


Pauline ethics in the context of the socio-political problems in Zimbabwe

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The ethics of Paul has been a subject of research for decades, and they have been applied in various contexts globally. Paul was a founder and nurturer of various early Christian assemblies. He addressed moral matters in these assemblies of groups of concerned people. Recent New Testament scholars have indicated that Paul's ethical teachings were meant to fit the particular needs of the congregations he had established. However, the principles drawn from Paul's moral teachings can be applied to any context, such as the Zimbabwean socio-political environment. Therefore, this article seeks to interrogate the suitability of Pauline ethics as a solution to the socio-political challenges facing Zimbabwe. The article argues that Pauline ethics can be applied as a solution to these challenges. The social conflict theory informs the analysis and arguments proffered in this article and enables one to understand the complex relationship between the ethics of Paul and the contemporary Zimbabwean context. The article concludes that there should be an equilibrium among rights, interests, and goods in the volatile Zimbabwean socio-political environment in order to promote human flourishing.

Contribution: The article significantly contributes by bringing to the fore the interface between New Testament studies and the Zimbabwean socio-political context.

Keywords: Pauline ethics; socio-political problems; Zimbabwe; social conflict theory; governing authorities.

Introduction

In his ministry as a missionary who established different Christian communities, Paul encountered several complex moral and practical challenges that threatened the existence of his newly established assemblies. These newly established communities such as Corinth, Thessalonica, Galatia, Rome, and Philippi, had been struggling with issues concerning sex and marriage, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, church order and worship, male and female roles, and politics and slavery, among other issues. To understand Pauline ethics, we must understand Paul's responses to these issues. The ethical teachings of Paul can be found in three categories of ethical exhortations contained in the authentic Pauline letters: situational exhortations, which consist of counsel and advice on any particular issue raised by the community (e.g., 1 Cor 5:1–11:1); traditional exhortations, which encompass general ethical themes such as love and holiness (e.g., Rm 12:1–13:14); and ecclesiastical exhortations, which are related to the institutional needs of the ministry and church (e.g., 1 Cor 11:2–14:40; Rosner 2006). The focus of this article is to interrogate Pauline ethics in light of the socio-political situation in Zimbabwe. Utilising the insights of social conflict theory, this article examines the suitability of the Pauline exhortations as a solution to the socio-political problems bedeviling Zimbabwe. It addresses issues such as corruption, human rights abuse, political violence, and the brain drain, among others.

Theoretical framework: Social conflict theory

This article utilises the insights of social conflict theory in seeking to examine and inform the analysis and arguments proffered to understand the complex relationship between the ethics of Paul and the contemporary Zimbabwean context. This theory was developed by Karl Marx (1818–1883), who focused on the unequal and competitive characteristics of social life and how they create conflict and social change. The social conflict theory can be defined as 'a macro-oriented paradigm in sociology that views society as an arena of inequality that generates conflict and social change' (Kurtz & Kurtz 2016:293). In other words, Marx maintained that a

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socialist society can fix the problems created by capitalism. The major aspects of this theory are that society can be constructed in a way that can benefit a few people while the majority are suffering and social inequality is determined by class, race, age and sex. According to Marx, social conflict theory is about the dominant group in society against the minority social group relations. He is known as the 'father' of social conflict theory.

Marx was a German sociologist, philosopher, revolutionary socialist, and economist. He developed his theory on the premise of the capitalist principle that for people to be productive, they have to work for survival. Schaefer (2011:138) argues that 'people have two relationships to the means of production: you either own the productive property or you work for someone who does'. There is always a conflict of interest between the owners and the workers at the centre of Marx's thinking. Marx questioned: How can we find so many poor people in an industrial and wealthy society? This question is relevant to this article, which concerns the communities in which Paul established Christian assemblies. These communities comprised poor people against the backdrop of a wealthy and industrial society. Hence, there was a conflict between the poor and the rich. This is reminiscent of the Zimbabwean socio-political context. Despite its mineral wealth and agricultural potential, the country is so poor that electricity is only available for 5 h per day. In addition, corruption is at unprecedented levels, further impoverishing the majority of Zimbabweans. According to Marx, in a scenario such as Zimbabwe, given the struggle among the social groups over scarce resources, social conflict is inevitable. Kurtz and Kurtz (2016:296) aptly argue that Marx's 'primary concern, however, was class conflict, which arises from the way society produces material goods'. In this regard, a social conflict theorist would contend that those in power will guard against the seizure of their benefits and privileges by the disadvantaged. Marx's social conflict theory assists in understanding the relevance of Pauline ethics in the poverty-stricken Zimbabwean context.

