

GRACE IN THE CHRISTENDOM: AN EXAMINATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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Abstract

This study embarks on an in-depth exploration of the multifaceted concept of grace within the contemporary Christian Church. Grounded in a through analysis of biblical teachings, historical theological developments, and current ecclesiastical trends, this research seeks to illuminate the complex and dynamic nature of grace in shaping Christian identity, informing worship and discipleship practices, and fostering spiritual growth and community. Through a critical examination of diverse Christian traditions and contexts, this study investigates how grace is understood, experienced, and communicated within various ecclesiastical settings. It engages with pressing theological debates, pastoral concerns, and missional opportunities, aiming to contribute to a nuanced understanding and authentic embodiment of grace in the contemporary Church. The research delves into the practical implications of grace for Christian living, exploring its role in shaping personal spirituality, communal relationships, and missional engagement. By synthesizing theological insights, empirical research, and pastoral wisdom, this study offers a rich and contextualized understanding of grace, equipping church leaders, theologians and believers to more faithfully embody and communicate the transformative power of grace in their contexts.

Introduction

Grace, which is a fundamental concept in Christianity, features prominently in the Pauline epistles. *Grace* is said to be the very centre and core of the entire Bible¹. It is 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 conceptualized and appropriated in theological discourse and Christian proclamation as a gift from God to be secured without any consequential response on the part of the securer². That is probably why there

is that cliché which states *Favour beyond Labour*. The securer takes what has been given by God gratuitously. It is not as if he/she has done anything to meritoriously deserve what had been given. Nevertheless, the gift has been bestowed, certainly not deservedly, but by mere grace of the giver, i.e. God, who has decidedly given the recipient what he/she does not deserve via his/her labour. Often, things are given on the basis of what the receiver has done. The remuneration of labourers, for instance, hinges markedly on the quality and quantity of the work that he/she had done. Wages too can be paid, based strictly on the status of individuals in an organisation. However, *grace* is not in tandem with this, but based purely on the prerogative of the giver, that is, God. Indeed, when it comes to *grace*, the benevolence of God is certainly not in doubt.

Biblical Exposition of Grace and in the Contemporary Church

The usage of the word *grace* is probably not commonly found in the Old Testament. However, there are some inferences. Since, *grace* implies *Favour beyond Labour*, one can see some cases where God demonstrated his favours which were not worked for. According to Ryrie, the concept of *grace* is many sided and subject to development in scriptures. In the OT *hen* “favour” is the unmerited favour of the superior to an inferior. In the case of God and Man, *hen* is demonstrated usually in temporal, though occasionally in spiritual blessings, and in deliverance in both physical and spiritual senses³. There are evidently the manifestation of *grace* in the Old Testament. For instance, the earth was reported to be void and without form at creation, and darkness was upon the earth (Gen 1: 2). It was probably *grace* that made God to engender light. According to Carson, France, Mortyer et al, the dark world was lit up when God said *Let there be light*, more precisely, day was distinguished from night by the creation of light. Light is a form of energy and may be produced in many different ways, not just by sun and stars (which were not created until the fourth day). Contemporary cosmologists say that the universe began with a hot big bang, which must have made a very bright light. Order began to appear and replace dark chaos⁴.

Another evidence of *grace* can be found in the case of Cain and Abel. While Abel’s sacrifice was accepted, that of Cain was rejected. Henry postulates that Abel offered in faith and Cain did not. In all ages, there have been two sorts of worshippers, such as Cain and Abel; namely proud, hardened despisers of the gospel method of salvation, who attempt to please God in ways of their own desiring; and humble believers who draw near to him in the ways he has revealed⁵. The submission of Henry here is at variance with *grace*. While Henry sees the gift of God to be based purely on worship, *grace* does not have any string attached. It is absolutely something that is done without necessarily demanding or requesting for it. According to Adeyemo, we are not told why Cain’s offering was not accepted⁶, thus, it can be conjectured that Abel received the *grace* of God, hence the acceptance of his own sacrifice.

