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CHURCH AND NATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: THE FORMATION OF THE PAULINE COMMUNITIES

Christos Karakolis

Foreword

This paper is limited to a study of the letters of the Apostle Paul, who is the earliest of the authors included in the New Testament. Through his missionary endeavors, new Christian communities blossomed in major cities of the eastern part of the Roman Empire. His letters, therefore, are unique and invaluable sources about the conditions in which these communities were formed and operated. Their authorship dates from AD 52 to no later than AD 63.¹ Knowing this timeframe is extremely helpful, because it allows us to study how disparate early Christian communities functioned within a narrowly defined chronological period. This timeframe could be extended if we also considered the so-called Deutero-Pauline epistles,² which reflect the subsequent development of the Pauline communities, after Paul's death,³ up until the end of the first or even the beginning of the second century AD. These letters, however, are not suitable sources for the study of the birth and infancy of

1 The chronology of the Apostle Paul's letters depends on whether the so-called "prison epistles" were written from Rome or Ephesus; see I. Karavidopoulos, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Thessaloniki: Pournaras, 2007³), 252-59 [in Greek].

2 These are the epistles to the Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus. The anonymous letter to the Hebrews is not considered part of the Pauline corpus due to the enormous differences—in terms of language, style, imagery, and theology—with other Pauline letters; see G. L. Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament), (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 6-11. On the distinction generally between proto-Pauline and deutero-Pauline epistles, see F. Vouga, "Le corpus paulinien," in *Introduction au Nouveau Testament. Son histoire, son écriture, sa théologie*, ed. D. Marguerat (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2008⁴), 163ff.

3 The scholarly consensus is that Paul died in AD 64 during Nero's persecution; see U. Schnelle, *Paulus: Leben und Denken* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 39.

the early Christian communities, since they retroject the issues of a subsequent era into the period of Paul's ministry.⁴ For this reason, I did not include them in the present paper.

Likewise, I will not deal with the book of Acts. From an academic perspective, this text is of limited usefulness since it was written approximately 30 to 50 years after the events it relates.⁵ For this and other reasons, Acts does not present the problems of the early Christian communities at their inception, but rather recounts selected issues with a theological and apologetic slant, reinterpreting them for a later time.⁶

I would like to note at the outset that, in this paper, I avoid using the terms "nation" and "national," since they are connected with the modern concept of nation, which was defined during the birth of modern nations.⁷ I make use, instead, of the terms "ethnie" (or "ethnic group") and "ethnic," understood within the historical framework of the New Testament period and antiquity in general. According to A. Smith, every ethnic community has the following features: (1) a collective proper name, (2) a myth of common ancestry, (3) shared historical memories, (4) one or more differentiating elements of common culture, (5) an association with a specific "homeland," and (6) a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population.⁸ I also do not employ the term "race," because this implies inherited biological characteristics,⁹ which did not concern the Apostle Paul.

4 See, for example, D. Marguerat, "Paul après Paul: Une histoire de réception," *New Testament Studies* 54 (2008): 317–37.

5 The Book of Acts is dated between AD 80–90; see the discussion in Ph. Vielhauer, *Geschichte der urchristlichen Literatur: Einleitung in das Neue Testament, die Apokryphen und die Apostolischen Väter* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975), 407.

6 On Luke's theological reading of history through the lens of his own time, see P. F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology* (Society for the Study of the New Testament Monograph Series 57), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), especially 220–23.

7 On these distinctions, see A. D. Smith's overview in *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991), 8–15.

8 Smith, *National Identity*, 21.

9 Ibid.

I have consciously chosen to focus my attention primarily on the problem of Jewish ethnic identity, since Paul himself repeatedly raised this very problem in his letters.¹⁰ Of course, Paul also raised a host of other problems caused by the social conditions, religious customs, dominant ideologies, and morality of the surrounding exo-biblical atmosphere of the era. These problems, however, are not related to a unified and established ethnic consciousness, but primarily to the social position, education, moral attitudes and behaviors, as well as the religious background, of the people belonging to a multi-ethnic, multicultural, and syncretistic society. Already by that time, the individual ethnic identities of the peoples that made up the population of the Roman Empire had begun gradually to assimilate en route to the final synthesis of a single super-ethnic identity, that of a citizen of the Empire, starting with the decree of Caracalla (*constitutio antoniniana*) in AD 212.¹¹ This identity became reified, at least in the geographically central areas of the empire, during the early Byzantine period.¹²

In the first part of this study, I will briefly outline the ethnic identity of the Jews of the Diaspora within the temporal and geographic framework of the Roman Empire during the New Testament era. In the second part, I will highlight some important issues arising from the distinction between Jew and Gentile within the early Christian communities. I will then examine some of the ways in which Paul attempted to solve these problems. In the fourth part, I will attempt to describe some of the key features of the new super-ethnic identity that Paul proposed in lieu of the narrow Jewish identity.

