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"SO I ALWAYS TAKE PAINS TO HAVE A CLEAR CONSCIENCE TOWARD BOTH GOD AND MAN" (ACTS 24:16) Saint Paul as Prisoner and Ethical Societies

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Abstract: This essay examines how Paul, the prisoner, and his contribution to ethical societies are characterised in the Book of Acts (21:27–28:31). After some introductory matters, the author examines how Paul's behaviour and words are portrayed in the circumstances surrounding his arrest and the first hearings in Jerusalem by Roman authorities and Jewish leaders. This is followed by an analysis of the portrayal of Paul during the Roman trials before Felix and Festus in Acts 24–26. The next section examines Paul's behaviour during his sea -voyage to Rome and his stay there. According to this portrayal, Paul knows his rights as a Roman citizen and uses them wisely. He insists on proper legal procedure and ably defends himself by insisting on the facts, without escalating the situation. During a private conversation, he instructs a Roman official regarding righteousness and self-control and thus contributes to ethical society. The final section opens with hermeneutical reflections and seeks to bridge the gap to current social ethics.

Keywords: Acts of the Apostles, Ethical Society, Paul the Prisoner, Religious Conflict, Roman Citizenship, Roman Empire, Trial of Paul

1. Introduction

While scholars and general readers of the Bible alike appreciate Acts 1–21 for various reasons, the final chapters of the Book of Acts are often neglected. There are several reasons for this: At first sight, these

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chapters are theologically not as rich as the earlier three-quarters of the book with their missionary speeches and inspiring endeavours of several early Christian leaders. Readers in the context of the church are often more interested in evangelism, mission and church planting and may find the detailed account of Paul being taken into Roman custody, the delays in his trial and long imprisonment to be a little tiring, discouraging and of little help for their ministries.

These chapters must have been of tremendous importance to the first readers of the Book of Acts. For good reasons, the author of Acts, commonly identified as Luke[1], provides a relatively detailed account of Paul as a Roman prisoner. Apparently, in Luke's apology for Paul's disputed Gentile mission and manner of including Gentiles into the people of God (so, the overall purpose of Acts), the unusually long imprisonment of Paul and his role and conduct in this process needed detailed explanation. The portrayal of Paul in these chapters adds significant elements to Luke's apology and has the explicit purpose of providing *certainty* for his readers (Luke 1:4, the preface to Luke's Gospel also applies to Acts).[2] Paul's years as a prisoner do not undermine the message that he proclaimed earlier to Jews and Gentiles alike – and continued to proclaim – whenever possible.

How do these chapters relate to *ethical societies*? The call for papers for the 2020 issues of this journal rightly emphasised that "ethics is fundamental to the well-being of individuals and societies and is integral to all aspects of human life. … A living human being is not just a bundle of perceptions, thoughts, or judgements but is *an individual actively and critically engaging in varying relations with God, community, and the world*. These relations have a constitutive ethical dimension" (Nandhikkara, [italics added]). Ethical societies are therefore societies not determined (exclusively) by markets, the interests of the powerful and rich or otherwise, but by people actively and critically engaging in varying relations with God, the community, and the world. While other religions and secular traditions have their contribution to this engagement, the focus here is on one Christian contribution to this engagement. We examine how one of the canonical books of the Christian Bible, the Book of Acts, portrays Saint Paul, one of the leading protagonists of earliest Christianity, and his

[1]See Keener, *Acts I*, 402–422.

[2]For a discussion of the purpose of Acts see Keener, *Acts I*, 435–458.

interaction with society and its representatives after being imprisoned. Paul's religious convictions directed his ethical decisions and behaviour. How can this portrayal inspire and guide contemporary reflection and contributions towards ethical societies by Christians and non-Christians alike? By raising this question, we examine how the traditional Christian ethical teaching, in this case narrative examples of ethical behaviour in the first-century canonical sources, can be interpreted and updated for solving complex moral problems in the modern world.

