

Author's Response: Favor and Gratitude: Reading Galatians in Its Greco-Roman Context.

In the book *Favor and Gratitude: Reading Galatians in its Greco-Roman Context*, I insist that Paul intentionally appealed to the cultural value of benefaction of the ancient world to proclaim the gospel message of Christ to the Galatian Christians. In my reading of Galatians, I discern that the “problem that has arisen in the community since his previous visit requires a detailed presentation and clarification of his gospel message that does not include the demand to be circumcised and observe the law” (p. ix). Therefore, in order to make this gospel message clearer to the community, Paul writes a letter defending his message over and against the one preached by his Jewish-Christian opponents, which demands that the Galatian Christians be circumcised and observe the Law in addition to having faith in Christ. Hence, I maintain that on the basis of my interpretation of the letter, “there is substantial evidence that Paul appeals to the cultural values of the Galatians in presenting and explaining his gospel message about God, Jesus Christ and the faith of the Galatians towards God, Jesus Christ and one another” (p. ix).

I build the argument of this book by examining how Paul uses the Greco-Roman cultural values of *χάρις* and *πίστις*, which are the foundations, as my reading of Galatians reveals, upon which he constructs the gospel message he preaches to the Galatians. I argue that the cultural understanding

of *χάρις* and *πίστις* is the backdrop against which Paul delineates the gospel message he previously preached to the Galatians, before the arrival of his Jewish-Christian opponents in the community. One of the cultural notions of *χάρις*, which underscores its usage in Galatians, involves, on the one hand, the values of favor, kindness, and goodwill that a benefactor gratuitously granted to the beneficiary. On the other hand, it is equally used in the Greco-Roman world to delineate “the return of favour or thanks by a beneficiary to the benefactor whether divine or human.” In other words, the kindness of a benefactor to a beneficiary is known as *χάρις*, and the actions of a beneficiary to a benefactor that acknowledges the favors that have been granted is known as *χάρις* (p. 4).

In addition, when I examined the meaning of *πίστις* in the Greco-Roman context, I noticed that as with *χάρις*, *πίστις* involves a relationship between a benefactor and a beneficiary. The Greco-Roman cultural values of loyalty, obedience, and faithfulness between the benefactor and the beneficiary undergird this relationship. To say it differently, the benefactor “needs to be someone, a nation, or a deity that is reliable and faithful ‘in providing the assistance’ [that has been] promised; also, the [beneficiary] needs *πίστις* in the sense of showing loyalty and commitment to the benefactor” (p. 5; see deSilva 1999, 46). Whenever a benefactor displays the virtue of reliability in delivering what has been promised to a beneficiary, then in turn, the beneficiary’s faithfulness shows that one is indebted and grateful to the benefactor who has delivered on the promise. The evidence shows that in the Roman world, the only cultural value that underscores the relationship between a benefactor and a beneficiary is *πίστις* (p. 5; see Gruen 1982, 64). An excellent example to keep in mind is Emperor Augustus’s description of the relationship between Rome and other nations in *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* 32.3 (Brunt and Moore 1967, 34–35).

In the chapters that follow, therefore, I carefully show through a detailed interpretation of the letter how Paul weaved the Greco-Roman terminologies of *χάρις* and *πίστις* into the gospel message he proclaimed to the Galatian Christians, which they would recognize. I further explain that God's favor to humanity is manifested in the death of Christ on the cross and also in the gift of the "Spirit of the Son of God" to humanity (pp. 26–27). My interpretation of Galatians reveals that the *locus classicus* of Paul's message to the community is the events of Christ's life: the sending of Christ into the world as a display of divine favor (4:4–5) in order for Christ to die on the cross for humankind (1:6–9) (p. 18–19). Paul identifies the death of Christ on the cross as a sure proof of "God's unbounded and gratuitous gift of divine favor to humanity" (p. 19). Indeed, Christ's death is God's gratuitous gift of divine favor to humankind without the demand to observe the Law and practice circumcision as Paul's Jewish Christian opponents insist.

