1 Demonology in the Teaching of St. Paul

1.1 Abstract

St. Paul's demonology is not a separate, systematically arranged treatise on evil beings. The Apostle does not describe their genealogy, number, hierarchy, or techniques for resisting them. Instead, he uses several groups of terms—**Satan**, **devil**, **demons**, **Belial**, **tempter**, "the god of this age," as well as **principalities**, **powers**, and **might**—when explaining what threatens faith, the communion of the Church, and the freedom received in Christ. Each of these motifs is subordinated to Paul's main thesis: Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected, is Lord, and no creation can ultimately separate believers from the love of God [1].

This study distinguishes the letters universally recognized by historical criticism as authentically Pauline from the Letter to the Colossians and the Letter to the Ephesians, whose authorship and relationship to the Pauline tradition are subject to debate. This distinction is not intended to weaken the theological unity of the canon, but to protect against anachronism: one must not attribute to Paul of Tarsus a developed system of later demonology simply because the Pauline tradition employs similar language. At the center remain the texts, their pastoral context, and the christological criterion of discernment.

Question	Answer proposed by the Pauline letters
Does Paul recognize the reality of personal and cosmic evil?	Yes; he speaks of Satan, demons, and hostile powers, but does not construct an autonomous "science of demons."
Is evil an equal force alongside God?	No. It is created, limited, and ultimately subject to the reign of Christ.
Where does the conflict take place?	In faith, worship, the truth of the Gospel, ethics, forgiveness, and the unity of the community.
How does Paul understand victory?	Through the cross, resurrection, faith, life "in Christ," love, and the hope of the resurrection.
What must not be inferred?	That every illness, weakness, conflict, or misfortune is a direct sign of demonic presence.

1.2 1. Method: From the Pauline Text to Responsible Theology

The first condition for an honest reading is acknowledging that Paul writes letters, not a manual of demonology. His statements are responses to specific situations: conflicts in Corinth, missionary hardships in Thessalonica, disputes over pagan worship, problems with false teachers, or the experience of his own weakness. Therefore, every sentence about Satan or "powers" must be read within the immediate context of the argument, rather than being torn out as a ready-made definition of the invisible world.

The second condition is distinguishing between layers of tradition. Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon are generally recognized as indisputably Pauline. Colossians and Ephesians are considered by some exegetes to be writings of Paul, and by others as works produced in his school; the discussion concerns style, vocabulary, and the degree of development of christology and ecclesiology. In this text, the term "deuteropauline" does not imply a lower canonical value, but rather

an honest indication of a historical-literary problem. It allows us to observe that the language of cosmic powers in Colossians and Ephesians is more developed than in the undisputed letters [2].

The third condition is the rejection of two extremes. The first consists of reductionism: every use of demonic language is explained exclusively as an archaic psychological or political symbol. The second is sensationalist in nature: it turns every suffering, disorder, family conflict, or failure into proof of extraordinary activity by evil spirits. Paul provides grounds neither for eliminating all language of personal evil nor for expanding it uncontrollably. He speaks of a real struggle, but its essential form is fidelity to the Gospel, moral sobriety, justice, forgiveness, and communion within the Church.

1.3 2. Paul's World: Jewish Apocalypticism, the Hellenistic Environment, and the Primacy of Christ

Paul emerges from the Judaism of the Second Temple period. In this era, biblical and extrabiblical literature increasingly presented history as a time of tension between light and darkness, obedience to God and deception, divine sovereignty and the temporary activity of the adversary. The figures of Belial, Mastemah, rebellious angels, and unclean spirits appear. However, one should not mechanically transfer all motifs from Enochic or Qumran literature into Paul's letters. The Apostle does not repeat their catalogs or myths; rather, he adopts language capable of describing the fact that sin and death have a dimension greater than an individual human act.

At the same time, Paul operates in the Greco-Roman world, where fear of fate, astral powers, spirits, and invisible intermediaries was widespread. Here, his christological correction is particularly important: a Christian is not to live in slavery to fear of the cosmos. According to Chris Forbes' analysis, Pauline terms can encompass a continuum from abstraction, through personifications, to personal spiritual beings; the Apostle creatively combines the heritage of Jewish apocalypticism with concepts functioning in the Hellenistic world [3]. However, this does not justify constructing a rigid map of "demonic ranks."

