

# Cross theology in James and selected Pauline Epistles: A theological synthesis for the contemporary church in Nigeria

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**ABSTRACT:** James, in his epistles, stresses how Christians should act; as a result, some great scholars such as Luther thought that James was teaching salvation by works. This supposed conflict with Paul's teaching that salvation was by faith led Luther and other scholars to question the authenticity of the Epistles of James. This is also reflected in the argument posited by some contemporary scholars that the theology of the cross in the Pauline epistles contradicts the teachings in the epistles of James. This work juxtaposes the theology of the cross in the Epistles of James and some selected Pauline epistles, such as Romans 8:13-39, 2 Corinthians 5:14-19, and Philippians 2:5-11. The work adopted theological and contextual approaches, and data were gathered from secondary sources such as books, dictionaries, commentaries, Greek lexicon and the internet. This study found out that the Epistles of James was also divinely inspired, just like Pauline epistles, which authenticate its place in the New Testament Canon. It also discovered that there is no contradictions in the theories on cross theology between the Pauline Epistles and the Epistle of James. The study concluded that the writings of James and Paul complement each other marvelously on the theology of the cross, especially on its basic themes. It is recommended that the selected Pauline epistles and the epistle of James, which is a general epistle, are suitable for doctrinal foundations and formulations for the contemporary church, especially on the theology of the cross.

**Keywords:** Cross, James, Pauline Epistles, synthesis, theology.

## INTRODUCTION

The letter of James deals with how Christians should behave in the church and society (Andria, 2006). The Epistle speaks of the conduct that should characterise the life of Christians. Because of its emphasis on how Christians should act, scholars like Martin Luther argue that James was teaching salvation by works (Andria, 2006). This supposed conflict with Paul's teaching that salvation was by faith led them to question the authenticity of this letter. This also reflects in the argument posited by some scholars that the theology of the cross in the Pauline epistles contradicts the cross theology in the epistle of James. Some scholars, such as Wilhoit, Dunn, Reasoner and Bauckham, denied outright the existence of the cross theology in the Epistle of James.

Wilhoit emphasises that James primarily addresses

ethical living and community behaviour, with little explicit reference to Christ's suffering or the cross as a theological motif. He suggests that James lacks the Christ-centred suffering motif characteristic of the theology of the cross (Wilhoit, 1989, p. 142). Dunn argues that James's focus is on practical righteousness and faith working through love, rather than on Christ's suffering or cross-related themes. He notes that while James references suffering, it is generally presented as a test of faith or endurance rather than as a theological reflection on the cross (Dunn, 1998, p. 367). Reasoner (2012) explicitly states that James does not develop or refer to the theology of the cross as understood in Lutheran or Reformation theology. Instead, he sees James as emphasising wisdom, works, and practical faith, rather than Christ's suffering and sacrifice

(Reasoner, 2012, p. 85). Bauckham notes that James contains few explicit Christological references and does not develop a theology of the cross. He observes that the epistle is more focused on ethical instructions and community cohesion than on the suffering of Christ (Bauckham, 2003, p. 192).

Buckham and Thiselton argue that the Epistle of James has nothing to say in set terms about the atonement through the death of Christ, as it is not once mentioned (Bauckham, 1999; Thiselton, 1992). From this, some have concluded that the writer did not believe that Christ died for the sins of man. This, of course, does not ring through. Whereas Morris opines that James is writing with a purpose of his own, and this controls what he inserts or omits. His epistle must be taken for what it is and not regarded as a general treatise on the essentials of Christianity (Morris, 1967). To the assertion of Morris, Taylor says,

The idea of 'the simple teaching of Jesus', consisting in the principle of self-sacrifice, is a modernist myth, and the claim that this teaching is preserved in the epistle of St. James springs from a failure to appreciate the true character of the writing... the truth is that the writing is not an epistle at all, but a homily, or rather a series of homilies, on various practical ethical themes... To expect in such writing, information regarding primitive belief about the death of Christ is as unreasonable as it would be to seek it in the document Q (Taylor, 1982).