10 See Frey, "Paul's Jewish Identity," in *Jewish Identity in the Greco-Roman World*, eds. J. Frey, D. R. Schwartz, S. Gripentrog (Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity 71), (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 304–10.

11 See F. Gross, *Citizenship and Ethnicity: The Growth and Development of a Democratic Multiethnic Institution* (Contributions in Sociology 128) (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999), 37–38.

12 See, for example, A. Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge: University Press, 2007), 45ff.

Jewish Identity in the Diaspora

The Jews, sharing (1) a collective proper name, (2) a myth of common ancestry, (3) a common history, (4) a common culture including traditions, language, and religion, (5) an association with a specific “homeland,” and (6) a sense of communal solidarity,¹³ are groups of persons which differ to a large extent from their milieu, especially in the Diaspora, where they constitute minorities. This point is particularly significant, because it was in the Diaspora during the New Testament era that the Jews came into contact with the “nations,”¹⁴ i.e., with groups of persons with different ethnic identities. This encounter resulted, from the one side, in some Jews’ adaptation, to a certain degree, to their “ethnic” or “Gentile” milieu,¹⁵ while, on the other side, in the creation of a class of converts—i.e., those who completely embraced Judaism, accepting circumcision and full observance of the Mosaic Law—as well as the ranks of “God-fearers”—i.e., Gentiles at the margins of the Jewish communities who observed only some of the key legal provisions.¹⁶

13 These are the features which, according to J. Hutchinson and A. D. Smith, “Introduction,” in the volume *Ethnicity*, eds. J. Hutchinson and A. D. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 6–7, all ethnic groups maintain to a lesser or greater degree (“In other words, ethnies habitually exhibit, albeit in varying degrees, six main features: 1. a common proper name, to identify and express the ‘essence’ of the community; 2. a myth of common ancestry, a myth rather than a fact, a myth that includes the idea of a common origin in time and place and that gives an ethnie a sense of fictive kinship, what Horowitz terms a ‘super-family’ . . . ; 3. shared historical memories, or better, shared memories of a common past or pasts, including heroes, events, and their commemoration; 4. one or more elements of common culture, which need not be specified but normally include religion, customs, or language; 5. a link with a homeland, not necessarily its physical occupation by the ethnie, only its symbolic attachment to the ancestral land, as with diaspora peoples; 6. a sense of solidarity on the part of at least some sections of the ethnie’s population . . .,” cf. Smith, *National Identity*, 21.

14 On the use of the term in the Bible, see G. Bertram and K. L. Schmidt, “ἔθνος, ἔθνικός,” *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* 2, 362–70.

15 See W. A. Meeks, “Judaism, Hellenism, and the Birth of Christianity,” in the volume: *Paul Beyond the Judaism/ Hellenism Divide*, ed. T. Engberg-Pedersen (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 24–25.

16 On Jewish proselytism in general, see A. Asano, “Community-Identity Construction” in *Galatians: Exegetical, Social-Anthropological and Socio-Historical Studies*

The Jews, therefore, found themselves in a position of power vis-à-vis the Gentiles coming to Judaism. Otherwise, though, the Jews were considered second-class citizens in the Gentile milieu and faced prejudice.¹⁷ In the Pauline communities, however, something radical happened: Jews and Gentiles were able to participate equally in the church without either group enjoying preferential treatment. This was a unique phenomenon in the ancient world, and therefore, unsurprisingly, the Pauline communities faced great difficulties in implementing this vision.

The Problem of Relations Between the Gentiles and Jews in the Communities of the Pauline Letters

When different ethnic groups, bearers of distinct ethnic identities, come into conflict, they create cracks in the unity of the super-ethnic community to which they belong, and sometimes even schisms. In his Epistle to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul referred to just such a problem that arose in the community of Antioch between Jewish and Gentile Christians (Gal 2:11–14). The Jewish Christians, influenced by Judaizers coming from Jerusalem, had suddenly refused to participate with their Gentile brethren in the common eucharistic table, observing the strict Jewish practice of avoiding all communication, including table fellowship, with non-Israelites.¹⁸ Peter, who was present, as well as Paul's co-worker Barnabas,¹⁹ were drawn into following this same practice. Paul then publicly challenged Peter, who was pretending to follow the Mosaic Law in the presence of the Judaizers, while not actually living "as a Jew,"

(London: Clark, 2005), 104–12. On the inclusion of Gentiles who were sympathetic to Judaism even in Temple worship, see S. Krauter, "Die Beteiligung von Nichtjuden am Jerusalemer Tempelkult," *Jewish Identity* (Frey), 55–74.

17 See L. H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 92–113.

18 See J. D. G. Dunn, "The Incident at Antioch (Gal 2.11–18)," in *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 137ff; P. J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1990), 227ff.

