

Faith and Culture in Saint Paul

by Father Theodore Stylianopoulos

The issue of Christian renewal cannot properly be treated only in the context and challenges of modern times. A holistic perspective must take into consideration all of the Church's historical life, particularly its earliest period marked by the most dramatic changes when the Christian faith was seen as a new, subversive force threatening both Jewish and Gentiles traditions. Indeed, Christianity emerged as a powerful renewal movement from the matrix of Judaism and rapidly spread among Gentiles in the Greco-Roman world already during the first generation of its adherents. By the middle 50's it had made what perhaps can be seen as the greatest cultural leap of its entire history, a remarkable transition from the Aramaic-speaking Jewish culture of Palestinian towns and villages to the cosmopolitan culture of the major Hellenistic cities of the East, such as Antioch, Ephesus, and Corinth, as well as of the center of the Empire, Rome itself. The amazing success of Christianity is eloquent testimony to its own internal vitality, its distinctive developing character over against both Judaism and Hellenism, as well as its capacity to adapt to new circumstances and to use both Jewish and Hellenistic elements to its own advantage.

In the eye of this dynamic and complex religious and cultural interaction stands the great figure of Saint Paul, Roman citizen (Acts 22:27-28), zealous Pharisee (Philippians 3:5-6), cultural Hellene (1 Corinthians 9:21; Romans 9:14), and most successful Christian missionary (Romans 15:16-29). Far from being an individualist working in splendid isolation - as some have portrayed him in the past - Saint Paul consciously lived, thought and worked with the strongest, albeit paradoxical, sense of solidarity with Jews, Gentiles, as well as Christians. He is after all the one who said, "I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). But he also said, "Neither circumcision counts for anything, nor un-circumcision, but a new creation" (Galatians 6:15), signaling his conviction about the new faith in Christ for which he fought both to disseminate and define with all his apostolic zeal, theological skill and pastoral capacity. The great Apostle epitomizes the dramatic interaction of faith and culture in early Christianity. In him we find evidence of powerful continuities and discontinuities between Christianity, Judaism and Hellenism. Furthermore, insofar as Saint Paul helped shape basic Christian perspectives during this most creative and canonical epoch of Christianity, we may also gain from him some challenging insights into the tumultuous interaction of faiths and cultures in our own times as we stand at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

A Modern Parable

A modern parable will bring home to us the revolutionary nature of Saint Paul's witness. Think of a strongly traditional Greek Orthodox family in cosmopolitan New York, or Boston, the Athens of America. Imagine them to be American citizens having established roots in American business and society, yet powerfully attached to their own religious and ethnic heritage which for them is a single, undifferentiated unity. Their ties with Greece are such that they send off their son to study in Greece and be thoroughly infused with the Greek Orthodox mindset and way of life. While in Greece the young man visits the Holy Mountain of Athos and has a profound religious experience. Suddenly the young man has a changed heart and a new set of priorities. What really matter to him now are Christ, the Church as His mystical Body, the Liturgy, and the theology and spirituality of the Church Fathers, all of which, according to his awareness, are only dimly perceived by his fellow Greek Orthodox living in an immensely rich culture of religious and ethnic traditions.

The young man then returns to America with a new vision and with glowing convictions about the opportunity of Orthodox mission in this free and open society. He tries to arouse local Greek Orthodox congregations to the same grand vision. He tells them that in order to have a true and vigorous Orthodox mission, they must have a renewal of identity centered on Christ and the fundamental truths of the Orthodox faith, which defines in any case their true baptismal identity, and not an ambiguous kind of sociological identity based on their sense of nationality and on their humanly justifiable pride in their ethno-religious culture and language. To be sure, he is not at all opposed to the rich ethnic heritage of the Greek Orthodox; rather, the mission of Christ and His Church have become for him an incomparably higher priority. He welcomes converts into the Greek Orthodox Church and points to them as being the first fruits of a renewed identity, a renewed humanity in Christ, just as in the case of the Book of Acts when the flow of Gentiles into Christianity transformed the identity of the nascent Jewish Christian Church.

