

# The Christian and Society in St Paul

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It is intriguing to speculate where theological controversy would be without St Paul. From the very beginning he has been quoted on both sides of every argument. This has been facilitated by the proverbial obscurity of many of his statements, but indirectly it is evidence of the complexity of his thought. Paul is not easy to understand because he was not a simple man. His enthusiasm had nothing of the shallow lucidity that characterizes the fanatic. The Corinthians accused him of ambivalence, but it is probably truer to say that he was simply a very hard-headed pragmatist. He was certainly capable of letting his mind run free in a sweep that carried his thought into a cosmic dimension, but for all that he never lost his sharp awareness of the realities of any given situation. This latter facet of his character has been rather overlooked, because the interest of commentators has lain elsewhere. However, at precisely this juncture in the history of the Church it is important to recognize the pragmatic dimension of his thought, because its realism is very instructive. Fortunately this aspect appears most clearly when Paul has to concern himself with the relationship of the believer to the society in which he lived, since this problem is perhaps the most crucial confronting the Christian today.

## *The Christian and his Environment*

For a man who castigated so severely the wisdom of this world (1 Cor. 1, 18-31), and who repudiated human respect as a motive (1 Thess. 2, 4; Gal. 1, 10), Paul pays a surprising amount of attention to the opinion of non-Christians. For example, he formally stresses that anyone who aspires to become a bishop 'must be well thought of by outsiders' (1 Tim. 3, 7). This text is all the more unexpected because the term 'outsiders' embodies a nuance of hostility. The authenticity of the Pastoral Epistles is disputed, but in both thought and terminology this text reflects a consistent attitude of the Apostle. He wrote to the Thessalonians: 'We exhort you, brethren, . . . to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands as we charged you, so that you may command the respect of outsiders, and be dependent on nobody' (1 Thess. 4, 11-12). And he warned the Colossians: 'Conduct yourselves wisely towards outsiders, making the most of the time' (Col. 4, 5). These passages clearly betray Paul's intention of maintaining good relations between the nascent Christian community and its environment. If a

note of mistrust is to be detected, it is to be laid to the account of a clear-headed evaluation of the potentialities of the sociological situation of the communities. They were minority groups in an environment that might easily turn hostile.

However, it would not be in character for this type of fear to be Paul's unique motive for writing as he did. It is very probable that he was also concerned with the positive impact that the Christian community could make. This appears clearly in Phil. 2, 14-16 where believers, by their lives, are considered to 'hold forth the word of life' to the world. Their very existence is a form of preaching. Paul never terms the preached Gospel 'the word of life', and here the meaning would seem to be that the Philippians' response to their call demonstrates the concrete possibility of a new dimension of existence radically different from that which man had been accustomed to expect of himself. In the bearing of those who through their response have realized the possibilities open to humanity, man is confronted both with his own need and the promise of salvation in a way that he cannot ignore.

In this perspective the fundamental point of the texts just quoted would seem to be that the Christian must win respect by accepted standards before he can really influence his environment. An adequate answer to the obvious question: what standards? would entail a detailed examination of the specific recommendations that Paul makes in the parenetic sections of his epistles, and this would take us much too far afield. Here it must suffice to say that in a sense nothing is more human than the moral teaching of the New Testament. True, the motivation and the finality are different, but it prescribes the same virtues and denounces the same vices as Greek, Roman, and Jewish moral codes. Any Jew or Gentile could have subscribed to this recommendation which comes from that epistle in which, as we have seen, Paul speaks most formally of the witness value of the Christian life: 'All that is true, all that is honourable, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is gracious, whatever is deemed excellent, whatever is worthy of praise, these are the things that should preoccupy you' (Phil. 4, 8). The Stoic colouring of this catalogue is evident, but what is significant is that the appeal is to the common conscience not just of Christians but of humanity. Paul took seriously the values of the society in which he lived. He realized that the basic lesson of the Incarnation is that Christians should become men, and this in a sense that would command the respect of their contemporaries. On this he built a most realistic theology of witness.<sup>1</sup>

It is not my purpose here to investigate if and how the Church has heeded this lesson. It is only too obvious that in some respects the Church has adapted all too well to the standards of the world, while in others she has to a great extent ignored values that our contemporaries prize. It is more important here to raise the question

<sup>1</sup>cf. 'Religious Life as Witness', *Supplement to Doctrine and Life*, 5 (1967), 117-134.

whether Paul went too far in accepting the standards of his time, because on a number of social issues his practical directives seem to be at variance with his professed principles.