19 See Acts 9:27; 11:22f.

i.e., in accordance with the provisions of the Law. In this way, he was indirectly encouraging the Gentiles to observe the related legal provisions in order to continue participating in the common meal with those Jewish Christians who considered themselves “better.” The problem was clearly one of inter-ethnic tension. The Jews, by refusing to eat with the Gentile Christians, were affirming their ethnic and thus religious purity and superiority over them. This thus led to a rupture in the community, since there was no longer a common Lord’s Supper.²⁰ According to this logic, the Gentiles were second-class Christians within the church, just as the “God-fearing” Gentiles were considered second-class Jews within the synagogue.²¹

In the same letter, Paul also refers to the problem caused by the Judaizers’ attempting to impose circumcision and observance of the Mosaic Law on Gentile members of the Pauline communities in Galatia. Circumcision and observance of the Law were the key identity markers for the Jews.²² The Jews’ effort to impose the identity markers of Judaism on the Gentiles meant that they were attempting to judaize them. In other words, a “superior” people, which propagated the idea of its superiority in a narrative about its exclusive call from God and its special relationship with him, was attempting to impose itself on an “inferior” people lacking these features, viz., the Gentiles. The Judaizers’ intention was to assimilate the Gentiles and erase their specific identity by requiring them, essentially, to assume the Jewish identity.²³ Paul was diametrically

20 At that time, the community’s common meal was directly connected with the eucharist; see, indicatively, H. Schlier, *Der Brief an die Galater* (15th ed. Kritisch-Exegetischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 7) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), 83–85; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (The New International Greek Testament Commentary) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 129.

21 See M. Murray, *Playing a Jewish Game: Gentile Christian Judaizing in the First and Second Centuries CE* (Studies in Christianity and Judaism) (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004), 11–15.

22 Frey, “Identity,” 310.

23 Paul refers to the Judaizers’ strategy, for example, in Gal 2:4, where he writes about the “false brethren . . . who slipped in to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage.” See J. D. G. Dunn, “Philippians 3.2–14 and the New Perspective on Paul,” in *The New Perspective on Paul: Revised Edition*

opposed to this on theological grounds. If the Gentiles were to accept circumcision, they would also be accepting its salvific value, which means that Christ came and died in vain,²⁴ since salvation could therefore be achieved through compliance with legal mandates. Paul does not seem concerned with the fact that Jesus himself lived as a Jew, observing the Mosaic Law, and interprets his death as the liberation of all people, Jews and Gentiles, from the curse of the Law.²⁵ However, as we saw above, the Law is an identity marker, and therefore its abrogation leads to the abrogation of the need to impose Jewish identity on Gentiles (which leads, at the same time, to an identity crisis for the Jews).²⁶ From thenceforth, everyone can and must maintain his/her own identity because—since Christ died “for all” (2 Cor 5:14–15)²⁷—salvation is accomplished not through the Law but through faith in him.

In some Pauline letters, we get the sense that the Judaizers were active opponents of Paul, and Paul himself has some particularly

(Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 469–70; Frey, “Identity,” 312–13.

- 24 See Gal 2:21: “for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose,” and Gal 5:2: “Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.” See O. Hofius, “Das Gesetz des Mose und das Gesetz Christi,” in *Paulusstudien* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 51) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), 53–63.
- 25 Gal 3:10–14; see the discussion on the use of the first person plural in R. N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Word Biblical Commentary 41) (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), 121–22.
- 26 According to the so-called “New Perspective on Paul,” the consensus is that Paul’s polemic against those who obey the Law is limited to the non-Jews, while the Apostle recognizes the Jews’ right to observe the Law; see, indicatively, J. D. G. Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul: Paul and the Law,” in *The New Perspective on Paul*, 150–51. Obviously, I cannot properly address this enormous issue within the limited framework of this study. It will have to suffice here to highlight just two points: First, Paul makes no distinction between Jew and Gentile when challenging the salvific significance of the Law and, secondly, even if Paul tolerated the Jewish Christians’ observance of commandments of the Law, it is clear from his writings that he considered this a disadvantage; see characteristically Phil 3:7–11. Dunn, “Philippians 3.2–14,” 481–84, believes that this passage simply affirms the superiority of faith over the Law. But Paul says here something more, namely, that in order to gain Christ, he counts his Jewish “advantages” as “loss” and “refuse.”
- 27 All Biblical quotations are from the RSV.—*Tf*.

pointed comments and serious accusations to level against them.²⁸ The Judaizers saw Paul as the leader and inspiration for the whole resistance to the Judaization of the Gentile Christians, and thus moved to attack him personally in their attempt to impose Jewish identity on the Gentiles. Specifically, they cast doubt on his apostolic office (1 Cor 9:1–3), his authority and prestige (2 Cor 12:11), the truth of his gospel (2 Cor 11:14; Gal 1:6–9), as well as the integrity of his character and the honesty and selflessness of his intentions (2 Cor 12:16–18). Paul responded to these accusations, since his passivity in the matter would have meant the discrediting not only of him personally, but also the core of his theology about Gentiles' freedom from the bonds of the Mosaic Law.