Equally scriptural is the *grace* that Abraham received. Adeyemo postulates that Terah, the father of Abraham, had at least three sons: Abram, Nahor and Haran, Haran died, leaving his son without a father⁷. Lot served as a replacement of his father, Haran, meaning that they were still three, albeit, Lot was quite young. However, Abraham, received the *grace* of being called by God. The scriptures affirm that God decidedly chose to call Abraham perhaps as a result of *grace* (because he was not the only one there), and Abraham obeyed even though he never knew where he was going. Again, according to Adeyemo, whenever a call was issued, its substance was the same: he was to *leave* and *go*. He was to leave three things- his country, his people and his father's household... These are the very things that give anyone a sense of security, but Abraham is told to leave them. He is not told specifically where he is to go, but is told that his destination will be his inheritance from the Lord. He need have no fear or anxiety about where he will end up, for the Lord's presence will be there for him⁸. Leaving one's place of abode is not always palatable, however, Abraham was not recusant, as he obeyed the directive of God. Buttressing the above postulation, the trio of Carson, France and Mortyer enthuse succinctly that: leaving homeland and family was a much greater decision in a traditional society than in today's mobile individualistic culture. Abraham risked everything he held most dear to obey God's call⁹.

Akin to the above, *grace* was probably extended to Serah, the wife of Abraham. Serah was barren, even till her old age. Some visitors came and Abraham invited them so that they could be hydrated. After the hydration, the visitors asked, *where is Serah, your wife?* (Gen.18:10). Perhaps there were other Serah's then, and that was probably why they said *your wife*, otherwise, that would not have been necessary. The visitors pronounced that Serah would have a son (Gen.18:10). Arguably, it is probable that Serah was not the only barren woman in the area. However, she was graciously blessed with a son. Other barren women within the vicinity then must have probably enamoured her and be exceedingly jealous. Those women (barren women) never had the opportunity of enjoying the *grace* that Serah enjoyed.

It has been argued in some quarters that God restricted his *grace* to the Israelites in the Old Testament, that *grace* was not universal. There is evidently no doubt that the Israelites were God's favourites and he was always ready to favour them in all ramifications. According to Ryrie, the Apostle Paul was the principal human instrument to convey the full meaning of *grace* in Christ. The NT offers grace to all, in contrast to the OT which generally restricted the offer of grace to God's elect people, Israel. *Grace* in its fullest definition is God's unmerited favour in the gift of his son, who gives to those who receive Him as their personal Saviour added grace for this life and hope for the future¹⁰. We should note that the giving of Christ by God to the world is the highest *grace*. Christ's coming guarantees

universal cleansing and salvation of souls of humankind. Ryrie goes on to postulate that it was not until the coming of Christ that grace took on its fullest meaning. His self-sacrifice is grace itself (II Cor.18:19). This grace is absolutely free (Rom 6:14; 5:15-18; Eph 1:7; 2:8-9). When it is received by a believer, it governs his spiritual life by compounding favour. It equips, strengthens, and controls all phases of his life... Consequently, the Christians give thanks (Charis) to God for the riches of grace in his unspeakable gift (II Cor. 9:15)¹¹.

It should be noted with utmost significance that the twelve young men that were chosen by Jesus at the commencement of his peripatetic ministry were probably not the only young men around then. However, they received the *grace* of being called to join in the propagation of the gospel. Those who were not called were not opportune to be numbered among the twelve, who perhaps represented the twelve tribes of Israel. According to Hale, mark... describes how Jesus chose his first four disciples. First, he met Simon and his brother Andrew fishing in the sea of Galilee. Jesus said "Come, follow me". At once, they left their work and followed him... In the same way, he called James and John (not John the Baptist); they too immediately arose, left their family, their boat, their work and followed him... Like Abraham, they didn't know where they were going... but they knew who they were going with¹². Buttressing the position of Hale here, Adeyemo opines that: All four gospels record the call of the first disciples quite early in Jesus ministry and show that they remained at his side to the end of his days on earth. These men were being trained to succeed him and carry on the work he had started. A rabbi with a group of disciples was a common feature in Palestine in Jesus' day¹³. It is pertinent to state without any spirit of immodesty that Jesus called other disciples the way he called the first, and those he called subsequently, were not recusant. They simply obeyed the simple invitation of *follow me*.

