

Lecture 2:

“Unity and Diversity in the New Testament”

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1. Communion and Local Churches

1.1. “From the beginning contact was maintained between local churches by collections, exchanges of letters, visits and tangible expressions of solidarity (cf. 1 Cor 16; 2 Cor 8:1-9; Gal 2:9ff; etc.). From time to time, during the first centuries, local churches assembled to take counsel together. All of these were ways of nurturing interdependence and maintaining communion. # 65: The communion of the Church is expressed in the communion between local churches, in each of which the fullness of the Church resides. The communion of the Church embraces local churches in each place and all places at all times. Local churches are held in the communion of the Church by the one Gospel, the one baptism and the one Lord’s Supper, served by a common ministry. This communion of local churches is thus not an optional extra, but is an essential aspect of what it means to be the Church.”¹

1.2. The significance of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15)

- a) Authority over local churches
- b) Care and concern for local churches
- c) Human-Divine elements of the decision making: debates (even fights) and Spirit’s voice!

1.3. Two ecclesiastical principles (Grenz):

- a) The principle of autonomy means that within the larger whole, each congregation is self-governing; each local church has “church powers”
- b) Balanced with congregational autonomy is the principle of association: no congregation is an end in itself; it participates in a larger whole and its goal is in the eschatological gathering of all people of God; so, each congregation ought to be “turned toward others”

1.4. M. Volf:

- a) On the one hand, each congregation can “stand” on its own feet (has full churchly “powers” within itself);

¹ “The Nature and Mission of the Church” # 64 (WCC/Faith and Order, 2005).

- b) On the other hand, it is necessary to maintain openness to others: that church which consistently denies the ecclesiality of other congregations is in danger of frustrating even its own ultimate vision which is the gathering of all people(s) of God under one God in New Jerusalem (Rev 20-21)

2. Government within Communities: “Balanced Congregationalism” (Grenz)

2.1. Even when leaders are needed, the whole church is the “decision-making” body

- a) Even Congregationalist churches, let alone Episcopal or Presbyterian, do not always in practice allow the whole church participate in the decision-making

2.2. General Guidelines:

- a) Jesus’ teaching concerning how disciples should relate to each other: it resisted authoritarianism and supported mutualism (Mark 10:42-43)
 - Similarly Acts 1:23-26 (the choice of the 12th apostle) and 6:3-6 (the choice of deacons); and so forth
- b) The Protestant principle of Priesthood of All believers

3. The Kingdom “Story” in the New Testament (N.T. Wright) ²

3.1. N.T. Wright: “My proposal about the gospels is that they all, in their rather different ways, tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth as the story of *how God became king*.” (cf. theocracy)

- a) “[T]he four canonical gospels tell the story of Jesus as the *continuation* and *climax* of the ancient story of Israel.”

3.2. “For over a century now it has been commonplace within the discipline called New Testament Studies to assume that the early church had to jettison its **Jewishness** in order to be relevant to the **Gentile** world into which it quickly went. Thus it has been assumed, again, that Paul had to downplay the idea of Jesus as **Israel’s** Messiah and to switch, instead, to the more readily available category of the *kyrios*, the ‘Lord’. But this proposal, hugely influential though it has

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Inaugural Lecture

by the Right Reverend Professor N. T. Wright
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http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_StAndrews_Inaugural.htm

been, simply fails to imagine what ‘the kingdom of God’ meant to the early Christians, Paul included (he doesn’t use the phrase that often, but when he does we can see that it remains at the centre of his worldview). Paul, in fact, held firmly to the ancient **Jewish** belief, rooted in the Psalms, in Isaiah and in Daniel, that a world ruler would indeed arise from Judaea, that **Israel’s** God would thereby return to dwell amongst and within his people, and that through this means the long-awaited new creation of peace and justice would be inaugurated for the whole world. All of that standard Jewish expectation came to fresh flowering in Paul’s work.”

