



Paul and the Philosophers: Alain Badiou and the Event

John Barclay

Abstract

This essay discusses the reading of Paul offered by the contemporary French philosopher, Alain Badiou. Badiou's emphasis on event and unconditioned grace is supported by readings from Galatians, such that his philosophical notion of 'event', with its militant and universal effects, may claim real consonance with Paul. However, Paul's strong notions of divine creation from nothing, and of the benevolence of the Christ event, require that God be reinserted into Paul's theology, while Badiou's focus on the resurrection, rather than the cross, misses the social radicalism latent in Paul.

Keywords

Alain Badiou, Paul, event, grace, cross

Paul's legacy is like a slow-burning firework. Explosive at the start, with huge flashes of illumination, it seems to die down for a while, in a steady state of lesser activity, before exploding again, unpredictably, in a huge rush of power and light, then quietly fizzing again before another moment of raw energy and danger. In the 2,000-year history of interpretation, there have been many such Pauline explosions, of which the Reformation is not the first or the only example. Indeed, one of the remarkable features of the present time is the dramatic rediscovery and reactivation of Paul not so much, as one might imagine, within the church, but outside it, or on its very edge, in a whole raft of continental philosophers, of whom Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou are perhaps the best known; but a whole list of others (Jacob Taubes, Giorgio Agamben, Stanislas Breton) could be named, who are working at the new and rather unexpected interface of religion, politics and philosophy in our post-secular world.¹ The

¹ E.g., S. Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001); idem, *The Ticklish Subject: the Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999); J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); G. Agamben, *The Time*

Paul to whom these figures are turning is a radical, subversive thinker of the unthinkable, a new resource in a context where the political left, as Terry Eagleton notes, stands in dire need of good ideas.² Given Paul's reputation for sexual and political conservatism, it may seem surprising that he, of all people, is the mascot of this new left-leaning religionless religion, but as I hope we will see, what Paul offers here is less a set of political policies than a way of configuring truth which is capable of breaking out of conventional discourses and pre-established assumptions regarding the limits of the possible. In this sense, the philosophers whose company Paul now keeps could well be described as anti-philosophers; I suspect that is where he has always been most at home.

My focus here is limited to one of these intriguing figures, the French philosopher, Alain Badiou, since his reading of Paul seems to me remarkably interesting and provocative;³ I also had the pleasure of meeting him a few months ago, and I am glad to report that I found him, for a man often dubbed the most important living French philosopher, a charming, as well as a remarkably modest, figure. Alain Badiou is an ex-Maoist and still radical, left-wing, public intellectual, a cultural critic, the author of many plays and novels, and a hugely original philosopher, whose range stretches from mathematics, art, science and literature, to ontology, ethics and, of course, politics.⁴ Now in his 70s, he describes himself as a man of 1968, hugely energised by the turmoil, the expectations and the subsequent disappointments of that remarkable year. Like any self-respecting French philosopher, Badiou is irreligious and anti-clerical by instinct: Paul is for him certainly not *Saint Paul*, and the gospel of which he was an apostle is, in its content, for Badiou a religious fantasy. Yet he finds himself remarkably drawn to the figure of Paul, and to the revolutionary contours of his thought-structures: in the early 80s he wrote a long political play called 'The Incident at Antioch', whose central figure, a woman named 'Paula', disputes revolutionary politics with Peter. And in 1997 he published a powerful little book entitled *Saint*

that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); S. Breton, *The Word and the Cross* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002). For discussion of some of the above, see A. Gignac, 'Taubes, Badiou, Agamben: Contemporary Reception of Paul by Non-Christian Philosophers' in D.W. Odell-Scott (ed.), *Reading Romans with Contemporary Philosophers and Theologians* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), pp. 155–211.

² T. Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revelation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. xii.

³ See also S. Chester, 'Who is Freedom For? Martin Luther and Alain Badiou on Paul and Politics', in P. Middleton, A. Paddison and K. Wenell (eds.), *Paul, Grace and Freedom. Essays in Honour of John K. Riches* (London: T & T Clark, 2009) pp. 97–118.

⁴ For authoritative analysis of Badiou, see P. Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); J. Barker, *Alain Badiou: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

Paul: La Fondation de l'universalisme which will be the focus of this essay.⁵ This book wrestles sufficiently well with the historical context and the contents of Paul's letters to count as a total reading of Pauline theology – as opposed to the random raiding for handy motifs which is common among philosophers elsewhere – and although I will register some serious reservations with his reading of Paul, I also find it extremely illuminating at many points.

