

# The Problems of a Pluralistic Society Illustrated from the Church in Corinth

PETER V. LEGARTH

The following two papers were given in two workshops at the FEET (Fellowship of Evangelical European Theologians) at Altenkirchen in August 1994. The papers given in the plenary sessions are to be published in the *European Review of Theology* and are well worth consulting on the issue of Pluralism.

The problems that confronted the Corinthian church are remarkably similar to the problems that we know in our own church life in the twentieth century. There is (of course) a difference in the concrete life situation, but what marked the Corinthian church was that the gospel was proclaimed in a society like ours where several sub-cultures existed alongside one another. We call this a pluralistic society; and thereby we refer to the widespread acceptance of an individual's right to think and believe what he wants to as long as he does not hurt others. In a pluralistic society there is a basic sense of tolerance; the freedom of the individual must be appreciated. He has the liberty to develop his own world view, and he can presuppose that he will be, if not accepted, then respected<sup>1</sup>. Thus, pluralism leads to tolerance in regard to different attitudes, but also to a lack of unity in the basic fabric of society.

In Corinth the philosophical, religious, and cultural trend was Hellenism, but a pluralistic attitude was, in reality, a characteristic of Hellenism. On the one hand many religious movements from the east had become popular in the west and the mystery religions had attracted a great many people in the Roman empire. On the other hand the emperor cults had grown in influence and had great political importance. Moreover there was still the belief in various old Greek and Roman deities and among the masses there was a belief in magic. Superstition was widespread and many people sought for help in astrology or from the oracles.

In the philosophical realm the Epicureans, the Stoics and the Cynics had had a growing impact; together with the Neo-platonists.

Moreover, during the first century we can also notice the early beginnings of gnosticism. Judaism, too, sought to survive in the synagogues in the Hellenistic world, and, indeed, the monotheism of Judaism attracted many non-Jews. It is not clear whether the Jews were active in an effort to convert pagans to Judaism and probably Judaism was not a missionary movement. However, proselytes were represented in the Jewish communities, and it is well known that many pagans stood at the threshold to the synagogue as god-fearers (σεβόμενοι).

Behind this plurality of religious and philosophical attitudes was a marked syncretism. Only the synagogue was an exception with its exclusive monotheism.

As we have already noted, pluralism involves a lack of unity in culture and religion. Thus, within certain limits the Christians in Corinth could think and believe what they wanted and were met with tolerance. According to Acts 18:1–18 there was opposition in the beginning, but this was caused by the Jews. They protested against the Christians being protected by the Jewish privileges and they brought Paul into court: 'This man', they charged, 'is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law' (Ac. 18:13, NIV); they wanted Gallio to realize that the Christians were not Jews. But significantly Gallio refused to listen

to them. '... since it involves questions about words and names and your own law—settle the matter yourselves' (Ac. 18:15). According to Gallio there is a basic freedom of attitude in questions about 'words and names and your own law' (εἰ δὲ ζητήματα ἐστὶν περὶ λόγου καὶ ὀνομάτων καὶ νόμου τοῦ καθ' ὑᾶς, οὐσεσθε αὐτοί). Luke recounts that this was the opinion of the political authority, and we may believe that this tolerance in questions about 'words and names and your own law' was widespread in Corinthian society.

This gave the church great opportunities for proclaiming the gospel in Corinth since the church benefited from the prevailing tolerance. In a dream the Lord spoke to Paul: 'I have many people in this city' (Ac. 18:10), and we understand from Acts and the Corinthian letters that the Corinthian church grew rapidly, and many Corinthians became Christians. Not many of them were 'wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth' (1 Cor. 1:26), but nevertheless many Corinthians were attracted by the Christian message. It is evident therefore, that the church profited from the pluralism in the sense that the message of the church was received with respect and tolerance.

The Corinthian church may have taken advantage of the pluralism of the society, but, at the same time, this same pluralism contained snares which could entangle the church. Thus, we learn from First and Second Corinthians that the church had great difficulties in holding the balance between confrontation and assimilation.

In fact, in the Corinthian letters we face a congregation that is (to a great extent) confused. It is a young church with no tradition. In a sense it has to create its own tradition but without a tradition from which it could evaluate itself and its surroundings the congregation was vulnerable and in danger of being drawn in different directions; 'tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming'—to cite from Eph. 4:14. Without a tradition, pluralism might cause confusion. Thus, the church in Corinth lacked a tradition from which it could evaluate the phenomena.

