

Paul, the Spirit and the Church

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Acknowledgements: In preparing this paper I have drawn very heavily on the following:

Dunn, James D.G., *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Eerdmans. 1998

Barclay, William. *New Testament Words*. SCM Press. 1964

It's not always acknowledged that Paul was one of the great personalities of the Greco-Roman world. He was a Hebrew scholar, fluent in Greek (unlike some of the Gospel writers), and a profound thinker and writer. For Christians he is the first and the greatest theologian. But he was also an extraordinary man of action, so his writings did not arise from quiet months in a study, but were dashed off on the road, or while in prison. Some of the writings we have are compilations of pieces of several letters, including replies to other communications which we do not have eg 1 and 2 Corinthians. Most were written in response to particular circumstances in a particular place. Rarely – and most clearly in Romans – did he have the opportunity to write an extended treatise. What we must be aware of is that his thinking did not arrive all of a piece, complete. We should not be surprised to find evidence of Paul's thought changing and developing over time.

Holy Spirit

Paul had a personal encounter with the divine, while on a persecution mission to Damascus. This encounter was unique – a direct confrontation with the risen Christ. The intellectual became a mystic. Paul came to realise that other converts would not have the same experience, but that like him they could receive and be enabled by the Spirit of Christ.

For Paul, being "in Christ" and to have the Spirit indwelling were two sides of the one coin. There was no doubt in Paul's mind that the Spirit was now active.

We should bear in mind the widespread assumption for several hundred years before Christ that the prophetic Spirit had been withdrawn from Israel, or at least that prophecy had ceased. Eg in 1Macc 4.46, after the desecration of the altar of the temple, the restorers did not know what to do with the stones of the altar, so they stored them 'until a prophet should come to tell what to do with them'. And John the Baptist's impact suggests he showed something that had been lacking.

Paul's observation, and that of Luke in the book of Acts, was that the Spirit was being given freely to Gentiles. This outpouring of the Spirit had convinced the Jerusalem leadership that Gentiles had to be accepted, and without circumcision. The experience of the Spirit was an almost universal experience of the first believers. Reference to this experience appears again and again in Paul's letters:

Eg 1Thess 1.6, Gal 3.1-5, 1Cor 2.11-14, and so on.

What Paul was reporting and building upon was experience. The experience came first – note that surveys continue to show that numbers of people today have some sort of 'religious experience', but don't speak of it, partly because they don't have the vocabulary. And we should remember that *ruach* (Hebrew 'breath') and *pneuma* (Greek 'wind') are themselves words which report experience.

In Paul's eyes the Spirit is such a common factor that it is the defining mark of the Christian, as spelled out in Rom 8.9. "You are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, assuming that the Spirit of God does indeed dwell in you; if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, that person does not belong to him." A Spiritless Christian would have been a contradiction for Paul. One became a Christian by receiving the Spirit.

For Paul, believing a credal statement, or being baptised, were not the crucial steps (although they might follow). The crucial step was receiving the Spirit. He could then say "You have the Spirit, and therefore you are Christ's." He and others could see that someone was a disciple, from the evidence they saw that the Spirit controlled the lives of converts.

What might be looked for as such evidence? There are several possible sources of evidence:

- 'signs and wonders' Rom 15.19
- strong emotional experiences Rom 5.5
- deep conviction 1Thess 1.5
- intellectual illumination 2Cor 1.12-16
- moral impact on life 1Cor 6.9-11

Note also that for Paul, the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. Any proposed 'evidence' of the Spirit can be critically evaluated against the character of Jesus as the image of God. There is no place for an amorphous 'spirituality' amongst those who would claim to follow Christ.

There are problems about this interpretation. We know from Acts that on some occasions, whole households were baptised. Had the Spirit come upon everyone in the household? Probably not.

I believe it more likely that the Spirit was seen to have come upon some of the leaders of that household, to be present in that gathering, and that was sufficient proof. As long as the new believers, the newly baptised, were gathered with one another, all would be upheld and nurtured by the Spirit, all were together 'in Christ'.

Let's now turn our attention to gatherings of believers, and start with the word 'church' (*ekklesia*) itself.

Church

Ekklesia has a Greek background. In classical Athens, the *ekklesia* was a popular assembly of citizens entitled to vote. The assembly declared war and made peace, it raised and disbursed funds, it elected magistrates. Every eligible citizen had a right and a duty to take part. In the wider Greek world thereafter, an *ekklesia* came to mean any duly convened assembly of citizens. The notion was simply adopted by the Roman world, using the Latin equivalent *ecclesia*.

But Paul had an extra twist to draw upon. It is very likely that Paul was drawing directly from the Septuagint – the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures. In the Septuagint, the Hebrew *qahal* (assembly) is translated as *ekklesia*. More significant are the phrases *qahal Yahweh*, *qahal Israel*. Paul speaks often of 'the church of God', so what we find in Paul's thinking is a continuity with "the assembly of Yahweh".

In both of these senses, *ekklesia* is an assembly which has not so much gathered together, but has been called together, in one case by a civil authority, in the other by God.