### *Principle and Practice*

One principle whose absolutely fundamental character is attested by the fact that Paul presents it as a direct consequence of baptism is stated by the Apostle in Gal. 3, 28: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' This is a flat denial not of national, biological or social differences, but of certain conclusions that were drawn from them. It asserts the spiritual equality of all human beings before God. Were Paul consistent with himself we would expect him to insist that this equality be manifested on the level of everyday experience. Yet this is emphatically *not* the case when he speaks in more concrete terms of women and slaves. On the practical level his principle is: 'Let everyone lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him, and in which God has called him. This is my rule in all the Churches' (1 Cor. 7, 17, cf. also v. 20, 24).

With regard to *woman* this meant that she was reminded that she was created for the benefit of man, and must submit to him as her head (1 Cor. 11, 3, 9). She was ordered to keep quiet in the assembly of the community, and was not even permitted to ask a question: that she could do at home (1 Cor. 14, 33-35). The idea that women could have authority over men is sharply repudiated. The sole role permitted them was that of the submissive housewife (1 Tim. 2, 11-15). Paul was slightly embarrassed by the case of women who had the charismatic gift of prophecy (1 Cor. 11, 5), and the parenthesis inserted in 1 Cor. 11, 12-13 would seem to indicate that he was aware of the discrepancy between his theory and his practice. Yet he went right ahead. In this it is not likely that he was influenced by the Jewish concept of woman as an inferior type of human being. He simply desired that his converts should conform to the conventions in force in the Greek society in which they lived.

The same ambiguity is easily perceptible in the Apostle's treatment of the question of *slavery*. In principle slaves are free, in the sense that there is no longer any distinction between slave and master (1 Cor. 7, 22). They are even warned: 'Do not become slaves of men.' Yet in practice Paul's line is: 'Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters' (Col. 3, 22), and stress is laid on the quality of the service they should render. They were to remain loyal and obedient regardless of the treatment they might receive, and whether their master was a Christian or not. And if the master was in fact a fellow Christian they were not to presume on the relationship (1 Tim. 6, 2). When Onesimus was sent back to his master there was no dispute about Philemon's rights over him. Although enlightened individuals had for centuries urged humanity toward slaves, con-

ditions seem to have grown steadily worse, and the wanton cruelty practised towards slaves in the first century is notorious. The somewhat lurid descriptions of Seneca are no exaggeration. There is not the slightest reason to think that Paul subscribed to the thesis propounded by Aristotle and Epictetus that the human race is divided into those who are essentially superior and those who are by nature inferior. But it is equally clear that he does not in any way criticize the institution of slavery. Once again he simply accepted a social situation with which he had been familiar all his life—and generalized it into a moral principle. It could be that he was not aware of the contradiction implicit in his teaching, but this is hardly likely, since it is only reasonable to assume that the emphasis on slaves remaining in their place was occasioned by some slaves taking literally the doctrine that in Christ they were free. This seems to leave us with a second possibility, namely, that Paul's teaching was not the fearless proclamation of truth, but sprang from the deeply rooted human instinct for survival. He could not have been unaware of the terrible consequences of the three slave revolts. Should Christian slaves refuse to serve their masters because the teaching that they were much more than mere instruments was a fundamental tenet of their religion, Christianity would have been dealt its death-blow. Only a comic poet like Philemon could get away with the assertion 'no one is by nature born a slave'.

