

## **The Church: Unity and Diversity**

By J. Ayodeji Adewuya

The world today is characterized by divisions along many lines—sociocultural, political, ethnic, racial, religious, and several others. Unfortunately, the Church has not been immune to such evils. The question then is, “How can the Church transcend the divisions that plague its context, and not be swept off its feet by the prevailing torrents of disharmony, divisions, and disunity?” An answer that is being proffered in this essay is that the Church must recover its scriptural identity.

The letters of Paul in the New Testament offer an experience and understanding of the early church through his eyes as he wrote to various churches with whom he was associated in one way or another. Those letters remain crucial in the twenty-first century as we navigate the various issues that the Church faces—particularly unity and diversity. Paul’s letters continue to confront the reader with powerful images, conflicting ideas, and the living witness of believers in the Lord Jesus. While it may be argued that Paul did not present a fixed doctrine or a systematic theology of the Church, the dynamic portrayal of the life, commitment, and zeal of Paul, his coworkers, and the congregations, is by far a more vital testimony to the reality of the Church.

As Paul’s letters show, division within the Church is not a new phenomenon. What is new in the twenty-first century is that the Church is being threatened by the construction of more boundaries. Despite Paul’s attempts to minimize social, gender, and racial distinctions within early Christian communities, social rankings continued to be operative, to some extent, in those communities as evidenced in the Pauline churches.

As it is in today’s world, social location was a major contributing factor to the interpersonal problems in the early Christian communities. The ethnic and socioeconomic mix of

the Pauline congregations had a direct bearing on the problems that were addressed among those communities. Paul's challenge was to create a group with a clear sense of its moral and theological identity while incorporating a diverse group of people: Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free. Paul wrote letters partly to clarify what the church's social relations with the surrounding environments could and should be. The preservation of the identity of organizations causes a continued separation from the outside society. A group's distinctiveness must be clear to its own members and outsiders. However, in the attempt to reach out to others or draw a demarcation line between believers and the world, there are two resultant effects, both of which are opposite to each other. The former results in missional inclusiveness, and the latter, distinctiveness as the people of God. In addressing the issues that plagued each church, Paul employed many metaphors that vividly illustrate the unity and diversity of the Church.

### **One Body, Many Members**

One of the most significant analogies that Paul employs in describing the Church is that of the "body of Christ" (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:7; Eph. 1:22-23; 4:15-16; 5:23, 30; Col. 1:24). In the Pauline letters, the concept of the "body of Christ" is frequently mentioned, and one finds a rich variety of examples presented by way of analogy in explaining it. In the context of Paul's discussion on the diversity of spiritual gifts (see Rom. 12:4-11), Paul employs the analogy of the members of the body, contending that every part of the body is not only essential to its proper functioning but also in fulfilling its potential. It is definitely an appropriate analogy. The human body is composed of many parts having widely different functions. Yet, as one body, it is a single functional unit and all of its members work smoothly and in harmony together for the good of the whole. The human body, should it lack one of its members, is deemed crippled and

its ability to function impaired. Likewise, the members of the Church each have a different set of talents, abilities, and spiritual gifts. For the Church to function well, each member must contribute his talents, abilities, and charismata to the work of the Church. Thus, the Church, like the human body, operates as a functional unit; and, like the human body, when one or more of its members is malfunctioning, it is to that extent crippled. Each member of the Church has his/her definite position, function, and value within the whole “body” of the Church.<sup>1</sup> The wholeness of the body of Christ is at risk when some say: “I have no need of you” (1 Cor. 12:21). Yet Paul fears just such a mutilation regarding the church-as-body at Corinth. If both voices were true, the body would be radically diminished—first, by the loss of those who feel they do not belong, and second, by the amputation by those who find certain parts unnecessary. Mutilation would result, and with loss of wholeness, a corresponding loss of holiness of the body, the Church. Hence, Paul perceives any threat of division and loss of unity in the body as an attack on the boundaries of holy space (see 1 Cor. 1:10; 3:1; 11:18; 12:25; 13; Gal. 5:20). Yet according to Paul, the community’s boundaries are threatened from inside, and so attention and energy are focused there. Paul’s image of the body provides the vehicle for reinforcing the unity of the group with its diversity of gifts.<sup>2</sup>

Paul adds an unexpected twist to this analogy, however. Where we should expect to find him using the word “Church” or a similar term, Paul uses the word “Christ.” He seems, in this usage, to equate the “Church,” the whole organization of Christians as a group, with Jesus Christ Himself. He says, “For just as the body is one, and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ”(1 Cor. 12:12), and he makes the point

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<sup>1</sup> J. Ayodeji Adewuya, *Holiness and Community in 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1: Paul’s View of Communal Holiness in the Corinthians Correspondence* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 173.

