

## **The Pauline Psychology**

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## 1. Introduction

Paul's teaching on humanity is rich and at the same time complex. Understanding the theological significance of Paul's writings requires some knowledge of the particular terms he uses. We therefore first of all study along the most common Pauline expressions with particular emphasis on Paul's distinct usage of the 'flesh' (*sarx*), before we then in addition explore certain teachings on the Christian life from a more practical viewpoint. By way of summary the conclusion at the end of this work points to the implications of the Christian doctrine.

## 2. Anthropological Terms

### A. Human Personality

#### psyche (*Ψυχή*)

*Psyche* (soul) is an expression Paul uses to address the individual person as a whole. Paul does not distinguish between body and soul like the Hellenists did. Rather, the *psyche* is one's life itself that he can lose. (Rom 11:3; 16:4; Phil 2:30) Paul's usage corresponds with Jesus' saying, "Whoever wants to save his life [*psyche*] will lose it." (Mk 8:35) Jesus himself gave his *psyche*. (Mk 10:45; Jn 10:11) As an apostle, Paul shared his *psyche* with the believers in Thessalonica. (1 Thess 2:8) *Ek psyche* is translated in the NIV as 'from your heart' and 'with all your heart' and points to the

commitment of the whole individual in religious service. (Eph 6:6; Col 3:23)

Once, Paul mentions *psyche* beside *pneuma* (spirit) and *soma* (body): all three should "...be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Thess 5:23)

A technical division into three distinct human parts overshoots the mark, in my view.

Wherever *psyche* is mentioned, it refers to the human life and person as a whole with the tendency to point to the inner quality of man since Paul exhorts his readers to be "of one soul." (Phil 2:2; cf. Phil 2:20).

### **pneuma (πνεῦμα)**

Though *pneuma* (spirit) is first of all a term for the Spirit of God and of Christ (Rom 8:14; 1 Cor 2:11; 3:16; 2 Cor 3:3; 1 Thess 4:8; Eph 1:13; 4:30; Rom 8:9; Gal 4:6; Phil 1:19), the same word is used to designate the Spirit of man. The significance of the term lies in the fact that the human *pneuma* is capable of having relationship to the divine *pneuma*. In Rom 8:16, the divine *pneuma* encounters the human *pneuma* to testify "that we are God's children." Because the believer possesses both the human *pneuma* and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:9), he is enabled for spiritual service (Rom 1:9), prayer, prophecy (1 Cor 14:14.32) and true worship (Phil 3:3). John writes that "God is spirit" (Jn 4:24), so man can be "one with him in spirit." (1 Cor 6:17)

The believer experiences life and renewal in the realm of the spirit. (Rom 8:10; Eph 4:23) In Romans, the living spirit stands in contrast to the mortal body which is

dying because of sin. Another antithesis is found in Paul's comparison of the 'circumcision in the spirit' that is different from the 'circumcision of the flesh.' (Rom 2:28f.; cf. Ladd 1993, 504) Though everyone has *pneuma* (1 Cor 2:11), not every human *pneuma* is 'circumcised' and thus renewed and truly alive.

When Paul writes about the grace of Christ to "be with your spirit" (Gal 6:18; Phil 4:23; 2 Tim 4:22; Phm 25), he simply means "be with you" and speaks to "man in his natural, inner existence." (Ridderbos 1975, 121)

### ***kardia* (καρδία)**

*Kardia* (heart) denotes the inner life contrasting external appearance. (2 Cor 5:12) God searches and knows man's heart. (1 Cor 4:5; Rom 8:27; 1 Thess 2:4) The heart of unregenerate man is darkened and opposed to God. (Rom 1:21; 2:5) Because God has written his law on man's heart (Rom 2:15), there is no excuse for sinful deeds. Faith is a matter of the heart. (Rom 10:6-10) Due to its corruption, the heart needs renewal and in this sense also needs to be 'circumcised.' (Rom 2:28f.) Thus the heart is the inner center of man that stands in positive or negative relationship to God.