An overview of the authentic Pauline letters

Most scholars (see, e.g. Brown 2015; Porter 1995; Puskas & Robbins 2011) agree that there are seven authentic Pauline letters: Galatians, Romans, 1st Corinthians, Philippians, 2nd Corinthians, 1st Thessalonians and Philemon. Three other letters bear the name of Paul as the author. The first is the Pastoral letters (1st Timothy, 2nd Timothy, and Titus) that are understood as pseudepigraphic. The other two letters, namely Colossians and Ephesians, are debated whether Paul wrote them. These five letters (Pastoral and Deutro-Pauline) are called Deutro-Pauline or Secondary Pauline letters. In this article, the ethical teachings derived from the authentic Pauline letters are applied to the Zimbabwean social and political terrain.

Pauline ethics

The ethical teachings of Paul are inseparably intertwined with his theology. Pauline doctrines are drawn from his letters. Paul's exhortations in his teaching show a two-fold structure, whereby the first mainly pertains to issues of belief, while the second predominantly pertains to Christian moral teaching. Paul had a broad range of moral teachings but he was more concerned with the ethical teachings of virtue and vice (such as 1 Cor 5:9–11; Rm 1:29–31; 13:13). Paul desired to teach his audience 'how one ought to walk and please God' (1 Th 4:1). This teaching by Paul was central in all his letters. According to Rosner (2006:211), Paul's major missionary goal was not just to save those who are lost (1 Cor 9:22) but also to 'present every person mature in Christ'. He also wanted to bring Gentiles into a full relationship with God. Most of Paul's letters were inspired by ethical teachings to his newly founded Christian communities. Dunn (1998) argues that in Galatians, 1 Corinthians, and 2 Corinthians and Romans, Paul was trying to solve problems pertaining to church divisions in those communities. In all these letters, he encouraged unity in Christ in order to avoid division in the church. Another situational ethical teaching by Paul pertains to the imminent coming of Christ (1 Th 4). The imminent return of Christ created many problems for the people of Thessalonica because they had abandoned their daily chores while waiting for his return.

At this point, the critical question is: How important are the law and scripture to Paul's ethical teaching? Rosner (2006:212) states that, 'In the first century, there was a widespread Jewish concern with the interpretation of the Pentateuch, including legal decisions on conduct, according to the law'. It is apparent that during Paul's time, Jewish ethical teachers presumed that the authority of the law was significant in their moral instruction. The issue of the law is one of the moral teachings that Paul raised, although he appeared to be against it in his letters. Several scholars, such as Hays (1995), Furnish (1996) and Dunn (1998) agree, in principle, that the law of Moses is irrelevant to ethical teachings. In his letters, Paul made negative statements about the law, indicating that it was valueless for Christians. According to Paul in Romans 7:15, the law 'works wrath', it 'increases sin' (Rm 5:20; 7:5; 8–11), and it also 'kills' (Rm 7:5). Paul also argued that Christians were no longer 'under the law' (1 Cor 9:20) and stated that through Christ's death, 'the law has come to an end' (Rm 10:4). Lastly, Paul clearly set aside various fundamental requirements of the law such as food laws (Rm 14:1–4, 14, 20), the Sabbath (Gl 4:9–11; Rm 14:5), and circumcision (Gl 5:2–6; 1 Cor 7:17–20). Even though Paul appears to have been downplaying the validity of the law in his letters, there is ample evidence that the law was an important and edifying basis for his ethical exhortations. Rosner (2006) argues that:

Paul's critique of the law relates, for the most part, to its abuse by sin and the pride and presumption it sometimes instilled in his kinsfolk when it marked them from other nations. (p. 214)

For Paul, scripture was a major basis for his teaching and ethical exhortations for Christians as it says, 'for our instruction' (1 Cor 10:11) and 'written for us' (1 Cor 9:9).

