

Conflict and Connection in Early Christianity

THE CHARACTER OF EARLY Christianity is shaped by the conviction that God was present in the life death and resurrection of Jesus and that this risen Christ is present in the church as Lord of his people. That confession meant that the early Christians broke out of the national and local framework of Israel to embrace a gospel to be preached universally to all people. It was also a personal gospel in that it called for a personal response of faith and was to be lived and expressed wherever these people lived. As a consequence this community of disciples of the crucified and risen Christ emerged in history with a combination of locally shaped diversity and a wider pattern of connection under the common lordship of Christ. In this sense the dynamics of the gospel contributed significantly to the diversity which emerged in early Christianity. Some differences in this community may have been the consequence of human frailty, pride, or sin. Paul draws attention this kind of divisiveness in 1 Corinthians, but he also underlines later in the same letter the diversity of gifts within the community that come from God.

Jesus as Fulfiller of the Hopes of Israel

In fulfilling the hopes of Israel in a crucifixion of universal significance and calling people to discipleship, Jesus laid the foundations of a rich profusion of local diversity and cosmic belonging. In the second century the otherwise unknown writer Diognetus put it this way:

For Christians are no different from other people in terms of their country, language, or customs. Nowhere do they inhabit cities of their own, use a strange dialect, or live life out of the ordinary. They have not discovered this teaching of theirs through reflection

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or through the thought of meddling people, nor do they set forth any human doctrine, as do some. They inhabit both Greek and barbarian cities, according to the lot assigned to each. And they show forth the character of their own citizenship in a marvelous and admittedly paradoxical way by following local customs in what they wear and what they eat and in the rest of their lives.¹

Given the manifest distinctiveness of Israel's social and religious habits how on earth did such a fulfillment of the destiny of Israel come to look like this? Essentially it came from the transforming character of Jesus' life and teaching and the creative imagination of the early Christians.

Israel was bound to God through a series of covenants. The covenant with Abraham promised the land to him and his descendants. The covenant with Moses, on the basis of God's redemption of Israel from bondage in Egypt, reasserted that Israel's God was the Lord and that his will for them was contained in the law delivered through Moses. Again the land was integrated into this covenant and made a political reality by the conquest and settlement of Palestine and its division among the tribes of Israel. The covenant with David and his descendants arose in the context of relations between the tribes of Israel and the nations around them. What was primarily a rebellious request for a king in place of the theocratic rule of God was turned around and God entered into a covenant with David to ensure the succession of his throne for ever. The building of the temple appears as an adjunct to this Davidic covenant. Israel thus became a kingdom, a nation among the nations, but with a secure covenant for the throne of David to last for ever.

Thus through its covenants with God there were four great pillars of their religious identity; the land, the law, the nation and the temple.

When we come to the New Testament all these are, to use W. D. Davies's term, "Christified."² The land of promise, so important in the Old Testament, seems to disappear completely in the New. The chief priests and Pharisees are reported with heavy irony in John's gospel as saying; "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on thus, everyone will believe in him and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation" (John 11:47ff). Jesus's parable of the wicked husbandmen in Mark 12:1-11 points to the kingdom being

1. Ehrman, *Apostolic Fathers*, 2:140f.

2. Davies, *Gospel and the Land*.

taken away from these custodians, and the Jewish leaders are reported by Mark to perceive that the story has indeed been told against them.

Paul takes this process a step further and identifies Christ as the true inheritor. Those who belong to him as joint heirs clearly include Gentiles. Not only is the land as inheritance transformed but the prerogatives of Israel as nation are eclipsed.

The broad new vision is laid out in Ephesians. Not only is the great wall dividing Jews from Gentiles broken down, but the gospel sets out a vision of a new humanity created by and in Christ.

What applies to the land and to the nation applies also even more precisely to the temple. Stephen is reported in Acts 7 as reflecting the older prophetic tradition that the temple had been a dangerous idea from the beginning. “The Most High does not dwell in a house made with hands.” John’s gospel goes further than this. Jesus is reported as clearing traders out of the temple and declaring that they should not make it a house of trade. But this reforming act is not the whole story. John goes on to record a conversation about the temple’s future in response to questions about the authority of Jesus to act in this way. Jesus declares that he will restore the destroyed temple in three days and John editorially refers this to Jesus own body and to his resurrection. The presence of God among his people, formerly indicated by the temple, is now to be found in the presence of the risen Christ. Or, in the terms of a later Johannine passage, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14: 23).