A similar problem arose in the Christian community of Rome after the death of Claudius (AD 54), when the Jews of Rome returned from the exile which had been imposed by Claudius' edict in 49. The Jewish Christians, in particular, seem to have faced hostility within their own community, which then consisted exclusively of Gentile Christians. In the Epistle to the Romans, we find traces of this problem. Paul's attempt to demonstrate, in an extensive and detailed argument, the unique value of Israel as the chosen people and its temporal precedence, in relation to the Gentiles, in the history of salvation (Rom 9:11) is clear, if indirect, testimony that, after Claudius' edict, the remaining Gentile Christians in the community of Rome devalued the absent Jews, and that when these latter reappeared, they faced negative attitudes and discrimination from their Gentile brethren.²⁹

28 See, for example, 2 Cor 11:13–15:26; Gal 2:4; 5:12; Phil 3:2, 18–19; cf. Col 2:16–19.

29 See W. Wiefel, "The Jewish Community in Ancient Rome and the Origins of Roman Christianity," in *The Romans Debate*, ed. K. P. Donfried (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1977), 114; D. Zeller, *Juden und Heiden in der Mission des Paulus: Studien zum Römerbrief* (Forschung zur Bibel 8) (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1973), 285–89.

Paul's Answer to the Problem

As I noted previously, for Paul, the problem of ethnic tensions—which, in his communities,³⁰ meant the relations between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians—was an enormous danger undermining the foundations of the very existence of the communities. Paul attempted to formulate appropriate responses based on the specific conditions of the time.

1) His collection represented just such a response.³¹ With the famine that broke out in Palestine, affecting the Jewish Christian communities there, Paul responded by raising funds for them—on a massive scale, for the time—from the Gentile Christian communities he had founded. His fundraising efforts were concentrated primarily in the communities of Macedonia and Achaia—not only in the big cities, but also in the surrounding region (cf. 2 Cor 9:2). Paul justifies this endeavor on the basis, presumably, of the image of the scale [ζυγός]: The Gentiles received spiritual gifts from the Jewish Christians. It was then time for the Gentiles to reciprocate by giving that which they themselves had and which the Jewish Christians needed, i.e., material goods. In this manner, they would eventually achieve balance.³² Through the “collection,” Paul likely sought to demonstrate to the Judaizers that his communities, although they had not adopted the Jewish

30 I include in these also the community in Rome, to which—even though Paul did not found it—he addressed his longest and most theological letter.

31 See P. V. Vassiliadis, *Charis—Koinonia—Diakonia: The Social Character of the Pauline Collection Project* (Introduction to and Commentary on 2 Cor 8–9) (Biblical Library 2) (Thessaloniki: Pournaras, 2002 = 1985) [in Greek].

32 2 Cor 8:9–15. D. J. Downs, *The Offering of the Gentiles: Paul's Collection for Jerusalem in Its Chronological, Cultural, and Cultic Contexts* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/248) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 145–46, rightly notes Paul's use of imagery from the worlds of worship and agriculture, but not from the world of trade, where the term “ζυγός” was used most frequently. On “ζυγός” symbolizing equality, Photios, in his dictionary (ed. C. Theodoridis, *Photii patriarchae lexicon* [E–M] [Volume 2; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1998]), Z 58, notes characteristically: “the scale [ζυγός] is both a tool and symbol of equality (ὁ δὲ ζυγός ἰσότητος ἅμα ἔργον καὶ σύμβολον)” while, according to the Suidae lexicon (ed. A. Adler, *Suidae lexicon* [Lexicographi Graeci 1.1–4; Leipzig: Teubner, 1928–1935]), Z 187, the “ζυγός” is “the instrument for discerning equality (τὸ τὰς ἰσότητας διακρίνον σκευός).”

identity, nevertheless participated actively in the problems of the Jewish Christians in Palestine, demonstrating feelings of unity and brotherhood. This was, obviously, at least in part, for the benefit of the Judaizers, who, as I mentioned earlier, were traveling through the Pauline communities, from Galatia to Achaia, slandering Paul, characterizing his gospel as heretical, and essentially calling the Gentiles to convert to Judaism by accepting circumcision and full observance of the Mosaic Law. The material assistance, therefore, that Paul collected, also had an enormous symbolic value: It was, *inter alia*, a call for a reconsideration of the narrow limits of Jewish identity and its openness to a different interpretation.