Though in a less marked degree we find the same conflict between theory and practice in Paul's view of the Christian's relationship to *civil authority*. On the level of theory we find repeated recommendations to complete detachment which are rooted deeply in the Apostle's eschatology. 'Why do you live as if you still belonged to the world?' (Col. 2, 20). 'Our city is in heaven' (Phil. 3, 20). These admonitions are the logical outcome of Paul's view that the earth was under the control of the 'god of this world' (2 Cor. 4, 4), and subjected to 'the world rulers of this present darkness' (Eph. 6, 12). In this perspective it would not be surprising to find Paul warning believers to be rather wary of the institutions of this age. Yet the reverse is in fact the case, because in Rom. 13, 1-7 he formally insists that obedience to civil authority is a matter not only of expediency but of conscience. A number of authors have thought that certain advice given the Corinthians conflicts with this attitude: they are not to bring their disputes before secular judges but are to judge themselves (1 Cor. 6, 1-6). This is not a repudiation of the state's competence in civil disputes involving Christians. The Apostle simply did not want the dirty linen of the Christian community washed in public. He was fully aware of the damage done to the image of a religious group by any discrepancy between ideal and practice (Rom. 2, 23-24). Certainly this text cannot be used to substantiate the thesis that Paul's practical attitude to civil authority is different in 1 Cor. and Rom.

How are we to explain this attitude in the face of the Apostle's eschatology? For Klausner the answer is very simple. 'When one considers all the shameful deeds of oppression, the murders and extortions, of the Roman government in every place where the hand of authority reached, and particularly in the provinces where Paul lived and travelled, one cannot escape a feeling of resentment against this recital of praise for the tyranny of Caligula and Nero, or of Gessius Florus. One is forced to see in it flattery of the rulers.<sup>1</sup> If he opposed duly constituted authority he would not be long permitted to operate. In mitigation it cannot be said that Paul is here counselling a neutral attitude, as the lesser of two evils when compared with open rebellion. It is difficult to understand the passage other than as a forceful recommendation of active support. To comport oneself in any other way is to act against the divinely instituted order of things. What principally bothers contemporary readers of Rom. 13, 1-7 is its absolute tone. It is phrased in such a way as apparently to admit of no exceptions—and the Third Reich is still uncomfortably close to us.

This last point brings us to another feature that the three sets of texts have in common. The practical directives they contain all occasion grave difficulties for those who accept the teaching of the New Testament as normative. Slavery and the subordinate position of women are rightly felt to be incompatible with the supreme principle of love, because genuine love embodies the affirmation in act of the unique dignity of the other. The very structure of the capitalist state is felt by many to be intrinsically incompatible with the ideals of Christianity. This kind of contradiction poses serious problems of interpretation with regard to the moral teaching of the New Testament. But it has been very truly said that 'it is logically unavoidable tensions, considered in a realistic manner, which create the possibility of understanding and life, true though it undoubtedly is that they can also be their destruction.'<sup>2</sup>

### *The Value of Concrete Directives*

The first and most obvious question that must be asked is: In what sense did Paul intend these concrete directives concerning women, slaves, and authority to be taken? Because they can be binding on the Christian in no other sense. However, it seems clear that the response is conditioned by the answer given to a more fundamental question: What precisely was Paul trying to do in the parenetic sections of his epistles?

Paul himself thus categorizes his exhortations: 'Like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you, and charged you to lead a life worthy of God who called you into his own kingdom and glory' (1 Thess. 2, 11-12, cf. 1 Cor. 4, 14-17).

<sup>1</sup>*From Jesus to Paul*, London, 1939, 565.

<sup>2</sup>*Essays on New Testament Themes*, E. Käsemann, London, 1965, 8.