God is present with his people in the person of Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection. He is present wherever his people gather in his name. In the terms of Matt 18:20, “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.”

The kingdom of God was a central element in Jesus’s teaching. This is not a kingdom located in a land and embracing a temple. Jesus’s kingdom is not of this world. Yet, it is clearly located in this world. This kingdom of God is seen in Jesus himself and in the individuals who come to him, belong to him, and follow him. There is a great deal in the gospel reports of Jesus’s teaching about the character of this kingdom. In Paul’s letters, the kingdom takes on a moral quality, in that certain kinds of actions exclude those who commit them from it (e.g., 1 Cor 6).

In John’s gospel, this kingdom is seen pre-eminently in Jesus’s crucifixion. It is implicit in the conversation between Jesus and Pilate that

develops in John 19. Pilate has a material idea of kingdom that is characterized by coercive power, whereas Jesus's kingdom is shaped by testimony to the truth. The culmination of this testimony is Jesus's crucifixion. John sustains the irony latent in the whole exchange between Jesus and Pilate by noting the title attached to the cross, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

This great transformation in the understanding of the presence of God with his people is not expressed in exactly the same terms in the various documents of the New Testament. The gospels develop different themes and scholars have offered a variety of formulations of these differences. Although possessing different notes, the gospels sing the song of God's redemptive presence in the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. One of the central themes is the transformation of the four great pillars of Israel's identity, land, law nation, and temple. They find their fulfillment and final expression in Jesus Christ crucified and risen. God is present with his people in the person of the risen Christ and in the company of that other comforter, the Holy Spirit.

Of course, there have been temptations to see Jesus in isolation from these four pillars that testify to the action of God in creating a people called by his name. Such moves tend to reduce Jesus to a human hero or a magical figure. The early Christians were surely right in their instinct to preserve the Hebrew scriptures of Israel as Old Testament in the Christian canon. That continuity does not undervalue the finality of the fulfillment in Jesus and the transformation of the signs of the presence of God. Rather the presence of the Hebrew scriptures in the Christian tradition witnesses to the great transformation from those scriptures in the gospel.

Manifest on every page of the New Testament is the claim that God is redemptively present in Jesus. It is emphasized in the gospels; it is the meaning of the central confession of the Christians that Jesus is Lord; and it is why the first Christians so early and so decisively saw Jesus as agent in creation and the cosmos.

The Implications of Crucifixion

That Jesus in his crucifixion is seen as the incarnate Son of God has profound implications for any social expression of Christian faith. Humility immediately becomes a central virtue in the Christian vocabulary. Power is the power of humility and service, of love, and testimony to the truth of

Jesus. It is hard to imagine a more profound subversion of any imperial, coercive notion of power. Thus, belief in God as almighty as set out in the Apostles' Creed is not belief in God who is more powerful than other potentates in the same sense in which they are powerful. While we might use imperial images for the sovereignty of God, those images only point to a reality that goes beyond the categories of these images. The old hymn which spoke of wreaths of empire meeting upon his brow cannot mean that the lordship of God is a lordship just like that of the empires known to the hymn writer but somehow bigger and better. The sovereign power of God is always to be imagined from that lordship in the crucifixion. Jesus put in stark contrast the greatness of the lords of the Gentiles (they make their subjects feel the weight of their authority) and the greatness that is to pertain among the disciples (they are to serve even as the Son of Man serves and gave his life as a ransom for others) (Mark 10:42–45).

Crucifixion also implies the priority of love as shown in Jesus. When he bids farewell to his disciples in John's gospel, he gives them a new commandment: that they love one another even as he has loved them. Indeed this is the love that exists between the Father and the Son that is now to be given in the word of Jesus to the disciples. Jesus's prayer in John 17 that the disciples "might be one as the Father and the Son are one" is glossed a few verses later in terms of the love that exists between the Father and the Son. "Righteous Father, the world does not know you but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (John 17:25–26).

The unity in this passage is the love between Jesus and the Father. It is not that there is a unity, some kind of separate comity within which love is shown. It is that the term unity is defined by this love of the Father and of Jesus. To speak, then, of the unity of the disciples is not to speak of comity, or agreement, or coherence, or a state or arrangement. It is to say that they love one another.