2) As we already had occasion to observe, Paul was systematically attacked by the Judaizers, who sought to undermine his legitimacy as an apostle, his credibility as a person, as well as the core of his theological teaching. In the face of these attacks, Paul tried to defend himself with extensive theological arguments, employing a forceful style and, in many cases, a polemical rhetoric. The apostle considered such an intense reaction necessary because of the danger to his communities of being turned from the truth of the Gospel. His enemies operated on the premise that, if Paul was unreliable as a person, then his teaching could not be true. Paul countered that he had received his apostolic calling directly from the Risen Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:8–10; Gal 1:1), which was foreordained by God before he was born (Gal 1:15), and he insisted that his gospel was the only thing that could lead to salvation (Rom 1:16; 2 Cor 11:4; Gal 1:6–12). It was a clash between two diametrically opposed tendencies. On the one side, the Judaizers were trying to impose their particular Jewish identity on the Gentile Christians, thereby essentially turning the Christian community into a Jewish one, with the lone addition of faith in Jesus as Israel's coming messiah. On the other side, Paul was accepting the Gentiles' otherness, liberating them from Jewish identity markers. It was in this context that Paul defended himself and his teaching; defending his personal integrity and apostolic authority simultaneously also protected the super-ethnic character of his communities.³³

33 For an overview of the discussion, see H. Boers, *Christ in the Letters of Paul: In Place*

3) In his letters, Paul repeatedly stressed the need for the spirit of unity and concord to prevail in his communities. He tried to prevent tensions and schisms, to reach compromise between the various conflicting forces, to identify and isolate any disrupting influences. This was the background for his attempt to reconcile the Jewish Christians' devotion to the Law with the new reality in Christ. This is particularly evident in his epistle to the Romans, which refers to a part of the community, the "strong," who do not discriminate between foods, and another part, the "weak," whose consciences dictate that they make distinctions regarding days and foods (Rom 14:1–15:7). Obviously, here, there is a conflict between parts of the Jewish and Gentile identities, respectively. On the one side, the Jewish Christians criticize the Gentile Christians as impious, since they do not observe distinctions regarding days and foods; on the other side, the Gentile Christians deprecate the Jewish Christians—or those who follow the Jewish distinctions regarding foods on the basis of the Mosaic Law—as having little faith. The solution initially proposed by Paul is mutual tolerance and acceptance: "Let not him who eats despise him who abstains, and let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats" (Rom 14:3). Eventually, however, he concludes that respect for the consciences of the weak must prevail, guarding them from being scandalized, even if it means that the strong have to waive their now self-evident rights ("We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves," Rom 15:1).³⁴ A similar problem, focused in this case on the consumption of meat sacrificed to idols, seems also to have arisen in Corinth (cf. 1 Cor 8). There, Paul provided similar

of a Christology (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche 140) (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 19–20, n. 19; J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 138, notes characteristically: "The authority which Paul claimed as an apostle, therefore, was the authority of the gospel. In fact, 'the truth of the gospel' was his first concern; his own apostolic status was secondary to and in service of the gospel."

34 See K. Ehrensperger, "'Called to Be Saints': The Identity-Shaping Dimension of Paul's Priestly Discourse in Romans," in *Reading Paul in Context: Explorations in Identity Formation: Essays in Honor of W. S. Campbell*, ed. K. Ehrensperger (London/New York: Clark, 2010), 109.

answers.³⁵ Finally, in his epistles to the Galatians and Philippians, Paul rejected the Judaizers' aforementioned demands vis-à-vis the Gentiles, stressing the need for unity and concord among members of the community. In the letter to the Philippians, in particular, he employs a soaring rhetoric of unity: Everyone is called to seek first the good of the other and then himself (2:3–4); all should be of a single spirit, soul and mind (2:2); all should strive side by side (1:27); all should have humility and a spirit of self-sacrifice modeled after Christ (2:5–11).³⁶ It was thus through mutual respect for ethnic diversity—as well as through active pursuit of unity, founded on humility and self-denial—that Paul attempted to ease the tension created by the coexistence in the same super-ethnic community of people with different ethnic identities.³⁷

4) All Christians, according to Paul's theology, are a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17). The "old man," enslaved to sin and subject to decay and death, has decisively and irrevocably died through baptism; the believer thereby shares in the death of Christ.³⁸ While one would expect, in light of this, that Paul completely negated his Jewish past and especially his Jewish identity, this, in fact, was not the case. In the third chapter of his Epistle to the Philippians, Paul insisted that the identity markers of Judaism still applied to him: He received circumcision, he was an Israelite, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, a Pharisee (3:5), and blameless as to his knowledge and observance of the Law (3:6). All these features were indelible.³⁹

35 "Therefore, if food is a cause of my brother's falling, I will never eat meat, lest I cause my brother to fall" (1 Cor 8:13); see M. M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 126–30.

36 See, among others, B. B. Thurston, "Philippians," in B. B. Thurston and J. M. Ryan, *Philippians & Philemon* (Sacra Pagina 10) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 89–91.

37 See C. N. Toney, *Paul's Inclusive Ethic: Resolving Community Conflicts and Promoting Mission in Romans 14–15* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/252) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 124–25.

38 See C. K. Karakolis, *Sin—Baptism—Grace (Rom 6:1–14): A Contribution to Pauline Soteriology* (Biblical Library 25) (Thessaloniki: Pournaras, 2002), 177–226 [in Greek].