<sup>2</sup> James W. Thompson, *The Church According to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Books, 2014), 70.

again in v. 27: “Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it . . .” (1 Cor. 12:27). Paul’s description of the Church as a functional unit like the human body is obviously important. When he equates the Church with the body of Christ, however, it does not seem to be an analogy any longer. It appears to be a statement of fact. Paul seems to push his own analogy to its logical limits when he says the Church does not merely appear to be a body, nor merely function like a body, but actually is in some real sense a body—the body of Christ—Christ Himself. This “body” is characterized by having been endowed through one Spirit; by service to one Lord; and by having inspiration from one God (1 Cor. 12:4-6).

A human body does not merely tolerate diversity. Rather, its wholesome existence and functioning depends on it. So, it is with the body of Christ. Because of Christ, we become His body, and He ensures the Church’s development and growth through the presence of the Spirit. The Church partakes of the one Spirit who gives gifts to everyone, regardless of social status, race, and gender, to nourish and nurture the body of Christ. Paul uses the analogy of the body as his starting point for understanding the spiritual gifts and ministries in the Christian community. Unity and diversity, harmony and peace are possible within the dynamic organism that is Christ’s body.

Paul’s description of the Church as the body of Christ makes allowance for a particular understanding of authority in the Church. Authority for believers expresses itself in the Church’s service, primarily in the recognition and utilization of the endowments of the Spirit. All members share in the authority of Christ which becomes crystalized in service.

The Christian community must continue to maintain and manifest the unity of all and radical equality despite differences of status, gender, or ethnic origin. In other words, within the community, equality must pave the way for each member assuming responsibility according to

his/her gifts. Stereotypical and traditional roles that are assigned based on gender, geographical location, social status, kinship, etc., must lose their force. The ideas and leadership that develop community life must become everyone's responsibility. Paul provides several examples in his letters. Onesimus is to be treated as a brother and no longer a slave. Also, women like Apphia, whose contribution to the spiritual life of the church at Colossae was probably not less important than Philemon's, deserve recognition (see Philemon 2, 16a). The foregoing echoes James's warning about favoritism in James 2:1-13. When we show favoritism, we become like evil judges who manipulate justice in favor of the rich and rob the poor of justice and fairness against an oppressor. When the Church, as the people of God, discriminates on the basis of social status, education, and/or gender it results in the neglect of those who are spiritually minded and accord special privileges to the few who may not even be qualified. Nominating committees often choose men and women more for their bank balances than for their abilities, their characters, or spirits. The Church must be able to share the love of Christ to all regardless of differences in gender, skin color, social status, or even age. It goes against the teachings of our Lord, and it will receive severe judgment on the day of his visitation. If such attitude prevails in the society, the Church must be willing to turn the tide.

### **No Jew, No Gentile; No Male, No Female; No Master, No Slave<sup>3</sup>**

Galatians 3:26-29 is the conclusion of Paul's argument in Galatians 3:6-29. Here Paul moved from the general statements in 3:7-9 to the explicit claims in verses 26-29. The argument in the section begins as an answer to the question, "Who are the children of Abraham?" It ends

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<sup>3</sup> This section is a modified version of my essay, "Galatians 3:28 and the African Story," in *One in Christ: Essays on Early Christianity and "All That Jazz" in Honor of S. Scott Bartchy* (Eugene, OR.: Cascade Books, 2014).