A cursory survey of the authentic Pauline letters shows that Paul used the Old Testament in four ways when addressing ethical teaching in churches (Hays 1996). Firstly, Paul sometimes read scripture as if the message was directed to the church. In most cases, he asked: 'What does scripture say?' (Gl 4: 30). He also taught the temptation for revenge when a person is wronged. He referred to Proverbs 25:21–2 which says: 'If your enemies are hungry, feed them' (Rm 12:20–21). Furthermore, he used scripture with reference to the issue of supporting the work of the gospel. He referred to Deuteronomy 25:4, which states that God 'speaks entirely for our sake' (1 Cor 9:10) and 'You shall not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain' (1 Cor 9:9).

Secondly, Paul implicitly used scripture as a source of specific norms (Rosner 2006). In Romans 13:8–10, Paul took for granted that acts such as covetousness, adultery, theft and murder were wrong because of the law. Although Paul was not explicit, his ethical teachings were based on scripture. Clearly, the language in Romans 1 condemns idolatry, incest in 1 Corinthians 5, and 'the works of the flesh' in Galatians 5:19–21, and shows that his ethical judgments were based on scripture. Scripture was thus significant to Pauline ethical teaching.

Thirdly, Paul usually gave narratives from scripture as examples of good moral teaching. He perceived the practical experiences of the people of Israel as a model for the church. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 10, he referred 'to Israel's wilderness wanderings and sin with the golden calf to warn the church against idolatry, sexual immorality, putting Christ to the test, and murmuring against God' (Clarke 1993). The issue was that the church was to consider itself as part of the Israelite's story, 'to hear the resonances between it and their own situation, and to shape their lives accordingly' (Rosner 2015:213). In a similar way, in 2 Corinthians 8:7–15, Paul proposed and encouraged the church to contribute to the poor Jerusalem church by referencing the divine provision of manna in the desert (Ex 16:18).

Fourthly, for Paul, in addressing moral problems, scripture was constantly a narrative outline of the community's identity. His moral judgement was intertwined with his sense of the calling of God's people. Chow (1993) claims that:

[W]hen Paul writes to the churches in need of moral discernment, he reminds them, based on scripture, of who they are and where they stand in relation to God's purpose. (p. 133)

Sampley (1991) agrees and states that:

Paul, with frequent reference to the promises to Abraham and the prophecies of Isaiah, used scripture to 'provide an overarching proleptic vision of God's design to redeem the world' and situates the community of believers within the unfolding story of this dramatic redemption. (p. 96)

All the moral teachings that Paul offered to his Christian communities discover their eventual merit in his narrative context.

As noticed in the given discussion, the ethics of Paul are situational responses to questions raised by Christian communities. These ethical teachings of Paul emanated from problems within the communities, probably because of conflict based on competition for power and resources, and the tensions between the rich and the poor, male and female, and Jews and Gentiles, among other issues. For instance, in 1 Corinthians there is church division and factionalism within the church because of power struggles. This is also evident in Romans 14–15, where there is a dietary conflict because the community was a composite of Christians from different religious and social backgrounds. From a sociological perspective, Paul, in his ethical teachings, attempted to resocialise the Christian communities according to the values and norms based on the Christ event on the cross. According to Purvis (1996:414), '[i]n the normal course of growing up, persons are socialized into ways of being in the world that are considered suitable and "normal"'. Similarly, Paul wanted different Christian communities to learn what was acceptable and normal in the Christian life. At Corinth, for example, some people moved from one culture to another, and from one social norm to another. It is possible that this was the process of resocialisation. It was not only about acquiring and learning novel behaviour but also about ways of feeling and seeing, being in another world, which sociologists of religion refer to as 'symbolic worlds' (Purvis 1996:414). In this context, creating a new symbolic world based on the Christ event on the cross was Paul's fundamental goal in all the Christian communities he taught.

