

UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND EARLY CHURCH

Robert M. Johnston
Baltimore, 22 November, 2013

In Christ's great prayer in John 17, as we all know, he prayed that his followers may be one, even as he and the Father are one (verse 11). In Acts 4:32 it is written of the young church in Jerusalem, "Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common." John did not record Christ's prayer, and Luke did not write his report, merely for the historical record. They wrote these things for inspiration and exhortation (as is true of all the many urgings to peace and harmony throughout the New Testament), because the church in the time of Luke and John did not have such intense unity. In fact, one need only read the New Testament with open eyes to see that discord was a continuing fact of life in the early church.

These tensions can be seen in several ways. The most obvious are explicit references to disagreements. A second window is discoverable tensions between writers of the New Testament canon, though these (in my opinion) are relatively mild and may consist of little more than differences of emphasis or definition. More serious are indications of serious conflicts that existed in the early church, conflicts in which only one side is represented in the canon. Our canon of twenty-seven writings did not reach final shape until the fourth century, after the church had the backing of the government for enforcing orthodoxy as it came to be defined. Writings that did not pass through that screen were not preserved or they were actively destroyed. This process of selection, of course, had begun long before AD 325, but after the so-called Peace of the Church there was a powerful political mechanism for enforcing unity and for suppressing writings that were regarded as deviant. The result is that there were varieties of Christianity that existed in New Testament times whose views are not represented in the New Testament, but their existence is recognized there. I will survey some of these disagreements and discuss how the early church dealt with them.

First are explicit references to quarrels. The first such disturbance arose soon as a direct result of the family-like closeness described in Acts 4:32, when they shared their possessions. The church was multiplying and becoming less homogeneous.

The Hellenistic Jews “murmured against” the Palestinian Jews “because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution” (Acts 6:1). The parties were marked by linguistic and cultural differences. The apostles resolved this difficulty by an administrative innovation, the election of seven officers charged with the distribution. Judging from their Greek names, these seven were chosen from the aggrieved party.

The degree of ethnic variation in the church took a mighty leap when the gospel went to the Samaritans (Acts 8), but far more when Peter baptized the Gentile Cornelius and his household (Acts 10), without requiring prior circumcision. In Acts 11:2-3 we discover that Peter came in for severe criticism for doing this. Luke writes: “So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcized men and eat with them?’” What Peter had done was an inconceivable flouting of Jewish tradition and every sense of propriety, a brazen irregularity, moving outside the acceptable bounds. Peter’s only defense was to describe the experience that had led him to do what was contrary to his own religious sensibilities and to declare that the Holy Spirit had told him to do it. Luke’s reference here to “the circumcision party” (οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς) introduces one of the parties in a division in the church that continued throughout the New Testament period and beyond.

A barrier had been broken, and the breach was enormously enlarged by the work of Paul, undertaken at first in partnership with Barnabas. The success of the mission to the Gentiles was seen by the brethren in Jerusalem as a threat to the purity and unity of the church. After all, circumcision was commanded in Scripture (Genesis 17:10-14, Leviticus 12:3).¹ Some men came down to Antioch, the headquarters of the Gentile mission, and were teaching the new members, “Unless you are circumcized according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). No stronger claim can be made for the importance of a doctrine than to say it is necessary for salvation! Luke tells us that “Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them” (verse 2). The upshot was that Paul and Barnabas led a delegation to Jerusalem, a meeting was held there, and the issue was much debated (verse 7). A breakthrough occurred when Peter related his experience, concluding: “Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will”

¹ On the role of Scripture, see the *Excursus* at the end of this paper.

(verses 10, 11). It is doubtful that anyone of a lesser standing than Peter could have dared to make such a theologically radical statement. Paul and Barnabas then made speeches. The real miracle occurred when James, the leader of the Jerusalem community of Christians, took the liberal side. The meeting concluded with the drafting of a letter that distanced the brethren in Jerusalem from the teachers who had earlier gone forth from there to trouble the Gentile believers in Antioch. They were content only to require that the Gentile Christians observe the Noachide laws (verse 29).²

The quarrel between Paul and Barnabas over a personnel issue (Acts 15:39) need not detain us. But Acts 21 is important. After many journeys Paul came again to Jerusalem and was welcomed by James, the leader there, and the brethren, who glorified God for the success of Paul's ministry among the Gentiles. But all was not well. They said: "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed; they are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs (mhde \ toi=j e!qesin peripatei=n). What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come" (verses 20-22). Luke is a peacemaker and emphasizes Paul's willingness to compromise. But when Paul himself deals with this issue his words are sharper.

In Galatians 2 we find Paul's account of a comparable incident, apparently after the events of Acts 15. He tells how James and Peter and John, pillars of the Jerusalem community, gave him and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship (2:9), requesting only that they remember the poor believers of Judaea. He does not even mention the Noachide laws. Then comes the revealing narrative of Paul's confrontation with Peter:

But when Cephas came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity (2:11-13).

