

The one and the many, the part and the all

Unity and diversity in the Messiah's body politic

Gordon Zerbe

Paul's pastoral rhetoric frequently engages the issue of unity and diversity, in close connection to core themes of the gospel. This article will attempt to schematize Paul's contribution in this area, while acknowledging that his varied exhortations or arguments emerge as contextual, fluid, and interventionist persuasion that often resists systemization. Paul does not treat the subject in the abstract, and his perspective on unity and diversity is itself marked by unity and diversity; his approach is varied and flexible,

Paul's mission is framed and energized by a vision of the imminent arrival of the reign of God, which means the merging of heaven and earth, overcoming the most fundamental division in the universe.

even if fundamentally coherent. His interest in various types and levels of diversity and of unity has much to offer contemporary readers.

The part and the all: Differences and disparities that divide human beings will one day be overcome in God's ultimate act of cosmic reunification.

A crucial premise for any discussion of ecclesial unity and diversity in Paul's thought must be his eschatological vision, his world-

transformational hope. Paul's mission is framed and energized by a vision of the imminent arrival of the universal reign of God, through the faithful agency of the Messiah. For Paul, this goal of a restored creation means the ultimate merging of heaven and earth, overcoming the most fundamental division in the universe, so that God's imperial reign will be universal, and "God will be all in all." Sometimes Paul pictures this drama as world-subjection¹ and sometimes as world-reconciliation.²

Central to this vision is the notion that God's reign will ultimately embrace all humanity, overcoming not only the binary distinction between "Israel" and "the nations," but also the binary

of belief and unbelief itself, loyalty and disobedience (Rom. 11). In a grand drama of interdependence, the portion enlarges into the “fullness of the nations,” and the remnant is reabsorbed into “all Israel.” Paul bases this conviction on four logics: (1) God’s overcoming of enmity through love, (2) the greater persistence of divine fidelity over human infidelity, (3) an asymmetrical economy of restorative justice, in which mercy ultimately transfigures distributive justice, and (4) the inevitably universal sovereignty and reconciling work of the Messiah.³

But since theological assertion in Paul’s writings never stands by itself, we must ask to what rhetorical end Paul makes these claims. The main target has to do with growing arrogance among the faithful of non-Jewish descent, not only over many Torah-observant faithful of Jewish descent (Rom. 14–15), but also over the disloyal “root” of Israel more generally (Rom. 11).⁴ Paul’s worry when he pens Romans 11, as he looks both east and west from Corinth (Rom. 15–16), has to do with the global unity of the church. Paul is very much aware that the growing gap between “denominationally” organized and increasingly separated house churches in Rome is being played out on the global scene more generally (the Judean church vs. the churches of Asia and Greece).

Not only that: Paul is also confounded, despite his visionary resilience,⁵ by unrealized eschatological hopes that relate precisely to what God’s people is supposed to look like on the way to this cosmic goal. The concrete issue has to do with persistent disbelief by some (the occasion of massive anguish and grief),⁶ but also pride of status among others—in particular, claims about who is in and who is out, left behind, disinherited, and on the way to inevitable destruction. Paul’s rigorous rejoinder is that the persistent unbeliever (even hostile opponent) is always the one for whom God’s mercy never ends. Identity and status, therefore, are mediated only on the basis of what is to come, never solely on what is in the past, or even what is in the present. Paul’s eschatological horizon allows no room for any final ecclesial self-assurance, nor any confidence in a presumed destiny of the other, the unbeliever or the enemy.