Furthermore, it is imperative to state that the book of II Cor. 5:17 states unequivocally that: *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come*. Doubtlessly, to be in Christ is by *grace*. This is because many would have loved to be in him, but are not opportune. It is only those who are in him (i.e. Christ) that would enjoy the benefits of being in him. Those who are not in him are non-beneficiaries of the salvation inherent in his name. They (i.e. those who are not in Christ) would not experience the newness in whatever ramification that is found in the name of Jesus Christ. To those who are in Christ, according to Adeyemo, something new has come and what is *old* has *gone*... In other words, we no longer live as we did before, because we live for Jesus who gives new meaning to our lives. This new order was introduced by God; it is he who has revered us to himself through Christ¹⁴. The trio of Carson, France and Mortyer enthuse thus: To be in Christ is to be participating already in the new creation. It is true that the time being the old still persists and the new has not yet fully come... However, in the present passage, it

is the newness of life of Christ now which is being stressed, not the tension involved in participating in the new creation while still living as a part of the old¹⁵. Hale, while supporting the trio states pungently thus: The most important words in this verse are the words in Christ. To be in Christ means to have faith in Him, to obey Him, to love Him, to know Him personally and to make Him the Lord of one's life. Just as a branch is "in the tree", so we must be in Christ¹⁶. Doubtlessly, all these can possibly be accomplished via *grace*.

Besides, Paul the Apostle was equally a recipient of *grace*. While he was annihilating those that belonged to the Way, he probably had disciples. However, Jesus chose him to be the one to disseminate the gospel. He had an encounter with Jesus as he journeyed to Damascus. He was spoken to and struck down blind. Acts records that his co-travellers heard the voice but saw no one (Acts 9:7). Buttressing the above, Hale opines that:

The men with Saul were also amazed. At first, they all fell to the ground with Saul (Acts 26:14). Then, as Saul still lay on the ground, they got up and stood speechless. It is written here that these men heard the sound from heaven. In Acts 22:9, it is written that they did not understand the voice. That is, they heard the voice, but couldn't make out the words that were spoken. It is not mention whether any of Saul's companions were converted. They saw the light and heard the voice, but God's spirit did not enter their hearts...¹⁷.

Arguably, *God's spirit did not enter their hearts* ostensibly because they have not received *grace* which was bestowed on Paul who was their leader. It was only the person who received *grace* that could fathom the scenario.

Notice that the contemporary Church has a strong conviction in the import of *grace*. Members believe fervently that nothing can possibly be accomplished without the intervention of *grace*. No matter how hardworking a person is, if he/she does not enjoy the benefit of *grace*, the person may labour in vain. Those who have succeeded are evidently products of *grace* and not hard work. This is because, there are those who have worked, probably harder, and could not attain success. In other words, they failed, perhaps woefully. *Grace* is markedly and perhaps glaringly demonstrated in the life of Prophet Samuel Kayode Abiara who hails from Erinmo in the present day Osun State, Nigeria. Abiara was reported to be going to *Ori oke Olorunkole* (God builds House Mountain) at Akinyele, along with other ministers of God. He was popularly known there then as *Woli Alagbon* (Prophet of coconut). This was ostensibly because he was constantly breaking his fast with coconut and gari on each occasion. What is extra-ordinarily impressive about this Prophet was that he received enormous *grace*. He succeeds exceedingly in his ecclesiastical calling. He established the Christ Apostolic

Church *Agbala Itura* (Compound of Relief) with branches globally. The Lagos Zonal office is at Oke-Odo in Lagos, while the headquarters of the Church is at Olode in Ibadan.

It is reported that *grace* made him towered phenomenally above his contemporaries who were going to the mountain together with him then. His colleagues are said to be going to him regularly to solicit for financial assistance, which he gladly rendered to them, without any hesitation, whatsoever. Abiara had transversed many advanced countries like the United Kingdom (UK), United States of America (USA), Canada, e.t.c. for the propagation of the gospel. He was not the only person that was praying on the mountain then, however, *grace* located him and he was, and still exceedingly favoured, as he is shoulder high among his colleagues, who often enamour his spiritual attainment and wish they are like him.

