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THE GRACE WE ARE OWED: HUMAN RIGHTS AND DIVINE DUTIES

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Traditional views of grace assert that God owes us nothing. Grace is undeserved, supererogatory and free. In this paper I argue that while this is an accurate characterization of *creating grace*, it is not true of *saving grace*. We have no right to be created as spiritual beings whose true good is found in relationship with God. But once we exist as spiritual beings, God does owe us a genuine offer of the salvation that constitutes our highest fulfillment. Creating grace is undeserved. Saving grace is deserved (being based on our inherent worth and vital interests as spiritual beings) but unearned (it is not based on anything we have done).

Two naive teen boys are treading water far from shore in an isolated lake. It's their own fault that they are in peril. They deliberately chose to disobey their dad's order not to canoe when a storm advisory was in effect. And foolishly, they took no life jackets with them. When the wind and waves kicked up, their canoe capsized. After searching the cabin, dad spies them far out in the lake—exhausted and near drowning. He knows that they cannot save themselves and that he is their only hope for rescue. The mission, however, will be dangerous and costly—it will risk his life and his boat will require extensive repair. But given the seriousness of their need, dad owes the boys at least an attempt at rescue. It would be wrong for him to just let them perish. He has a duty to try to save them and they have a right to be helped. Attempted rescue is not a benevolent gift but is something due to them.

According to Christian theology the situation in which human beings find themselves *vis-a-vis* God is similar to the boys' predicament. We were made for relationship with God, but by free choice we broke the relationship and are now alienated from God. We cannot return to God by our own efforts; our only hope is in divine rescue. Salvation—the restoration of friendship with God—is accomplished through the atonement of Jesus Christ and is applied by grace given to individuals.[1] Traditional views of grace assert that

(TG) grace is undeserved, supererogatory and free. God owes us nothing and we have no right to even be offered redemption. Making salvation available is not required or obligatory on God; thus God can justly offer salvation to and withhold salvation from whomever God chooses.

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In this paper I reject **TG** and in its place develop and defend a revised view of saving grace:

> **(RG)** an offer of saving grace is deserved, obligatory and must be distributed equally. God does not owe us creating grace, but once we exist God does owe us an offer of saving grace. Being offered salvation is a human right and offering it a divine duty.

RG rests on a distinction between creating grace and saving grace:

> **(CG)** the action of God that brings us into existence as spiritual beings meant for unionwith God;
>
> **(SG)** the action of God that repairs our separation from God and brings us into actual union with God.

Because I assume a strongly libertarian account of freedom, I leave open the question of whether God must actually save everyone (or even anyone, for that matter). But I do argue that God is at least obliged to offer **SG** to all—and to do what God can by way of persuading us to accept the offer. Like attempted rescue of the boys, an offer of saving grace is not simply a benevolent gift but is something due to human persons as a matter of obligation, something to which we have a right. While God has no *a priori* obligation to create, God does have an *a posteriori* obligation to make salvation available. Our moral status, as spiritual beings with inherent worth and interests which can be harmed or benefited, entitles us to be offered salvation and requires God to offer it. This duty comes from God's voluntary decision to create spiritual beings who need relationship with God. Despite being owed, salvation is nonetheless an unearned gift.

I. Human Rights and Hume's Flawed Claim

David Hume lays out several circumstances—abundant resources, effective concern for others and complete solitude—in which justice has no point. Among the conditions that make claims of justice irrelevant, he says, is unequal power. While the powerful may choose to treat the weak with gentleness and compassion, they do not owe them duties of justice. He offers this thought experiment:

> Were there a species of creatures, intermingled with men, which, though rational, were possessed of such inferior strength . . . that they were incapable of all resistance . . . the necessary consequence, I think, is, that we should be bound, by the laws of humanity, to give gentle usage to these creatures, but should not, properly speaking, lie under any restraint of justice with regard to them, nor could they possess any right . . . of such arbitrary lords. Our intercourse with them could not be called society, which supposes a degree of equality; but absolute command on the one side, and servile obedience on the other. Whatever we covet, they must instantly resign: our permission is the only tenure by which they hold their possessions: our compassion and kindness the only check by which they curb our

> lawless will: and . . . the restraints of justice . . . being totally useless, would have no place is so unequal a confederacy.[2]

Hume gives three real-life examples—the power of human beings over animals, the "superiority of civilized Europeans above barbarous Indians" and the domination of men over women in many cultures. In each case, he says, the powerful have no obligation of justice to the weak. While they may choose to be kind to them, the weak, because they are not equal to the strong, have no right to be treated well. Humane behavior toward them is based on compassion and mercy, not justice.