39 This becomes clear from, among other things, the fact that Paul used the present

At the same time, however, he considered all these characteristics as “loss” and “refuse” (3:8). These Jewish qualities no longer had any bearing on his identity, which had acquired new markers: Knowledge of Jesus Christ, which led to a redefinition of his Jewish identity (3:8); no longer seeking the righteousness which comes from the Law, but the righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus Christ (3:9); he thenceforth understood his sufferings as imitating the passion and death of Jesus Christ (3:10) in order to lead to resurrection from the dead (3:11). Perfection for him was to actively “strain forward,” not static compliance with the commandments of the Law (3:15).⁴⁰ So, calling the Jewish Christian members of the community to imitate him,⁴¹ he entreated them, among other things, to relativize in their own way their Jewish identity as the decisive factor in the orientation of their lives, and to instead be driven by their faith in perfection and salvation in Christ.⁴²

The Christian’s New Identity as Transcendence of Individual Ethnic Identities

As we saw earlier, Paul radically reduced the value of Jewish identity by questioning the importance of some of its key components. His ultimate goal was to integrate the Jewish identity—and every other identity—into human beings’ new identity in Christ, which has a super-ethnic character. I will now move to detail some of the key features of this new identity that Paul was trying to instill in the members of his communities.

tense rather than the past when describing the elements of his Jewish identity; see Frey’s comprehensive analysis in “Identity,” 285–321.

40 That the pursuit of perfection is dynamic is evident from Phil 3:12–15, where Paul utilized athletic terminology to describe the pursuit of perfection as an athletic event, in which the goal is “the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”; cf. Thurston, “Philippians,” 209–11.

41 In his letters, Paul repeatedly portrayed himself as a role model for the faithful, just as Christ served as a role model for him: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1; see also, indicatively, 1 Cor 4:16; Gal 4:12; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6). See also E. A. Castelli’s analysis in *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation) (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 89–117.

42 See D. Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, CA/London: University of California Press, 1994), 9.

First, Paul preached complete freedom from the Law. The Law had absolutely no salvific significance. Its only function was to lead people to Christ (Gal 3:24–25). This theological evaluation of the Law, which was the central Jewish identity marker, was a major blow to the entrenched ethno-religious identity of the Jewish Christians. While, of course, Paul seemed to accept Jewish Christians keeping some provisions of the Law, he considered it evidence of a weak conscience and tolerated it only as a concession (cf. Rom 14:13–15:7; 1 Cor 8:4–13). A “strong” conscience, according to Paul, enjoys complete freedom from the commandments of the Law, which were the identity markers of Judaism (Rom 14:2; 1 Cor 8:1, 4, 7, 9). This meant that the Jewish Christians who still adhered to some of the Law’s commandments should not take pride in this practice, which was due to their “weak” conscience (Rom 14:1–2; 1 Cor 8:9–12).⁴³ On the other side, Paul considered that for Christians—whether of Jewish or Gentile origin—attribution of salvific significance to the Law meant the effective nullification of Christ’s sacrifice (Gal 2:21). On this last point, Paul was resolute.⁴⁴

Paul understood that there was a deep divide between Judaism and Christianity. The rhetoric of contradiction that he routinely used in his letters testify to this perception:⁴⁵ “old”—“new” (2 Cor 5:17); “letter”—“spirit” (Rom 2:29, 7:6; 2 Cor 3:6); “death”—“life” (Rom 5:17, 21; 8:2); “sin”—“grace” (Rom 5:20–21; 6:1–2:14); “wrath”—“righteousness” (Rom 1:17–18); “Adam”—“Christ” (Rom 5:15–19), etc.⁴⁶ With this rhetoric, he was attempting to steer the recipients of his letters to an assessment of their understanding of their identity,

43 On the “strong” and “weak” in the Roman Christian community, see Toney, *Paul’s Inclusive Ethics*, esp. 89–90. For the corresponding problem in Corinth over the issue of meat sacrificed to idols, see Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, 126–30.

44 See O. Hofius’s analysis in “Die Adam-Christus-Antithese und das Gesetz: Erwägungen zu Röm 5,12–21,” in his *Paulusstudien II* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 143) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 102–3.

45 On the socio-rhetorical significance of semantic contrasts for the distancing of a “heretical” group from the broader “parent” community, see F. Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles: A Sociological Approach* (Society for New Testament Studies: Monograph Series 56) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 20, 40, 44–45, 47, 178.

46 See representative Karakolis, *Sin—Baptism—Grace*, esp. 227–42 and 263–318.

in all its dimensions, and to redefine it based on the fact that many of these aspects were no longer valid or important. Such radical changes would eventually lead to a new identity.⁴⁷

The Christian's new identity unites and connects members of the ecclesiastical community regardless of their particular ethnic identity. This is demonstrated especially by the terminology Paul used to express the new reality in Christ: that of family (all Christians, Jews, and Gentiles, are brothers and sisters in Christ, Rom 14:10); of human physiology (all Christians are members of the same body, which is the body of Christ, and therefore to be regarded as equal and essential to its operation, 1 Cor 12:12ff); and, finally, through images and narratives from the Old Testament (the true children of Abraham are not the Jews, who satisfy the requirements of the Law, but Christians, who believe in the promise; Gal 4:22ff). In this way, Paul sought to bridge the differences between Jews and Gentiles, so that the former did not feel that they had completely abandoned their tradition (although it had to be reinterpreted), and the latter were able to integrate themselves into the primeval biblical narrative of the history of salvation.⁴⁸ All these define and distinguish the church community from non-Christian Gentiles and Jews. These outsiders were not brethren (cf. 1 Cor 8:11; Gal 4:28–31; Philem 16),⁴⁹ did not belong to the body of Christ, which is the Church (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:12, 27), and were not truly children of Abraham and Isaac, even if they were their children according to the flesh, as it applied to the Jews (cf. Gal 4:21–31).