- a) “Of course, the communities which Paul founded were determinedly **non-ethnic** in their basis. But this was not because Paul had as it were gone soft on the essential **Jewishness** of his mission, or because there was something wrong (as Epicureans imagine) with **Judaism**, but because he believed that it was precisely part of the age-old divine plan that when God did for Israel what he was going to do for Israel then the nations would be brought under the healing, saving rule of this one God. Paul’s ‘gospel’, his *euaggelion*, was thus much closer in meaning to the various *euaggelia* of Caesar than most of modern scholarship has imagined. It was, as Acts 17 (already quoted) indicates, the royal announcement, right under Caesar’s nose, that there was ‘another king, namely Jesus’. And Paul believed that this royal announcement, like that of Caesar, was not a take-it-or-leave-it affair. It was a powerful summons through which the living God worked by his Spirit in hearts and minds, to transform human character and motivation, producing the tell-tale signs of faith, hope and love which Paul regarded as the biblically prophesied marks of God’s true people.”
- b) “The communities which sprang into surprised existence as Paul went around making this royal announcement were remarkably devoid of an obvious symbolic world. They were precisely not defined by the worldview-symbols of **Judaism** – Temple, Torah observance and so on. They certainly didn’t adopt the symbols of the surrounding **pagan** culture. How could this new community, this new *sort* of community, retain what for Paul was its vital centre, namely its strong unity across traditional social divisions, and its strong holiness in matters of our old friends, money, sex and power? For Paul the answer was simple. The community needed to understand what it was that had happened in Jesus the Messiah, and in particular who the God was into whose new world they had been brought. What we see in Paul is thus properly characterized as the birth of the discipline which later came to be called Christian **theology**, by which I mean the prayerful and scripture-based reflection, from within the common life of the otherwise disparate body called the church, on who exactly the one God was and what his action in Jesus and by the Spirit was to mean. Early Christian theology was not an exercise undertaken for the sake of speculative system-building. “
- c) Implications to our topic

4. The Emergence of the Church in Relation to Judaism (A Missiological Reflection on the Acts):

4.1. Acts 1: Continuity with Israel: The selection of the 12th Apostle

- a) Consider the implications of 1:6-9: In response to the question of “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus urges them to become witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth!

4.2. Acts 2: The diversity of Pentecostal tongues

- a) Both continuity and newness
 - Diversity of languages and dialects
 - Yet all from the Jewish diaspora

4.3. Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37: The life of the first Church in the New Testament: the “Pentecostal Church”

- a) Consider the features of continuity and newness
 - Sermons in Acts 2, 3, and 4 (first Christian sermons) are totally Jewish in nature, and yet also totally Christocentric!
- b) Note that while gathering in Jewish milieu, following Jewish customs and idioms, the church seemed to have been its own (social) group from the start; in the midst of the people (of God) but yet, establishing a separate community within the Old People of God
 - Even Acts 7, Stephen’s last speech, is totally Jewish – and yet, by that time the church was not only separate from the Jews but also publicly opposed, even to the measure of martyrdom

4.4. Implications of 6:1 (a complaint by the Hellenists...against the Hebrews)?

4.5. The importance of Acts 10 for our topic!

4.6. Beginning from Acts 13, in each city the Jewish center of worship was visited first and when the opposition grew, Paul and other missionaries went elsewhere

4.7. Concluding remarks from the brief study of Acts: What would Paul think of the Insider Movement within Judaism?

- a) What might be the implications to the Muslim context?

5. Pauline Resources for Dealing with Ethical and Cultural Issues

5.1. Theological-Missiological Reflection on **Romans 14**

- a) Embracing the Other Believers (vv 1-4, 10-12)
 - ...particularly the ones at the lower level of maturity
 - ...in the midst of theological and ethical conflicts
 - ...knowing that the human person is not in the place of the Judge (only God is)
- b) Endorsing each Believer's particular conviction with regard to the debated issue (vv 5-9)
- c) Evaluating wisely and constructively each Believer's motifs and reasons for his or her particular behavior (vv 12-18)
- d) Establishing common peace and God's purpose for the world as the ultimate goals (vv 19-23)

5.2. Theological-Missiological Reflections on **1 Corinthians 8**

- a) More important than presumed knowledge is genuine love (vv 1-3)
- b) No idols are truly existent, only God is (4-6)
 - This is true even if some weaker Christian might assume otherwise (vv 7-8)
- c) Be careful not to let your own spiritual and intellectual maturity to establish a stumbling blocked to the weaker Christian (vv 9-13)

5.3. Implications to our topic

5.4. Any other relevant Pauline or New Testament guidelines?

6. Final Reflections

ADDENDUM: Two Pauline Texts (NIV)

Romans 14

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. ² One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³ The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. ⁴ Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

⁵ One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. ⁶ Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷ For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. ⁸ If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. ⁹ For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰ You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister¹? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. ¹¹ It is written:

“As surely as I live,” says the Lord,
“every knee will bow before me;
every tongue will acknowledge God.”

¹² So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

¹³ Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. ¹⁴ I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. ¹⁵ If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, ¹⁸ because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.

¹⁹ Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. ²⁰ Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. ²¹ It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.

²² So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. ²³ But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

1 Corinthians 8

Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that “We all possess knowledge.” But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. ² Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know.

³ But whoever loves God is known by God.

⁴ So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that “An idol is nothing at all in the world” and that “There is no God but one.” ⁵ For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), ⁶ yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

⁷ But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. ⁸ But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

⁹ Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

¹⁰ For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? ¹¹ So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. ¹² When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.