Hume's claim that the powerful owe nothing to the weak as a matter of justice is badly mistaken. We cannot infer 'A has no right to just treatment from B' from the fact that 'A is weaker than or inferior to B.' In addition to being logically flawed, Hume's claim has implausible implications. If it were the case that the weak have no rights against the powerful, then the drowning teens would have no right to attempted rescued. Children, the sick, the disabled, the mentally handicapped and the elderly would not be entitled to humane treatment from healthy adults. Thus Hume is wrong in thinking that justice depends on equal power and that the weak have no rights.

In fact, Hume has it exactly backwards, since it is precisely in situations of unequal power that justice—understood as respect for rights—is necessary. Without rights, the weak and vulnerable are at the mercy of the powerful. Rights safeguard the powerless, protecting their basic interests from serious harm by forcing the powerful to observe moral constraints. Rights, moreover, are more than privileges or favors that depend on sympathy and that may be given or withheld at will. There are two distinct kinds of moral transactions. Supererogatory benevolent actions, while admirable and praiseworthy to do, are optional and not required as a matter of right. Just actions, however, are called for by rights which impose duties. It is wrong not to do what is obligatory, and if a person fails to perform a moral duty then they are subject to blame and criticism.

Rights express a fundamental principle of morality—respect for persons. There are, Stephen Darwall points out, two types of respect.[3] *Earned respect* values people because of their acquired traits and achievements. It is not owed to everyone, comes in degrees and is gained and lost by one's actions. *Basic respect*, by contrast, honors the inherent worth and dignity of a person simply as a human being. It is not earned or forfeited by a person's actions, is owed to everyone, and is not a matter of degree. Basic human rights are grounded in our inherent worth. Rights are also grounded in interests. To have an interest is to have a stake in something and to gain or lose depending on the condition of that thing. Certain interests (such as avoiding death or severe and constant pain) are central to a person's well-being and the individual flourishes or languishes as those interests are advanced or set back. Any entity with interests has a well-being that can be harmed or benefited *and* rights which protect that well-being. People with rights must not be treated simply as instruments for advancing our own personal interests. Instead, we must treat them as ends by paying attention to their needs, promoting their welfare and helping them reach their true good.

Thus—*contra* Hume—the weak are owed something by the powerful. Justice and rights depend on intrinsic worth and on having important interests, not—as Hume thought—on equal power.

II. Free Grace: The Theological Equivalent of Hume's Claim

TG is the theological equivalent of Hume's claim. Consider a recent statement by John Frame: "the very idea of grace is that God is not required to give it. If God is required . . . to give grace to us, then we have a certain claim on him. But grace excludes such claims. Here redemption is parallel to creation . . . . In neither case do we have any claim upon God."[4] Or hear Paul Jensen: "is it the case that I do not deserve salvation? Unless it is then I am not saved by grace. . . . [H]uman ill-desert requires salvation to be the product of divine supererogatory goodness. But the very notion of supererogatory goodness, i.e., good acts which God can justly leave undone, makes the claim that God is required to perform them incoherent. Thus, if humans are ill-deserving of divine salvation, then God can justly not save them."[5]

According to **TG**, human beings stand in the same relationship to God as do the animals, natives and women to European men of Hume's examples. God owes us nothing as a matter of justice; we deserve nothing and have no right to demand anything from God. In particular, God has no duty to make salvation available to us and we have no right to be offered **SG**. An offer of salvation is a gratuity which may be given or withheld by God at will.

Scripture and tradition teach that salvation is by grace alone. We are alienated from God and cannot gain God's favor by our own efforts. Grace is the supernatural assistance required for reconciliation with God. **TG** is found across the theological spectrum, not just in narrow strands of predestinarianism.[6] **TG** is characterized by three points. First, *grace is undeserved*. It is a form of benevolence that is the opposite of justice. To say that salvation is undeserved means that it is not based on anything in human beings. As John Calvin says, it is a result of God's "freely given mercy, without regard to human worth."[7] Second, *grace is supererogatory*. Offering salvation is something which it is good of God to do, but not something which God must do and to which human beings are entitled. Calvin states that "salvation comes about solely from God's mere generosity." Because God "can owe none," if we are offered salvation, it is by God's voluntary choice rather than obligatory duty.[8] Third, *grace is free*. Because salvation is not a right but a gift, God can—in perfect fairness—give grace to some and refuse it to others. God is absolutely sovereign, Calvin says, and has no moral obligations: "he has not been bound by any laws but is free; so that equal apportionment of grace is not to be required of him."[9] God has the sovereign right to save and to damn whomever God wants: "the fact that God . . . chooses one man but rejects another arises . . . solely from his mercy, which ought to be free to manifest and express itself where and when he pleases."[10]

TG parallels Hume's claim. According to Marilyn Adams, "nothing (certainly not creatures' rights) bind God as to what soteriological scheme (if any) he establishes." Indeed, "God is so far above, so different in kind

from us, as not to be enmeshed in merely human networks of mutual rights and obligations; God is not the kind of thing that could be obligated to creatures in any way. . . . God will not be unjust to created persons no matter what he does."[11] God owes us nothing. God may offer salvation as an act of benevolence, but it is not a divine duty or a human right.

