Whose Love? An Exegetical Analysis of Lonergan’s Use of Romans 5:5

© Eric Vanden Eykel
Marquette University

I'd like to begin with a confession: I am neither a systematician nor a Lonerganian. While I have read and appreciated much of Lonergan's theology, my chief area of study is the New Testament and Christian origins. I submit this confession to you for reasons that will become clear in a moment.

The paper you are about to hear was first conceived several years ago while I was a student in Fr. Doran's doctoral seminar, “Lonergan, Girard, and Soteriology.” As one who was interested in the NT and its interpretation, I spoke with Fr. Doran about possible avenues of exploration for a final paper on an aspect of Lonergan's exegesis. My question went something like this: I'm interested in examining Lonergan's use of Scripture in his theological treatises ... are there any particular passages from the NT for which he has an affinity? As one who was not quite “in the know” in terms of the breadth of Lonergan's works, I failed to comprehend fully the contained giggle that accompanied his response, which went something like this: “Well, there is one verse that fits that description.” The verse, of course, is Rom 5:5, which reads, “and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

While I ended up writing my paper for that class on an unrelated topic, I was intrigued by the fact that one verse could be so prominent in a collection of works that could easily occupy several feet of a library shelf (or two). During subsequent conversations with Dr. Jeremy Blackwood, I sought to clarify why Lonergan was interested in this verse, and to determine if there might be any merit in examining it in more depth. The issue, he told me, is with Lonergan's interpretation of the genitive construct, “the love of God (ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ),” which he reads as a subjective rather than an objective
genitive. The former implies that the love referenced here is none other than God’s own love, while the latter suggests that it is a person’s love for God. Upon examining my Greek NT, I shared with him my conviction, not only that Lonergan’s read was correct, but that I could see no possible way of translating the genitive construct in any way other than as a subjective genitive. Well, he said, you should write a paper on that, because a lot hinges on whether or not he is right, and not everyone agrees that he is. So here we are.

There are two ways that I could have gone about writing this paper. The first is that I could have immersed myself in Lonergan’s works in an effort to more fully understand the implications of his interpretation of Rom 5:5. A related task would have been to familiarize myself with theologians whose arguments would seem to stand or fall depending on whether he was right to read Rom 5:5 as he did. Obviously, this would have taken some time. The second is that I could simply write this paper from the perspective of a biblical scholar who has been told that there is a debate, but who is not fully aware of its implications. That is, I would seek to argue that in Rom 5:5, Paul does in fact refer to God’s own love, and that this subjective rendering of the genitive makes better sense in the context of his larger argument.

I chose the latter of these two options, and I have done so in hopes that one better versed in Lonergan studies will take what I’ve done and build on it. The assumption is that if my path of willful ignorance generates any resonances with Lonergan’s work, then these will be of even greater value.

---

1 To be sure, the English translation of ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ as “love of God” isn’t particularly helpful, as the phrase may be interpreted subjectively or objectively. The same is true for other expressions: “love of a parent,” for example, without any sort of context, may refer to a parent’s love for his or her child or a person’s love for his or her parents. “For love of the game,” on the other hand, is easier, as games typically have no love of their own.
than if they were gained from within Lonergan’s own systematic and theoretical framework. I begin
with a syntactical analysis of Rom 5:5 in which I argue that the subjective reading of the genitive ἡ
ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ is in fact the most natural. I will then consider the ways in which this interpretation
coheres within the larger theological project of the Epistle, or at least within the first half.

In order to introduce the question of syntax, I would like to begin by sketching for you a
debate over another passage in Romans, one that has divided biblical scholars for over a century. The
passage in questions is Rom 3:21-26, which I quote here from the NRSV:

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the
law and the prophets, 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who
believe. For there is no distinction, 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;
24 they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,
25 whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He
did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the
sins previously committed; 26 it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous
and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

The issue revolves around how to translate two genitive clauses in verses 22 and 26: the first reads
πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ; and the second, πίστεως Ἰησοῦ. Similar constructions occur in Galatians,
Ephesians, and Philippians. 2 For the sake of simplicity all are referred to under the collective title,
pίστες Χριστοῦ.

