men and women, as well as humans and nature. What remains unexplored by feminist, economic, or eco-theologians is this complimentary and in some ways counteractive understanding of Lutheran grace as only ever given in and through union with God. Here, Christ is not just means of grace, but *is* grace. Luther writes:

Surely we are named after Christ not because he is absent from us, but because he dwells in us, that is because we believe in him and are Christs one to another and do to our neighbors as Christ does to us ... We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in [herself], but in Christ and in [her] neighbor.¹²

The gift of Christ as grace keeps on giving through relational union with God as well as creaturely neighbors.

Unfortunately, in addition to a complete lack of attention to feminist concerns, the Finnish school remains constrained by its tendency to look backward, while assuming the only alternative to Kant's rejection of metaphysics is a return to substance metaphysics.¹³ Their arguments amount to a desire to uncover and claim an "original" Luther. This is most conspicuous in Mannermaa's scholarship and is likely an effect of his historical theological orientation and training. By making such arguments, however, the conversation remains constrained to questions that are impossible to definitively answer ("Who was the 'real' Luther?" and "What were his 'original' intentions?") and has embroiled their theologians in debates primarily with scholars who defend their interpretations of Lutheran orthodoxy.

I hold that in both cases the Finnish school is not so much wrong as missing a profound opportunity—an occasion to breathe some fresh life into Luther and his theology, to make it surprising again by undercutting certain broad cultural assumptions about the reformer and the tradition. In other words, I suggest these new interpretations should not be aimed so much at arguments that allow one to claim ownership of a historical Luther (over and against other Lutheran traditions) but at creative and constructive theologies relevant to the most pressing issues we currently face in the world.

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profoundly shaped by the way we give and receive gifts.¹⁴ In spite of a complete void of gender sensitivity, the Finnish interpretation of Luther offers a disruption of a patriarchal, separatist, static understanding of self and God defined over and against what they are not, rather than focusing on with what or with whom they are in communion.

Instead of supporting the oft-repeated lineage of the modern sovereign subject, from Augustinian self-reflective interiority through Luther's free Christian to Descartes' *ego cogito ergo sum*, I think the rhetoric of participation in Christ compels us to pause and look again at the kind of self Lutheran theology creates. "I do not live in my own person now," Luther writes, "but Christ lives in me. 'The person does indeed live, but not in itself or for its own person.' ... This 'I' Paul rejects; for 'I,' as a person distinct from Christ belongs to death and hell."¹⁵ Instead of a precursor of *ego cogito*, I think what we find in these alternative interpretations of Luther is that the self-knowing, self-controlled, static ego is radically called into question by constitutive relationships and a cooperative mode of being-with.

In other words, what I see at times in Luther is something remarkably akin to feminist scientists' reconstruction of human selves and the nature of reality itself. Rather than a conglomeration of distinct "things" mashed together or reactively bouncing off one another, these relational ontologies suggest reality is something much more messy, interwoven, and indwelling. They also demonstrate we have a plethora of alternatives to either the Kantian avoidance of ontology or substance metaphysics.

Externalities-within

An interpretation of Lutheran grace as relationally communicated, besides unilaterally declared, calls for a description of being that can accommodate Luther's radical understanding of being with and through others, both Christ and neighbor. Where the Finns challenge the predominant Kantian interpretation of Luther, I wonder as well about how Cartesian and Newtonian views of the human being, and its relation to the human and other-than-human world, influence the ways we read the reformer.

In the Cartesian-Newtonian worldview, non-human matter became the analog of the Protestant passive human before an

12. Luther, "Freedom of a Christian (1520)," *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, Timothy F. Lull, ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 620.

13. Cf. *Union with Christ*, 8.

14. This is an insight from Gift Theory, a latent influence throughout the article.

15. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:167, quoted by Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith*, 39.

active God. Where humanity lies passive before the active God in matters of grace, non-human matter rests passive before the meaning-producing and commodification activity of the human. In contrast to Newton's view of all non-human matter behaving as machines with predictable reactions, the editors of a recent volume on "new materialisms" explain that for quantum physics matter "has become considerably more elusive (one might even say immaterial) and complex, suggesting that the ways we understand and interact with nature are in need of a commensurate updating."¹⁶ Part of this seeming "immateriality" and complexity is due to an increasing understanding that relationships—not separative "things"—are the "building blocks" of reality. These relationships constitute us not only psychically, emotionally, or spiritually, but physically—all the way down to the sub-atomic. Recognition of this material reality has challenged theories of being, pushing theorists to think something more like being-with, being-in-community, or being-in-relationship.

While Judith Butler admits she does not know yet how to theorize the kind of interrelation she experiences in her life and losses, Donna Haraway and Karen Barad are articulating just this kind of relational ontology. Barad, feminist philosopher of science and trained quantum physicist, constructs a view of all material reality (including non-biological) as responsive, active, dynamic, and profoundly relational. Engaging the quantum physics of the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Niels Bohrs, she explains that the basic "building blocks" of reality are relationally imbued waves of energy, rather than static "uncuttable" atoms. Since relations precede and constitute relational partners, their interaction is better expressed by Barad's neologism: "intra-action."¹⁷ Where *interaction* implies secondary and external relationships between parties, the term *intra-action* suggests that we never enter into relations because we only become who we are in, with, and through these relations. In other words, no essential "me" exists without a multitude of "you's."