The heart is also related to the intellect. The faithless heart is subject to hardening (Eph 4:18), whereas the heart of faith is enlightened by God with the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God." (2 Cor 4:6) Even more, the Holy Spirit himself indwells the believer's heart (2 Cor 1:22) as does Christ "through faith." (Eph 3:17)

The will of man is motivated by the heart. The unbeliever's heart is full of sinful desire (Rom 1:24), but the believer's heart follows the way of obedience to God. (Rom 6:17) Lastly, the heart is also subject to emotions. Paul writes that he has sorrow and anguish in his heart. (Rom 9:2)

In sum, *kardia* refers to the inner aspect of man including his intellect, will and emotions, either connected with evil or conversely directed toward God. It is the "central seat and organ of man's conscious life." (Towns 1971, 38) Twice Paul uses the term in close connection with the human mind. (2 Cor 3:14f.; Phil 4:7)

### **nous (νοῦς)**

Paul's usage of the term *nous* (mind) refers to the thinking and understanding part of the person, particularly in man's relationship to God. (cf. Ridderbos 1975, 118) When man prays in a tongue, the mind does not understand and therefore is unfruitful. (1 Cor 14:14) The human *nous* in the sense of wrong or lack of understanding can be depraved (Rom 1:28; 2 Tim 3:8) and futile. (Eph 4:17) Concerning believers, Paul appeals to them to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind." (Rom 12:2; cf. Eph 4:23) Conversion that Paul calls 'circumcision' is a matter of the spirit and the heart, but the gradual transformation that is followed takes place in the mind.

Paul took his decision to religious commitment in his mind. (Rom 7:25) In regard to religious matters, "each one should be fully convinced in his own mind." (Rom

14:5) This should not result in quarrels and divisions, but brothers should be “perfectly united in mind and thought.” (1 Cor 1:10) Paul also sets the mind alongside the conscience. Both are corrupted when opposed to God. (Tit 1:15)

### **syneidesis (συνείδησις)**

Paul uses *syneidesis* (conscience) in Romans 2 to refer to Gentile’s morality. Gentiles do by nature things required by the law and thus “show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.” (Rom 2:15)

Thus the conscience is the inner organ of moral judgment. The heart motivates but the conscience discerns. It accuses and condemns the person in case of action against his inward law. Yet a clear conscience is no guarantee for innocence. (1 Cor 4:4) The conscience can be misleading, even ‘defiled’ (Tit 1:15) or ‘seared.’ (1 Tim 4:2) God’s Word sets the conscience in line with his standards. (cf. Zuck 1969, 336)

Believers should keep a good conscience in avoidance of the bad. (1 Tim 1:19) Deacons as models of God’s people should serve with a pure conscience. (1 Tim 3:9) Even if the conscience is too sensitive and ‘weak’, one should act out of love in consideration of the weaker brothers. (1 Cor 8:7-13; 10:25-33) The conscience is an important witness to pure conduct. (Rom 9:1; 2 Cor 1:12; 2 Tim 1:3) Paul commends himself to the conscience of his audience. (2 Cor 4:2; cf. 5:11)

In conclusion, the conscience is an important but not perfect inner guide that should be examined and “exercised in the light of the divine revelation in Jesus Christ.” (Ladd 1993, 520)

## **B. Body and Flesh**

### **soma (*σῶμα*)**

Different from the mainly inner life of human personality, the *soma* (body) first of all constitutes the outer, physical aspect of the person contrasted to the human *pneuma*. (1 Cor 5:3; 7:34) As such, “*soma* is an essential, not unimportant element in human existence” (Ladd 1993, 507) not only in this life but even in eternity. Salvation includes the redemption of our *soma*, and the ‘natural *soma*’ that is sown will be raised as a ‘spiritual *soma*.’ (1 Cor 15:44; cf. Phil 3:21; Rom 8:23)

The term is, though, not confined to the external part of man, but rather denotes “man himself according to a certain mode of his existence”. (Ridderbos 1975, 116) For one thing, in this earthly life, believers are called to offer their “bodies as living sacrifices” to God. (Rom 12:1; cf. Rom 6:13) Beside active practical service, such consecration particularly implies the purity of the body. (1 Thess 5:23) Because bodily life includes sexuality (1 Cor 7:14), Paul calls for sexual purity in the believer’s life (1 Cor 6:18), since sexual impurity “degrades” the body. (Rom 1:24) Thus man stands in relation to his body and with his body in responsibility before

God. Ultimately, at the final judgment each man will receive for the things he has done “through the body” (*dia tou somatos*). (2 Cor 5:10; cf. Ridderbos 1975, 117)

Significant in this context is Paul’s teaching that the believer’s body is a “member of Christ himself” and “a temple of the Holy Spirit.” (1 Cor 6:15.19) The body is intended to be an instrument of godly service. Due to the fallen nature of man, however, the natural body is mortal and corruptible. (Rom 6:12; 8:11; 2 Cor 4:11) The believer is instructed to “put to death the misdeeds of the body” (Rom 8:13) following Paul himself, who beats and subdues his own body for self-control. (1 Cor 9:27) Without such self-control, man is overcome by his evil desires, a truth that is more deeply developed in Paul’s doctrine of the *sarx* (flesh).