In reality, however, the Corinthian church was not without a tradition for in 1 Corinthians Paul reminds the church members that they ought to have learnt better from the apostolic teaching: 'Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures'

(1 Cor. 15:1–4). Paul reminds the Corinthians of the gospel he has preached in Corinth, a gospel which was both kerygma and tradition. Paul had received the Jesus tradition (παρέλαβον), and he had passed it on to the Corinthians (παρέδωκα). In 1 Cor. 15:1–4 Paul uses rabbinic terms for the transmission of the authoritative tradition. As a pharisee he had probably been using this vocabulary to describe the process of tradition. Now as the apostle of Jesus Christ he uses this same terminology to describe the handing over of the gospel tradition. The Corinthian church had a tradition—the carefully transmitted apostolic tradition.

Another example of this vocabulary is found in 1 Cor. 11:23: 'For I received from the Lord (παρέλαβον ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου) what I also passed on to you (παρέδωκα ὑμῖν). This is followed by the account of the Lord's Supper. Behind this formula stands the conviction that what the church is receiving from the historic tradition in the past, it receives from the risen and glorified Christ in the present. What Jesus said in the past, corresponds to what Jesus says in the present to the Christian church. Therefore it is important for the Corinthians to take their stand on the apostolic tradition.

This correlation between the past and the present perspective is clear from the verbal forms in 1 Cor. 7:10 and 9:14. In 9:14 Paul refers to the saying of Jesus about the worker who deserves his wages (Lk. 10:7). Paul writes: 'In the same way, the Lord commanded (διέταξεν; NIV: has commanded) that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.' From the aorist form διέταξεν we learn that Paul alludes to the gospel tradition, the horizontally transmitted tradition. Jesus from Nazareth determined that the worker earns his pay.

On the other hand we find in 1 Cor. 7:10 Paul referring to the present Lord of the church. In 1 Cor. 7 Paul discusses marriage and divorce and also in this context he mentions the gospel tradition. Paul alludes to Mt. 19:6: 'Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate' (cf. Mk. 10:11), and he writes: 'To the married I give this command (παραγγέλλω) (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband' (1 Cor. 7:10). The present form παραγγέλλω shows that Paul here describes the risen Christ who is the Lord of the church. Through Paul the risen Christ now speaks to the church. But what does the risen Lord say? He says what he said! The aorist form διέταξεν in 1 Cor. 9:14 and the present form παραγγέλλω in 1 Cor. 7:10 belong together.

It was this combination of the past and the present in the apostolic tradition that the Corinthian church was neglecting. They stressed the spontaneous inspiration, especially the more ecstatic charisms, but in so doing they ignored the fact that, for Paul, vertical inspiration corresponds to the horizontally transmitted tradition.

Consequently they were 'blown here and there by every wind of teaching' (Eph. 4:14); and in Corinth with its pluralism there really were a large number of 'winds of teaching'!

In this regard it is interesting to observe that Paul refers (relatively often) to the Holy Scriptures in 1 and 2 Corinthians. The phrase 'for it is written' (γέγραπται γάρ) we find already in 1 Cor. 1:19<sup>2</sup>. Paul here cites Isa. 29, 14. He does not discuss whether the congregation has to obey the holy Scriptures. He simply takes it for granted that the church follows the biblical tradition. When we examine more carefully the quotations from the Old Testament, we realize that Paul often uses the Scriptures in a way that from our point of view, may appear strange. We may not feel able to interpret the Scriptures in exactly the same way as Paul did. But the main point that Paul makes is that the Scriptures are an undebatable authority in the Corinthian church. The Old Testament is not obsolete and out of date. On the contrary, the church can learn from the history of Israel as Paul emphasizes in 1 Cor. 10:1–13: 'These things happened to them as examples (ταῦτα δὲ τῆσιν ὡς ἐκείνοις) and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come' (1 Cor. 10:11). Similarly Paul stresses that the commandment about the oxen in Dt. 25:4 was written down with a view to the Christian church. God 'says this for us', he claims in 1 Cor. 9:10. In 2 Cor. 3:12–18 Paul describes the veil (τὸ κάλυμμα) that is over Moses' face and the hearts of the Israelites: '. . . to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away' (2 Cor. 3:14–16). Thus, according to Paul, the Christian church has a true understanding of the Old Testament. The church proclaims that 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures' (1 Cor. 15:3–4). Paul takes it for granted that the Old Testament has a canonical status in the Christian church.

A crucial passage in this regard is found in 1 Cor. 4:6. Paul describes the relationship between Apollos and himself, and he continues: 'Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying: "Do not go beyond what is written" (μάθητε τὸ μὴ ὑπὲρ ἃ γέγραπται).'<sup>3</sup> No doubt Paul is here delineating the basic attitude of the Christian church to the Scriptures. The Scriptures constitute the foundation on which the church is constructed (cf. Eph. 2:20).

