

10-4-1978

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Recommended Citation

Buck, Erwin (1978) "Christian Unity: The Perspective from Galatia," *Consensus*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 4 , Article 2.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol4/iss4/2>

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CHRISTIAN UNITY:

THE PERSPECTIVE FROM GALATIA

Erwin Buck

In speaking about Christian unity from Paul's perspective, his letter to the Galatians is a good frame of reference. In it the fronts are most sharply drawn. Here, if anywhere, one ought to be able to ascertain just how far Paul is willing to compromise and at what point he is ready to concede that the quest for the unity of the Church is to be abandoned.

Without a doubt, Galatians is Paul's most polemical letter. Christian solidarity reaches its crisis here, whether or not one agrees with the Tubingen school that the Church ruptured here and that the schism between Peter and Paul became irreconcilable. At a time when the unity of the Church faces yet another crisis, it is well to look back upon that earlier period and to learn from it.

IMPEDIMENTS: THREAT TO CHRISTIAN UNITY

Foolish Galatians

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul does not even observe the customary niceties of etiquette, so greatly is he disturbed about the instability of his addressees. This letter contains no thanksgiving for the Galatians, no commendation of any sort. Compared with Paul's other letters, Galatians almost lacks a greeting altogether and the body of the letter begins with indignant astonishment over the Galatians' ready desertion of the Lord himself! ¹

Mindless Galatians! Their wavering is so inexplicable; it must be the result of some evil spell (3:1). Some sorcerer must have beguiled them and swayed them so cleverly that they are no longer able to tell the difference between what is of God and what is of Satan. Paul must explain to them the very ABC and give them criteria for differentiating between the works of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit (5:20ff.). The element-

1. Note the political language! The text, unfortunately, is not clear; the subject who is being deserted may be either God or Christ.

any list of vices is heavily studded with those most likely to disrupt community. Divisions are essentially evil, it appears to say — church and divisions are mutually exclusive concepts.²

The Galatians have let themselves be fooled into thinking that there can be gradations within the Christian community and that adherence to a newly introduced set of criteria constitutes a higher level of perfection.

The first threat to Christian unity, then, are the Galatians themselves, with their predilection for criteria for admission or rejection (e.g. 4:10) and their propensity for cutting each other down (5:15).

Fickle Peter

The Galatians were not the first ones to waver between opposing theological views. On an earlier occasion (2:11ff) Peter had buckled under the pressure of conflicting claims. Peter's great mistake was that he had *separated* himself (2:12). In Paul's estimation, Peter's action posed a double threat, doubly fatal. First, his drawing back would naturally exert pressure on all non-Jewish Christians to subscribe to the Jewish regulations (2:14). Secondly, as can readily be seen from the subsequent behavior of Barnabas and others (2:13), it sounded the death-knell for any kind of unity or communion within the Christian congregation. The disintegration of congregational solidarity seemed unavoidable.

It is not fair for us to assume that Peter acted out of doubt, fear, or lack of conviction. He, no less than Paul, was probably concerned to avoid schism and factions which would endanger the unity of the Christian community; the only difference being, he felt the way to accomplish that end was to avoid offending the Jewish sensibilities. Thus, both Peter and Paul placed a very high priority on maintaining and nurturing unity within the Church; but they had differing views as to how this could best be done.

It is puzzling to note that Paul on occasion acts very much like Peter did in Antioch. On the subject of food offered to idols (1. Cor. 8), Paul is convinced that the entire matter is an *adiaphoron*. Nevertheless, he counsels the Corinthians to abstain from eating such food if a fellow-Christian may be offended by such eating (1. Cor. 8:13).

Since the action of Peter at Antioch was apparently motivated by the very same considerations, why does Paul oppose him so vehemently in public (2:14)? More on this later; suffice it to say here, Paul evidently perceived the situation at Antioch quite differently. He is convinced that the action of Peter, well-intentioned though it may be, will not only *not* safeguard Christian unity, but will have the exact opposite effect and inflict irreparable harm on the community.