III. The Flaws in Free Grace: What God Must Do, and Why

TG is mistaken in the same way that Hume's claim is mistaken. Before explaining *why* God owes us something, let me briefly say *what* I think God owes us. God owes us equally a genuine, continuous offer of salvation and maximal assistance to freely accept the offer. We must be given a genuine chance to be saved. God cannot demand the impossible by setting certain standards for salvation, such as explicit belief in the gospel, and then only giving some people the opportunity to meet those standards. The offer must be continuous. It cannot be withdrawn at death and must stand even after repeated rejection. In addition to a genuine, continuous offer of salvation, God must provide help to respond to the offer. God does not owe us *efficacious* grace, grace that actually saves by causing us to repent and believe. But God does owe us *sufficient* grace, grace that—by enlightening our minds and freeing our wills—makes us fully able to respond to the offer of salvation. Actual salvation requires our cooperation, and God's assistance must leave us free to accept or reject God's love. Since sufficient grace comes in degrees, God owes us maximal rather than minimal help. God must do all God can, short of compelling us and destroying our freedom, to empower, prompt and urge us to believe.[12] Finally, this offer and assistance must be provided equally to all persons. The term 'offer of salvation,' then, does not mean merely providing opportunity; it means, as well, encouragement and persuasion to accept the offer. God owes us equal and optimal—but not efficacious—grace.

Many theists reject the idea that God can have obligations. Without entering that complicated debate, let me simply say that both scripture and reason—as this paper argues—suggest that God has obligations. The biblical witness contains many divine promises in which God freely binds Godself to humanity. Consider, for example, the major redemptive covenants—the promise to Abraham, the giving of the law at Sinai, and the restatement of the promise to David. It is true that God has no pre-creation, involuntary obligations. But God does have post-creation, voluntary ones. I had no marital obligations until I pledged my faithful love to my wife Jenna. My promise created my obligation. In the same way, God—for example—has no before-the-promise duty to help Moses lead the Israelites out of Egypt. But having made that promise, God does have an after-the-fact duty.

And now my argument. I take my starting point from Frame's assertion that "redemption is parallel to creation. . . . In neither case do we have any claim upon God." Daniel Strange agrees: "God's decrees of creation *and* redemption are not necessary. . . . God's freedom to create or not create can also apply to redemption."[13] This, I contend, is false. Redemption and creation are not symmetrical. While we have no right to be created, once we exist we *do* have a right to be offered salvation. Why?

The argument against **TG** (and for **RG**) is as follows:[14]

1. If God makes spiritual beings, then God must take steps to fulfill their spiritual desires.
2. God has made all human persons as spiritual beings.
3. Therefore, God must take steps to fulfill their spiritual desires.

This *modus ponens* syllogism is valid, so the only question is whether its premises are true. I believe they are.

Premise 2: God has made all human persons as spiritual beings.

By 'spiritual being' I mean a creature who is oriented to God and who finds its supreme end and deepest fulfillment in union with God. Unlike rocks, petunias and lizards, we are in our very nature created for relationship with God. St. Augustine makes this point is his famous prayer: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."[15] Karl Rahner observes that all persons have an immediate, pre-conceptual awareness of a transcendent reality. God "stamps . . . man's nature" with "a character which we may call a 'supernatural existential'"—that is, "a tendency towards God, which is on occasion quite implicit and incoherent and yet always completely permeates man's being and existence."[16] This natural desire for God is the gracious gift of God (and hence 'supernatural'), yet is a basic, essential characteristic (or 'existential') of human nature. The *sensus divinitatis* is not restricted to a rare few, but is universal. All human persons are spiritual beings who long, often unconsciously, for intimacy with the God for whom they are meant and in whose love they find their *summum bonum*. Human behavior, both holy and sinful, is motivated by a deep spiritual hunger. Human nature is permeated with spiritual longings and our highest good is found in friendship with God. This is what it means to be a spiritual being.

Premise 1: If God freely chooses to make spiritual beings, then God must take steps to fulfill their spiritual desires.

Take the antecedent. It was God's free and gratuitous choice to make spiritual beings. God did not have to create at all, and God did not owe it to us to make us as spiritual beings, nor—*per impossible*—did we somehow earn that right by any action on our part. Prior to creation we had no claims on God. That we are made for relationship with God is an undeserved benevolent gift.

