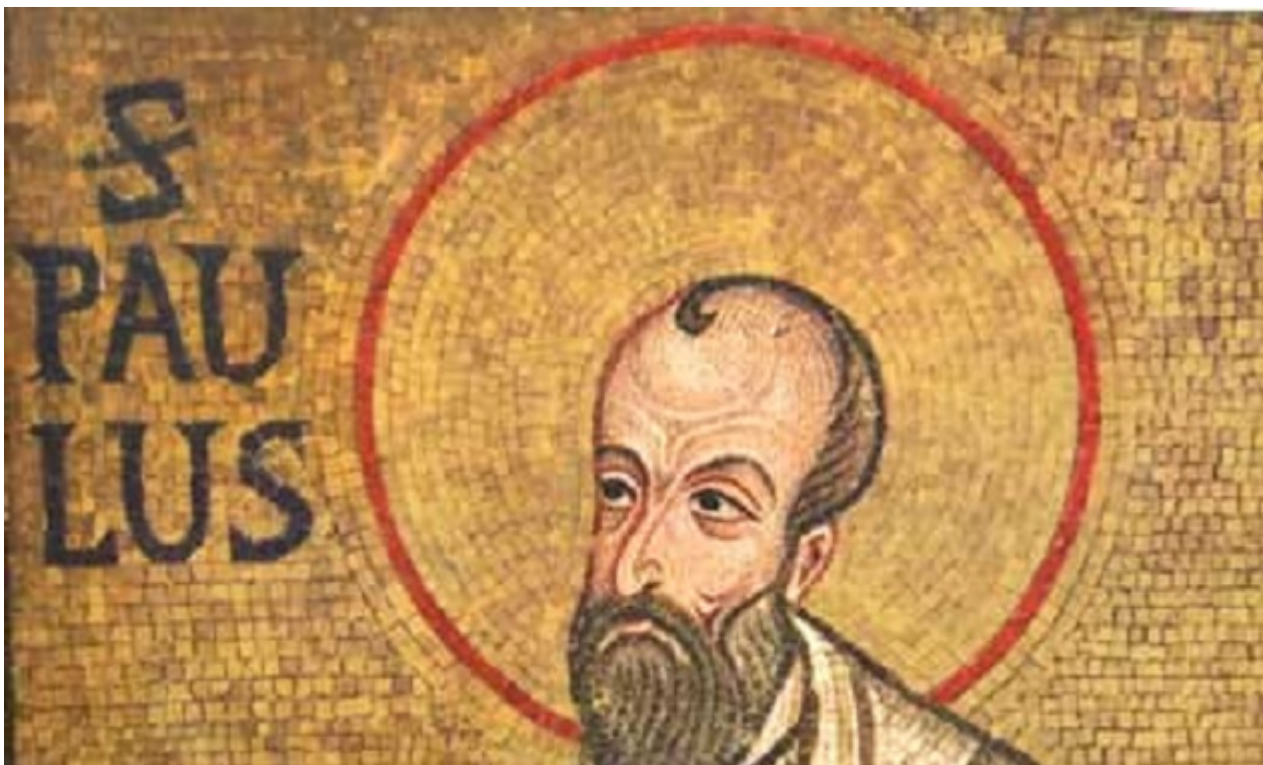


Saint Paul and Greek Society. Past-Present-Future (Ioannis Karavidopoulos)

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With the preaching of Saint Paul concerning Christ, a significant change began to occur in the Greco-Roman world in the middle of the first century A.D. The Jews of Thessaloniki were particularly annoyed by the activity of Paul and his associates and stirred up a mob, throwing society in the city into uproar. Thereafter they complained loudly to the local political authorities: “These people who have been turning the world upside down have now come here, as well... they are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar and saying that Jesus is another king” (Acts 17, 6). Unwittingly, by the use of this phrase, they recognized the already significant, and even more so the forthcoming, change in the world, which would result in its utter transformation.



This radical transformation was heralded by Saint Paul with what he said in his preaching about people's redemption in Christ and their responsibilities to others

within society. Very briefly and we might summarize the influence of the Pauline message on the society of his day in three points.

1. In contrast to the theoretical and anthropocentric freedom of the Stoic philosophers who dominated at the time of Saint Paul, he projected freedom in Christ, the freedom that flows from the historical fact of the cross and resurrection of Christ. A freedom that does not exist in our internal nature, but is offered as a gift of God. Our inability to find solutions to our problems by depending solely on our own internal powers- what, in theological terms we call "sin"- made it necessary for God to intervene historically in the world, in the person of Christ. So freedom is a gift of God to the world, in Christ. But the freedom proclaimed by Paul is not only a gift of God, but also involves a response on the part of us people, responsibility towards society and nature.