If Peter is allowed to withdraw from the fellowship at Antioch, a mortal blow will have been dealt to Christian unity. So important is the matter to Paul that he risked open confrontation with Peter — confrontation which could have ruined the reputation of Paul and called his apostleship into serious question.³

Paul must have been well aware of the potential repercussions of such a confronta-

2. Schlier, *haireisis*, TDNT.

3. 2:2,6. Peter is an authority to be reckoned with. Even Paul acknowledges him as a "pillar." *Dokountes* is not derogatory, of course.

tion. That he chose to risk his very apostleship is testimony to the zeal with which he strove to maintain Christian unity.

False Teachers

The real culprits, in Paul's view, are the false teachers who have infiltrated Galatia. About them Paul has nothing good to say at all. As far as he is concerned, they act from the express desire to pervert the Gospel (1:7). Their purpose is to exclude the Galatians from fellowship (4:17); they act from purely selfish motives (4:17b); and they are nothing but troublemakers (5:12b).

On these false teachers Paul can only pronounce his anathema (1:8) and he wishes they would go and castrate themselves (5:12)!

This is highly political language. Obviously these teachers would have appraised their own role and purpose quite differently. No doubt they were convinced — absolutely convinced — that they were the bearers of the true Gospel and that it was their duty to stand up for purity of doctrine.

Paul's powerful language attests to the fact that he considered these teachers an immense threat to the Christian cause. At the same time it puts into sharp perspective the high priority which Paul assigned to the matter of Christian unity.

IMPERATIVE: DRIVE TOWARD CHRISTIAN UNITY

The Ministry of Reconciliation

As in his other letters, so here, Paul identifies himself as an Apostle (1:1) whose call and office derive directly from God (1:15). As such, he bears special responsibilities for his congregations and claims special authority to address them with encouragement, admonitions, and even threats, if need be. He can command their obedience even if he cannot (and does not attempt to) enforce it. One of the hallmarks of the Church is that it is apostolic. "The Church and the Apostle are correlatives."⁴

The ministry of the Apostle is one of reconciliation (2. Cor. 5:18f) and this is a prime motif also in Galatians. The entire letter aims to forestall the disintegration of the Church and to promote unity within it. But simple exhortation will not be effective any longer, so Paul resorts to warnings and threats (1:8). Yet he does it not out of a sudden gut reaction; he had explained to the congregation on an earlier occasion (1:9) that an anathema would have to be pronounced on any pseudo-Gospel.

This anathema, furthermore, does not constitute an expulsion from the congregation. There is no question of excommunication here; such an act would only fracture the community still further. That no one is being thrown out of the church in Galatia is amazing! In spite of the heat of the battle, Paul, with admirable restraint, does not suggest that the false teachers be read out of the Church, but "only" that they be presented to God for judgment.⁵

Though the letter, at first glance, seems to draw the lines very narrowly, it actually allows incredible differences to exist side by side within the Church. The problem is to be solved, not by expulsion or segregation, but by forceful dialog — even open con-

4. Stig Hanson, *The Unity of the Church in the New Testament* (Uppsala: Almqvist, 1946), p. 91.

5. Josef Hainz, *Strukturen Paulinischer Gemeinde-Theologie und Gemeinde-Ordnung* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1972), p. 111.

frontation — within the community. Paul is not so much fighting *against* opponents in this letter, as he is fighting *for* the community — and there is a difference!

The Need for Reciprocity

It belongs to the very essence of the Church that it is a community in which the various members minister to each other's needs, while they promote the health and well-being of the community as a whole. Paul enunciates these thoughts most clearly in his Corinthian correspondence, but they are not absent in Galatians, though sometimes stated negatively. The reciprocal relationships within the Church are not those of competition or destruction (5:15,26), but those of sharing (6:6) and of mutual service (5:13b). The fruits of the Spirit promote wholesome reciprocal relationships (5:22f). The reciprocal pronoun is a key word in Paul's ecclesiology.⁶ He defuses the volatile situation by emphasizing the need for reciprocal burden-bearing (6:2). The community needs, and must be able to depend on, the mutual respect, sympathy, and help of its members. Only in this way can it hope to survive as a community (5:15).