The centrality of love can be seen also in the argument Paul uses with the Corinthians to persuade them to order their assemblies in a manner that more closely reflects Christian values and aspirations. There had been some disorder in the Corinthians' church and that disorder had involved a lack of respect for some in the gathering. Given the social diversity of Corinth and the apparent social diversity of the Corinthian church, it is probable that there is social discrimination at work here. Paul first

deploys an argument using a body image to suggest that each member has a role to play and that respect is due to all, especially those who might in other circumstances be thought less worthy of esteem. Furthermore, in the image Paul employs, these different contributions are actually to be understood as gifts from God. They are to be respected as signs of the presence of the risen Christ.³ The image is primarily a snapshot. In that sense it fails to provide for the dynamic element in the presence of Christ in the church. By its very nature the image fails to allow for the kind of movement implied in Paul's exhortation at the end of the chapter to seek the higher gifts.

So Paul offers a "more excellent way" of understanding how to act in this situation. Christians are to act on the basis of love, the core value of the gospel. The various possible contributions are repeated in relation to love. It is love that validates them and makes it possible to see them as gifts from God.

If I speak with the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. (1 Cor 13:1-9)

It is the presence of God in the community that will be the basis for an orderly congregational life. Why? Because the essential exemplification of that presence is love.

This is a remarkable observation. Paul does not settle a question of disorder or division with a form of order or an organizational structure. Rather he underlines the diversity of contribution by naming it as a gift

3. See the comments he makes in regard to prophecy in the church in 1 Cor 14:20-26.

from the risen Christ. He leaves open the full effect of that variety according to the core principle of love. Love is more abiding even than faith and hope, and it is certainly more fundamental than arrangements of order. This is extraordinarily high risk in group dynamic terms. In theological terms, it is a stunning assertion of confidence in the creative ordering of divine presence.

A similar point can be seen in the way Paul encourages the Philippians to resolve their conflicts. They are to have the mind of Christ. This is immediately elaborated in terms of crucifixion and humility. It is a point of exegetical debate as to whether this passage implies that God's exaltation of the crucified Jesus is a reference to his resurrection and that the humility was exercised with a view to, or in the light of, a later vindication. I take the view that the exaltation is the glory of the name of Jesus as the suffering crucified one and that the glory of Jesus is thus seen in his humility and crucifixion. In other words the passage is radically re-defining the meaning of glory in terms of crucifixion and humility, rather than the crucifixion and resurrection being described simply in existing categories.⁴ Suffering and humility are central to Paul's idea of glory.

Again we notice in this passage that the basis upon which the Philippians are to work out their salvation is the dynamic presence of God, not some formal criteria. Certainly they had the model of the "mind" which was in Christ from Phil 2:5–11. However, the passage continues with the following argument:

Therefore my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.
(Phil 2:12–14)

The essential motivation for the Philippians is that God is at work in them. The basis of their life commitment and effort is cooperating with the immanent divine in their lives.

4. An older very useful essay on this exegetical question is Moule, "Further Reflexions on Philippians 2:1–11." See also Martin, *Carmen Christi*.

Implications of the Personal and Universal Character of the Gospel

Every page of the New Testament announces the great transition to a gospel that is to be preached universally and to be received by all without distinction. Paul's commission in Acts to go to the Gentiles is a story of a dramatic role reversal for a Jewish zealot (Acts 9:1–25). Peter's vision in Acts 10, and its recounting to the elders of the church in Jerusalem, is a story of prejudice overcome by divine warrant.⁵ Paul's missionary journeys emanating from Antioch are an extension of the movement of the story of Acts in circling out from Jerusalem. These circular movements conclude with the presence of the gospel in Rome, the heart of the Mediterranean world's imperial life.⁶ Even within the gospels there are hints of this universal application of the new Christian gospel.⁷

This universal reach is not simply geographic. It is also social. Indeed this gospel is to be brought to all humanity regardless of social distinctions. It is a gospel for prisoners, jailers, magistrates, philosophers, masters, slaves, men, and women. No distinction or barrier can affect the reach of this gospel. It is universal, it is for all.

