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APOSTLE PAUL AND THE CONTEXTUALIZED PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

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Abstract

The Church of Christ owes very much for its origin and growth, to Paul's pioneering missionary endeavours and to the theological insights presented through his writings. It is from Paul's conviction of the need for adaptation, there grew up the decision not to impose on the Gentile Christians his own Jewish legal traditions and cultural specialties. Paul had a clear grasp of the essentials of the gospel and could distinguish them from the Jewish cultural elements. He believed that demanding gentile converts to adapt the Jewish ways, while they accept the gospel of Christ, was not only unnecessary but also it would really pervert the essence of the gospel (Gal 1:6-7). It was this firm conviction and deep commitment to the truth revealed in Jesus Christ that made him a faithful messenger in his ministry to the gospel (Rom 15:16), and made his witnessing a great success in the world of his times. The importance of Paul's labour, and his contribution for the early spread of Christianity into the gentile world, and its emergence as a well-established Christian Church was beyond comparison. In our missionary undertakings, we have to

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learn much from the open mind, large heart, wide vision and principled practices of St Paul.

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1. Introduction

The New Testament Books bear witness to the way, how the gospel was proclaimed in different parts of the world during the apostolic times and how the Church was implanted in the various socio-cultural contexts of the different places. The apostles and their co-workers who proclaimed the gospel in the various regions, had the insight and the courage to offer the good news of salvation to all, appreciating their different ways of life and respecting their cultural identities. Paul's epistles were written as the apostle had to correspond with the communities of faith which he had formed in different places. The gospel traditions evolved first as oral texts and then slowly assumed written forms. The earliest written part of the New Testament was Paul's letters. The gospel traditions were also gradually written down and the four gospels of the New Testament had their origin in the different parts of the Roman world. In this article we discuss the contextual application of the gospel message found in the writings of apostle Paul.

2. Paul's Model in Religio-Cultural Contextualization

The Church of Christ owes very much for its origin and growth, to Paul's pioneering missionary endeavours and to the theological insights presented through his writings. It is from Paul's conviction of the need for adaptation, there grew up the decision not to impose on the Gentile Christians his own Jewish legal traditions and cultural specialities. After the Resurrection the apostles realized through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit that faith in the Risen Lord and repentance of the sins are the basic requirements to accept the new offer of the salvation from God in Christ Jesus (Act 2:38, 3:19-20). The Risen Lord became the centre of their lives. But they and the early Christian community of Jerusalem did not find any real difficulty in continuing the practice of the Law. Thus the Church of Christ had its early beginning in Jerusalem as if it were a new sect of Judaism. The apostles and the first Jerusalem community started a new way of life confessing their faith in Jesus. But they continued their normal Jewish practices according to the Mosaic Law, like the Sabbath observation, Temple worship, circumcision and other customs. But the separation, which Paul experienced from the Law in his

conversion experience, was very radical. He understood that his zeal for the Law did not help him in any way to receive the new gift of salvation in Jesus Christ but only to reject it and persecute the followers of the Lord. Paul's disillusionment with the Law after the Damascus Christophany is reflected in his statement, "I through the Law died to the Law that I might live to God" (Gal 2:19). The statement implies that his earnest practice of the Law itself led him to reject the Law in favour of the new way of salvation offered in Christ.

2.1. Breaking the Shackles of Jewish Seclusion

Paul's major contribution to Christianity was in breaking the shackles of Judaism and freeing the early Christian communities from the bondages of the Jewish sectarian attitudes. He wanted to remove the hurdles that hindered the spread of the gospel into the vast Gentile world. This concern and commitment for the gospel was the reason for his difference of opinion with James, the *Episcopus* (Bishop) of Jerusalem with regard to the freedom Gentile Christians enjoyed in their eating habits. James' direction was that the Gentiles should "abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, from blood and from what is strangled" (Acts 15:20, 29). This imposition of the Jewish cultural laws with regard to food-habits was very impractical in the Gentile Christian contexts. Paul's direction to the communities in this regard was very practical and open-minded, "Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For 'the earth is the Lord's and everything in it'. If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience" (1 Cor 10:25-27). When one buys from the market or is invited for dinner, it was not practical to inquire whether the meat is of an animal sacrificed to an idol, or whether the animal is killed by strangling¹ or not.