Paul continues to emphasize in the letter that Christ's death on the cross "leads to the outpouring of the Spirit of the Son of God in the life of the believer." Paul's gospel message on the "Spirit of the Son of God" includes his exposition on the outpouring of the spirit (3:2, 5, 14), and on the effects of the Spirit on the believer (5:22–23) (pp. 26–27). To support the proposition that Galatians is foregrounded with the language of benefaction from the Greco-Roman world, I showed how Paul appeals to his own experience (1:10–15), that of Abraham (3:6–14, 15–18; 4:21–31), and also the Galatian Christians' experience of God's benefaction (1:6–7; 3:1–5; 5:1, 7, 13). By preaching his gospel message from the point of view of the Greco-Roman benefaction conventions, Paul shows that his, Abraham's, and the Galatians' experience of divine benefaction include an obligation to reciprocate the divine favors granted to them (p. 51). Faith (*πίστις*) is the

believer's acts of gratitude to God for the divine favors received through the death of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit.

The relationship of benefaction in Galatians as Paul presents it, is clearly not limited to the divine-human relationship. Paul shows how the relationship with God inexorably prepares believers to enter into a relationship with one another in human-human benefaction. On his own part, Paul couches his relationship with the Galatian Christians in friendship *topoi* by showing how his encounter with them is an exercise in benefaction (4:12–10). One would notice that Paul presents the relationship of benefaction among the Galatians in the exhortatory section of the letter, inviting them to do good and serve one another through love (5:1–6:10). Moreover, the Jerusalem collection is an opportunity for the Galatian Christians to benefit the believers in Jerusalem (2:10; 1 Cor 16:1–4). By inviting the community to serve one another through love, Paul places the ethos of reciprocity on the love of one another. "Love for one another provides the context for a genuine concern for the well-being and goodwill (*εὐνοία*) among friends" (p. 83).

Sofanit T. Abebe's review of the book presents some critical observations worthy of note. Abebe notices that the book lacks any significant interaction with the understanding of *χάρις* and *πίστις* in Second Temple Judaism. More so, Jewish authors of the Diaspora, like Philo, engage the Greco-Roman ethos of benefaction for his Jewish community in the Diaspora. James Harrison has done some excellent research on this and has provided a comprehensive treatment of the notion of grace in Judaism. He proposes that Second Temple Judaism is familiar with the Greco-Roman cultural understanding of benefaction. He examines Second Temple Jewish writings, including the works of Philo and Josephus, to prove that this is the case (Harrison 2003, 97–166). Abebe notes that the lack of interaction with the Second Temple Jewish context makes it

impossible for the book to provide a broader view of “our understanding of first-century Christ-followers.” In fact, this book is focused on benefaction, and rightly so, its meaning in the social world of the Gentile Christians in the regions of the Galatia, whose membership appears not to have a single person of Jewish descent. To this community of Gentile Christians that Paul preaches and addresses in his letter, I examine his gospel message, proposing that he did so by appealing to their cultural values of benefaction. With no single Jewish Christian in this community, it is hardly convincing that interaction with the Jewish understanding of *χάρις* and *πίστις* would have been relevant to the community’s Christian identity.

Abebe quotes an early review of the book by Jin Hwan Lee (2021), where Lee suggests that the book lacks a broader interaction with the cultural realities of the relationships common among private associations in the Greco-Roman world. In other words, the experience of benefaction in the Greco-Roman world is not limited to patron-client relationships in human-human benefaction as the book suggests, and it is also not limited to a superior-inferior relationship of benefaction. Rather the benefaction conventions of the Greco-Roman world go further than that. They are, in fact, the undergirding value in the relationship among private associations in the ancient world. Abebe and Lee call attention to this experience of the non-hierarchical relationship of benefaction prevalent in the ancient world. Lee makes it clear that patronage relationships are non-existence in community life among private associations. Therefore, rather than subverting the Greco-Roman patronage system as the book proposes (pp. 61, 124–125), Lee opines that Paul is complying with the social system of benefaction in the Greco-Roman world. As a private association, Lee proposes that the Christ-group, like those in the regions of the Galatia to whom the letter is addressed, are not any “different from other private associations in antiquity.”