For him, all this would be consistent with Orthodox theology and history, since Orthodoxy itself has made several great moves into new nations and cultures over the ages. Indeed, such renewal of baptismal identity centered on Christ and His Church, even at the risk of losing some precious cultural traditions and gaining new ones, is exactly the essence of the matter and the pledge of the future destiny of the Orthodox Church in America for the glory of Christ. Such a zealous man, you can imagine, would create quite a stir preaching his message to Greek-Americans and all at once trying to relate to family, friends, converts, and the general public.

While the parable is not analogical in every detail, it gives us an illuminating perspective in which to understand Saint Paul and his personal and theological

struggle with faith and culture. Born in Tarsus, arguably the Athens of the Eastern Mediterranean, he was of a family of "Hebrew of Hebrews" (Philippians 3:5), apparently well-established, and possessing Roman citizenship (Acts 22:27-28). He learned Greek there but went off to Jerusalem for high Jewish studies, where he joined the strict party of the Pharisees, if he were not already a member of it (Philippians 3:5). But while heavily involved in the persecution against Christian Jews who were "Hellenists," that is, spoke Greek and were raising issues about the Temple and other Jewish customs (Acts 6:1,8-14; 9:1-18) he was granted a vision of the risen Christ, which transformed his whole life and simultaneously called him to a new mission in the Gentile world (Romans 11:13). The person of the risen Lord was such a powerful reality for him that he could say, "For me to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:23) and "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). From Law-centered he became Christ-centered. The Christ-focus was so immense that the Apostle came to view all other values, whether Jewish or Hellenic, as relative, including the Mosaic Law, and he was willing to live out the consequences. Some twenty years after his call and conversion he could still write that he counted all things, including his attainments in Judaism, a "loss" and "refuse," in order "to gain" Christ and to continue to pursue the "surpassing worth" of Jesus his Lord (Philippians 3:8-9).

Saint Paul and Judaism

From this perspective we can appreciate the dramatic struggle of faith and culture reflected in Saint Paul's Epistles. In his *magnum opus*, the Epistle to the Romans, he takes up the theme of continuity and discontinuity between Jews, Gentiles, as well as Christians in a rather conscious way. Of course he is not concerned with this theme in the abstract but in terms of the direction of salvation history in his times. His concern was about what God was doing in Christ among Jews and Gentiles which the Apostle understands as the revelation of God's righteousness — the demonstration of God's saving action in fulfillment of His promises in the Old Testament. It is in Romans (chaps 1-3) that the Apostle presents a Christ centered survey of universal history which finds that ultimately neither Jews nor Gentiles have much to boast about morally or spiritually. All have gone astray and all need Christ through whom God offers universal salvation by means of faith in Christ and apart from the Law of Moses. In what follows, our first focus will be on aspects of Saint Paul's life and thought in continuity and discontinuity with his own tradition of Judaism of which he as a zealous and strict adherent.

Chapters 9-11 of Romans are of special relevance to our discussion. The chief issue here is the fact of the corporate unbelief of the Jewish people. To the Apostle, this fact presents a painful personal and theological problem of the greatest magnitude, wrapped in the mystery of God's inscrutable ways. How can his fellow Jews not believe in their own Messiah? What is one to think

about God's faithfulness to His promises? What is God's plan about Jews and Gentiles now that messianic times have arrived? Saint Paul's complex and laborious argumentation in part reaches a high point with his illustration of the good olive tree in Romans 11:17-14. The illustration is not accurate horticulture — a wild shoot is not grafted on a good tree but the reverse — and St. Paul is aware of it (Romans 11:24). However, his extended use of this forced image indicates that Saint Paul is grappling in an agonizing way with the problem of the relations between Jews, Gentiles and Christians, and can thus serve as a key by which to outline some main aspects our topic.

First, we note that the illustration unequivocally assumes the essential continuity between the Jewish tradition and all Christian believers. The good olive tree (*kallielaios*) with its richness (or "fatness," *piotes*) is the whole Jewish heritage glowing with divine revelation. Saint Paul earlier sums up this heritage when enumerating God's many gifts to the Jews: "the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Law, the worship,... the promises,... the patriarchs, and... the Christ" (Romans 9:4-5). Elsewhere in Romans he mentions the privilege of "the oracles of God" (*ta logia Theou*), the Scriptures, with which the Jews have been entrusted by God. According to Saint Paul's train of thought in Romans 9-11, there are two kinds of branches on the good olive tree, natural and honorary. The honorary branches are the Gentile Christians, formerly shoots of a wild olive (*agrielaios*), but now organically "grafted" to the good olive tree of whose richness they partake. The natural branches are the minority of Jewish Christians, mentioned not in the illustration itself but earlier in Romans 9-11, who constitute "the faithful remnant" of the Old Testament prophecies and who have attained to God's righteousness in Christ (Romans 9:24; 11:5-7). These two kinds of branches representing the Jewish and Gentile Christians are united by their common call in Christ (Romans 9:24) and their mutual participation in the blessings of the Jewish heritage. They are the ones who "confess with [their] lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in [their] hearts that God raised Him from the dead," and who consequently make up the saved community in which "there is no distinction between Jew and Greek [because] the same Lord is the Lord of all" (Romans 10:9-13).

