

GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS COLLEGE

PAUL, THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY:
WHAT DOES THE APOSTLE SAY ABOUT CHRISTIANS' RELATIONS WITH
NON-CHRISTIANS?

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
BACHELOR OF ARTS IN RELIGION

BY
ANDREW MICHAEL SOLEIM

SAINT PETER, MINNESOTA

MAY 2009

Contents

Terms	iii
Introduction	1
I. Apocalypticism	3
II. Letters	10
III. Implications	22
IIIa. The Historical Church and Society	26
IIIb. The Church and Society Today	28
Conclusion	34
Bibliography	37

Terms as they are used in this writing

Apocalypticism – A belief that the current world will come to an end. The term typically (and in this writing) refers to the more specific belief that the end times are coming very soon (or have already begun).

Eschatology – The specific beliefs one holds about the final destiny of humanity.

“Eschatological” refers to people, events or other things which are related to this destiny. Related closely to apocalypticism, but the terms are not entirely synonymous.

Mainline Protestantism (or Mainline Christianity) – A group of large Protestant churches that were brought to the United States historically by immigrants. Most hold similar doctrines and theology, including Trinitarianism. Examples include the United Methodist Church, the American Baptist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Episcopal Church. When using the term “Mainline Christianity,” Roman Catholicism may also be included.

Parousia – The second coming of Jesus Christ, described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11.

Introduction

Paul the apostle has been a source of advice on moral issues ever since he first wrote to Christians in the mid first century. The seven books of the New Testament universally believed to be authentically Pauline (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon) deal with such diverse issues as marriage, slavery, the government and worship. Both historically and today, these exhortations have been considered by many Christians to be applicable to all people, even non-Christians. This has not been limited just to Paul's writings; the whole of Christian ethics has often been treated as binding on all people. Paul has been seen as a great social reformer.

The apostle would almost certainly disagree with this take on his writings. Despite the appearance of verses such as Galatians 3:28,¹ Paul was not a social reformer. He was far more concerned with ensuring the holiness of the church and its members than he was with changing society outside the church, and did not consider any Christian, even himself, to be in a position to judge non-Christians. This position is very different from the one that the church has often taken historically, and has enormous implications for issues facing the church today.

Why would Paul teach this way? Surely, knowing his doctrine of justification by faith alone, one would expect that he would have wanted as many people as possible to be saved. The answer is impossible to know fully, but would have included a number of different reasons. Paul probably wished to avoid attracting attention to the young Christian church by proclaiming that all non-Christians were defying God. The apostle

¹ "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." NRSV.

was further concerned for the holiness of the church, wanting to make sure that the Christians themselves were in a right relation with God before they worried about converting others and risked bringing sin into the church. He also thought that those outside the church were simply beyond his jurisdiction; they were people who did not have the Holy Spirit within them and could not be expected to act as Christians do.. Finally, Paul was an apocalyptic thinker who believed Christ could return any day, almost certainly within Paul's own lifetime. In Paul's mind there was no time to change those outside the church, and it was most important that he guarantee the salvation of those already inside it.

As long as Paul is considered by the church to be an authoritative source, or even just a useful one, it is crucial that he is properly understood. Too often it has been overlooked that Paul's epistles are a teacher's correspondence with his students, answering questions and explaining doctrines. Instead, they have been read as lists of commandments that are binding on all people everywhere. This has given the church reason to involve itself intimately in secular matters, influencing laws and politics, enforcing capital punishment, even fighting wars. The history of the church's involvement in secular affairs is largely one of judgment.² This is unfortunate considering Paul's teaching that the church should be separated, but not isolated, from secular society. In order to use Paul effectively, his teachings regarding the church's relationship with secular society need to be explained and understood. Just as important as his actual teachings are his reasons for teaching them.

² To say nothing of the millions of people that have been killed or have left the church because of its secular activities.

Paul's reasons for advocating a definite separation between Christians and non-Christians are closely tied to the historical context in which he lived and taught. Churches were small, Christianity was a very new, minority religion, and Christians believed the Parousia³ was going to occur at any moment. Today the situation is almost completely reversed, with Christianity being 2000 years old and the most popular religion on the planet. While most Christians still believe in the second coming of Christ, few mainline Christians today believe the event will occur as imminently as Paul believed it would. Despite these substantial changes, Paul's teaching on the separation (but not isolation) between the church and secular society is still relevant today. His teachings also hinged on the fact that non-Christians could not, in his mind, be reasonably expected to act as Christians did, as well as his desire to keep the church pure and holy, free from the dangerous sins that might be brought into it by outsiders. Some of Paul's reasons, then, are still valid today while others are not. Paul's teaching has important implications for issues facing the church in regards to its relationship with secular society as a whole, but it is difficult to know in what situations and to what extent his ideas can be used today. A new method for applying Paul's teachings on the church and society must be developed.

Apocalypticism

In order to understand Paul's ideas about the church's relationship with society it is important to understand why he taught the way he did. Paul's apocalypticism was an extremely important facet of his thought, and this way of thinking is largely responsible for his teachings regarding the individual, the church and society. Paul presented a relatively thorough description of the Parousia and the final resurrection over the course

³ The second coming of Jesus Christ and associated eschatological events.

of his letters, but the most important aspect of his apocalypticism is its imminence. The apostle believed the Parousia was coming, and it was coming very soon. Since there was so little time left, Paul was very concerned with ensuring the salvation of those people who had already become Christians, and was less concerned with how those people should relate to outsiders.

As a Pharisee, Paul would have been well versed in earlier Jewish texts. These included the Hebrew Bible as well as other Jewish writings from the post-exilic period. Perhaps the most pertinent of these is the book of Daniel, found today in the Jewish Bible and the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. The apocalyptic vision in the seventh chapter of Daniel includes a passage that has been interpreted as a messianic prophecy⁴ by Christians and has since become very famous. It reads:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worship him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.⁵

The imagery here is very powerful. Paul, like many later Christian readers, may have identified the “one like a son of man” with Jesus Christ. Even if he did not, the imagery found in this book can be seen again in his letters. Paul expected this “everlasting dominion” to come very soon.

⁴ It must be noted that the prophecies referred to here as “messianic prophecies” are ones that have been interpreted as such by Christian readers centuries following their composition. They may or may not have been intended and read as such by their original Jewish authors and readers. For instance, some Jews may originally have interpreted the passage in Daniel 7 as prophesying a coming messiah, but others may have seen it as referring to some other eschatological figure, such as the angel Michael. Still another group may have seen the “one like a son of man” simply as a metaphor for Israel, just as various beasts act as metaphors for different empires earlier in the chapter. It is not the intention of the author to examine or comment on the validity of the Christian interpretation of these passages, but rather to show the influence they may have had on Paul and the formation of his thought.

⁵ Dan 7:13-14, NIV. The author will primarily use the NRSV in this writing; the NIV is used here due to the familiarity of the term “son of man,” which the NRSV translates as “human being.”