The tone is personal and intimate. This is not to say that Paul could not issue a direct order. He could and did (cf. 1 Thess. 4, 2), but as a general rule he avoids this approach and prefers the persuasive approach of a father or brother (cf. Philem. 8f). The atmosphere is one of concern. There is no trace of bureaucratic pre-occupation with order for its own sake. The words of the Apostle are an extension of the mercy that God has displayed in the Christ-event (Rom. 12, 1). This particular passage is of great significance, because it introduces the section (Rom. 12, 1-15, 33) in which we find the passage concerning the attitude of the Christian to civil authority. But over and above commanding its interpretations, it affords a valuable insight into Paul's concept of the nature of the moral directive, because it brings to light what is implicit in a whole series of texts (cf. 1 Cor. 1, 10; 2 Cor. 10, 1; Rom. 15, 30). *Through his incorporation into the Christ-event by baptism the believer is a new man. The decision that this embodies has cut him free of the bonds that held him back from the achievement of his true destiny. This is to be fully and completely a mature human being, which involves the recognition that he is a creature and owes God both service and worship. It is by recognizing and fulfilling these needs that the new man is concretely realized. The function of moral exhortation is to awaken man to a clear awareness of what his reintegrated nature demands of him. This is as much an act of mercy on God's part as the death and resurrection of Christ which initiated the whole process, because unless man lives out the grace he has received it becomes void* (2 Cor. 6, 1). It is very tempting to translate 'grace' here by 'opportunity'. It is a real possibility that is given man in Christ, and which would be non-existent without Christ. But unless man realizes this possibility in service and worship he effectively repudiates it, whatever the fervour of his verbal adhesion to Christ. In this perspective it is very difficult to see Paul's specific directives as norms, i.e. as rules which have an absolute value for the direction of human existence. Paul is not defining limits so much as clarifying the possibilities of sonship.

As he says to the Thessalonians: 'We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober' (1 Thess. 5, 5-6). In other words the Christian is to live without illusions. For Paul it is an illusion to think that sin has no consequences, that life has no meaning, or that God does not intervene in history. The fundamental element in the Apostle's sense of reality was precisely the fact that God had intervened in history in the person of Jesus (Gal. 2, 20). Had his converts the same intense awareness of the true implications of this event, I doubt very much that Paul would have felt the need to issue moral directives. Possibly some of his converts did have this awareness. The vast majority certainly did not. Only those who did could 'make the most of the time' (Col. 4, 5). Those who did not soon showed themselves to be fundamentally unrealistic. They were the enthusiasts who in their fervour believed that their commitment to Christ

necessitated the overthrow of all realities of the present age, and the lazy who maintained their commitment on a purely speculative level and in no way modified their way of life.

It is very probable that it was the enthusiasts that Paul had in mind when he wrote the passages concerning slaves, women, and civil authority. When this is kept in mind together with what has been said of the Pauline parenthesis in general, the implications of Paul's practical directives in these cases begin to emerge. In all three instances Paul's concern is with the believer, and not with the structures in themselves, and his object is to foster a realistic approach to the present. The Christian commitment is necessarily social (cf. Rom. 12), and though this time-space is given meaning only by the past and the future it is the providential context in which the decision for Christ must be actualized in and through service. Paul's intention was that individual believers should recognize and grasp the opportunities present in their concrete situations, and not permit themselves to drift on vague dreams of Utopia.

In support of this contention we can point to two passages. For example, with regard to slaves, Titus is recommended to 'bid slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect. They are not to be refractory or to pilfer, but to show entire and true fidelity, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour' (Titus 2, 9-10). This text crystallizes Paul's teaching on witness. Given the general situation in the first century the comportment of an ordinary slave who was devoted and honest could not fail to provoke wonder. To say that slaves accepted a new teaching was poor recommendation, but to be able to point to this teaching as the source of an almost miraculous change in their way of life was a very different matter. Paul was fully aware that only a concrete demonstration of this nature could make the Gospel 'attractive'—the pragmatist in religion is not a new phenomenon. It was this dimension of the slave's existence that had priority where Paul was concerned. I don't say that he was ignorant of the sorry lot of the majority of slaves, but it seems clear that he considered suffering an integral part of the Christian life. Where it originated was not very significant. What he felt was really important has been well expressed by Dostoievski: 'There is only one thing that I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings.' Paul believed that man was free to choose his attitude in any given set of circumstances. And this was the dimension that he chose to emphasize, for a reason that we shall come to a little later. The institution of slavery is only on the periphery of his thought.