For Saint Paul, therefore, salvation history marks an essential and intrinsic continuity between Christianity and Judaism. Unlike Marcion of in the second century and some theologians in modern times, Saint Paul has a completely positive view of the revelatory value of the Old Testament and the Jewish heritage. In agreement with the overall witness of the New Testament, the Apostle holds to the fundamental view that the Christian faith and life are to be interpreted in the category of renewal and fulfillment, rather than negation or abolition of the Jewish heritage. This line of theological thinking continues in the classic patristic tradition which affirms not only the workings of grace but also the sainthood of numerous figures in the Jewish tradition down to the Maccabean martyrs.

Secondly, however, the illustration of the olive tree also emphasizes a sharp discontinuity between Judaism and Christianity centering on Christ. Here the qualification must be made that Saint Paul, in his own view, has a lover's quarrel not with the Jewish heritage as such but with contemporary unbelieving Jews. Without mincing his words, the Apostle holds that in the new stage of salvation history marked by the lordship of Christ, some natural branches were indeed "broken off" the good olive tree by reason of unbelief (*apistia*), just as "in their place" previously wild branches have been organically "grafted" by reason of faith (*pistis*, Romans 11:17-20). In vain modern thinkers involved in the Jewish-Christian dialogue have tried to find support in Romans 11 for a theology of two equally valid covenants by God, one for Jews and the other for (Gentile) Christians. According to Saint Paul's illustration, the unbelieving Jews in messianic times are clearly cut off from the good olive tree. Earlier in Romans 9-11 the Apostle states that they are not the spiritual but the physical Israel (Romans 9:6-8). He considers that they are "vessels of wrath," who stand over against the "vessels of mercy," the Christian Jews and Gentiles with whom the Apostle himself identifies using the plural "we" (Rom. 9:22-24). Thus a double discontinuity exists, not only between Christians and unbelieving Jews, but also between unbelieving Jews and their own heritage!



This precisely is the agonizing problem of Romans 9-11 over which Saint Paul struggles to provide various answers. The two important qualifications he makes are (1) that the unbelief of the Jewish people serves the positive cause of a large-scale conversion of Gentiles and (2) that it is provisional rather than final (Romans 11:11,25-26). The Jews have indeed stumbled but they have not ultimately been rejected by God as His people — "by no means!" (*me genoito!*), says the Apostle, for otherwise the faithfulness of God to His own promises would be in question (Romans 11:1,11,29). They may now be "enemies of God" pertaining to the Gospel and for the sake of Gentiles, but they are the irrevocably beloved and elect people of God, although now paradoxically in a state of disobedience, just like Gentiles Christians were previously in a state of disobedience (Romans 11:28-32). God's plan is to consign all to disobedience that He may show mercy upon all (Romans 9:32). Saint Paul's profound conviction which he reveals as a divine mystery is that by God's power all Israel will finally believe and be saved (Romans 11:23-26). He concludes with a doxological affirmation of God's inscrutable wisdom (Romans 11:33).

It is of great importance to note that Saint Paul, despite his harsh language — there was no ecumenical politeness in antiquity — refrains from pronouncing judgment on the Jews as being accursed by God. Rather, he expresses astonishing solidarity with them, solemnly stating that he would be willing "to be cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren and kinsmen by race"

(Romans 9:3). These words of the Apostle, as well as similar words by Moses in Exodus 32:32, have been lifted up by various Church Fathers as the highest examples of selfless love. In the illustration of the olive tree Saint Paul on the contrary warns Gentile Christians three times not to be haughty or conceited toward unbelieving Jews but to stand in awe before the mystery of God (Romans 11:18-25). However, later Christian generations were often to forget the Apostle's admonitions. Without any sense of solidarity with the Jewish people, they turned the lover's quarrel and the "in-house" biblical critique of Jews into a hateful source of prejudice, polemics, and persecution, despising and mistreating the Jewish people. It is one of the darkest ironies of history that the "honorary Israelites," the Gentile Christians engrafted on the good olive tree, chose many times to stomp on the broken branches rather than to long and pray with Saint Paul for their salvation.

