



From Text to Trench: A Triangulated Hermeneutic of Pauline Adoption and Patronage in Nigerian Ecclesiology

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Abstract

This paper develops a triangulated theological framework connecting first-century biblical exegesis with the social and institutional realities of post-colonial Nigeria. Focusing on the Pauline theology of participation (*koinonia*) and adoption (*huiiothesia*) in Romans 8:14–23, the study challenges both individualistic Western soteriological frameworks and the transactional prosperity paradigms dominant in contemporary Nigerian neo-Pentecostalism. By pairing exegetical findings with qualitative thematic analysis of West African ecclesial structures and integrating the indigenous research of Dr. Nesta Andy-Philip of the University of Abuja, this paper exposes the growing gap between the radical, suffering-sharing, communal demands of the Pauline text and the consumerist, power-centered orientation of contemporary church pedagogy. The paper concludes by proposing a contextual model of ecclesial pedagogy designed to foster structural accountability, moral resilience, and prophetic civic engagement within the Nigerian democratic experiment. This study contributes to the field of African contextual theology by demonstrating that methodological triangulation, combining historical-grammatical exegesis with qualitative social analysis offers a robust path toward bridging the hermeneutical divide between ancient biblical texts and contemporary African ecclesial realities.

Keywords: Pauline adoption (*huiiothesia*), methodological triangulation, Nigerian neo-Pentecostalism, prosperity theology, ecclesial pedagogy, cruciform theology, post-colonial ecclesiology, Romans 8 exegesis.

1. Introduction: The Hermeneutical Disconnect

There is a persistent and troubling crisis at the heart of African theological discourse. On one side stands a rich tradition of rigorous biblical scholarship, carefully analyzing the ancient texts of the Christian faith using well-established methods of historical and literary analysis. On the other side stands the lived reality of millions of African Christians, navigating daily life in societies marked by institutional corruption, political violence, economic inequality, and social fragmentation. The problem is that these two worlds rarely communicate meaningfully.

Within the specific context of Nigerian Christianity, this gap has become acute. Urban churches, particularly in cities like Abuja, Lagos, and Port Harcourt, have experienced extraordinary



numerical growth over the past three decades. Yet this growth coexists with a society that continues to struggle with deep structural problems: systemic public corruption, ethnic polarization, failing public services, and widening economic inequality. This creates a theological and practical question: why does an increase in church membership, church building, and religious activity fail to produce a corresponding improvement in the ethical quality of public and institutional life?

This paper argues that the answer lies in a double failure of interpretation. The first failure is academic: biblical scholarship in many African university settings risks becoming detached from contemporary social realities, treating ancient texts as objects of purely historical interest rather than as living resources for social transformation. The second failure is ecclesial: popular church teaching has largely replaced the demanding, communal, and structurally engaged gospel of the New Testament with either a privatized Western individualism that reduces salvation to a personal spiritual transaction, or a neo-Pentecostal prosperity framework that treats the Holy Spirit as a supernatural resource for individual material advancement. As Andy-Philip's (2024) research demonstrates, when the gospel is reduced to material accumulation and personal immunity from social failure, the radical social and ethical obligations of the Christian faith are systematically hollowed out (*God and Mammon* 34).

To address this double failure, this paper uses methodological triangulation: a research strategy that deliberately combines more than one analytical tool to examine the same problem from multiple angles. Specifically, it pairs careful historical-grammatical exegesis of Romans 8:14–23—one of the richest texts in the Pauline corpus for understanding the social and ethical implications of salvation—with qualitative thematic analysis of contemporary Nigerian church practices and educational materials. The result is a critical, corrective dialogue between what the text actually says and what contemporary Nigerian Christianity actually teaches.

The paper draws throughout on the indigenous scholarship of Dr. Nesta Andy-Philip of the University of Abuja, whose research on theology, scripture, economics, and social accountability in the African context provides the localized framework that makes this theological analysis directly applicable to the Nigerian situation. The paper proceeds through eight sections: methodology, exegetical analysis, qualitative findings, triangulated synthesis, proposal for ecclesial reform, a revised pedagogical framework, discussion, and conclusion.