Paul himself does not develop the positive value of the role of women in a social structure that bids them to be completely submissive to their husbands. But from what we have seen in the last paragraph there is little doubt but that he would concur with Peter—on this point at least. 'Likewise you wives be submissive

to your husbands, so that some, though they do not obey the Word, may be won without a word by the behaviour of their wives when they see your reverend and chaste behaviour. Let not yours be the outward adorning with braiding of hair, decoration of gold, and wearing of robes, but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit which in God's sight is very precious' (1 Peter 3, 1-4). Once again the apostolic instinct of the author predominates. The woman's situation is not viewed in itself, but exclusively as a providential opportunity. Thus it was inevitable that it should be considered a good thing. But no more than in the case of slavery can the Apostle be understood to have made a formal pronouncement concerning the role of women in society, much less concerning the supposed attributes of their 'nature'.

It should now be clear that Paul's directives with regard to the Christian's attitude towards civil authority must be understood in the same general perspective. We have here no trace of the 'Staatsmetaphysik' that has become traditional in Catholic thought. This would be a reduction and abstraction of Paul's thought. He is concerned solely with the authority-figures with whom the Christian comes into daily contact. The force for order that they represent is seen as a good thing, the reflection of the will of the Creator. In this Paul speaks from experience. Despite the fact that Nero was Emperor for a considerable part of his apostolic life, the Roman authorities in Greece and Palestine had saved him from a couple of nasty situations, and had treated him according to the letter of a just law. That their intervention entailed certain disadvantages did not weigh much with Paul. He was mature enough to know that there are no ideal situations. He conceived his duty to be to recognize any given situation, and to exploit the opportunities it offered him to the utmost. I feel that he doubted that some of the Roman community were doing this. In writing Rom. 13, 1-7 he had in mind believers who shared the resentment of the Jews against the Roman Empire, and, paradoxical as it may seem, the line he took was almost certainly dictated by the eschatology which is held to be in radical contradiction with the directives given.<sup>1</sup> His eschatology also influenced what he says concerning slaves and women.

The epistles to the Romans and to the Corinthians belong to that period of Paul's life when the expectation of the end was still vivid, and his thought is dominated by the hope that the present age was hastening to its close. Thus while there are obvious points of difference his attitude towards violent revolt bears comparison with his attitude towards marriage. He objects to both for the same fundamental reason—the time is too short. His pragmatic tempera-

<sup>1</sup>Sometimes this is pushed to the conclusion that Rom 13, 1-7 is a non-Pauline interpolation, cf. J. Kallas, 'Romans 13, 1-7: an Interpolation', *New Testament Studies II* (1964-65) 365-374.



ment led him to approve marriage in certain cases, namely, where the thought of bed would be so great a distraction as to render a committed Christian life impossible. It was this same character trait that led him to so formulate his directives to the enthusiasts in Rome in such a way as to exclude revolt. Given the limited time expectancy before the end it would be a distraction from issues that he considered more important. With all its faults the state as it existed provided adequate opportunities for service and witness. As such it was integrated into the providential order of the world. To turn aside from the opportunities it afforded in order to engage in what would inevitably be an abortive frontal assault on an immensely powerful institution would be to fail to render God the 'rational service' that was his due (Rom. 12, 1). Paul believed that in the context of the grace of Christ men changed themselves. His whole teaching clearly indicates that he would have no patience with the naive belief that an idealistic change in the social institutions of his time would bring about a corresponding change in the hearts of men—a lesson that this generation has learned (should have learned?) from the Bolshevik revolution.

What emerges most clearly from this brief look at the apparent conflict between theory and practice in Paul's teaching on a number of social issues is the value of the present moment. The fundamental recommendation is to 'make the most of the time'. This means living the present moment in such a way that the individual not only grows in human stature but also contributes to the diffusion of the Gospel by incarnating its ideal of love and service. It was inevitable that Paul should concretize this in function of the social structures known to him. It is impossible to say with certitude whether he ever reflected on their intrinsic value, but it seems likely that his estimate of their short-lived duration deterred him from further speculation. In their specificity, then, his concrete recommendations cannot be considered normative for today. Since we do not share Paul's expectation of the imminence of the end (unrealistic as that might be!) we can and must be more critical of social institutions. We would be unfaithful to Paul only if we permit grandiose dreams of the future to obscure the appeal of the present.