Does all this relationality, union, and fusion mean confusion? Is undifferentiated reality and relativism—a big pot of mashed-up matter and meaning—the consequence? Barad can help us think differently about difference. For Descartes, Newton, and predominant doctrines of God, difference is maintained by space and separation.¹⁸ Barad's work reveals that difference can be maintained in the midst of real, even constitutive, entanglements. Informed by Bohr's philosophy of physics and building on Judith Butler's articulation of performed exteriorities, Barad proposes that differences remain distinct but not separate as "exteriorities-within" phenomena. Barad's mentor, the biologist, philosopher, and feminist Donna Haraway, provides a concrete biological example

of Barad's quantum level intra-active becoming.

Like Barad, Haraway suggests a new understanding of relation that disturbs modern Cartesian-Newtonian concepts of material relations and human agency, because we only become ourselves and do anything in and through constitutive encounters with others. She points out that what seem to be clearly separate and self-sufficient human bodies are actually entangled and interdependent with a multitude of humans and other-than-humans. She writes:

I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body. [T]he other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm.¹⁹

In a radical departure from the Cartesian *ego cogito*, Haraway concludes that we only become human through and with these other-than-human creatures. Consequently, "[p]artners do not precede the meeting" since, "to be one is always to become with many."²⁰ Haraway reconceptualizes the human as composed of a multiplicity of exteriorities-within—others without whom we would not be ourselves, just as they would not be themselves without us.

Indeed, Barad shows that what Haraway posits on a biological scale is the case all the way down to the sub-atomic level. Relations, not substances, are basic to reality. Yet this union is not a mess of relativistic uniformity. Difference is maintained within a mundane mess of entangled and mutually dependent relations.

If anyone is in Christ, [she] is a new creation;
the old has passed away, . . . the new has come (2 Cor 5:17).

Thinking with new materialisms we arrive at a remarkable opportunity to think about a difference between God and world that does not rely on separation or distance. Luther held firmly to Chalcedonian Christology, insisting on a union between God and creation without mixture or confusion. Luther's interpretation of the communication of properties emerges as remarkable in his extension of this christological principle.

With early church theologians like Athanasius and Cyril, Luther extends the communication of properties from the exclusive domain of Christ's person to soteriology in the "happy exchange."²¹ Rather than transubstantiation, which obscured difference between Christ's body and the elements, Luther again extends the *communicatio idiomatum* and hypostatic union to articulate how a person can be united to Christ's body in communion, just as the elements maintain a difference-preserving union with Christ's body.²² Finally, he extends this difference-preserving union into

16. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 2010), 5.

17. "I introduce the term 'intra-action' in recognition of their ontological inseparability, in contrast to the usual 'interaction,' which relies on a metaphysics of individualism." Barad, 128.

18. *Ibid.*, 377.

19. Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2008), 3–4.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Luther, "Freedom of a Christian (1520)," in Lull, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 603.

22. See Luther's "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper—Part

ethics, where we are united to Christ. United with Christ, we share in Christ's benefits, become Christs to one another, and can share Christ's gifts with one another. Tying together ethics and the Eucharist, Luther writes: "You must take to heart the infirmities and needs of others as if they were your own. Then offer to others your strength, as if it were their own, just as Christ does for you in the sacrament. This is what it means to change into one another through love, to lose one's own form and take on that which is common to all."²³

For fear of letting inimical works righteousness take effect with any admission of interiority, Lutherans have predominantly insisted that God's grace comes to us from pure exteriority. But what if God's acts in the world and in us are not imputed only from the outside? Given the importance Luther placed on Christology and the *communicatio idiomatum*, it is fair to conclude that the creative and saving work of this incarnating God is communicated to us and not solely declared on us.²⁴ Here God emerges as exteriority-within the world, exteriority-within me, and exteriority-within you.

God is not world and the world is not God, but God is inextricably and unreservedly in, with, and under the world. We are not individual recipients of a separative gift from a distant God. We owe our very existence to multiple worldly graced gifts through which God is intimately invested. We only exist because we depend on grace-filled gifts from multiple sources: human, other-than-human, and divine. Without recognizing these multiple ties with "you," "I" discover that "I" have gone missing as well. Such relationality "is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as the tie by which those terms are *differentiated and related*."²⁵

III (1528)" in Lull, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*.

23. Luther, "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body and Blood of Christ (1519)," *LW* 35: 48–73.

24. The central role Luther gave to Christology and especially the *communicatio idiomatum* is well established. See, for example, Marc Lienhard, *Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ: States and Themes of the Reformer's Christology*, Edwin H. Robertson, trans. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982) and Oswald Bayer and Benjamin Gleede, eds. *Creator est Creatura: Luthers Christologie als Lehre von Idiomenkommunikation* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007).

25. Butler, 22 (italics added).

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In keeping with Luther's emphasis on the christological principle of the hypostatic union and the *communicatio idiomatum*, this kind of grace must be communicated, not just declared.

Understood in terms of union, participation, and communion, grace reorients our understanding of all relationships: to God, to our neighbors, and to the very fabric of reality. The salvation of new creation offered us through Christ in grace is not just forgiveness of sins, but simultaneously union with Christ and through Christ with all things. Language and models of God function through gender relations and beyond to our economic practices, ecological relations, and treatment of those seen as different or "other" than "us." In communicating grace, rather than just declaring it, we allow for modes of language and models of relationship built not on unilateral power-over and separative relations but on what is shared or created in, with, and through communion.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the author suggest might happen if Christians understood grace as reciprocal gift?
2. In what ways does grace as reciprocal gift meet the world's needs? In what ways does it meet your needs?
3. In what ways does the idea of grace as reciprocal gift shift our language and imagery of God?