In doing so we are asking questions that are not the narrator's main focus. Luke's primary purpose was not to give guidance regarding Christian contributions to an ethical society. However, as the genre of ancient historiography implies,[3] Acts offers not only an apology for Paul (and other Christians in Acts) but also serves as an *exemplum* for others to follow (see Stenschke, "Challenges"). In Acts 21–28, Paul no longer determines his movements and lodgings, but operates mostly in a passive role.[4] Others take – or fail to take – the initiative and decisions. Yet, Paul still manages to interact with the wider society, in this case the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, the Roman soldiers and various representatives of Roman rule. During the journey to Rome, his range of activities widens again, as Paul enjoys a reasonable degree of freedom.[5]

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[3]For a detailed discussion of the genre of Acts and its implications see Keener, *Acts I*, 51–220.

[4]The portrayal of Paul's missionary work as a free man in Acts 11–21 (e.g., 20:33–35) and his interactions with his opponents contributes in its own way to quests for biblical perspectives on ethical societies. In view of the extent and contents of Paul's ethical instruction in the communities that he founded (for Luke's emphasis on teaching Gentile converts, see Stenschke, *Portrait*, 335–344), we could argue that his mission contributed towards ethical societies as he insisted on a thorough ethical resocialisation and moral improvement of his converts.

[5]For a detailed discussion of the sources and historical reliability of Luke's account and focus on the *literary* portrayal of Paul, see Keener, *Acts I*, 221–257, *Acts III* and *Acts IV*; Pervo, *Acts*, 548–690; Schnabel, *Acts*, 881–108. According to Acts 20:5–21:17, the author accompanied Paul to Jerusalem (20:5–21:18) and leaves with Paul for Rome (27:1). It is likely that he was present for some of the time between these "we-passages" and an eyewitness to some of the events; see also Porter and

Our focus includes Paul's continuation of his ministry of preaching the Gospel (for instance, to Felix and Festus)[6], but it is wider: How does Paul behave under these circumstances and what does he say? In what way did he contribute to an ethical society in his day? In the concluding section, we will ask what the Church today can learn from this portrait in terms of its own behaviour and witness when it faces resistance from religious leaders and encounters officials who either perform appropriately or fail to live up to the ethical standards that they are called to embody.

2. Paul's Arrest and Defences in Jerusalem

After a Jewish crowd seizes Paul in the temple precincts and is about to lynch him (Acts 21:31), soldiers from the Roman cohort in Jerusalem intervene, rescue him and then arrest him. Paul immediately takes the initiative and politely approaches the commanding officer: "May I say something to you?" (21:37).[7] Once the language issues have been resolved ("Do you know Greek?"), Paul can clarify a misunderstanding as to his own identity: He is *not* the Egyptian insurrectionist for whom he was mistaken by the Roman officer (based on the false report "that all Jerusalem was in confusion"). Paul discloses his Jewish identity, his origin and that he is a citizen of Tarsus, a prominent city (21:39). He then asks for permission to address the crowd in the temple court. There Paul had been falsely accused of bringing a Gentile into the temple precincts that were reserved for Jewish worshippers (21:28–29). Paul insists on clearing up this misunderstanding and dispelling the ensuing charge, as well as in explaining the true intentions of his visit to the sanctuary.

Apparently, Paul gains the trust of the officer and is granted permission to speak. In order to gain a hearing and to emphasise his own Jewish identity, he addresses the crowds in Aramaic, the common language in Judea at the time. Earlier on, Paul spoke to the Roman officer in Greek (21:37), the *lingua franca* of the Roman East. By speaking in

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Pervo (149–156); for a succinct defence of the historical reliability of Acts, see Schnabel, *Mission*, 20–34.

[6]In Acts 20:17–35, Paul gives a statement of account of his ministry *within* the Christian community; see Stenschke, "Lifestyle". Paul's willingness to accommodate a large section *within the Christian community* of Jerusalem led to his arrest.

[7]Throughout, I follow the *English Standard Version*.

Aramaic, Paul, coming from the Jewish diaspora, emphasises his close ties to the land of Israel and his familiarity and identification with the culture, practices and concerns there.[8] In this first scene, Paul is characterised as polite, ready to clarify a misunderstanding regarding his identity (citizenship / privileges) and his previous actions. He gives the impression of being aware of the options available to him and an able communicator.