Another set of apocalyptic prophecies can be found in the non-canonical book of 1 Enoch. The book was originally composed as several separate books which were later combined into the larger work. The dates of composition of the different smaller works are unknown, but fragments of all but one section (the *Similitudes of Enoch*) have been found at Qumran, proving their existence by the mid-first century C.E. at the very latest.⁶ The *Similitudes*' existence at that time can therefore not be proven beyond doubt. Unfortunately, it is the portion most useful for studying Paul, due to important correlations between its content and Paul's eschatology. The *Similitudes*, however, contains a number of references to political figures and events that appear to indicate a composition in the early 1st century C.E.⁷ Most scholars today believe the work was composed in the first century B.C.E. or the early first century C.E., giving Paul plenty of time to familiarize himself with it before he began writing in the mid 50s C.E. While this does not prove that the text was composed before the time of Paul, and certainly does not prove that Paul was familiar with it, the parallels between the two are so striking that they should be mentioned. Paul was probably familiar with 1 Enoch, and if he was not then at the very least he drew on some of the same sources for many of his ideas. The existence of this book, as well as others such as the books of 4 Ezra, the Apocalypse of Peter and the Apocalypse of John, is indicative of widespread apocalypticism in the early 1st millennium C.E. Paul was nothing if not a product of a society which embraced apocalypticism.

⁶ Mitchell G. Reddish, *Apocalyptic Literature*, (Peabody: Abingdon Press, 1990) 164.

⁷ Ibid.

The *Similitudes of Enoch*, the second major division of 1 Enoch, deals extensively with eschatological prophecies. The (unknown) author draws on the Son of Man figure in Daniel, but elaborates more fully upon his role. This role is given in chapter 46:

And this Son of Man whom you have seen will rouse the kings and the powerful from their resting-places, and the strong from their thrones, and will loose the reins of the strong, and will break the teeth of the sinners. And he will cast down the kings from their thrones and from their kingdoms, for they do not exalt him, and do not praise him, and do not humbly acknowledge whence their kingdom was given to them.⁸

The Son of Man's role in the last days is explained here in more detail than it is in Daniel. The figure will depose all earthly rulers who do not recognize him and will defeat those who have oppressed the faithful ("the kings", "the powerful", "the strong" and "the sinners"). The events are further described in chapter 62:

And on that day all the kings and the mighty and the exalted, and those who possess the earth, will stand up; and they will see and recognize how he sits on the throne of his glory, and the righteous are judged in righteousness before him, and no idle word is spoken before him. And pain will come upon them as upon a woman in labor for whom giving birth is difficult, when the child enters the mouth of the womb, and she has difficulty giving birth. And one half of them will look at the other, and they will be terrified, and will cast down their faces, and the pain will take hold of them, when they see that Son of a Woman sitting on the throne of his glory.⁹

The Son of Man¹⁰ is portrayed in 1 Enoch as a righteous conqueror. His campaign on earth will be swift, painful and terrifying to his enemies. The pain will come to them "as upon a woman in labor." The prophecies seen here and in Daniel will become very important for understanding Paul's teachings about Christ's return

⁸ 1 Enoch 46:4-5 translated by M. A. Knibb, in Mitchell G. Reddish., *Apocalyptic Literature*, (Peabody: Abingdon Press, 1990) 170.

⁹ 1 Enoch 62:3-5

¹⁰ Note that the figure is also referred to as "Son of a Woman;" cf. Gal 4:4: "God sent his son, born of a woman." NRSV.

Paul himself wrote pieces of apocalyptic literature, though they do not conform to the commonly accepted “rules” of the genre. Paul does not use the same sort of vivid imagery seen in writings such as Daniel and the book of Revelation, portraying tyrants as vicious monsters or different races of people as different species of animals. Rather, his apocalyptic prophecies are clear and straightforward, telling things the way Paul believes they will be without going into complex allegories. Their most important purpose is to show what Paul thought specifically about the end times, which in turn influenced his teachings about the church and secular society. They also show the extent to which Paul was influenced by earlier works and Jewish traditions. Some of the parallels seem too close to be mere coincidence.

One of the longest and most important texts for understanding Paul’s eschatological expectations is 1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 5:11. Paul draws heavily on earlier traditions for his explanation of the Parousia. He describes Christ’s return as a descent from heaven to the sound of a trumpet, a parallel with other, earlier prophetic literature including Zechariah¹¹, Isaiah¹², Joel¹³ and Amos¹⁴. When Paul writes about the believers being “caught up in the clouds”¹⁵ with the Lord, he may have had Daniel 7:13 in mind.¹⁶ Another possible parallel is found in 5:3: “sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!” This verse sounds strikingly similar to 1 Enoch 62:4 quoted above: “And pain will come upon

¹¹ Zech 9:14

¹² Isa 27:13

¹³ Joel 2:1

¹⁴ Amos 2:2; , see also Matt 24:31, Rev 8:6ff

¹⁵ 1 Thess 4:17 NRSV

¹⁶ Daniel 7:13 says, in part, that the son of man shall come “with the clouds of heaven”.

them as upon a woman in labor for whom giving birth is difficult, when the child enters the mouth of the womb, and she has difficulty giving birth.”

First Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 also contains a number of points that indicate Paul’s belief in the imminence of these events. Perhaps the most telling is in verse 4:17 when Paul states that “we who are alive, who are left” will rise to the clouds to meet Christ. Assuming Paul is including himself in the “we” of this statement, he expected to be around for these events. Furthermore, this passage is the source of the famous statement, “The day of the Lord shall come like a thief in the night.”¹⁷ Paul elaborates further, saying that this day will come when people say “There is peace and security.”¹⁸ “Peace and security” was a phrase stamped on many Roman coins, much as United States coins have “Liberty” and “E Pluribus Unum”.¹⁹ Such a reference would not have slipped by Paul’s readers. The day of the Lord would come soon and without warning.

Paul’s other major apocalyptic passage is found in 1 Corinthians 15. Here he goes into some detail regarding the resurrection of the physical body. Paul argues against those who say there is no resurrection; the details of his argument, while interesting, are not important for this discussion. However, one small point in this chapter should be mentioned. In verses 51-52, Paul writes, “We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in the last moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.” This ties closely with 1 Thess 4:17, saying that some of the believers (Paul included) would still be alive at the time of the trumpet sound. The portrayal of Christ as a righteous conquering ruler in verses 24-27 also resembles the Son of Man seen in Daniel and 1 Enoch.

¹⁷ 1 Thess 5:2, NRSV

¹⁸ 1 Thess 5:4, NRSV

¹⁹ Meeks, Edgar M., “Annotations to First Thessalonians,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible: NRSV*, ed. Wayne A. Meeks, Jouette M. Bassler, Werner E. Lemke, Susan Niditch, Eileen M. Schuller, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 2223.

First Corinthians 7 is part of one of Paul's longest discussions on sexual morality and marriage. Paul speaks to various groups of people (men, women, married and unmarried, those married to unbelievers) and gives either his personal advice or the Lord's command on their respective issues. When speaking to the unmarried, Paul gives the advice "I think that, in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife."²⁰ Here, Paul shows that he clearly believed the Parousia (the "impending crisis") was so near that marriage would be pointless for believers.²¹ In fact, Paul advises all groups to stay as they are, even advising slaves to not seek their freedom. This advice has a twofold purpose; to avoid social problems within the church and to avoid attracting unwanted attention from outside the church. Both would be unnecessary if the church, and indeed the very world as they knew it, would only be around no more than another few years.

In Romans 8 Paul discusses what it means to truly live in the spirit, as well as what this life will mean for believers in the future. Paul acknowledges the ordeals that Christians (and all people) face in this world, but states resolutely, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed in us."²² The idea of present suffering being rewarded many times over in the eschatological (near) future is an almost universal one in apocalyptic literature. Paul seems merely to be stating it without diving into a long and detailed apocalypse. Once again, Paul writes that the glory is "about to be revealed" in the believers.