Paul's ethical teaching, concerning Christian freedom and dietary restrictions in 1 Corinthians 8–10, is now elaborated on. As has been alluded to here, the community of Corinth constituted people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. Many Jews had participated in cults, which practised dietary laws with different restrictions. Aasgaard (2002) points out that:

[A]t least some of the Gentiles among them had participated in pagan cults in which meat was sacrificed to idols and then eaten as participation in the reality of that god or goddess. (p. 517)

Thus for the new Christian community in Corinth, to eat meat that was being sold in the marketplace and which could have been sacrificed to idols was problematic. Yet Paul preached the gospel of Christ, which assured freedom from the old restrictions and norms. It is significant to observe that the people who would be entering a new Christian community were supposed to be radically resocialised to a novel 'reality' whereby the cross was central. Purvis (1993:80) argues that 'whatever values and practices they had embodied in their lives would be subject to the new symbol system, the new perspective of life that the gospel offered'. Therefore, the people in Corinth could have insisted that eating meat sold in marketplaces was not an issue and were

theologically correct. However, doing so brought dissonance and conflict within the new community and they had to draw the attention of Paul to resolve the problem. The reality of the power of idols, it was argued, had no place in the new Christian community and was substituted by the Christ event on the cross. In his response to this conflict, Paul did not indicate whether or not to eat the meat sacrificed to idols. However, at the end of his discussion, he simply stated:

All things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial. All things are lawful, but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage but that of the other. (1 Cor 10:23–24)

It has been established that the ethical teachings of Paul are based on the Old Testament (the Law of Moses) and the cross of Jesus Christ. What we are now confronted with are these questions: Can the exhortations of Paul help us to understand the complex relationship between the ethics of Paul and the contemporary Zimbabwean context? Can the ethics of Paul be used as a panacea for the socio-political challenges that have affected Zimbabwe for decades?

In the next section, the focus is on the relevance of Pauline ethics to the socio-political landscape in Zimbabwe.

The Zimbabwean socio-political terrain: Relevance of Pauline ethics

Zimbabwe has been plunged into a deeply rooted crisis, which needs a concerted effort from all stakeholders to work together towards building a better Zimbabwe. One may ask: Is this the Zimbabwe that we yearned for? Paying special attention to the socio-political and economic situation that is prevailing in Zimbabwe today, the country, during its early postcolonial period, was known as a 'jewel' and 'a bread basket of Africa' (Mavengano & Marevesa 2023). These were the days when there was an economic boom and Zimbabwe could feed the whole of Africa because of its huge agricultural output. Zimbabwe's entry into independence was a marvel economically, socially, politically, and agriculturally, among other good things, but these are now just memories of her heyday and golden days.

Soon after independence, there was a massive expansion of the educational system. The people who had not been able to go to school because of the war were encouraged to return to school. Several schools, colleges and universities were opened in rural areas to cater for those who had been disadvantaged during the colonial period (ZCBC 2020:6). Zimbabwe emerged as having the highest literacy rate in Africa (Dube 2020) and great strides were made in the first 15 years after independence. There was expansion of public health facilities across the country in the sense that medical services were established in both government and mission hospitals where the bulk of medical services were provided, especially in rural areas (Dube 2020). There was also a mass distribution of electricity, especially in rural areas, which the colonial masters had abandoned. Among the many positive developments post-independence in improving the lives of

the people, was the adoption by the new government of the policy of reconciliation with different stakeholders in Zimbabwean society (ZCBC 2020).

