



Second Corinthians and Ecclesiology: A Pauline Message for Church Organisation Today



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The New Testament is a fundamental resource for the experience and identity of all believing Christians. Since the rise of critical biblical criticism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, many Christians have been troubled with how to reconcile the historical understanding of the New Testament texts produced by such interpretation with the faith they have in Christ and with their belief that in him God was at work reconciling humankind and creation to himself. In this article I aim to outline how historical New Testament criticism can work in partnership with one branch of theology, namely, ecclesiology, to further the influence of the gospel in the face of certain challenges posed by our postmodern world.

Interpreting the New Testament historically and theologically

Some years ago I published a work that sought to integrate historical criticism of the New Testament with its contemporary application in ecclesiology: *New Testament Theology: Communion and Community*.¹ I argue that historical criticism allows us to hear the voices of the texts' authors in a manner sensitive to their cultural distance from us yet in a theological context where they are alive in Christ and we engage in a form of dialogue and indeed communion with them. I model the idea of the authors being 'alive in Christ' in a number of ways so as to include differing Christian beliefs on this matter.² In this enterprise I find reassurance in a remark by Krister Stendahl that 'A theology which retains history as a theologically charged category finds in its ecclesiology the overarching principles of interpretation and meaning.'³

I will now apply this approach to New Testament theology by attending to the voice of a New Testament author as one who is alive in Christ. In particular, I will consider how part of Paul's message in Second Corinthians – understood using historical-critical method enriched with a particular social-scientific perspective – bears upon what has become a rather pressing issue for the Christian churches, here mainly but not exclusively with reference to the Roman Catholic Church (the one I know the best). This issue is how Christian churches should organise themselves to respond appropriately to our current postmodern situation.

The churches and the challenge of postmodernity

Every Christian denomination – in the West at least, since the situation is rather different in the developing world – faces an ensemble of challenges that are usually referred to as those of postmodernity. Jean-François Lyotard famously characterised postmodernity as 'incredulity to metanarratives'.⁴ Put more simply, this means that we are experiencing an 'increasing disillusionment with all overarching explanatory hypotheses for the world in general and human beings and societies in particular'. 'The postmodern era is thus marked by a shift from belief in certainties and truth claims to more localised and piecemeal factors.' The individual tends to create his or her own meaning 'rather than receiving it from without'.⁵ This development manifests itself in many ways. The large claims of religious and other normative traditions (especially in relation to moral absolutes and the very existence of God) find fewer and fewer adherents (= 'detraditionalisation'),⁶ relativism and individualism are

on the rise, and 'pick and mix' attitudes closely aligned with rampant consumerism are more apparent.⁷ In some quarters problems associated with globalism are viewed as a symptom of postmodernity.

Ecclesiological responses to postmodernity

At the risk of some simplification, it is submitted, following the careful argument of Gerard Mannion in *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity*,⁸ that responses by the Roman Catholic Church and, to an extent other Christian churches, to the widening gap between themselves and an increasingly postmodern contemporary culture tend to align themselves around two poles.

First, are those ecclesiologies that are based on erecting barricades against the contemporary world, on insisting that the Church transcends any given culture and on reasserting what are regarded as old verities. These are 'exclusivist' or 'neo-exclusivist' responses. In the Roman Catholic Church during the last two decades this type of approach (often expressed in the journal *Communio*) has been taken by the central, Vatican authorities, usually with little or no consultation with the laity or even, sometimes, with other bishops, and for this reason is accurately classified as 'top down.' Notable expressions of this view emerge in the 1992 document issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith ('CDF') entitled *Communio in Notio: Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion* and in *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, published by the CDF on 6th August 2000.

There is a *second* response, which seems closer to the approach and spirit of the Vatican II document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, is more cognisant of the particular social and historical context in which the Church finds itself and is more interested in engaging with the world, postmodern or not. This is 'ecclesiology from below'. In keeping with the journal, *Concilium*, where this approach has often been supported, it tends to be conciliar and dialogical.