1 Alain Badiou on Paul

In Badiou's own words (I here use the English translation), 'For me, Paul is a poet-thinker of the event, as well as one who practices and states the invariant traits of what can be called the militant figure. He brings forth the entirely human connection, whose destiny fascinates me, between the general idea of a rupture, an overturning, and that of a thought-practice (*une pensée-pratique*) that is this rupture's subjective materiality' (p. 2 [ET: 2]). Paul as the militant, the practical organiser of revolutionary cells, the Lenin of the early Christian movement, is certainly one thing that attracts Badiou to Paul. But, as this quote makes clear, he is more fundamentally drawn to the way that Paul's whole thought and practice is oriented to, and founded upon, an event, an epoch-breaking and unpredicted happening, in faithfulness to which Paul is himself reconstituted as a subject and demands the reshaping of others, as representatives (vectors) of a reshaped humanity. Badiou identifies this 'event' for Paul as the resurrection of Jesus, the eruption of the impossible that breaks history into two but, since he does not believe in this event, he cannot share Paul's orientation to it to any degree. Yet he is fascinated by the *form* in which Paul radically structures his thought around this event and in which Paul both declares and enacts its truth in the practical reshaping of life in faithfulness to the event. In this sense, Paul is for him a paradigmatic, indeed, foundational, thinker of the event, even if, ironically, the event around which this new form of thought emerges is, for Badiou, a non-event!

Event (*événement*) is one of the central organising themes in Badiou's philosophy, which he offers as a radically fresh way of constructing philosophy, including the notion of truth as a subjective process of faithfulness to the event.⁶ Events can take place in all of the four spheres in which Badiou categorises reality – politics, love,

⁵ *Saint Paul: La Fondation de l'universalisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997); translated by Ray Brassier: *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). In the following, page references will be given from the French edition, with the corresponding English page references in brackets.

⁶ See his central work, *L'Être et l'événement* (Paris: Seuil, 1990).

art and science: thus the event might be the French or Bolshevik revolution, or falling in love, or the invention of Cubism, or a scientific revolution that springs from an unexpected intuition. An event is a completely original happening which interrupts the flow of history and which cannot be either named or understood within the context in which it occurs: it cuts against the grain of the world, not simply as a new departure in the sequence of history, but as the creation of a new possibility, something previously thought impossible, if it was thought of at all. Readers of Badiou in French will notice how often the verb *surgir* is used in connection with Event – or the cognates, *surgissant* and *surgissement*. The translator renders these variously as ‘erupt’ or ‘suddenly emerge’. The point is that the event not only breaks away from previous structures of sense or legality; it is also neither accounted for, nor structured by, any preconceived generality or any pre-constituted community. It is, as Badiou puts it, ‘pure beginning’, the opening of an epoch, the transformation of the relation between the possible and the impossible (pp. 45–49 [ET: 41–45]). As he puts it elsewhere, in his highly provocative little book on ethics, it bores a hole through the fabric of established knowledges.⁷

For Badiou, one becomes an authentic human being (as opposed to a merely biological human animal) through total allegiance and passionate fidelity to the event. The event becomes a truth-event through this subjective process with highly material effects (what he calls a truth-procedure), and conversely, the subject becomes a subject through fidelity to the event, in solidarity with others similarly constituted. It is crucial for Badiou that the event is always potentially a universal phenomenon, a truth destined for everyone and not just for some new sub-set of humanity. In an age that strongly valorises difference, universalism is, of course, a highly dubious concept to most, but Badiou is in strong reaction to Levinasian ethics of alterity and Derridean postmodernism, which he sees as resulting in the identity-politics of special interest groups (whether religious communities or nationalist racisms), which acquiesce all too easily with the reactionary and fake universalism of global capitalism. For Badiou it is because the event is radically unconditioned that it belongs to no interest group, political or ideological, and is always potentially universalisable in its address to everyone. Because the event comes about for no assignable reason, because it is not integral to any previous totality, because it is not structured or calculated by any pre-existing rules, because it is neither natural nor necessary, because it is without preparation or precedent, it belongs to no particular sub-set of humanity. Thus radically unconditioned, the event is that paradoxical phenomenon of a singular universal: singular in its happening, but not

⁷ A. Badiou: *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2001) p. 32.

particular to any time, place or community. It is addressed to all and destined for all, and, even if its truth is only practised by a faithful minority, they constitute, like the French resistance movement during the war, the representatives of a more universal community, not an exclusive sub-group with their own particular truth.