In Acts 22, Paul is portrayed as ready to defend himself. He addresses the crowd as "brothers and fathers", emphasising his Jewish identity and loyalty. His defence ends up being a statement of account of his life and ministry up to this point. Paul openly speaks about his past as a radical persecutor, his calling and obedience to the divine commission, even against his will. In passing, Paul emphasises that he respects the temple (22:17). He had come there to pray, fell into a trance, and received a vision by the risen Lord. He would have liked to minister to his own people and stay in Jerusalem (there is no "inner emigration"; Paul is loyal to his fellow Jews and bound by the salvation – historical priority of ministering to them first – see Romans 1:16. Even now, he had returned to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish feasts, Pentecost – Acts 20:16), but was sent far away to the Gentiles. His ministry among the Gentiles was not his own idea. Rather, he was sent there because his fellow Jews in Jerusalem would not accept his testimony about Jesus. As the crowds interrupt him at this point, Paul is unable to defend himself against the false charges levelled against him and the purpose of his visit (21:28–29). Again, the Romans intervene and take Paul back to their barracks.

When the Roman authorities (for whom the situation is incomprehensible) want to examine him by flogging (they don't make any efforts to inquire among his accusers), Paul discloses his *Roman* citizenship emphatically, but in a friendly manner (22:25). It is not clear why he did not do so earlier on (21:39; did he, perhaps, not want to distance himself from his fellow Jews and thus raise their suspicions?). When the tribune, a higher-ranking officer, enquires regarding this privilege of Roman citizenship, Paul affirms it.

In difficult circumstances, Paul simply raises a question; he does not accuse the soldiers or become abusive. He also does not protest that he remains bound (in chains) until the next day (22:30). While

[8]See the detailed discussion in Keener, *Acts III*, 3187–3195.

Paul is ready to defend himself before the Jewish people (and, later, the Council – 22:30–23:10), it is curious that he takes no initiative to explain to the Roman officers the reason for his being accused by the Jews and the ensuing events. It seems that Paul intends to resolve the conflict among the Jews, rather than involve the Roman authorities. He avoids any escalation of the situation. Paul discloses his legal status and reminds those around him of its implications (he must not be bound and flogged). He does so calmly and insists on proper legal procedure. In this way, he emphasises ethical standards.

When given the opportunity to defend himself before the Jewish Council (22:30–23:10), Paul also addresses the Council in a way that emphasises his own Jewish identity and loyalty to his ancestral religion. As a Jew, he addresses his fellow Jewish *brothers* (23:1); later he emphasises his Pharisaic background and identity. When he is reprimanded for his claim of good conscience, he first reacts harshly, but insists on proper procedure according to the Law (punishment, such as being stricken, may follow only after a proper investigation and verdict – 23:3; see Keener, *Acts III*, 3270–3276). Once Paul learns of the identity of the person who gave the command to strike him, he immediately budges. He acknowledges the high priest's office and authority and refers to the Law that he transgressed ("You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people"). Paul shows respect for that office, if not for the person holding it. In this way, Paul emphasises that he knows the Law and adheres to it (23:6). This respect for the Law and his loyalty to his people and its identity is probably behind Paul's reticence to accuse his Jewish opponents before the Roman authorities.

Paul is aware of the composition of the Council and the theological tensions between its members, and he knows how to use that to his advantage. Thus, he succeeds in playing off his opponents against one another. As a result, the Pharisees in the Council identify with Paul and conclude that a spirit or an angel could have spoken to Paul in his temple vision (22:17–18). Owing to the violent dissension within the Council, Paul cannot finish his defence (as happened previously before the people). In what is reported, Paul does not address the charges levelled against him by the Jewish pilgrims from Asia, which led to his arrest. Eventually, he is rescued and brought back to the Roman barracks.

Later, when Paul hears – through his nephew – of a deadly plot against his life (an ambush on the way back to the Council for an alleged further hearing), he requests one of the centurions to take his nephew to the tribune (even after the visionary affirmation that he will reach Rome – 23:11). In this way, the plans of Paul's opponents are disclosed to the tribune, who carefully questions Paul's nephew and hears of the plot. He understands the seriousness of the situation and takes all necessary measures to take Paul to Caesarea by night to avoid further escalation of the situation and to safeguard Paul's safety. The tribune also seeks to safeguard the security of his informant.