Furthermore the claims of this gospel are seen to affect the whole of life for those who respond. Such people are new born (John 3); they are liberated (Gal 5), and enslaved (Rom 6). Almost the whole content of Paul's letters, which constitute nearly a quarter of the material in the New Testament, is concerned with working out the implications of responding to the gospel. This gospel calls for an individual personal response within the social interactions and everyday exchanges of the Christian. This personal response is set within interactions of a church community which itself is where the gospel is being lived out and is the arena of the presence

5. See Acts 10:1–11:18. The conclusion to the story is that “God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

6. Paul planned to go on from Rome to Spain (Rom 16:15–28) and this is referred to in the late first century letter *1 Clement* v. 5–7, and also in Muratorian Canon, probably to be dated around AD 170.

7. There are obvious texts, such as the great commission in Matt 28:18–20, the instruction in Mark 16:7 to the disciples to go to Galilee, and the commission in Luke 24:44–52. But there are other pointers to the reach of God's redemptive providence to the nations. See Wilson, *Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*; Stenschke, *Luke's Portrait of Gentiles*; Olmstead, *Matthew's Trilogy of Parables*; and Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles*.

of the risen Christ. Personal does not mean private. It means the whole of life is caught up in and transformed by the power of the gospel.

The struggle of the early Christian churches was how this actually took place. In the hands of Paul this gospel did not translate into a political revolution. It did not offer a political program. But it did imply a new view of the human condition and a new set of values which Christian churches were called upon to manifest in their own particular circumstances. In that sense it was subversive.

Take the example of family structures and obligations. The gospels contain remarks from Jesus which are positively subversive of existing family obligations. Disciples are to love Jesus more than father or mother. Jesus acknowledges no family other than those who hear his word and follow him (Matt 12:49). Indeed “whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt 10:37). Of course, he repeats the law that his hearers should honor their mother and father, and he chides the temple authorities for their corruption of the temple offerings system at the expense of parental obligations and he repeats a restrained view on divorce.⁸ But the preservation in the gospels of these apparently harsh sayings from Jesus serves to underline the apostolic realization that commitment to Jesus supervenes all other obligations, even family priorities that had been enshrined in the Law of Moses.

In a gentile environment we can see a process of pragmatic adaptation by Christians to the existing social realities. A view about Christian family obligations arose only when those with social power in the current familial structure had become Christians. Converted heads of families were then able to influence a different set of family obligations by giving up power. No one is encouraged to take political or social power in these New Testament documents. Rather they are encouraged to wait with patience and to submit in humility. They are encouraged to persuade family members by godly living. This was to be achieved by living out the moral implications of the gospel, principally in the expression of humility and love.

The gospel is to be expressed in every facet of every day living. This means inevitably that differences may well emerge in different social settings. A vivid example is the confrontation between Paul and Peter over

8. See the implicit interpretation of Deut 24:1–4 in Matt 19:8, and the reports of Jesus’s words in Matt 5:31–32, 19:3–12, Mark 10:2–12 and Luke 16:18.

the issue of fellowship at meals between Jews and Gentiles.⁹ In a mixed group Paul cannot envisage the possibility of separate dining. The obligations of open Christian fellowship must take priority over customs drawn from their previous life, even when those customs had the sanction of the Jewish law. What might otherwise be the case in groupings which were essentially Jewish or essentially Gentile is precisely the issue raised at the Council of Jerusalem and resolved on a practical and pragmatic basis. Habits from past experience, even habits enshrined in the Law of Moses, are eclipsed by the priority of respect and acceptance within the Christian community.

Within the Christian community there are no fundamental distinctions. Where there had apparently been some kind of religio-ethnic conflict, Paul is quite explicit as to the way forward. In Gal 3:26, he says:

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. 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.

Similarly in Ephesians we are presented with a vision of a new humanity embracing all. That some were “circumcised” and some were “uncircumcised” (that is, Jews and Gentiles) is clear and readily recognized in Ephesians 2. Whereas there had been a great dividing wall between these two, Christ has abolished the law that “he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace” (Eph 2:15).

This dual character of the new faith; that it was universally available and that it called for a comprehensive response in the particular circumstances of time and place meant that the way the gospel was expressed would inevitably vary according to locality and context.