What are the special features of *ekklesia* for Paul?

- 1 Paul is happy to describe predominantly Gentile assemblies as *ekklesia*. Paul emphasises the inclusive strand, rather than the exclusive strand in Jewish thought, and takes it to a new level. An *ekklesia* of Gentiles is now seen as an extension of 'the assembly of Israel'.
- 2 Paul is content with the notion of multiple assemblies of God, coexisting in different places at the same time. There can even be *ekklesia* in someone's house. There can be several house *ekklesia* in Rome, coexisting as part of the *ekklesia* of Rome. All these *ekklesia* were the assembly of God in continuity with the assembly of Israel.
- 3 The fact that 'the whole church' of Corinth could meet in a house (Rom 16.23) reminds us of how tiny these first *ekklesia* actually were. It is not until the later letters (Colossians, Ephesians) that we see that Paul's thinking has moved to a more universal sense for *ekklesia*.
- 4 It's obvious, but easily ignored, that *ekklesia* is an 'assembly'. We have to keep reminding ourselves that it is never a building. When Paul writes of 'coming together in church' (1 Cor 11.18), he is thinking of them coming together to be *ekklesia*. As *ekklesia* they were not functioning as isolated individuals, but as a corporate entity.

- 5 But what were they to do, as *ekklesia*? One thing they were not to do, was to develop a cultic identity. There were to be no temples other than “you are God’s temple”, no sacrifices other than “your bodies”, no priests different in kind from the priestly ministry of all who served the gospel, no fundamental distinction between sacred and non-sacred.

Christian identity is both personal and corporate. But what is the nature of the corporate identity? Paul struggles throughout his letters to describe *ekklesia*, and uses metaphor frequently.

Paul Minear has pointed to ninety-five images of the church in the New Testament. They include:

- a letter from Christ 2Cor 3.2-3
- the olive tree Rom 11.13-24
- God’s planting and God’s building 1Cor3.9
- The bride of Christ 2Cor 11.1-2
- Citizens Phil 3.20
- People of God Rom 9.25-26
- Israel Gal 6.16
- Circumcision Phil 3.3
- Abraham’s sons Gal 3.29, Rom 4.16
- Remnant Rom 11.5-7
- The elect Rom 8.33
- New creation 2Cor 5.17
- Light Phil 2.15
- Slaves Gal 5.13
- Sons of God Rom 8.14-17

(It is worth noting that although Paul uses the imagery of family *relationships* in writing to his churches, he did not think of the assembled body of believers as *structured* as a family. This notion appears more explicitly in the Pastorals 1Tim 3.4-5, Tit 1.6, 2.5)

Body of Christ

Paul’s dominant theological image for the church is “one body in Christ” (Rom 12.4-5. 1Cor 10, 1Cor 12). The image varies somewhat in detail from place to place, and is not uniformly “the body of Christ”. Eg “the bread which we break isparticipation in the body of Christ” (1Cor 10.16); “you are Christ’s body and individually members” (1Cor 12.27).

Probably Paul drew inspiration for this image from Greek and Roman literature – the body was a common representation for unity – and then extended the image, so that a Christian *ekklesia* is marked by its allegiance to Christ, and a sacramental sharing in his body through the eucharist.

But there is more.

Paul strikingly describes the body's members as both gifted and gift-giving; expounded at length in Rom 12.4-8 and especially in 1 Cor 12.4-27. Individual members are given gifts (*charisma*), which in turn are exercised for the good of *ekklesia*. *Charisma* is an unusual word in Greek. It is rare in classical Greek, and in the New Testament it's predominantly a Pauline word. It's an otherwise unexceptional word which Paul has taken up and transformed into a term of profound theological significance – a free and undeserved gift from God. *Charisma* are the concrete expressions of God's *charis*, God's grace.

What we find here is the idea that the unity of the *ekklesia* is expressed through the diversity of the *charisma*. This body functions not through its leadership and operational systems, but through the interaction of different charisms. The *charisma* are often paired as checks and balances: eg tongues and interpretation, prophecy and discernment.

Closing Comments

There is little guidance in Paul's letters about how an *ekklesia* should be structured. As the founder he clearly sees a substantial role for himself in the ongoing life of each of 'his' churches. There's advice about how to deal with specific issues which are emerging, but this is generally reactive, rather than proactive. We can see that Paul's thinking about the church changed over time.

The notion of mutual interdependence as members of the body of Christ is a high ideal to live up to. It is expected that every member of an *ekklesia*, no matter how small or large that church, has spiritual gifts which are to be exercised for the good of all, and it is the task of leadership to ensure the conditions for this to happen. Sadly, the experience of the *ekklesia* in Galatia and in Corinth showed how much could go wrong when these churches were left to fend for themselves.

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Questions for Discussion

- 1 What response can you make to someone who says, "I don't see that you need to go to Church to be a Christian."
- 2 How do you think Paul might respond to a Natural Church Development survey result, which suggested one of 'his' churches was short of 'passionate spirituality'?
- 3 What difference, if any, does it make to think of the church as 'a body', in comparison with 'a family'?