Throughout the *corpus Paulinum*, the starting point is not curiosity about evil powers, but the confession: **"Jesus is Lord."** In 1 Cor 12:3, this statement constitutes the fundamental criterion of the Spirit. In Rom 8:38–39, Paul lists angels, principalities, powers, height, and depth, only to immediately declare that none of them can separate the believer from the love of God in Christ. In 1 Cor 15:24–28, the fullness of Christ's reign leads to the annihilation of every hostile principality, authority, and power, with death being the last enemy [1]. Demonology in Paul is therefore an element of the christology of victory, rather than an alternative narrative about the power of evil.

1.4 3. Satan as an Adversary of Mission, Faith, and Communion

1.4.1 3.1. Obstacle to Mission and Tempter of the Community

In 1 Thess 2:18, Paul says: "we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us." The Apostle does not explain what specific sequence of events he has in mind. It could be persecution, political obstacles, conflicts, or the dangers of travel. Theologically, however, he interprets the obstacle as resistance to the proclamation of the Gospel. This does not mean that every logistical difficulty should be called the work of Satan. Rather, the text shows that for Paul, the Christian mission is not a neutral social enterprise: it encounters resistance that must be discerned from the perspective of faith [1].

In 1 Thess 3:5, Paul calls the adversary the "tempter." His concern is not with spectacular phenomena, but with the persistence of the faith of a community subjected to oppression. Temptation can take the form of

discouragement, departure from the Gospel, or loss of hope. Here, Paul's pastoral realism is particularly evident: the response to the threat is not a magical ritual, but the sending of Timothy, concern for the fate of the faithful, strengthening through teaching, and the renewal of community bonds.

1.4.2 3.2. Temptation and Human Weakness

In 1 Cor 7:5, Paul asks spouses that temporary abstinence be mutually agreed upon and not lead to a permanent cessation of marital relations, "so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control." The text neither demonizes sexuality nor reduces human desire to the action of an evil spirit. On the contrary, the Apostle treats marital reciprocity realistically, linking temptation to human fragility (*akrasia*). Satan here is a figure of the adversary who exploits disorder, rather than an explanation for all human responsibility.

This way of speaking has an important pastoral consequence. Pauline demonology does not allow shifting the blame for one's own decisions onto external forces. Man remains called to responsibility, self-control, prayer, and living in the truth. Evil operates where the bond of love, honesty, and mutual respect loosens; but Paul's antidote remains concrete virtue and concern for the good of the other person.

1.4.3 3.3. Forgiveness as Resistance to the "Designs" of Satan

In 2 Cor 2:5–11, Paul asks the community not to plunge the offender into despair after appropriate punishment, but to forgive and comfort him. He justifies this with the words: "so that we may not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs" (2 Cor 2:11). It is surprising that the "design" of the adversary is associated here not with something extraordinary, but with a lack of mercy. Unforgiveness, moral superiority, and permanent stigmatization can shatter a community just as effectively as overt sin.

This passage belongs to the most important Pauline criteria of discernment. Spiritual warfare is not the search for extraordinary signs, but the defense of communion through truth and forgiveness. Paul does not relativize guilt; first he recognizes the necessity of discipline. However, the goal of discipline is the recovery of a brother, not triumph over him. Where Christians turn the concern for holiness into ruthlessness, they may—according to Pauline logic—unconsciously implement a strategy of division.

1.5 4. Demons, Idolatry, and the Unambiguity of Worship

The most direct use of the word *daimonia* is found in 1 Cor 10:20–21. Paul considers the question of meat from sacrifices offered to idols. Earlier he states that "an idol has no real existence" (1 Cor 8:4), but this does not mean that participation in worship is indifferent. "What pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons." He then contrasts "the cup of the Lord" and "the cup of demons."