2. Methodology: Bridging Text and Social Reality Through Triangulation

The methodological foundation of this paper is triangulation—the deliberate integration of different analytical approaches to investigate a single problem from more than one angle. In academic research, triangulation strengthens the reliability of findings by ensuring that conclusions are not dependent on any single method but are confirmed by multiple independent lines of evidence. As Swinton and Mowat (2016) explain, the combination of textual and empirical analysis is not a compromise of rigor but an enhancement of it, because it prevents both the detachment of purely theoretical analysis and the atheoretical superficiality of purely descriptive observation (p. 42).

This paper combines two distinct but complementary methodological approaches: historical-grammatical exegesis as the primary textual method, and qualitative document analysis with thematic analysis as the empirical method. Together these two approaches constitute what this paper calls a triangulated hermeneutic—a method that moves continuously and critically between the world of the ancient text and the world of contemporary Nigerian ecclesial practice, allowing each to interrogate and illuminate the other.



2.1 The Textual Horizon: Historical-Grammatical Exegesis

Historical-grammatical exegesis seeks to establish the meaning of a biblical text by attending rigorously to its original language, literary structure, and historical-cultural context. As Osborne (2006) explains in *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, this method respects the fundamental principle that texts mean what their authors intended them to mean in their original contexts, and that understanding those original contexts—including the social, political, economic, and religious realities of the first-century Mediterranean world—is indispensable for responsible interpretation (p. 22).

For the analysis of Romans 8:14–23 in this study, historical-grammatical exegesis means reading Paul's language about adoption (*huiiothesia*), sonship (*huiioi*), co-suffering (*sympaschomen*), and cosmic groaning (*systemazei*) within the specific socio-political framework of the first-century Roman Empire. As Wright's (2013) comprehensive Pauline theology has established, Paul consistently addresses his letters to communities living under Roman imperial power, and his theology consistently engages the social and political dimensions of that context—not as a secondary application but as a primary intention (p. 36). Reading Romans 8 in isolation from this imperial context produces a truncated and distorted theology.

2.2 The Empirical Horizon: Qualitative Document Analysis and Thematic Analysis

The empirical component of the triangulation uses qualitative document analysis to gather data from the actual educational materials through which Nigerian church communities are being formed. Following Bowen's (2009) foundational methodology for document analysis, the studied materials include publicly available discipleship curricula, sermon transcripts from widely broadcast urban Nigerian mega-church services, denominational policy documents, and promotional communications from major ministry networks (p. 32). These materials were selected because they represent the functional theology—the theology that is actually being taught at scale—rather than the formal theology that may be asserted in denominational statements.

The gathered materials are then processed using the six-phase thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This framework enables the researcher to identify, organize, and interpret patterns in the data through a structured process of coding and theme development that moves inductively from specific textual evidence to broader interpretive conclusions (p. 87). Creswell and Poth's (2018) comprehensive guide to qualitative research design provides the overarching methodological framework within which both the document analysis and the thematic analysis are conducted (p. 254).

The triangulation of these two methods—textual-exegetical and empirical-qualitative—enables a genuinely critical dialogue. The historical-grammatical exegesis establishes what the biblical text actually teaches about salvation, community, power, and suffering. The qualitative data establishes what contemporary Nigerian church practice is actually communicating about these same topics. The comparison of the two reveals both the nature and the extent of the theological disconnect that is the central concern of this study.

3. Exegetical Analysis: Romans 8:14–23 in Its First-Century Context

Romans 8:14–23 stands at the theological climax of Paul's letter to the Romans. Having spent the preceding chapters establishing the reality of sin's power, the failure of the law to overcome that power, and the liberating work of Christ and the Spirit, Paul now draws together these threads into a



vision of what the redeemed community looks like in its full theological depth. The passage divides naturally into three interconnected movements: adoption and freedom (vv. 14–16); co-heirship and co-suffering (v. 17); and cosmic solidarity and hope (vv. 19–23).