The final major discontinuity between Judaism and Christianity pertains to Saint Paul's hermeneutical perspectives. Saint Paul's quarrel of love with contemporary Jews was not only over Christ but also over the interpretation of the Jewish tradition. The experience of Christ gave the Apostle and the early Church a new hermeneutical key by which to appropriate the Jewish heritage. It is a fact that the developing Christian tradition consciously or unconsciously embraced numerous individual elements as well as patterns of Jewish thought, worship and practice from a new theological perspective, yet with a great deal of variety and diversity. At certain points, however, the Christological criterion yielded interpretive results quite conflicting with those of the Jewish scribal tradition. Of course Saint Paul would claim that the coming of Christ and the gift of the Spirit led quite naturally to the Christian interpretation of the Jewish heritage as the fulfillment of prophecies. But the scribal teachers would vehemently disagree, viewing the Christological interpretations as radical departures, even an apostasy, from Judaism. What we observe in history are two communities of faith with differing hermeneutical perspectives.

The most crucial discontinuity in interpretation, and one which hastened the historical separation between Judaism and Christianity, centered on the role of the Mosaic Law. Already the Hellenists of Acts, that is to say, the Greek-speaking Jews who had become Christians, seemed to have questioned the authority of the Temple, the Law and Jewish customs in messianic times, which generated a fierce persecution against them (Acts 6:13,-14; 8:1). The Apostle Paul, erstwhile zealous persecutor of these same kind of Christians, took up their cause and was himself, after Damascus, persecuted not only by unbelieving Jews but also by right-wing Jewish Christians, those whom he names "false brethren" (Galatians 1:4) and "the circumcision party" (*hoi ek peritomes*, Galatians 1:12) who wanted, along with Christ, to maintain Jewish customs in strictness. When Saint Paul speaks about "his Gospel," he surely means not a different Gospel from that preached by all (1 Corinthians 15:11), but rather preaching Christ to the Gentiles apart from the requirements of the



Mosaic Law, a Gospel with which "the pillars" of the Jerusalem Church agreed (Galatians 2:1-9).

The essence of the complex problem of the Law in Saint Paul and early Christianity, as more and more scholars have come to perceive in recent years, has nothing to do with the alleged Jewish attitude of meritorious "work righteousness," but with the concrete question of how Gentile converts were to be received into the Church. Some of the Jewish Christians insisted that Gentile Christians had to be circumcised to be saved (Acts 15:1). Gentile Christians in the Galatian churches actually began to practice circumcision, kosher

foods and Jewish festivals (Galatians 4:10; 5:2), what the Apostle describes as "Judaizing" or living like Jews (Galatians 2:14). His uncompromising answer is well known: justification is by faith in Christ not by works of the Law (Galatians 2:16).

The Pauline phrase "works of the Law," contrasted to faith, points essentially to the Jewish religious customs and not to ethical works which Saint Paul everywhere requires (Romans 2:6-10; 1 Corinthians 7:19; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 5:20-21), especially in his frequent pastoral exhortations. Although the Apostle does not explicitly make a distinction between moral and ceremonial parts of the Law, he does implicitly draw such a differentiation (Romans 2:21-29; 1 Corinthians 7:19). The focus of his objections to the Law, after all, centers on circumcision and other religious signs which visibly identified Jews as Jews (Galatians 2:3; 4:10; 5:2,11; Romans 2:25-29; Philippians 3:2-3,19), and not on moral elements assumed to be valid for all. His sharp critique of the Galatians is that they were "Judaizing" by observing circumcision and the like, not that they were either wrongly or excessively given to moral works! Where Saint Paul theologizes about the Law, the Apostle conceives of it in its totality as a God-given, holy, but temporary dispensation which Christ has ended and from which Christians are now free (Galatians 3:15; 4:7; Romans 7; 10:4). That the term *telos* (Romans 10:4) should not be understood as "goal" or "fulfillment," as many exegetes would have it, but rather as "termination" or "end" is indicated by the contrasts which follow as explanation of the point (Romans 10:5-9). Obviously a dispensation that is temporary according to God's plan has a beginning (Moses) and an end (Christ). In Saint Paul's

theological thought what is really fulfilled in Christ is God's promise to Abraham, not God's gift to Moses (Galatians 3).

