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YOU'VE GOT TO 'ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE': THINKING ABOUT DIFFERENCES BIBLICALLY

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Throughout the history of Christianity there have been differences among Christians, as is reflected even in our earliest texts. Although Walter Bauer's 1934 book on heresy and orthodoxy in early Christianity is today often credited with making scholars aware of the varied nature of early Christianity, in fact it was always clear in the primary texts.² We know, for example, that there were differences between Paul and some other believers, because Paul did not hesitate to say so. Indeed, he was at times rather forthright in characterizing negatively those who criticized him and his gentile mission. In 2 Corinthians 11, for example, he refers derisively to certain 'superlative apostles' (v. 5), whom he then denounces as 'boasters, false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ' (v. 13). A bit later in this same passage and in Galatians 2 also, he refers to 'false brothers' (2 Cor. 11:26; Gal. 2:4), in the latter passage accusing them of trying to 'spy out the freedom which we have in Christ Jesus'. Paul even gives an account of his direct confrontation of Kephass in Antioch, accusing him (and also Barnabas) of hypocrisy in withdrawing from meal-fellowship with Gentile believers out of fear of criticism from 'certain men from James' (Gal. 2:11-14). In a number of other NT texts as well, we have complaints about false teachers, and others who are accused of working against what the authors of the texts regard as the truth and/or right Christian behaviour. So, differences among believers, sometimes quite sharp ones, there certainly have been from our earliest evidence.

But we should not presume that the alternative to these sharp differences and polemical denunciations is simply a uniformity of doctrine and practice. It is also possible to focus on unifying matters and accommodate diversity. The same Paul who denounced those Jewish Christians who

¹ I beg indulgence in alluding to the popular song 'Accentuate the Positive' (music by Harold Arlen, lyrics by Johnny Mercer, 1944). This is the text of my invited address to the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society annual meeting, May 2011 (Glasgow).

² Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. by Robert Kraft and Gerhard Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971; German 1934).

opposed his Gentile mission and denied the validity of his converts as full co-religionists also sought and made agreement and compromise with other Jewish Christians, as reflected in his account of his agreement with the Jerusalem leadership in Galatians 2:1–10. Jerusalem seems to have favoured concentrating first on a mission to Jews (probably inspired by OT prophecies of a renewal of the people of Israel, to be followed then by the conversion of the nations to the God of Israel, as in Isa. 59:1–16). Paul, however, on the basis of what he took as God's special revelations to him, apparently believed that the Gentile mission was to be conducted now, alongside a mission to Jews, and that he was called to be a special instrument to accomplish the eschatological project of bringing the nations to the God of Israel.³ His strenuous programme for the Jerusalem collection represents a still larger effort to maintain fellowship, and to demonstrate it tangibly.

Indeed, I have contended that in the earliest expressions of what has been called 'proto-orthodoxy' (especially in the late first century and second century), one of its principal features is a readiness to accept certain differences among believers, to recognize a deeper commonality beneath those differences; and I have emphasized that those in that time who came to be called 'heretics' were more often exclusivist and sectarian, demanding assent to their own standpoint as a basis for fellowship.⁴ That is, 'proto-orthodoxy' was not a single Christian group or teaching but seems to represent a variety of emphases, the crucial factor being a readiness to accept one another as fellow-believers and treat their common ground as more important than the things that distinguished them from one another.

We have an early instance of this in 2 Peter 3:15–16, where it is highly significant that the Petrine voice of this text refers approvingly to the letters of Paul, appearing to include them among texts treated as 'scriptures'. Also, of course, Acts of the Apostles is well known for its portrayal of a relatively positive relationship between Paul and the Jerusalem church-leadership. Though scholars argue over the historical reliability of Acts,

³ E.g., in Galatians 1:15–17, Paul refers to God's calling of him as including the purpose of his mission to the Gentiles. Likewise, in Romans 11:25–32, Paul refers to the scenario of salvation-history that he lays out as a *mysterion* (v. 25), which here as in other NT uses seems to designate a heavenly secret of God's plan now revealed. See H. Krämer, 'μυστήριον', in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by H. Balz and G. Schneider, 3 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 2, pp. 446–8.

⁴ See further my discussion of 'Radical Diversity' in my book, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 519–61.

it serves my purpose to note simply that this author was keen to assert a mutual recognition of these differing kinds of early Christianity.

In Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, we have another example of this feature of 'proto-orthodox' Christianity. In *Dialogue* 47, Trypho (the lead Jewish interlocutor) asks Justin about whether there are Christian believers who also wish to observe the Jewish Law. Justin (who in the text has been arguing strenuously that the Law is no longer required and has been superannuated in Christ) responds to Trypho's question by acknowledging that there are indeed Torah-observant believers. Moreover, he accepts them and has no great problem with their observing Torah, *so long as they do not require Torah-observance of Gentile believers* (*Dial.* 47.1). Indeed, Justin distinguishes himself from certain other Gentile Christians who refuse to have fellowship with Jewish believers who continue to observe Torah (47.2), and then he re-affirms his own view that, those Jewish believers who associate themselves with Gentile believers and do not require Torah-observance of them should be treated as siblings in faith (*hōs homosplanchnois kai adelphois*, *Dial.* 47.2). Justin expresses disapproval, however, of those Jewish believers who refuse to accept Gentile Christians and try to pressure them to observe Torah. Nevertheless, he expresses belief that, even those Gentiles who do Judaize and take up Torah-observance in addition to their faith in Christ 'shall probably be saved' (*Dial.* 47.4).

One of the most enduring expressions of this readiness to accommodate diversity is the affirmation of the four-fold Gospel. It is increasingly likely that our familiar four Gospels were already acquiring a regard as comprising the circle of authentic Jesus-narratives sometime between 100 and 150 CE.⁵ It seems that they circulated as separate texts and that codices adequate to contain all four began appearing perhaps sometime around or not long after 200 CE. From the remains of early Christian manuscripts, it appears that in the earliest period Matthew and John were far more frequently copied and read than Luke and Mark.⁶ Nevertheless,

⁵ See, e.g., G. N. Stanton, 'The Fourfold Gospel', *NTS*, 43 (1997), 317–46; Theo K. Heckel, *Vom Evangelium des Markus zum viergestaltigen Evangelium*, WUNT, 120 (Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1999); Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM, 2000); James A. Kelhoffer, "'How Soon a Book" Revisited: ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ as a Reference to "Gospel" Materials in the First Half of the Second Century', *ZNW*, 95 (2004), 1–34.

⁶ See L. W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), esp. 15–41.

we know from figures such as Irenaeus that in at least many circles of second-century Christians all four Gospels were regarded highly.

We also know that the differences among the Gospels were noted by ancient Christians, and were for some deeply troubling.⁷ Tatian's anxiety about the differences among the four Gospels led him to produce a harmonized text (the '*Diatessaron*'), urging that it be used liturgically in place of the separate Gospels. But proto-orthodox circles retained the four Gospels as discrete accounts, prizing and preserving their literary integrity, and seeing their differences of emphasis as a richness of testimony to Christ.

Likewise, over against Marcion's insistence that there can be only one true Gospel account of Jesus (in his case, an edited text of Luke), 'proto-orthodox' Christians affirmed the familiar four Gospels as all valid and scripture. Moreover, despite Marcion's anxiety about the differences among the apostolic traditions, and against his insistence that there can be only one true apostle, for him Paul, the emerging NT canon of 'proto-orthodox' Christians included texts linked to various apostolic figures: Peter, James, John, and Jude. In short, as I have observed in a recent article, the shape and contents of the NT with multiple Gospels and texts ascribed to a diversity of apostolic figures, its architecture so to speak, represent an affirmation of early Christian diversity.⁸ Given the paradigmatic significance of the NT, we could say that this affirmation of diversity is written into the scriptural DNA of Christianity.

But, perhaps especially in the West, and particularly since the Reformation, Christians have tended to treat diversity as a problem, a threat, and an obstacle to unity. Indeed, the common notion has been that Christian unity depends on *agreement*, especially in doctrine and church polity. So the question for us is whether this anxiety about diversity is justified, and whether it may bring the danger of a narrowness that makes us unfaithful to the NT and the 'proto-orthodox' circles from which we would like to trace our religious derivation. We might, then, ask whether there are biblical resources for handling diversity positively. In the following discussion, I focus on a key NT passage, proposing that it provides us

⁷ Oscar Cullmann, 'The Plurality of the Gospels As a Theological Problem in Antiquity', in *The Early Church: Studies in Early Christian History and Theology*, ed. by A. J. B. Higgins (London/Philadelphia: SCM/Westminster, 1956), pp. 39–54; Helmut Merkel, *Die Widersprüche zwischen den Evangelien. Ihre polemische und apologetische Behandlung in der Alten Kirche bis zu Augustin*, WUNT, 13 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1971).