The church, then, is the prefigurative, provisional, interim eschatological community, living as a sign of, in anticipation of,

and in alignment with God's cosmic reunification of all things, when the part merges into the fullness. In effect, the church exists to lose itself in the fullness. But two other crucial premises should also be noted. For Paul, the church is that body politic patriotically loyal only to Lord Messiah Jesus. Incorporation into the global political community (*ekkklesia*) is by an act of "loyalty" (a pledging allegiance which includes conviction/belief and trust),

Paul is not interested in particular boundary definitions as much as in fundamental loyalty to the Messiah, expressed through virtues, not casuistry.

and ongoing participation in that assembly is expressed and assessed by the "obedience" appropriate to that "loyalty-fidelity"—conduct worthy of messianic citizenship.⁷ Paul is not interested in particular boundary definitions as much as in fundamental loyalty to the Messiah, expressed through virtues, not casuistry. Finally, the church is as much an act of God in the world through the agency of

the Messiah as it is a community of human willing, running, and acting. There is a divine energy and sovereignty in Paul's thought that confounds our modern liberal notions of the ultimacy of individual autonomy and freedom of choice (whether we think of how things happen, or of who is to be included and who should be excluded).

The one and the many: What about differences in the present order of time?

As for the diverse reality of the church as interim "part" in the present order of time, Paul at critical junctures uses the imagery of the "one" amid the "many." This imagery occurs specifically in reference to (1) the baptismal unity of the church, highlighting the notion of an incorporating rebirth that transcends or suspends other identities, rankings, and loyalties;⁸ (2) the celebration of the Lord's table;⁹ and (3) the diversity of gifts, functions, and members, where it applies not just to harmonious interpersonal relationships but also to giving greater honour to "dishonourable" members.¹⁰

When we trace exhortations that express the notion of "being of one mind" or of "having the same mentality," we find a similar diversity of use: (1) in caution about social ranking relative to gifts;¹¹ (2) in challenge against "superior thinking," arrogance, and

status seeking, in contrast to solidarity with the lowly;¹² (3) in confrontation against factions and divisions;¹³ (4) in encouragement toward solidarity among leaders;¹⁴ and (5) in exhortation to maintain a common front of loyalty to the gospel in the face of external pressure.¹⁵ When Paul uses this wording of “thinking the same,” or “having the same mind,” he refers primarily to regarding one another as of the same rank, value, or status, or to holding to a common purpose (in contrast to “thinking high” or “thinking of oneself”); he is not referring to having the very same ideas or thoughts, in the sense of unanimity of opinion.

When Paul writes about “having the same mind,” he refers primarily to regarding one another as of the same rank, value, or status, or to holding to a common purpose, not to have the very same ideas.

For analytic purposes, we might say that sometimes Paul’s discourse on unity and diversity in the church addresses (1) issues that involve biological and social factors of human life, and at other times (2) matters of conviction and practice that pertain to fundamental loyalty to the Messiah. But even these two arenas are not always kept distinct. Paul’s disputes with some congregations over matters we might consider theological or ethical are inseparably linked to, and perhaps stem from, questions of social status and rank distinctions, or from ethnocultural identities. For instance, Paul’s discourse in 1 Corinthians on crucifixion (chap. 1) and resurrection (chap. 15), and on communion (chap. 11) and gifts (chap. 12), is in large measure a way to get at disputes deriving from disparities in social, educational, and economic status that have plagued the congregation.

If we focus, first, on how Paul understands the ecclesial meaning of those differences and disparities that pertain to biological and social factors of human life, we can distinguish four categories.

First, there are biological and social “givens” that stem from birth or birthright.¹⁶ These include those binary distinctions of (a) male/female, (b) Jew/Greek (that is, genealogical community, which for Paul does not signify ethnic or cultural differences in the modern sense of multicultural arbitrariness, but genealogical community defined by birth, with its attendant customs), and (c) slave/free (that is, legal status as a function of birthright). The

emphasis on rebirth or re-creation in Messiah as that which reorients the meaning of these differences confirms that Paul perceives these categories primarily as functions of birth.¹⁷

Second, there are what we would term class or economic differences, evident in Paul's reference to the powerful and weak, the rich and poor (1 Cor. 1-4; 2 Cor. 8), and even the wise and foolish, a disparity based on the privilege of education (1 Cor. 1; Rom. 1). Even these differences, Paul admits, are largely functions of birth, although not enshrined in law (as with slavery), such that he can refer to this "class" distinction in terms of the "well-born" and the "non-born," as a way to highlight its honour/shame implications (1 Cor. 1:26-28).