²⁰ 1 Cor 7:26-27, NRSV

²¹ Interestingly, Paul gives this statement as his own opinion, not as the word of the Lord. He claims to have "no command of the Lord" in verse 25.

²² Rom 8:18, NRSV

These passages paint a striking view of Paul's beliefs about the future. He expected Christ to return at any time without warning. He believed this would come so soon that he even advised people to not bother getting married. It is not surprising, then, that Paul did not seem to place a high emphasis on changing the world. There simply was no time. The world as Paul knew it would soon pass away, so he had to do as much as he could with the people who were already in the church and those few that he could convert before it was too late. It is important to note, however, that nowhere in Paul's letters does he claim to know the exact time at which these events will occur. He never declares his statements on the timing of the Parousia "by the word of the Lord"; he only declares them as such when speaking about the events themselves, not the timing (an important distinction). Rather, Paul seems to have carried his imminent apocalyptic expectations over from his days as a Pharisee and applied them to his Christian apocalypticism. Apocalypticism was widespread among Jews in the first century, and Christians quickly picked it up from them.²³ Paul's readers expected Christ to return every bit as soon as Paul did. Why reach out to others when there was so much to do in the church and so little time to do it?

Letters

Paul's churches²⁴ were small enclaves of believers scattered across the Mediterranean. While the exact size of the churches is unknown and certainly varied, the groups were probably no larger than a few dozen people in the early days of Paul's

²³ Apocalypticism would see another wave of popularity among Jews following the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 AD and among Christians during the Roman persecutions in the second half of the 1st century.

²⁴ The term "Paul's churches" or "Paul's followers" is not meant to imply that these people were controlled by or necessarily founded by Paul. Indeed, Paul himself argued strongly against the idea of different teachers leading different factions within the church (1 Cor 1:10-17). Further, he says explicitly that he does not mean to "lord over your faith; rather, we are workers with you for your joy." (2 Cor 1:24). The term "Paul's churches" is used simply to refer to the churches and believers to which Paul wrote.

ministry. Everywhere Christians existed as a minority until well past the time of Paul's writing. The believers came from all levels of society; young and old, slaves and aristocrats, men and women, former members of all religions. At the beginning they were, in a sense, a microcosm of the Greco-Roman society surrounding them and to which they were inextricably tied. Such a heterogeneous group of people would have trouble enough just working together to advance their faith; indeed, there is plenty of evidence of divisions in the churches based on all manner of social distinctions.²⁵ With all the potential and actual divisions within the church, how were the believers to deal with the biggest division of all: the one between Christians and non-Christians? Were Christians supposed to try to get those outside the church to follow the same social rules as they did within it? Paul addresses this issue directly in a couple locations in his letters, and an overall impression of his teaching on the subject can be gained by reading the entire corpus of Paul's letters.

Paul's views on the church and those outside can perhaps be seen most clearly in 1 Corinthians 5. Here, Paul responds to disturbing news brought to him by messengers from the church in Corinth:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not even found among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Should you not rather have mourned, so that he who has done this would have been removed from among you?²⁶

A member of the church is reported to be engaged in a sexual relationship with his stepmother. Perhaps worse still, the other members of the church are openly aware of the man's sin and have not condemned him. In the following verses Paul commands the

²⁵ See especially 1 Cor 3:1-9, 1 Cor 6:1-8, 1 Cor 11:17-22, 1 Cor 12:12-31 (in fact, much of 1 Corinthians deals with divisions in the church of Corinth).

²⁶ 1 Cor 5:1-2 NRSV.

church by his apostolic authority to “hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”²⁷ It is not entirely clear what Paul means by this; is the man to be killed or merely thrown out of the church? Based on Paul’s language of removal in verse 2 and “driving out” in verse 13, not to mention his lack of legal authority under Roman law, it is likely that Paul intended for the man to be cast out of the church. The man needed to be removed because, as Paul says, “a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough.”²⁸ Paul fears that the whole church may be infected by the presence and tolerance of this man’s sin.

The wider implications of this passage follow immediately after these specific commands. Paul writes:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons – not at all meaning the immoral of this world, since you would then need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber. Do not even eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging those outside? Is it not those who are inside that you are to judge? God will judge those outside. “Drive out the wicked person from among you.”²⁹

This passage has enormous significance for Paul’s views of the church and society outside it. First of all, Paul fully acknowledges that sin exists in the world (outside the church) and there will always (until Christ’s return) be people living in sin outside the church. He does not forbid his followers from associating with the immoral, provided that they do not claim to be Christians while actually still living their lives in sin. Anyone who is not a Christian is, in essence, expected to be immoral. They do not have the Holy Spirit in their hearts, and they live in the flesh, so how can they be expected to

²⁷ 1 Cor 5:5 NRSV.

²⁸ 1 Cor 5:6 NRSV.

²⁹ 1 Cor 5:9-13 NRSV. The final sentence is taken from Deuteronomy 17:7.

bring forth the fruits of the spirit?³⁰ It is only those people who live a hypocritical life, confessing Christ with their mouths but denying him with their actions,³¹ who are condemned by Paul here.

The second important point to take from this passage is that Paul forbids the believers to judge anyone outside the church, even denying that he himself has the authority to do so. God will judge everyone, including those who do not profess the Christian faith. Paul's authority, and the authority of all Christians, extends only to the boundary of the church itself. Anyone outside is beyond the realm of their judgment. In Adewuya's words, "Paul is not so much concerned that standards of the wider culture differ from those of the Christian movement as he is that the community adhere to its own principles, and live to its calling."³² Paul does not care what outsiders do; he cares only that the Christians live according to the Spirit.

Thirdly, hypocritical people who confess with their mouth but deny with their deeds are to be expelled from the church immediately. They are not to be associated with, nor are they to be allowed to take communion ("with such a person do not even eat."). People such as the man mentioned earlier have the potential to lead the rest of the church down a path of unrighteousness. Paul calls for their expulsion mostly out of concern for the church, but also for the sinner ("so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord."). Paul has set up a delicate but definite distinction between those inside the church and those outside: believers may associate with anyone who is not a Christian,

³⁰ Gal 4:16-26.

³¹ Titus 1:16 NRSV. The letter is almost certainly pseudonymous, but nonetheless is the source of a useful phrase.

³² J. Ayodeji Adewuya, "The People of God in a Pluralistic Society: Holiness in 2 Corinthians," in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, ed. Kent E. Browser and Andy Johnson (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 211.

regardless of what immoral acts that person commits. They themselves, however, are to live a life pleasing to God.

It is important to draw a distinction between true Christians who fall into sin and genuinely repent and those who deny the wrongness of their actions. The example of the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians contrasts with an unnamed Corinthian who somehow mistreated Paul during one of his visits there.³³ The man, his sin, and his punishment are all unnamed; the implication is that they are not important. The man had been sufficiently punished by the Corinthian church and now had become “overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.” This punishment must now be stopped, because “Satan must not be allowed to exploit the Corinthian situation...by harassing the repentant into believing that he is not forgiven.”³⁴ Paul forgave the man, and urged the Corinthians to do the same. The simple act of sinning does not deny one a place in the church; it is the denial of the sin that does it.

The separation Paul intended between Christians and non-Christians is evident even in his earliest letter, 1 Thessalonians. It has already been seen that Paul’s eschatology was well formed by the time he wrote this letter; his vision of the church’s place in society seems to have been established as well. Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica to express his joy at the way they had maintained their faith even without his continued presence and instruction. He praises the Thessalonians for their love of one another and follows this with advice regarding relations with outsiders.