The cross of Christ has a real place and importance in the NT books (Denney, 1997). The cross is the crucial doctrine of Faith (Hague, 1982). This work, therefore, examines the theology of the cross in Pauline epistles and the epistle of James as a treatise for the church in order to establish that both Pauline and James' thoughts align on the basic themes of the cross. Some of the biblical texts from the undisputable Pauline epistles that contain Paul's traditional emphases of the cross are Romans 8:13-39, 2 Corinthians 5:14-19 and Philippians 2:5-11. These texts shall be juxtaposed with the epistles of James on the cross theology for the contemporary Church.

## **CROSS THEOLOGY IN SELECTED PAULINE EPISTLES**

### **The Cross in Romans 8: 18-39**

When Paul speaks of Christ's death, he has the crucifixion in mind (Gorman, 1989). Romans 8:18-39, which discusses the issues of suffering and perseverance with the expectation of future glory, falls within this purview. The passage presents the concept about dying with Christ; hence, suffering and perseverance is part of the basic themes of the cross (Bowen, 1998). In the second half of

Romans 8, Paul explains the suffering that is present in the world and offers some guidance to his readers on how to cope with it. In the passage, Paul encourages those facing suffering in three ways:(a) they have future hope (Rom 8:18-25), (b) help is available for them (Rom 8:26-27), and (c) they are chosen by God (Rom 8:28-30). The chapter closes with the assurance that the believer cannot be cut off from the love of God (Rom 8:31-39) (Bowen, 1998). Paul had earlier challenged the Roman Church in Romans 5:3 to imbibe the right attitude towards suffering and to persevere (Bowen, 1998). Hence, in Romans 8:19-25, Paul identifies the suffering of his readers in a global context and that, like other creations, future glory awaits. Consequently, in Romans 8:18-25, Paul tells his readers to look forward to the blessings which they have not yet received. Paul, having reminded his readers of the great blessings they have started to enjoy through their fellowship with God (Romans 3-5), goes on to remind them in Romans 8:15-16 how they experience this fellowship when they pray (Bowen, 1998).

Paul concludes in Romans 8:31-39 with words of assurance which can be divided into three sections (Rom 31:32-33a; 33b-34a; 34b-37) (Bowen, 1998). In each section, Paul reminds his readers of what God has done and then follows this with a word of assurance. In Romans 8:35, a list of things that believers might think could separate them from Christ's love is provided (Rom 8:36). Paul states that suffering is designed to lead to glory and, in fact, bring believers closer to God. Paul, therefore, concludes that Christians are more than conquerors in all these things (Tozer, 2009). Paul's message, which emphasises the fact that Christians have a new life in Christ, does not mean that life has no problems. Like Jesus, they would suffer, but in suffering, they have true comfort. Firstly, they look forward confidently to heaven; secondly, they are always in touch with God through His Spirit who helps to pray, and thirdly, they know that God has chosen them and that He does not change His mind, therefore, they can be sure that nothing will ever cut them off from Him (Tozer, 2009).

### **The Cross in 2 Corinthians 5:14-19**

2 Corinthians 5:14-19, one of the passages selected for this study, is one of the most memorable sections of the NT that emphasises reconciliation and Christian discipleship as themes of the cross (Turner, 1989). It is referred to as one of the characteristics of the Christian ministry in the NT and one of the most important and difficult in the whole of the Pauline literature (Barret, 1973; Harrison, 2008). 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 emphasised Christ's death as an act of renewal. Christ-centred living is therefore required of anyone who identifies with the gospel, as that is what Christ's death represents (Turner, 1989). The deep motivation of Paul's ministry is Christ's love. This love is both the love that comes from Christ and the love which results from the death of Jesus Christ on

behalf of all believers. Consequently, all must identify themselves with Christ, whether in death or life (Coulibaly, 2006). Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 5:16-17 the consequences of Christ's death. First, Christ's death means that forthwith, a radically different way of viewing reality is present. No one is to be viewed according to the old order with its "fleshly" priorities and values, even if Paul had known Christ in this manner; those days were gone forever (Turner, 1989).

Secondly, the former fleshly worldview has been replaced by a distinctively Christian one. In other words, Christians no longer live as they lived before, because they live for Jesus, who gives meaning to their lives. God introduced this new order; it is God who has reconciled Christians to himself through Christ (2Corinthians 5:18) (Coulibaly, 2006). It is also He who has enlisted the apostles and Paul in particular, into this specific ministry of reconciliation and discipleship. This ministry is to announce the pardon that God is offering in Christ (2Corinthians 5:19). As an apostle, therefore, Paul finds himself in the position of being a spokesperson or ambassador, responsible for teaching people what God expects of them (Turner, 1989).