The editors of nearly every modern NT translation since Martin Luther’s 1522 edition have
rendered πίστες Χριστοῦ as an objective genitive, namely, “faith in Christ” or some variant thereof. But
not every Pauline scholar is convinced that this is the best reading. In 1891, Johannes Haussleiter

---

suggested that the ΠΧ passages signify Jesus’ own faith in God in light of his impending crucifixion, and that Christians participate in this faith, or better, faithfulness, by embodying a similar faith in their own lives. A few years later, in 1906, Gerhard Kittel affirmed Haussleiter’s suggestion, citing similar gentives in Rom 3:3, which speaks of the πίστις θεοῦ, referring to God’s covenant faithfulness to the people of Israel, and in Rom 4:16, which speaks of the πίστις Ἀβραάμ, or Abraham’s faithfulness. Paul, Kittel argued, would have only succeeded in misleading his readers if he meant anything other than “faithfulness of Christ” in Rom 3:22, 26.

After Kittel the debate subsided. It was not solved, mind you, but it did go away. It made a brief appearance in England in the 1950s, but it was not until the early 1980s that it was dredged up again. In 1983, Richard Hays, now of Duke University, published his dissertation, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11*, in which one of the chapters was devoted to exploring ΠΧ formulations in the Pauline corpus. In this work, he employs structural analysis to argue that, in Galatians, we find “a gospel story to which Paul alludes and appeals.” At its heart is the protagonist Jesus Christ, “whose act of obedient self-giving on the cross became the means by which ‘the promise’ of God was fulfilled.” With this in mind, he posits that “the emphasis in Paul’s theology lies less on the question of how we should dispose ourselves toward God than on the question of how God has acted in Christ to effect our deliverance.”

In terms of syntax, Hays, among other scholars such as Luke Timothy Johnson, Doug Campbell, Bruce Longenecker, Ian Wallis, Leander Keck, Michael Gorman, and N. T. Wright, argue that the *subjective* reading of πίστις Χριστοῦ as “the faithfulness of Christ” is in fact the most natural reading. They maintain that if Paul wanted to signify the believer’s faith in Christ, he could have done
so easily. Moreover, they argue that a subjective reading of these passages always fits better in their immediate contexts. Every occurrence of ΠΧ in the undisputed Pauline corpus is accompanied by the verb πιστεύω, referring exclusively to “those who have faith” or “those who believe.” If we take ΠΧ as an objective genitive, then “those who believe” is a tautology.

But there are many who remain unconvinced, preferring the objective “faith in Christ” to the subjective “faith of Christ.” Those in this group include Roy Harrisville, R. Barry Matlock, and, perhaps most prominently James D. G. Dunn. Scholars who advocate for this reading also, and perhaps unsurprisingly, argue that it is the most natural reading. To be sure, one of the strongest arguments in their favor is the syntactical one. And this is perhaps the most important observation for the analysis of Rom 5:5 that I’m about to get to. Basically, scholars in the objective genitive camp note that every instance of ΠΧ in Paul’s letters lacks a definite article. They note that “the faithfulness of Christ” is only feasible if you supply a genitive article in front of πίστις. And if Paul had intended for these passages to be read subjectively, as referring to Christ’s own faithfulness, surely he would have not forgotten to include the article. While instances of subjective genitives without the article are attested in ancient Greek literature, they are rare: it is far more common for the subjective genitive to be articular.

This brings us back to the passage I’ve promised to talk about in this paper, namely, Rom 5:5 and the genitive construct, ἡ ἁγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ. Those of you who have enough Greek to understand what I have just said will undoubtedly be able to guess what I’m going to say next. This particular phrase does have the article that is missing from all of the ΠΧ formulations. Taking the syntactical arguments from the ΠΧ debate, particularly those that state that these passages should be read as objective genitives due to their lack of a definite article, it stands to reason that in Rom 5:5, because we
have the definite article, we have a subjective genitive, namely, “God's own love” rather than simply “our love of God” or “our love for God.” So in terms of grammar alone, reading Rom 5:5 subjectively is not a stretch by any standard whatsoever. But what difference does this make for the way in which this passage fits within the larger context of the epistle? It is to this question that I will now turn.

Rom 1:16-17 contains what is commonly recognized as the “thesis” of the letter. Here Paul writes: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.’” N. T. Wright’s summary of this passage is uncharacteristically brief: “God’s gospel unveils God’s righteousness” (397). Robert Jewett argues that the core of this thesis “is the paradox of power,” namely, “that in this shameful gospel that would seem to lack the capacity to prevail, the power of God is in fact revealed in a compelling manner” (Hermeneia, 137). In short, Romans is a letter about God's own initiative for salvation; more specifically, what God has accomplished and will continue to accomplish through the good news of Jesus Christ.