Expressing the Faith in Different Ways

As the Christian gospel traversed the Mediterranean world it crossed language and cultural borders. It is not surprising that the early Christians came to express their faith in different ways which went well beyond simply different languages. We can see this process had already commenced in the letters of Paul. He wrote to people in significantly different

9. Gal 2:11–14.

social, ethnic and political circumstances. He himself was a Jew with a Jewish education and knowledge of Graeco-Roman culture. One of the interesting examples of the church embracing cross cultural concepts is that of adoption. There is no provision for individual adoption in the Old Testament. Rather the kinship connections and their implied obligations were thought to deal with the situations of loss or need that might arise. On the other hand, adoption was widely used in both Greek and Roman society and there was a clear and detailed set of procedures for effecting an adoption. Such adoption was regularly used to secure an heir and the legal procedures for adoption often included the making of a will.¹⁰

Paul is the only New Testament writer to use the language of adoption (*huiiothesia*). He uses the terms to emphasize the “bringing to sonship” by the express and deliberate act of God. Thus, in Rom 9:4 Paul says that his kindred according to the flesh are Israelites and to them belong the privileges God has given them, including “adoption”, the law covenants and glory.¹¹ Adoption is here used of God’s action in calling Israel as a people. Paul’s general usage moves in a more individual direction in line with the meaning in the Graeco-Roman world.

In Gal 4:5 receiving sonship is equivalent to liberation from the law. In Romans 8 it is the spirit of sonship as distinct from the spirit of bondage that governs the life of the community. While the terms used may be the same in these passages and the general point about personal relationship with God is broadly the same, the precise nuances of the word usage and their semantic profile is discernibly different and significant in being so.

The point I want to highlight is that Paul employs a largely technical term drawn from the cultural context in which he was working in order to express something quite fundamental about the Christian gospel. Furthermore the imagery is used somewhat differently in each case. In Galatians and Romans the terminology points to different things and the cultural significance of the terms is used differently in each letter. This is probably not so much because of the different social or audience contexts as the different argumentative purposes in which Paul was engaged in each case. This is not a novel point. It is widely recognized in New Testament scholarship and in endless commentaries on the text of the

10. See Gardner, *Family and Familia*.

11. The allusion here is clearly to the repeated declaration in the Old Testament that God makes Israel his son as if by adoption. See Exod 4:22, Isa 1:2f., Jer 3:19, Hos 11:1.

New Testament. However, the significance for understanding Paul's flexible way of expressing the meaning of the gospel is not so often noticed. It is clear that Paul uses language and ideas in different contexts in different ways. Such key terms in Paul's letters as freedom, slavery, knowledge and justification are used with different connotations and to different effect in the different letters in which they are used.¹² Furthermore in Romans, a single document in which the audience is not a variable, a continuous theme of God's relationship to humanity and to individuals is sustained using different terms.¹³

Today we might be inclined to label this "a process of enculturation." In many respects this would not be unfair. What it implies, however, for the present purpose, is that Christians in different contexts not only could express themselves differently but given the obligation to testify to their faith where they were located, they were obliged to do so.

Thus, at the very heart of the apostolic mission is a principle of diversity in relation to the one true gospel. Clearly the language of the Christian gospel is not univocal.

Paul's Churches Varied in Style and Character

It is not surprising to find similar differences in the style and character of the communities which emerged from the preaching of this gospel. One might think that the mission to the circumcised of Peter, or James or John might have led to communities with different habits and styles from those which resulted from the mission of Paul to the Gentiles. We do

12. See Kaye, "To the Romans and Others' Revisited."

13. A number of classical Lutheran interpretations of Romans set the opening five chapters as the foundation of the whole and despite the fact that the language of justification disappears from the text, the doctrine needs to be taken into the rest of the letter as the key heuristic theme. Schwetizer, *Mysticism of Paul*, took this a step further and argued that the disappearance of the justification terms after chapter five indicated that the Paul had set this doctrine aside and moved to a more useful doctrine of the mystical being in Christ. A more reasonable interpretation of the linguistic evidence is that the underlying theme of the letter is more general and these different linguistic expressions are used as being appropriate to the point that has been reached in the development of the argument. This has been a subject of immense study because of the importance of Romans in Christian history and the reasonably opaque character of the evidence from the perspective of later commentators. See for example, Campbell, *Paul's Gospel*; Donfried, *Romans Debate*; Greenman and Larsen, *Reading Romans*; Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*; and Kaye, *Argument of Romans*. For specific interpretative approaches, see also Grieb, *Story of Romans*.

not really know if this was so. However, it is clear from Paul's letters that the Pauline churches were themselves different in many respects. While it is undoubtedly the case that the Acts of the Apostles glosses over some things, and is selective in what it records, nonetheless the basic information about the social character and context of the Pauline churches is reliable enough to draw some conclusions in conjunction with material from his letters.¹⁴ Those differences arose in large part because of the different circumstances in which they were located, the different stories of their founding and early life and the different challenges which they faced.