But we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we

³³ 2 Cor 2:5-11.

³⁴ Bruce W. Winter, “Carnal Conduct and Sanctification in 1 Corinthians,” in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, ed. Kent E. Browser and Andy Johnson (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 197.

directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.³⁵

Paul urges the church members to keep a low profile in society. He tells them to work hard as productive citizens, but not to attract attention to themselves. Why do this? If Paul intended to effect major changes on the greater society, why not tell his followers to spread the news as much and as fast as possible? This seems to have been the goal of other Biblical writers, such as the author of the Gospel of Matthew.³⁶ Paul instead opts for the quiet route, wanting his readers to be self sufficient and invisible as Christians.

Further evidence of Paul seeking to avoid undue disruptions to the social order can be found in 1 Corinthians 7, in addition to the apocalyptic undertones that come out of the passage upon closer examination. Paul gives advice on his own authority (not by the word of the Lord) that any Christian who is married to a non-Christian should stay married to that person if at all possible. Divorce should only be considered an option if the unbelieving spouse does not consent to live with the believer.³⁷ This serves two purposes. The first, as Paul says later in the passage, is that the believing partner may very well be able to convert the unbelieving one, thus bringing another person into the kingdom of God.

The second purpose, which Paul does not explicitly mention but can reasonably be drawn from the text, is that Paul did not want Christianity to have a reputation as a radical cult which demanded its members divorce their spouses. No doubt Christianity already sounded radical enough to a typical Roman, with the cannibalistic sounding

³⁵ 1 Thess 4:10b-12 NRSV.

³⁶ Matt 28:18-20: "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'" NRSV.

³⁷ 1 Cor 7:12-16 NRSV.

sacrament of the Eucharist and the idea that all people were equal before God regardless of their social status. Tacitus, writing in the early 2nd century, several decades after Paul but almost two centuries before the legalization of Christianity, refers to the new religion as a “pernicious superstition” and a “disease,”³⁸ reflecting popular Roman opinion at the time. Similar descriptions of Christianity can be found in Tacitus’ contemporaries Suetonius³⁹ and Pliny the Younger.⁴⁰ Paul sought to avoid giving more ammunition to the persecutors that he may have seen coming.

Perhaps Paul wanted his churches to be low on the radar for fear of persecution. The great Roman persecutions of Christians did not begin until the mid-60s C.E. under Nero (when Paul himself is believed to have been martyred), but Paul likely feared them long before they actually started. After all, he himself had been a Pharisee who went about “violently persecuting the church of God and...trying to destroy it.”⁴¹ Persecution of Christians by Jews is mentioned by Paul in Galatians 4:29, 2 Corinthians 11:23-26 and 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16.⁴² Further persecutions play a major role in the later book of Acts.⁴³ Knowing first hand of persecution from both perspectives, Paul wished his followers to be spared persecution as much as possible.

Paul did not preach total isolation from society. As he says in 1 Corinthians, to do so would be impossible without leaving the world entirely. After all, Paul wrote to churches in major cities, not small communities living in the wilderness. In fact, there is

³⁸ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.3

³⁹ *Lives of the Caesars* 16.2: “[A] class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition.”

⁴⁰ 10.96-97: “I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.”; “The contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms.”

⁴¹ Gal 1:13b NRSV.

⁴² The passage in 1 Thess is considered by some scholars to be a later interpolation due to the harshness of its language towards Jews that has no parallel in the authentic Pauline letters; the author is of this opinion as well.

⁴³ See especially Acts 6:8-8:3, 12:1-3, 14:19, 18:12-17 and 21:30-31.

some indication in Galatians that Paul may have expected his followers to give to the poor.⁴⁴ Had Paul intended his followers to be completely isolated from non-Christians, the first thing to be thrown out would almost certainly have been marriages between Christians and non-Christians. As mentioned earlier, however, Paul specifically tells his readers to stay married to their non-Christian spouses if at all possible. Next in line would probably have been business deals with non-Christians, which are not addressed anywhere in Paul's writings and therefore cannot be said to have been forbidden. Paul seems to have intended his followers to be separate from society, but not isolated from it.

A passage from 2 Corinthians bears mentioning, though questions of its authenticity are somewhat problematic.⁴⁵ In 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1, Paul uses strong language to urge his followers to be distinct and separate (though not isolated) from non-Christians. Paul says in the first part of the passage:

Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness? What agreement does Christ have with Beliar? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God.⁴⁶

To Paul, Christians and non-Christians are as different as night and day. They are completely distinct from one another and have nothing to do with one another.

⁴⁴ Gal 2:10: "They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do." It is not entirely clear whether Paul is referring here to the poor in general, only to Christians, or to a specific group of Christians.

⁴⁵ These verses appear to be placed in the middle of a different passage. Paul makes an appeal to the Corinthians to open their hearts to him in 6:11-6:13 which continues with 7:2-7:4. According to Fitzgerald, "Of the various solutions, five merit mention. The passage could be (1) a fragment from the letter mentioned in 1 Cor 5:9; (2) a digression in which Paul deliberately uses unusual and highly emotional language for rhetorical effect; (3) a passage, non-Pauline in origin, that Paul himself inserts here to provide moral exhortation and/or warn the Corinthians against associating with his opponents; (4) a non-Pauline passage, perhaps of Essene origin, inserted by a later editor; or (5) an originally anti-Pauline passage that reflects the theology of Paul's opponents." John T. Fitzgerald "Annotations to 2 Corinthians" in *The HarperCollins Study Bible: NRSV*, ed. Wayne A. Meeks, Jouette M. Bassler, Werner E. Lemke, Susan Niditch, Eileen M. Schuller, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 2173.

⁴⁶ 2 Cor 6:14-16a NRSV.

Paul follows these statements with a series of quotations from the Hebrew Bible referring to God's promises to be Israel's God so long as Israel remained holy and faithful to him. The passage closes with Paul saying, "Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God."⁴⁷ Not only are Christians fundamentally different from non-Christians, but holiness depends on the Christians being a group set apart from the non-Christians. Paul seems to take a strong position in this passage, but the fact that it cannot be definitively tied to Paul makes its usage controversial. Perhaps it is best to consider 2 Corinthians to be representative of Paul's views (if for no other reason than the fact that it seems to fit well with the rest of his writings) but not necessarily actually written by him.⁴⁸ Regardless, it is useful for pointing out the differences Paul wished to see between the church and the rest of society.

One line of Paul's that is quoted with some frequency is Galatians 3:28. This verse is often cited when advocating the position that Paul was a social reformer. It is the famous verse that reads "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Indeed, to the society which Paul wrote this would have been a radical idea. All of these distinctions were very prominent in Greco-Roman society. Most Jews at this time saw themselves as completely set apart from the Greeks and other gentiles. Men dominated the family, politics, economics and essentially all aspects of society. Slavery was crucial to the Roman economy, and slaves constituted a social stratum similar to the one they have occupied in every society that has allowed for them: the bottom. To say that these

⁴⁷ 2 Cor 7:1 NRSV.

⁴⁸ If the passage is not Pauline, its contents are indicative of a person influential in the early church reading Paul in a similar way as the author.

distinctions no longer apply, and that all people are equal regardless of their previous social status, sounds very much like an advocacy for radical social change.

However, closer examination of Galatians 3:28 and its context reveals that broad social reform was not Paul's intent with this line. All are now one "in Christ Jesus." In other words, all believers are equal in God's eyes. Gentiles, women and slaves have an equal share in the kingdom of God with Jews, men and the wealthy. Everyone can be a Christian, regardless of one's social standing before developing faith. Paul is not advocating for the elimination of these social distinctions in society at large; he is rather assuring his followers that they will not exist in the coming kingdom of God.