Whereas sometimes ‘body’ and ‘flesh’ somehow synonymously refer to the material corporeality of man (cf. Rom 2:28; Col 2:1.5), the latter term points more clearly to the aspect of human limitation and weakness.

### ***sarx* (σάρξ)**

As indicated, “the body passes ‘over’ into the new creation; the flesh does not.” (Ridderbos 1975, 104; cf. 1 Cor 15:50) Man enters the kingdom of God only when he is born of God’s Spirit (cf. Jn 3:5), which probably sets Paul’s perspective for his usage of flesh first and foremost in contrast to the spiritual and with reference to everything that is genuinely human including sin and corruption.

*Sarx* in its rather simple reading points to the creature's physical substance. (1 Cor 15:39) When Paul speaks of troubles 'in the flesh' most likely the physical human body is in view. (Gal 4:13; cf. 2 Cor 12:7) In addition, *sarx* is used to indicate physical kinship whenever Paul refers to "Israel after the flesh," the descendants of the patriarchs. (Rom 4:1; 9:3; 1 Cor 10:18) When Paul says he did not consult 'flesh and blood' in Gal 1:16, he simply means he did not talk to any man. Likewise he says that 'the flesh' (= man) would suffer troubles in marriage. (1 Cor 7:28) Finally, Paul sometimes uses 'all flesh' for mankind as a whole. (Rom 3:20; cf. Gal 2:16; 1 Cor 1:29) The term *sarx* therefore first of all indicates relation to bodily humanity. In regard to Jesus' incarnation, Paul describes his sharing in humanity as being "manifested in the flesh." (1 Tim 3:16; cf. Rom 8:3; Eph 2:15; Col 1:22)

Such usage shows us that the term *sarx* in itself does not necessarily imply the aspect of man's sinfulness. Rather, a person who lives 'in the flesh' and does not have the Holy Spirit is simply powerless to live up to God's standards, and in this sense "those who are in the flesh cannot please God." (Rom 8:8) Here, the expression 'in the flesh' is a distinct Pauline term for unregenerate man contrasted to those who also live 'in the flesh' but in addition have "faith in the Son of God." (Gal 2:20) Those who live 'by faith' do have God's Spirit; those who are only 'in the flesh' do not.

Paul uses the flesh-Spirit antithesis to explain man's desperate condition in light

of God's law. The flesh is too weak to obey the Law. On the contrary, nothing good dwells in the flesh. (Rom 7:18) Unregenerate man lives 'in the flesh' and thus stands in enmity against God. He opposes God either by works of self-righteousness (cf. Phil 3:2-7) or by works that are driven by the sinful desires of his flesh. (Gal 5:19) In such opposition man 'in the flesh' remains subject to death. (Rom 8:13; cf. Gal 6:8) Only by God's redemptive work through the Spirit man gains life. Thus flesh and Spirit live in conflict with each other, and the believer "must learn how to let the Spirit have dominance." (Ladd 1993, 512; cf. 1 Cor 3:1-3)

Paul clearly distinguishes himself from those who live "according to the flesh" (*kata sarka*). (2 Cor 10:2f.; cf 1:17) He does not take pride in his circumcision or his religious past as a Pharisee but shifts his boasting from the flesh to the cross of Christ. (Gal 6:13f.) He says his wisdom is not "after the flesh" (1 Cor 1:26) but "taught by the Spirit." (1 Cor 2:13) Nonetheless, Paul knows that, even though he lives by faith in the power of the Holy Spirit, with his natural body he still shares in humanity and so he still lives *en sarka*. (2 Cor 10:3; Gal 2:20; Phil 1:22.24) There remains a tension between the various usages of the Pauline expression that is difficult to unfold. Marshall summarizes that *sarx* "is used in a broad range of ways to signify a physical substance and then a human being or beings in contrast to God and subject to sin, weakness, and ultimate corruption." (Marshall 2002, 403)

### **3. Christian Life**

#### **A. Human Weakness**

Paul's concept of the flesh is closely connected to the theme of human weakness. In chapters 11 and 12 of 2 Corinthians, Paul lists his experiences of mostly bodily suffering and weaknesses. The climax of his argument is reached when Paul writes that he was given a "thorn in the flesh." (2 Cor 12:7) Whereas we cannot be sure about the precise nature of the thorn at this point, he elsewhere more probably refers to a human illness with the expression "infirmity of the flesh." (Gal 4:13) In addition, Paul also uses the term "weakness of the flesh" to address limited understanding. (Rom 6:19) For Paul, humankind in its flesh is weak in every respect.