You are now getting a glimpse, I hope, of what Badiou finds so interesting about Paul. Formed by a Jewish set of assumptions about the world, including the division of the world into Jews and Gentiles, Paul is transformed – indeed becomes a subject – through the resurrection of Christ and its revelation on the Damascus Road. As Badiou understands the matter, the Jewish tradition and the historical context of the first-century are of course the site at which this event breaks through, but they do not set the conditions according to which it is made comprehensible, or in accordance with which its truth-procedures are lived out. Paul dares to articulate this event as an entirely unconditioned grace, an event without precedent or limit, overflowing, supernumerary, unearned and unfitting, without the condition of ethnicity, status or gender, and therefore addressed to all and destined for all, without exception. Paul proclaims, Badiou insists, a ‘new creation’ not the climax of a long history: nothing leads up to it, or prepares for it; it is not created by pre-existent possibilities or prior conditions. For this reason, the emergence of the Christian subject is unconditioned: *‘le surgissement du sujet chrétien est inconditionné’* (p. 19 [ET: 18]). There are no qualifications necessary for this Christian subjectivity, because the subject is not just transformed by its encounter with grace, but is created by it: ‘by the grace of God I am what I am’ (1 Cor 15.10). Christian identity consists of fidelity to this event, which cannot be proved, as if it were some natural event, only declared, and declared to all in its universal scope. Badiou is fascinated by the way that Paul charts – or rather creates – a third discourse, that is neither the discourse of ‘Greeks’, the discourse of cosmic order and natural wisdom, nor the discourse of Jews, that of law, or of the prophetic/elective exception to the cosmic norm. Paul’s third discourse is a-cosmic and il-legal: its co-ordinates and meaning are entirely formed by the event itself. It is this Pauline ability to think the new – to disconnect the truth from the cosmic order and from the law – that makes Paul such a fascinatingly revolutionary thinker for Badiou. Paul forms communities that are in principle universal in scope, not by the imposition of some particularity masquerading as the universal, but through common fidelity to a non-particularisable event, a fidelity that can be indifferent to differences without erasing them for the sake of some coercive sameness. In Paul’s communities there is neither Jew nor Greek, not because these ethnic differences have been obliterated, but because, as Badiou puts it, the passage of the process of truth crosses these differences at a diagonal (neither affirming them nor denying them), declaring and enacting the truth of

the event *in* multiple and different cultural sites but never *beholden* to their cultural rules or *confined by* their national interests.

2 Paul and the Christ-event

In order to assess the value of this reading of Paul, both its strengths and its weaknesses, it will be helpful to direct our attention to a few Pauline texts, chosen from Paul's most revolutionary pamphlet, the letter to the Galatians. We may consider first Paul's account of his own 'calling' (or 'summons'), which, shorn of the embellishments we find in Acts, indicates the nature of his encounter with the Christ-event with particular lucidity. 'You have heard', he says, 'of my former life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors' (Gal 1.13–14). To break there for a moment: this little vignette includes the classic ingredients of a life given meaning by a pre-constituted community. This way of life has a label (*Ioudaismos*), derived from a territory (*Ioudaia*) or a people (*Ioudaioi*), a label loaded with an implied antithetical relationship to another cultural entity, *Hellenismos*. It is a life performed within a people-group (a *genos*) whose historical continuity is articulated by its commitment to 'ancestral traditions', and these traditions contain defined standards of excellence according to which Paul exceeded his contemporaries. History, community, ethnicity and moral excellence are here woven into a close web. Then Paul relates his summons, which is described not as the next step in his advance within Judaism, nor even as some reconfiguration of his tradition, but as an event arising from an altogether different source, even in an altogether different time-frame: 'But when God who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace was pleased to reveal his Son to me, that I might proclaim him among the nations, I did not confer with any human being . . .' (Gal 1.15–16).