The Apostolic Council (Acts 15; Galatians 2) by supporting Saint Paul's position on the Mosaic Law regarding Christians who were Gentiles, succeeded in securing the unity of the Church but sealed Christianity's accelerated separation from Judaism. Saint Paul was not against observance of the Law by Jews, although the Law for him had become in the final analysis a matter of indifference as a saving criterion. But the Jewish people as a whole could not accept the new faith if it involved such a substantive revision of a core part of the tradition which defined their identity. In Romans 9-11 Saint Paul expressly links the corporate unbelief of the Jews to their zealous attachment to the Law (Romans 9:30-32). At a time in history from the Maccabean Revolt to the Jewish Rebellion against the Romans (*ca.* 165BC-73AD), when the Jews were struggling to preserve their identity over against Gentile cultural, political and military onslaughts, they probably sensed only too well that the Christian relativization of the Law of Moses was life-threatening to the Jewish community. No wonder that they were aroused to persecution of Jewish Christians and their expulsion from the synagogues.

However, the Apostle Paul and others like him were willing to risk that sacrifice toward a new universal identity in Christ. The Apostle was not of course opposed to a Jewish identity on a sociological level any more than he was opposed to a Roman, Greek or Scythian identity. Nor does he suggest anywhere that Hellenic culture was "higher" or "nobler" than the Jewish. He does not appeal to any humanistic reasons in moving beyond what, from the Christian point of view, came to be regarded as sacred Jewish religious culture. Rather, for him as well as for the developing Church, the very nature of faith in a universal Lord and the very nature of the Church as a universal community required this historically fateful passage toward the universalizing of the essence of the Jewish faith discovered in Christ and the new humanity, the Church, which is His Body.

Here we may note that Saint Paul's bold move for the cause of Christ and the Church in the Greco-Roman world has much to say to us Orthodox Christians with the blessings and burdens of our own rich ethno-religious heritage today as we face the interaction of faiths and cultures in a global context. Our challenge is to consider how far our own Christian identity is shaped by the experience and convictions of Saint Paul regarding Christ as the universal Savior, the Gospel as the universal message, and the Church as the universal new humanity; and how far it is variously shaped by the immense and rich ethno-religious heritages of the various Orthodox Churches developed over many centuries. To be sure, as peoples with concrete histories we can rejoice in our particular ethnic cultures and share in the variegated culture of today's global village. But what of our universal identity in Christ which transcends all cultures and adapts to new ones? What are the measures of appropriate unity

and diversity? To what extent can we move beyond the sense of necessary uniformity and see that new cultural forms can express the essential experience and truth of the Orthodox faith? These and such questions will become more and more burning concerns in the future and tremendously important for our mission on a global scale. To understand more deeply our true identity as Christ's Church is also to grasp more clearly the great mission to which He calls us today.

St. Paul and Hellenism

As part of his self-introduction to the Christians in Rome, the Apostle Paul writes that, "I am under obligation both to Greeks and barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish: so I am eager to preach the Gospel to you also who are in Rome" (Romans 1:15). With these words, the great Apostle seems at first blush to commit a social blunder by referring to his future hosts, the Romans, as barbarians and fools. But, of course, this is not the case. Rather he simply assumes that the Romans are cultural Greeks, because they are versed in the Greek language and share in the Hellenic culture pervasive in Rome itself. His words indicate how far the meaning of the word "Hellene" has widened by the first century. There is little doubt that, as far as the social distinction between Greek and barbarian is concerned, the Apostle would classify himself not as a barbarian but as a cultural Greek, too.