2. Unlike the despairing initiation at the time of Paul into a variety of mystery religions, which had no moral implications for people's everyday lives. Paul proclaimed initiation into the greatest mystery of all, the "Mystery of Christ" (*Eph.* 3, 4), the "mystery which has been kept secret for long ages" (*Rom.* 16, 25), a mystery which was not celebrated in the initiations of the profane, hidden away from all eyes, but which entered the bright path of history and was not intended for the few, but for all humanity. Because the Gospel message is of global dimensions and must reach "the ends of the earth".

3. Peace and security were promised by the Roman emperors. "But when they say peace and security, then sudden destruction will come upon them" (*I Thess.* 5, 3), observes Paul, perhaps hinting at the much vaunted but not implemented *Pax Romana* and *Securitas* of the Roman Caesars.

Many historians find parallels between the first Christian century and our own times, especially in matters of freedom and responsibility, initiations into various cults and the imperial worship which was accompanied by the *Pax Romana*, which today bears the nominal adjective of another great power. I would add another point of comparison. There is much talk today of globalization, not only on an economic level, but also cultural and many others besides. In the first century, the growth and spread of Christianity occurred within a framework, *mutatis mutandis*, of course, of Roman globalization with the Greek cultural model and a single common language, Greek, with mergers of religions and a uniform administrative organization. Saint Paul never discussed with his associates the matter of whether the globalization his day was reversible or not. All he cared about was to exploit the means offered, and felt the weight of his missionary obligation on his shoulders: the fact that "the Gospel must be preached to all creation". And he said "Woe

betide me if I do not preach the Gospel (*I Cor.* 9, 16). And so it was that he “set the whole world in uproar”, preaching “another king, Jesus”.

It is not easy for us to follow in any great detail the signs of turmoil in Greco-Roman society and the transformation which was to come. Therefore, please allow a giant leap of many centuries with the posing of this question: What role did Saint Paul play in theology and Greek society in the 20th century and the start of the millennium?

II

I shall begin from an important point in the mid-20th century, the Second World War, because it was after this that, in Greece, theological literature really began to blossom, as is evident from the explosive increase in theological bibliography, especially as regards Biblical and Patristic studies, but also, as might be expected, in all branches of theological studies.

What was this impressive development due to? In the first place, the ruin, material and spiritual, left over from the Second World War made it absolutely necessary for the Church and theology to address the questions which were matters of concern for people, and to do so from a firm foundation, such as the Biblical and Patristic sources of the faith. Secondly, the specialist studies of Greek theologians in the universities of Europe and America, where they were challenged in a variety of ways, resulted in a dialogue between the tradition of the Church and modern trends in academia. Even the negative challenges produced fruitful thinking with positive results. Thirdly, the establishment of a second Theological School in Greece, at the University of Thessaloniki, in 1943 (after that of Athens in 1837), increased the number of theologians in the country and, as a result, the education of students in the field of theology.

All sectors of theology attracted the attention of Greek scholars. But the area which really dominated research, especially Biblical, was that of Saint Paul's epistles. If I may express this with statistical data, which is based on personal research, I would say that 35% of Biblical theological work (particularly New Testament studies) had to do with studies which were concerned with the epistles and theology of Saint Paul. It is reasonable to ask what this preference is due to. We can find a satisfactory answer if we take the following factors into account:

As is well-known, the Apostle was the founder of the Church in Greece (Philippi, Thessaloniki, Veria, Athens, Corinth and Nikopolis), and so it is natural that Greek theological research would concern itself with his work and his epistles. Besides, in

1950, the 1900th anniversary of the foundation of the Church in Greece was celebrated in Athens, with speeches, events and the publication of commemorative books. So, apart from anything else, further impetus was given to the study of his work by this anniversary. As early as 1925, the late Archbishop Chrysostomos Papadopoulos (1923-38) had instituted the celebration of festal vespers on the sacred rock of the Areios Pagos at the feast of Peter and Paul, and actually composed a special dismissal hymn for Saint Paul.

And apart from this, the figure of Saint Paul was highlighted by the various Christian organizations which, even if they did not have firm theological bases- the usual charge against them- played an important role in the post-war years in the spiritual reconstitution of the country.

Finally, involvement with the epistles of the New Testament in general did not present the thorny problems faced by academic research into the Gospels in the West in the immediate post-war decades and which Western scholars solved in their own way, which was not always acceptable to the Orthodox.