Apparently the Corinthian church partially failed at this point. The basis for the church ought to be the Scriptures and the apostolic tradition. With that foundation the congregation could meet the pluralistic

society with security, with confidence, and without fear. But in Corinth the Christians obviously doubted the validity of this foundation. And the result was confusion.

Internally the Corinthians were characterized by mutual disagreement: "I follow Paul"—"I follow Apollo"—"I follow Cephas"—"I follow Christ" (1 Cor. 1:12). And in the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians Paul warns against divisions in the church. Later he writes about the lawsuits among the Corinthian believers (1 Cor. 6:1–13) and the serious misuse of the Lord's Supper with divisions between rich and poor (1 Cor. 11:17–34).

Apparently the congregation was influenced in different directions. Concerning marriage some Corinthians evidently held an ascetic point of view, and Paul agrees that 'it is good for a man not to marry' (1 Cor. 7:1). On the other hand, some Corinthians were advocates of a libertinism, and Paul must warn them against sexual immorality (cf. 1 Cor. 6:12–21). Concerning food sacrificed to idols some were so accustomed to idols that when they ate such food, they thought of it as having been sacrificed to an idol (1 Cor. 8:7). Others felt free to eat that meat, for the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it (1 Cor. 10:26).

One of the slogans in Corinth is cited twice by Paul: 'Everything is permissible'—'Everything is permissible for me' (1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23). We do not know the background of this statement, but it is not unthinkable that Paul himself created this expression in the confrontation with judaizers and their claim to submission to the Torah. Perhaps some Corinthians had interpreted this saying as a statement with universal validity and had transferred it to quite another context. What seems without a doubt is that this motto was prevalent in the Corinthian church, and Paul had to correct it. However, it is significant that it was in Corinth that this slogan became popular'. Tolerance is indicative of pluralism, and it is plain that this tolerance was present within the Corinthian church itself and formed the setting for the slogan: 'Everything is permissible'. Tolerance became broad-mindedness and indifference. Every statement could have validity, but in the church this atmosphere was menacing the life of the congregation, and again and again Paul criticizes the Corinthians for their lack of concern in regard to sin. It is noteworthy that in the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians Paul does not blame the different groups adhering to Paul, Apollos, and Cephas. He censures the church because it accepts these quarrels and divisions. In chapter 5 Paul is not primarily condemning the immoral brother having his father's wife, but he rebukes the Corinthian church because it accepts this sin and is even proud (1 Cor. 5:2). In chapter 6 Paul's aim is not first of all to condemn the lawsuits among the Corinthians, but to

reproach the church for accepting these conditions. A main theme in 1 Corinthians is church discipline. The reason why this was a problem in Corinth was that pluralism in society had influenced the church and had caused indifference toward serious problems within the congregation.

It is easy to see that the Corinthian church had great difficulties facing the pluralism of its surroundings. And there is no doubt that one of the reasons for this disorientation was the insecure foundation of the church. The church should have been aware of its secure basis in the Scriptures and in the apostolic tradition. However, the church did not build on the rock, but on sand (cf. Mt. 7:24–27). The winds blew from several different directions in the name of pluralism and beat against the congregation in Corinth, so that it was in great danger of falling with a great crash. As far as we know, it did not fall because in later church history we meet Corinth—e.g. when bishop Clement writes his letter to the church in the last years of the first century. It survived, and as I understand it, this was due partially to its not totally leaving the foundation of the Scriptures and the apostolic tradition. There were great troubles in Corinth when Clement wrote his letter to the church, but nonetheless Clement praises the Corinthians and mentions that ‘the commandments and the ordinances of the Lord were “written on the tables of your heart”’ (1 Cl. 2:8). This description is to a certain degree conditioned by rhetorical rules since at the beginning of a first century letter the addressees are honoured. Nevertheless, to some extent it surely reflects the historical situation.

As already mentioned, in the Corinthian letters we meet a congregation which is largely confused. It was difficult for the Corinthian church to establish itself in the pluralistic context. Moreover, there was an additional difficulty in that the church did not have a clear foundation in the gospel itself. Some members of the church wanted to describe the gospel as wisdom. They understood the preachers of the gospel as teachers of wisdom. According to them the gospel had to be acceptable in the Corinthian situation, and the result was a gospel that was preached ‘with words of human wisdom’ (1 Cor. 1:17), ‘with wise and persuasive words’ (1 Cor. 2:4).

