

Grace in Pauline Theology and its Socio-economic Implications for Post-COVID-19 Context in Nigeria

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Abstract

The concept of grace, which features prominently in the Pauline epistles, needs a reconceptualization in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, a public health risk of unimaginable proportions that has caused a significant shift in ecclesial processes and theologies. Scholars have treated the Pauline theology of grace synthetically in the Pauline corpus; thematically as central to Paul's theology; doctrinally in juxtaposition with the themes of law and free will; and within the purview of other subject matters like Mormonism, liberation theology, and hyper-grace teaching. Yet, these scholars have not paid attention to the socio-economic implications of Paul's theology of grace, especially in the African context. Therefore, this study examines Paul's theology of grace and its socioeconomic implications in the post-COVID-19 context in Nigeria and leans on theological reflection. Offline and online data were collected using literature research and digital analytical methods respectively, and descriptively and theologically analysed. For Paul, grace does not negate the ethic of hard work and self-sufficiency. These economic precepts show antipathy towards the pursuit and retention of wealth and communal welfarism, but emphasise the theology of enterprise.

Keywords: Pauline theology of grace, theological reflection, COVID-19 pandemic, COVID-19 African context, theology of enterprise

Introduction

Grace is a fundamental concept in Christianity. Gresham Machen, as cited by Bufford, states that grace is the “very centre and core of the entire Bible”¹. It is most clearly expressed in the promises of God revealed in the Bible and embodied in Jesus Christ. Likewise, the concept/doctrine of grace is integral to every Christian theology and a prominent feature in the Pauline epistles and theology. Grace has been mainly conceptualised and appropriated in theological discourse and Christian proclamation as a gift from God to be received without any consequential response on the part of the receiver.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is far more than a public health risk of unimaginable proportions that has caused a significant shift in ecclesial processes and theologies, calls for a reconceptualization of the teaching of divine grace within the context of a COVID-19 that has enormous social and economic impacts. Paul's theology of grace has social implications beyond its common connection with the doctrine of justification.

Paul's doctrine of grace has been treated synthetically in the Pauline corpus;² thematically as central to Paul's theology;³ doctrinally;⁴ in juxtaposition with the themes of law,⁵ free will⁶ and justice;⁷ and within the purview of other subject matters like the Greco-Roman motif of benefaction;⁸ Mormonism;⁹ the Gospels;¹⁰ liberation theology;¹¹ God-human and human-human relationships;¹² and hyper-grace teaching,¹³ among others. However, these scholars have not paid attention to the socio-economic implications of Paul's theology of grace in a post-COVID-19 pandemic context in Africa.

Therefore, this study examines Paul's theology of grace as situated in the Greco-Roman world and flesh out its socio-economic implications for a post-COVID-19 pandemic context in Africa. The study is carried out within the ambit of theological reflection and Paul's economic ideas. There are several scholarly models of theological reflection. But this paper adopts Killen and de Beer's model of theological reflection.

According to Killen and de Beer, theological reflection is the discipline of exploring individual and corporate experience in conversation with the wisdom of a religious heritage.¹⁴ Therefore, theological reflection may confirm, challenge, clarify, and expand how we understand our experience and how we understand religious tradition.¹⁵ In essence, as pointed out by Liston, there is an effort to "articulate the relationality of life, especially the relationship between God and the self, between God and people and between people and with each other".¹⁶

Thus, theological reflection incorporates the process of restoring or transforming this relationship, especially in a context whereby the divine-human or human-human relationality is being threatened with destruction – an ill-structured situation. The point of contact between experience and the Christian tradition is a give-and-take exchange.¹⁷ For Killen and de Beer, the deep and compelling drive for meaning serves as the motivation for theological reflection.¹⁸

Procedurally, Killen and de Beer's framework for theological reflection succinctly entails four movements: focus on some aspect of the experience, issue, situation or sources; description of the identified experience to identify the feelings in those experiences and identification of the images that give rise to them to focus on the "heart of the matter"; explore the "heart of the matter" in conversation with the wisdom of the Christian heritage (which includes questions from Christian themes and material from the tradition source), cultural sources and one's position; and identification from this conversation new truths and meanings for living that provide vision and motivation for renewed Christian action.¹⁹ It must be stated that many structured processes or methods of theological reflection tend to follow this framework and will vary according to context and purpose.²⁰

Theological reflection is the process of finding God in experience.²¹ It is critical to fashioning out faith-filled action in the world. In the context of this paper, the theological reflection process entails a focus on the COVID-19 pandemic experience in Africa; the description of this

experience in the light of socio-economic processes in Africa; analysis of its connection to Paul's doctrine of grace as situated in the Greco-Roman world of the first century; and then, exhuming of proposed templates on socio-economic implications from the aforementioned conversation/synthesis as new truths and meaning for living in a post-COVID-19 pandemic context in Africa. As affirmed by Yaghijan, the result of theological reflection is proposing (s) a solution to the identified experiential/existential problem via reinterpretation or reconstruction of the Christian tradition.²² Theological reflection shares these three elements in common: experience – reflection – response.