### The Cross in Philippians 2:5-11

In Philippians 2:5-11, Paul encourages his friends in Philippi to live in unity and humility and to have true fellowship and unity by reminding them of the example of Christ. Here, humility, unity and sacrifice were reflected from the cross of Christ (Foulkes, 1997) as he speaks of the humiliation that Jesus accepted and then his exaltation as Lord of all, perhaps using an early Christian hymn (Foulkes, 1997). Paul here quotes a hymn that he may have written himself. Arguments about who wrote the hymn are based on technical issues of terminology and on the fact that the hymn does not mention some points that Paul stresses elsewhere in his letters (Abata, 2006). His idea is that the thought process of a Christian should not be different from the thought of Christ. His idea is that Christian thought should not contradict that of Christ. A Christian does not have the freedom to have an attitude that is different from or that contradicts that of Christ (Abata, 2006). Martins is of the opinion that no introduction to the letter would be complete without a reference to the great passage in Philippians 2:5-11. Here lies the *locus classicus* - a passage considered to be best known of Paul's doctrine of the person of Christ and the nature and scope of Christian salvation (Martins, 1993). The hymn emphasises the very nature of God, which Christ relinquished. Abata links this word with the glory of God in terms of essence, dignity, honour, glory and power (Abata, 2006). From Philippians 5:7-8, the hymn sets out the details of Christ's incomparable change in status (Abata, 2006). So he made himself nothing; literally it says 'he emptied himself' not of his deity but of his glory, making

himself without reputation (Foulkes, 1997). Abata states that Jesus' humbling himself was not a one-time act but was spread over his entire life, from his birth to his climax on the cross. It is difficult to imagine a slave owner willingly becoming a slave, but this comes nowhere near the humiliation that Christ accepted (Abata, 2006).

As a result of being humiliated and sacrificing himself, God the Father gave Christ a name that is above every name, but the name is not specific. What it means is that God exalted him to a place of honour that is high and above (Philippians 5:10-11). The words used in Isaiah 45:23 about God are also used for Jesus to express the honour and rule of authority of Jesus over all creation (especially when people would say that the Christ of the NT is less than God) (O'Brien, 1991). By implication, Paul wants his readers to know that this is to the glory of God the Father; in essence, the glory to which Christ has been raised is in no way independent of the Father (cf. 1 Cor 15:28) (Abata, 2006). All these tremendous statements have a practical purpose in their context, which is to persuade the Philippians to set aside disunity, discord, and personal ambition and emulate Christ's attitude of humility, self-sacrifice, and discipleship (Foulkes, 1997).

### CROSS THEOLOGY IN JAMES

The Epistle of James is unique on several levels. While the Pauline epistles speak of Christ primarily theologically, explaining the significance of who Christ is, and what Christ has accomplished on the cross and the resurrection, the Epistle of James teaches in a way which is redolent with the teachings of Christ in his earthly ministry (Young, 2018). This is particularly clear when comparing the epistle of James to the teaching sections of St. Matthew's Gospel, such as the Sermon on the Mount. Even so, there is an assumed identity of the Lord Jesus Christ which James uses as a presupposition in order to argue for his case regarding how followers of Christ ought to live. One example of this comes in James 2:1. St. James describes Jesus Christ not only as 'Lord', but as 'the Lord of Glory' (Young, 2018).

Morris submits that though his purpose is not to set forth his doctrine of atonement, what James says has its implications for such a doctrine. There are four points to notice in the Epistle of James that speak of the atonement and the significance of the cross of Christ (Morris, 1967). These four points include the seriousness of sin, salvation that comes from God, man's response and the place of suffering (Thiselton, 1992).

