

SOCIAL GUIDANCE IN THE LETTERS OF SAINT PAUL THE APOSTLE

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Abstract:

Paul the Apostle was very aware that the effectiveness of preaching Christian teachings depended on the practical application of these teachings in the daily lives of new converts to Christianity. He usually addressed simple people, with family issues, with socio-professional integration problems, relationships with local authorities etc. Therefore, he presents Christian dogma through the lens of their specific needs, giving them practical advice on how to conduct themselves in society, which he directly linked to divine protection if the citizens managed to behave according to the canons established by the Holy Scriptures.

Keywords:

Pauline Epistles, social guidance, slavery, justice, social assistance.

1. Paul the Apostle’s view of slavery

Paul’s attitude towards this most disadvantaged social category in the Roman Empire, i.e., slaves, is very interesting. Contrary to expectations, Paul the Apostle does not take a radical position on slavery, demanding, as everyone expected, their liberation; in fact, he calls for better cooperation between slaves and masters. We cannot accuse St. Paul of siding with the powerful or being indifferent to the suffering of slaves. However, we should know that Paul the Apostle was not interested in material comfort, economic stability or socio-cultural balance. For him, the most important thing was for people to receive his teachings, to accept Christ who had died and risen again. It is true that slavery was a social injustice and that many suffered because of their masters’ tyranny. However, the Christianity preached by Paul proposes a change in attitude, not in condition. Both the slave and the master, according to the Apostle Paul, should rethink their attitude towards each other. Think

how much turmoil would have been caused if Paul had demanded that all slaves be freed. Therefore, aware of the consequences, St. Paul teaches them relate to God from their current state, for the purpose of Christian life is not social emancipation or economic prosperity, but salvation in Christ. Instead of proclaiming the liberation of slaves, instead of demanding that masters set them free, St. Paul teaches that both social categories (slaves and masters) must diligently fulfil their duties. Thus, he recommends slaves to obey their masters and work as if for the Lord¹; all of them, whether masters or servants, are to receive their reward according to their deeds.² Of course, Paul knew that by encouraging them to draw closer to God, abuses from masters would disappear³; but at the same time, all the cunning strategies used by slaves would also disappear, as they knew that what they did was a sign of obedience and submission to God. Instead of causing disturbance, Saint Paul the Apostle promoted peace and spiritual benefit.

The Apostle knew that it would be normal for people to be free, and that is why, when he found an opportune moment, he advocated for this cause. An example in this regard is the *Epistle to Philemon*, in which Saint Paul asks the recipient to free his slave Onesimus. It is worth noting that the Apostle never forces things, but asks Philemon to free Onesimus because he knew that Philemon was very attached to him and would not hesitate to obey in these circumstances. This Epistle clearly dispels any accusations that Paul is on the side of the powerful and influential and implicitly against social equality. But let us not forget that, above all, he is against any disturbance that would affect ecclesial unity.

2. Paul the Apostle's Position on Facing Judgment in Pagan Courts

St. Paul got very upset whenever he heard that many Christians were resorting to pagan courts to settle disputes within Christian communities. Therefore, Paul first reminds them that Christians themselves are the judges of the world, in the sense that others will be judged by them in comparison to

¹ Col. 3:22-23; Eph. 6:5-7.

² Eph. 6:8.

³ Col. 4:1; Eph. 6:9.

them.⁴ How could they abandon this dignity and turn to pagan courts, thus damaging the image of the Christian community? Is there not a wise man within the community who can resolve conflicts that arise?, Saint Paul rhetorically asks.⁵ It was unbelievable for Apostle Paul that “*one brother takes another to court – and this in front of unbelievers!*”⁶

He finds it inexplicable that they have come to quarrel with each other, but to address pagans is at the limit of patience. The true Christian must avoid quarrels, endure injustice, suffer loss⁷ – these are, in the Apostle’s opinion, the traits of a Christian. In these conditions, Saint Paul tells them that all the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.⁸ He lists a number of passions to demonstrate to them that any passion keeps the man away from God. It is clear that this list of sins⁹ serves as an argument against those who attempt to rank sins according to their severity, trying to justify themselves and accuse others at the same time. Saint Paul is clear in his thinking; any passion stands between man and the Kingdom of Heaven.

The reason Saint Paul the Apostle addresses this issue is also the desire to maintain ecclesial unity, removing any opportunity for disturbance within the community and avoiding defamation coming from pagans against the Christian community.

3. Paul the Apostle’s attitude towards idol food

“Idol food” refers to food sacrificed to idols, which, not always being completely consumed by fire, was gathered to be eaten at communal meals in honour of the respective idols. Consuming such foods was considered participation in idolatrous worship. Christians were often invited to these communal meals by their relatives and friends, putting them in the situation of having to eat such foods. If all the food was not consumed, it was sold in the market. Additionally, in order to directly involve all buyers in an act of

⁴ 1 Cor. 6:2.

⁵ 1 Cor. 6:5.

⁶ 1 Cor. 6:6.

⁷ 1 Cor. 6:7-8.

⁸ 1 Cor. 6:9.

⁹ 1 Cor. 6:9-10.

idolatry, pagan priests would visit butcheries and food stores and perform pagan rituals upon the food.