47 B. Hansen, *"All of You Are One": The Social Vision of Gal 3.28, 1 Cor 12.13 and Col 3.11* (Library of New Testament Studies) (London & New York: Clark, 2010), 193–94, refers to a "renegotiation of identity."

48 On the function and importance of the recounting of Biblical events in Paul's letters, so as to include the Gentile Christians in them, see the analysis by B. W. Longenecker, "Sharing in Their Spiritual Blessings? The Stories of Israel in Galatians and Romans," in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment*, ed. B. W. Longenecker (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 58–84.

49 In Rom 9:3, Paul called non-believing Jews "my brethren" and "my kinsmen by race." But it is clear that in this case he was referring to a natural relationship, which he considered inferior to a spiritual one. In any event, we can discern here that Paul's Jewish ethno-religious identity continued to operate, even after he had fully assimilated into his new Christian identity. Paul gives an informal definition of the concept of brother in 1 Cor 8:11: "the brother for whom Christ died."

We can ascertain from these arguments that the Christian's new identity was built on preexisting foundations: on scenes from the daily life of the people of that era, both Gentiles and Jews. The use, for example, of such images as the relationship of body parts to each other and to the whole body for the description of a community or society is not Paul's invention, but rather existed in the secular literature of his era.⁵⁰ Also, the use of the motif of common descent in creating a new collective identity in fledgling communities was clearly not a new concept.⁵¹ So there was continuity with previous and contemporaneous representations. But there was also discontinuity, because these preexisting representations were radically reinterpreted, and indeed in such a way that perhaps for the first time in antiquity Jews and Gentiles were united in a single super-ethnic identity.

From all this, it is clear that Paul recognized ethnic diversity, and did not view it as a threat to the unity of his communities. His vision was of a single community, in which the Jews may hold temporal precedence with regard to their calling from God ("to the Jew first and also to the Greek," Rom 1:16), but in which otherwise there was no distinction in value ("There is neither Jew nor Greek," Gal 3:28). This unity did not exclude diversity, but transcended it. It was not that men and women ceased to bear the biological and social characteristics of their gender (Rom 7:2; 1 Cor 7:4, 11:3–15, 14:34–35), but that these characteristics ceased to matter in Christ ("There is neither male nor female," Gal 3:28). Similarly, Jews and Gentiles retained their identities, while simultaneously transcending their differences in Christ. It is clear that Paul did not try to remove their distinct identities and fully equate Jews and Gentiles from the fact that the Gentiles were never considered Jews in the Pauline communities, and that Israel was not identified in the Pauline letters with the fullness of the Church.⁵² All Jews—even those who did

50 See Plato, *Republic*, 462; Titus Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 2,32–33; Josephus, *The History of the Jewish War* 1507; 2264; 4406 (references from J. Roloff, *Die Kirche im Neuen Testament* [Neues Testament Deutsch Ergänzungsreihe 10] [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993], 107).

51 See Hansen, *All of You Are One*, 191–94.

52 On the related passage in Gal 6:16, see the discussion in M. C. de Boer, *Galatians*:

not believe in Christ—were considered Israel generally, while only Jewish Christians were characterized as the true Israel. When Paul referred to the church as a whole, he used, as we saw earlier, a different terminology (such as, for example, that related to the family), which allowed him to hold both differentiating and unifying elements in tension within the new Christian super-identity. As Mitternacht has noted, “oneness in Christ is not the same as collapsing differences into sameness. It implies equality of righteousness for Jews and Gentiles in Christ—no more, no less. Jews remain Jews, Gentiles may remain Gentiles. Together but distinct, Jews and Gentiles constitute the people of God.”⁵³

The chief feature of this new identity is faith in Christ, which binds community members together, mitigating the differences that divide them and creating new elements that unite them.⁵⁴ Paul constantly emphasized that every Christian, whether Jew or Gentile, lives a new reality “in Christ,” which derives from the death and resurrection of Christ, as well as the believer’s participation in this salvific event through the once-and-for-all acceptance of baptism and the continually repeated performance of the eucharist. Paul constructed this new Christian identity on the foundational belief that Jesus Christ is the true, pre-existent God, who became man and died for the salvation of all people, without exception.⁵⁵ If Jesus Christ were a mere man, then the events of his life could not lead to salvation, nor to the foretaste of this salvation as the transcendence of the various ethnic

A Commentary (The New Testament Library) (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 405–7.