Throughout his entire epistle, James makes it clear that sin is incompatible with Christian profession (Morris, 1967). The first subject James deals with is the problem of temptation (Andria, 2006). It is the barrier to fellowship with God. He points out that temptations arise from a man's lust. 'Then he lust, when it hath conceived, beareth sin: and the sin, when it is full grown, bringeth forth death'

(James 1:15). James is clear on the universality of sin. 'In many things we all stumble' (James 3:2). And he brings this out by showing that if we break but one commandment, we are law breakers. We cannot shelter behind a fancied security of having kept some of the commandments, for God's demand is that we keep them all (Andria, 2006). God is more than mildly displeased with sinful men. He is their enemy. Out of this situation, James quotes from Proverb 3:34, "God resisteth the proud" (James 4:6). He leaves us in no doubt but that sin is universal and that it leaves man with God ranged against him (Davids, 1997).

In this situation, James does not look to anything human for the remedy, but salvation can only come from God. He says explicitly, "Of his own will He brought us forth by the word of truth" (James 1:18). The reference to birth and to the 'word' as the divine agent reminds the readers of the teaching on regeneration in John's Gospel. In contrast, the explicit statement that in this God (Andria, 2006) was doing 'his own will' clinches the priority of the divine. It is not a salvation humanly motivated or engineered, of which James writes. Moffatt ascertains that God deliberately willed to make man his choice offspring, to God man owes his new, true life, to God's set purpose and to that alone (Moffatt, 1981).

Similarly, James exhorts his readers to receive with meekness the implanted word, which can save your souls (James 1:21). Again, the thought is that of what God does within man, and not of anything that man can do of himself. In the same spirit, James can look for 'the wisdom that is from above' (James 3:17), and can remember that 'God giveth grace to the humble' (James 4:6; Davids, 1997). James, then, clearly states that all men desperately need salvation, since they are sinners and as sinners the objects of God's hostility. He is clear, too, that God is ready to provide salvation out of His mercy and by His regenerating Word. But if he is convinced of one thing, it is that salvation does not come to men who sit back idly and wait. Man must respond (Morris, 1967). It is imperative that men respond to God's readiness to save. Indeed, so strongly does James emphasise this that his epistle has sometimes been misunderstood as though it taught a doctrine of salvation by works (Moffatt, 1981).

Consequently, James lays emphasis on the place of suffering and trial in relation to the cross. After the greetings, James begins his epistle by saying, "count it all joy, and my brethren, when ye fall unto manifold trial" (Jas. 1:2) (Morris, 1967). Another subject he deals with is the problem of trials. But he does not answer the questions of how to endure trials. Rather, he simply affirms that enduring trials is a requirement for faith and result in spiritual growth (1:4). It will make Christians mature and complete (Andria, 2006).

The Christians James referred to were facing various trials. Though the trials were not severe, and they were not ill, it was more about being rejected and being economically abandoned, which happened because they

were Christians. In spite of the painful trials, James admonished the believers to rejoice because there is an eternal reward at the end. The eternal reward of God's future is joy (Davids, 1997). It is established here that suffering is not to be regarded as an evil. Christians should welcome it, for it is part of the discipline of living by faith. Only the Christian who has been tested and proved in this way is mature (Davids, 1997). However, Morris says that this does not mean that sufferings lead to atonement. It is the thought that is seen elsewhere in the NT that Christians were led to a different view of suffering in the light of the cross. James also came by this same view of suffering (Morris, 1967).

James admonishes men to rejoice in trials. The reason for this is that trials are trials of faith, which will produce perseverance or patience. Perseverance is an important Christian virtue, mentioned often by Jesus (Luke 8:15-21, cf. Mt. 10:22) and Paul (Roman 5:3-4; 8:25; 2Cor. 6:4; 12:12). Christians who know their scripture, as James did, the importance of this virtue is underlined by the fact that Abraham was the first person to be tested and God rewarded him for being faithful, showing the virtue as important in (Genesis 22:1). Furthermore, Job was also tested by satan and he is seen as supreme example of perseverance. Surely, Christians who follow their example would equally be rewarded (Davids, 1997).

Summarily, James emphasises the cross as an instrument of salvation which is designed by God through his son by his grace to sinners. Man must accept this grace and also endure the suffering and trials that may come through it.