Third, there are individual differences not primarily attributable to genealogical or social givens, or to class standing, namely, those various abilities and functions of the many, as energized by the Spirit for the common good, for instance gifts of public speaking or of knowledge (2 Cor. 10; 1 Cor. 2).

Finally, but most importantly for Paul, all of these in some way contribute to the construction of status and honour (inferior/superior; honourable/shameful; boasting/despising), which in many ways is the most critical disparity that Paul confronts concretely. Paul lives in a society ranked especially by status/honour-consciousness, oriented around some combination of the prior three factors. Paul is concerned far more about disparities of status/honour constructions pertaining to any or all of the factors above, than about class or economic means by itself, or even ethnicity by itself.

What, then, does Paul suggest we should do with these types of difference and disparity? We could schematize Paul's approach as follows.

1. Some differences are negated or suspended, and must be disregarded, by virtue of incorporation "in Messiah," a realm that anticipates the final eschatological reunion. Here we can include those differences that pertain to certain "givens" of birth: sexual differentiation, genealogical community, and legal status. Paul indicates that these differences are in some way negated¹⁸ through the process of absorption into the body (politic) of Messiah.¹⁹ But the question is, what is meant concretely by this negation? Does Paul propose simply that an attitudinal shift must

take place in how a person is regarded, while the structures of the status quo are maintained?

It is sometimes claimed that Paul consistently applied only the negation of the Jew/Gentile binary, while compromising on the male/female and slave/free binaries, for reasons of practicality or because of his own internalization of prevailing norms. There is some truth to this, but the matter is actually more complex. Paul's particular solutions in this area must be framed in connection with three factors.

First, Paul understands these binary constructions largely as givens of birth and not generally amenable to change, insofar as they entail being and status "in the flesh" or "in the world." But at the same time there is being and status "in the Messiah" and "in the assembly."²⁰ As givens of birth, these are things that one

Paul seems to think of the time of congregational assembly as a distinct, liminal space in which the final goal of cosmic re-creation is socially and ritually enacted, when all join at the table without any status hierarchy or honour distinction.

should not seek to change "in the flesh," with the proviso that a slave might make use of the opportunity of freedom, if it should come.²¹ But "in the Messiah" and "in the assembly," all this is negated, while at the same time those other structures remain. One can only imagine the tension, perhaps the contradiction (from our perspective), that while masters will still have slaves, during the time of the assembly any disparity based on that difference must come to an end. Paul seems to think of the actual time of congregational assembly as a distinct, liminal space in which the final goal of cosmic re-creation is socially and ritually enacted, when no one

who is poor can be humiliated by common banquet practice (as they are "in the flesh"), and when all join at the table without any status hierarchy or honour distinction (1 Cor. 11:17–34).

Second, any hierarchical given "in the flesh" is subject to inversion in the arena "of Messiah" (see further below): "for the person called in the Lord when a slave is a freedperson of the Lord; likewise, the person called who was free is a slave of Messiah" (1 Cor. 7:22). The further radicality of the letter to Philemon is that Paul requests that Philemon make the slave Onesimus free not only "in the Lord" but also "in the flesh," that

is, that Philemon grant freedom because of his “usefulness” in the work of the gospel (Phlm. 11, 16). In the main, however, the negation (or inversion) of prevailing structures of the world happens most fully in the sacred space of the actual ecclesial

The problem of the legacy of Paul’s voice is that when apocalyptic urgency is removed, what remains is a conservative affirmation of the status quo. The imperative for us is either to recover the exigency of radical apocalyptic destabilization, or to rethink agency.

assembly, when the charisma of the Spirit reigns supreme (1 Cor. 12), not status and roles attached to being “in the flesh.” We can thus understand the severity Paul attaches to “disregarding the body,” when those who have nothing are humiliated in the sacred, ritual space of the gathered, banqueting community (1 Cor. 11).

Third, for Paul these binaries of existence in the world will soon be overcome in the age to come, to which their final negation can be deferred. Just as justice must be deferred (as a warrant for nonretaliation; Rom. 12:17–21), so also Paul proposes that other transformations pertaining to life “in the flesh” or “in the

world” can also wait, because the “structures of the world are passing away” (see, for example, 1 Cor. 7:29–31). Apocalyptic mentality is paradoxically both revolutionary (in creating liminal spaces that unplug from the prevailing structures and norms) but also conservative (by inviting people to wait, to defer in matters pertaining to the world as a whole).