Supporters of both of these positions tend to maintain them with considerable fervour; the situation is very polarised. This can be seen, for example, in the fierce critique that *Dominus Iesus* attracted upon its publication. One reason for criticism was the way it used Scripture, as seen in a response by the prominent Roman Catholic New Testament scholar, PHEME PERKINS. Underlying its arguable triumphalism, Perkins actually discerned a deep-seated anxiety: were the authors of the document afraid that the Church would not be able to find a credible witness in the postmodern world?⁹ She argued that the document used examples from Scripture a-contextually and a-historically, as 'warrants for dogmatic assertions that exist without context'.¹⁰ Perhaps worst of all, she charged the document with having 'no ear whatsoever for the eschatological tonality of New Testament texts', the hope in the End very necessary for those today who are victims or postmodern developments such as globalization.¹¹ Her conclusion took no hostages:

*Dominus Iesus presumes that Catholics draw their faith neither from scripture nor from tradition but from the ecclesial documents in which catchphrases and references from the former are passed through as rhetorical ornaments. The consequences of such disregard for the sources of revelation is alienation between those in control of such documents and the rest of the faithful, so the church's legitimate concern about retaining basic concepts of Christian faith appears no more than a power play.*¹²

Dialogue in plotting a way forward

This discussion reveals that the current dilemma posed to Christian churches by postmodernity is twofold: first, the very need to respond to its challenges in an effective way and, secondly, the ecclesial processes and structures necessary to develop a successful strategy to do this. My own preference is for a 'bottom up' ecclesiology' as offering the best chances of success in both respects. I thus find it encouraging that many of the statements made by Pope Francis since his election on 13 March 2013 indicate that his own views seem more closely aligned with this type of ecclesiology than with the 'top down' versions that appeared in the two pontificates preceding his. Central to such a 'bottom up' ecclesiology is dialogue, both for engagement with the world and for the ecclesial processes that will enable and substantiate that engagement. Yet dialogue, as we will soon see, set within a context of the mutual creation and maintenance of identity and values.

On 6 August 1964 (so its fiftieth anniversary approaches), Pope Paul VI issued the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* that explicitly offered a theology of dialogue (*colloquium* in the Latin original). This document appeared before the end of Vatican II; it was intended to be an influence on the Council (§14) and so it was, for example in *Gaudium et Spes: The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (see §92).¹³ Yet this splendid document of Paul VI was not the last word on dialogue. It did not, for example, fully model the process of dialogue, especially as it left underdeveloped how dialogue entailed that the Church would listen as well as speak and the extent to which dialogue entailed agreement between the parties.

My own work on dialogue builds upon Martin Buber's notion of 'I and You', that when 'I' encounters 'You' a meeting occurs that goes to the heart of our shared humanity: 'The basic I-You word can only be spoken with one's whole being' and 'The basic I-You word establishes the world of relation.' Buber also dealt with the question of such a relation entering language, and becoming dialogue. Genuine dialogue occurs when 'each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them.' He recognised that dialogue occurred in a community as well as between pairs of people. Yet it was fundamental to Buber's understanding that genuine dialogue did not require the reaching of agreement. It required, rather,

NOTES

1. PF Esler, *New Testament Theology: Communion and Community* (London: SPCK, 2005).

Its argument is summarised in PF Esler, 'Die historische Interpretation des Neuen Testaments als Kommunikation in der Gemeinschaft der Heiligen. Entwurf einer ekklesialen Hermeneutik' in *Evangelische Theologie*, an issue edited by Ulrich Luz and Gerd Theissen, (2012), pp. 260–75.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 191–254.

3. K Stendahl, 'Biblical Theology, Contemporary', in GA Buttrick, ed., *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), pp. 418–32, at p. 428.

4. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition – A Report on Knowledge*, ET Régis Durand (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. xiv.

5. G Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: Questions for the Church in Our Time* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), p. 4.

6. See P Heelas, S Lash and P Morris (eds.), *Detraditionalization: Critical Reflections on Authority and Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 16–20.

8. Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity*.

the affirmation of the other, whether we agreed with them or not.¹⁴ This approach to dialogue forms the basis of my model of inter-personal communion, though its development necessitated the incorporation of other social and theological dimensions.¹⁵

In two recent works Dimitry Nikulin has also explored the nature of dialogue in ways cognate with my own and relevant to the twofold challenge of postmodernity to the churches.¹⁶ He identifies four features that turn conversation into dialogue: (1) a personal other (meaning the 'me' that is expressed in the dialogue, even if that will never coincide fully with the essential 'me'); (2) a voice, as the minimum of corporeality required by the exchange, with each voice both communicative and expressive of the person concerned; (3) unfinalizability, meaning that a dialogue is meaningful at each point in its course and can always be carried on further; (4) disagreement with the other and the constant questioning of every claim made (which he calls 'allosensus', as distinct from 'consensus' and 'dissensus').¹⁷

Now let us bring what Paul has to say in Second Corinthians into the discussion. This will exemplify the integration of historical interpretation of the New Testament and ecclesiology that I have advocated in my *New Testament Theology* and also, perhaps, provide a form of appropriation of Scripture for ecclesial purposes that hopefully avoids the problems articulated by PHEME PERKINS in relation to *Dominus Iesus*.