In the early Church there were many Jewish converts especially from the priests and Pharisees who thought it quite necessary, to combine the faith in Christ with the pursuit of righteousness through the observance of the Law (Acts 15:5). The Pharisaic Judaism of Jesuanic times believed in the possibility of acquiring self-justification through human practices and observances. They

¹According to the Jewish conception based on the Mosaic Law, a Jew was not allowed to eat the flesh of an animal killed by strangling, as several ancient tribes including the Jews believed that life resides in the blood.

thought that by practising the prayer, penance, alms giving and other observances prescribed in the Law, one could become oneself a just person and acquire merits before God. During his public life, Jesus himself had to fight against this attitude of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 23:1-36; Lk 18:9-14; Mk 7:1-13). In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Christ exposed the true way for a person to receive the word of justification from God (Lk 18:9-14). The Pharisee boasts before God about his good works done through the practice of the Law. But the tax collector confessing his sinfulness prays for God's mercy and the Gospel tells, "He went back to his house justified rather than the other" (Lk 18:14). In the gospels, we hear Jesus speaking about God's mercy and love, and highlighting the idea that he had come into the world in search of the lost ones and not the self-righteous ones. In the parables like those of the prodigal son, lost coin, lost sheep, the barren fig tree, and the stories of the woman caught in adultery, calling of Matthew, the conversion of Zacchaeus, anointing of Jesus' feet, etc., this idea is emphasised.

A basic realization of Paul in his conversion experience was that his practice of the Law and all his human attempts were futile to gain true righteousness before God. But he is now saved by Christ and possessed by him only because of God's grace (*charis*).² He is made righteous before God and reconciled to him through the mercy he received. One has to believe in God's mercy manifested to humanity through the new plan of salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ and accept the gift of salvation by surrendering oneself to Christ. On the basis of this conviction, Paul preached the Gospel during his missionary journeys without putting any demand for the practice of the Law from the gentile converts and established Christian communities who committed themselves to Christ in faith alone without the practice of the Law or circumcision.

²It was Paul who first introduced the term *χάρις* in the New Testament to indicate the special gift he received through God's mercy and love. In the first century Greek imperial inscriptions the term *χάρις* was used to designate imperial favour shown in some deed or gift to a community or to a city. Here we see a close resemblance with the Pauline use of the word. According to Paul *χάρις* means God's kind gift of salvation offered to the human being out of his great love for us. For further linguistic explanations of the term *χάρις*, refer F.W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition, based on W. Bauer's *Grichisches Deutsches Worterbuch zu den Novum Testamentum...*, Chicago & London, 2000, 1079-1080.

Some of those Jewish Christians who staunchly adhered to the practice of the Law considered Paul's approach intolerable and went about visiting the Pauline communities and persuaded them to accept circumcision and observe the Jewish practices (Acts 15:1-4, 24-29). When these over-zealous Judeo-Christian missionaries attempted to introduce the practice of the Law and circumcision into the gentile Christian communities of Galatia, Philippi and so on, Paul dared to oppose it vehemently. Paul wrote the epistle to the Galatians to face the challenges the Church of Galatia was facing due to the interference of the Judaizers (*the circumcision party*, Gal 2:12). They were confusing the Church demanding the gentile Christians to accept circumcision and observe the Jewish festivals, laws, traditions and practices. He considered it to be an impossible compromise to tolerate such movements that are against the good of the gentile mission. It was in such a context that he reflected deeply on the meaning of the Christian existence basing on the Scriptures and offered a deep and consistent theological defence of his position in his letter to the Galatians and a little later, in the epistle to the Romans. He had the particular care to avoid the demand from the new converts to practice the specifically Jewish traditional elements which are not related to the essence of the gospel and to present the gospel in its purity before the world, preaching it in a way graspable by the people of the context and writing to them in a language, style and thought patterns understandable and acceptable to them.

2.2. Paul, the Universalizer of the Gospel

Paul played a major role in transforming the new communities of Christian believers into a universal Church of Christ. He had a clear grasp of the essentials of the gospel and could distinguish them from the Jewish cultural elements. He believed that demanding gentile converts to adapt the Jewish ways while they accept the gospel of Christ is not only unnecessary but also it really *perverts the essence of the gospel* (Gal 1:6-7). It was this firm conviction and deep commitment to the truth revealed in Jesus Christ that made him a faithful messenger in his *priestly ministry to the gospel* (Rom 15:16), and made his witnessing a great success in the world of his times.