But Paul rejects these viewpoints. ‘Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power’ (1 Cor. 1:17). The gospel is not wisdom in the general sense of the word. ‘For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate”’ (1 Cor 1:19). It is impossible to find God by means of wisdom. According to Paul God is found not in wisdom but in foolishness. God is found not in strength but in weakness. God ‘chose the lowly things of this world

and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no-one may boast before him (1 Cor. 1:28–29).

What some of the Corinthians failed to realize was that the gospel is ‘the message of the cross’. This gospel of Christ is not popular. A philosophical gospel can become popular. But for Paul it is not a question of popularity. The question is: which gospel is the power of God to save the world? A philosophical message cannot lead the world from condemnation to salvation. Only the message of the cross is the saving gospel.

On precisely that point the Corinthian church had difficulties. ‘Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom’ (1 Cor. 1:22). The Jews met the church with a demand for proof. They wanted a demonstration of the truth of the gospel; they wanted a sign. Jesus was confronted with the same request, ‘a sign from heaven’ (Mt. 16:1; cf. 12:38; 16:4; Mk. 8:11; Jn. 6:30); ‘If someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent’ says the rich man to Abraham about his brothers (Lk. 16:30).

On the other hand the Greeks in Corinth wanted a logical proof for the truth of the gospel. They could accept the message if it conformed to good manners in the intellectual circles of Corinth.

The Corinthian church obviously felt embarrassed in these circumstances. How should it respond to the different demands to the gospel? I understand from 1 Corinthians that the Corinthians had constructed a Jesus-is-the-answer theology. In the pluralistic society the church was met by many questions, and the Corinthians responded: ‘Jesus is the answer.’ Especially among the Greeks there was a strong interest in wisdom, and at least some of the Corinthians accordingly interpreted the gospel as a message of wisdom.

Precisely on that point there is a similarity between the Corinthian situation and our situation. The church faces a call to justify its existence. And it is tempting for the church to follow some of the Corinthians and formulate a Jesus-is-the-answer theology. It is tempting for the church to strive to be acceptable. Instead of talking about the Christian gospel and its consequences today we listen to church leaders talking about Christianity as a cultural tradition. ‘We have to be aware of our cultural traditions’, it is said. Yes, of course. But the main point is that we have to be aware of the message of the cross. Often we listen to a church saying ‘yes’, but it is more seldom heard saying ‘no’—at least not when it is unpopular to say that ‘no’. In Denmark there are great moral problems. But for the most part the church is silent and we look forward to the day when the church dares to be unpopular.

Modern man has many questions, and it is tempting to say: ‘Jesus is the answer.’ But Paul reminds us that Jesus is not necessarily the answer. Paul did not proclaim a Jesus who corresponded to the expecta-

tions of the Jews and the Greeks. In this regard it is important that we do not misunderstand his words in 1 Cor. 9. Paul here claims that he makes himself 'a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible' (1 Cor. 9:19). 'To the Jews, I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some' (1 Cor. 9:20-22). These words tell us that Paul spoke the language of his audience. He wanted to preach the gospel not as a stranger, but as a native. A missionary must be able to speak the local language or the local languages. But what Paul underscores in 1 Cor. 9 is not only a matter of language. It is also a question of adaption to the local culture. Paul changed his conventions and his way of living on account of the gospel. To a certain extent Paul was further willing to accommodate to the religious attitudes of his listeners. He could act as one 'under the law' though he himself was not under the law. He could become like 'one not having the law' though he himself was not free from God's law but under Christ's law. Up to a point Paul was willing to change his own religious attitudes. At the council in Jerusalem it was vital for Paul on account of the gospel that Titus was not circumcised (Gal. 2:3); but soon after this Paul circumcised Timothy 'because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek' (Ac. 16:3). Timothy was circumcised 'to win the Jews'. But this adjustment is possible for Paul only as long as the gospel of Christ is unaffected. The adaptation must never imply a transformation of the gospel itself, the aim of the adaptation is that the offence of the gospel may be totally clear. Similarly the modern church should speak the language of its listeners. It must adjust itself to the many conventions of the pluralistic society; but the church has no call to preach a Jesus who corresponds to the expectations of modern man. Pluralism is characterized by many questions. But Jesus is perhaps quite different from being the answer to these questions.

Nobody expects a crucified Christ, a crucified God. But Paul says: 'we preach Christ crucified' (1 Cor. 1:23). For only the crucified Christ saves. He is 'the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor. 1:24). The answer-Jesus cannot save. Only the crucified Christ can save. Therefore, he is to be proclaimed by the Christian church in the first as well as in the twentieth century.

The Jews refused a crucified Messiah. They knew that 'anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse' (Dt. 21:23). God has turned against him and he

cannot be the Messiah claimed the Jews for God must be behind the Messiah, not against him. For a Jew it was nonsense to talk about a crucified Messiah<sup>4</sup>.