God created us for and with the desire to experience communion with God. Therein lies God's free choice. But this free choice has a consequence—it creates divine duties and human rights. Once God makes spiritual beings whose *summum bonum* can be fulfilled or frustrated, then God has a duty to offer and we have a right to be offered relationship with God. To make us as spiritual beings meant for intimate personal union with God and then withhold from us any possibility of the salvation that will fulfill our spiritual yearnings would be unjust. It would, moreover, contradict God's intent in creating spiritual beings in the first place. Human parents must—morally and rationally—love and provide for any

child they choose to beget. As Timothy Jackson states the moral principle: "if one has induced the needs and potentials of another by bringing him into existence as a dependent, then one owes it to that other, as a matter of duty, to meet his needs and to cultivate his potentials."[17] The decision of a loving parent to have a child is simultaneously a decision to seek that child's flourishing. In the same way, having created us to find our deepest fulfillment in relationship with God, God must do what God can to fulfill this desire (by offering salvation and assisting us to believe). While God need not provide efficacious grace that actually fulfills our spiritual desires, God must give us optimal opportunity to be saved.

So, *contra* Frame and Strange, creation and redemption are not identical. **TG** fails to recognize the "revolutionary character" of God's decision to create spiritual beings.[18] The question 'does God owe us something?' means at least two things—'before we are created, does God owe us existence?' and 'once we are created, does God owe us an opportunity for salvation?' The answer to the first is no; creation is an act of free, undeserved grace. But the answer to the second is yes; once we exist, we do deserve a chance to receive what is essential for our well-being. Since friendship with God is our true good, an offer of salvation is required. In matters of creation we have no claim on God; in matters of redemption, we do. The ethics of **CG** (which is based on supererogatory benevolence) and **SG** (which is about justice, duties and rights) are not the same.

Let me now develop in more detail some reasons for thinking that **TG** is false, that in creating us as spiritual beings God assumes the duty to make **SG** available to everyone. First, *as spiritual beings we have the right to be offered a chance to avoid serious harm and the horrendous suffering of hell*. To be harmed is to have one's interests set back. Certain interests are central to our well-being, and when they are blocked we experience serious harm. Rights protect us from harms such as severe suffering.

Consider non-human animals. While Hume believed that we should be kind to them, he did not think of animals as having rights to humane treatment. We owe nothing to them as their due. Hume is mistaken about this. The capacity to feel pain is a sufficient ground for ascribing interests, and hence rights, to animals. Some entities have no interests in this sense. A clay pot is not conscious and thus has no goals, desires or experiences. Because it has no good of its own and cannot be benefited or harmed, it has no rights. But animals are conscious. As creatures capable of suffering, animals have the right not to have needless pain inflicted on them. Thus we owe something to animals as their due.

This argument applies *mutatis mutandis* to God and human beings. St. Paul is often cited to defend the claim that God owes us nothing. Just as a clay pot has no right to be treated well by the potter, so human beings have no right to be treated well by God (Rom 9:20–21).[19] Understood this way, the analogy is faulty. If I make a clay pot, I may destroy it if I like—there are no moral constraints on my action toward it. But if I make a child, I may not treat it in any way I choose. And since children are conscious persons with interests, not harming my child is obligatory—not an optional benevolence. Moral duties are inherent in creating sentient beings—and in creating spiritual beings. Because we can suffer spiritual deprivation—the loss of our true good, the enjoyment of God's love and

presence—God owes us a chance to escape this misery as a matter of right, not as a privilege or favor.

The right to avoid serious harm includes the right to not suffer inescapable horrendous evils. Adams defines evil as horrendous if experiencing that evil means that a person's life cannot be good on the whole, if within that person's life good is engulfed or defeated by evil.[20] As an analogy, consider so-called 'wrongful lives' in which a child's non-existence is preferable to a severely disabled life with terrible burdens and without compensating benefits. Children have a right not to be conceived unless their most basic interests are protected. This right limits parents' reproductive liberty. They must not let their child suffer a serious harm that they could have reasonably prevented. Parents owe their children something.

Hell—where any temporal happiness enjoyed on earth is wiped out by eternal suffering—is an instance of horrendous evil. Because we have been created for relationship with God and find there our highest good, salvation is essential for a person's well-being. To be denied the possibility of union with God would be find ourselves condemned to permanent frustration since our supreme end—an end necessary for our ultimate fulfillment—will never be satisfied. Jesus himself acknowledged that it would be better not to exist than to sin and be damned (Mt 26:24; Lk 17:2). God must not create a person to whom salvation from the misery of hell is not offered and who thus suffers unavoidable horrendous evil.