3.1 Adoption (*Huiothesia*) and Freedom from Fear: Verses 14–16

Paul opens the passage with a declaration about identity: "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Rom. 8:14, ESV). The Greek term Paul uses for sons—*huiioi*—carries specific socio-legal weight in the Roman world that his audience would have immediately recognized. In Roman legal practice, adoption (*huiothesia*) was a formal procedure through which a person was transferred completely from one family to another, shedding all previous debts and obligations and receiving the full name, rights, and inheritance of the adoptive father. The adopted person's new status was legally absolute and permanent: it could not be revoked (Burke, 2006, p. 54).

By deploying this legal concept, Paul makes an extraordinarily bold claim: ordinary believers—including non-elite Jews and Gentiles living on the margins of the Roman Empire—have been adopted as full heirs into the family of the God who made the cosmos. This adoption is not a metaphor for a slightly improved spiritual condition; it is a permanent, legally comprehensive, and identity-defining transfer of status. The believer is no longer a slave—no longer defined by fear, submission to oppressive systems, or the perpetual anxiety of insufficient performance. They are a child, permanently and irrevocably received into the father's household.

Scott's (1992) careful exegetical study of the background of *huiothesia* in Paul establishes that the adoption language also draws deeply on the Old Testament tradition of Israel's corporate sonship—particularly the Exodus narrative, where God declares Israel to be his firstborn son (Exod. 4:22) and calls the nation out of Egyptian slavery into covenantal freedom (p. 266). Paul's use of adoption language in Romans 8 therefore carries a double resonance: the liberation from Egyptian slavery that defined Israel's identity, and the liberation from Roman patronage dependency that would resonate with his first-century readers. Both forms of liberation point to the same theological reality: the believer's identity is no longer defined by the fear-generating dependencies of corrupt human power systems but by the unconditional, permanent love of the divine Father.

Verse 15 makes the anti-fear dimension of adoption explicit: "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" (ESV). The contrast between the spirit of slavery producing fear and the Spirit of adoption producing the intimate cry of *Abba* is not merely emotional or psychological. It is structural: it describes two fundamentally different ways of being organized as a community before power. The slave-patronage system produces fear and dependency because the patron's favor is perpetually uncertain and must be continuously earned. The adoptive family system produces freedom and security because the father's love is unconditional and the child's status is permanent.

Fee's (1994) comprehensive pneumatology confirms that the Spirit's role in Romans 8:15–16 is to make this filial freedom an experienced reality—not merely a theological proposition. The Spirit who enables the cry of *Abba* communicates to the believer's inner person, directly and personally, the assurance of their permanent status as a beloved child of God (p. 806). This direct, immediate, Spirit-mediated assurance does not flow through human intermediaries, does not depend on financial transactions, and cannot be withdrawn by pastoral authority.



3.2 Co-Heirship and Co-Suffering: Verse 17

Verse 17 introduces the most theologically demanding and most frequently suppressed dimension of Romans 8: the inseparable link between glory and suffering. Paul writes: "and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom. 8:17, ESV). The grammatical structure of this verse is precise and uncompromising. The prefix *syn-* (together/with) appears on both verbs: *sympaschomen* (we suffer with him) and *syndoxasthomen* (we may be glorified with him). Co-glory and co-suffering are grammatically and theologically inseparable.

Gorman's (2009) extensive scholarship on what he calls Pauline cruciform theology provides the most rigorous contemporary account of what Paul means here. Gorman demonstrates that suffering in the Pauline framework is not an unfortunate temporary condition to be overcome on the way to the real spiritual business of blessing and glory. Suffering—specifically the kind of cruciform, self-giving, other-centered suffering that follows the pattern of Christ's own death—is itself the shape of the believer's participation in Christ's glory in the present age (p. 40). The adopted child of God does not escape the world's pain; they enter it more deeply, sharing in it with Christ for the sake of the world's healing.

This cruciform pattern directly challenges any theology that presents the benefits of adoption as a mechanism for individual exemption from suffering, institutional failure, or material hardship. As Bates (2017) has demonstrated in his important account of faith as allegiance to King Jesus, genuine New Testament faith is not a spiritual technology for securing personal benefits. It is a wholehearted, embodied, costly loyalty to the crucified and risen King whose own pathway to glory led through rather than around the suffering of the world (p. 89).