The Responsibility of Servanthood

Indispensable, also, for the existence of the Church is the willingness to become a servant and to subordinate personal advantage to a higher principle. Paul himself is a ready example of such willing submission. He acknowledges the authority of Peter, in spite of the latent tensions between them. He visits Peter to get to know him (1:18); he accords him his traditional title of honor (2:7,8); and he goes to confer with the authorities in Jerusalem (2:2,6). True, he does all this not as an admission of his own inferiority and their superiority, but to foster and nurture the unity without which the Church cannot be the Church. The outcome of the Jerusalem conference, as Paul portrays it, is the clear demonstration of *koinonia* (2:9). To promote this *koinonia*, Paul is willing even to take steps which might reflect adversely upon his own independence. The unity of the church demands such risks and sacrifice.

In the final analysis, even the show-down between Peter and Paul in Antioch, not precipitated by personal animosities between two competing leaders, is intended to prevent a fissure from developing into a rift. It sounds contradictory to say that Paul precipitates a public confrontation to prevent a schism, but Paul intends his report to be so understood. So horrendous a prospect is the potential schism, that Paul is willing to risk a personal feud between himself and the respected Peter. That he maintains a radically anti-Petrine position, however, cannot be concluded either from Galatians or from the Corinthian correspondence.⁷ The Tubingen school was wrong in that inference.

These same sentiments are expressed also with regard to the collection of funds for Jerusalem. The expression *ton ptochon* (2:10) is clearly a veiled reference to the Church at Jerusalem. It also seems clear that, by requesting this collection, Jerusalem was asserting its claim to pre-eminence.⁸ It is surprising, then, that Paul so readily acquiesces to the request (2:11). True, he interprets the collection not as an

6. Robin Scroggs, *Paul for a New Day* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), p. 43.

7. Hainz, p. 249.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 243.

acknowledgment of pre-eminence, but as a service rendered in the name of grace and fellowship (2. Cor. 8:4; 9:13), a service done willingly and for theological reasons (Rom. 15:26f). Yet it is remarkable that Paul is prepared to undertake actions which can be interpreted adversely over against his own stature as an Apostle, and that he carries such actions through with determination, simply because he considers them theologically right and ecclesiologically indispensable. He really believes in the unity of the Church!

Since Paul, in this exemplary fashion, has assumed the obligation to let the common good prevail over the possible loss of personal reputation or gain, he is uniquely qualified to counsel his congregations to refrain similarly from competition and petty animosities (5:15,26) and instead to do good to all people (6:10).

INDICATIVE: AFFIRMATION OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

One Baptism

The unity is given by the very fact that all have been incorporated into the community by baptism. The most eloquent statement of Paul in this regard is Galatians 3:28, a statement which is very likely, at least in part, an early Christian baptism formula.⁹ If so, the basic insight into the meaning of Christian baptism which this formula conveys is one common to the Pauline Churches.

The formula emphasizes two equally important aspects of baptism.¹⁰ It affirms, on the one hand, the *universal range* of baptism. Race, social status, sex, education — baptism bridges all these barriers. “The formula implies that *all* superior-inferior relationships are destroyed in the body of Christ.”¹¹

Secondly, the formula affirms the *unity* created by baptism. There is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, there are not male and female — all believers are one in Jesus Christ.

Surely, this lofty image is conceived eschatologically, but the church is an eschatological community which already possesses what it hopes for.¹²

Baptism has established a comprehensive unity. This unity can and must now be affirmed in spite of all outward signs to the contrary.

One Body

While the expression *soma Christou* does not occur in Galatians, the thought is there. Baptism bridges the “many” and the “one” (3:28) so that all who are baptized are now one person.¹³ Thus baptism has created a new corporate person analogous to the corporate person created through Adam, who comprises the whole human race.

Particularly instructive is the tortuous exegesis of the promise to Abraham. Here Paul affirms on the one hand that Christ is the promised seed of Abraham (3:16) and,

9. Scroggs, p. 44.

10. Hanson, p. 78.

11. Scroggs, p. 44.

12. Hanson, p. 82.

13. Note the masculine *heis!* See J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), p. 150: “Ye are all one man . . .”

on the other, that all Christians are that promised seed (3:29). So then, Christ, together with those who belong to him, form one corporate person; it is no longer a question of many, but of one.¹⁴

A similar thought is expressed at 4:19 where Paul uses the imagery of childbirth to depict the Christian community coming to life in the shape and form of Christ himself.