Offline and online data were collected using literature research and digital ethnographic methods, respectively. The data were descriptively and theologically analysed. The study focuses on Paul's perspective of the doctrine of grace hinged on the salvific work of Christ accomplished through his death on the cross and resurrection. While his economic ideas revolve around a proto-work ethic or theology of labour, Christians remain in their pre-salvation callings except for sinfulness, and the wholesome liquidation and disbursement of capital assets.

COVID-19 Pandemic and the Spiral Effects on Socio-economic Activities in Nigeria

Coronavirus disease (or COVID-19) originated in the Wuhan Province of China in December 2019 and it began spreading rapidly in China and to other parts of the world through the movement of people in early 2020. Apart from the resultant impact on the health personnel, systems and facilities in Africa, the pandemic also greatly impacted the socio-economic processes in Africa. The spread of COVID-19 affected economic activities in China, and in February, brought the Chinese economy came to a halt. This also extended into Africa because China is a major exporter of commodities to African countries.²³ Thus, many businesses in Africa were negatively impacted on a large scale since Africa relied heavily on China for the supply of primary and intermediate raw materials.

The severe social effect of the coronavirus crisis was felt through the imposition of movement restrictions to control the spread of the disease in Nigeria. These movement restrictions include, but are not limited to, the following: restricting non-essential activities, closing schools and universities, encouraging people to stay home, lockdown of entire cities, and requiring essential businesses to run skeletal operations and employees should work from home. These measures inevitably had spiral negative effects on the economic activities in African countries, and policymakers had to use economic policies, both fiscal and monetary policies, to mitigate the negative effect on the economy.²⁴ The pandemic affected social interaction and economic activities through the imposed social distancing policies.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, especially after the “lockdown” and occasioned by the health crisis itself and the post-pandemic restrictions include, but not essentially limited to the following: significant job and income losses; weakness and depreciation of socio-economic safety nets; increased cost of production and the attendant high cost of goods; weakening of health facilities; increasing poverty; deterioration of personal health; exposure of an overworked and inadequate health personnel; non-sustainability of pre-COVID-19 socio-economic infrastructures; significant drop in global demand for air travel; slump of financial markets and loss of value in investment equity due to investors’ application of short-selling strategies of stocks; reduction of tourist visits to tourists sites; decreasing ability of the less-privileged to have access to qualitative and timely health-care; fewer employment opportunities; reduced attendance and participation in sporting activities; and an inept, non-responsive and largely inefficient governments, especially in Africa, among others.²⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic is more than a health crisis. It evolved into a social and economic emergency with every country in the world feeling the pangs and pains of its socioeconomic disruption. And many countries in Africa are yet to recover from the aftermath of the COVID-

19 pandemic especially as it relates to the social and economic living of Africans.

Paul's Doctrine of Grace in Perspective

Grace, in Christian theology, is generally defined as the spontaneous, unmerited gift of divine favour in the salvation of sinners, and the divine influence operating in individuals for their regeneration and sanctification. Christian theology has coined a lot of phrases and epithets for the grace motif in Paul's writings: salvation is *sola gratia* (by grace alone); the grace of God is free, sovereign, totally gratuitous, indiscriminate, unconditional, unconditioned, non-contingent, and unmerited.²⁶

It is conceived as "God's favour toward the unworthy" or "God's benevolence on the undeserving" (Romans 3:23, 24; 5:1-2; 11:5-6). It is the unmerited favour of God and not the same as the secular consideration of "grace" as relating to "elegance or beauty of form, manner, motion, or action; or a pleasing or attractive quality or endowment". (Find reference for this) Paul's writing on grace is made more explicit in his letter to the church in Ephesians: "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love; he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the one he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace" (Ephesians 1:4-7 NIV).