For the rightful freedom of the Gentiles, Paul did not hesitate even to argue and oppose Peter and James. In Gal 2:11-14 Paul describes how he had to confront even Peter in this regard. From the context we understand that Peter broke the table-fellowship with the Gentile Christians, because of the insistence of those who came from James

who wanted the Gentile Christians also to practice the Jewish puritanic laws with regard to eating. But for Paul, such an insistence is not straightforward about the truth of the gospel. In this regard Paul took a stand basing on the primary principle of charity and on the common-sense principle of contextual equity. He thus summarises his attitude, "I know and am persuaded in the Lord that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother is being injured by what you eat you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat, cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died" (Rom 14:14-15). Paul clarified further what does he practically mean here in his first epistle to the Corinthians: "If someone says to one, 'this has been offered in sacrifice,' then out of consideration for the man who informed you and for conscience sake – I mean his conscience, not yours – do not eat it" (1 Cor 10:28-29). Paul firmly stood for this principle of freedom for the Gentile Christians with regard to their eating habits and believed that it is part of the freedom, which the gospel brings with it. The gospel is not tied with any culture and should remain above cultural inhibitions, so that it may spread and be accepted by all without denying or changing one's own cultural ways.

It was Paul's clear vision of the essence or truth of the gospel and his dedication to stand firm for his convictions that helped the spread and growth of Christianity into the gentile world and enabled it to become the Universal Church of Christ. Such a principled approach to life and mission is ever valid in all our apostolic endeavours and activities in the Church for all ages. Wherever the Church failed to distinguish the essence of Christian faith and missionaries tried to impose their own social practices, cultural traditions or parochial interests, upon the new converts or on other already existing ecclesial communities, it had put great hurdles in the peace, harmony and growth of the Churches. This was a factor that blurred the missionary atmosphere of the Church of India and hampered the peace and growth of the Church. In our missionary undertakings, we have to learn much from the open mind, large heart, wide vision and principled practices of St Paul.

2.3. Paul's Ingenuity for Adaptation

Acts 17:22-31 narrates Paul's famous speech in the Areopagus, the central gathering place in the city of Athens, which especially was the cultural capital of Greek islands. Referring to their altar of the unknown God, Paul told them, "What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." (Acts 17:23). Quoting the Greek Philosopher Epimenides, he further said to them, "It is in him we live, move and

have our being” (Acts 17:28). Even though some mocked at Paul, his method of approach brought for him several followers who believed in Christ, as it happened in every city where he preached. Here what we find is the intelligent methodology, which Paul employed in his gospel proclamation. He moved from the familiar to the unfamiliar and from the known to the unknown. The Jewish synagogue was for him a familiar place from where he could move to the Gentiles with some already converted followers. The altar of the unknown God of Athens became for him a means to refer to the invisible God, who manifested himself in Jesus of Nazareth. In 1 Cor 9:19, Paul says that though he was a free man, he became a slave to all so that he might win more. He solemnly asserts his identification with all humans for the sake of the gospel in the following words, “To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (1 Cor 9:22-23). Of course, he has the awareness that how much ever he tries he cannot save all because some anyway would resist all attempts and that is why he says, ‘*so that I might by all means save some.*’

The apostle’s general use of his Roman name, ‘*Paul*’ to refer to himself, itself is a sign of his spirit of adaptation. The Book of Acts uses his Jewish name *Saulos* (Greek) or Saul in the early chapters and makes a change to ‘*Paulos*’ later. The often-heard popular explanation for this is that God converted Saul and transformed him into Paul as Genesis 17:5 speaks of the change of *Abram* into Abraham. *Saul* actually was only Paul’s Jewish name, which he received at his circumcision on the 8th day. Since Saul was also a Roman citizen by birth, he was called also ‘*Paul*’ as his Roman surname. Acts introduced this Roman name only at the beginning of his missionary journey into the Roman world for the proclamation of the gospel (Acts 13:9).³ This Roman name was easily acceptable to the people of the empire and therefore more appropriate for his work among them. The apostle himself consistently used only his Roman name in all his epistles and it signifies a conscious cultural adaptation from his part for the sake of the gospel.

2.4. Paul’s Care for the Poor

In the Greco-Roman world, the economic and socio-political situations were not all favourable to the ordinary people and to the

³Paul’s conversion event is described in Acts 9:1-19. The name Saul appears several times in following chapters 10-13. The name ‘Paul’ is introduced only in Acts 13:9.

poor. A small minority that wielded the power and enjoyed all the privileges. Slavery was a prevalent general practice. The social status of majority of the people were that of the slaves. It was hard times for the ordinary working classes and the poor. The men enjoyed all socio-political rights and privileges while the women were deprived of them. In such situation, how did the gospel's message of universal love and brotherhood influence Paul to respond to these situations?