Problems in Zimbabwe emerged during the power struggle and subsequent conflict between the Patriotic Front's Zimbabwe African People's Union (PF-ZAPU) led by the late and former vice president of Zimbabwe, Joshua Nkomo and the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) headed by the late and former president of the Republic of Zimbabwe, Robert Gabriel Mugabe. The struggle for control and ownership of the liberation of the country exacerbated the conflict. The two liberation parties were also fighting because of ideological and ethnic differences, and these differences culminated in the Gukurahundi Massacre in which an estimated 20 000 people lost their lives (Rwodzi 2020). This marked the beginning of trouble in Zimbabwe. This brief historical recall of Zimbabwe's socio-political and economic path is relevant to this article in the sense that questions such as, What went wrong for this country? Why are we in this crisis? need to be asked. We have witnessed and continue to witness many highly qualified professional people leaving the country for greener pastures in neighbouring countries and overseas (Marevesa 2020). The socio-political and economic conflict in Zimbabwe was premised on fighting for power and control of resources, resulting in few people benefiting and the majority suffering.

Indicative of the scenario currently taking place in Zimbabwe, is the smuggling of gold. A self-proclaimed prophet and ambassador-at-large, Uebert Angel, has been a central figure in Al Jazeera's 'Gold Mafia' documentary (The Zimbabwean Mail 2023) and several high-profile politicians and business people have been implicated in this mafia. It is alleged that billions of United States dollars have been smuggled out of the country for the benefit of a few at the expense of the majority. What is disheartening is that the majority of Zimbabweans are in abject poverty, where civil servants are getting 'peanuts' at the end of each month, the health delivery system has collapsed, citizens are struggling to get clean water, and electricity, as alluded to earlier, is now a scarce commodity. Zimbabwe is like a capitalistic country in which there is inequality, which generates conflict determined by class, race, and sex, among other factors.

The ethics of Paul can be relevant in the Zimbabwean situation in that the country needs to be radically resocialised (Purvis 1993) into a new society or country whereby good governance is central. A similar situation is reflected in 1 Corinthians 1 ff. In this situation conflict based on power had divided the church into four groups. Paul encouraged the groups to be united in Jesus Christ. In the same way, Zimbabwe needs to come out of its political and media polarisation. This polarisation has divided people into various groups resulting in much suffering and ending in politically motivated violence. Apart from this violence, Zimbabwe is now

characterised by hyperinflation, corruption, sanctions, and other social ills, all of which threaten the unity of its people. The problems that bedevil Zimbabwe are a result of the dominant group (ZANU-PF) in the country being opposed to the minority group (opposition political parties). Masunungure and Badza (2020) claim that the challenge is that the opposition parties are made up of actors with competing ethnic, religious and political interests. Among the competing political interests are differences on how Zimbabwe can fix its many problems. The competing interests can also be seen at international fora, where Western and Eastern countries compete for the dominant control of the natural resources in Zimbabwe. In the scramble to get dominance and control, Zimbabwe has become a battleground for the superpowers. The countries that have competing interests in Zimbabwe, particularly those that intend to siphon natural resources, have no concern about the welfare of the country's citizens as their main intention is to loot. If the ethics of Paul are applied in such a scenario we may not have a situation in which the Zimbabwe elite and the international competitors are fighting, at the expense of the poor majority, for the nation's resources.

Paul, in Romans 13:1 ff, talked about everyone submitting to government authorities because all authority comes from God. This is an interesting ethical teaching of Paul, which various scholars such as Rosner (2006), Dunn (1998) and Furnish (1996) have grappled with without reaching a consensus on what Paul was saying. The complexity of this ethical exhortation to the people of Rome lies in it being applicable to every person. Yet Paul and other apostles refused to listen to the command from authorities to stop preaching the gospel, for example, Acts 5:27–29. Paul indicated that Christians should set themselves aside and have faith in God to provide what they need through the people in authority, either bad or good. This type of ethical teaching of Paul is relevant to Zimbabwe because it is the submission of this article that all authority comes from God, whether evil or good. Zimbabwean Christians have been submitting to their governing authorities even though there is, as mentioned, corruption, a brain drain, sanctions, shortages of health services, politically motivated violence before, during and after elections, and many other issues. The church continues to be submissive to the governing authorities. However, the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishop's Conference (ZCBC) was the only church organisation that wrote a critical communique challenging the government on its thwarting of the anti-government protests that took place on 31 July 2020 (among other issues that the government was falling short of). The communique created conflict between the church and the state over the challenges that it highlighted. It asked questions such as 'Is this the Zimbabwe we want?' (Dube 2021:5).