Also, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9 NIV). Grace (*charis*) as used in Romans and Ephesians means graciousness (as gratifying) of manner or act (abstract or concrete, literal, figurative or spiritual, especially the divine influence upon the heart and its reflection in the life, including gratitude) which is acceptable, beneficial, favourable, joyous, liberal, pleasurable and thankworthy.²⁷ Grace, in this context, refers to the

kindness of a master towards the inferiors or servants, especially of God towards humans. This wins for us God's favour (1 Peter 2:19; Acts 14:26; 15:40). Christ's grace is further described as the mercy shown towards human sinfulness. For centuries, this is the notion and understanding of the concept of grace that prominent scholars for centuries have anachronistically translated "grace" (*charis*) - as completely 'free' and without obligation, yet, there is no ancient evidence to support claims of nonobligatory, free, or unconditional grace. In contrast, *charis* (grace) is obligatory.²⁸

Nonetheless, the expression of the concept of grace in other Pauline corpus reveals something else. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:10 says: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (ESV), and 2 Corinthians 9:8: "And God is able to make all grace to abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work" (ESV Cf. 2 Corinthians 12:9). By implication, the concept of grace in the Pauline thought is not only a disposition or an inclination like God, which moved him to treat sinners better than they deserve. Thus, the word "grace" also refers to the action or the influence of the aforementioned disposition, which produces real practical outcomes in people's lives. This conceptualisation of "grace" is made more explicit in the actual meaning of *charis*, the English translation for grace, in the context of the Greco-Roman world of Paul's time.²⁹

The English term, "grace", is the usual translation for the Greek *charis*, which occurs in the New Testament about 150 times (two-thirds of these in writings attributed to St. Paul).³⁰ Paul wove the word *charis* more than 100 times into his letters to individuals and different congregations around the Roman Empire. Greek and Roman converts, who were the original recipients of these letters, reading or hearing this word, would have understood it in a considerably different context than we would in the 21st century. And their understanding of what Paul and

others meant by the “grace of God” could have potentially been quite different from ours.³¹

Charis (grace) as a standalone word in the Bible could be used as a greeting with high meaning (“Grace and peace be upon you”), as a descriptor of how God conveys powerful favour, as an expression of an undeserved divine act of goodness, and more. These nuances of *charis* (grace) may be familiar to us. But for a Greco-Roman citizen or a Greek-speaking Jew, who would be hearing or reading this word in a biblical context, the meaning of “grace” would describe something foreign to our contemporary understanding—a powerful relationship between a giver of gifts and the recipients of those gifts.³²

In the time of Jesus and the apostles, Paul inclusive, a system known as “patronage” existed in the Roman Empire—the physical and cultural setting in which much of the New Testament was written. This meaning is not the same as our 21st-century appropriation of the term “patronage” – the bestowal of gifts in exchange for illegal or inappropriate acts, such as political patronage. Rather, patronage concerning *charis*, among the citizens of the Roman Empire had a positive meaning - a good relationship with lasting mutual benefits (See Romans 16:1-2; Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1). In the Greco-Roman society of the first century and according to societal rules, when a new client (the person receiving money or support from a patron) entered into a relationship of dependency with a Roman patron, they entered an agreement and relationship “based on mutual trust and loyalty”.³³

This new social contract impinges responsibilities and duties upon both the patron and the client. The influential patron protected the client's economic, social and legal interests by letting him profit from the patron's social connections and by allowing him access to the patron's resources, while the client was expected to show respect and gratitude to the patron, to render certain services to him and to support his political, economic and social activities.³⁴

There are 157 occurrences of *charis* in the New Testament, translated in the King James Version as favour, grace, gracious, credit, thank, thankful, thankworthy, acceptable, gratitude, pleasure, liberality, and bounty. Where *charis* is being used as an adverb (*charin*), it is translated as because of, for this reason, for the sake of, on account of, and wherefore. The word *charisma* occurs 17 times and is translated as gift, free gift, and spiritual gift. *Charitoó* occurs twice and is translated as favoured and accepted. *Charizomai* occurs 22 times and is translated as give, forgive, hand over, deliver, give up, grant, freely give, and bestow.³⁵

Charis in ancient Greece and Rome was a system whereby one person gave a valuable thing to another person, and the receiver gave service, thanks, and lesser value back to the giver. *Charis* was a system of reciprocal transactions that became the patron-client system. *Charis* was used for “reward”. Favours and gifts were received with consequential obligations. *Charis* put into motion the law of reciprocity. Hence, grace in this context means a helpful gift given without any expectation of return. The practice in the ancient world of people granting and receiving favours and gifts came with clear obligations.³⁶

A detailed study of Paul’s relationship with groups and individuals mentioned in his epistles demonstrates that Paul innately understood the social conventions of benefaction, and this understanding must have informed how he used *charis*. Paul used *charis* and its related words more frequently than other New Testament authors. Paul drew on both his Jewish and Roman backgrounds to teach about grace.³⁷ Paul utilized the word and the idea of grace as a vehicle to teach the importance of service (Galatians 1:15-16).