In fact, Paul clearly advocates the worldly maintenance of at least some of these distinctions elsewhere in his letters. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul advises the believers "let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called."⁴⁹ He immediately follows this with advice to slaves that they not be concerned about their current condition, and that they make use of it (the exact meaning of this last advice is unclear). As far as men and women are concerned, Paul clearly states in more than one place that they are equal before God.⁵⁰ However, he also says in 1 Corinthians 11 that "Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ."⁵¹ Finally, in Romans Paul spends much of the first several chapters making a clear distinction between Jews and Gentiles while nevertheless maintaining that both are now equal before God.⁵²

⁴⁹ 1 Cor 7:20 NRSV.

⁵⁰ 1 Cor 7:3-4, 1 Cor 11:11

⁵¹ 1 Cor 11:3 NRSV. Paul's views on men and women are complicated and are easily a doctoral dissertation in themselves. This work will barely touch on them. Suffice to say Paul clearly taught equality of the sexes before God, while advocating the maintenance of at least some of the Greco-Roman ideals in a marriage and in society at large.

⁵² See especially Rom 3.

Clearly, Paul did not intend for his readers to attempt to do away with all social classes and distinctions across all of society. To do so would have been impossible and would detract from what was truly important for the believers: serving the Lord. Paul assured his churches that any distinction between slave and free, male and female or Jew and Greek would disappear in the imminent kingdom of God. To Paul, the inequities many believers faced were inconsequential. They would last only a short time, perhaps as little as days or weeks, but certainly no more than decades. These short term inequities would be replaced by an eternity of equality.⁵³ There was no reason to get rid of classes and social distinctions, because God was going to get rid of them very soon anyway. In the meantime, they may play an important role in this world that they will not play in the coming kingdom.

Even more clearly, however, Paul intended his followers to be radically different from the people they were before their conversion. Little, if anything, is more apparent in his letters than this. Just one example of this intention is given in 1 Corinthians 6:

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.⁵⁴

Similar statements can be found in most of Paul's letters. Galatians 5 paints a striking picture of the differences between those who live "in the flesh" and those who live "in the Spirit":

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

⁵³ Cf. Rom 8:18.

⁵⁴ 1 Cor 6:9-11 NRSV.

I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

This is explained even further in Romans 12, with Paul telling the church in Rome, “Do not conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”⁵⁵

Christians are expected to live by the Spirit, while pagans are expected to live according to the flesh. The church, as a group of Christians, was therefore expected to be fundamentally different from the rest of society, made up of non-Christians. Edwin Judge puts it well when he says, “The ‘Christians’ were not a cult-group (which would not have had such cultural consequences and would not have needed that sort of name), but a kind of nation with a whole culture of its own.”⁵⁶ They were their own group of people; a group that existed within Greco-Roman society, separate but not isolated.

As a specific example of changes that Paul may have wished to see within the church (aside from the general ones given in Galatians 3:28), his letter to Philemon is excellent. Paul writes to a Christian named Philemon regarding Philemon’s slave Onesimus. Onesimus was a runaway who came to Paul and was converted by him. Though the letter is vague (probably deliberately so), it seems that Onesimus may have wronged Philemon in some way in addition to running away from him.⁵⁷ Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon bearing the letter, asking him to forgive and even free his

⁵⁵ Rom 12:2a NRSV.

⁵⁶ E. A. Judge, “The Interaction of Biblical and Classical Education in the Fourth Century,” *JCE* 77 (1983), 32, quoted in P. J. Marshall, “The Enigmatic Apostle: Paul and Social Change. Did Paul Seek to Transform Graeco-Roman Society?” in *Ancient History in a Modern University*, ed. T. W. Hillard, R. A. Kearsley, C. E. Nixon and A. M. Nobbs (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 157.

⁵⁷ Philem 18.

slave.⁵⁸ Paul appeals to Philemon's Christian faith and the fact that Onesimus, as a Christian, is now his brother rather than his slave. As the only extant personal letter of Paul's, Philemon gives us great insight into what Paul hoped the practical application of his teaching would be.

What may be the most telling evidence of all that Paul was not consciously a social reformer is what is not seen in his letters. He never once tells readers to go out and evangelize, nor does he even imply that the new social order in Christ applies to non-Christians. Paul seems perfectly content to see his followers quietly minding their own business, having good relations with outsiders but not attracting undue attention to themselves. Had Paul intended otherwise, he certainly would have written something about it. The question of social reform is such an important issue that for him to have left it out implies that he did not intend the early Christians to engage in it outside of the church.

Implications

If all this is true, if Paul really was far more concerned with changes in individuals and in the church than he was with social reform, if he did not set out to change the world, then the entire method for studying and applying Paul's writings has to be reexamined. Paul's commands apply only to Christians, not to non-Christians. In fact, it would appear that Paul believed and taught that the whole of Christian ethics applied only to Christians, since non-Christians could hardly be expected to act as Christians do. This has enormous implications, both historically and today.

The concept of the authority of the church has changed considerably in the last few centuries. Leaving aside all other reasons (and there are many), this change has been

⁵⁸ Philem 16.

partly due to the actual concept of “the Church” changing. Up until the early 16th century there was one church in Western Europe. When the reformers challenged the authority of the Roman Catholic Church beginning in 1517, new churches were founded that were completely independent of any other church. The Lutheran churches, the Calvinist churches, the Catholic Church, and others thought of themselves as “the Church” and condemned the doctrines of the other churches. To the Lutherans, only the Lutheran church taught the correct doctrine; to the Calvinists, only the Calvinist church, to the Anabaptists, only the Anabaptist church, and so on. The idea of “the Church” changed to include only the denomination to which one actually belonged. All other people, even those who belonged to a different denomination which claimed the title of “Christian,” were outside the church.

In the last 100 years “the Church” has begun to change again, though this transformation is not complete and it is far from clear how far it will go this time. In this most recent change, different denominations have started coming together. Several different Lutheran denominations in the United States merged over the course of several decades to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The ELCA in turn has agreed to full communion with a number of other Protestant denominations, including the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church, and several others. The Episcopal Church is in full communion with other members of the Anglican Community and with the Old Catholic Church.⁵⁹ These churches, however, are not in full communion with the ELCA. How, then, are members of the ELCA supposed to think of members of the Old Catholic Church? Should they be considered members of the church or not? The move

⁵⁹ A group of churches which were formerly members of the Roman Catholic Church, but split from it over the doctrine of papal infallibility in the 1870s.

towards ecumenical relations between churches in the last century has led to many situations such as this one. While it is true that most lay members of most denominations take a more liberal⁶⁰ view of other denominations than the leadership's official policy, the official doctrinal statements remain largely unchanged.

Furthermore, many denominations exist whose members consider themselves to be fully Christian, but who are not typically recognized as such by members of other denominations. Churches in this category today include the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses. Many members of mainline Christian denominations, such as the United Methodist Church, view Mormons differently than they do other mainline denominations, such as the Episcopal Church. A recent poll shows that only 52% of non-Mormon Americans consider Mormons to be Christians.⁶¹ Should the morals and beliefs of a mainline Protestant denomination be applied to groups which consider themselves Christians but are not considered Christians by others?

