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Volume 3-2011

**How Does God's Grace and Living in
Gracious Community Help Us to
Endure Present Suffering?**

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Introduction

This paper holds that God's grace and living in a gracious community can assist us to cope with present day sufferings. God's grace favors and forms a gracious community as a unique creation where altruism and an embodied memory of the graciousness of the self-revealing God enables members to engage suffering as an opportunity for growth and to embody a theology of hope as a lived, living and a livable reality. A gracious community is presented as a

¹See www.sun.ac.za.

manifestation of divine grace in which God's people draw strength from the concern and graciousness of our gracious and self-disclosing God to form, inform and reform character in a challenging world as ours. Members of the community are change agents within a social order.

In the concluding statements of the chapter entitled *Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom* in his book *I Have A Dream*, Martin Luther King Jr underscored that people of good will are indispensable in the search for a society where everybody is somebody. Such persons embody and demonstrate the courage to put an end to suffering by willingly or graciously suffering themselves rather than inflict suffering on others. They envision and work for the actualization of a world of peoplehood, cooperation and peace which rejects racism, materialism and violence.² Being God's people, they seek and espouse the knowledge of the true God through the sovereign, gracious and self-revealing God. True godliness John Calvin emphasized in his book *Truth For All Time* consists of a pure and true zeal which loves God as a real father and looks up to him as a real Lord. True godliness embraces God's righteousness and detests offending God more than dying.³

These gracious and altruistic persons are aware that human progress does not roll on wheels of inevitability but through the efforts of people who cooperate with God. They constitute a gracious community vis-à-vis their gracious communication of God's grace with the needy or suffering. God as John Leith has pointed out is working out his purpose in human history. The sovereign Lord calls God's people to be the instruments of the divine purpose which is not reducible to the savedness of the soul. God's purpose includes the establishment and nurturing of a holy community and the glorification of His name through all the earth.⁴ God's people are theologically minded, seeking and working for a society where those who receive God's grace embody and communicate graciousness as identity and spirituality. Called out of the world and redeemed from sinfulness, the

² *I Have A Dream: Writings And Speeches That Changed The World* (London: HarperCollins), 134.

³ *Truth For All Time: A Brief Outline of the Christian Faith* (Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust), 3.

⁴ *Introduction to The Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press), 75.

gracious community is restored to serve as sign, instrument and sacrament for making meaningful the implication of the Christ event a historical reality: members are social change agents whose embodiment of grace presents gracious as a living proof that God's grace and that living in a gracious community can help us endure the present suffering especially the biting effects of distressing pursuit of *pseudocapitalism* and individualism in our time. Tutu⁵ cautions that in spite of its great deal of wealth and prosperity, this *pseudocapitalism* ends up as a victory with countless casualties in the unemployed, the homeless and the poor. It treats these vulnerable persons with disdain: its heroic deification of the means of production and its abuse of human dignity have no significant concern for compassion and caring.

True humanity Nico Koopman argues is not defined by independence and rationality but by the willingness to enter into relationships with others. In this relationship with others one does not discover a replica of oneself as Aristotle taught. In the interaction with others, in the communion, in the relationship, I find my essence and being. I receive my being from the other. We receive our existence from the hands of the other hence my existence becomes meaningful because there are others who want to share their existence with me.⁶ As the Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu has pointed out in his book, *God Has A Dream*, 'as we share God's love with our brothers and sisters, God's other children, there is no tyrant who can resist us, no oppression that cannot be ended, no hunger that cannot be fed, no wound that cannot be healed, no hatred that cannot be transformed into love, no dream that cannot be fulfilled.'⁷ The tyrant and oppressors include the said biting effects of distressing pursuit of *pseudocapitalism* and individualism in our time. True humanity teaches us about how to live with things as people who can also live without them.

The gracious community is ceaselessly burdened with what Dirkie Smit describes as stories of remembering yesterday's conflicts and suffering while facing a common tomorrow, stories of dealing

⁵ *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (London: Rider Books), 37-41.

⁶ "Some Theological and Anthropological Perspectives on Human Dignity and Human Rights." *Scriptura* Vol 95 No 2(2007), 183.

⁷ *God Has A Dream*, 128.

with painful pasts while searching for a shared future.⁸ This community of faith can surmount these challenges by confessing and embodying God's gracious love in word and deed, in ethos, in structures, in practices and policies and in every sphere of human life.