Paul's Theology of Grace and Its Socio-economic Implications for a Post-COVID-19 Nigerian Context

Generally, three kinds of Christian orientations on the implications of God's grace have been identified. The first orientation is that God's grace results in the absolute application of God's love towards sinners so

that they become perfect, blameless and absolved of any implications of sin. The second argues for a partial application of God's grace so that, while God shows his love for the sinner, the sinner needs to cooperate with God's gift to achieve salvation. The third denies any application of grace in that the sinner cannot work towards salvation.³⁸ Over the years, Christian orthodoxy has affirmed that the initiative in the relationship of grace between God and humanity is always on the side of God. God initiates the giving of grace. However, an individual does have a response to give and a responsibility for the continuance of the relationship.

Paul's theology of grace is set in the context of the Greco-Roman world's practice of benefaction.³⁹ The extreme focus on Paul's theology of grace without existential considerations will be detrimental to the encapsulation of the holistic salvation that Jesus Christ portrays, most especially as located in the Lucan soteriological narratives. The understanding of the patronage system of Paul's time shows that there are practical implications and obligations of the grace-filled relationship we have with God through Christ. The cultural analogy is plain and translates well into our time today: God serves as our divine patron, providing us with undeserved forgiveness, favour and the matchless gift of eternal life, gifts we cannot possibly repay. We should respond appropriately as recipients (clients) of God's grace in the form of beneficial service towards God (Romans 12:1; 6:1-4) and our fellow humans/humanity (Galatians 5:13-14; 6:2; Romans 13:9-10).⁴⁰

In another vein, a succinct perusal of Paul's economic ideas gleaned from his epistles reveals a balance to his exposition of the doctrine of grace and its contextual consequences for Africa in a post-COVID-19 context. Paul's economic ideas are set within the socio-cultural context of his time and markedly different from that of the Jerusalem ecclesial community,⁴¹ which had adopted communal living to cease working due to the idea of an imminent *Parousia* and led to poverty and acute suffering, further compounded by the Jerusalem famine of A.D. 46.⁴² According to Grogan, the Pauline economic ideas are aptly situated

within the geo-social urban centres of the Greco-Roman world and these were demarcated territories comprising Christian congregations in Greek cities or Latin colonies probably thoroughly Hellenized.⁴³

Paul's economic ideas, as identified by Gotsis and Dodd, explicate three major strands: a proto-work ethic or theology of labour; his instruction for new Christians to remain in their pre-salvation callings, except where it relates to sinfulness; and his recommendation that there should be no wholesale liquidation and disbursement of capital assets.⁴⁴ These Pauline econometrics are more accommodating to the economic conditions of human co-existence and synonymous with the contemporary economic outlook.

Paul's proto-work ethic or theology of labour follows the need for economic self-sufficiency among Christians. He counselled Christians who had left their trading activities to return to their previous work so that they could provide for their needs (2 Thessalonians 3:6-10). There was no room for anyone to be voluntarily unemployed. It emphasised that Christians are to put all their best into work to achieve results that resolve existential problems (2 Corinthians 11:27; 2 Thessalonians 3:8). Paul's proto-work ethic relates to resourcefulness and dignity of labour in contrast to the Greco-Roman world of his time that presents manual labour as a degrading feature of human life.⁴⁵

The second strand of Paul's economic ideas involves Paul's instructions for Christians to remain in their pre-salvation state or calling. These point to a life devoid of unhealthy competition with the "other" and encourage cooperative engagements and job satisfaction. Also, they are intended to encourage the Christians to be self-sufficient and neither become a burden on others nor give room for unbelievers to complain about them (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12). Paul himself engaged in a job (Acts 18:3), thus, he does not make financial demands of his churches (1 Corinthians 4:12; 1 Thessalonians 2:8-9).