Second, *as spiritual beings we have the right to help in meeting our basic need for salvation*. From the right to avoid harm we can derive a duty to be helped when in serious trouble. A need is an essential condition for human welfare, and when a need is unmet a person suffers significant harm. Positive rights to assistance protect us from harms that result when we cannot meet our own basic needs. It is often thought that not harming others is a duty while doing good to others is supererogatory. This is not true; there are some duties of benevolence. The boys have a right to attempted rescue simply because they can't save themselves and will otherwise die. And dad has a duty to try to rescue them. While some assistance is generous and goes beyond the call of duty, some assistance is required.

As spiritual beings salvation is our most basic need. Just as the boys' most important interest is at risk, so sinners stand to lose the true good of knowing and enjoying God forever. Given the tremendous harm that hell represents, God must reach out in help by offering and encouraging us to receive salvation.

Finally, *as equal beings we have the right to be offered salvation equally*. These rights—to avoid horrendous suffering and to be offered needed help—apply to all people. Fairness requires treating each person's interests and welfare as equally important as everyone else's. This is simply a matter of rational consistency. It is coherent to treat people differently only if there is some relevant difference between them. If both boys are in the same situation and if dad can rescue both, then it would be wrong for him to rescue one but let the other drown for no reason except his sheer wish.

The same applies to God. Since all human persons are spiritual beings with an equal capacity to suffer the pain of damnation, God must treat all alike by offering salvation to everyone without exception. Because each person's soteriological interests count and count as much as those of anyone

else, it would be wrong for God to make salvation available to some—say to those born in the Christian west in the last two millennia—but not others. If salvation is offered to all without distinction, then either it cannot require explicit belief in the gospel (but can be found through implicit faith as shown in sincere moral action and religious devotion) or all who do not hear of Christ in this life must be evangelized after death. God must give all an equal opportunity to be saved, not as a matter of courtesy and compassion but as a matter of justice and duty.

Finally, notice that premise 1 is unconditional. It contradicts Augustine's claim that, by deliberately choosing sin, we forfeit all right to salvation. First, it is not obvious that we deliberately choose sin.[21] We were created to enjoy God's presence. Sin breaks our relationship with God and disconnects us from our true good—leaving us, as spiritual beings, incomplete and restless. We typically sin from ignorance rather than evil intent. We do wrong because we misjudge it to be good—a way of meeting our hopes and fears, of creating happy and meaningful lives. As G. K. Chesterton suggested, "the man at the brothel door is looking for God."[22] Sinful behavior is motivated by a deep, unconscious spiritual hunger. But even if most wrongdoing was deliberate, defiant rebellion against God's authority, that would not disqualify us from the right to be offered salvation. Why not? Because salvation is necessary for our ultimate welfare as spiritual beings. The boys retain their right to attempted rescue and dad is duty-bound to assist even if, just before the storm, they told him off, cursing and mistreating him. Our right to be offered salvation is absolute and inalienable, one that we possess unconditionally. This unforfeitable right is based on our worth—a moral status that cannot be lost by bad behavior.

I conclude that premise 1 is true. Having made spiritual beings for union with God, God must seek the fulfillment of our highest good by offering us salvation. **TG** is flawed because it ignores the human rights and divine duties that come with creating spiritual beings. A God who operated by **TG** would condemn some persons to suffer horrendous evil, ignore their need for spiritual assistance, and play favorites. **TG** fails to distinguish **SG** (which is deserved by and owed to all equally) from **CG** (which is undeserved, supererogatory and free). **TG** has a faulty view of **SG** because first, *SG is **not** undeserved*. While creation is undeserved, an offer of salvation *is* deserved because of intrinsic human worth and the basic human rights which protect our most fundamental interests. Second, *SG is **not** supererogatory*. Creation is an optional choice. God is free to create or not create spiritual beings, but offering salvation to all created spiritual beings is obligatory for God. Third, *SG is **not** free*. Access to salvation must be distributed equally to all spiritual beings; it cannot be offered to some and withheld from others. Thus, while God does not owe us **CG**, God must offer us **SG**.

IV. Objections Considered

I now briefly consider two objections to the God-owes-us-something view. First, on **RG** what happens to grace? Do moral demands on God destroy salvation by grace? Second, on **RG** what happens to divine sovereignty? Do moral demands destroy God's right to do as God pleases?

What about Salvation by Grace?

Scripture clearly affirms that salvation is by grace. And yet if God owes us an opportunity to be saved as a matter of justice, then in what sense is salvation by grace? Romans 3:24 says that we are "justified by . . . grace as a gift" and Romans 6:23 claims that salvation is "the free gift of God." Romans 11:6 teaches that "if salvation is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works." Ephesians 2:8–9 states that "by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works." The Greek word δωρον (*doron*—used in Eph 2:8) means a gift received undeservedly and without payment, and the word χαρισ (*charis*—used in Rom 6:23) means something given freely, graciously, as a favor done out of good will.[23] In these verses St. Paul contrasts salvation as divine gift with salvation achieved by human effort. A gift is, by definition, something that is not bought or given because the recipient did something to gain credit. Salvation is not earned by what we do, by good works and obedience to the moral law. We simply receive God's gift, a gift provided for by Christ's sacrifice, through faith.