3.3 Cosmic Solidarity and Hope: Verses 19–23

The third movement of the passage extends the vision of adopted sonship to its widest possible scope. Verses 19–23 present a picture of the entire created order groaning under the burden of its present condition, waiting with eager expectation for the full revelation of the children of God who will share in its ultimate liberation. Paul writes:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. (Rom. 8:19–22, ESV)

This is one of the most cosmologically expansive statements in the entire New Testament. The adopted children of God are not merely recipients of personal spiritual benefits. They are participants in God's larger project of renewing the entire creation—a project that encompasses the physical, social, institutional, and political dimensions of human life as well as its spiritual dimension. Middleton's (2014) work on the eschatological scope of Paul's inheritance theology confirms that the creation's liberation from bondage is inseparable from the believers' own glorification: they are two dimensions of a single divine redemptive project (p. 188).

The practical implications for the Nigerian context are direct and challenging. If the adopted children of God are called to participate in the creation's liberation from bondage, then the institutional bondage of the Nigerian state—the structural corruption, the patronage networks, the



exploitation of the poor, the destruction of public goods—is not a problem to be escaped through personal spiritual exemption. It is the precise location of the community's cruciform mission. The church that has been adopted into the freedom of the children of God is called to bring that freedom to bear on the groaning structures of the society around it.

4. Qualitative Findings: Contemporary Nigerian Ecclesial Realities

When the qualitative document analysis and thematic analysis described in Section 2 is applied to contemporary Nigerian neo-Pentecostal educational materials, three dominant themes emerge. These themes reveal the specific shape of the theological disconnect between what Romans 8 actually teaches and what contemporary Nigerian church pedagogy is actually communicating.

4.1 Theme One: Transactional Spiritual Patronage

The most pervasive theme across the analyzed materials is what this study terms transactional spiritual patronage: a model of the church's relationship with God and with its members that is structurally identical to the patronage networks of the Roman imperial system that Paul's theology was specifically designed to dismantle. In this model, divine favor—including material prosperity, physical health, social advancement, and protection from institutional failure—is presented as a commodity that can be obtained through the correct spiritual transactions: financial giving to the church, submission to the senior pastor, correct verbal confession, and attendance at specific ministry events.

Table 1 summarizes the three dominant analytical codes identified within this theme and their theological and social implications.

Table 1

Analytical Codes and Implications of Transactional Spiritual Patronage

Analytical Code	Expression in Church Materials	Theological and Social Implication
Material Exemption	Teaching that genuine faith produces immunity from economic hardship, poverty, and institutional failure	Replaces cruciform solidarity with systemic social suffering with a model of individual spiritual insulation
Big Man Ecclesiology	Centralization of all spiritual authority in the senior pastor as the unique human conduit of divine favor	Recreates the oppressive patron-client dependency structure of the Roman imperial system within the church
Escapist Spirituality	Prayer and worship focused entirely on personal protection from national social problems rather than engagement with them	Ignores the cosmic mandate of Romans 8:19–23; produces politically passive and civically disengaged believers
Anointing as Purchase	Financial giving to the pastor framed as the mechanism for receiving his specific spiritual anointing	Transforms the communal gift of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:7) into a commercial transaction mediated by human authority

Andy-Philip's (2024) monograph *God and Mammon* provide the most thorough indigenous theological analysis of this pattern, demonstrating from within the biblical canon itself that the



equation of spiritual faithfulness with material prosperity—and the corresponding use of financial giving as a mechanism for purchasing divine favor—is a distortion of the covenantal economic ethic of both Testaments (p. 45). The prosperity framework conflates the covenantal promise of God's provision for his people with the transactional logic of human patronage networks, reducing the Father-child relationship of Romans 8 to the patron-client dependency that Paul's adoption theology was specifically designed to replace.