In this episode, Paul is portrayed as friendly, accommodating and Law-abiding, but also as cunning regarding the dissensions among his opponents. He uses the theological differences between them, not their shortcomings in their office or other potential charges. He uses the information he has or receives and passes it on to the people in charge. He uses all possible means to uncover the plots of his opponents and to avoid the consequences. Paul does not accuse his Jewish opponents or malign them to the Roman authorities. His later affirmation that he has no charge to bring against his nation (28:19) is already discernible at this stage. Paul does everything possible to avoid an escalation of the situation.

3. Paul on Trial before the Roman Authorities

In the ensuing defence episode before Antonius Felix, Paul fully co-operates by providing the information about where he is from (23:34). While his opponents flatter Felix (*captatio benevolentiae*), slander Paul, and accuse him falsely and harshly with professional assistance (24:1–9), Paul's rhetoric is modest in comparison (24:10). In his defence, Paul recalls the facts and lets them speak for themselves. Paul had arrived in Jerusalem only twelve days earlier (he was in the city for only seven days – 21:7; 24:1) – not enough time to endeavour to do what his opponents charged him with. He came with a pious purpose – to *worship* at the temple, not to profane it (24:6). He was not disputing with anyone or stirring up a crowd (as his Asian opponents had done in the temple – 21:27–28), neither in religious places (temple, synagogues), nor in the city itself. On the contrary, Paul had peaceful and pious intentions: He came to Jerusalem to bring alms to his people and to present offerings in the temple. Rather than profanation, he was purifying himself in the temple, "without any crowd or tumult"

(24:17–18). In addition, Paul is not a regular visitor (who might have prepared disruptions on earlier visits): On this occasion, he came after several years had passed since his last visit (24:17).

Repeatedly, Paul also reiterates and insists on proper Roman legal procedure: His opponents cannot prove what they level up against him (24:13). The Jews from *Asia Minor* (most likely Ephesus) – who initially accused Paul in the temple courts, instigated the crowd and caused a riot (21:27–28) – should be here before Felix and make their accusation, if they have anything against Paul that would stand up to scrutiny. They would be the eyewitnesses of his alleged wrong-doing. From merely seeing Paul with Trophimus, a Gentile Christian from Ephesus in the city, they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple precincts and, therefore, made their charge. Paul discloses that his accusers cannot present their witnesses. Like Paul, they were pilgrims to Jerusalem and most likely had left the city by now. In addition, their supposition was false and their charge false and exaggerated. For good reasons, they were absent now. In addition, the accusers know that this detail (Gentiles must not enter the temple) would not be a strong argument before a Gentile court. Paul refers to the occasion, without raising the issue himself. If his accusers continue, however, he might do so.

Paul affirms his Jewish identity and abiding, complete loyalty to the "God of our fathers, believing everything laid down in the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection from the dead". Because of this hope "which these men themselves accept", Paul strives to have a clear conscience before both God and people (24:14–15).

There are several references to the encounter in the Council in Jerusalem, which was embarrassing for his opponents (24:15), but Paul refrains from using this against his opponents (such as a charge of violent dissension and threatening the life of a Roman citizen). In addition, some of the men belonging to the Council – and perhaps even present – also believe in the resurrection from the dead. In this way, Paul reframes the conflict (see Meyer): The disputed domain is not his mission among the Gentiles (22:21–23), nor the charge of profaning the temple (24:4), but belief in the resurrection – which some of his accusers share and which is not considered a crime in Roman eyes. The men who are present now (in contrast to the alleged

eyewitnesses) and who accuse Paul should be reporting about the events in the Council meeting when *they* could not agree among themselves and when dissension arose to such an extent that the Roman soldiers had to intervene to rescue a Roman citizen from them (24:20). Surely, his accusers would rather not return to this situation. Paul does not do so either, but indirectly indicates that he could do so, if his accusers continue to make false charges against him. If needed, he still has some powerful cards left in his deck to play.