We have mentioned that he was born in Tarsus, a thriving Greek city. He received the name *Pavlos* which, although originally Roman, was quite likely given to him in its Greek version and most always was used as such. He was well versed in the Greek language as his letters show. By the time he had written any letters at all, his Christian evangelizing and tent-making involved him for at least fifteen years (35-50 AD) in the hustle and bustle of all the major centers of Hellenistic culture except Alexandria. It is no surprise at all that Saint Paul's letters reflect numerous Hellenistic elements, including language, epistolary form, dialogic manner of exposition and, on occasion, key terms. Once he anonymously quotes a proverbial statement of a Greek poet (Menander) with approval, "bad company ruins good morals" (1 Corinthians 15:33). In Philippians 4:8, his eloquent exhortation about whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, gracious, and so on, could have been said by any Greek philosopher or moralist. He even uses a Stoic term such as *syneidesis* (Romans 12:15; 1 Corinthians 8:7; 2 Corinthians 4:2) from the popular terminology of his time.

Saint Paul's affinities with Hellenistic culture already had deep roots in Judaism which had direct and welcome contacts with Hellenism since the days of Alexander the Great (356-323BC). The Jews in Alexandria, where they strived for citizenship, translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek primarily for their own use. Jewish cemetery inscriptions found throughout the empire

are mostly in Greek. The later Hasmonean Kings in Palestine issued Greek coins. A gymnasium had been built in Jerusalem one hundred and fifty years before Christ. When Jesus and His disciples "reclined" to eat the Last Supper, they were in fact following a Greek custom long in use. By the era of Saint Paul Hellenic culture had penetrated Palestine to such an extent that scholars no longer consider the distinction between Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism useful. Although there were a variety of reactions to Hellenism, including fierce opposition by some, the ideal among most Jews was to create a synthesis between Judaism and Hellenism as expressed by a rabbinic saying: "May the beauty of the Greeks dwell in the tents of the Jews." Again, it is not surprising that Jews would embrace many aspects of the prevailing culture. Earlier the prophet Daniel and the three youths had adopted Babylonian names and used Babylonian wisdom (Daniel, chaps. 1-6)! Today both Jews and Greeks in the United States not only have eagerly absorbed American patterns of life and thought, but also have in part contributed to the shaping of American culture itself.

For a minority group living in a dominant culture the question is not whether or not to acculturate but how much. The remarkable feature about the Jewish people in Graeco-Roman times, given the historical upheavals of that period, is that they vigorously maintained a distinctive identity. Although Judaism exhibited great diversity both in the Diaspora as well as in Palestine — recall the variety of religious groups such as the Sadducees, Pharisees, Scribes, and Essenes — virtually all Jews shared a common identity centered on faith in the one God, the Law and a profound sense of being a particular people. Philo of Alexandria was deeply Hellenized in thought but nevertheless was a sincerely observant Jew who chided other Hellenizing Jews for not keeping the Jewish customs. The Apostle Paul who calls himself "a Hebrew of Hebrews [and] as to the law a Pharisee" (Phil. 3:5) was much less Hellenized than his contemporary Philo. Saint Paul Greek is distinctly less literary than Philo's and his cast of thought basically Hebraic. It is true that several generations ago scholars were fond of interpreting every major aspect of Saint Paul's thought, such as the Christological titles Son of God and Lord, the contrast between flesh and spirit, and the sacred rites of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, in terms of Hellenistic syncretism. But in the last two generations a great reversal has taken place in biblical scholarship. A consensus of scholars now views these important aspects of life and thought of Saint Paul and the early Church as intrinsic developments of the new Christian movement entirely understandable within the context of its Jewish background.

Saint Paul's openness to the Greco-Roman world and its culture, an amazing phenomenon for a former zealous Pharisee, was theologically grounded and derived from his understanding of his vision of the risen Christ. In Galatians 1:11-17, where he appeals to this momentous event as his front-line defense of the divine origin and authority of the Gospel, he describes his conversion as a "call" from God using the language of Jeremiah and Isaiah. God had set him

apart "from his mother's womb" and "called" him to evangelize His Son among the Gentiles (Galatians 1:15-16). The Apostle contends for "the Gospel that [he] preach[es] among the Gentiles," the Gospel to the uncircumcised "entrusted" to him by God (Galatians 2:1,7). In this special "commission" from God lies his "necessity" to evangelize and his "obligation" to "Greeks and barbarians" (1 Corinthians 9:16-17; Romans 1:14). Elsewhere he names himself "the Apostle to the Gentiles" (Romans 11:13). Saint Paul thus understood himself as fulfilling a special role in God's design pertaining to the Gentiles entirely consistent with the Old Testament.