One Spirit

The unity of the church is further guaranteed in that God himself has sent the Holy Spirit into the hearts of all believers; that he has given the Spirit to every Christian, is proven by the fact that they are all able to call upon God as their Father (4:6f). This is expressed most clearly in 1 Corinthians 12:13, where all, Jew or Greek, slave or free, are incorporated by the one Spirit into the one Body by the act of baptism. But it is evident in Galatians, as well. The Galatians are *all* spiritual.¹⁵ Thus, the Spirit has made them all joint heirs of the promise (4:7). This was accomplished by God (4:7); it is not contingent on any demonstration or performance on their part.

The unity is a fact which can joyfully be proclaimed in the face of all evidence to the contrary.

One God

While Paul's exegesis at 3:19f is obscure, his intention is clear enough. God is one, and there is only one God. He acts in a consistent way and according to a uniform plan. His plan is not to have two, mutually exclusive, ways of salvation — one via the law and another via the promise. There is only one way — the way of promise, the way of the Gospel.

The implications for Paul's ecclesiology must not be underrated: God's people cannot be fractured.

One Eucharist

Paul does not specifically discuss the Eucharist in Galatians, but its importance becomes evident in light of the background of his encounter with Peter at Antioch (2:11ff). Paul would hardly have reacted so deeply against Peter, if the "eating together" from which Peter suddenly refrained at Antioch had referred simply to parties and social gatherings. What Peter, undoubtedly, refrained from, was participation in the common meal which accompanied the celebration of the Eucharist.¹⁶

Peter's action was objectionable not as a breach of etiquette, but because it would have made impossible the common celebration of the Eucharist. As in Corinth (1. Cor. 11:17-22), so in Galatia, the Eucharist could become an occasion for schism. Were this to occur, it would be a perversion of the sacrament which, according to Paul, is the *koinonia*, the participation in the body and blood of the Lord (1. Cor. 10:16-18).

To exclude each other from the common celebration of the Eucharist is to exclude each other from fellowship and communion with the Lord himself. Such a situation

14. 3:16 *eph' henos*.

15. 16.1 *pneumatikos* does not refer to one segment within the total congregation, but to all the members of the congregation.

16. Hainz, p. 120.

cannot be tolerated within the Church. It is important to note that, for Paul, questions of conscience arise when anyone is *excluded* from the Eucharist, whereas in our own day questions of conscience are frequently introduced when certain people are *admitted* to communion.

IMPLICATIONS: PAUL AND WE ON THE SUBJECT OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

It goes without saying that Paul was oblivious of the Canadian situation of 1978. The Bible is an ancient book; ¹⁷ its applicability to our own day must be discovered rather than posited. Paul's critique and appeal are directed specifically to the churches of Galatia some twenty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. He speaks to *their* situation and to *their* problems. This must be kept very clearly in mind.

The Scope of Christian Unity

It is very doubtful whether Paul had any concept of a universal Christian Church. He usually addresses himself not to the church at large, but to individual congregations, to local churches in Galatia, Judea, Macedonia, etc., using the term *ekklesia* in the plural (e.g. 1:2,22).

Even the expression *ekklesia tou theou* probably does not refer to the Christian Church as a whole. At 1 Thessalonians 2:14 Paul uses also this phrase in the plural; there are *many* churches of God. The phrase appears to have been a "title of pre-dilection for Judean communities," ¹⁸ which eventually, by way of flattery, was also applied to the Church at Corinth. ¹⁹ It is a title which belongs to an individual congregation, and that not by virtue of the fact that it is a part of a larger whole.

Nor does Paul imply that, to be Christian, the Church must be organizationally one. Quite the contrary: he insists vehemently that his apostleship and his congregations are independent from Jerusalem, no matter how great the prestige of the Jerusalem Church — a prestige which Paul freely acknowledges and respects by going to consult with the pillars and those of high repute there.

Having said this, one nevertheless sees nuances in Paul which signal the beginning of a more comprehensive concept of the Church — Church as a universal entity. What Paul says about individual congregations he intends to be applicable also to all the other individual congregations. Certainly, Paul does not visualize a church with denominations, synods, and even sects. What he says cannot *mutatis mutandis* be applied to ecumenical and inter-synodical relations in the world-wide church of our

17. Dennis Nineham, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible: A Study of the Bible in an Age of Rapid Cultural Change* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1977).

18. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Pauline Theology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1967), p. 76; Hainz, p. 233f.

19. Lucien Cerfaux, *The Church in the Theology of St. Paul*, English trans. Geoffrey Webb and Adrian Walker (New York: Herder and Herder, 1959), p. 113.

own day. Still, the principles which he lays down for the life of a congregation do have definite implications for the Church of all time.

The Norma Normans

Some may object to making Paul's major intention in Galatians the maintenance and nurture of the unity of the Church. It may be felt that Paul is rather at pains to point out the right way of salvation; namely, that salvation is obtained by grace rather than by works.

Paul is very much concerned to extol grace over against works as the way of salvation; nowhere does he do so more persuasively than in Galatians. But — and this is the key distinction — the main reason he keeps pounding home the theme of salvation by grace through faith is because the unity of the Church becomes possible only if grace is the underlying basis.

Thus, the major theme in this Letter is the unity of the Church, not doctrinal purity. The doctrine of salvation by grace goes hand in hand with this major theme, but it is subservient to it.

The *norma normans* is the Gospel beside which there is no other.²⁰ Yet Paul uses this one Gospel not as a criterion for reading individuals or groups of people out of the Church but as a basis on which alone the unity of the Church can be built and maintained. In other words, the Gospel of justification by grace through faith is so important for Paul not because this Gospel can become a test of orthodoxy, but because it alone allows the Church to be all-inclusive. There is room in the Church for Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, male and female. That is so precisely because they are all justified by the grace of God and not by personal distinctions of any sort.²¹

There is a world of difference between these two uses of the Gospel, but it is exactly this difference, which is so frequently obscured, or forgotten entirely, when the Church of the present day discusses Christian unity and comes to the conclusion that such unity cannot be countenanced — *because of the Gospel!*

CONCLUSION

In Galatians, Paul is fighting not so much *against* certain people as he is *for* the unity of the Church, and *for* the Gospel which is preached everywhere and forms the basis of the common existence. This one Gospel is not a matter of the use or disuse of certain critical tools or a question of one hermeneutical method over against another. Paul himself can use — without apology — the most questionable of exegetical tools and hermeneutical methods, as is evident from his reasoning based on the allegory of Sarah and Hagar or from his strained grammatical argument about the seed of Abraham. It is not the method or procedure which is under attack, it is the result!

That result must be, Paul would insist, that salvation is available equally to all and that therefore the eschatological community is truly one community. Everything else

20. *par' ho* is ambiguous; it may mean "contrary to" or "different from."

21. 3:7-14. The very purpose (*hina*, 3:14!) for justification by grace is that the blessing of Abraham may come also to the Gentiles (3:14). Or e.g. 2:16f.: Jews, too, are saved by grace, not through works. The significance of the doctrine of salvation by grace is, then, the fact that all people stand on the same footing and belong to the same community on the same basis as all the rest.

is of comparatively minor importance. On those who hold to this view, Paul pronounces a blessing (6:16); those who do not, must contend with the threat of a curse (1:8,5:10), a warning that they must render account to God.

That the thoughts expressed above have immense bearing on discussions relating to Christian unity in our own day almost at every step of the way. Though not immediately applicable to all questions of inter-synodical and ecumenical relations, the most important features of Paul's arguments clearly transcend the passage of all time.

Vigorous argument in the Church ought to be in the service of unity, not in the interest of erecting and maintaining barriers. The onus is on those who want to maintain divisions, not on those who want to have them removed. To be sure, Paul does not compel us to establish a super-church, or even to create one Lutheran synod. After all, it is admissible for Paul himself to enter into a gentlemen's agreement to work in different areas with divergent emphases (2:7ff).²² Yet to argue for the preservation of divisions in the Church in the name of Paul, is to place words into his mouth which he does not want to utter. The voice of Paul is heard most clearly when the Church joyfully affirms the eschatological conviction, "we are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord."

22. Although in essence identical, the Gospel to the Gentiles and that to the Jews would obviously have different contours.