The people of God in this sense represents the church, that is, the scattered people of God who scatter to do the will of God but gather to refresh, reflect and resolve to represent the incarnate God in their daily lives and practices. The church Koopman⁹ has argued is challenged to confess and embody wholeness and fullness and to explicitly communicate and commend their visionary theological enterprises to especially, the suffering. To confess and embody are more than merely discerning the implications and imperatives of God's self disclosure in Jesus Christ. It speaks more about concrete cooperation with God to form, inform, reform and re-present a gracious community as a community of character, which embodies theology of hope as a historical reality. The gracious community of God's people is graced with:

Altruistic Religiosity: One of the central concerns of the people of God is the welfare of the neighbor. It ensues from the quest to rediscover, recover and restore the human dignity of persons especially the suffering, the needy or the less privileged members of our society. For instance, sickness which is also suffering often alienates us from our communities, loved ones and in many cases from their faith. Allan Verhey shows that sickness comes as a forerunner and messenger of alienation. The sick suffer a sense of betrayal from the communities they trust. Sickness, with its pains and weakness, pushes people to the margin of public life and forces a withdrawal from public activities. Sickness often restricts the life and activities of the suffering to health care places and givers. The suffering experience alienation from public spaces reserved for strength and beauty, for efficiency and productivity in life. They are in many cases compelled by their challenging states of affairs to reason that they rather belong elsewhere.¹⁰

With the fall of humanity in Adam and its continuing translation, sin distorts, rapes and often misrepresents the human dignity of persons. Sin Douglas John Hall has argued also speaks about a resolute being

⁸ *Essays in Public Theology: Collected Essays 1* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press 2007), 325.

⁹ "Confessing and Embodying the Catholicity of the Church in the Context of Glocality." *Scriptura* Vol 94 No 1 (2007), 38.

¹⁰ *Remembering Jesus: Christian Community, Scripture and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 138-139.

alone which also implies being against. Our very being as human beings, as God intends it, is a being with. Hence the distortion of our being with that is, sin, is in summary our alienation from what we are created to be with.¹¹

Hence an embodied quest to rediscover, recover and restore the human dignity of persons especially the suffering, the needy or the less privileged members of our society constitutes a significant religiosity (ethos) of the gracious community of God's people. The gracious community of God's people is a reaching out community. To belong to it also demands a reaching out ethos which includes willingness and availability to be in relationships with others because there are others who want to share their existence with the believer. Reaching out is, to quote Davis Bosch, 'an attribute of God. God is a missionary God.'¹² God's people, as it is evident in a Scripture based Christianity, embody a living consciousness of the fact that our humanity is caught up in one another's.

This religiosity enables committed witnesses to persevere beyond repressive tolerance. Members of the gracious community embody the political ethics of Jesus, and also reflect on Christian daily life as normative witness to the Lord who never changes. Their bodily presence among the nations, seek to relive the incarnated Jesus, the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world as the same now and tomorrow as ever. The Holy Spirit empowers members of the gracious community with the grace to instruct one another in righteousness.

I. Ability to Instruct One Another

This significant grace enables the gracious community of God's people to assist the victims of the society. The Holy Spirit empowers and inspires the church to instruct one another in righteousness. No one is higher or lower than the community's vision for the celebration of the human dignity of members. Human dignity which as innate/alien dignity cannot be lost, and human dignity as life/wellbeing that befits a person and can be promoted; are all celebrated. The gracious community of God's people receives and

¹¹ *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 209.

¹² *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 390.

celebrates even in (humanly speaking) imperfect form, the gifts the Lord bequeaths God's church with. The Lord fills the church with goodness and knowledge which also enables mutuality, giving and receiving of instructions from each other. From the point of view of the health of the church, the communication process which includes the duty to listen critically to one another is held to a high esteem. The Spirit graces every member of the community with at least one charismatic gift to contribute towards the development of persons and their communities. Understanding the will of God for the particular context and the commitment to discerning its moral pursuit as a historical reality is a major concern of this community of faith.

II. Moral Discernment

The gracious community by its calling and ministry speaks about a people who seek to know, understand, grow in and communicate the Will of God as a historically lived, living and livable reality. Given this truth, one does not need to argue much on the community's ability to assist the suffering to engage present day challenges in transformational developmental dialogues. As a community of moral discernment, members' celebrated identity and spirituality as both *homo sapiens* (rational being) and *homo loquens* (speaking creature) inspires reasoning and sharing of perception and approach to understanding, interpreting and appropriating God's mind for God's people in a challenging state of affairs, with one another. The rationality of a given reason is corporately discerned with a view to ascertaining its conformity with the sovereign and graciously revealed Will of God.