Perhaps most importantly, it must be kept in mind that Paul wrote to churches that held different beliefs and lived in a different world than many Christians do today. Paul held firmly to the belief that the Parousia was coming very soon, almost certainly within his own lifetime. Mainline Christian denominations today typically believe in the second coming of Christ and the establishment of his kingdom, but it is a rare thing to hear a pastor today speaking of these eschatological events having such imminence as Paul did. For the most part it is only smaller splinter groups of Christianity whose apocalyptic tendencies approach Paul's. Apocalypticism is rarely a major factor in determining

⁶⁰ They are "liberal" in the sense that they consider members of other mainline denominations to truly be Christians, despite what their official doctrine says.

⁶¹ The Pew Forum Publications, "Public Expresses Mixed Views of Islam, Mormonism," The Pew Research Center, available at <<http://pewforum.org/surveys/religionviews07/>> (accessed April 26, 2009).

morality among mainline Christians. Paul viewed the second coming as imminent, and taught accordingly regarding morality and relations with those outside the church. If the only reason for Paul's calls for separation from outsiders was his apocalypticism, then perhaps this separation is no longer necessary today.

Furthermore, in Paul's day Christians made up a tiny minority of the society in which they lived. In several cases Paul founded the very first Christian church in a city. It is understandable that he would want to avoid attracting attention to his fledgling churches. Today the situation is almost completely reversed, with Christians making up a large majority of the population of North America, Latin America, Australia, Europe and parts of Asia and Africa. It would be impossible for Christians as a group to hide in American society, and in most cases it would be unnecessary anyway, as religious persecution is a rare thing in the United States today. If the only reason for Paul's teaching on the church's separation from society was his desire for Christians to be invisible to outsiders, then this distinction may not be necessary today.

However, these two reasons (apocalypticism and a desire to avoid attracting attention) were not the only reasons for Paul's teaching on this subject. He also wanted to keep the church holy and pure by keeping it free from dangerous sin. This is illustrated clearly by his commands in 1 Corinthians 5. Those who did not act as Christians belong outside. Paul also recognized quite clearly that non-Christians could not be held to the same standard as Christians. The Holy Spirit was not present in non-Christians in the way it was in Christians, and therefore its fruits could not be expected to be found in non-Christians. For these two reasons as well, Christians were told to

maintain separation from outsiders. These reasons are as valid today as they were in the 1st century.

Because the situation today is completely different from the situation in which Paul wrote, it is important to recognize that not everything Paul wrote is applicable in today's society in exactly the same way it was applicable in the 1st century. Among other things, the boundary between what is inside the church and what is outside it needs to be clearly established. What exactly "the Church" is needs to be established as well.

The Historical Church and Society

The Bible as a whole, including Paul's letters in particular, has been extensively used for the formation of civil laws. All manner of activities have been outlawed historically, ranging from witchcraft to working on Sundays and from adultery to conversion to another religion. The Bible and its commandments have been the basis of hundreds of secular laws, some of them among the strictest ever enacted. Sins against God were punished severely. Operations undertaken in the name of the church include witch hunts, the Inquisition and the Crusades.

The church historically was strongest in Europe, and in the Middle Ages thousands of people there ran afoul of the church's official doctrines. Christians who acted counter to the doctrines and expectations of the church were excommunicated, following the example of the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5. However, unlike the Corinthian example, excommunicated persons were not always left to themselves. Martin Luther was excommunicated as a heretic by the papal bull *Decet Romanum Pontificem* in response to his teachings and writings in opposition to official Catholic dogma. Following his excommunication by the Pope on January 3, 1521, Luther was

declared an outlaw by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V on May 25, 1521 in the Edict of Worms. The following passage describes how Luther was to be handled in the secular realm:

We forbid anyone from this time forward to dare, either by words or by deeds, to receive, defend, sustain, or favor the said Martin Luther. On the contrary, we want him to be apprehended and punished as a notorious heretic, as he deserves, to be brought personally before us, or to be securely guarded until those who have captured him inform us, whereupon we will order the appropriate manner of proceeding against the said Luther. Those who will help in his capture will be rewarded generously for their good work.⁶²

The edict went so far as to explain what exactly was meant by being “punished as a notorious heretic,” declaring that Luther’s punishment would entail “confiscation and loss of body and belongings and all goods, fixed and movable, half of which will go to the Lord, and the other half to the accusers and denouncers, with other punishments as given more fully in the present edict and mandate.” Luther was to be executed and all his property was to be confiscated, with half of it going to the very people who had accused him of heresy in the first place.

This punishment is somewhat ironic when one considers Paul’s views on the church’s power. The punishment of excommunication is completely in line with 1 Corinthians 5:13b, “Drive out the wicked person from among you!” Luther had argued against many of the most fundamental teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and refused to recant. Assuming Paul would have agreed with the church’s position on indulgences, the power of the papacy, etc., and not with Luther’s position,⁶³ he likely would have ordered Luther removed from the church when he refused to recant.

⁶² Edict of Worms, translated by Dennis Bratcher, available at <http://www.cresourcei.org/creededictworms.html>

⁶³ A question that has been debated for nearly 500 years, and one which this writing will not attempt to address.

However, Luther's true judgment and punishment took place after the excommunication was already effected. Only then was he under threat of being burned at the stake and otherwise punished by the authorities. This is in direct contradiction to what Paul writes immediately before the verse quoted above: "For what have I to do with judging those outside? Is it not those inside that you are to judge? God will judge those outside."⁶⁴ Luther argued against, among other things, the excessive use of power in the secular realm by the Catholic Church. The church, in response, continued to exercise temporal power in its punishment of Luther.

The Church and Society Today

Several important issues pertaining to the church's position in the whole of society face the church today. These include such topics as homosexuality, abortion, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination, war, politics and many others. Obviously these cannot all be addressed in the following pages; this writing will examine only the various issues related to homosexuality.

Homosexuality is one of the foremost ethical issues facing the church today. Homosexuals have been persecuted by the church off and on during its history, and are now beginning to be accepted by some liberal denominations. In the majority of churches, however, homosexuals are at the very least frowned on, and are often denied communion or membership in the church altogether. This seems to be a proper application of ecclesiastical authority, according to Paul. Leaving aside the question of whether Biblical passages condemning homosexual behavior should be taken literally today, the church is well within its rights to accept or deny members based on scriptural criteria. Whether or not this particular criterion is legitimate or not is beyond the scope

⁶⁴ 1 Cor 5:12-13a NRSV.

of this writing; the method with which is it being used is legitimate either way. This is an issue pertaining to individuals within the context of the church, not secular society, and as such the church (according to Paul) has the final word on it.

However, many churches have taken a strong stance against issues of same-sex marriage and the adoption of children by same sex couples, even in the secular world. The Roman Catholic Church's official position on homosexual unions of any kind is one of solid opposition. In 2003, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) wrote the following exhortation to Catholics worldwide:

In those situations where homosexual unions have been legally recognized or have been given the legal status and rights belonging to marriage, clear and emphatic opposition is a duty. One must refrain from any kind of formal cooperation in the enactment or application of such gravely unjust laws and, as far as possible, from material cooperation on the level of their application. In this area, everyone can exercise the right to conscientious objection.⁶⁵

All Roman Catholics are thereby obligated to resist any attempt to legalize unions between same sex couples in their countries and to refuse to accept any unions that have already been legalized.