The exegetical difficulty arises from the tension between the nullity of the idol and the seriousness of pagan worship. Paul does not recognize many gods as parallel deities. He defends radical monotheism: "yet for us there is one God, the Father" and "one Lord, Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 8:6). At the same time, he considers participation in a ritual act not to be neutral, because it creates communion. A person cannot simultaneously build eucharistic communion with Christ and enter into a ritual expressing belonging to a foreign cult [4].

Paul's text therefore has both a demonological and an ecclesiological dimension. It does not encourage obsessive tracking of demons in every element of culture, but warns against religious syncretism. When a cultic practice denies exclusive belonging to God revealed in Christ, it becomes incompatible with the Eucharist. This resolution still requires prudence: the critique of idolatry does not provide grounds for

accusing people of other religions or for contempt for their dignity. Paul speaks about his own community and the boundaries of its worship.

1.6 5. "The God of This Age," Belial, and Deception under the Guise of Light

Second Corinthians contains the most complex images of the adversary's activity. In 2 Cor 4:4, Paul speaks of "the god of this age," who has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel. This juxtaposition does not establish a metaphysical dualism. Satan is not a second god competing with the Father of Jesus Christ. The very term "of this age" points to temporality, limitation, and transience. Paul contrasts the present age with the future fulfillment whose source is God.

In 2 Cor 6:15, the rare name **Belial** appears: "What accord has Christ with Belial?" The term has roots in Jewish apocalyptic tradition and emphasizes the radical incompatibility between belonging to Christ and what destroys the covenant with God. The pericope is textually complex and considered by some scholars to be a possible interpolation or traditional material. Honest exegesis should note this fact rather than construct a vast doctrine on a single verse [5].

The most influential Pauline image appears in 2 Cor 11:14: "even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." The context concerns false apostles and rival teachers. Evil is not described here primarily as noisy terror, but as religious deception. Falseness can adopt the language of piety, authority, revelation, or "higher" spirituality. Paul's criterion remains the Gospel of crucified Christ, selfless service, and fruits that build up the community, rather than the mere effect of extraordinariness or charisma.

This warning is especially necessary in any era prone to succumbing to religious sensationalism. Not everything that presents itself as light deserves trust. At the same time, not every different experience or crisis should be considered deception. Pauline discernment is patient, communitarian, and christocentric: it asks about compliance with the Gospel, love, truth, humility, and the real good of persons.

1.7 6. "A Thorn in the Flesh": The Limits of Interpreting Suffering

In 2 Cor 12:7, Paul writes about "a thorn in the flesh," called "a messenger of Satan," to harass him, to keep him from being conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations. This is one of the most frequently abused texts in popular demonology. The Apostle does not explain what this thorn was. Suggestions have included illness, eye trouble, persecution, opposition from enemies, psychological suffering, or a metaphorical experience of weakness. None of these hypotheses can be considered certain.

Most important is the theological meaning of the pericope. Paul asks the Lord three times to take the suffering away, and the answer is: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." No technique for removing ailments or command to attribute them to a demon is presented here. On the contrary, the experience of helplessness leads the Apostle to a deeper knowledge of grace. The text teaches humility in the face of suffering and caution toward easy diagnoses [1].

From this point emerges an important pastoral principle. Physical illness and psychological disorders require adequate, professional medical and psychological help. Faith can accompany treatment through prayer, sacraments, community support, and hope, but it does not replace diagnosis. Paul's "thorn" does not constitute proof that illness is the result of possession; its indeterminacy prevents such a conclusion.

1.8 7. Principalities, Powers, and Might: The Problem of Cosmic Language

In Rom 8:38–39, Paul creates a catalog of everything that cannot separate us from the love of God: death, life, angels, principalities, things present, things to come, powers, height, depth, and "anything else in all creation." The text is not an encyclopedia of spiritual beings. It has a rhetorical and pastoral character: no force in the created world, regardless of its name, has the final word against a believer in Christ.

In 1 Cor 15:24–28, the perspective becomes eschatological. Christ reigns until he "destroys every ruler [principality] and every authority and power"; the last enemy is death. The terms *archē*, *exousia*, and *dynamis* can point to personal spiritual powers, to political and social structures hostile to God, or to both dimensions simultaneously. In ancient apocalyptic language, the boundary between the personal, the cosmic, and the institutional does not always correspond to modern divisions.