An icon of St. Paul preaching in the northern Greek town of Berea

In a book entitled *The Early Christians: Their World Mission and Self-Discovery* (1986), Ben Meyer convincingly develops the thesis that, of all the religious groups in first-century Judaism, including the Jewish Christians, only the Christian Hellenists and Saint Paul were able to conceive of and carry out a seemingly impossible world mission against all odds, and that for theological reasons. The Christian Hebraists understood themselves as the vanguard of a restored Israel and resisted the outreach to Gentiles. But the Christian Hellenists and Saint Paul understood themselves as the first fruits of a new

humanity in Christ in which "there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, male and female; for... all are one in Christ" (Galatians 3:28). The key difference was that the Hellenists and Saint Paul interpreted the death and resurrection of Christ as His enthronement as universal Lord (*Kyrios*). The experience and theology of the universal lordship of Christ, and the resulting universal soteriology, were thus the driving force behind the world mission. As the Epistle to the Ephesians puts it: Christ "has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body" (Ephesians 2:14-16).

But what was the content of Saint Paul's openness to the world? Surely he did not come to Hellenistic society with empty hands. Yet by what insights and criteria did he strive to give shape to the life of the congregations he founded? Christ did not give him a blueprint but the grace of the Holy Spirit. It was by his daily union with Christ, and the power of the Spirit, that St. Paul preached, taught, ministered, organized, and theologized. The Church Fathers correctly say that it was Christ who acted in Saint Paul for the Apostle himself had said that he possessed the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16). Nor was he unaware that certain boundaries were not to be crossed. A former Pharisee inclined to see even eating with Gentiles as defiling, the Apostle would indeed be highly conscious of the road he traveled in pagan society. He nowhere reflects on the matter of continuity and discontinuity between faith and culture in a systematic way. He deals with *ad hoc* issues and develops distinctive positions, using all appropriate elements, whether Jewish or Greek, according to his new discernment in Christ. Examples abound. The Roman Christians must shun drunkenness and debauchery (Romans 13:13), but they may eat of whatever food according to their own judgment in good faith (Romans 14). The Corinthian widows would do better to stay unmarried but if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry (1 Corinthians 7:9). The slave Onesimus is returned to his master, but Philemon must now treat him no longer simply as a slave but as beloved brother in Christ (Philemon 12 and 16).

An extended example of the dynamic interplay between Saint Paul's theological discernment, spiritual sensitivity and pastoral flexibility is the Apostle's long discussion on idol meats in 1 Corinthians, chapters 8-10. Are Christians allowed to eat the meat of animals previously offered to pagan deities? The Apostle answers yes, agreeing with the "strong" or theologically knowledgeable of Corinth because, although there are many mythical gods and lords, yet for Christians there is one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ. Idol gods are nothing, he says. Nevertheless, the Apostle pastorally sides with the "weak" Corinthians whose conscience is offended by such practice (1 Cor. 8). Saint Paul's spiritual insight is that "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (8:1). His pastoral principle is that a Christian should sacrifice her or his rights if the building up of another person is at stake. He presents himself as an example

by sacrificing his apostolic rights to material support and also by becoming all things to all for their salvation (chap. 9).

However, eating idol meats is one thing (10:23) which is permissible. Participating in ceremonies and banquets at pagan temples is quite another which is not. The Jews have their sacrifices and the pagans have theirs as well. But the Christians have their own distinctive identity in the Lord's Supper, participating in the one bread and becoming the one body of Christ (10:14-22). While the Christians are permitted table fellowship with pagan friends in pagan homes, they are not to eat meat about which a scandalous question is raised (10:27-29). The Apostle's last words on the subject eloquently indicate both an open-ended discernment and a clear awareness of the Church as a distinctive community. "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the Church of God" (10:31-32).