Although Paul here uses scriptural language, drawn from accounts of the calling of the prophets, what he is describing is not generated from within his tradition and is not confinable to his own community: this revelation ('apocalypse') neither originates from, nor directs itself to, what he here figures as 'Judaism'. The rupture is signalled already by the way Paul places up front, what he also parades elsewhere, that within his perfect conformity to his native cultural-historical regime he perfected an act – the persecution of the church – that marked precisely his alienation from the singular truth of the gospel. The name for the event that occurs unconditioned either by Paul's obedience to his ancestral tradition or by its unfortunate effects in persecution, is *charis*, a term perfectly familiar to Paul's contemporaries, Jewish and

non-Jewish, but which he radicalises in the light of the Christ-event in order to invest it with the highly peculiar sense of a wholly unconditioned gift. It is by means of this gift-event that Paul has acquired a paradigmatically new subjectivity. As he puts it a little later: 'I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal 2.19–20). It is characteristic of Paul that he expresses his identification with the Christ-event in the Greek perfect tense, which conveys what has been and *continues to be*. Paul does not simply recall the Christ-event as a moment in the past to be remembered; it is declared, ritualised (in baptism) and practised (in everyday life) as a present reality which the Christian both lives from and lives in. There is something peculiar here in Pauline theology both in the understanding of the self ('it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me') and in the understanding of time. The Christ-event is not only a singular interruption in the once-and-only past; it keeps puncturing the folds of time to re-enact the new creation.

So much for Paul's own summons as a Jew. What about the calling of non-Jews, the 'Greeks' as Paul calls them, or 'the nations', who are also, he says, called by or in *charis*? Their history is also shattered by the Event, although this rupture is described in different terms. In Galatians, Paul narrates it as follows: 'Formerly, when you did not know God, you were in slavery to beings that are by nature no-Gods; but now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and bankrupt elements (*stoicheia*) to which you want to be enslaved again?' (Gal 4.8–9). With extraordinary boldness, Paul describes the condition of these perhaps cultivated and accomplished inhabitants of Galatia as a condition of slavery. For all that he will draw off the rhetorical and even philosophical resources of his Graeco-Roman environment, these constitute again only the *site* for the event, not its foundation, its cause, or its originating condition. The 'elements' that Paul mentions here (what he earlier called 'the elements of the cosmos', 4.3) most probably refer to the four physical ingredients of nature: earth, air, fire and water. He immediately goes on to speak of the observance of 'days, months, seasons and years' (4.10), suggesting that he saw in and beneath the religiosity of the non-Jewish world, with its careful marking of the calendar, an alignment to the structures of the cosmos. Precisely what, in his contemporaries' eyes, made religion 'natural' and therefore right and true is interpreted by Paul as a regime of truth rendered false by the new creation of the Christ event.

Although Paul's language here overlaps in part with his fellow Jews' critique of non-Jewish religion (e.g. the assault on idolatry in *The Wisdom of Solomon*), there is a subtle but important difference. For Jews such as the author of *Wisdom*, 'idolatry' represented a

rational error – a failure to perceive what should be perceptible by the correct operation of reason. If focused properly on the nature of the cosmos and its ultimate cause, one should be able to deduce a singular deity as the architect of the whole, whose being is by definition outside the created order. Such a critique represents an outflanking of non-Jewish philosophy, but it operates on shared philosophical grounds and represents a common commitment to the operation of reason. Paul *appears* to move in the same direction, but then, importantly and characteristically, corrects himself: ‘now that you have come to know God – or rather, to be known by him . . .’ (Gal 4.9). To come to know God would suggest a pre-constituted order of knowledge, independently accessible, by means of which rational readers of the universe would attain to knowledge of the truth. By contrast, to be known by God is to be reconstituted by a phenomenon – by an event – which bears its own criteria for truth-discernment. It is precisely because it does not build on the foundations of ‘knowledge’ or wisdom that Paul’s message is good news for the Greek and for the barbarian, for the wise and for the stupid (Rom 1.14).

The radicality of Paul’s stance can be seen finally in his summary statement at the end of Galatians. ‘Far be it from me,’ he says, ‘that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the cosmos was crucified to me [again, in the perfect tense] and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but new creation’ (Gal 6.14–15). An old antithesis between Jew and non-Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, is here set aside, not in the sense that either is erased or rendered negative, but in the sense that each equally can constitute the site at which new creation springs into being, but neither constitutes the sufficient, or even the necessary, condition for such an irruption. In their place, a new antithesis is created, between the ‘cosmos’ and the ‘new creation’, the latter, the new reality, not labelled ‘the church’ but the new creation, as potentially expansive as the world, which it confronts in order to redeem. The negative dimension of this rupture, we may note, is here identified with the cross, not the resurrection, though the two are hardly separable in Pauline theology. What is clear is Paul’s paradigmatic fidelity to a new and impossible event, a creation from nothing, an essentially unconditioned grace which follows no rational order, no cosmic structure and no moral rule.

