

## **The Relationship of Believers to Christ and to Each Other Within the Pauline Communities**

### **Key Passages**

I Corinthians 4:12; 9:19-22; 16:25

2 Corinthians 1:24; 13:4

I Thessalonians 3:12; 4:18; 5:15

Philemon 8-9

Romans 11:18; 12:5-10; 14:1-15:7

Paul has frequently been presented as a great colossus who stood independently and alone in the Early Church, opposing Peter and the community in Jerusalem, whatever the cost. Not enough attention has been paid to the resultant image of Paul that this creates. How can someone oppose other Christ-believing apostles or missionaries and still hold a theology of one body in Christ? If such competition for converts between two missions did occur, then we would appear to have a church built on conflict rather than mutual recognition and acceptance (albeit despite differences). It would be surprising if such a divided community were to survive, let alone expand rapidly, as in fact we know it must have done.

Paul's theology of mutuality in Christ, or fellow labourers in the gospel, in fact the whole basis on which Paul's communities were built and on which, at least for a short period, they continued to operate, has been ignored or not fully appreciated. When we read through Paul's letters, the care to one another is a frequent refrain. Individually believers are members of one another (Rom. 12:5); they are to love one another (12:10; 13:8); they are to live in harmony with one another (15:5); they are to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed them (15:7); and they are to greet one another with a holy kiss (16:6; 2 Cor. 13:12). Elsewhere we find that they are to have the same care for one another (I Cor. 16:25), through love they are to be servants of one another (Gal. 5:13) and to bear one another's burdens (6:2). They are to abound in love for one another (I Thess. 3:12), they are taught by God to love one another (4:9), they are to comfort one another (4:18) and encourage one another (5:11) always seeking to do good to one another (5:15).

We can see here a clear and unmistakable ethic of mutuality of those within the one body of Christ. Within this community they belong to Christ and through him to each other. This makes them a close family of sisters and brothers in Christ who are obliged to care for each other as themselves. The focal point of the Pauline communities was

a set of relationships, christology and communally perceived. This form of community life not only originated from Paul, particularly the stress on brothers, sisters and children in Christ, but he also considered himself as part of it and was likewise obligated to his congregations, as the members were to one another. Though he regards himself as free from all men, he has voluntarily enslaved himself to everyone in order to win some (I Cor. 9:19). He appeals to the Galatians to 'become as I am, for I also have become as you are' (Gal. 4:12). This solidarity and mutual identification is Paul's ideal and example to his congregations.

This qualifies all aspects of Paul's use of authority. He does not seek to dominate or control - 'we do not lord it over your faith; we work with you for your joy' (2 Cor. 1:24). This aspect of Paul's strategy is particularly exemplified in his frequent use of the verb *parakalō*, which is used 23 times in his letters. He never employs the very strong term *epitagē* for his own instructions, but instead uses weaker terms such as *diatassein* ('direct') or *parangallein* ('change/command'). His practice is clearly enunciated in Philemon (vv. 8-9): 'Though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you'. This passage reveals that Paul was not only concerned about authority, but just as much concerned about how it is exercised. His desire for and emphasis upon the voluntary decision of his audience is obvious. He prefers to work with people and in harmony, even though he is not afraid of conflict. This does not prevent him from exhorting, encouraging, persuading with every rhetorical device at his disposal to 'compel' his audience to obey the claims of Christ. Because of the example of Christ, Paul does not use his power to dominate, but, following Christ who 'did not please himself' (Rom. 15:1), he addresses his communities in weakness, even in fear and trembling (I Cor. 2:3). Thus Paul professes, whether or not he always lived by it, that his strategy is to stress his own weakness in order for God's power to be manifest through him (2 Cor. 13:4).

We note here that when Paul refers to Christ, it is not just his words or his teaching that is noted, but his life and example. Thus Christ's example in laying down his life is the most significant aspect of his coming into the world, taken of course along with the emphasis that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world until himself'. In parallel to this Paul seeks to imitate the weakness, humility and self-giving of his master. When he is weak by God's grace he comes strong, because his grace is perfected in weakness. As he imitates Christ, so Paul calls his congregations to imitate him. As Christ in humility embodied the grace of God for humankind, so Paul seeks to embody the gospel in his own life and can thus urge his converts to 'imitate me as I imitate Christ' (I Cor. 11:1). If Paul consciously tried, and also taught others, to follow the example of

Christ, it should be noted that Christ was not a Zealot who took up arms for resistance against Rome. So if Paul imitates and teaches a Christ who was crucified in weakness, this aspect of his life should be reflected in some measure at least in his relations with Peter and the Jerusalem church. In fact, his theology of the Other who differed or disagreed with him must surely also have been influenced by his own experiences.

The likelihood of this is greatly increased if we note that Paul actually recognized and supported diversity within early Christian communities. In Romans 14-15 Paul offers a charter for the rights of groups to differ from one another. In traditional interpretations of these two chapters, Paul tends to be presented as barely tolerating 'the weak' who, because of residual Jewish scruples, are unable to integrate fully with the normal, or should one say normative and liberal believers of Gentile background who shared the emancipated theology of Paul in which days and food laws were of no great significance.

Although there is still general agreement that the issues at stake in the congregation at Rome centred on Jew-Gentile issues, there is now much more diversity of scholarly opinion. The significance of Jewishness for Christ-believers, including the compatibility of Jewish patterns of behaviour, is still certainly under discussion in the Roman congregations. What has become clearer recently is that Paul's exhortations are addressed mainly to the strong. Instead of regarding 'the weak' as imperfect or immature believers, who are tolerated temporarily, their right to be and to continue to be different has gradually been recognized. The verb *bastazein* ('to bear') is not taken to mean tolerate in the sense of put up with but is now seen to be much stronger in impact. We who are strong must support, bear up, even carry the weaker ones. The force of this is strengthened when we note that in Romans 11:18 the Gentiles are reminded not to boast over the branches because they are not the stem but are borne (*bastazein*) on the stem of Abraham. As Gentiles are borne on the stem of Abraham, so they too must bear up the weak who differ from them in lifestyle.