### **SYNTHESIS OF THE CROSS THEOLOGY IN JAMES AND PAULINE EPISTLES**

Although scholars maintain that James does not specifically talk about the death of Christ as atonement, his epistle has implications for the theology of the Cross. Four points are noticed in James' epistle, which speaks of the significance of the cross of Christ (Morris, 1967). The four points include the seriousness of sin, salvation that comes from God, man's response and the place of suffering (Morris, 1967). The intention of the epistle is to establish the cross as an instrument of salvation designed by God as grace to sinners. Sinners must accept this grace, endure trials and sufferings in order to be approved for God's glory (Morris, 1967).

Whereas the selected Pauline epistles, in essence, Romans 8: 18-39, 2 Corinthians 5: 14-19 and Philippians 2:5-11, demonstrate the concept of suffering, perseverance (Foulkes, 1997), reconciliation, love, Christian discipleship (Turner, 1989), humility, unity and self-sacrifice which are reflected from the cross of Christ (Foulkes, 1997), as part of the basic traditional themes of the cross.

The summary of the epistle to the Romans shows that suffering is inseparable from faithfulness to Christ in a

world which does not yet know Him as Lord. It is one of the marks of being a Christian (Rom 8:18, 17). Bowen explains this further, that Christians experience suffering because they are Christians (Bowen, 1998). Christians suffer for many reasons. Suffering is an unavoidable part of life in this world, both for human beings and for animals. Human knows what it is to feel pain, sickness, weakness of the body and mind, and death. No one imagines that Christians escape these things.

In the Epistles to the Corinthians, Paul brings out the full stereological significance of Christ's representative death and resurrection. He appeals to the Corinthians for reconciliation and Christian discipleship as a result of Christ's death and resurrection. In the passage, he emphasises the newness of life in Christ. Paul explains that God took the initiative in Christ to reconcile us to himself, not counting our sins against us. Consequently, God committed to us the message of reconciliation, so that through us as his ambassadors he appeals to others to be reconciled to him (Harrison, 2008).

In Philippians 2: 5-11, Paul shows the importance of humility, self-sacrifice and unity as virtues. God is incomparably high and great, and yet he humbles himself to take note of the things which are created, and the greatness of God's servant is attributed to the humility which God has displayed towards him (O'Brien, 1991). This epistle stresses unity and humility. The hymn has an independent message, including praise for the risen and exalted Christ, but Paul puts it into a context that emphasises its message of humility as the key to unity. Although it may have been originally composed for Christological or soteriological reasons, Paul's motive for using it here is not theological but ethical (Hawthorne, 1983). Just as Timothy and Epaphroditus exemplify self-sacrificing service and Paul illustrates self-sacrifice, suffering, and expectation of future reward, so does Christ; an example the readers were already familiar with and should already be motivated to imitate (Hawthorne, 1983).

## Conclusion

The study of the Pauline and non-Pauline epistles ascertains that salvation, which was won by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, is at the centre of the New Testament. James emphasises four important points about the cross, which are the seriousness of sin, salvation that comes from God, man's response and the place of suffering, which is one of the traditional emphases of the cross.

The selected Pauline epistles underscored basic traditional emphases of the cross. These traditional themes in Paul's concept of the cross in Romans 8:13-39, 2 Corinthians 5:14-19 and Philippians 2:5-11 include love, adoption, reconciliation, sacrifice, suffering and perseverance, reconciliation and love, Christian discipleship, humility, unity, and self-sacrifice. Both emphases of the epistles on the cross are relevant to the Christian today,

especially in Nigeria, where the prosperity Gospel, otherwise known as the Theology of Glory, is being emphasised over the reality of the Cross. Together, the epistles of James and Paul present a unified and balanced theology of the cross that speaks not only to individual salvation but to the communal and ethical life of the Church in every age.

## Recommendations

In line with the synthesis of cross theology in the selected Pauline corpus and James's epistle, this work recommends that:

1. Like the ancient church, theologians should recognise that James was also divinely inspired. The writings of James and Paul complement each other marvelously, especially on the cross theology
2. Bible scholars and teachers should critically observe the holistic and all-encompassing gospel of salvation and physical benefits of the cross in James' epistles in line with the epistles of Paul. Such a gospel will include salvation from sin, Christian discipleship, self-sacrifice, deliverance from existential problems and the expectation of the forthcoming glory.
3. Bible scholars and contemporary theologians should note that a formidable *kerygma* can equally be developed from the epistle of James as well as Pauline theology of the cross when critically examined.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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