4.2 Theme Two: The Systematic Suppression of Suffering Theology

The second major theme identified in the thematic analysis is the systematic absence from contemporary Nigerian neo-Pentecostal pedagogy of any serious theology of suffering, communal solidarity in hardship, or engagement with structural social failure. The qualitative data reveals that whenever suffering appears in the analyzed materials, it is interpreted in one of two ways: as a demonic attack to be defeated through spiritual warfare, or as the result of a personal faith failure requiring increased spiritual investment. The Pauline concept of co-suffering with Christ as the normative, gloriously significant pathway of authentic Christian discipleship is essentially absent from the pedagogical content.

This suppression of suffering theology has precise and predictable consequences. When Nigerian believers encounter genuine hardship—poverty, institutional injustice, personal tragedy, or systemic failure—they encounter it without the theological resources to make sense of it within the framework of their faith. The only options their theology offers them are self-blame (insufficient faith), demonization (spiritual attack), or transactional escalation (give more, pray more, submit more). None of these resources equips them for the cruciform solidarity with their suffering neighbors and the sustained engagement with structural injustice that Romans 8:17–23 demands.

Andy-Philip's (2023) inter-textual analysis of Deuteronomy 8:18 and Luke 12:16–21 demonstrates from within the scriptural canon how prosperity frameworks systematically misread covenantal wealth promises by stripping them of their communal obligations and their warnings against selfish accumulation (p. 95). When the "power to get wealth" of Deuteronomy 8:18 is read without the preceding verses' warnings about forgetting God in prosperity, and without Jesus' parable of the rich fool who secured personal wealth while being bankrupt toward God (Luke 12:16–21), the result is precisely the triumphalist, self-serving theology of material exemption that the qualitative data reveals.

4.3 Theme Three: The Weaponization of Scripture for Personal Benefit

The third theme identified in the qualitative analysis concerns the use of biblical texts within contemporary Nigerian church pedagogy. The document analysis reveals a consistent pattern in which biblical passages—including Psalms of lament, prophetic calls for justice, New Testament teachings on mutual service, and Old Testament covenantal passages—are regularly selected, recontextualized, and applied in ways that serve individual material aspiration rather than communal ethical formation or structural engagement.

Andy-Philip's (2021) empirical study of how the Psalms are used in selected African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria provides detailed documentation of this pattern. His research demonstrates that Psalms expressing communal lament, cries for justice against oppressive powers, and songs of solidarity with the suffering poor are systematically sidelined in favor of Psalms that can be reread as personal prosperity guarantees or victory declarations (p. 70). This selective use of the Psalter is



not simply a matter of theological preference; it represents a structural filtering of the biblical canon that removes precisely those texts most relevant to the Nigerian situation of institutional corruption, systemic poverty, and social injustice.

The consequence is a community formed by a truncated canon—a community that knows how to claim biblical promises for personal financial blessing but has never been taught to read Psalm 10's description of the wicked who oppress the poor, Psalm 72's vision of a king who defends the cause of the poor, or Amos's thundering denunciations of economic exploitation and religious hypocrisy as the very heart of what the God of Israel requires. This canonical impoverishment leaves the community without the theological vocabulary needed to name, critique, and resist the institutional corruption that surrounds them.

5. Triangulated Synthesis: What Text and Trench Reveal Together

When the exegetical findings of Section 3 and the qualitative findings of Section 4 are placed in direct critical dialogue through the triangulation framework, a sobering theological conclusion emerges: the contemporary Nigerian church has, in large measure, replicated within its own institutional life the precise social structures that Paul's theology of adoption in Romans 8 was specifically designed to dismantle.

This is the central irony of the contemporary Nigerian situation. The Roman imperial system that Paul addressed in his letter to the Romans operated through patronage dependency, hierarchical control, the centralization of power in a single supreme patron figure (Caesar), the promise of security in exchange for absolute submission, and the exemption of the powerful from accountability to the weak. The dominant model of Nigerian neo-Pentecostal church organization operates through precisely the same structural logic: patronage dependency on the senior pastor, hierarchical control, the centralization of spiritual authority in a single charismatic figure, the promise of material security in exchange for financial submission, and the effective exemption of church leadership from accountability to the congregation.