by affirming that those who believe in Christ are both “Abraham’s offspring” (3:29) and children of God (see 3:26). In contrast to the Greco-Roman milieu of Paul, where people were valued based on their geography, gender, and genealogy, the important identity marker is “in Christ.” The interpretation of the passage, especially verse 28, has suffered misconceptions that need to be addressed if one is to make sense of what Paul is trying to articulate. First, is the wrong assumption by many interpreters that the verse has no present social implications. The meaning is only spiritual. Understood this way, the passage is a “pie-in-the-sky,” eschatological ideal, a laudable and ideal goal that will find its fulfillment at Christ’s return. However, an interpretation that limits the passage to a future realization is, at the least, questionable on both rhetorical and grammatical grounds. On the one hand, regarding rhetorical prowess, the problem that engulfed the Galatian churches was more urgent than Christ’s return. It was a lack of understanding of what it meant to be one in Christ and live together as the people of God—both Jews and Gentiles. Grammatically, on the other hand, the prevalence of the present tense in verse 28 suggests a present reality. In Jewish society the Jew, the free man, and the male were all superior; while the Gentile, the slave, and the female were all inferior.

Second, some interpreters understand Galatians 3:28 as an implicit suggestion of the obliteration of social distinctions in which case, the Church achieves unity through the abolition of social distinctions and having them replaced with an amalgamated, undifferentiated Christian identity. However, one must say that if the thrust of Galatians 3:28 is the obliteration of social distinctions, Paul undermines the basis of own missionary activity and evangelistic mission.

Paul’s proclamation of the Gospel to the Gentiles was aimed at bringing them into the Church with their distinct identity as Gentiles who are not to be saddled with obedience to the Law as a means of their inclusion in the people of God. The issue in Galatians 3:28 is that of

dominance or power which was being exerted by one over the other because of those differences. Thiselton rightly notes, “To remain Jewish or non-Jewish does not spring from general indifference, but from its salvific irrelevance. As with in the case of gender, such distinctions are not abrogated wholesale. . . .” The new creation transforms and relativizes such distinctions, but they have a place.<sup>4</sup> As Campbell also asserts, “So whilst, eschatologically, there is no longer Jew or Greek, this does not mean that these are not abiding realities in ethical matters in everyday life of the churches.”<sup>5</sup>

Unity in Christ does not lend itself to an undifferentiated identity. It comes as a result of each person’s and each Christian community’s relationship with Christ—relationships that do not only ensure that we treat each other with respect but also ensure that we relate with one another with equality and mutuality despite our “otherness” and many differences. Lowe’s remarks are poignant: “The sociological basis on which Christianity rests is not ties of kinship, as in the case of Judaism, but that of fellowship—fellowship in Christ. . . . Such fellowship may acknowledge kinship as a potential ally, it may regard it indifferently, as comprising an unequivocal force; or repudiate it as being a distracting encumbrance. Whichever position it holds, the ties of kinship are, for Christianity, in the last resort expendable.”<sup>6</sup>

The following concluding observations could be made. First, one must note that in Galatians 3:28, Paul is not dreaming of an ideal state or setting forth ethical demands. He is stating a fact. Paul is not suggesting that there will be no more racial or national distinctions in the world, no more slave-master relationships, no more recognition that God created male and female. Rather, he is saying that as God regards baptized believers in Christ Jesus, all have the

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<sup>4</sup> A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 550-551.

<sup>5</sup> William S. Campbell, *Paul and the Christian Identity* (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 92.

<sup>6</sup> Raphael Lowe, *The Position of Women in Judaism* (London: 1966), 52-53.

status of *huioi* (sons and daughters). Hence, Galatians 3:28 emphasizes a radical equality of believers in Christ, and the elimination of social and gender distinctions in the community of faith. For Paul, not only do stereotypical and traditional roles lose their force but also the ideas and leadership that develop community life become everyone's responsibility.<sup>7</sup>