Contemporary discussion proposes several models. The "personal" reading sees the powers as real spiritual beings. The "structural" reading, associated among others with Walter Wink, notes that evil can manifest itself in institutions, ideologies, and systems that acquire an almost impersonal power over people. The intermediate approach, present in Forbes, allows treating Pauline language as a continuum rather than a choice exclusively between a literal demon and a pure metaphor [3].

Regardless of the model, the central message is singular: the powers are not man's autonomous fate. Their end is linked to the reign of Christ and the overcoming of death. Therefore, Pauline demonology does not lead to fatalism or fear of ubiquitous forces. It leads to hope, responsibility, and perseverance in doing good.

1.9 8. "The Elements of the World," Sin, and Death: When Evil Receives the Language of Power

To the complete picture, we must add Paul's term *stoicheia tou kosmou*, usually translated as "elements of the world," "elemental spirits of the universe," or "rudiments of the world." In Gal 4:3 and 4:9, Paul speaks of subjection to these elements before the coming of the fullness of time; in Col 2:8, 20, the same language is used in polemics against a teaching that wants to subject Christians to regulations and practices presented as necessary for spiritual fullness. Exegetes are not agreed as to whether *stoicheia* primarily mean cosmic elements, heavenly bodies, spiritual powers associated with the cosmos, basic religious principles, or a combination of these meanings. The text itself does not allow choosing one solution exclusively [3].

What is important, however, is what Paul contrasts with the "elements." In Galatians 4, his response is not secret knowledge about the cosmos, but the sonship received in the Son: "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba, Father.'" In Colossians, the response is the fullness given in Christ, not fear of the invisible order of the world. The baptized person is not to regain security by submitting to cosmic practices, magical safeguards, or rituals promising control over fate. He is to grow in the freedom of a child of God.

A similar function is fulfilled in Paul by the great personifications of **sin** and **death**. In Rom 5–8, sin "reigns," "dwells" in man, "deceives," and "kills"; death "reigns" from Adam. However, one should not without further argument identify them with demons. Paul uses language that shows the human problem is greater than the sum of individual transgressions: sin has an enslaving character, and death is an enemy of all creation. This rhetoric makes it possible to capture the reality of evil without depriving man of responsibility and without multiplying spiritual entities beyond what the text states.

In this sense, Pauline demonology meets his anthropology and soteriology. Man is not merely a victim of external attack; he is also entangled in sin, death, and "the flesh," understood not as the material body in itself, but as an existence closed to God. Christ's victory is not an escape from the material world, but liberation to a new life in the Spirit. Therefore, Paul's advice regarding the fight against evil always combines the spiritual dimension with concrete transformation: the abandonment of idolatry, impurity, lying, jealousy, violence, and pride.

1.10 9. The Rulers of This Age and the Cross: Wisdom That Disarms Violence

In 1 Cor 2:6–8, Paul speaks of "the rulers of this age" who did not know the hidden wisdom of God, "for if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." Who are these rulers? One interpretation refers them to historical decision-makers responsible for the death of Jesus: representatives of political and religious authority. Another sees in this phrase also cosmic powers that operate through human violence and do not understand that the cross will become their defeat. Both readings have arguments, and the ambiguity itself may be intentional [7].

This is not, however, an invitation to demonize specific individuals or groups. Paul does not command resolving conflict with "rulers" through violence, contempt, or political revenge. He points to the paradox of the cross: what the world considers weakness and foolishness reveals the power and wisdom of God. If the rulers of this age also symbolize systems of violence, domination, and falsehood, they are overcome not by imitating them, but by the love of God revealed in the crucified Christ.

This perspective helps to responsibly use the language of "structural powers." One can say that systems of injustice, prejudice, corruption, human trafficking, domestic violence, or exclusion acquire the ability to enslave individuals and entire communities. However, one should not automatically proclaim that every social structure is demonic or that every political difference has such a character. Paul's criterion remains theological and moral: whether a given reality serves truth, life, justice, and communion, or leads to idolatry, death, and dehumanization.