Table 2

Triangulated Comparison of Paul's Vision, Roman Imperial Structures, and Contemporary Nigerian Ecclesial Practice

Paul's Vision in Romans 8	Roman Imperial System	Contemporary Nigerian Church Model
Freedom through adoption (<i>Abba</i>): security from God, not from human patron	Security through submission to Caesar: patronage dependency at every level	Security through submission to the pastor: financial and personal loyalty required for divine access
Communal co-heirship: all believers equally adopted children sharing the same inheritance	Rigid hierarchy: elite patrons distributing favor to dependent clients	Big Man ecclesiology: senior pastor distributes spiritual favor to loyal financial supporters
Co-suffering solidarity: entering the world's groaning to bring liberation	Triumphalist domination: imperial power as the solution to social problems	Triumphalist exemption: Spirit as the mechanism for escaping social problems individually
Cosmic mission: creation's liberation as the horizon of adopted community's action	Imperial expansion: the world's domination as the Empire's project	Institutional growth: the church's expansion as its primary self-referential goal



The table reveals the precise shape of the disconnect. Paul designed the theology of adoption specifically as a counter-cultural, anti-imperial alternative to the patronage-dependent, fear-producing social system of Rome. The contemporary Nigerian church has inverted this design: it has taken Paul's liberating theology of adoption and reconstituted it as a religious variant of the very patronage system Paul was subverting. The result is a community that uses the language of spiritual freedom while institutionally reproducing the structures of spiritual bondage.

Andy-Philip's (2024) research on the socio-religious dimensions of displacement and belonging provides an important complementary perspective here. His analysis of communities experiencing institutional marginalization and the search for a secure communal identity demonstrates that when the church fails to provide the genuine familial security of Pauline adoption—unconditional belonging, shared inheritance, freedom from fear—people seek alternative forms of security through whatever networks are available, including the very patronage structures that the gospel is designed to replace (p. 25). The church's failure to deliver authentic Pauline adoption is not simply a theological error; it is a pastoral failure with concrete, measurable social consequences.

6. Discussion: The Pedagogical Crisis and Its Roots

The findings of the triangulated analysis point to a pedagogical crisis with deep roots. The transactional patronage model, the suppression of suffering theology, and the weaponization of scripture for personal benefit are not random or incidental features of Nigerian neo-Pentecostalism. They are the predictable products of a specific set of pedagogical choices: choices about what to teach, what not to teach, and what metrics to use for measuring the success of Christian formation.

At the level of formal theological education, Andy-Philip's (2016) research on academic and pastoral training methods identifies a critical deficit: the absence of rigorous, multi-disciplinary, and contextually grounded formation in most Nigerian pastoral training institutions. When ministerial candidates are trained primarily through rote learning of doctrinal propositions and charismatic performance skills rather than through the critical engagement with biblical texts, social science methods, and ethical accountability structures that genuine ministry requires, they are equipped to reproduce and amplify the popular theologies they already know rather than to critically evaluate and reform them (p. 18).

At the level of popular ecclesial culture, Katongole's (2017) theological analysis of African Christianity's engagement with social suffering identifies a further root of the crisis. Katongole argues that a church formed without a theology of honest lament—without the capacity to name, mourn, and bring before God the specific sufferings and injustices of its community—will inevitably default to either triumphalist denial of those sufferings or helpless withdrawal from the structures that produce them (p. 52). The Nigerian church's systematic suppression of lament from its worship and pedagogy has produced precisely this result: a community that oscillates between the triumphalism of prosperity declaration and the passivity of escapist prayer, with no theological resources for the sustained, organized, and structurally engaged response that the groaning world of Romans 8 demands.

The connection between these pedagogical failures and the wider Nigerian democratic crisis is direct and traceable. Ukah's (2008) sociological research documents how the institutional model of the Nigerian mega-church, with its centralized authority, financial opacity, and patron-client organizational logic, functions as a training ground for the very forms of institutional behavior that destroy democratic governance when transferred to the political sphere (p. 143). Leaders and



followers formed in churches that normalize unaccountable authority, opaque financial management, and the equation of personal material success with divine approval will carry these institutional habits with them into every other sphere of public life. The church does not merely reflect the culture of corruption; in many cases, it actively reproduces and deepens it.