As a community of moral discernment Verhey explains, members also test all reasons including appeals to Scripture to ascertain their conformity with the story of Jesus Christ whose disciples they are. Often members transform the question of what they ought to do in such challenging status quo into the question of how they might live the story they love to tell.¹³ They own up the story as theirs. In other words, questions about conduct and character of members are transfigured into questions of deeds and disposition in a given state of

¹³ "Able to Instruct One Another: The Church as a Community of Moral Discourse" in *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*, Abraham, William T, et al (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 152.

affairs in visible ways that befits the Gospel. The gracious community of moral discernment is also a community of moral deliberation.

III. Moral Deliberation

As we hinted above, the gracious community is also a community of moral deliberation. Giving and receiving listening ears in responsible ways enables members to ask and to receive answers as to why something has to be done in one way instead of another, or the necessity for nothing as the case may be. Members of the gracious community embrace openness to the gates of truth which pays significant attention to the various life experiences and analysis of others. Openness to the truth also paves ways for spiritual formation, information and reformation which enables the suffering or the wounded to draw resources from received grace in the form of reasons bestowed on others, to forge ahead even in the midst of perplexing circumstances of life. In other words, moral deliberation enables the wounded to embrace a deeper discernment or a clearer vision of God's Will in order to live out their vision of the Godnews, lighting a lantern in the darkness of the demands and traumas of life and actively living according to the norms and values of the Christian Gospel. Moral deliberation ushers in, sustains and substantiates spiritual direction as a necessary faith based practice of the gracious community towards the suffering/wounded.

Spiritual direction as a South African theologian Louis Kretzschmar¹⁴ describes it is a process in which one is guided by the Holy Spirit and through a more mature and insightful Christian to discover one's deepest desires, true identity and calling even in crisis ridden circumstances of life. Spiritual direction often referred to as mentoring is in this sense is essentially concerned with the vision of God, union with God and the discernment of God's Will. Such a perspective on spiritual direction is rooted in the Christian tradition, the life of the gracious community of faith and God's concern for shalom, holiness and social justice. Jesus Christ is the overriding spiritual guide of both the director and the directed. Also implied in spiritual direction is the idea of someone aiding another and where necessary exercising a meaningful authority over such an other.

¹⁴ "The Indispensability of Spiritual Formation for Christian Leaders." *Missionalia* Vol. 34 No 2/3 (August/November 2006), 356-357.

Spiritual direction and (in/re)formation empowers the suffering or wounded to discern and savor God's goodness, creating an essential balance between the experience of joy and the experience of struggle in the calling and identification with the gracious community of faith. By its calling and ministry, the gracious community is also a community for moral discourse.

IV. Moral Discourse

A Nigerian born systematic theologian Yusuf Turaki¹⁵ describes what is reflexive of a gracious community as a Messianic community, i.e., a new covenanted community which transcends human classification because there are no more strangers or aliens. All are in Christ Jesus, brothers and sisters who apply this *beneficia Christi* not only to themselves but also to others. *Beneficia Christi* which places significant stress on the human dignity/right of all empowers believers to engage in discourse on what should or should not be done in a given state of affairs. Their discourses also extend to personal and communal responsibilities, actions, reflections and spirituality. It is about truth telling which can assist the suffering/wounded to learn, grow and espouse the truth to others, as a believer's response to distressing states of affairs.

Truth telling as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said is learnt. It is also a matter of correct and appreciation of real situations and of serious reflections and practical engagement with issues based on their merits.¹⁶ For this gracious covenanted community of faith, truth telling, is learnt and communicated in the light of an embodied memory of the life and works of Jesus Christ. Substantiating the *beneficia Christi* also, to use the words of Kwame Bediako,¹⁷ implies providing, in Christ-like humility and in Christ-like vulnerability, the conditions that make it possible for others to perceive and recognize Jesus Christ as Lord, irrespective of the prevailing status quo. In Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit reveals to us a divine paradigm which confronts our response to power and weakness, our response to evil and our response to sociocultural enmity and exclusiveness. This memory provides the gracious community with its unique paradigm

¹⁵ *The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ* (Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2006), 48-50.

¹⁶ *Ethics* (London: SCM, 1955), 363-371.

¹⁷ *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 42, 45.

for reflections and practices: it is by its calling and orientations a community of memory.