The term 'deserve' can be used in two ways that correspond to the distinction between earned respect and basic respect.[24] In one sense, to deserve means to merit or to earn (as in 'she deserves to win the gold medal because of her brilliant skating'). *Merit-desert* (or m-desert) is based on human action, on what we do. In another sense, however, to deserve means to be worthy of (as in 'she deserves not to be mistreated by her husband'). *Worth-desert* (or w-desert) is based on human constitution, on what we are. Once this equivocation is recognized, it is clear that the boys do not m-deserve but do w-deserve attempted rescue. They are worthy of—and owed—the offer even though they have done nothing to earn it. Merit is not the only way in which we become entitled to something.

To say that salvation is by grace simply means that it is *unearned*—not that it is *undeserved*. This is why St. Paul consistently contrasts grace with works, gift salvation with earned salvation. There is nothing we can do to merit God's friendship; forgiveness is given to us only through the merit of Christ. But even though human beings do not m-deserve the opportunity to be saved, we do w-deserve it. Thus Jensen is mistaken in thinking that "humans are *ill-deserving* of divine salvation." Because we are spiritual beings with inherent worth and vital spiritual interests, we are—in fact—*well-deserving* of being offered **SG**. This is also why Calvin is mistaken in thinking that grace is given "without regard to human *worth*." While grace is given without regard to human *merit*, it is offered precisely because of human worth. Once we distinguish the two senses of 'deserve,' we can see that what is essential to the notion of grace is not that it is undeserved, but that it is unearned. It is because **TG** confuses merit and worth that some mistakenly see **SG** as undeserved and conclude that God owes us nothing.[25] The fact that an offer of salvation is owed does not destroy salvation by grace.

Nor does **RG** destroy human gratitude to God. We might think that when a duty is done, there is no place for thanks. This seems true when negative duties not to harm are at issue. The boys do not owe gratitude if dad refrains from hitting them with an oar and drowning them. But

gratitude *is* appropriate when the duties in question are positive duties to help. This is true even when, as in the boys' case, the benefits are owed and the benefactor is fulfilling a duty. Gratitude shows that we are glad for the good we have received, that we appreciate what was done for us and that we recognize and regret the cost to the giver. And so the redeemed respond with thanks to God for the salvation which they have been given.

What about Divine Sovereignty?

As we have seen, **TG** protects maximal divine sovereignty. To say that God is bound to obey external rules would set up over God something that constrains God. But **RG** does not put God under involuntary obligation. I was not under parental duty until I freely place myself there by having my daughters Becky and Sarah and adopting my son David. In the same way, only after creation are there human rights and divine duties. By choosing to create spiritual beings, God puts Godself under moral obligation to them and voluntarily surrenders the complete freedom to treat them in any way God chooses. Consider an analogy. The choice to create beings with libertarian free will puts God under metaphysical constraint. There are some things that God cannot do if God wishes to respect human freedom. In the same way, God's choice to create spiritual beings puts God under moral constraint. There are some things that God cannot do once God creates persons with spiritual needs. These limits, however, are not externally imposed on God but are self-chosen. Creating spiritual beings was God's critical free choice. God did not have to create persons, but when God did so God simultaneously chose to impose moral limits on Godself. Because of something *God* has done, we now have a claim on God. The fact that an offer of salvation is owed does not destroy divine sovereignty.

This objection is part of a broader worry that **RG** is human-centered and "is an attempt to subvert God into humankind's servant." "[I]t is important," Strange asserts, "that we safeguard God's self-sufficiency and independence from creation" and human beings.[26] In reply, the biblical record of salvation history portrays a God who is eager to know and love all human persons, a God who seeks relationship with us, not independence from us, a God who—as Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it—does not wish to be "free *of* man but *for* man."[27] This objection also ignores the fact that **RG** begins with an act of God's free gratuitous grace—creation of spiritual beings. This choice, however, has moral consequences for both them and God. Once spiritual beings exist, God becomes self-obligated to offer salvation to everyone. Both **TG** and **RG** are God-centered, but where **TG** is God-centered in both creation *and* redemption, **RG** limits God's absolute sovereignty to the moment of creation. Because God initiates and pursues relationship with us, **RG** does not turn God into our servant.

V. Concluding Thoughts

God, as a totally free gift, created us as spiritual beings meant for intimate personal union with God. But we are unable to establish friendship with God by our own efforts without assisting grace. God must act to help us

reach our true good. God does not owe us existence—but God does owe us an offer of salvation.