If we are to realize the extent, and the quality, of Pauline studies in the second half of the 20th century, all we need to do is to compare them with the corresponding studies of the first half of the century, as these are reflected in a book by N. Louvaris, *Εισαγωγή εις τας περί Παύλον σπουδάς (Introduction to Studies about Paul*, 1st ed. 1919, 2nd ed. 1960). In the prologue to the first edition, having quoted the view of the distinguished German philologist Wilamowitz that three men were able to elevate and reinforce people's outlook, Plato, Goethe and Paul, Louvaris anticipated the surprise of Greeks readers at this expression, given that Greeks did not know Paul as they ought to have. He attributed this to the fact that "our religious education is always defective" and continues "and so it is that we acquire some knowledge of the great apostle only through the reading of extracts of his epistles in church". That was in 1919.

But the situation changed dramatically in the second fifty years of the century, especially in Pauline studies.

III

And now a delicate and difficult question arises: did this explosion in Pauline studies have a commensurate effect on modern Greek society? At first sight, it would appear that the answer is not entirely free of negatives. Because Saint Paul, who dominated theological studies, seems not to have had a particularly marked influence on modern Greek society. Scriptural phrases in ordinary language, which

became proverbial and are used spontaneously in everyday speech, generally come from the Gospels, especially as read in divine worship and, even more especially from Great Week, but not particularly from Saint Paul. Of course, the use of Pauline expressions by the Greek people has been noted, but it is much more limited in comparison to the everyday use of expressions from the Gospels. Even Paul's theological phrase used in connection with baptism "whoever has died is freed from sin" (*Rom.* 6,7), which demonstrates the remission from the power of sin for people who have died with Christ in baptism, is used by ordinary folk in a totally misinterpreted way to mean that the departed are free, in the consciences of their kith and kin, of any blame for whatever peccadilloes that may have committed before their death and that "we shouldn't speak ill of the dead". It would appear that the sublime theological thinking of Saint Paul, which inspired the pens of the Fathers of the Church and, for centuries, motivated theologians, hardly touched folk piety, which was more greatly affected by popular saints with great miracle-working powers. As is well enough known, this touches ordinary people's souls more than soaring theological thought.

Another reason which prevented the spread of Pauline discourse in Greek society may be sought in the accusations on the part of self-styled progressive intellectuals, who, with shallow and academically unfounded publications, often attack Paul as a misogynist, forgetting that it is Paul himself who preached the revolutionary doctrine for his time that "No-one is Jew or Greek; no-one is slave or free; no-one is male or female; but you are all one in Christ Jesus" (*Gal.* 3, 38), and much else besides of a similar nature.

When we began earlier to touch upon the subject of Paul's influence on modern Greek society, we used the expression "at first sight" and recorded reality as it impacted upon us "at first glance". If we now attempt to delve a little deeper into modern Greek life, we shall see that there are certain basic indications which allow us to trace the presence of Paul, sometimes underlying, sometimes more apparent. This attempt is reinforced by the following observations.

I. Apart from the epistles of Saint Paul to the churches in the Greek cities of Philippi, Thessaloniki and Corinth, the preservation of which, before they were printed, was ensured in thousands of manuscripts in libraries across the country, from the National Library in Athens to small local ones (with manuscripts that have likely not yet been catalogued) and culminating in the libraries of the Holy Mountain, and apart from the churches named after him, the chapels and the numberless Byzantine icons, I would like to present here, briefly, or, rather, to mention simply, the infinite and largely unrecorded local traditions about Saint Paul, some of which

are the following:

The Saint Paul neighbourhood in the north-east part of Thessaloniki, is certainly linked topographically with the visit of Saint Paul, since in the same area, or near it, there are locations linked to him in oral tradition, such as, for example, the southern chapel of Moni Vlatadon (The Monastery of the Vlatades), dedicated, according to tradition, to the memory of his preaching there, or, more likely, to his escape via that spot on his way to Veria; and the spring nearby, where he stopped to refresh himself and which since then has been known as the spring of Saint Paul. It lies in the grounds of the Friends of the Poor Association, next to the little church of Saint Paul's and also to the huge one in his name which rises today near the foot of Kedrinos Lofos (Cedar Hill).

Memories of Saint Paul echo in many other places in Greece. From Ierissos, Nea Fokea and Sithonia in Halkidiki, where, when passing, Saint Paul is said to have scratched a groove with his sword (the location is Spathies ["Sword-cuts"]) or the hill Ai-Pavlos near Nikiti, where Christ's thirsty apostle struck a rock with his sword, like a second Moses, and caused a stream of water to flow which continues to do so to this day. There are also locations linked to Saint Paul in Crete, Cyprus and Kefalonia, the last of which, according to the recent theory of a German geographer, is the Melite of the *Acts* (chaps. 27-8), where the shipwreck occurred.