It is noteworthy that there are no counter attacks on his opponents. Paul might have had some insider knowledge regarding the religious leaders, which he could have used. Moreover, there is no punitive miracle, as was the case previously with Jewish sorcerer, Bar-Jesus / Elymas on Cyprus (13:6–12, although, curiously, this was also before a Roman proconsul). To some extent, Paul is almost protecting his Jewish compatriots: He only alludes to issues that would be embarrassing to his opponents but does not make them explicit. In this way, Paul does not escalate the situation.

Later, when given further opportunities to speak to Felix (24:24–25), Paul – reminiscent of the Old Testament prophets – boldly speaks about Felix's ethical failures when he addresses *righteousness* and *self-control* and announces coming divine judgement (see Schnabel, *Acts*, 966–967; Keener, *Acts IV*, 3433–3436). For him, pointing out ethical failures (and the need to change such behaviour), the required virtues of people in power and what will be required one day before the heavenly judge were apparently part and parcel of "faith in Jesus Christ". It is noteworthy that this happens in conversations of a private nature, not during official trials. In this way, his conversations with the governor directly contribute to an ethical society. Because of the coming resurrection and his own accountability before God, Paul always seeks to have a clear conscience before God and people (24:16).

At the same time, Paul refuses to use illegitimate means by fulfilling Felix's expectation of a bribe (see Keener, *Acts IV*, 3437–3442) in order to release him or bring the trial to a conclusion (24:26). Paul stands for righteousness. Keener (3442) writes:

> Paul's noncompliance with the expectation of a bribe appears courageous. It would also stir sentiments of justice on his behalf, whether in a Roman court or among the ideal Greek audience of Luke's finished work. It would normally be indiscreet to challenge the corruption of a governor (who held more credibility with

Rome than did Paul), but after Felix's humiliating recall, Luke's credibility might be the greater for challenging him (especially with those who knew anything about Felix). On discovering a person's innocence, a good governor would free the person and possibly even reward him or her.

Acts 25:8 offers a brief summary of Paul's defence before Festus: "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offence". Paul also insists on proper legal procedure and asserts that Caesarea, as the official seat of Roman power in Judea, is the place of Caesar's tribunal (as Festus himself had indicated earlier on to Paul's opponents – 25:1–5). This is where he should be tried. When it becomes clear that Festus wishes to do Paul's Jewish opponents a favour by transferring the trial to Jerusalem, Paul eventually appeals to the imperial court in Rome (25:10–11). Paul uses this privilege of Roman citizens only when it becomes clear that this judge (Festus) is seeking to please his opponents and that he might not, or will not, receive justice there and then. Paul would not have survived a transfer for trial in Jerusalem (25:3). This appeal sets Paul's journey and eventual arrival in Rome in motion (25:12).

In Acts 26, Paul defends himself before Festus, Agrippa, Berenice, military tribunes and prominent men of Caesarea. In this context, he emphasises that his ministry included ethical instruction (recalling John the Baptist). He called all people to repent and turn to God, "performing deeds in keeping with their repentance". This instruction was a direct contribution to an ethical society (see Luke 3:10–14).

Again, Paul emphasises that the charges are not true and recounts his behaviour calmly. He speaks "true and rational words" (26:25). He has not committed any crime against religious or state authority. If there are legitimate charges, he is ready to face the consequences. Paul again insists on proper legal procedure. His appeal to the emperor appears as a last resort when it becomes clear that he might not receive justice in Judea. Again, Paul does not escalate the situation or instigate a counterattack against his opponents.

4. Paul on His Way to Rome

The account of the eventful sea voyage also contributes to our quest. Here the "society" consists of the band of travellers who travel with

Paul to Rome on board three different ships. On several occasions during this voyage, Paul takes the initiative.

Paul gains the trust of the Roman officer Julius, who oversees the transport of Paul and other prisoners. Consequently, Paul is allowed to see his friends at Sidon. He does not abuse this trust but returns to the ship.

Paul endeavours to contribute to the success of the journey, or at least to preventing impending danger, by giving his advice as an experienced sea -traveller (see 2Cor 11:25–27) regarding the inexpediency of travelling so late in autumn with its storms: "Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives" (27:10). In the midst of the storm and after a long period of desperation (27:20), Paul encourages his fellow travellers and assures them that there will be no loss of life among them. Paul readily shares the revelation he received and its trustworthiness (27:21–26).