⁸ L. W. Hurtado, 'The Formation of the Christian Bible', *Modern Reformation*, 19/6 (Nov/Dec 2010), 33–6.

with instruction in the matter of unity and diversity. Indeed, I propose that this text challenges the traditional fixation with doctrinal agreement as the key basis for Christian unity, and lays out an approach that is very much worth considering.

EPHESIANS 4:1-16 AND CHRISTIAN UNITY

The Epistle to the Ephesians is traditionally considered one of the most impressive presentations of Christian faith in the NT. One of the themes of the epistle seems to be unification. In 1:9-10, the author says that God's revealed purpose is 'to unite all things' in Christ. In 2:11-22, the author celebrates the work of Christ in uniting Gentiles and Jews, having 'broken down the dividing wall of hostility', reconciling both 'to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing hostility to an end' (vv. 14-16). In the passage I focus on here, 4:1-24, we have more direct teaching about Christian unity in diversity. It is teaching that seems, however, not to have had its due impact in Christian history.

Let us begin by noting the exhortations that commence the passage. These are introduced with wording intended to secure the most respectful regard for them. The voice of the apostle Paul speaks here, portrayed as 'a prisoner for the Lord', who begs [*parakalō*] readers to 'walk worthily of the calling to which you were called' (v. 1). More specifically, this is to involve acting 'with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (vv. 2-3).

My first observation is that such exhortations are hardly necessary if the pre-condition for fellowship is complete agreement. It is scarcely necessary for me to exercise 'forbearance' with anyone intelligent enough to agree with my views. Forbearance is called for only with those who are (from my viewpoint) perverse enough to take another view of the matter! So immediately these exhortations seem clearly intended for situations of Christian diversity. Indeed, they are only applicable in these situations.

I observe further that the point of the behaviour exhorted here is to 'maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (v. 3). I emphasize that it is 'the bond of peace', not a bond of doctrinal agreement. Moreover, the unity (*henotēta*) called for is 'unity of the Spirit'. The Spirit is divine gift, God's own empowerment, not a force of human devising or effort. As the following verses indicate, the bases of Christian unity lie in the unity of God and God's actions. Believers are one (whether they act accordingly or not) because 'there is one body, one Spirit... one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of us all' (vv. 4-6). In short, the expression of Christian unity means to live out,

to actualize, the unity that is based in God. Believers are one in God and Christ; the question is whether we can find the readiness to reflect that in our engagement with one another.

Next, the author celebrates the richness and diversity of the grace that has been given to believers: 'Grace given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift' (v. 7). Appropriating a statement from Psalm 68:19, the author portrays the ascended Christ as bestowing gifts, including apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers, these intended to equip the larger body of believers ('the saints') 'for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ' (vv. 11–12). Neither here nor in other NT passages do we have a complete list of Christ's gifts, and those mentioned here should be taken as illustrative and selected to fit the focus here on the formation and equipment of the body of believers for ministry.

In v. 13, we come to the statement of the eschatological goal in light of which Christian life and the work of all those varied gifted individuals are to be conducted. It is pretty clear that v. 13 looks ahead to the future consummation of God's plan, which is characterized here grandly as attaining 'the unity of the faith and knowledge [*henotēta tēs pisteōs kai tēs epignōseōs*] of the Son of God, to maturity, the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ'. I want to underscore the observation that 'unity of the faith' is part of the eschatological consummation, something to hope for and expect, as a corollary of the fullness of God's eschatological revelation, when we 'shall understand fully even as we have been fully understood' (adapting slightly the wording of 1 Cor. 13:12). That is, 'unity of the faith' is not presented here as something that can be devised by councils and doctrinal committees, but is instead a component of the eschatological resolution of all ambiguities in the bright light of God's full revelation and final victory. If unity of the faith were something that we could achieve, it is difficult to see why the text here portrays it as an eschatological condition.

Also, note the comparison of this 'unity of the faith' with 'the unity of the Spirit' mentioned in v. 3. 'Unity of the Spirit' (i.e., a unity that flows from the Spirit's enablement and that reflects the essential oneness of God) is to be maintained 'in the bond of peace', and is a present responsibility to which readers are exhorted. We are urged to *maintain* 'unity of the Spirit', but we can only *await* 'unity of the faith'. The latter is posed as a condition that may be attained at some indefinite future point (as connoted by the subjunctive verb, *mechri katantēsōmen*, v. 13).