The Catholic Church is, of course, not the only church with a position on the issue of homosexual marriage. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is in the process of developing a social statement on human sexuality, and as such the official position of the church may change in the near future. The ELCA has not released an official statement on homosexuality at any point in its history, though it has discussed marriage in general. At this point the church's position is that "Marriage is a lifelong covenant of

⁶⁵ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Considerations Regarding Proposals To Give Legal Recognition To Unions Between Homosexual Persons," Roman Curia: Documents of a doctrinal nature, 2003, available at <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20030731_homo_homose-unions_en.html> (accessed April 26, 2009).

faithfulness between a man and a woman.”⁶⁶ Importantly, however, the church notes later in the same document that

Although this church vigorously opposes the abuse of sexuality, not everything considered sinful should necessarily be made a civil offense. This church supports policies and laws that foster justice, mercy, equality of opportunity, and the protection of basic human rights.⁶⁷

The ELCA, while not addressing the issue specifically, appears to be leaving itself open to the possibility of the legalization of same-sex unions without actually condoning the practice itself. The ELCA has drawn a distinction between that which is sinful (and therefore should not be done by Christians) and that which should be illegal for everyone, including people who are not members of the church.

While the purpose of this writing is not to make any sort of claims about one Christian denomination being superior to another, in this specific instance the ELCA appears to hold a position that is closer in line with Paul’s than the Roman Catholic Church does. The ELCA does not (at this point) sanction same-sex marriages, citing numerous Biblical passages that speak negatively of homosexual behavior. It also does not advocate either the establishment or disestablishment of laws pertaining to homosexuality. The Roman Catholic Church likewise refuses to sanction same-sex unions, citing the same Biblical passages as the ELCA as well as the earlier church tradition of natural law. The Catholic Church, however, advocates the reestablishment and maintenance of secular laws banning same-sex unions, citing the same reasons. This position runs counter to the way Paul expected the church’s power would be used. The Catholic Church appears to be attempting to hold non-Christians to the same standard to

⁶⁶ ELCA, “A message on Sexuality: Some Common Convictions,” (Minneapolis: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1996).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

which it hold Christians. This is beyond the mandate Paul gives to the church in his letters, and seems to be the most recent manifestation of an outlook that has existed in the Catholic Church for well over a millennium; one where the church has great secular power in addition to its ecclesiastical authority.

An even more difficult issue can arise when discussing adoption by homosexual couples. Once again, the church is within its rights to ban adoption by homosexual couples among its members. This is in line with Paul's teachings. To attempt to ban all homosexual adoptions, even those by non-Christians, is, however, beyond the authority Paul asserts belongs to the church. The greatest difficulty arises when agencies in charge of secular adoption are run by the church. If adoption by same sex couples is legalized by the state, these agencies may be forced to facilitate adoptions by people whom they are morally opposed to providing for. This situation occurred in Massachusetts in 2006⁶⁸ and in Great Britain in 2007.⁶⁹ In both cases the agencies were run by the Roman Catholic Church, which refused to allow any same sex couples to adopt children from its agencies. Both times the church was refused an exemption from the law, and in both cases the church eventually halted its adoptions altogether rather than being forced to facilitate adoptions by homosexual couples.

In these specific instances, the church appears to have acted appropriately according to Paul's writings.⁷⁰ The church refused to grant adoptions because it was

⁶⁸ Steve LeBlanc, "Catholic Charities to halt adoptions over issues involving gays," *Boston Globe*, March 10, 2006, available at <http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2006/03/10/catholic_charities_to_halt_adoptions_over_issue_involving_gays/> (accessed April 26, 2009).

⁶⁹ Renee Montagne and Rob Gifford, *NPR News Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, January 24, 2007, available at <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6994646>> (accessed April 26, 2009).

⁷⁰ Once again, it is not the intent of the author to offer an opinion on whether the Catholic Church acted correctly or not; it is merely to say that the church correctly utilized Paul's writings in its attempt to decide what to do given its beliefs.

morally opposed to the actual act of granting them, not just to the idea of homosexual couples raising children. The bishops of the Boston Archdiocese and the Archbishop of Westminster believed that they themselves would be committing a sin if they facilitated adoptions by same sex couples. They felt that the government was forcing them to commit a sin. They closed their doors rather than doing so, an action consistent with Paul's calls for holiness within the church. In these specific cases, the church acted appropriately (according to Paul), and it was the government which overstepped its authority.

In light of the substantial changes between the church in Paul's day and the church today, it is necessary to determine how exactly Paul's writings on the separation between the church and secular society can still be used. A few specific examples have been discussed, but a general method still must be arrived at. It would be very easy to read the preceding pages and decide that the church should withdraw completely from society, having nothing to say about any issues facing society as a whole. That is not the author's intention, nor does it seem likely to be a position that Paul would have taken had he been aware of the situation the church would be in 2000 years after his letters were written. The mistakes the church has made by becoming too deeply involved in secular affairs should in no way diminish the important contributions it has made to social justice issues such as racism in the United States.

Deciding on the specifics of this new method for determining whether the church should take a stand on a given social issue is beyond the scope of the current writing. Nonetheless, some recommendations can be made. First, this method must incorporate Paul's commands in regards to the church and society, while remaining aware of the

changes the church has undergone since the time of his writing. The church should first and foremost work towards the holiness of its own members, but should not completely isolate itself.

Secondly, the authors of the new method should recognize that, as the ELCA says, “not everything considered sinful should necessarily be made a civil offense.”⁷¹ However, the church must also draw a distinction between behaviors which are sinful but have no victims other than the people who commit them (a description some feel applies to homosexuality, for example) and those sinful actions which cause suffering for other people (such as racism). Perhaps most importantly, the term “the church” needs to be clearly and finally defined. It must be clear who is in it and who is not so that the church knows who it can speak to in what ways.

As a community of concerned people, the church is in a position to speak out against the latter category of sins given in the previous paragraph (those which harm others). As Paul says, the church should not attempt to impose its will on people who are not members, nor should it expect those people to act as Christians should. Nonetheless, the church occupies a unique position in the world and has the ability to effect real and necessary change on society, and should not feel inhibited in its desire to do so. If the church speaks out for or against an activity facing society it should do so not on a basis of whether the action being addressed is inherently sinful or not, but by looking at how the activity affects other people. Churches in the United States played an important role in the civil rights movement in the 1960s, for example, despite the fact that the injustices being suffered took place mostly outside the church. In cases such as this, the church

⁷¹ ELCA, “A message on Sexuality: Some Common Convictions,” (Minneapolis: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1996).

acted out of a sense of social justice. It spoke out as a group of concerned citizens who wished to improve society, rather than an organized religious group denouncing the actions of outsiders as sinful. This sort of beneficial activity should be allowed to continue.

Conclusion

Paul the apostle was not a social reformer, despite apparent evidence to the contrary. He wrote only to Christians, and his advice and commands were intended for Christians alone. He told his readers to maintain a separation from non-Christian members of their societies and to concentrate on their own holiness and salvation.

Paul taught this way for a number of reasons. He was a product of an apocalyptic culture and drew heavily on earlier apocalyptic texts in his letters. Facing the imminent return of Christ to the world, Paul was concerned primarily for the salvation of his own followers rather than those who had never heard (or had rejected) the gospel of Christ. Paul also was very concerned that the fledgling Christians would be infected by the sin of non-Christians, threatening their holiness. Having persecuted Christians himself, Paul was also deeply concerned that the new church would be in grave danger if its members began trying to convert new believers *en masse*. Finally, Paul told his readers not to expect non-Christians to act as Christians should, since the non-believers were still bound to the flesh rather than being free in the Spirit.