3 Is Badiou a good reader of Paul?

While I will voice some criticisms of Badiou’s reading of Paul, I want to affirm first the strengths of his reading, although this affirmation will perhaps alarm some other contemporary readers of Paul. In the first place, I think Badiou is absolutely right to insist on the utter

novelty of the Christ-event for Paul, its break with what he terms his 'Judaism', its unconditioned 'eruption' through the fabric of nature and time, and its nonconformity with the structures of reason or law. This is a highly controversial claim in current Pauline studies, whose last generation of scholars has been at pains to point out how *Jewish* Paul is, not only in his intellectual resources, but also in his cultural framing of the Christ-event. My teachers (Tom Wright and Morna Hooker) and many of my contemporaries would insist, for instance, that Paul's comprehension of Christ is framed by a Scriptural narrative, that Paul's theology is basically a reconfigured Jewish discourse, and that the Christ-event is (simply) 'the climax of the covenant'. There are strong and understandable political reasons for this careful shepherding of the dangerous apostle, but in my view all such attempts fail to grasp the radicality of Paul. Badiou's careful distinction between what he calls the 'site' of the event (the linguistic, social and political context *in which* it takes place) and the event itself in its truth-effects (pp. 24, 74–75 [ET: 23, 70–71]) is of some value here. No one could deny that Paul is a Jew, that he describes Christ as the son of David *kata sarka* (according to the flesh), or that he draws heavily on the resources of his Scriptural heritage to clarify the meaning of the event (a point to which we shall return). But the Christ-event itself is a new creation which simply cannot be plotted by means of pre-existing co-ordinates, and Paul inducts believers not into some watered-down form of Jewish proselytism but into a commitment to walk in line with the truth of the gospel in whatever their cultural or social location. If, in our anxiety to foster Jewish-Christian dialogue or to create a biblical salvation-history, we efface or reduce the novelty of this 'new creation', we will obliterate perhaps Paul's most significant contribution to our theology and to our politics.

Secondly, I think Badiou is absolutely right to lay stress on the event as unconditioned by prior conditions, even conditions of 'fit' or historical preparation. In this connection he has recovered the Pauline thematic of unconditioned and boundary-crossing grace which is associated particularly with the Protestant tradition, but certainly need not be confined there. The past generation of Pauline scholars, impressed by Ed Sanders' rather Protestant configuration of Second Temple Judaism, has attempted to turn against previous caricatures of the Jewish tradition as legalism by insisting that early Christianity and its contemporary Judaism were both "religions of grace" and that Paul says nothing original or noteworthy on this topic.⁸ Badiou reminds us that there *is* something deeply subversive in Paul's configuration of grace. If we had further space here we could

⁸ E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977).

discuss the normal understandings of gift/grace in antiquity, where the gift is fitting by being distributed to the appropriate recipients; and we could place, in contrast to that, Paul's highly peculiar – in fact intellectually and morally dangerous – notion that the Christ-event enacts a gift that is wholly unconditioned.⁹ Although Badiou has perhaps himself been influenced here by the Protestant tradition of exegesis (one of the books he has read on Paul is by Bultmann's pupil, Günther Bornkamm), it is ironic that it takes a French atheist to remind Pauline scholars that Paul's theology of grace is a highly threatening doctrine in its refusal to acknowledge any prior conditions – moral, social or ethnic – for its transformative operations in the world.

Thirdly, Badiou's notion of the singular but universal event is a significant contribution to the attempt to rethink Pauline universalism in the present day. One of the characteristic and most valuable features of the "new perspective" on Paul has been its stress on the crossing of the ethnic boundary between Jew and Gentile, but the theological basis for this universalism has not always been well articulated. At times the new perspective seems to hark back to the Enlightenment valorisation of the universal over the particular (introduced into New Testament studies by F.C. Baur), a valorisation which always denigrates Judaism as the narrow, the limited and the ethnocentric. At other times, appeal is made to the 'equal rights' of Gentiles alongside Jews (so Krister Stendahl), as if Paul were somehow driven by an ideology of universal human rights.¹⁰ If theological grounds are sought, appeal can be made to the implications of monotheism – if God is one, he is one equally of all (cf. Rom 3.29–30) – but it is not clear why Paul should interpret monotheism so differently from his equally monotheistic but covenantal fellow-Jews. I think Badiou has put his finger on something extremely significant: it is because the event is completely unconditioned, it is because its eruption owes nothing to prior ethnic, historical, social or ideological causes or structures that it belongs to no sub-set of humanity. Because it comes from nowhere, it goes everywhere. Paul does not just think that the universal is somehow morally better than the particular; he is driven by the implications of an event that punctured the structures of time, knowledge and society, and therefore can enter, and presses to enter, all such structures without exception. What this implies about the church as an always provisional, decentred, outward-looking bearer of a truth far greater and more universal than itself is an issue ripe for further discussion.