The problem of the legacy of Paul’s voice is that when apocalyptic urgency is removed, what remains is a conservative affirmation of the status quo: let slaves and women stay in their place, even in the assembly (as becomes the prevailing view by the middle of the second century). The imperative for us is either to recover the exigency of radical apocalyptic destabilization, or to rethink agency. In other words: Paul puts the emphasis entirely on messianic agency in the eschatological drama.²² In what ways, however, must the Messiah’s assembly today take on a greater risk of agency in the world (never mind in its own midst), in light of a different eschatological situation?

2. Some differences are necessary and must be celebrated.

Here we can include those differences that concern individual gifts, abilities, and functions, which aid the common good. In

addition, even though Paul does not mention this specifically, we might include here the variation of culture and gender as a specific benefit for the community and its ministries. Even Onesimus, though bound by his slavery, is thought to be a special useful asset to Paul's ministry. We should also observe that the Spirit's bountiful distribution of charisma on all members is blind to structures of order or givens of birth, whether of gender, genealogical community, or legal status. It is undoubtedly the charismatic nature of early Christian communities that accounts for the prominent roles of women in ministry and leadership, which at various times still conflicts with prevailing social norms (outwardly, or internally, in the form of ambivalence, as seems the case with Paul).

3. *Some differences and disparities must be eradicated or minimized.* Two key images need to be considered here. One is the vision of ecclesial equity in economic terms (2 Cor. 8:13–14). While Paul acknowledges the role of donors (Rom 12:8), he explicitly rejects the system of patronage that accompanied most gift giving in his society. Rejecting the balanced reciprocity of patronage relationships, Paul promotes a kind of general reciprocity as typical of village societies, which treats differences of means and needs as temporary. Acts of giving and receiving therefore imply no hierarchy of status or honour. Paul's commitment to refuse any subsidy and to work with his hands is directly tied to this rejection of the patronage/benefaction system. In the one case where he does accept subsidy, he carefully frames it in terms of the second key image: "partnership" (Phil. 1:5, 7; 4:14, 15).

The imagery of partnership in Paul expresses his commitment to a mutualism that seeks to mitigate economic disparity and hardship while refusing paternalism. Paul thus exhorts "partnership with the needy" (Rom. 12:13) along with "solidarity with the lowly" (Rom. 12:16), and refers to the massive undertaking of financial aid for the poor in Jerusalem as an expression of partnership (2 Cor. 8–9; Rom. 15). Indeed, he acknowledges that this mutualism of economic support is an integral part of a deeper partnership in the gospel enterprise (Gal. 2:9–10). The financial gift for Jerusalem is meant not only to assist those in need but also as a symbol of the worldwide unity of the church, and no doubt as a peace offering in the midst of the emerging rift in the church.

Paul emphasizes that it represents an exchange in kind (a mutualism of the spiritual and material), without presuming patronage one way or the other (Rom. 15:14–33).

4. Some disparities based on difference are subject to inversion. As hinted above, Paul's interest peaks, and his rhetoric becomes most radical, when it comes to (dis)establishing status and honour. The classic text on the inversion of the prevailing status and honour system of his world is 1 Corinthians 1:26–31

Rejecting the balanced reciprocity of patronage relationships, Paul promotes a kind of general reciprocity as typical of village societies, which treats differences of means and needs as temporary. Acts of giving and receiving therefore imply no hierarchy of status or honour.