All of these and many other traditions, bear witness to the fact that the folk soul in Greece keeps alive the memory of the visits of Saint Paul and this memory is reflected in place-names, narratives and other manifestations, which we cannot say are unrelated to or independent of the piety of the Greek people.

In 1964, at his investiture as honorary Doctor of Philosophy at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, George Seferis, [the Nobel prize winning poet], said: "We are a people with a dauntless soul, who have kept the deep deposits of our memory even in centuries of persecutions and empty words. Now that the world around us wants to make us boarders at a global inn, shall we really renounce this memory? Will we, as it were, agree to be cheated out of our heritage? I'm not looking for stopping or for turning back; I'm looking for the intellect, the sensitivity and the courage of people who go forwards".

2. The sermon preached by Saint Paul in the Roman Empire, as we have already seen, was a message of freedom, but, at the same time, one of responsibility. But when freedom is not experienced with responsibility by the same person, it bears a cost, both for individuals human cases and for society as a whole. Society today presents many pathological symptoms, particularly that of a surfeit of freedom,

linked, unfortunately, to a lack of responsibility. But no-one can seriously claim that there are no responsible nuclei radiating the life of love and freedom: the love which derives from Him “Who loved us and gave Himself for us” (*Gal. 2, 20*); and the freedom “for which Christ set us free” (*Gal. 5, 1*). Can anyone deny that the fruit of this freedom of the Spirit of God comes from the seed which Paul sowed, orally and in writing, among the Greek people?

3. The further one researches modern Greek society, the more one realizes that, if not in the superficial sphere of everyday speech, but in our real human and social relationships, the spirit of the Pauline theological message is present. The enlistment of the faithful in social activities, their participation as leaders or ordinary members in the tasks of reforming society, their critical discourse, particularly that of Church leaders, as regards what is happening around us, and also their behaviour in practice are nothing but the implementation of Pauline social models over time, from the first century until today. At the time when the Stoic, Epicurean and Cynic orators of the day were proposing inactivity and indifference, applying the well-known saying “*λάθε βιώσας*” (live secretly), Paul, without losing himself in an eschatological vision, urges Christians to preserve a practical “community spirit” towards absolutely everyone, to participate actively in social life, and to tend to the needs of our fellow citizens and of all people. In this way he clearly differentiates his position from that of the opposing exhortations of the orators of the time, making his well known point that “If people don’t want to work, let them not eat” (*II Thess. 3, 10*).

Paul’s vision was not limited to the brethren in a particular community, but was of global dimensions. His “always do good, to each other and everyone” (*I Thess. 5, 15*) is typical of his exhortations in all his epistles, not only in the first two to the Thessalonians. The universality of his teaching, not only on the theological level of the salvation of the Jews and Gentiles, but also on a practical level of “brotherly love” towards all in an era, like that of today, of globalization, with all the positive and negative effects- especially the latter- that have been noted by Orthodox Church leaders and academic theologians, is the real contribution over time of Pauline discourse to the society of our own day.

At the turn of the second millennium, we must confess that, if Pauline discourse has not yet been experienced in all its facets, the work before us, especially for the younger generation of theologians and other scholars, is obviously plentiful. One swallow does not make a summer and there remains much work to be done.

The seal of the Theological School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki is etched with the figure of Saint Paul, surrounded by his exhortation to the

Thessalonians: “Do not quench the Spirit” (*I Thess.* 5, 19).

Over the years, the society of the city has demonstrated its ability to withstand the trials of history, the conquests and the wars and, if not the whole, at least a large part of it has been dynamic in its adherence to the Pauline exhortation above. In his Chronicle of the fall of city in 904 A. D. the Thessalonian cleric Ioannis Kameniatis writes: “For us, our home is Thessaloniki... a great city and the first of the Macedonians... proud of its piety which it received at the beginning and has maintained until now. For Thessaloniki [boasts] of having Paul as its teacher of piety, ...being the first to be recognized as Orthodox and called such, and therefore, as special, to be exalted above the others”.

After what we have said above, which is certainly no sociological study but merely some thoughts by a Biblical theologian, we believe that what Kameniatis said about the Thessalonians of the end of the first millennium still holds true, generally, the Greeks of the end of the second, who boast of having Paul as a teacher of piety. It is, indeed, valid not only as a valuable legacy from the past, but mostly and above all as an imperative duty for the present and the future.