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Pluriformity in Pauline Thought Regarding Financial Support From the Christian Communities at Thessalonica and Corinth: A Reflection

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"There are many issues, sociological, theological, and anthropological that surfaced in Paul's compositions to the early Christian communities. Frequently, Paul expressed pluriformity in the discussion of those issues. In other words, Paul often varied his meaning in speaking about a particular issue."

Pluriformity in Pauline Thought Regarding Financial Support From the Christian Communities at Thessalonica and Corinth: A Reflection.

Jonathan Schott

There are many issues, sociological, theological, and anthropological that surfaced in Paul's compositions to the early Christian communities. Frequently, Paul expressed pluriformity in the discussion of those issues. In other words, Paul often varied his meaning in speaking about a particular issue.

The purpose of this brief reflection is to discuss the pluriformity of meaning concerning Paul's stance on financial support from the early Christian communities at Thessalonica and Corinth and the purpose of that financial support. Specifically, I propose that Paul understood the communities' financial support as a necessity for the early church faithful. However, I contend that Paul did not vision financial collection as a "reward" or "salary" for his work as an apostle—in fact he vehemently denied that claim. Rather, Paul understood the requirement of financial support specifically earmarked for the church in Jerusalem, commissioned by the gathering known as "the Jerusalem Conference" (Gal 2:10). We will rely on two scriptural texts to illustrate the variance of presentation of the issue. We will examine 1 Thess 2:5-7 -- *As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ --* and 1 Cor 16:1-4 – *Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go*

also, they will accompany me -- to illustrate Paul's varying standpoints on financial support from the early Christian churches.

In 1 Thess 2:5-7, a rather simple context of an oath presents the pretext for Paul's rejection of financial support as reward or payment for his services. Using the phraseology "as God is our witness," Paul defers his message to the highest authority to not only authenticate the truth of the Gospel message, but also to authenticate that what he is saying as an Apostle is in fact, truthful, ordained by his own commission in Christ. The rhetoric of an oath is indicative of Paul's belief that he and his companions had been sent by God to proclaim the Gospel and thus the associated administrative tasks that forthwith accompanied the Gospel message. Therefore, what follows in 2:5 rightly defers to God's authority in stating that Paul and his companions have not, nor have they ever sought personal financial gain for their missionary work. Paul did not collect funds for his missionary work; he collected funds specifically for the church in Jerusalem.

1 Thess 2:5-6 lays the framework for Paul's understanding of his apostolic administrative functionality that follows in 2:7 (. In 2:7 Paul states that by his Apostolicity, he does and can have the authority to seek financial support from the church in Thessalonica, but that his ministry took on a pastoral approach rather than administrative.¹ In other words, while issues like financial support were Paul's right to demand, he did not seek this from the Thessalonians. This presentation of financial support is markedly different from another instance of Paul's appeal for finances in 1 Cor 16:1-4, to which we now focus our attention.

¹ Cf. 1 Cor 9:4-15 for Paul's insistence that financial compensation should not skew the validity of his ministry.

The responsorial tone of 16:1 indicates that Paul is commenting on earlier questions raised by the Corinthians. Paul's deliberate and purposeful rhetoric regarding the "collection for the saints" is indicative of Paul's understanding of the goal of financial support. In 16:1-4 specific directions, given also to other early church communities (16:1), are made to ensure the growth of a financial package to be delivered to the church at Jerusalem. Furthermore, reference again is given to Paul's variance on the goal of financial support in 16:3-4. As if to say "To be sure your gift goes to Jerusalem, you may send someone with me." These brief words are reflective of Paul's insistence that the value of his ministerial work, commissioned by Christ, should not be blurred by financial worry.

Essentially, Paul is showing the wealthy church at Corinth that the fellowship and stewardship of the community in their own assembly was to serve as a model to the people and as a reminder of the goodness of Christ throughout the world, thus implying that their financial support for Jerusalem might be a means to cross the divide between the "Jewish" Christian church in Jerusalem and the "Gentile" Christian church throughout Macedonia and Achaëia.

To conclude, one may infer that this bridge-building between the two demographics through financial stewardship may have been one of Paul's ultimate goals for raising the collection. Paul could have been trying to demonstrate to both the Macedonian and Achaëian churches and the church in Jerusalem that there was indeed no longer "Jew and Greek" by appealing to the willingness of Christians to sacrificially offer financial support to one another. This, however, raises many questions, such as why there was only one line of financial support: into Jerusalem. Could Paul have possibly believed

that the Macedonian collection was a fee paid to the Jewish Christians on behalf of the Gentile as an “acceptance tax?” How much of the collection was given to the poor? Why do we not find any reference to the specifics of the collection in the Lucan account in Acts? Was the collection mandated by the Jerusalem Conference as a sign of unity amongst the early Christian communities? Or, did Paul simply wish to bring a large collection to the church in Jerusalem to boast about his ability to evangelize? These brief inquiries are just pieces of the larger puzzle that we must attempt to solve. However, we can, and have shown that Paul demonstrated a clear pluriformity in regards to financial support. Paul presented two clear varying stances on financial support from the early Christian communities at Thessalonica and Corinth. Their money was not payment to Paul and his companions for flattery or as a “salary.” Rather, it was a financial package to be delivered to the “saints” in Jerusalem. Now, as scholars, our task is to dive deeper into our own “theological coffers” to withdraw more scholarship on the subject of the collection and the financial administration of the early Christian churches.

Note: all Scriptural texts are New Revised Standard Version.