(along with 2:1–8; 3:18–23; 4:6–21; 11:17–34; 12:4–26), which functions to shame (some of) his status-preoccupied Corinthian readers. Paul's shaming sarcasm continues in 2 Corinthians, climaxing with his own ironic claim to status by boasting in weakness.²³ Philippians also includes calls to divest from status and honour, in accordance with the path of the Messiah's humiliation and exaltation, which parodies Roman imperial claims and undermines prevailing social norms (Phil. 2–3). This concern to invert status constructions is sprinkled across Paul's letters: others are to be considered superior in rank to oneself (Phil. 2:3); the sign of devoted love is to "outdo one another in showing honour"

(Rom. 12:10); one must "associate with the lowly," regard others as having the same status as oneself, and refuse to consider oneself in superior terms (Rom. 12:16). The model is the Messiah, "who though rich became poor for your sake" (2 Cor 8:9).

Finally, we turn to consider differences that we might label as theological or ethical, while recognizing that these are intertwined (overlaid) with variations that we can identify as regional-political, sociocultural, or even economic.

5. Some differences are to be challenged and confronted. For Paul those variations in conviction and practice that are inconsistent with loyalty to the Messiah must be confronted and rectified through mutual exhortation or disciplinary procedures. These pertain to (1) idolatry, especially participation in civic festivals dedicated to local deities, which would have included aspects of the imperial cult (1 Cor. 10:1–22), and (2) ethical

immorality (1 Cor. 5–6; 1 Thes. 4), not to any ontological precision in christological confession (as would become crucial at a later time). Behaviour displaying (egregious) disloyalty to the Messiah is subject to internal disciplinary procedure (1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 2, 7), and met with threats of potential²⁴ exclusion from the reign of God (1 Cor. 5, 10). These judicial proceedings may result in punishments (2 Cor. 2, 7), or decisions to exclude members from local assemblies (1 Cor. 5), but do not include pronouncements on an individual's final destiny, which is left in God's hands (see, for example, 1 Cor. 5:5).

We might also include here Paul's confrontation (indeed, cursing) of those who preach a "different gospel," his disparagement of "false brothers and sisters," and his confrontation of Peter (in connection with "men from James") in the name of "the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 1–2). The issue in these cases has to do with controversy over matters of Torah observance appropriate to loyalty to the Messiah, and thus for some a marker for inclusion or exclusion. In 2 Corinthians, Paul also attacks opponents for preaching a "different gospel" and a "different Jesus" from the one they received, but the particular issues at stake remain vague. Most likely the disloyalty warranting such attack has to do with a combination of moral laxity and status preoccupation (of the sort that rejects the cruciform way of solidarity with the lowly and its inversion of prevailing status norms).²⁵ Key non-negotiables for Paul, against any mere spiritualizing of the salvation drama, are the crucified Messiah and its implications for a cruciform pathway of life (1 Cor. 1–2), and the resurrection, which guarantees and anticipates the final victory of Messiah over all other rule, and undermines preoccupation with worldly status (1 Cor. 15; Phil. 2–3).

6. *Some differences are to be approached through mutual forbearance, accommodation, and deferring to God.* We can roughly schematize the ecclesial situation in Paul's day as one in which the ethno-religious, regional-geographic, sociopolitical, economic, and confessional divergences among early Christians had fallen into two main "denominations": the majority of congregations (house churches) in urban centres of the Greco-Roman world, on the one hand, and the congregations in Judea and Jerusalem, along with the remainder of congregations in urban

centres, on the other. We might speak of those within the sphere of Paul and his associates, and those congregations within the sphere of Peter and James (Gal. 2:1–10).²⁶

The most important text in this connection is Romans 14–15. We are accustomed to thinking about the particular issues at stake here, and those for which we are therefore to forbear, as applying only to those things that are *adiaphora*, that is, indifferent, not significantly consequential. But that would hardly be the view of both parties. What was a matter of indifference to one

With the integrity of his Gentile congregations assured, but with the worrisome trend that many of them would prefer to disinherit those of Judaic descent, the terms of Paul's rhetoric shift, for the sake of the deeper and broader unity of Messiah's people.

group (Paul and “the strong”) was a matter that for the other party (“the weak”) involved the negation of the very status of the Word of God, the essence of God's covenant.²⁷

What we in fact find is that Paul's approach to some forms of confessional-ethical variation differs according to context. In Galatians, Paul is uncompromising in cursing his theological opponents (from the “other” denomination), all for the sake of defending the status in the Messiah's community of those not of Jewish birth. And his rhetoric leads him to undermine almost completely the entire Word of God, negating all those

Mosaic commandments (in God-inspired scripture) that have to do with purity and separation. But in Romans, as he contemplates the emerging rift between these very communities, both locally in Rome and globally across the Mediterranean, his approach moderates significantly.