The Philippian Christians seem to have been gathered in house groups. We do not have any suggestion from Philippians that they were a single assembly. Indeed they are not addressed by Paul as a "church," or *ekklesia*. Acts seems to suggest that the leading people in this Christian group were socially well-placed. Furthermore when Paul left them he, and by inference also the Philippians Christians, were publicly vindicated. This social structure may well explain the pattern of conflict reported in Paul's letter. It fits the more intractable character of inter-group differences, which may also account for the more extreme arguments for agreement and solidarity in the letter.¹⁵

Thessalonica was an altogether different situation. The social context was hostile and the apostles left under a cloud. Paul obviously worried about them and his letters indicate a more agitated single Christian group. In this hostile environment the Thessalonian church had taken the very early step of forming a welfare system for those of their number who had suffered in some way and were in need of support.¹⁶

Corinth was much more complex than either of these two locations. There were divisions within the church of social rank and wealth as well as of ethnic background. They had assemblies although they appear not to have been quite what Paul wanted and they seem to have had one comprehensive assembly.¹⁷

The differences between these Christian communities show that Paul did not have a single organizational pattern for the churches he founded.

14. For reviews of the debate, see Green and McKeever, *Luke-Acts and New Testament Historiography*; and Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*.

15. The most obvious case is Philippians 2, but see also the exceptional naming of offenders at Phil 4:2.

16. See 2 Thess 3:10f.; 1 Thess 5:14.

17. See the extensive discussion in Witherington, *Conflict and Community*.

He was not operating some kind of franchise. Rather he seems to operate on a more open and dynamic basis and to have a high level of reliance on the ordering of the community life that will come from the active presence in the community of the same risen Christ and the same Holy Spirit.

The Acts of the Apostles reports that the style and shape of community life in Jerusalem and Antioch were different again. Jerusalem appears to have elders in fairly secure roles, to have taken over a Jewish pattern of community welfare and to have conducted an experiment in common property, which does not seem to have lasted. There seem to have been Jewish Christians who differed among themselves as to significance of the practice of the Jewish law.¹⁸ In Antioch they appear to have ecstatic prophets whose contribution to the life of the community is generally accepted. They operate in a Greek environment and are publicly known as Christ's people, "Christians." They also maintain connections with the Jerusalem church and sponsor a variety of mission journeys.¹⁹

While all these church communities are manifestly different, it is also clear that these different church communities are in regular contact with each other and soon develop some patterns of interaction.

We observe in early Christianity that existing social connections and priorities are in a state of flux and are being changed. The absolute claims of Jesus's lordship cut across existing patterns of belonging which have previously provided a basis for social and personal order. The immediate result is to introduce new patterns of diversity and difference within the newly constituted community of the churches. The early Christian reality was that the gospel, universal in its scope and address and yet demanding a personal and living response, laid the foundations of a rich profusion of local diversity and cosmic belonging.

It is salutary to observe that the New Testament evidence shows clearly that the issues of diversity and connectedness facing the earliest Christians resonate clearly with the present challenges facing Anglicans world wide. Every time the gospel crosses a social or cultural border and claims faithfulness to Christ in that new situation, it inevitably extends the diversity apparent within the church.

While some of the factors creating conflict among Anglicans are specific to this moment in human history, it is also quite clear that diver-

18. See for example Acts 11 and 15.

19. See Acts 13:14.

sity within the Christian church not only emerged very early, but that this diversity was created by the very dynamics and character of the gospel itself. Or, to put it another way, and to return to my opening proposition, the trouble arises because we believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the incarnate Son of God. More than that, the presence of diversity in these Christian traditions unavoidably gave rise to local traditions and thus in time to sub-traditions within Christianity. Those same local traditions also pointed to the universal Lordship of Christ and to the universal extent of the invitation in the gospel. These two elements in Christianity have meant that Christians have faced a continuing struggle to sustain a creative dynamic between the personal experience of the gospel on the one hand, and on the other the universal reach of the gospel. That is the underlying issue in the present Anglican crisis.

SAMPLE