Paul uncovers the plans of the sailors to escape from the larger cargo ship with a smaller vessel (26:30–32). He informs Julius and the soldiers accordingly and thus prevents the sailors' escape, which would leave the ship without experienced navigators needed for running the ship aground safely (27:26).

Immediately before the actual shipwreck, in a father-like role, Paul sees to it that the people on board resume eating and regain their strength (27:33–38). This is accompanied by a renewed assurance of the survival of all 276 people on board.

Once ashore, Paul helps with maintaining a fire (he gathers a bundle of sticks and puts them on the fire – 28:2–3). Paul heals the father of Publius and other Maltese islanders and thus contributes to their well-being (28:8–9). In this way, he acknowledges the friendly reception by the Barbaric islanders on this cold winter morning (see Stenschke, *Portrait*, 94–97) and the hospitality of Publius over three days. These healing miracles are the only use of miraculous powers in the entire account of Paul, the prisoner. Like Jesus, Paul does not use this resource to his own benefit or for his own comfort.

5. Paul in Rome

Once in Rome, Paul invites the Jewish leaders and presents his case and message to them (28:17–20). Again, he is ready to inform others and defend himself. Paul takes the initiative, perhaps also with the

intention of preventing harm to the entire Jewish community through his coming and the legal proceedings against him before an imperial court (28:17; "I had no charge to bring against my nation" – 28:19). His desire to inform is met with interest from the leaders, who wish to hear what Paul's views are, "for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against" (22). Otherwise, Paul lives at his own expense and welcomes all people who come to him. He resumes his ministry of "proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (31). This would have included ethical teaching, like that found in his letters (e.g., Rom 12:1–15:7; 1Cor 5–11; Gal 5:1–6:10; Eph 4–6). As a prisoner, Paul fulfilled the commission that he received, even if it entailed much suffering for the sake of Him who called him (Acts 9:16).

Before we summarise, it is noteworthy that Luke mentions how Paul receives some recognition and support from others. Perhaps it is only because of his Roman citizenship that Paul is treated with a measure of respect by the Roman officers. For example, they do not treat him in the way Pilate treated Jesus. Paul is kept in light custody and his friends can attend to his needs (24:23).

Roman officials repeatedly recognise that Paul is innocent of the charges brought against him (26:31–32; see also 25:18–19). They neither pass a verdict on Paul nor set him. Throughout his imprisonment, Paul's acquaintances have access to him and can provide for his needs. Paul is trusted by Julius, the Roman officer overseeing the transport of prisoners. He treats Paul in a friendly manner and gives him a certain amount of freedom. In Rome, Paul is kept in light custody and can receive larger numbers of visitors (28:23).

It is also interesting to note the positive reaction of the Maltese islanders to the ship-wrecked sea travellers. They did not plunder and kill the ship-wrecked travellers (although that was not unheard of in antiquity) but treated them with unusual kindness. Publius provided hospitality for three days. Later, the thankful Maltese islanders provided what was necessary for the onward journey, according to the notions of ancient hospitality.

6. The *Ethos* of Paul, the Prisoner

We have already noted at the end of each section how the *behaviour and words* of Paul, the prisoner, are characterised in these chapters. Paul knows his legal status as a Roman citizen and knows how and

when to use it wisely. Paul knows the proper course of legal procedure and insists on its application to his case. He fully co-operates in the legal procedures and refuses to bribe one of his judges. He is ready to defend himself, presents the facts, and passes on relevant information that he receives. Paul is polite; there is no polemic on his side. He shows respect to his opponents. He does not escalate the conflict, nor aggravate the situation; there are no counterattacks on his opponents.[9] Paul's punitive miracle of Acts 13 remains singular in the Book of Acts.

Paul tries to make a positive contribution to the journey by referring to his experience in seafaring and by encouraging the people on board in a desperate situation. He shares his God-given confidence with them and is concerned for their physical well-being and survival. He keenly observes what is happening around him and intervenes when necessary. He gets involved to the benefit of all, be it a chore as mundane as gathering wood for a fire or as particular as employing his gift of healing for the benefit of others.