⁹ For an outline of the difference here see J.M.G. Barclay, 'Grace Within and Beyond Reason: Philo and Paul in Dialogue' in Middleton et al. (eds.), *Paul, Grace and Freedom* (see note 3), pp. 9–21.

¹⁰ K. Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (London: SCM, 1977).

As I have indicated, I think Badiou's reading of Paul has its weaknesses as well as its strengths, and I wish to point here to three of these, as a way of deepening our engagement with the legacy of Paul. Firstly, as a number of people have noted, there is a significant lack of clarity in Badiou about the relationship between the event and the site of the event. In simple terms, the question that has been posed to Badiou is 'how can something come out of nothing?' Since writing his book on Paul, Badiou has returned to this issue and modified his views, most fully in his recent *Logiques des Mondes*.¹¹ Badiou seems to suggest now that the event is composed of elements already immanent in the situation in which it erupts, but that those elements cannot determine, calculate or predict the eruption of the event itself. This seems to water down somewhat the radicality of the event as creation from nothing, but I suppose if you remove a transcendent deity from the Pauline, or any other, notion of the event, you are bound to have to water it down in some such way. For Paul, the Christ-event genuinely is creation from nothing. Badiou grasped that, but is unable to theorise it once God is taken out of the picture. But I think something else is at stake here beyond simply my complaint that if you take God out of Paul's theology, something appears to be missing. Badiou attempts a de-theologising of all Paul's key concepts: faith, for instance, becomes conviction, and hope is translated as certainty.¹² Even grace is detached from its theological moorings: one can extract, Badiou believes, 'a formal wholly secularised conception of grace from the mythological core' and 'tear the lexicon of grace and encounter away from its religious confinement' (p. 70 [ET: 66]). 'Yes', he writes, 'we are the beneficiaries of certain graces (*Oui, nous bénéficions de quelques grâces*), ones for which there is no need to invoke an All-Powerful' (p. 70 [ET: 66]). But note the shadow of the theological structure of grace in the assumption that events have a certain specifically *beneficial* shape. Presumably Badiou would not take as an 'event' the collision of a meteor with the earth such that all human life was subsequently degraded. This would also be a singular, unconditioned happening, with universal effect, but it is hardly a grace. As has been noted by his critics, Badiou may have formulated a new way of thinking about the structure of ethics, but it is not clear whence derive the values that define notions such as 'benefit', unless they are the residue of a Pauline/Christian conception, mediated through a secularised Marxist filter.

Secondly, I am uneasy with the way that Badiou, following a line of interpreters that goes all the way back to the Valentinian

¹¹ A. Badiou, *Logiques des Mondes* (Paris: Seuil, 2006).

¹² *Saint Paul*, pp. 15–16 [ET: 14–15].

Gnostics, interprets 'the Jew' in Paul as a cipher for some generalised cultural or theological stance. In his theory of discourses, 'Jew' in Paul comes to stand for the exception (to the Greek cosmos), the prophetic, the sign, or ritual. At other times, in a more sinister vein, the Jewish law stands for rigid enclosure and restriction, or what is obsolete and harmful (pp. 14, 15 [ET: 13, 15]). In common with many other Pauline interpreters since the Holocaust, I think it is important to resist all such attempts to fill the category 'Jew' with general characteristics. The Jew for Paul is not an empty cipher but a historical, particular and non-substitutable phenomenon. Here it becomes important that Paul does not just draw on Scripture as a linguistic resource to say what he wants to say about the Christ-event, but finds in Scripture, on his radical re-reading, a peculiar narrative of Israel that bears the same shape as the Christ-event. This does not contradict what I said earlier about the radical novelty of the Christ-event, because Paul is not constrained by our configurations of historical sequence. In his letter to the Romans, Paul develops his conviction that what has happened in the Christ-event, and has emerged as its results, is already integral to the being of Israel and will result in her final salvation. The new creation in Christ was what happened in the birth of Isaac, in the aftermath of the Golden Calf, and in all those moments when Israel has been remade as God's people. It is the grounds for confidence also that 'all Israel will be saved' and that the God who has consigned all people to disobedience will also have mercy on all (Rom 11.25–32). Israel's special place in this scheme is, I think, a non-negotiable feature of Paul's theology, but because Israel also is constituted by the unconditioned grace enacted and anchored in the Christ-event, this is paradoxically no exception to the Pauline principle that the Christ-grace comes without any condition whatsoever.