How could the early Church spread in the Greco-Roman world with such openness and flexibility, and yet develop its own distinctive identity? For a long time many New Testament scholars, especially on the Protestant side, have reveled in the great variety of patterns of life and thought in the New Testament. They have gleaned "many gospels." They have talked about the utter disunity of early Christianity. One cannot help but sense a hidden agenda somewhere. In more recent times, however, a corrective to this tendency is taking hold especially in the area of the study of early Christianity and its social environment. For example, the comprehensive study by Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (1983), builds up a detailed case for the powerful unitive forces in the Pauline congregations both on a local and universal level. Meeks shows that, along with the undeniable diversity, Pauline Christianity is marked by a broad but distinct convergence through developing patterns of language of belonging and separation, a sense of spiritual and moral purity, the rituals of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and patterns of belief, practice and governance. When the Epistle to the Ephesians states that there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all" (Ephesians 4:56), it is not speaking idly but expressing a powerful drive of the early Church to develop and maintain its unique character and witness in the Graeco-Roman world, just as Judaism had done long before. It is this same drive that eventually led to the clear consciousness among Christians that they constituted, along with Jews and Gentiles, *to triton genos*, the third race.

Ben Meyer in his book, *The Early Christians* (1986), takes to task a number of scholars such as Walter Bauer, Hermann Gunkel, Walter Bauer, Rudolf Bultmann, and others, who have treated ancient Christianity of the first and second century as an excessively variegated and syncretistic phenomenon. Meyer cautions that the diversity should not conceal the drive toward identity and unity. Nor should "orthodoxy" be defined as something static and fixed in order then to be superficially dismissed, for "orthodoxy" itself is dynamic and

developing. Meyer finds that behind all the talk about conflicting diversity and syncretism by modern scholars lies "a massive cultural phenomenon: the recoil of the West from its religious heritage, or at least from the classical form of its religious heritage" or, to put it more simply, a hidden resistance to truth-claims and dogmatic teaching (Meyer, p. 196).

As for this writer, whenever I have encountered the writings of "thorough-going diversity scholars" over the years, I have genuinely wondered whether or not we were reading the same Apostle Paul, the same Clement of Rome, the same Ignatios, the same Polycarp, the same Justin Martyr and the same Eirenaios — the leaders of the ancient Church who express the Church's deep integrative movement toward doctrinal, sacramental and administrative unity. To my understanding, one of the most astonishing aspects of the interaction of faith and culture in Saint Paul and the early Church is that, as the young Christian movement was leaving behind the distinctive signs of Jewish identity mentioned above, it did not move into the Hellenistic world in a syncretistic manner borrowing and mixing elements indiscriminately. On the contrary, it had a powerful sense of its own uniqueness, an invincible conviction of possessing the truth, a dynamic ability to develop its own patterns of faith, worship, teaching, and organization — the building blocks of what in time emerged as the institutional signs of a highly visible apostolic and catholic Church putting its own seal on culture! To be sure, there was great diversity and even divisions and heresies in ancient Christianity as a historical phenomenon. Some groups seeking to preserve forms of Jewish Christianity and other groups, the wild variety of Gnostic sects hopelessly syncretistic, are evident until the mid-second century and beyond. But the primitive Church of Jerusalem, the Gentile Church of Saint Paul who did his utmost to maintain the unity of the whole Church, the Church of Clement of Rome, and later the Churches of other leading Christian figures such as Saints Ignatios, Polycarp, Justin Martyr and Eirenaios, form a golden cord of amazing historical continuity, catholic identity and theological coherence which shines all the more against the background of Graeco-Roman unbridled religious syncretism.

The dynamic interplay of faith and culture in Saint Paul and the early Church carries significant and challenging insights for Orthodox Christians today as we face the dramatic interaction of diverse faiths and secular pluralistic cultures on a global scale. Perhaps the greatest challenge for us is Saint Paul's conviction about world mission grounded in the universal lordship of Christ. Dare we, like Saint Paul, claim the modern world in Christ's name, rather than maintain a basically defensive and protective posture over against contemporary society? What kind of discernment and measures of flexibility are truly appropriate to the catholicity of the Orthodox faith so that it may be lived and expressed incarnationally through new cultural forms? The Church of Saint Paul was like a jeep with four-wheel drive, efficient and able to travel the cultural topography of the time with power and amazing success. The Orthodox Church today presents more the image of a stretch limousine, self-conscious

about its image and using a lot of energy to maintain itself rather than carry out its mission. The future holds opportunities and risks. The closer we are to Christ, the more clearly we can discern our way under the law of Christ (*ennomoi Christou*, 1 Corinthians 9:21). The deeper our union with Him, the stronger our conscious identity as His Body, the more securely we can be "all things to all... for the sake of the Gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:19, 22-23).



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