We have been concerned with what God must do, and why. So what has God actually done? Scripture affirms that God loves the whole world and desires the salvation of all (1 Tm 2:4; 2 Pt 3:9). From this we can logically infer universal access to salvation. If God desires something (that everyone be saved) then God acts to bring it about (by drawing all people toward friendship with God). Scripture affirms "the utmost patience" (1 Tm 1:16) and endlessly-seeking love of God, portraying God as a shepherd desperately searching for one lost sheep until he finds it, as a woman turning her home upside down until she retrieves a missing coin, as a heartsick father anxiously awaiting the return of a wandering son (Lk 15). This, of course, does not resolve the question of who is actually saved. According to separatists, human freedom means that people may become so entrenched in willfulness and pride that they forever refuse God's offer of salvation and are thus eternally damned. Universalists are more optimistic, believing in God's resourceful ability to bring all into God's kingdom. They question the assumptions that human beings can freely choose to forever reject God and that human freedom is the greatest good. I leave unanswered the question of who is actually saved. While not a *convinced* universalist (who thinks that universalism can be dogmatically defended), I am a *hopeful* universalist (who finds support for universalism in scripture, theological reflection and philosophical reasoning).[28]

Does God owe us something? The answer, I have argued, is yes. Does this mean, then, that a duty-and-rights model is the best way in which to think of the divine-human relationship? The answer, I think, is no.[29]

From the human side rights-talk distorts our relationship with God. Rights play an important role in impersonal contexts by governing interactions between strangers who do not care about each other and whose interests may conflict. When there is indifference or ill-will between people and when others may be a threat, then rights are a necessary protection for what is due someone. If dad ignored the boys' pleas for help, refusing to rescue them because he can't be bothered, then they could insist that he do so. But if dad is considerate and kind, then he will automatically come to their aid without being asked. When relationships are characterized by caring, rights are not necessary to ensure that we get our due. The fact that the boys may not exercise their rights, however, does not mean that those rights do not exist. Because God has our best interest in mind by willing all human beings to enjoy their chief end, we can trust God and need not demand our rights. Rights-talk, then, does not properly characterize our relationship with God.

The same is true from the divine side. Duty-talk distorts God's relationship to us. Dad, if he is a good man, will not experience the duty to rescue his sons as an externally-imposed requirement. When we experience duties as demands that come down on us from outside, it is because these duties are not connected to our natural concerns and because we see the other person's interests as limitations on our freedom. Dad will feel himself under obligation only if he is not naturally inclined to care about his sons. But if he wants to help, then doing so will not feel like an unwanted demand. In caring relationships the other person's concerns

are not an imposition that constrains us, but interests that we naturally wish to promote. In the same way God, while under moral obligation to human beings, does not experience these demands as alien requirements forcing God to do things which God would rather not do. Instead, because God's nature is love, concern for human well-being is deep in the structure of God's natural desires and motivations. God offers us salvation gladly not grudgingly, out of love rather than obligation. Duty is not the driving force behind God's gracious treatment of us.

Human rights and divine duties, while a fact, ultimately misconstrue the human-divine relationship. It is important, however, to critique the standard God-owes-us-nothing model—one that conceptualizes the relationship between God and humanity in terms of duty and obligation—and challenge it on its own terms.

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NOTES

1. The term 'salvation' is a broad, comprehensive concept in scripture and theology. It refers to the mending of brokenness and is holistic, including physical healing, forgiveness of sins and liberation from political oppression. In this paper, where I use the term to mean the restoring of a broken relationship with God, it has a relational (rather than a legal) focus. I also mean it to refer to eschatological salvation—avoiding hell and gaining heaven, where hell is understood as permanent exclusion from friendship with God. I take hell to be not a place of physical torment but an experience of spiritual suffering and deprivation where, in being separated from God's love and presence, one loses the true good of eternal communion with God. In this sense salvation is the opposite of damnation.

2. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983), pp. 25–26. The rest of this section draws on Joel Feinberg, *Rights, Justice and the Bounds of Liberty* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 142.

3. Stephen Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," in *Ethics and Personality*, ed. John Deigh (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 65–78.

4. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), p. 234.

5. Paul T. Jensen, "Intolerable but Moral? Thinking about Hell," *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (1993), p. 238. Hear also Paul Helm ("The Logic of Limited Atonement," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 3 [1985], p. 50): "if God has to exercise mercy . . . then such 'mercy' would not be mercy. For the character of mercy is such that each person who receives it is bound to say 'I have no right to what I have received . . . .'" And Stephen Davis ("Universalism, Hell and the Fate of the Ignorant," *Modern Theology* 6 [1990], p. 181): "God can . . . make us in any way God pleases and we have no authority over God to challenge this decision." Finally, Richard Purtill ("Justice, Mercy, Supererogation and Atonement," in *Christian Philosophy*, ed. Thomas P. Flint [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990], p. 42): salvation is a good which God "would not be unjust in leaving undone." Thus "God's forgiveness of us is purely supererogatory: [God] would not be unjust if [God] did not forgive us."