² The three prohibitions stated here are generally regarded as an early version of the Laws of the Sons of Noah, later seven in number. We need not assume that this directive released Gentile believers from other moral requirements, but these three were issues of special concern to Jewish believers, concerns which Gentiles might otherwise not share.

Paul quotes his own words of sharp rebuke that he publicly gave Peter. The first great Christian controversy, occasioned by the mission to the Gentiles, was over what one must do to be saved, and there were clearly at least two sides in the debate, both considering themselves to be Christian, both believing that they were preaching the gospel. Paul is ferociously uncompromising:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed (Gal. 1:6-8).

We do not hear the voice of Paul’s opponents nor, perhaps, can we read their words, but it is not hard to imagine what they thought of him. They would have agreed with the judgment of Gerd Lüdemann that the first great Christian heresy was Pauline theology.³

Let us try to understand their point of view. In their opinion, not only was Paul dangerously wrong about salvation and casting doubts on the law of Moses, but he was a false apostle. He was not one of the Twelve. Not only did he flout Jewish tradition, but he played fast and loose with the teachings of Jesus. Jesus had given clear instructions about how the evangelistic ministry was to be supported (Matthew 10:5-9 and parallels), for “the laborer deserves his food.” Paul knew these instructions perfectly well and affirmed that he had a right to such support, yet he deliberately chose not to follow them (1 Corinthians 9). Paul knew what Jesus had said about divorce and remarriage, yet on his own authority he made an exception (1 Corinthians 7:12-15). It was hard for some people to be neutral about Paul. Later on, groups like those who produced the *Kerygmata Petrou* (probably Ebionites) insisted that Paul was a false apostle,⁴ while people like Marcion affirmed that he was the only true apostle.

Some might say that we can hear the voice of Paul’s opponents in Matthew and in James. We do not know whether they are opposing Paul himself, or rather some

³ See, for example, Gerd Lüdemann, *Heretics: The Other Side of Early Christianity*, trans. By John Bowden (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 61-95.

⁴ In the earliest church the prime qualification for being an apostle was that one must have been an eye witness of the risen Christ (Acts 1:21-26; 2:32; etc.) Paul claimed to satisfy this requirement on the basis of a visionary experience (Galatians 1:11-12; 1 Corinthians 9:1; Acts 9:3-6; 22:6-10; 26:13-18). The Jewish Christian community represented by the *Kerygmata Petrou* rejected visionary experiences as a valid proof of apostleship. See Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), 2:122-23.

of Paul's disciples who carried things much farther that Paul would have approved of. But in any case Matthew probably had other Christians in mind when he cites Jesus saying: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. . . . Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:17, 19; note that they are still in the Kingdom). James certainly has fellow Christians in mind when he asks: "What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him?" (James 2:14). Perhaps he is not addressing Paul but rather Hyper-Paulinists, the kind of Christian teacher of whom we read in 2 Peter 3:15-16: There are some things in Paul's letters hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction.

To be sure, in the Pastoral Epistles he exhibits a different side: he has become more concerned about law and order. For by that time the cleavage between Paulinists and Anti-Paulinists is not the only division in the church. The Hyper-Paulinists (if that is an appropriate term) have evolved into the Proto-Gnostics. First Timothy 6:20 warns against the falsely named Gnosis. John warns against Docetists, who have withdrawn from John's church and formed their own (1 John 2:18-19; 4:1-3). He calls them antichrists. The Revelator warns against other groups, such as the Nicolaitans. We read the warnings of the canonical writers, but we cannot hear what was being said by those who were warned against. If they wrote anything, it is mostly gone. But they all considered themselves Christians.

It is wrong, however, to suppose that the only thing that the New Testament writers had to say about differences of opinion was to denounce them. When we turn from the sharpness of Paul's letter to the Galatians to his letter to the Romans we get a different picture. In Romans Paul is writing to a church that he neither founded nor had yet visited, but it was already a mixed congregation consisting of both Jews and Gentiles. The real message of Romans concerns how these two groups of Christians should relate to each other. The emperor Claudius had expelled all Jews from Rome in AD 49 because riots had broken out among them caused by disagreement over Christ.⁵ This was when Priscilla and Aquila came from Rome to Corinth (Acts 18:2). But now the Jews had returned to Rome (Priscilla and Aquila are back, Romans 16:3). The church offices they vacated when they had to leave have been filled by Gentile believers. The two groups are arguing about whether it is

⁵ So we infer from Suetonius *Lives of the Caesars*, Claudius, 25.

necessary to do all the Jewish things, to keep the festivals, to abstain from meat offered to idols. Paul's counsel in Romans 14 is remarkably mild, a beautiful plea for Christian tolerance of differences and forbearance. "Then let us no more pass judgment on one another, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. . . . Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (Romans 14:13, 19).

We have taken only a cursory look at the tensions and differences in the early church. We have not, for example, noted all the many pleas for peace in the apostolic writings, or at Paul's rebuke of factionalism at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:10-15). But we can make some generalizations.