In this context, the question arose as to whether Christians could participate in these communal meals and buy the respective foods. Opinions were divided, with some less knowledgeable in Christian doctrine, out of fear of making mistakes, refusing to participate in such feasts and also refusing to buy food offered to idols. Others, however, knowing that idols did not really exist, would buy these foods and even participate in the feasts, a behaviour that scandalised the more reluctant Christians.¹⁰

St. Paul once again reveals his great interest in maintaining ecclesiastical unity, promptly intervening whenever there is a reason for dispute. Therefore, aware of the disagreements that arise, he establishes two very important criteria for every Christian to follow in order to overcome this tense situation. Firstly, St. Paul the Apostle establishes that since idols have no real existence, food offered to idols does not produce real defilement.¹¹ Secondly, a Christian must consider their neighbour. If a permissible attitude scandalises their neighbour, it becomes impermissible.¹²

The love for one's neighbour is central to Christianity. The Savior said that the greatest commandment is to love God and one's neighbour.¹³ Christ Himself did nothing for Himself, did not accumulate anything for Himself, but sacrificed Himself for us, for our neighbour. Likewise, following the example of the Savior, Christianity always relates with love to one's neighbour; however, love in Christianity is fulfilled only through sacrifice – sacrificial love. Paul also calls for the Christian to sacrifice for their neighbour, to renounce themselves and to cut off their own will. Christ the Lord is the example, He did not come to do His own will, but the will of His Father.¹⁴

Saint Paul not only provides an answer, but also offers himself as the answer. He gives himself as an example, showing how he acted in such situations. He never placed himself above others, but always sacrificed himself to save others.

¹⁰ Pr. Prof. Dr. Constantin Cornițescu, *Op. cit.*, pp. 19-20, cf. 1 Cor. Ch. 8-10.

¹¹ 1 Cor. 8:4; 8:8.

¹² 1 Cor. 8:13.

¹³ Matt. 22:37-39.

¹⁴ Jn. 5:30.

Everything was done for everyone¹⁵, so that the Gospel of Christ could be preached to all.¹⁶

The model of a Christian proposed by Saint Paul the Apostle is one who is always ready to sacrifice for their neighbour.

4. Advice on Helping Widows

Saint Paul is very strict when it comes to order within the communities he established. He is aware of the difficulties faced by a woman left alone, but at the same time, he also knows the character of such women. Therefore, he offers clear and firm instructions to his disciple Timothy regarding the inclusion of widows in the list that allows for assistance from the church. In order to be present on that list, a widow had to be at least 60 years old, to have had only one husband, to have raised children, been hospitable to strangers, washed the saints' feet, helped the poor, in short, have a reputation for good deeds.¹⁷ Furthermore, Saint Paul instructs Timothy to avoid young widows, as when their passions lead them astray, they turn away from Christ.¹⁸ Therefore, he should advise them to marry, have children and take care of their households,¹⁹ so they do not become idle, engaging more in gossip than persisting in prayers day and night.²⁰ He also urges Christians who have a widow relative in their house to personally care for her so as not to burden the Church, but to be able to help those in need.²¹

This rigorous list of requirements compiled by the Apostle Paul aims to establish clear order within Christian communities, avoiding any reason that could threaten the unity of the Church.

5. Advice on Christian behaviour in Church and society

All the advice given by Saint Paul regarding the attitude of women in the Church as well as their clothing comes as a result of observations and not as a result of the misogyny of which some accuse him. In the community of

¹⁵ 1 Cor. 9:22.

¹⁶ 1 Cor. 9:23.

¹⁷ 1 Tim. 5:9-10.

¹⁸ 1 Tim. 5:12.

¹⁹ 1Tim. 5:14.

²⁰ 1 Tim. 5:5.

²¹ 1 Tim. 5:16.

Corinth, there was often much commotion in the Church due to the imprudent interventions of women. Therefore, Saint Paul, trying to correct this situation, proposes that women no longer intervene in such discussions, but ask their husbands at home whenever they have any doubts.²² Again, this attitude of Paul the Apostle is dictated by his desire for order in the Church.

He also intervenes when it comes to women's clothing. It was known that pagan women used all kinds of jewelry, believing that this way they could display the beauty of their faces. Saint Paul finds another way to adorn women, becoming at the same time pleasing in appearance and modest, as well as humble. Thus, he recommends women to wear modest clothing; their adornment should be with discretion and good deeds.²³ Saint Paul seeks spiritual benefit, and therefore all his exhortations are guided by this thought, so any accusation is unjustified. He also recommends that while praying, women should cover their heads, showing modesty, submission to their husbands, gentleness, and humility.²⁴ He recommends that they "learn in quietness and full submission".²⁵ He asks them not "to teach or to assume authority over a man", but to be quiet.²⁶ An extremely important thing that Saint Paul emphasises is that a woman can be saved through childbearing, persisting in faith, wisdom, love and holiness.²⁷

Of course, Saint Paul also asks men not to pray with their heads covered, as they are the image and glory of God.²⁸

We note that all these arrangements are still kept by the Orthodox Church, especially in rural areas, and they contribute greatly to creating an atmosphere of prayer in the Church. We all have the feeling that where there is order, we can truly pray. Moreover, we have all noticed that any disorder, both internal and external, creates a less favourable environment for prayer.

²² 1 Cor. 14:34-35.

²³ 1 Tim. 2:9-10.

²⁴ 1 Cor. 11:6-10.

²⁵ 1 Tim. 2:11.

²⁶ 1 Tim. 2:12.

²⁷ 1 Tim. 2:15.

²⁸ 1 Cor. 11:4-7.

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