The church-state relationship is so poor that most Zimbabweans view the country as being characterised by numerous crises including corruption, human rights abuses, economic meltdowns and deepening poverty. The perpetual call for protests on the part of the population is

perhaps a signal of the mounting frustrations with the governing authorities who are not encouraging social, political and economic stability for Zimbabweans. Rather, their suppression of rebellious anger and voices only worsens the situation and nose-dives the nation into a further grave crisis (Dube 2021). According to the ZCBC (2020:3), '[t]his comes on the backdrop of unresolved past hurts like Gukurahundi, which continue to spawn even more angry new generations'. The African Union (AU), the European Union (EU), and the United Nations (UN) have made numerous clarion calls complaining about the abuse of human rights after the demise of the former president of Zimbabwe, but there has been no change. The ZCBC (2020) argues that '...some of our people continue to live in hideouts, with some incarcerated while others are on the run. Fear runs down the spine of our people today'. This led it to react to the governing authorities of Zimbabwe (the above-mentioned communique). The church in Zimbabwe is represented by the ZCBC, while submitting to the governing authorities, was able to be the voice of the voiceless. It boldly drew the attention of the governing authorities to the socio-political and economic problems that the people of Zimbabwe were facing. The issues raised by the church have resulted in much conflict between it and the state. Pauline ethics, therefore, becomes relevant to the socio-political terrain in Zimbabwe. The governing authorities in the country require a radical resocialisation into good governance. To do so, they need to abandon maladministration, corruption, political and media polarisation, and the abuse of human rights, among others.

Reflections

This article has observed that the ethics of Paul can be understood in terms of three groupings of exhortations, namely situational, which addresses issues raised by a particular community; traditional, which deals with general motifs like love and holiness; and ecclesiastical, which are related to the institutional needs of the ministry and church. It is significant and apparent that the law and scripture were important during the Pentateuch and the time of Paul. The Jewish teachers acknowledged that the law was important and relevant in moral teaching. It is also apparent that Paul downplayed its relevance and value, viewing it as unimportant. Nonetheless, even though Paul in his letters appeared to downplay the validity of the law, there is ample evidence that the law was an important and edifying basis for his ethical exhortations. It is observed that the ethical teachings of Paul emanated from problems within the communities probably as a result of conflict based on competition for power, resources, tensions between the rich and the poor, male and female, and Jews and Gentiles, among other factors. For instance, 1 Corinthians points to there being division/factionalism within the church because of power struggles. This is also evident in Romans 14–15 where dietary conflict emerged because the community comprised Christians from different religious and social backgrounds. From a sociological perspective, Paul in his ethical teachings was attempting to resocialise the Christian

communities according to the values and norms based on Christ's event on the cross. Similarly, this article advocates that the governing authorities in Zimbabwe, the churches and the political parties should learn what is considered acceptable and normal in a given country in terms of good governance. It is crucial for Zimbabweans to be resocialised from corruption, abuse of human rights, political and media polarisation, and politically motivated violence, among other problems that are bedevilling their country.

Conclusion

It was established that Paul in his ministry as a missionary encountered various complex moral and practical challenges in his newly established Christian assemblies – challenges that threatened their existence. These communities such as Corinth, Thessalonica, Galatia, Rome, and Philippi had been struggling with issues concerning, among others, sex and marriage, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, church order and worship, male and female roles, politics and slavery. This article argues that Paul developed his ethical teachings when addressing these issues. The ethics of Paul have been a subject of research for decades and in this article they have been applied to the socio-political and economic terrain in Zimbabwe. The utilisation of the insights of social conflict theory in the article has demonstrated that the Pauline ethical exhortations are suitable as a solution for addressing Zimbabwe's socio-political and economic issues including corruption, human rights abuse, political violence, and the brain drain. This article challenges governing authorities, political parties, civic organisations and other stakeholders in Zimbabwe to be resocialised (Purvis 1993) in order to address the problems bedevilling the country.

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