The church today is very different than the one to which Paul wrote. Christianity has spread across the entire planet up through the present day, when one third of the world's inhabitants profess adherence to one form of it or another. In much of the world Christians make up a large majority of the population and have no fear of persecution.

Two thousand years after Christ, apocalypticism as Paul knew it has all but died out in the church. The church itself has splintered into dozens of large groups and thousands of small ones.⁷²

In spite of these fundamental changes in the Christian church and its position in society, Paul's teachings still have merit today. The issues of apocalypticism and persecution may have changed, but Paul's other reasons are still valid. Non-Christians, in the eyes of the church, still do not have the Holy Spirit in them to bring forth its fruits, and are not expected (or thought capable) of acting as Christians should. Further, the church today is entirely justified in wishing to maintain its holiness as it sees fit.

Because of these changes, however, Paul's teachings on the church and society cannot be used in all situations exactly as they are written. At the moment, issues have to be examined on a case by case basis to determine whether or not the church would be justified in taking a position and standing by it on the basis of Christian concepts of sin, rather than on the basis of some universal morality. Even then, it is often far from clear what the correct course of action is. Ultimately the decision often comes down to the personal opinions of the people making it. Ideally, a new method of determining the correct action for the church in a given situation could be developed, being based on Paul's method but also incorporating the experiences of an institution that is almost 2000 years old.

The church has always had a somewhat difficult relationship with the rest of society. Though the exact nature of this relationship has changed over time, the tension

⁷² A process that had begun already by the time of Paul; cf. 1 Cor 1:11-12: "For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.'" NRSV.

has always existed. If the church can finally figure out a way to be comfortable in society, a way to relate to society outside the church, then this tension which has been the cause of so many problems may finally be overcome (at least from the church's side). Paul's idea of separation without isolation may just be the way to do this.

Bibliography

1. Adewuya, J. Ayodeji. "The People of God in a Pluralistic Society: Holiness in 2 Corinthians." In *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, edited by Kent E. Browner and Andy Johnson, 201-218. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007.

Adewuya discusses a number of passages in 2 Corinthians which deal with Paul's desire for holiness in the Corinthian church. One passage in particular, 6:14-7:1, deals directly with the relationship between Christians and non-Christians. The article is part of a larger work which deals with similar topics in several different books of the New Testament. Adewuya himself is a professor of New Testament studies at Church of God Theological Seminary.

2. Dunstan, G. R. "Law and Religion in Contemporary Society." *Christian Jewish Relations* V. 14 (1981) 19-27.

Dunstan, an ordained minister and canon professor, summarizes how religion and the Bible continue to be used in law even to this day.

3. Fitzgerald, John T. "Annotations to 2 Corinthians." in *The HarperCollins Study Bible: NRSV*. General Editor, Wayne A. Meeks; Associate Editors, Jouette M. Bassler, Werner E. Lemke, Susan Niditch, Eileen M. Schuller. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993.

Fitzgerald comments on the context and language of 2 Corinthians, putting forth a number of hypotheses on its composition and date. He provides important insights on the meaning of unclear passages. He is a professor of religious studies at the University of Miami.

4. Keck, Leander E. *Paul and His Letters*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988.

This book provides important background information on Paul and the content of his letters. It does an excellent job of explaining Paul's overall theology. Keck is the former dean of the Divinity School at Yale University.

5. Hartman, D. "Epistolary Conventions and Social Change in Paul's Letters." In *Ancient History in a Modern University: Early Christianity, Late Antiquity and Beyond*, edited by T. W. Hillard, R. A. Kearsley, C. E. Nixon and A. M. Nobbs, 195-204. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998.

Hartman writes about the specific Greek language used by Paul in his letters and the similarities and differences between it and the Greek used in most other ancient letters. The tone Paul takes with his readers does not always come through properly in English translations, and is important for understanding Paul's meaning. The article is in a collection of articles originally published as

the proceedings of an international conference held at Macquarie University, and all chapters have been reviewed and edited by a panel of four religion, history and language scholars.

6. Marshall, P.J. "The Enigmatic Apostle: Paul and Social Change. Did Paul Seek to Transform Greco-Roman Society?" In *Ancient History in a Modern University: Early Christianity, Late Antiquity and Beyond*, edited by T. W. Hillard, R. A. Kearsley, C. E. Nixon and A. M. Nobbs, 153-174. Grand Rapids: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998.

The author takes the position that Paul did not attempt to transform Greco-Roman society, though he does not actually make that point the focus of his article. He brings up several important passages that would not have been immediately obvious choices to use for this thesis. The article is in the same collection as the Hartman article above.

7. Meeks, Edgar M., "Annotations to First Thessalonians." in *The HarperCollins Study Bible: NRSV*. General Editor, Wayne A. Meeks; Associate Editors, Jouette M. Bassler, Werner E. Lemke, Susan Niditch, Eileen M. Schuller. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993.

Meeks provides interesting information about the historical context of 1 Thessalonians, and discusses some of the language Paul uses that would normally be lost on modern readers. Meeks is the general editor of the Harper Collins study Bible.

8. *A Message on Sexuality: Some Common Convictions*. Adopted by the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. 1996.

This is the most recent document adopted by the ELCA in regards to human sexuality. A new social statement is in the process of discussion and is expected to be voted on in the future. As of this writing, however, this statement represents the ELCA's official position on human sexuality.

9. The Pew Forum Publications, "Public Expresses Mixed Views of Islam, Mormonism." The Pew Research Center, available at <<http://pewforum.org/surveys/religionviews07/>> (accessed April 26, 2009).

This is a poll conducted in September 2007 by the Pew Forum on the opinions Americans hold of other religious groups and figures. The Pew Forum is an independent nonprofit organization founded to collect information on religious attitudes and opinions in the world, particularly the United States.

10. Ratzinger, Joseph. "Considerations Regarding Proposals To Give Legal Recognition To Unions Between Homosexual Persons." Roman Curia: Documents of a doctrinal nature, 2003, available at

<http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20030731_homohomose-unions_en.html> (accessed April 26, 2009).

This is an official document of the Roman Catholic Church, detailing how Catholics worldwide are to respond to attempts to legalize same sex unions, and how they are to react if such measures pass. Cardinal Ratzinger ascended to the Papacy in 2005 as Benedict XVI.

11. Reddish, Mitchell, Ed. *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader*. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990. Roetzel, Calvin J. *The Letters of Paul*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

This book provides important background information on apocalyptic literature that may have been familiar to Paul, and also provides translations of these works. Reddish is a professor of religion at Stetson University.

12. Suetonius. *Lives of the Caesars*.

Suetonius gives one of the first non-Christian accounts of Christianity in the Roman Empire.

13. Tacitus. *The Annals*.

Tacitus gives an early account of Christianity in Rome.

14. Tan, Yak-Hwee. "Judging and Community in Romans: An Action Within the Boundaries." In *Gender, Tradition and Romans*, edited by Cristina Grenholm and Daniel Patte. New York: T & T Clark International, 2005.

Tan discusses the difference between judging those within the community and those outside of it. Tan is a professor of New Testament Studies and Greek at Trinity Theological College.

15. Winter, Bruce W. "Carnal Conduct and Sanctification in 1 Corinthians: *Simul sanctus et peccator*?" In *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, edited by Kent E. Browner and Andy Johnson, 184-200. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007.

Winter writes about the changes Paul expects to see in Christians following their conversion. He also brings up the difference between the sinful man in 1 Cor 5 and the one in 2 Cor 2. Winter is a former warden of Tyndale House and is the principal of Queensland Theological College.