The first four chapters of Romans proceed from problem to solution to outcome. The problem is that humanity, Gentile and Jew alike, has digressed into wickedness, idolatry, and “unfaithfulness.” The solution is for Paul the righteousness and covenant faithfulness of God, which is most clearly manifested in what Wright calls the “surrogate faithfulness” of Jesus, one who was born into a world of rebellion and yet remained faithful to God even to the point of crucifixion. Through the faithfulness of Jesus (and here I betray my own preference for the subjective reading of ΠΧ), order is restored and the family of Abraham grows to include Gentiles as well as Jews. The faithfulness of the believer is by no
means discounted, as it is the means by which the righteousness of God is demonstrated in the present. Drawing from Rom 3:21, 26, God's righteousness has been disclosed through the faithfulness of Jesus and God makes righteous the one who shares the faithfulness of Jesus.

In Rom 4, Paul seems to respond preemptively to a hypothetical request for an example. What type of person shares or emulates the faithfulness of Jesus? Not surprisingly, the example he gives is Abraham. They key verse here is Rom 4:16: “For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham.” Incidentally, the last bit of this verse, “the faith of Abraham,” is syntactically identical to Rom 3:26. It is a genitive construct with no definite article, and yet no scholar of Paul would dream of translating it objectively as “the one who has faith in Abraham.” Rather, the sense is that Abraham's faith is a paradigmatic faith, a faith worth imitating.

All of this brings us back now to Rom 5, which is arguably a turning point in the letter. Here Paul begins to develop the theme that will span the next four chapters, namely, the future glorification of those who have been made righteous. The role of hope at the beginning of this chapter is striking: “We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom 5:2-5:5).

So hope looks ahead to a state of glory and is simultaneously produced, even strengthened, by suffering. The interesting thing about hope is the reason why Paul says it does not disappoint, or literally, put to shame: “because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit
that has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). But the really interesting thing (at least for me) is that the verb Paul uses to describe the pouring of love (ἐκχύννω) is here in the perfect tense (ἐκκέκυται), which implies that the action is not only a completed action, but that it was completed at a specific point in the past.³ That is, God’s love does not continue to be poured into our hearts; God’s love was poured into our hearts.

From the verses that follow, it would seem that the crucifixion is for Paul the moment at which this actually happens: “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom 5:6). Moreover, “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). What we have then, in short, is hope in a future state of glory, a hope that is both engendered and fueled by suffering and validated by the very love of God which was poured into our hearts at the cross, the culmination of Christ’s faithfulness, through the Holy Spirit. Whether or not this is some sort of proto-Trinitarian formula is a topic for another paper. But in the meantime, what I would note is not only the interrelatedness of faith, hope, and love, but also the inseparable actions of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. These three cooperate in the economy of divine love, a love that now incorporates those made righteous through the sharing of Jesus’ faithfulness.

But the question remains, How does one share in the faithfulness of Jesus? How does one participate in the death of Christ, the moment at which God’s love was poured out? For Paul, the short answer, which is probably all we have time for, is baptism and transformation through new life in the Spirit. The baptismal schema he presents in Rom 6:3-4 is tripartite: baptism into Christ Jesus is to die with him; baptism into Christ Jesus is to be buried with him; and baptism in Christ Jesus is to be raised

³ The perfect tense implies, of course, that the effects of the event completed in the past do continue in the present.
with him “so we also might walk in newness of life” (6:4). Baptism here is no mere symbol or outward right, but a genuine sharing in the same faithfulness embodied by Christ. It thus effects an authentic transformation in the faithful, uniting them to Christ in such a way that they are no longer under sin but under grace (Rom 3:9; 6:14). Those who share Christ’s faithfulness in this way are free to live with him in the life he lives to God (6:8, 10), and in this way, they are no longer slaves of sin but slaves to righteousness.

As I realize I’ve said a lot, I’d like to end with a brief summary. I have argued in this paper that the subjective interpretation of the genitive η ἁγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ in Rom 5:5 as “God's own love” is in fact the most natural reading, both in terms of syntax and in the broader context of the epistle. I noted that this verse stands at a turning point in the letter, a point at which Paul begins to speak of the future glorification of those made righteous. I suggested that the outpouring of God's own love through the Holy Spirit is integrally linked with Christ’s death on the cross, and that this implies a certain interrelatedness between these persons and their actions. Moreover, I argued that their economy of divine love, because of the cross, now includes those who would share in Christ’s faithfulness through baptism. Walking in newness of life, these persons seek to fulfill the vocation Paul gives to them: “present your members to God as instruments of righteousness” (6:14). And fueled by God’s own love, they continue to manifest God’s own righteousness in the present time.