The early church experienced increasing disunity. Any early unity it had resulted from the afterglow of the Pentecost experience and from the relative smallness and homogeneity of the community. The disunity had many causes: church growth, ethnic diversification, strong personalities like Paul, and the tug between conservatism and liberalism (if those terms are appropriate; perhaps it would be better to say "traditionalists and innovators"). Yet the early church was united, after all, in their loyalty to Jesus and their desire to follow him. But the devil was in the details. There was diversity of temperament, of theology, of behavioral standards. In a word, early Christianity was in fact pluralistic. The question is how and why a writer like Paul could be so intolerant of his opponents in some contexts, and yet plead for tolerance and mutual acceptance in other contexts. My impression is that what made the difference was the spirit of those holding the various opinions. Paul did not like contentiousness, except when he did the contending. His contending was when a salvific truth was being threatened; otherwise he could be relaxed about differences, as long as faith and love were maintained.

In the second century we can perceive a growing impulse toward tightening the ship and standardizing the faith. (A parallel development was happening in Judaism. Before Jamnia it had been very pluralistic, but thereafter the Pharisaic variety was made the norm.) The devices used were the monarchical episcopacy and the creed (probably originally a baptismal vow), and the *regula fidei* (and later, a fixed canon). Persecution was both a help and a hindrance. Three centuries later unity could finally be achieved when Christianity became the established religion of the Empire,

and heresy was against the law.⁶ But this imposed unity came at a terrible price. Unity trumped truth, trumped love, and redefined faith. Faith no longer meant trust in Jesus but rather assent to the creeds. Obedience to Jesus morphed into obedience to the bishops. Orthodoxy was determined by majority vote in church councils. The losers of the debates were called heretics. If the church fell, it was not a fall out of unity, but a fall into unity.

God's church today finds itself in a somewhat similar condition. Anytime after the first generation, if not before, there are always conservatives like James and liberals like Paul. But yesterday's liberal becomes today's traditionalist. And one can be liberal about some things and conservative about other things. Like Peter we can experience a clash between what our tradition has taught us and what the Holy Spirit is telling us to do. Like the church toward the end of the first century and into the second century, we can be embarrassed by the antics of some deviant groups among us, like the libertine false teachers denounced by Jude or like the Gnostics. They give the church a bad reputation. We want to distance ourselves from them. This was in fact the original motivation for the development of the explicit categories of heretic and orthodox.

What is the way to unity, and what kind of unity does God want us to have? There is a hard way, and an easy way. The hard way is to wait for the Spirit to lead, to maintain charity, to discuss humbly, to respect differences of opinion but not be satisfied with them, to back off when disagreement leads to division. The quick and easy way is to use political means (church policy and any temporal means available) to impose unity. In such an environment the contest is not between truth and falsehood or between right and wrong, but between winners and losers, between the mighty and the weak, between those who "get there fustest and with the mostest" and those who are less aggressive.

What kind of unity should we seek? Above all the unity of the Spirit, as in the afterglow of Pentecost. How much unity of opinion and of behavior is necessary? The only rules are these: What is clearly true? What glorifies God? What keeps the community together? If people of equal learning and good will cannot agree about where the truth lies in a certain area, the reason must be that the evidence is

⁶ To be sure, excommunication could be and was imposed for unacceptable teachings as early as the second century, as the church in Rome did with Cerdo and Marcion. But they were able to go out and start their own churches.

ambiguous or inadequate. If people cannot agree about what glorifies God, the reason is that they have not prayed enough. If people do not care about what will keep the community together it is because they have not loved enough.

Excursus: The Bible

In the beginning was an Experience. The Earth was without Scriptures and Canon. And God spoke.

Experience precedes Scripture. The Exodus Experience preceded the Book of Exodus. But the record of the Event makes it available to posterity: “Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction” (1 Corinthians 10:11). Jesus was seen and heard in person by the Twelve, who bore witness (Acts 2:32; 1 John 1:1-3), and then seen by Paul in a visionary experience (Acts 9:3-6; Galatians 1:12; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:3-8). These experiences eventually resulted in the writing of gospels and epistles. Without the events of Acts 10, which in a sense even trumped Scripture (after all, the circumcision party had Leviticus 12:3 and Genesis 17:10-14 on their side), the apostolic letter of Acts 15:23-29 would not have been written.

Is divine guidance like a GPS or a Road Atlas? If the directions of the GPS get written down properly the product is an itinerary or a road atlas, and the GPS can be discarded. The voice of the Spirit got inscripturated and can be consulted at will. It is now in our power. Thus the Church gathered unto itself Scriptures, but it had no Canon until it said: Only these, and no others. After that there was no longer any authoritative new revelation, nor any need felt for it, and instead of new revelation we have exegesis of old revelation. The scholar replaces the prophet.

When we repeat the motto, *Sola Scriptura*, think on these things.