Listening to Paul in Second Corinthians

In Second Corinthians Paul is continuing a dialogue with the Corinthians that sometimes took oral form, when he was with them, and sometimes written form, as in the several letters he wrote to them, of which only two survive. In antiquity there was a strong sense that letters served as a substitute for actual presence, as expressed in the commonplace, 'absent in body but present through the letter'. The features noted above for dialogue, such as its not always entailing agreement and its unfinalizable nature, are characteristic of First and Second Corinthians.

The manner in which Paul communicates with his addressees in Second Corinthians bears directly on the way Christian churches could effectively organise themselves to respond to our postmodern condition. Attending to Paul on this matter is to enter into communion with him, our ancestor in faith who is alive in Christ. Clearly Paul is attempting to exercise leadership in relation to the Corinthians, and to that extent occupies a position mainly, if loosely, analogous to religious leaders in the Christian churches. But the way he goes about this is a long way from a 'top down' ecclesiology. It is based on genuine dialogue and indeed communion between him and the Corinthians.

To characterise the distinctiveness of Paul's approach I will utilise a recent development in social identity theory. Broadly speaking, this theory is a branch of social psychology pioneered by Henri Tafel that focuses on the

way members of a group derive identity from belonging to it in a context of comparison with other groups to which they do not belong.¹⁸ The particular development comes in a recent essay by John Turner.¹⁹ I do so in spite of Neil Ormerod's warnings about deploying the social sciences in an ecclesiological context, which seem to require, at a meta-analytical level perhaps, that social scientists 're-orient' their approach by engaging with theologians on the question of original sin.²⁰ It is difficult to see why theology should have a corrective role for the heavily empirical practices of social psychologists researching in the area of social identity, even though it most certainly can profit by their discoveries.

John Turner's 2005 essay dealt with the question of power, here understood as the capacity to cause effects, to have an impact on or change things, people or society, to cause them to act in ways they would not otherwise have acted. The manner in which the central organs of the Roman Catholic Church have exercised power in relation to the publication of the ecclesiological documents mentioned above has been regarded in some quarters as problematic, such as in the statement of PHEME PERKINS quoted above. Accordingly, a consideration of a particular approach to power that, it is submitted, appears in the ecclesial context of Second Corinthians may be useful in the discussion.

Turner notes that the standard theory of power in social psychology runs like this: a person ('the influencing agent') controls resources (like positive and negative outcomes; rewards and costs, information, etc.). These resources are desired, valued or needed by others and this makes them dependent upon the influencing agent for the satisfaction of their needs or the attainment of their goals. This situation gives the influencing agent the capacity to influence them. The mutual dependence between people involved in this process produces a psychological group. The exercise of such influence represents power in action, which is necessary for any leader.

Turner argues that causality runs in exactly the opposite direction to that espoused by the standard theory. There are three main aspects. Firstly, psychological group formation, which is understood as meaning the development of a shared social identity, produces influence among the group members. Secondly, influence, operating through one or more of the three processes of persuasion, authority and coercion, produces power, meaning the capacity to exert one's will over, to have an impact on, other people. Thirdly, the power so produced allows its holder to gain and control resources and their distribution.

On this view, power emerges from group formation, social organization, and shared beliefs, histories and values that shape social and personal identity and perceived self-interest. 'Authority is based on ingroup norms that a person, role or group has the right to prescribe appropriate beliefs, attitudes or behaviour in certain areas.' Leaders gain power, then, not by possessing resources but by representing and working for

9. P Perkins, 'New Testament Eschatology and *Dominus Iesus*', in SJ Pope and C Heffling (eds.), *Sic et Non: Encountering Dominus Iesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), pp. 80–8 (cited by Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity*, pp. 95–6).

10. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 88 (cited by Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity*, p. 97).

13. On *Ecclesiam Suam*, see B Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church: Aims and Obstacles, Lessons and Laments* (New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 191, and R Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: A People Called and Sent* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), p. 50.

14. See Esler, *New Testament Theology*, pp. 43–7 (with references to Buber's works).

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 38–66.