And the Greeks refused to worship a crucified man. Such was a ridiculous and foolish notion. The earliest known Roman depiction of the crucifixion is a description of Alexamenos glorifying his God—a crucified man with a donkey head<sup>5</sup>.

But no matter what Jews and Greeks would require, we preach Christ as crucified, says Paul—'a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ (is) the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor. 1:23-24).

This problem is highly relevant for the modern western church. It has to proclaim the crucified Christ. The popular Christ will not save anybody, but the crucified Christ saves. The modern church should not be surprised if and when this gospel message is rejected and ridiculed. This gospel about Christ crucified will never be popular. So it was in the first century, and so it is in the twentieth century. Jews and Gentiles turned their backs on the message on the cross. In the same way the gospel of Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2) will be repudiated today. But the church is not called to avoid repudiation and disapproval, but to announce the gospel of God's saving act in the crucified Jesus Christ.

Christ is 'the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor. 1:24). Of course the Jews too knew that 'to God belong wisdom and power' (Job 12:13). But the whole point is how God is wise and powerful. It is Paul's purpose to show that God has revealed his wisdom and his power in the crucified Christ. God reveals himself in his contrast. God discloses his power through weakness and his wisdom through foolishness.

God acts in a different way from what is expected. That relates both to the gospel, and our lives with God. We expect God to solve our problems, and it is right to ask for God's power. Sometimes we experience God's concrete help and his answer to our prayers and we are then confirmed in the belief that God is a living reality. However, perhaps God does not act in this way; we meet God's power through weakness. 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor. 12:9). This, was God's answer to Paul and he experienced God's power in a peculiar way, namely when he himself was most weak. God met him in weakness and deficiency when Paul had to give up his own efforts and let God be Lord. God met Paul when Paul became weak.

A group has to justify its world view if it is going to make an impact outside the group. Consequently there will be a demand for strength and effectiveness in a pluralistic society. But the church has no mandate to

promise strength and effectiveness. The church cannot justify its message in this way. Sometimes weakness is avoided and the serious consequence is that God is not encountered.

The Corinthian church was young and inexperienced. Therefore Paul often reminds the Corinthians of their fellowship with other congregations (e.g. 1 Cor. 11:16); The church is not a church on its own. Furthermore, Paul emphasizes the necessity of being deeply rooted in the biblical and the apostolical tradition and in the true gospel of the cross. Pluralism offers a favourable possibility of preaching the gospel; but it is vital for the life of the church that it does not lose its distinctive stamp in this pluralistic context and make itself conform to the environment. The Corinthians had great difficulties in precisely this respect, and for that reason Paul's letters to the Corinthian church are of immediate importance in the western church today.

### Footnotes

1. Lexicon der Ethik, hrsg. von Otfried Höffe . . . , Munchen <sup>2</sup>1980, col. 81–83, 272f; Evangelisches Staatslexikon, begründet von Hermann Kunst und Siegfried Grundmann, Stuttgart, Berlin <sup>2</sup>1975, col. 1848–1855; Evangelisches Soziallexikon, begründet

von Friedrich Karrenberg, Stuttgart, Berlin <sup>7</sup>1980, col. 1004–1006.

2. Other examples of γέγραπται in 1 Corinthians are 1:31; 2:9; 3:19; 4:6; 9:9; 10:7; 14:21; 15:45; ἐγλάφη in 9:10; 10:11 and γεγραμμένος in 15:54. In 2 Corinthians we find γέγραπται in 8:15; 9:9 and γεγραμμένος in 4:13.

3. The new Danish translation has rendered the passage: 'Hold jer til Skriften' ('Abide by the Scripture').

4. Cf. Trypho in Justin Dial 32: 'These and such like Scriptures [Dan. 7,9–28], sir, compel us to wait for Him who, as Son of man, receives from the Ancient of days the everlasting kingdom. But this so-called Christ of yours was dishonourable and inglorious, so much so that the last curse contained in the law of God fell on him, for he was crucified.'

5. Cf. Celsus in Orig. c. Cels VI,34: 'And everywhere they speak in their writings of the tree of life and of resurrection of the flesh by the the tree—I imagine because their master was nailed to a cross and was a carpenter by trade . . . Would not an old woman who sings a story to lull a little child to sleep have been ashamed to whisper tales such as these?' Cf. Lucianus *De morte Peregrini* c. 13 and Justin *Apol I* 53, 2 (comp. 13, 4; 22, 3).

*Peter Legarth teaches in the Menighedsfaeltet in Aarhus, Denmark.*