Finally, something significant is lost from Pauline theology when the event is made exclusively the resurrection of Christ, and is not taken to include his crucifixion as well. This restriction clearly serves Badiou well at a number of levels, and he is deeply resistant to an ethic of sacrifice and self-oblation which he identifies with the Christian fascination with the cross. Yet so much is lost by this concentration on only one side of the cross-resurrection dialectic in Paul, not least his remarkable theology of suffering and the specific shape given to the Christ-event by its association with the love and self-giving of God. But here I want to focus on another aspect of the loss, as pointed out recently by Larry Welborn.¹³ Paul's proclamation of the cross which, as we have seen from our extracts from Galatians, is central to his self-understanding, carries a set of social

¹³ L. Welborn, 'Extraction from the Mortal Site: Badiou on the Resurrection in Paul', *New Testament Studies* 55 (2008), pp. 295–314.

implications which should be of great interest to a left-wing social theorist. The cross is everywhere in the Roman empire the symbol of degradation, social humiliation and paltriness: it is reserved for slaves and people Paul calls scum (1 Cor 4.13). As Paul points out to the Corinthians, it is commensurate with the message of the cross that God has chosen mostly those who have no education, who are low-born and of no social power (1 Cor 1.18–31). For slaves, over whom hung the ever-present threat of death by crucifixion, it was surely immensely liberating to be identified with their Lord who had undergone that very same fate and who was not only their Lord but the Lord of their masters and of the whole cosmos. There was no place so socially desperate to which the cosmic ruler had not sunk, and as Paul's new communities gathered in worship to this crucified and risen Lord, their identities were inevitably scrambled and re-made. Paul's theology of new creation and unconditioned grace takes social effect in those new and daring social experiments we call the church, where meals were shared across previously unbridgeable social boundaries, where the slave offered worship alongside his master to a common Master Jesus, where the Spirit gave gifts without condition, and where new identities were created out of nothing through the waters of baptism. The extraordinary confidence of these new communities, their innovative social configurations and their creativity in thought and practice are the social expressions of the impact of the new creation, of which Paul was the chief ideologue and activist in the first explosive generation.

Is this the sort of Paul we want? I am aware that some of what I have reported from Badiou, and much of my admiration for him, may sound all too Protestant. The apostle of new creation, of radically unconditioned grace, of a conversionist Christian ideology, and of a radically adaptable and provisional ecclesiology is clearly an untameable creature, an upsetter of the status quo and perhaps theologically, and even psychologically, unstable. Christian theological appropriation of Paul will always receive him alongside other canonical voices, but what precisely this means remains, I think, an open question. If, as I have come to think, Paul is actually in strong disagreement with the theology of the *Wisdom of Solomon*, this raises very difficult questions for a community with the Catholic canon of Scripture. Even within the smaller, Protestant canon Paul's voice sometimes seems distinctly out of tune in the supposed harmony of Scripture. Paul has always been a dangerous theologian – the apostle of the heretics, as Tertullian called him – and it is tempting to try to domesticate him by placing him in better behaved canonical company. But there is also the opposite danger, that by taming Paul we lose his awkward insistence on the unmanageable and incalculable divine grace, with its liberating and hugely creative impulse. For Badiou it was inevitable that Paul's revolutionary vision would be

betrayed: that his unsettling saintliness would congeal into priesthood and his adaptable militant cells would become an institutional church (pp. 40–41 [ET: 38–39]). Yet the future is always open and the Pauline firework still alight. Who knows how it might yet explode and with what effect?

Professor John M.G. Barclay
Lightfoot Professor of Divinity
Department of Theology and Religion
Durham University
Abbey House
Palace Green
Durham
DH1 3RS
Email: john.barclay@durham.ac.uk