16. D Nikulin, *On Dialogue* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006) and *Dialectic and Dialogue* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

17. Nikulin, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, pp. 72–94.

18. For details, see PF Esler, 'An Outline of Social Identity Theory', in JB Tucker and CA Baker (eds.), *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament* (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming, 2014), pp. 13–39.

group values and identity. Here a leader achieves success through negotiation, not coercion.

This approach well matches how Paul operates in the three sections of Second Corinthians (which, contrary to most contemporary scholarship, I believe is a unified composition): (1) Chapters 1–7, where he explains and defends his conduct to the Corinthians (with reference to his apostolic ministry and authority in 2.14 to 7.4); (2) Chapters 8–9, dealing with the Collection; (3) Chapters 10–13 he defends himself and his authority against charges raised by 'false apostles' (2 Cor 11.13).

Limitations of space only allow me to offer a flavour of the evidence here. Above all, it is clear that Paul is engaged in psychological group formation as he works to develop a shared social identity that will allow him to have influence among the Corinthian Christ-followers. The keynote appears in 1.24 when he says: 'We do not lord it over (*kurieuomen*) your faith, but we are co-workers (*sunergoi*) of your joy'. Paul is disavowing any form of rule (no doubt oppressive) associated with local rulers, *kurioi*, in this context. *Kuriein* is the word used in Luke's version of the saying 'The kings of the foreigners lord it over them' (22.25).

Instead, the partnership between himself and the Corinthians is a major theme of Chapters 1-7. This emerges as early as 2 Corinthians 1 in references to comfort (*paraklêsis*). Exposure to Paul's divinely-sourced comforting allows them to develop their own, no doubt by opening themselves to the same divine source of all comfort. 2 Corinthians 1.7 announces that his firm hope is not to establish a dependency-relationship in the area of comfort, but a partnership: 'Our hope for you is firmly established; for we know that just as you are partners (*koinônoi*) in suffering (*pathêmata*), so also you are partners in comfort (*paraklêsis*).' In 1 Corinthians 1.11 Paul develops this notion of partnership by mentioning the need for them to be cooperating in prayer with him. While Andrew Lincoln has recently made an important contribution to Paul's use of the language of *koinônia*, 'partnership' or 'communion',²² social identity theory offers us new insights into this rich area of Pauline thought. We see an illustration of Turner's view of 'the nature of power as having more to do with the basis of organized, collective action than with a dependence relationship'.²³ In many respects Paul builds friendship with the Corinthians; indeed that he is almost writing a love letter to the Corinthians comes out in 2 Corinthians 2.1–4. Paul's attempts at psychological group formation also embrace the glorious future destiny they will all share: 'Knowing that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us with Jesus and will bring us into his presence along with you' (4.14).

Finally, in Chapters 10–13 (from the outset an integral part of the letter in my view), where Paul expresses his pain at what the false apostles have been up to in Corinth, we see both that dialogue may not always result in agreement and that it can have an open-ended nature that calls for further discussion. Neither of these features, however, is inimical to genuine communion.

Conclusion

The question of the ongoing tension between the Church and the world is not new: Richard Niebuhr published *Christ and Culture*, his brilliant modeling of various possibilities, as long ago as 1951. Yet with the onset of postmodernity the issue has become far more acute. In this article I have made a case for the various elements in Christian churches, including hierarchy, clergy and laity, to engage in dialogue directed to the development of the best strategy for engaging with the world. While disagreements are to be expected and neatly circumscribed solutions may not necessarily result, it is only through dialogue that fully respects what each party can bring to the discussion that we will develop an ecclesiology that is imbued with distinctive group values and identity and is properly responsive to the postmodern challenge. This was Paul's approach in Second Corinthians and his example, actualised at one point in history, lives on – like him – amongst us still.

19. J Turner, 'Explaining the Nature of Power: A Three-Process Theory', *European Journal of Social Psychology* 35 (2005), pp. 1–22.

20. N Ormerod, 'A Dialectic Engagement with the Social Sciences in an Ecclesiological Context', *Theological Studies* 66 (2005), pp. 815–40.

21. I gave a longer version at the Society of Biblical Literature Conference in New Orleans in November 2009: 'Testing John C. Turner's Theory of Power Against a New Testament Example: Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians.'

22. AT Lincoln, 'Communion: Some Pauline Foundations', *Ecclesiology* 5 (2009), pp. 135–160.

23. Turner, 'Explaining the Nature of Power', p. 2.



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