1.11 10. The Church as a Space of Resistance: Discipline, Reconciliation, and Responsibility

In 1 Cor 5:1–5, Paul uses the harshest formulation: "to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord." The text concerns a specific, public, and serious violation of the community's order. It must not be turned into a general formula for judging difficult, sick, or crisis-stricken persons. It probably concerns exclusion from the community, whose eucharistic communion is a sign of belonging to Christ. "Delivering to Satan" therefore describes the weight of leaving this space, not a private ritual intended to inflict suffering [4].

Crucially, the goal is not the destruction of the person, but his salvation. This goal is explained in light of 2 Corinthians 2: after punishment, forgiveness and comfort are to follow, so that the person may not be "overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." Pauline discipline is therapeutic in a spiritual sense: it is to protect the truth of the community and open the way to conversion. When the community loses this goal and separates punishment from mercy, it ceases to act in accordance with the Apostle's logic.

It can therefore be said that according to Paul, the adversary strikes at three interconnected realities: true worship, the unity of the community, and moral freedom. The Church's response also has three

dimensions: the Eucharist and exclusive belonging to Christ; truth combined with forgiveness; and the practice of life corresponding to the grace received. This is far from a model in which the main method of defense would be the search for increasingly extraordinary experiences.

1.12 11. Practical Criteria for Reading Paul Today

Pauline texts can shape mature spirituality if they are not severed from their center. First, one must maintain the **primacy of Christ**: evil is spoken of only to more clearly confess the reign of the Risen One. Second, one must preserve the **primacy of love and communion**: forgiveness, reconciliation, and care for the weaker are part of resistance to division. Third, the **primacy of truth** is necessary: false religiosity can appear under the guise of light, which is why discernment is not based on emotion, fear, or the authority of a single person, but on the Gospel and the discernment of the Church.

Fourth, Pauline texts call for **anthropological realism**. Temptation exploits weakness, but man does not cease to be responsible. Sin can enslave, but grace does not invalidate freedom—it heals it and enables it for good. Suffering can be experienced in faith, but it should not be precipitously interpreted as a sign of guilt or demonic interference. Where the help of a doctor, psychologist, psychiatrist, lawyer, or emergency services is needed, seeking such help is an act of responsibility, not a lack of faith.

Fifth, Paul excludes demonizing people. Eph 6:12—even if it belongs to the later Pauline tradition—formulates the principle "not against flesh and blood." No one is an "enemy to be fought" for a Christian in a personal sense. A person entangled in sin, conflict, or violence remains a person whose dignity does not disappear. Paul's ethics does not allow replacing responsible discernment with the language of accusation.

1.13 12. Colossians and Ephesians: Christology above Cosmic Powers

The Letter to the Colossians and the Letter to the Ephesians develop the language of principalities and powers in a particularly distinct way. In Col 1:16, everything—"thrones, dominions, principalities, or powers"—is described as created "through him and for him." In Col 2:10, Christ is "the head of all rule [principality] and authority," and in Col 2:15 he disarms the powers and triumphs over them through the cross. Regardless of the resolution of the authorship question, the text does not allow seeing these powers as equal to God. Their status is created, and their eventual hostility does not exceed the reign of Christ.

In Eph 1:20–21, Christ is seated far above every rule [principality] and authority, power, and dominion. Eph 3:10 even portrays the Church as the place of the manifestation of the manifold wisdom of God to the rulers and authorities. Meanwhile, Eph 6:10–17 speaks of a struggle "not against flesh and blood," but against the powers of darkness. The latter text is often cited without the full picture of the "armor of God." Meanwhile, its elements are truth, righteousness, readiness to proclaim peace, faith, salvation, the word of God, and prayer. These are not magical practices; they are attitudes of faith and ethics [6].

Paul's "not against flesh and blood" is also important. If conflict has a spiritual dimension, it must not be transferred into hatred toward people. A Christian does not fight against a person, family, social group, or denomination. The fight consists in rejecting falsehood, injustice, violence, and despair. The "armor" understood in this way protects against demonizing another human being.