I highlight the sequence of these two kinds of unity. 'Unity of the Spirit' is for the present; it is not conditional upon and does not presuppose 'unity of the faith'. 'Unity of the Spirit' is to be expressed now, *in the*

absence of 'unity of the faith'! In the history of Christianity, however, unity of doctrine has typically been seen as the requisite condition for ecclesial unity, for worshipping together, for truly recognizing one another fully as fellow Christians. That is, Christian unity has tended to be seen as 'unity of the faith', agreement in Christian teaching. And differences of doctrine have tended to be treated a justification for refusing in various ways to treat those with whom we differ as full siblings in God.

We have, quite simply, tended to reverse the clear sequence of this passage. We have made agreement in doctrine a requirement for Christian unity, and we have used differences as a justification for disunity, an excuse to ignore the clear exhortation to 'maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'. But 'unity of the Spirit' is to be maintained 'in the bond of peace', which means choosing not to go to war over differences, not to attack and inflict the harm of denying Christian fellowship upon those with whom we differ.

We have invested enormous efforts and resources in polemics, defending our views and attacking those of other Christians. In kinder moments, we have established commissions and task forces to promote serious discussion of our differences, all with the aim of seeing whether we can come to agreement in matters of difference, and in the assumption that such agreement is a necessary pre-condition for full Christian fellowship. I propose that in polemics and such kinder deliberations we have ignored the thrust of passages such as the one I have focused on here. We have ignored the clear eschatological framework of salvation and revelation, in which the fullness of both are awaited from God and are not ours to construct. We have ignored the clear exhortations to engage our differences 'in the bond of peace' and with an eagerness to 'maintain the unity of the Spirit', groundlessly using our differences as justification for our disobedience to Scripture.

To be sure, the text before us also reflects a concern about believers being 'tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by human cunning and craftiness in deceitful wiles' (v. 14). There is such a thing as heresy. But, as I have stated, the heresies and heretics mentioned in the NT and subsequent early Christian literature tend to be instances of exclusivist claims and a refusal to accommodate Christians who will not accept them. For example, this seems to be so in the case of the 'secessionists' mentioned in 1 John. It is also true of Marcion. We should remember, after all, that the Greek word from which our word 'heresy' derives (*hairesis*) refers to a 'party' or 'sect'. The term acquired a pejorative connotation as 'heresy' as a result of being applied to versions of Christian teaching that asserted a unique validity for themselves, refusing to treat other Christians as fully brothers and sisters.

The passage concludes by urging readers to 'increase' or 'grow up' (*auxēsōmen*) 'into him in all things, he who is the head, Christ' (v. 15). It is important to note that readers are to do this by 'speaking the truth in love' (*alētheuontes de en agapē(i)*). This interesting expression combines a concern for truthfulness and honesty with an equal concern for the exercise of Christian love (for one another). The one concern means that we should not treat the quest for truth with indifference, or become apathetic about it. Toleration based on apathy is hardly anything to brag about! But living in truth and acting out truth (which seems to be connoted in this interesting verb, *alētheuō*) means more than a concern to formulate right doctrine; it means exhibiting the truth that we profess in our actions.

Moreover, this 'truthing' (to translate the term rather woodenly) is to be done 'in love' (which must mean love for others). A concern for truth is not an excuse for unkindness, much less for hatred! To seek the truth 'in love' is likely very different from the ways that Christians all too often have treated doctrinal differences and those with whom they differ. We know very well from 1 Corinthians 13 what Christian love is to involve: 'love is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude; love does not insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful... bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things' (1 Cor. 13:4-7). This is not sentimentality, but instead involves a demanding effort.

It is right to strive to articulate Christian faith in clarity. It is understandable and justifiable for Christians to be concerned about differences in faith, polity and practice, and right for Christians to engage one another over their differences, seeking to find why they differ and whether these differences may be reduced, or may even lead to mutual clarification and a greater appreciation of the truth as a result of considering them. But I conclude by reiterating two main points.

First, the responsibility to 'maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' does not await 'unity of the faith', and this responsibility is not lessened because of differences in faith. The 'unity of the Spirit' that requires 'forbearing one another in love' is obligatory precisely because there are differences among Christians, and is to be maintained precisely in the midst of these differences. 'Unity of the Spirit' is a present obligation. 'Unity of the faith' is an eschatological condition dependent upon God's final consummation and revelation.

Second, our concern to articulate truth in words and practice must be exercised in Christian love. And this *agape*-love is not sentimental but a robust commitment to concern and care for others, including especially those with whom we differ. *Agape* does not mean approving the views of others or consenting to them, and it certainly does not involve an indifference to the concern for Christian truth. We are summoned to love

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those with whom we differ, and Christian *agape* is most fully expressed precisely by believers who care deeply about the matters over which they differ, but are also committed to finding what unites them as well as identifying their differences.