Though weakness is not the same as sinfulness, the fallen state of mankind makes Paul's doctrine of weakness even more significant. In essence, the truth is that weak humanity cannot save itself but is dependent on God's grace. Since the Fall mankind lives under bondage of sin. (cf. Rom 7:14) The whole world became subject to demonic powers (cf. Eph 6:12) and in result is hostile towards God and headed for judgment. The fact of universal sin and its paramount power is Paul's sound standpoint that determines his psychology. The term 'flesh' then constitutes "the very pregnant and very specific description of man in his sin, and the coinciding of being

human and being a sinner is therefore expressed in it.” (Ridderbos 1975, 93)

In Rom 7, Paul shows how the Law functions to expose the utter sinfulness and weakness of humanity in its flesh. (McCartney 1999, 9; cf. Rom 7:8.13) Significantly, the weakness of the flesh is not confined to the unregenerate man but remains a painful reality for the regenerate man as well. (Murray 1965, 260; Dockery 1981, 247) Though the believer was ‘already’ united in Christ’s death and resurrection (Rom 6:5; Gal 2:20; 5:24; Eph 2:6), he does ‘not yet’ live in his presence. Paul recognizes that in his earthly existence he still shares in humanity and therefore the flesh still resides in him. (Rom 7:18.25; Gal 2:20) Ultimate deliverance will take place not before the resurrection. (Dockery 1981, 253; cf. Rom 8:23; 1 Cor 15:57) In other words, the Christian on earth is constituted righteous yet remains a sinner. For both the unbeliever but also the believer, fleshly weakness is “a fundamental mark of the individual’s worldly existence.” (Black 1984, 86)

In Gal 5, Paul lists the sinful “works of the flesh.” (Gal 5:19-21) Overall, Galatians 5-6 climaxes the argumentation of the preceding chapters 1-4 against the nongospel of the Judaizers. (Russell 1993, 182ff.) Because humanity is too weak to fulfill the Law, the Law is not the way of true religion. We saw above that the Law functions to reveal sin; in itself it is powerless because it is “weakened by the flesh.” (Rom 8:3) As McCartney puts it, “although the Law can be understood as an appeal to

strength, its true purpose is to manifest weakness.” (McCartney 1999, 13) In Galatia, the Law actually functions to expose the wrong-teaching of the Judaizers – Paul implicitly argues that by their ‘fruits’ of the flesh they are recognized. (cf. Mt 7:33)

The doctrine of weakness contributes to the understanding of the gospel of grace. Humanity in the state of weakness is dependent on God’s intervention. Salvation in Christ is given only by grace. The same is true for sanctification. A God-pleasing lifestyle is possible only in the power of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit is given by grace on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ. (Gal 3:2.5)

### **B. Victory under Grace**

The Holy Spirit is the fundamental mark of belonging to Christ. (Rom 8:9) The believer was crucified with Christ and baptised with the Spirit. At the point of conversion, man passes over into a “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17) and since then serves “in the new way of the Spirit.” (Rom 7:6) The believer participates in the death and resurrection of Christ in a redemptive-historical sense. (cf. Ridderbos 1973, 206ff.) Yet salvation and deliverance from sin are inaugurated, and the believer as well as the whole creation still awaits the final consummation. (Rom 8:22f.)

Until then, the Christian is instructed to “put to death the misdeeds of the body” (Rom 8:13) such as the “works of the flesh” listed in Gal 5. (cf. Ladd 1993, 517) He is told to do so “by the Spirit.” Since he is “in the Spirit” (Rom 8:9), he entered a new

life principle with freedom from sin's power. Now he has to answer to this newness. Paul preaches to "live according to the Spirit" (Rom 8:4-5; cf. 8:14) and to be "controlled by the Spirit." (Rom 8:6; cf. 8:9) In Gal 5:16 he exhorts his readers: "Walk in the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh." Such a life leads to the "fruits of the Spirit" listed in Gal 5:22-23. The new covenant community in the power of the Holy Spirit is free to live a life of victory over the weak flesh since they are no longer "under law, but under grace." (Rom 6:14)

#### **4. Conclusion**

Studies on Pauline Psychology expose the entire helplessness of mankind and in result reveal the total dependency of man on God's grace. At stake is the individual's soul that is either saved in Christ or eternally lost. God works with the individual in his heart and conscience. The gift of the Holy Spirit is given those who wholeheartedly convert to God. Regeneration and the renewal of the mind is the work of the Holy Spirit who provides the new life according to God's promise. The doctrine of weakness shows that the dependency on God's grace remains the same even for the believer who passed over into the new life. The Pauline teaching on Psychology leads to humility, thankfulness, and genuine worship.

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