While Paul could use Peter's supposed hypocrisy in Galatians for very effective persuasion in solidifying the integrity of his congregations (Gal. 2:11–14), we must also appreciate that Peter, no less than Paul, was simply trying to be “all things to all people” (1 Cor. 9:19–23). Paul can hardly have been naïve to the fact that it is easy to accommodate to either community (those under the law, and those not) when those communities don't interact and are not aware of the shift in the conduct of the one doing the travelling, whether Peter or himself. But when those who seek to mediate the middle (and transgress the boundaries) are put to the test from their respective community of primary responsibility or

affiliation (Gal. 2:7–8), they will inevitably be forced to move one way or the other. Peter was forced one way, to protect the integrity of his community, while Paul was forced the other way, to protect the status of his community.

In Romans, however, Paul is desperately seeking a rapprochement between the two communities that he (ironically) helped to push apart in Galatians. With the integrity of his Gentile congregations assured, but with the (more?) worrisome trend that many of them would prefer to disinherit those of Judaic descent, the terms of his rhetoric shift, for the sake of the deeper and broader unity of Messiah's people, both locally and globally.

Paul has not changed his position ("I know and am persuaded in the Lord that nothing in itself is unclean"; Rom. 14:14), but now he asks the (liberal) "strong" who share that view to accommodate to the views of the (conservative) "weak," inviting them to consider limits to their legitimate "freedom" and evident

Paul does not think everything can be fully solved by the internal, ecclesial procedure of theo-ethical discernment; indeed, some matters of grave importance to many must be deferred to God.

"knowledge." Paul pleads for one side to cease despising and for the other to desist judging. Ultimately, Paul says, the final determination about what counts for loyalty to the Messiah (for the strong) and fidelity to the Word of God (for the weak) will have to be deferred to the heavenly tribunal (Rom. 14:10–12).

In effect, Paul does not think everything can be fully solved by the internal, ecclesial procedure of theo-ethical discernment; indeed, some matters of grave importance to

many must be deferred to God.²⁸ But equally clear is that Paul is also not content with a false unity founded on perpetual separation, harmony through avoidance. He pleads, therefore, that parties embroiled in vigorous and divisive dispute about what constitutes messianic fidelity (the key category for some) in relation to what constitutes scriptural fidelity (the key norm for others)²⁹ might somehow still be able to "welcome one another" in the mutuality of table fellowship, so that the world will hear the "one voice" of their allegiance to the God of Lord Messiah Jesus.

Notes

¹ See, for example, 1 Cor. 2:6–8; 15:24–28, Phil. 2:9–11; 3:20–21; Rom. 15:12; 16:20.

² See, for example, Rom. 8:18–25; 11:25–36; Col. 1:19–20; compare Eph. 1:10.

³ For the texts, see Rom. 3:3–8, 19–26; 4:13–25; 5:6–11; 9:6–29; 11:17–36; 15:7–13; Phil. 2:9–11; 3:20–21; 1 Cor. 15:24–28. I discuss this matter in detail, and its tension with other themes in Paul, in “The relevance of Paul’s eschatological ecclesiology for approaching ecumenicity,” in *New Perspectives on Believers Church Ecclesiology*, ed. Abe Dueck, Helmut Harder, and Karl Koop (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2010), 30–47.

⁴ This is the twofold grouping that also worries Paul in Rom. 15:31.

⁵ See, for example, Rom. 8:23–25; 13:11–14; 16:20.

⁶ Rom. 9:1–5.

⁷ Phil. 1:27–4:1.

⁸ Gal. 3:26–28; 1 Cor. 12:12–13; Col. 3:12, 15; compare “both as one”; Eph. 2:14, 15.