V. Community of Memory

As I have shown in an earlier work,¹⁸ remembering Jesus is a call to preserve (Christian) identity and community and to sustain a common life worthy of the gospel. Resources from the epistle to the Hebrews provide this view with the impetus to assert that the reason for believers' ministry of remembrance is to trace the sameness of Jesus across the generations. Jesus Christ as this epistle tells us in chapter 12 verse 8 is the same yesterday, and today and forever. And verse 9 of it cautions believers not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace. Remembrance enables the gracious community of faith, to draw resources from the concrete community-based activities of the biblical Jesus and the historical pre-Constantinian and the Enlightenment affirmation of the Gospel to trace the sameness of Jesus across the generations. Biblical Christology enables committed witnesses to proclaim their faith with a normative witness to the Christ who never changes. The memory of Jesus' cross inspires Christ-believers to accept and endure innocent suffering, with joyful hope. Remembering Jesus' historic cross persuades those believers to 'consider him who endured such opposition from sinful persons. Such faith practitioners are not to grow weary and lose heart in times of hardships (cf. Heb 12: 4).

With this memory of Jesus, the church receives strength to face the sad truth about the world and to respond even to suffering and to death truthfully. The story of Jesus is Good news to the suffering. Through it, innocent suffering inclusive, the eyes of faith are trained to see the very image of the Lord, and the ears¹⁹ to hear such inspirational words of Jesus, which the author of the fourth Gospel recorded as: "All these I have spoken while still with you. But the comforter, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not

¹⁸ Olo Ndukwe, *Christian Faith and Social Transformation: Yoderian Challenges to Reformed Theology* (Saarbrücken Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011), 155-156, 358.

¹⁹ *Remembering Jesus*, 111-113.

give to you as the world gives. Do not let your heart be troubled and do not be afraid... I have told you these things so that in me you will have peace. In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world” (John14: 24-27; 16: 33).

The proclamation of Christ’s lordship over the world and his headship of the church make it clear that what believers celebrate is not their strength; it is that of the Lord of the universe and the head of the church. Christ-believers celebrate the sameness of their Lord who never changes. There is as Darrel L. Guder as shown a profoundly ethical dimension to the biblical understanding of witness as it describes the community’s whole sense of its being, doing and saying. The most important social task of the gracious people of God is to be nothing less than a community capable of forming, informing and reforming virtues sufficient enough to witness God’s truth in the world.²⁰ Fundamentally, the gracious community of God’s people is also a community of character.

VI. Community of Character

We have seen that the memory of Jesus empowers the church with strength to face the sad truth about the world and to respond even to suffering and to death truthfully. A true biblical understanding of witness includes understanding its rootedness in ethics of being, doing and saying. This makes it more evident that God’s grace and the gracious community which divine grace initiates, sustains and also empowers the witnesses to inform, form and to reform is good news to the suffering. As the *laos* (people) of God study our past in order to learn or rediscover what God has done in, with, for and through the church, we rejoice for the vast resources of experiences, which also serves as theological ethical guide even in the face of present day suffering. The climax of the divine self-disclosure Bediako²¹ has argued was in a human life which could be seen, looked upon and touched. The quality of that life was such that it provided, and continues to provide clues for its recognition as truly divine in its origin, as it was truly human in its manifestation.

²⁰ *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 70.

²¹ *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 39.

This memory also help us to recognize that remembering together the biblical Jesus Christ as well as the life and activities of his early disciples makes the gracious community of faith a character forming, informing and reforming one. Such represents an appeal to historiography which makes it more obvious that meaningful resources retrieved from the pre-Constantinian and the Enlightenment catholic ministry of the church can play significant roles in restructuring and restoring sanity back to biblical sense of human dignity and human actions/reactions even in times of sufferings and pains. Believers' corporate discernment of the Will of God even in the face of present day suffering will issue from a theological and social conviction that is rooted in Christology. Stanley Hauewas²² describes a community of character as one that hears the story of the God we find in the Scripture and live out ethics that is faithful to that story. Its faithfulness to the story transforms society through moral osmosis.

Moral osmosis represents an attitude of honesty, perseverance, transparency, hard work, mutual respect, clean thinking/actions, selflessness in service and tolerance among other Christ centred values which believers embody as their ethical witness among the nations. Such believers exist as a constructive part of their host environment by proving the Gospel through their integrity, honesty, perseverance, tolerance, and the goodness of their lives. Empowered by the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit, the said Christocentric values are endowed with grace to permeate, draw up and gradually flush out ungodly characters, cultures, traditions, etc in order to baptize a given personality or environment with a meaningful *mysterium tremendum fascinans*²³, i.e., a mysterious divine encounter which is at the same time overwhelming and fascinating; that is, a tremendous encounter with God which breeds instant transformation and provides the grid for subsequent life and practices of the recipient. Moral osmosis is a visionary practice of theology of hope.