7. Towards a Reconstructed Ecclesial Pedagogy for Nigeria

The triangulated analysis of the preceding sections establishes both the theological standard against which the current pedagogical model must be measured and the specific dimensions of its failure. This section translates those findings into a concrete, actionable framework for the reform of ecclesial pedagogy in Nigeria, organized around four interconnected priorities.

7.1 Priority One: Recovering the Community-Forming Function of Biblical Exegesis

The first and most fundamental reform required is the recovery of the community-forming function of careful biblical exegesis. Biblical texts—including the challenging and socially demanding texts that have been systematically excluded from popular preaching—must be taught in their full canonical context, with their social, ethical, and structural implications made explicit. This means training ministers and teachers to read texts like Romans 8:17–23 not merely as personal spiritual encouragements but as communal theological mandates with direct implications for how the church organizes itself, manages its resources, relates to its surrounding society, and exercises its civic responsibilities.

Andy-Philip's (2016) argument for pedagogical dexterity in theological education is directly applicable here: theological training institutions must equip ministers not only with biblical language skills and doctrinal knowledge but with the critical social science tools—including sociology, political science, and qualitative research methods—needed to bring biblical texts into genuine, rigorous, and honest dialogue with the complex social realities of the Nigerian context (p. 22). The goal is not to subordinate the text to contemporary social analysis but to enable the text to speak with its full authority and specificity to the actual situation the community faces.

7.2 Priority Two: Rebuilding Institutional Accountability Structures

The second priority flows directly from the theological content of the adoption doctrine in Romans 8. If all believers are equally adopted children of the one Father, with equal direct access to the Spirit's witness to their filial identity, then no human pastoral authority stands between the believer and God, and no human leader is exempt from the accountability that co-membership in God's household demands. This theological conviction must be institutionalized in the governance structures of Nigerian churches.

Practically, this means establishing genuinely independent financial oversight boards with real authority to audit church accounts and hold leadership financially accountable; creating open feedback and accountability channels through which congregants can raise concerns about leadership behavior without fear of retaliation; and implementing transparent decision-making processes that distribute authority across shared leadership structures rather than concentrating it in a single figure. Barclay's (2020) analysis of the social implications of Pauline grace provides the theological foundation for this structural accountability: a community that lives by the logic of grace—in which all members receive unconditionally, none can claim privilege, and all are mutually obligated—is a community that is structurally incompatible with opaque, self-serving institutional governance (p. 45).



7.3 Priority Three: Cultivating Public Lament and Prophetic Civic Action

The third priority addresses the systematic suppression of lament and structural social critique. The church must deliberately and regularly incorporate into its corporate worship specific, honest, publicly named liturgical lament—structured practices of naming and mourning the specific corruptions, injustices, and failures of the Nigerian democratic experiment before the God who hears and acts. This is not a concession to negativity or a failure of faith. As Katongole's (2017) African theology of lament demonstrates, it is a profound act of prophetic integrity: the refusal to declare *shalom* where there is no *shalom*, and the insistence on bringing the community's honest suffering and anger into the transforming presence of God (p. 78).

This liturgical lament must be the springboard for organized, informed civic engagement. Churches should develop structured programs to educate their members in their civic rights and legal responsibilities, to mobilize them for honest electoral participation, to support those in their communities who work in public service with transparency and courage, and to advocate publicly for the institutional reforms that the suffering people of Nigeria need. As Andy-Philip's (2022) research on the strategic role of religious leaders in Nigeria's Fourth Republic argues, faith communities that perform this civic formation function become the most powerful anti-corruption forces available to the society (p. 125).