It was Paul's personal decision to embrace the lot of the ordinary working class of his times and to identify with the poor. This remains as a sign of his social concern and commitment to identify himself with the believers and adjust to their living conditions and ways of life. He believed in God's special concern for the poor, the oppressed, the weak and the ordinary and in his gift of salvation to them through the gospel. The Christian tradition Paul received also pointed to a Jesus who preached the gospel to the ordinary folk, to the poor and the marginalized, to the sick and the less privileged in the society. It is the same attitude Paul narrates in 1 Cor 1:26-2:5. Paul's Corinthian converts did not belong to the wise according to the worldly standards, not to the powerful, not to those of noble birth. According to him instead, "God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor 1:28-29).

Paul chose for himself only the lot of the ordinary working class people and laboured with his own hand for his livelihood (1 Thess 2:9; 1 Cor 4:12). He indicates two reasons for such a choice of hard life. First of all, he had the sense of unworthiness to serve the gospel as one who once persecuted the Church (1 Cor 9:16-18). Secondly, he thought that avoiding all demands for remuneration would remove any possible obstacle for the easy spread of the gospel (1 Cor 9:12b). He was a person of noble birth from a Benjaminite Jewish family that enjoyed the extraordinary privilege of citizenship of the capital city of Rome. It was his personal decision to embrace the lot of the ordinary working class of his times and to identify with the poor. This remains as a basic sign of his social concern and commitment.

In the context of the famine in Jerusalem and Judea in the late forties, Paul tried to bring relief to the suffering Christian communities. This was a sign of his commitment to the poor. The Second Corinthians chapters 8 and 9 amply testify to his earnestness and zeal in this commitment. He presented before the community the

model of Jesus Christ who, though he was rich, became poor for the sake of us, so that by his poverty we might become rich (2 Cor 8:9). This service of Paul had a great witnessing value for the glory of the gospel. It instilled the true Christian spirit into the Gentile converts and it worked at the same time as a bridge of reconciliation between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians.

2.5. Approach to Slavery

There is a brief discussion on slavery in 1 Cor 7:21-23, which, though casually introduced, is very significant and pregnant with deep implications for the future. Paul's stand here is neither passive nor indifferent, but very positive and forward looking, and even revolutionary considering his times. His first advice to a converted slave is, "were you a slave when called, let it not worry you. But if perchance you can gain freedom make use of it rather."⁴ By birth Paul was one who enjoyed the right of citizenship both the cities of Tarsus and Rome and naturally he could not appreciate the condition of being a slave. When this natural urge and appreciation for freedom, which was embed in his personality, was transformed by the message of Jesus' selfless love and universal brotherhood, it became a force in him that longed for human salvation, human dignity and equality. This attitude becomes very evident in his courageous statement that seriously challenged the existed condition of humanity of his times: "You were brought with a price, do not become slaves of human masters" (1 Cor 7:23). It is a declaration of human dignity based on the Christian call as people liberated by the price of Christ's blood.

Paul's small but beautiful letter to Philemon with a very earnest appeal for Onesimus, the run-away slave whom he converted to Christianity, is an ample testimony to his new vision of humanity that transforms human society. Paul sends back to Philemon young Onesimus saying, "I am sending him back to you, *sending my very heart*" (Philem 12). Verse 16 further indicates Paul's attitude, "...no longer as a slave but more than a slave *as a beloved brother*, especially to me and how much more to you." Here what Paul evidently argues, is for the freedom of the children of God that brakes off the bondages of one who surrenders himself to Christ. One who submits to Christ is a person internally free. This is what Paul

⁴The different way of translation preferred to 1 Cor 7:21 by the New Revised Standard Version is really a controversial one and I consider it a translation not reasonable and unacceptable. I have discussed this problem in some detail in a long footnote in my article "The Secret of Paul's Missionary Success," *Third Millennium* (April-June 2007).

solemnly declares 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." It was certainly a statement quite revolutionary and challenging to the world of his times where some made others slaves, and the dignity and human rights of women were forgotten or denied.⁵