For clarity, we describe this visionary practice as ethical body politics. Body politics here suggests a corporate and embodied

²² A *Community of Character: Toward A Constructive Christian Social Ethics* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 1986), 1.

²³ J. Macquarie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (2nd Ed.; London: SCM, 1970), 78-79.

social witness (or politicking, or proclamation, or campaigning) of Jesus' political ethics among the nations. A central concern of this vision is the quest to realize the practice of the rule of Christ within historical contexts as an implication and essence of the phrase *Scriptura Civitate interpretata*.²⁴ It represents the true description of the social ethics of the early church, which the New Testament suggests. To be political is to make decisions, to assign roles, and to distribute powers, and the Christian community cannot do otherwise than exercise these same functions, going about its business as a body.

Body in this sense represents an ancient image for the human community. It is used to emphasize the awareness that each member needs and serves each of the others, that the whole is more than all the parts. Their interdependence is structured according to an already given plan, which is flexible and visible to grow, but neither chaotic nor infinitely negotiable.²⁵ Historically the Gospel proclamation has always been political although some believers misinterpret and misappropriate it as apolitical due to ignorance or conscious attempt to feign *pseudoinnocence*.²⁶ The gracious community of faith is also a change agent which seeks to transform and develop society with the political ethics of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion – Change Agents

In my dissertation submitted to Stellenbosch University,²⁷ the church is described as a public peoplehood which represents God's scattered people who gather in Christ's name to find out what it means here and now to put into practice this different quality of life. This unique quality of life is God's promise to them and to the world

²⁴ That is, Scripture interpreted in the light of the city, in the light of public life; in the light of questions and issues, the challenges and crisis of society. See Smith *Essays in Public Theology*, 38.

²⁵ *Body Politics*, ix.

²⁶ *Pseudoinnocence* represents an ethos of innocence which closes its eyes to the realities on ground and makes a utopianist virtue out of powerlessness, weakness and helplessness, inordinately. *Pseudoinnocence* leads to either an idealisation of the unhealthy state of affairs or escapism into a better world without significant attempt to engage the evil in transformative dialogues. It does not come to terms with the destructiveness in oneself or in others hence *pseudoinnocence* often becomes self-destructive. *Pseudoinnocence* uses the ideal to blind people from seeing the atrocities in the prevailing status quos. See Boesak, Allan. *Farewell to Innocence: A Social-Ethical Study of Black Theology and Black Power*. (Kampen: J.H Kok, 1983), 10-11.

²⁷ *Christian Faith and Social Transformation: Yoder's Social Ethics as Lens for Revisioning the Ecclesiological Identity of the South Central Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2008), 305.

as it is also their promise to God and service to the world. Such a group if it lives faithfully also exists as a living theology of hope, which can be embodied as the necessary instrument, sign and agent for social change. Its focus on the suffering, wounded and vulnerable God revealed in Jesus Christ inspires the present day suffering person to theologize and embody her/his identity as a challenge to the prevailing social order: being an injector of social change through moral osmosis.

As Bediako²⁸ has argued from a Christian perspective, the challenge facing every Christian theology is that of a new public theology that is able to offer and to demonstrate the capacity of its faith and experience to function as a positive social (and political) element for the enhancement and consolidation of those values and attitudes that make for wholesome social cohesion and so promote harmonious and integral human development. Shaping human agency for God's reordering of the suffering society (earth) as we can learn from Steve de Gruchy²⁹ is a praxis based approach that finds its meaning in Reinhold Niebuhr's assertion, *God give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which could be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish one from the other.*³⁰ Thus, God's grace and living in a gracious community as we have seen in this paper can greatly assist the present day suffering person to embody a theology of hope: it is about an embodied knowledge and quest for the Will of God in the service of vocation, as a theological approach to present day suffering.



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²⁸ "African Theology as a Challenge for Western Theology" in *Studies in Reformed Theology 7: Christian Identity in Cross Cultural Perspectives*, Brinkman, Martien E & van Kuelen, Dirk, eds., (Zoetermeer: Uiteverij Meinema, 2003), Pg 65.

²⁹ Agency, Sin and Grace" Protestant Perspectives on Mission and the Earth Crisis, *Missionalia* Vol 34 No 2/3 (August/November 2006), Pg 377.

³⁰ "A View of Life from the Sidelines" in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Address*, Brown, Robert McAfee (Yale: University Press, 1986), Pg 251.