1.14 13. The Discernment of Spirits and the Criterion "Jesus Is Lord"

First Corinthians develops the theme of discernment not through a theory of demons, but through the question of the gifts of the Spirit and the building up of the Church. "No one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus is accursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3). This confession is not a magical formula. It is a christological criterion: the authentic Spirit leads to the recognition of Jesus' lordship, and thus to his cross, service, and love.

Among the charisms, Paul lists "the discernment of spirits" (1 Cor 12:10). He does not describe a technique for recognizing invisible beings. In chapters 12–14, the emphasis is placed on the order of the assembly, the comprehensibility of speech, mutual listening, and love as "a still more excellent way." Discernment is therefore an ecclesial gift: it does not serve to build private advantage or religious sensationalism, but to protect the community from chaos, falsehood, and pride.

Paul's criterion is demanding today as well. In the face of alleged revelations, extraordinary experiences, or violent judgments about "the activity of evil," the first question should be: does a given interpretation lead to the truth about Christ, love, peace, responsibility, and care for man? Does it build up the Church, or does it give birth to fear, accusation, isolation, and contempt? The mere impression of extraordinariness is not a criterion of spiritual truth.

1.15 14. Patristic Reception and the Limits of Later Developments

The Church Fathers adopted Pauline motif of Christ the Victor, who through the cross overcomes the powers hostile to man. Justin, Irenaeus, Origen, Athanasius, and Augustine developed the teaching on fallen spirits, temptation, and the victory of grace. In their writings we find elements much more systematized than in Paul's letters. This is a normal development of theological tradition, but one must not retroactively insert all later demonology into individual Pauline sentences.

Particularly valuable is the patristic warning against curiosity about evil. Spiritual vigilance does not mean fascination with demons. In the ascetic tradition, it is opposed by prayer, humility, fidelity to the commandments, sacramental life, and discernment conducted within the Church. This line is consistent with Paul: the center of faith is Christ, not the opponent of Christ.

Contemporary theology responsibly utilizes this tradition when it avoids accusatory language. In situations of severe emotional crisis, suicidal thoughts, violence, addiction, or loss of contact with reality, the first duty is care for safety and medical and psychological help. Spiritual accompaniment can be important, but it cannot replace professional assessment. Paul's language about evil is meant to inspire hope and love, not to stigmatize suffering persons.

1.16 15. Theological Synthesis: What Is Pauline Demonology?

Pauline demonology is primarily **christological**. It does not ask first how strong the powers are, but who Christ is in relation to them. It is also **soteriological**, because it describes the liberation of man from enslavement to sin, death, falsehood, and idolatry. It is **ecclesiological**, since it sees the place of resistance to evil in a reconciled, praying, and responsible community. Finally, it is **eschatological**: the full manifestation of Christ's victory belongs to the future, but its effects are already present in the lives of believers.

There is no place in Paul for a dualism of two equal deities. Satan, demons, and powers are not a second center of history. They are creatures or names of realities hostile to God that do not have the final word.

Paul's most consistent response to evil is not fear, but faith in the victory of the cross; not isolation, but the communion of the Church; not violence toward people, but truth, forgiveness, and love.
From this perspective, one may speak of spiritual warfare only when its evangelical meaning is not lost. Man is to reject sin, idolatry, falsehood, and division; he is to examine what builds up the community; he is to accept weakness without despair; he is to seek help appropriate to the situation. In this way, Pauline demonology remains not a margin of the religious imagination, but a part of the Good News about the reign of Christ.

1.17 Conclusion

St. Paul allows neither trivializing evil nor giving it a central place. He recognizes the adversary, demons, and powers, but places each of these concepts under the sign of the cross, the resurrection, and the ultimate subjection of all things to God. His practical instructions are simple yet demanding: not to participate in worship contrary to faith; not to give place to division; to forgive; to test spirits through the confession of Christ; to live in truth, justice, and love; not to demonize people; and in suffering to seek grace and responsible help.
Read in this way, Pauline demonology is not an invitation to fear. It is a call to mature faith in which evil is named, but never receives the final word.

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