Second, present-day society, particularly the Western world, continues to struggle with a system where circumstances of birth, education, ethnicity, social status, and education continue to define how people are treated. Even in matters of justice, one could hardly speak of equality. Christians cannot retreat into their citadel of spiritual unity and ignore their responsibilities as members of the society. The inferential truth in this passage is that, as people of equal values in the eyes of God, none should be discriminated against by those who profess to be followers of Christ. Paul's declaration, "There is no longer Jew or Greek. . ." (Gal. 3:28a), is an assertion from below: "[we] Jews [Asians, non-Europeans] are not inferior!" Paul was a counter-colonist whose message decolonizes by freeing the colonized to be conscious of their divine status as children of the promise (see Gal. 4:23, 28, 31), regardless of their cultural contexts, ethnicity, gender, and social status (see 3:28). Thus, the African can shout "Hallelujah!" Christ has freed the African/African-American to say "yes" to their "blackness or African-ness," and the woman to say "yes" to her "female-ness." Galatians 3:28 does not promote a "raceless" or "genderless" society, but one in which each person could embrace and celebrate not only oneself but also the "other."

Racial distinctions are irrelevant in the Church and racial discrimination in the Church is sinful. Paul's message in Galatians 3:28 must be brought to bear on the day-to-day life of the people of God. Paul's interpretative framework powerfully shapes and frees enslaved people

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<sup>7</sup> Helen Doohan, *Paul's Vision of the Church* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989), 179.

with a view to creating new postcolonial communities in Christ. As the language of Galatians 3:28 shows, the principal forms of social domination that prevailed in Roman imperial society were supposedly transcended in the new alternative society. Presumably this formula expressed at least the ideal social relations in the new movement, the *Ekklesia*, and for Paul in his own mission. Paul was adamant that there be “no longer Jew or Greek” in the assemblies he helped organize among the peoples of Asia Minor and Greece. This was in contrast to the ideology of the Roman imperial order. However, for Paul, history had been run toward its fulfillment not through Rome but through Israel.<sup>8</sup>

Third, we must be careful that in striving to articulate an account of identity and social dynamics in opposition to that which characterized the Greco-Roman milieu of Paul that we do not obliterate the difference and the silences that are present within the object of study itself.

Fourth, acknowledging diversity is neither enough nor strategic for the fulfillment of the Church’s vision and mission. Rather, the Church must strive for inclusion in order to turn the existing diversity into its greatest strength. Inclusion means involvement and integrating diversity in organizational systems and processes and thus shaping a work environment that gives everyone the same fair chance to deliver their best work.

Fifth, focusing on a common goal and shared vision (rather than emphasizing these differences) requires a certain mindset, and creating an inclusive culture requires new behaviors. It means to go beyond the easy solutions common in like-minded groups. It means to disrupt conformity and prompts us to question assumptions, scrutinize facts, and think more deeply.

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<sup>8</sup> Richard A. Horsley, “Paul and Slavery: A Critical Alternative to Recent Readings,” ed. Allen Dwight Callahan, et al., *Semeia* 83/84 (1998), 177.

In conclusion, there is a beautiful story about a hymn, “In Christ There Is No East or West,” written in 1908 by the noted English writer, John Oxenham. The song was part of a script for a pageant at a giant missionary event sponsored by the London Missionary Society’s exhibition, The Orient in London. An interesting account of the impact of this hymn comes from an incident during the closing days of World War II, when two ships were anchored together, one containing Japanese aliens, and the other American soldiers, all waiting to be repatriated. For an entire day they lined the rails, glaring at one another. Suddenly, someone began to sing, “In Christ There Is No East or West.” Then another on the opposite ship joined in. Soon there was an extraordinary chorus of former enemies united, praising God with these words:

In Christ there is no East or West,  
in Him no South or North,  
but one great fellowship of love  
throughout the whole wide earth.

In Him shall true hearts ev’rywhere  
their high communion find;  
His service is the golden cord  
close-binding all mankind.

Join hands then, brothers of the faith,  
whate’er your race may be;  
who serves my Father, as a son  
is surely kin to me.

In Christ now meet both East and West,  
in Him meet South and North;  
all Christly souls are one in Him  
throughout the whole wide earth.<sup>9</sup>

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**Dr. J. Ayodeji Adewuya**

Professor of New Testament & Greek  
Pentecostal Theological Seminary  
Cleveland, Tennessee

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<sup>9</sup> Kenneth W. Osbeck, *Amazing Grace: 366 Inspiring Hymn Stories for Daily Devotions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1996), 34.