The third strand of Paul's economic ethics is his discouragement of the renunciation of property, abandonment of riches as a divine rule, the liquidation of assets or capital, and common ownership of resources. However, Paul encourages a modest acquisition of wealth by individuals of the working class with the mindset of maintaining humanity through a lifestyle of contentment (Philippians 4:11, 1 Thessalonians 4:12; 1 Timothy 6:6). This instruction is situated within the social context of existing social inequities of power, property and wealth.⁴⁶ Paul warned that the accumulation of wealth could lead to spiritual distractions and sinful desires (2 Timothy 6:9-10). Christians are not to trust in perishable possessions but to direct them to the spread of the gospel and to the benefit of the church, especially in a social context whose population majority are vulnerable and poor.⁴⁷

The doctrine of grace explicated by Paul is resultantly balanced out by his implicit but nuanced economic ethics. Grace impinges on the Christian the complete reliance on God for salvation, which affects not just the spiritual component of human existence, but also influences the soul and body categories of human sustainability. On the other hand, the econometric indices in Paul's epistles explicate self-reliance and self-sufficiency, genuine care for the needy, and the redistribution of resources for the general good rather than an enrichment of a few elites. Thus, the salvific grace that Christians have received is a call to reciprocal beneficial actions on the part of the receiver. The Pauline theology of grace, which puts the responsibility for salvation on God, is balanced out by his econometrics, which puts the responsibility for sustainability on the saved, who is responsible to offer "service" as a consequential act for receiving God's grace. This active position will correlate with the action of the Corinthian Christians, whom Paul commended for reciprocal and charitable acts towards those in Jerusalem as a manifestation of their *charis* to God or being recipients of God's grace – they provided financial and material relief for the saints in Jerusalem during a famine.

This inter-connectedness between Paul's doctrine of grace and his economic ideas is instructive for Christians and governments in Africa in this post-COVID-19 pandemic era. It calls on Christians to form a synergy between orthodoxy and orthopraxis; create a balance between the spiritual and the temporal, and facilitate a healthy cohabitation between faith and works. Tushima refers to this paradox as "the dialectic of grace and works".⁴⁸ By implication, "right living flows from the redemptive miracle of the 'in Christ' relationship"⁴⁹ As we explicate God's part of our salvation in the provision of His grace, we must also energize and deploy all available accessories, resources, and processes to mitigate the socio-economic after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic by focusing on utilizing the service indices connected to Paul's deductive and connotative use of *charis* (grace) in his epistles. Thus, Paul's theology of grace puts on the Christian a covenantal reciprocal obligation that is more physical and "carnal" rather than spiritual.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations emanate from engaging data got from theologically reflecting on Paul's theology of grace and Paul's economic ideas in the context of a socially and economically disadvantaged post-pandemic Africa and in order to mitigate the socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the African context.

1. Governments and individuals should activate a service-oriented (producing) economy rather than a consumer-centric economy. This aligns with the reciprocal component embedded in the grace we have received from God through Jesus Christ.
2. The democratic governments and ecclesial institutions should provide frameworks and templates that will instigate a shift from a certificate-bearing knowledge economy to a result-oriented knowledge economy that is focused on solving emerging socio-economic problems. This calls for a re-orientation and a reappraisal of methodologies and curriculum of instruction at our various educational institutions.

3. Every local church should increase and reorganise its channels of welfaristic activities to become more holistic in order to provide the necessary succor to the numerically increasing suffering people within its domain.
4. Christians should seek to be empowered with the necessary skills that provide answers to current socio-economic questions in Africa. There must be a balance between the spiritual and the temporal.

CONCLUSIONS

In Paul's theology, grace does not negate the ethic of hard work and self-sufficiency. These economic precepts show antipathy towards the pursuit and retention of wealth, communal welfarism, but emphasise the theology of enterprise. They provide the "shock absorbents" for mitigating the resultant socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa. The "saved by grace" receives God's grace (*charis*) with a benefactorial sense of responsibility rather than waiting for "heaven" to happen on them.

The explication of a theology of grace should be balanced with that of a theology of work/labour. A Christianity that is predicated on the divine aspects without the consequent emphasis on human responsibilities is un-biblical and inadequate for contemporary Africa. The Christian is saved to save in all temporal and eternal ramifications as we deploy the gifts of the Holy Spirit (embodiment of divine grace/deposits). In essence, Christian doctrine must not be left at the realm of doctrinal reflection alone, but also at the realm of actionable templates. Christian orthodoxy must be balanced with orthopraxis.

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