6. See, for example, Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), pp. 548, 781: "to say that we are saved by grace is to say that we are saved both without merit on our own part and without necessity on the part of God." Salvation is "a matter of grace, or unmerited favor"; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1941), pp. 427–28: grace "is God's free, sovereign, undeserved favor or love to man . . . . [T]he fundamental idea is that the blessings graciously bestowed are freely given, and not in consideration of any claim or merit"; Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 2 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 178: salvation by grace "is an act of God which is in no way dependent on man" or "any human contribution"; *Systematic Theology* Vol. 3. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 274: the term grace "indicates that it is not a product of any act of good will on the part of him who receives it but that it is given gratuitously, without merit on his side"; *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 1979), p. 858: "grace is God's favor toward us, unearned and undeserved"; and *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* 2nd ed. Vol. 6, ed. Bernard L. Marthaler (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2002), p. 383: Roman Catholic teaching emphasizes the "total gratuity of grace," defining grace as "the free and unmerited favor of God as manifested in the salvation of sinners".

7. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1961), p. 931.

8. Ibid., pp. 921, 922.

9. Ibid., p. 929.

10. Ibid., pp. 958–59.

11. Marilyn McCord Adams, "The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians," in *Reasoned Faith*, ed. Eleonore Stump (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 304, 308.

12. See Jerry Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1992), chap. 4.

13. Daniel Strange, "A Calvinist Response to Talbott's Universalism," in *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*, ed. Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 156.

14. This argument draws insights from the pre-Vatican II Catholic discussions (between Henri du Lubac, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar, among others) on the relationship of nature and grace. See Stephen J. Duffy, *The Graced Horizon* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992); and *The Dynamics of Grace* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994).

15. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 3.

16. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol. 6 (London, UK: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966), pp. 392–93. Calvin (*Institutes*, p. 43) agrees: "there is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity . . . . God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty." The *sensus divinitatis*, however, is more an awareness of God than an attraction to God.

17. Timothy Jackson, *The Priority of Love* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 2003), pp. 84–85.

18. Ibid., p. 91.

19. John Sanders ("A Freewill Theist's Response to Talbott's Universalism," in Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation*, pp. 176, 187) observes that the issue St. Paul is addressing in Rom 9 has nothing to do with choosing individuals for salvation but instead is about God's sovereign right to save Gentiles solely by faith without circumcision and observance of the Jewish law. The topic is God's sovereignty over *how* people are saved, not over *who* is saved.

20. Adams, "Problem of Hell," p. 304.

21. The Mosaic law distinguished unintentional, unwitting sins and defiant, deliberate, 'high-handed' ones (Num 15:27–31). Even the most extreme acts—the crucifixion of Christ ("Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"—Lk 23:34) and Saul's violent persecution of the church ("I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief"—1 Tm 1:13)—are portrayed as sins of ignorance rather than malicious wickedness.

22. G. K. Chesterton, cited in Richard Mouw, *Distorted Truth* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1989), p. 1.

23. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 210 and pp. 876–79 respectively.

24. The terms "merit" and "worth" come from Gregory Vlastos, "Justice and Equality," in *Theories of Rights*, ed. Jeremy Waldron (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 75.

25. Consider how the merit—worth distinction is blurred in the definitions of grace cited in footnote 8. Strong: "to say that we are saved by grace is to say that we are saved . . . without *merit* on our own part." Salvation is "a matter of grace, or *unmerited* favor." Berkhof: grace "is God's free, sovereign, *undeserved* favor or love to man . . . the blessings graciously bestowed are freely given, and not in consideration of any claim or *merit*." Tillich: grace "is given gratuitously, without *merit*." Episcopal Church: "grace is God's favor toward us, *unearned* and *undeserved*." And Roman Catholic church: grace is "the free and *unmerited* favor of God as manifested in the salvation of sinners."

26. Strange, "Calvinist Response," pp. 158 and 157 respectively.

27. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, excerpted in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ*, ed. John deGruchy (London, UK: Collins, 1988), pp. 77—78, emphasis mine.

28. These terms come from Walls, *Hell*, p. 13.

29. This section draws on Hugh Lafollette, *Personal Relationships* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 142–47; and Nicholas Dent, "Virtue, *eudaimonia* and Teleological Ethics," in *Virtue Ethics and Moral Education*, ed. David Carr and Jan Steutel (London, UK: Routledge, 1999), pp. 21–34.