2.6. Dignity of Women

Paul is sometimes criticised concerning his attitude to women. We accept that he was a man of his times and he had his own limitations dictated by the circumstances. A woman covering her head was considered a sign of nobility in the cultural context of the times and he wanted the Christian women be regarded thus and not as libertines.⁶ With regard to the injunction of silence given to the women in the Church gatherings in 1 Cor 14:35-36, the first thing to be noted is that it contradicts Paul's previous instruction in the same letter itself, namely in 1 Cor 11:5 (and also 11:13) which reads, "... but any woman who prays or prophesies in the prayer gatherings with her head unveiled dishonours her head." Accordingly, Paul allowed women to pray and prophesy in the prayer gatherings and only they have to use head covering. The contradictory character of 14:35-36 brings suspicion with regard to its true Pauline origin. The statement could probably be a Judeo-Christian addition as D.F. Gordon has

⁵Some of those who have noted a kind of passivity and submissiveness advised to the slaves in some of the letters in the Pauline corpus such as Colossians, Ephesians and 1 Timothy, may have doubts in their minds about our appreciation of Paul's social attitudes. It is good to remember that these epistles belong to the deutro-Pauline group of letters, which are written by some of his disciples or co-workers in the name of the master. The epistles generally accepted by modern scholarship as authentically Pauline are Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon and they do not contain any such advices for a passive acceptance of slavery.

⁶Ben Witherington III, in his book, *Conflict and Community in Corinth, A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1&2 Corinthians*, Michigan, 1995, 234, Footnote 12 refers to a temple instruction representing a third century BC Greek practice, "nor (let it be permissible) for women (to enter) with their heads braided, nor men with their heads covered." Paul's instruction in 1 Cor 11:4-6 goes in the same lines and indicates a social practise of the times. A man covering his head in prayer dishonours his head, and any women praying with her head unveiled dishonours her head. Witherington also points to another social conception of the time in footnote 15 (P. 234), "the head covering was meant to warn men (and angels) that the wearer was a respectable woman and thus untouchable." (The head covering remained as a sign of respectability in Graeco-Roman cultural context of the times, implying a warning against daring to approach for selfish sexual intentions).

suggested, because verse 34 adds, “*even as the law says.*”⁷ But in the OT Mosaic law nowhere it is said that women should be silent in prayer gatherings. It could perhaps be part of the interpretation given to Gen 3:16 by the Jewish tradition. Paul, who argued for Christian freedom from the Law, cannot have imposed such an absolute injunction in the Church on the basis of a Jewish tradition. The manuscript evidence also supports such a suspicion with regard to the genuineness of 1 Cor 14:35-36.⁸ Hence we think it is not probable that this silence order to women in the Church be directly coming from Paul himself. The value of his daring pronouncements and innovative stands are to be appreciated. The already referred statement in Gal 3:28c, “... there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus,” shows that he believed in the basic equality of man and woman and in their rightful place in the body of Christ.

3. Conclusion

The importance of Paul’s labour and his contribution for the early spread of Christianity into the gentile world and its emergence as a well-established Christian Church was beyond comparison. According to the information we get from Galatians and from Acts, Paul preached Christianity and established Christian communities first in the Roman provinces of Syria and Cilicia and then during the three missionary journeys, in the other southern provinces of Asia, Macedonia, Achaia and Galatia. His epistles, which are the earliest written part of the New Testament, firmly formed the ground of Christian Theology. They remain as the great and lasting testimony to his sense of mission, to the richness of his God-experience in Christ and to the depth of his theological reflections, which he shared with his converts and the way he proclaimed the gospel adapting to the particular context of the place and the culture of the people, and built of the local Christian communities. Paul wrote to the Churches in Corinth: But thanks be to God who in Christ always leads us in

⁷Refer D.F. Gordon, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, Michigan, 1988, 705-708.

⁸It is true that the text of 1 Cor 14:35-36 is witnessed by many important manuscripts namely, P46 α A B K ψ 0243, etc. But several manuscripts present the same text only after 1 Cor 14:40. They are D F G 88, Itar, Ambrosiaster etc. Codex Fuldensis inserts these verses only in the margin after 14:33. Thus the appearance of the text in three different places in different manuscripts is an indication of an insertion of the text in a very early period. Probably it was the result of an attempt by a Judeo-Christian to bring the Jewish attitude to women into this Pauline epistle.

triumph and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him (Christ) everywhere. For, we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved... (2 Cor 2:14-15). Paul's venture for the proclamation of the gospel in the Greco-Roman world in those hard times and difficult situations, and his ingenuity in implanting the seed of the gospel and bringing up the communities of faith, was really astonishing. In spite of all difficulties, oppositions and challenges, what shone before their eyes was Paul's great conviction concerning the value of the message and the strength of his unwavering commitment to the person of Christ.