7.4 Priority Four: Forming Cruciform Character for Public Life

The fourth and deepest priority is the formation of genuinely cruciform character—the kind of person who has so deeply internalized the pattern of the Son's own self-giving, suffering solidarity that they carry it as a non-negotiable, habituated disposition into every dimension of their public life. This is what Paul calls in Romans 8:29 conformity to the image of the firstborn Son, and it is what Wright (2010) describes as the formation of second-nature virtue through the repeated, communally sustained practice of the disciplines of the Christian life (p. 74).

This character formation cannot be accomplished in a single sermon, a leadership conference, or a discipleship course. It requires years of sustained communal practice: prayer that addresses God as Father rather than as patron, mutual accountability that takes seriously the equal adoptive dignity of every member, service to the poor that is motivated by co-heirship rather than charity, and engagement with suffering that is sustained by the eschatological hope of Romans 8:18 rather than extinguished by the absence of immediate material reward. The church that consistently practices these disciplines will form people who can enter the groaning structures of Nigerian political and institutional life and bring the liberating, justice-bearing presence of the adopted children of God to bear on them.

7.5 Limitations of the Study

The triangulated hermeneutic employed in this paper carries inherent methodological limitations that responsible scholarship requires acknowledging. First, the historical-grammatical exegesis of Romans 8:14–23, while carefully grounded in the primary scholarship of Wright (2013), Fee (1994), Gorman (2009), Burke (2006), and Scott (1992), represents a selective engagement with an extraordinarily rich and contested passage. The specific focus on the socio-political and anti-imperial dimensions of Paul's adoption theology—while exegetically defensible and contextually necessary—gives less attention to the pneumatological depth of the passage, its connection to the



preceding argument of Romans 5–7, and its relationship to Pauline eschatology more broadly. A full commentary-length treatment would expand these dimensions significantly.

Second, the qualitative component of the triangulation draws on published sociological and theological research—including the pioneering indigenous scholarship of Dr. Nesta Andy-Philip of the University of Abuja—rather than on original primary fieldwork with specific communities. While this approach is methodologically appropriate for a journal paper, it means that the account of Nigerian ecclesial realities is mediated through existing scholarship rather than through direct empirical observation.

Third, the triangulated synthesis highlights the points of greatest divergence between the Pauline text and contemporary Nigerian practice. This necessary critical focus means that genuine positive resources within Nigerian Christianity—including its extraordinary community-building capacity, its pneumatological vitality, and its missional creativity—receive less constructive attention than they deserve. Future research might productively apply the same triangulation method to map points of convergence as well as divergence.

8. Conclusion

The distance between the ancient text of Romans 8:14–23 and the concrete trench of contemporary Nigerian ecclesial life is wide, but it is not unbridgeable. This paper has demonstrated, through methodological triangulation, that the theological resources needed to address the deepest pathologies of Nigerian Christianity—the patronage dependency, the triumphalist escapism, the suppression of suffering solidarity, and the civic passivity—are already present in the very text that Paul wrote to counter the structural corruptions of the Roman imperial world.

The adopted children of God described in Romans 8 are people who have been permanently liberated from the fear-generating dependency of patronage systems; who share equally in the co-heirship of a Father who shows no partiality; who enter the groaning of the world in cruciform solidarity rather than escaping it through individual spiritual exemption; and who work toward the liberation of the creation itself as the expression of their cosmic vocation as God's children. This is the theology that Nigeria needs, and it is the theology that the Nigerian church has largely failed to teach.

The path forward requires the courage to bring the full weight of biblical exegesis to bear on the specific institutional realities of Nigerian Christianity—not as an external critique from a detached academic position but as an act of pastoral love for a church that has immense potential but has been formed by a deficient theology. When Nigerian pastoral training institutions, local churches, and individual believers commit to this kind of rigorous, honest, contextually grounded theological formation, the gap between text and trench will begin to close.

When that happens, the church will not merely become a more internally coherent institution. It will become what Romans 8 always envisioned: a community whose freedom, justice, and cruciform solidarity is itself a sign and a foretaste of the creation's coming liberation. That is the vocation of the adopted children of God, and it is a vocation that the groaning creation of Nigeria is waiting, with eager longing, for the church to embrace.



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Authors' contributions

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Declarations

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