- 53 D. Mitternacht, “Foolish Galatians?—A Recipient-Oriented Assessment of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians,” in *The Galatians Debate: Contemporary Issues in Rhetorical and Historical Interpretation*, ed. M. D. Nanos (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 410.
- 54 See W. S. Campbell, *Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity* (Library of New Testament Studies) (London & New York: Clark, 2006), 170.
- 55 One of the most characteristic passages is the so-called Christological hymn of the Epistle to the Philippians (2:6–11); see the excellent analysis by O. Hofius, *Der Christushymnus Philipper 2,6–11: Untersuchungen zu Gestalt und Aussage eines urchristlichen Psalms* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 17) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991²).

identities. Faith, then, in the divinity of Jesus Christ, as well as in the salvific significance of his death and resurrection, is what allowed Paul to relativize individual identities and attempt to transcend them by inaugurating a new super-ethnic Christian identity.

Epilogue

The foundation of Paul's theology and praxis was his unshakeable conviction that the Second Coming was close at hand.⁵⁶ It was primarily due to this expectation that Paul did not attempt radical changes in the existing social structures and was not concerned about institutionalizing a stable governance model for his communities. On the contrary, he utilized existing social and hierarchical structures, and even tolerated potentially disruptive customs, such as speaking in tongues (1 Cor 14:1–33)⁵⁷ and baptism “on behalf of the dead” (1 Cor 15:29)⁵⁸ in the community in Corinth. In this context, Paul formulated the new Christian super-ethnic identity by utilizing elements from the already existing identities of Christians, since he firmly believed that the Eschaton was approaching.

Much later, the Byzantine Empire developed a tendency to identify itself with the Kingdom of God.⁵⁹ The early Church's strong eschatological orientation thus faded, giving rise instead to a peculiar realized or at least inaugurated this-world eschatology,⁶⁰ which necessarily downplayed the significance of the Second Coming.⁶¹

56 See, representatively, 1 Cor 7:29, 31; 16:22; Phil 4:5; 1 Thess 4:15. See also J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 310–13; J. Sánchez Bosch, *Maestro de los pueblos: Una teología de Pablo, el apóstol* (Navarra: Verbo Divino, 2007), 232–34.

57 See the material in G. Hovenden, *Speaking in Tongues: The New Testament Evidence in Context* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 2002), 6–30.

58 See the discussion in M. F. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead* (1 Cor 15:29): *An Act of Faith in the Resurrection* (Society of Biblical Literature, Academia Biblica 22) (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 165–68.

59 See J. Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1982), 64–65.

60 See, for example, the political eschatology of Eusebius of Caesarea; B. E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 77–78.

61 See J. Meyendorff, “The Christian Gospel and Social Responsibility: The Eastern Orthodox Tradition in History,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity in Church His-*

Quasi-realized eschatology as a state ideology had, as a side effect, the attempted assimilation and finally the complete annihilation of distinct ethnic identities. The Eastern Roman Empire tried to impose this assimilation, sometimes with disastrous results, as when significant parts were excised from it and simultaneously seceded from the Byzantine church in response to this heavy-handedness.

History teaches us that the much more difficult course, but at the same time extremely fruitful, was that proposed by Paul—viz., respect for and acceptance of different ethnic identities and their integration into a new super-ethnic identity, which is not threatened by diversity, but instead pre-supposes and respects it. Conversely, while the authoritarian imposition of a particular identity may seem a much cleaner and sometimes simpler solution, it is ineffective and potentially even disastrous.

The modern Orthodox Church, having lost the sense of the Eschaton's nearness, settled for the most convenient and anodyne solution to the problem of the coexistence of members with different ethnic identities in the same geographical area: the so-called "Diaspora," permitting and even encouraging the creation of separate communities based on ethnicity. While it thus managed to largely avoid tensions and problems, it nevertheless also created separate eucharistic tables and, in practice, a kind of unofficial and unacknowledged schism.⁶²

Faced with the prospect of tension caused by the ethnic diversity of its members, the Church has taken the easy way out by allowing the creation of separate worshipping communities in the same geographical area based on ethnic criteria. In trying to avoid conflict, the Church has alienated its members from one another, leading ultimately to a *de facto* rupture in the church body's unity. Conversely, the difficult path, but at the same time the only one that can lead to the consolidation of true Christian identity—which has

tory: Essays Presented to George Huntston Williams, eds. F. F. Church & T. George (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 118–30.

62 For the corresponding case in which two parallel meals took place in the early Christian community in Antioch, and Paul's scathing critique to Peter for this practice, see Gal 2:11–14.

the potential to transcend ethnic origins without nullifying them—is for the Church to attempt to integrate the different ethnic communities into a single body. Here, the identity markers are not language, particular customs or rituals, but Christ and selfless love for one's brother, despite his difference.

— Translated by the Rev. Dr. Gregory Edwards, Th.D..