Again, the story of Pastor Enoch Adejare Adeboye, from Ifewara, in Osun State, the General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) is also a clear demonstration of *grace*. Adeboye had joined the RCCG which was founded by Pa Josiah Akindayomi, as an interpreter. The founder was reported to be unlettered. Doubtlessly, Adeboye met some men in the Church who were probably older than him, and spiritually superior to him. However, Pa Akindayomi, (the founder of the Church) was said to have stated that God instructed him to hand over the administration of the Church to Adeboye after his demise. This was because the church world witness tremendous growth and expansion in his hands. Pa Akindayomi scribbled the name of his successor, kept it in his bible, and told his wife that the name of his successor is in his Bible, and that when he is gone, they should check it. At his demise, his Bible was carefully checked by the elders of the church. And the name of Pastor Adeboye was found, perhaps to the petulance of the elders. The elders were reported to be flabbergasted, as they were said to be wondering about the choice of ogbifo lasan lasan (an ordinary interpreter) to lead the Church. This was because the elders considered themselves to be spiritually superior to the interpreter.

It should be noted without any spirit of immodesty that Adeboye's choice as the leader of the Church engendered enormous animosity. The elders were indeed uncomfortable and somewhat made the administration of the Church cumbersome for him. That probably hastened his movement from Ebule-Metta to the present site, *Redemption Camp*, even as he had to be virtually living with reptiles. With time, however, the hitherto bushy site became a city, as magnificent buildings started springing up, almost on daily basis. The city has its own generating plant that supplies electricity to the city in its entirety. There is no doubt that the choice of Adeboye was by *grace*. This was because, as postulated earlier, he met some men probably older than him, and perhaps

superior to him spiritually. However, *grace* located him, thus he was made the leader.

Grace can also be seen in the establishment of other Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal Churches. While some individuals started these churches and succeeded, others failed. Among those that succeeded were Joseph Ayo Babalola, Christ Apostolic Church, Moses Tunolase Orimolade, Cherubim and Seraphim Church, Samuel Bilewu Oshofa, Celestial Church of Christ, David Oyedepo, Living Faith, Chris Oyakhilome, Christ Embassy, Daniel Olukoya, Mountain of Fire and Miracles, William Folorunso Kumuyi, Deeper Life Bible Church, e.t.c. Indeed, the *grace* bestowed on Kumuyi was gargantuan. Of a truth, the formal establishment of Deeper Life Bible Church can be dated to November 7, 1982

when its first Sunday service was held at Gbagada, an outlying district of the Mainland in Lagos¹⁸. Kumuyi had started a small Bible study at the University of Lagos in 1973 to meet the needs of the people within and outside the University campus who were coming to him for counselling and answers to the questions on the Christian faith. He felt the counselling sessions were taking too much of his time because he was still a Mathematics teacher in the University of Lagos at that time, hence he invited people to come together one evening in the week and study the Bible with him, and that was how the ... Bible study group began. The group met at 7.00pm every Tuesday for one and a half to two hours, the Bible study outline was duplicated and each participant had a copy¹⁹. When more people joined the Bible study, particularly in 1975 when about 500 people would sit outside the flat and listened to Kumuyi through the loudspeakers; it became necessary to get a bigger location for the Bible study. Thus, the group in 1977 moved to an auditorium of a Church at 17, Shonibare street, Mushin, and remained there for a few months before they moved to the bigger auditorium of the Redeemed Christian Church of God at Oyingbo and eventually settled at Gbagada in April 1981²⁰. It is probable that Brother Kumuyi (as he was fondly called then) was not the only one that was organising Bible study in his house, others were perhaps organising *Home Cells*. However, he received *grace* and the gathering metamorphosed to a Church. *Grace* was also bestowed on Pastor Kumuyi, as he was opportune to pray during the Inauguration of President Donald Trump of the United States of America. Arguably, it is seldom for an African priest to be so recognized in an advanced country like the USA.

Conclusion

The significance of *grace* cannot be possibly over-emphasised. *Grace* is seen as something that is bestowed or given without the receiver meriting it. It is just similar to mercy. A person is considered suitable for a given favour, even if he/she has not deservedly merited it. The import of *grace* can be seen in the benediction. One can see glaringly that it appears in the last verse of the Christian scriptures- *The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all saints* (Rev.22:21). Notice that after

virtually all Church services, the significance is usually brought to the fore, *may the grace of the Lord go with you*. Many Christians would not like to leave the Church without sharing the *grace*. They consider it as a *Sine qua non* in the service, hence their unalloyed reverence for it.

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