⁹ 1 Cor. 10:17; anticipating 1 Cor. 11:17–34, and evoking comparisons with the problem of table fellowship between Jew and non-Jews in Gal. 2 and Rom. 14–15.

¹⁰ 1 Cor. 12:4–31; Rom. 12:3–8; compare Eph. 4:1–16. For the inversion theme, see esp. 1 Cor. 12:22–26; Rom. 12:3.

¹¹ Rom. 12:3; cf. 1 Cor. 12:14–26.

¹² Phil. 2:2–13; Rom. 12:16; compare Rom. 11:18, 20, 25; 12:10, 13; compare boasting by factional proponents in Corinth: 2 Cor. 5:12; 11:12, 18, 21.

¹³ Rom. 15:5; 2 Cor. 13:11; 1 Cor. 1:10–11. Factionalism is associated with (a) intolerance of legitimate variation (Rom. 14–15); (b) faulty identity formation (1 Cor. 1–4); or (c) faulty practice or teaching (Rom. 16:17–19).

¹⁴ Phil. 4:2–3.

¹⁵ Phil. 1:27–28.

¹⁶ Gal. 3:26–28; 6:15; 1 Cor. 7:19; 12:12–13; Col. 3:11, 15.

¹⁷ See, for example, Gal. 3:26–4:11; 4:21–5:6; 6:15; Col. 2:8–3:15. We could also say that citizenship is also mainly a function of birth, a very important prestige factor that seems to have affected unity (Phil. 1:27–30; 3:17–21).

¹⁸ Neither/nor: Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11; 1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 6:15.

¹⁹ In terms of the body politic, Paul can also use the imagery of transfer of dominion relative to membership in a prior organic community: Col. 1:13; 1 Thes. 2:12.

²⁰ See, for example, 1 Cor. 7:25–31; 11:17–34; Phlm. 16.

²¹ 1 Cor. 7:17–24.

²² See, for example, 1 Cor. 15:24–28; Rom. 11:26.

²³ 2 Cor. 4:7–12; 5:12; 11:21–12:10.

²⁴ It is important to note that Paul considers any judicial decision, including one that might involve exclusion from the local assembly, to be penultimate, relative to the higher judgment to be enacted at the judgment seat of Messiah (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 3–4; 2 Cor. 5). That is, Paul specifically avoids making pronouncements on eternal destiny. Paul’s equanimity in Phil. 1:15–18 does not involve any mitigation of the serious denouncement, but transfers the situation to the agency of the Messiah, in a crucial use of the passive voice.

²⁵ The attack on preachers whose motivation is identified with rivalry in Phil. 1:15–18 probably stems from a similar issue. For an attack on anonymous opponents from a different (presumably Judeo-Christian) persuasion, see Rom 3:5–8. Whether we are to think of these pronouncements as authoritarian intolerance is a matter for a different discussion; the point here is that some behaviours and practices are inappropriate to loyalty to the Messiah and must be confronted. Paul’s apparent equanimity in Phil.

1:15–18 does not involve any mitigation of the denouncement but transfers the situation to the agency of the Messiah, in a crucial use of the passive voice.

²⁶ The situation is obviously more complex. One can also point to differences within these general camps—for instance, fissures within the Judean group (for example, Acts 11, 15, 21; Gal. 2). We could also distinguish those congregations within the sphere of John; in large measure these would appear more closely affiliated with the Pauline stream. But they seem to go even further than Paul in the rejection of institutions of Judaism, including the temple.

²⁷ It is only because of years of distance and separation from the Jewish tradition that we are unable to understand how Paul’s perspective was so subversive to “Jewish-Christian” sensibilities.

²⁸ Paul pleads for the almost impossible. And ironically, that community of Judaic, Torah-observant believers with whom Paul sought rapprochement was a hundred years later denounced and eventually excluded as heretics by the majority “great church” of Gentile believers.

²⁹ Article 4 of *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995) similarly distinguishes between the “living Word” and “the Word of God written.”

About the author

Gordon Zerbe teaches mostly New Testament at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. He has been wrestling with Paul for a couple of decades, and is close to finishing a commentary on Philippians for the Believers Church Bible Commentary Series.