It is important to keep in mind that the Christ-group fits the description of a private or voluntary association of the ancient world. Yet voluntary associations are organized around a leader who helps members maintain norms, responsibility, and the identity of the group. The Greco-Roman private or voluntary association is not a single or monolithic or uniform category. There are associations where members are encouraged to compete for honor through generous contributions to promote the association’s social activities. For instance, an inscription quoted by Richard S. Ascough (2000, 322) lends credence to competition of patronage prevalent among voluntary or private associations. Also, an association of merchants, shippers, and warehousemen on Delos honored a Roman banker, Marcus Minatos, son of Sextus, for funding the construction of the association’s headquarters. He would usually invite the members of the association to public dinners he hosted. He was honored as the patron of the association with the erection of a statue, an inscription, and a place of honor at banquets (Ascough 2008, 42–43).

Reviewing the evidence, then, it seems to me that the Christ-group falls within the category of private or voluntary association with a generous patron who provides physical and financial support to the group. Accordingly, only a few first-century Christians would have social and economic resources to benefit the community, which reveals a great deal of patronage relationships among them. For instance, the church in Corinth depends on the patronage of a member with a large enough house to accommodate the group for their gathering (1 Cor 11:17–22). Those who gather in Philemon’s home in Colossae experience his benefaction as the generous host of their association (Phlm 5–6, 22; see Rom 15:22–29). No single member of the Christian community in Galatia is mentioned by name in the letter. Yet, it is beyond doubt that this community has benefited from the generosity of some members, who have social and economic power and resources.

The so-called *Magna Carta* of Christian identity in Galatians 3:28 could be interpreted as Paul's message of equality and oneness in the community beyond the social norms prevalent in the society. Therefore, the exhortations to serve one another through love (5:13) and to do good to all (6:10) encourages each member of the community to use their capabilities to do good deeds and to share their resources with others in the spirit of giving and receiving benefaction. Likewise, Paul's suggestion to the community on how to participate in the collection for Jerusalem gives each member an opportunity to engage in benefaction towards the Christians in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:11–14). What this reveals, therefore, is that Paul invites the Galatian Christians to reimagine a different way of giving and receiving benefaction far beyond the social convention of benefaction prevalent in the society. When Paul uses the language of private or voluntary association, Ascough (2000, 322) notes that he does so to encourage a different kind of social relationship among members of the Christ-group.

Finally, Abebe finds a weakness in the book's lack of engagement with the work of John M. G. Barclay on grace (2015). Abebe observes that the book does not engage Barclay on "the patterns of salvation in Galatians," which "can be explained by the subversion incongruity brings on the criteria of fit between God's benefaction and the worth of the recipient." The result of Abebe's observation on how my interpretation is different from Barclay's leads her to conclude that agency in Galatians is more complex than my book presents. She insists that my interpretation would have benefited from interaction with Barclay's "idea of the incongruity, priority, and efficacy of grace." Abebe does not elaborate further on the complexity of agency in Galatians that is supported by Paul's argument in the letter. Nevertheless, to say the least, in his volume: *Paul & the Power of Grace*, Barclay (2020, 42; see pp. 63–74) insists that the gratuitous character of God's gift of divine

favor to humankind does not diminish human agency because God's favor or grace "energizes its recipients into action (2:8)."

It is impossible to understand Paul's scheme of thought as it concerns God's gratuitous offer of divine favor or grace to believers as he presents it in Galatians without paying attention to the relationship between grace (χάρις) and faith (πίστις). In my opinion, these two terminologies are not mutually exclusive in the argument of Galatians. Rather they both undergird the character of the relationship between God and believers, and also its corresponding impact on believers in the Christian community. Suffice it to say that any meaningful reading of Galatians must be attentive to the intricate weave of the connection between divine grace and the faith of the believer. Accordingly, this is what I have done in my book, and I have looked at it from the Greco-Roman context of Paul's Gentile audience.

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Ferdinand Ikenna Okorie¹
Catholic Theological Union, Chicago
fokorie@ctu.edu

1 Dr. Ferdinand Okorie is a member of the Claretian Missionaries. He is Vice President and Academic Dean of Catholic Theological Union and an Assistant Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. He received an M.Div. and an M.A. in Theology with a concentration in Biblical Languages and Literature from Catholic Theological Union, Chicago. He also obtained a Ph.D. in New Testament and Early Christianity at Loyola University, Chicago.