Paul shows direct concern for the establishment of ethical societies in his *instructions* to Felix about ethical conduct as a government official (righteousness, self-control) and his accountability to God ("and the coming judgement" – 24:26). In doing so, Paul shows great courage. He summarises his proclamation as a call to turn to God and *live accordingly* (26:20). Regarding his own contribution and motivation in view of the resurrection of both the just and the unjust, Paul asserts that he "always takes pains to have *a clear conscience toward both God and people*" (24:15; Paul also affirms his obedience to divine command: "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision" – 26:19). This effort ensures his own exemplary behaviour and contribution to an ethical society.

In all these situations Paul uses his own initiative, but always stays true to his calling and testifies to Jesus and his resurrection in his various defence speeches, as well as in his private conversations with Felix and when he is in Rome (see the summary in Schnabel, *Paul*, 113–115).

[9]See also Rapske's summary, "The missionary prisoner Paul as presented in Acts" (429–436).

7. Conclusion: Paul, the Prisoner, and Ethical Societies

As the Book of Acts is part of the Christian canon, Christians have sought guidance in it for different quests.[10] While not a common application of Acts, our quest – despite the limitations highlighted throughout this essay – is nevertheless legitimate and possible. This portrayal of Saint Paul, the prisoner, shows him *actively* and *critically* engaging his society. In this way, it contributes to *Christian perspectives regarding ethical societies*.

In relating this portrait to the current quest for ethical societies, the uniqueness of Paul and his special personal resources need to be kept in mind. As a Roman citizen, Paul enjoyed a privileged legal status and apparently knew how to use this skilfully to his own advantage. Paul was aware of proper Roman legal procedure, was a gifted orator (possibly he had formal rhetorical training) and moved among officials and officers with ease (see Acts 19:31). Paul hardly uses his supernatural powers in these chapters; he does not perform miracles to his own advantage. In addition, Paul encounters people who respected his rights and sought, at least in some measure, to ensure that he received justice.

While there is no simple formula to "just do as Paul did", the portrait of Paul, the prisoner, in Acts can inspire Christians in different circumstances. Acts indicates the following Christian contributions to ethical societies by presenting Paul as a model and aid to Christians and others in: i) knowing their rights, referring to them, defending them and using them wisely, as well as knowing the rights of others and respecting them, one must add; ii) insisting on proper legal procedures for themselves and others; iii) insisting on the facts and presenting them readily and fairly (without polemic or counterattacks); iv) making wise use of situations; v) avoiding aggravating situations or escalating conflicts; vi) behaving politely and respectfully towards others; vii) disregarding and rejecting unethical expectations (Acts 24:26); viii) avoiding abusing the trust of others; ix) showing concern and offering expertise and practical help, even under difficult circumstances; x) keeping the well-being of others in mind, as well as their own (Paul showed concern for the entire group of

[10]For general guidance, see Marshall; for Acts, in particular see Fee / Stuart, 94–112 ("Acts: The Question of Historical Precedent"); Stenschke, "Challenges"; and Witherington, 97–102.

passengers on board the ship and for the Maltese islanders); and xi) taking the initiative for the better, whenever possible. In displaying such behaviour, Christians can expect to receive a certain amount of respect and recognition from society at large. Christians living and serving in societies with properly functioning legal systems can emulate the exemplary behaviour of Paul; in other contexts, further reflection and guidance are mandatory.[11]

Before addressing and actively and critically engaging society at large, Christians seek to maintain a clear conscience before God and people, perform deeds in keeping with their repentance and live accountably before God in view of the resurrection and the coming judgement, as Paul claims for himself in Acts 24. Such personal integrity makes Christians models of ethical conduct in their own contexts and gives credibility and force to their witness to Christ and their ethical instruction. Their witness to the Gospel includes ethical instruction to all people – including, where possible – those in power regarding ethical conduct in office (Acts 24:25). All of this requires exemplary Christian leaders, patience, careful preparation, courage, strategic thinking and the willingness to engage society, despite all the challenges this might involve.

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[11]In the process of application, exegetical observations need to be brought into the conversation with the rich heritage of Christian moral theology, including previous applications.

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