

My Church, Your Church, Our Church: *Unity in the Spirit* | BY ROBERT PAUL PAPPAS

The church sits upon a ragged precipice, a citadel of light to the weary and despondent pilgrim. Her bright beams expose the path traversing the blighted valley of sin and temptation. She is refreshment to the hungering and thirsting masses; she is life to the diseased and dying; she is hope to the discouraged and discontented. The church is many things to many people. Her forms and traditions, her dogmas and creeds, her mission and sacred objectives, her symbols and imageries, however noble and self-sacrificing, often supersede the passion of her delight—a risen Savior. At what point does our formulation of the church become an idolatrous foray into religious jargon? Day after day Jesus Christ taught in the hallowed precincts of the Jewish temple—“but his own did not receive him” (John 1:11, *NIV*).

How did the apostle Paul cut through the ecclesiastical red tape and maintain a viable focus amidst adverse circumstances? The early Christian sect’s most noble defender in the epistle to the Galatians declares that Christ, the object and essence of salvation, is the *desire of ages*—whom neither dogma nor creed can supplement. The glorious cross illuminates our dull senses and reminds us that the gospel is summarized in the one person—Jesus Christ. Yet Paul redefines the parameters of this liberating faith by cutting through the counter-productive norms in Roman society. Rome was a product of its time—its unremitting civic tradition and cultic constraints, its irreverent regard for life, and above all else its structured caste system. Nevertheless, hearts were searching for dignity and self-worth.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is about transformed relationships. Paul declared, “There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for we are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal

3:28). The transforming power of the Apostle Paul’s profession of faith recorded in Galatians 3:28 is commonly referred to as the *Magna Carta of a New Humanity*. The most fundamental power of a grass-roots movement is its ability to convey self-worth. The most fundamental power of witness among church members is unity *in Christ*. Paul’s social mandate is valid in both ancient and modern societies—how far have we really come?

There is Neither Jew or Greek

Racism is a social contaminant, a public cancer, a collective malignancy that deprives humanity of its re-creative autonomy. Racism is not a social disorder; rather, it is an intrinsic, carnal disorder that can express itself in many shapes and forms. It was the cross of Christ (Eph. 2:13, 14), the centric and unifying element of his meritorious death, which broke the “middle wall of partitions” of ethnic divisions represented by the diverse philosophic entanglements of Jewish and Greek thought. Nationalism, legalism, and spiritual pride inhibited early Christian development in the newly formed church and created a plethora of social issues, in contrast to the social equality *in Christ* which permeated Pauline thought (1 Cor. 12:13; Col. 3:11). Richard N. Longenecker, among other scholars, asserts that Galatians 3:28 was a “baptismal confession” that designated death to the old way of life (Rm. 6:6; Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9) and transformed social relationships covering “in embryonic fashion all the essential relationships of humanity.”¹ The power of Christ’s redeeming grace is an introspective social dynamic. The ramifications of the gospel affect both the believer’s interpersonal and social orientations. Udo Schnelle points out, “With the expression [in Christ] Paul unites the vertical and the horizontal realms: from communion with Christ (cf. Gal. 3:27)

grows a new *communitas* of baptized believers that now transcends fundamental gender, ethnic, and social alternatives (Gal. 3:28; 1 Cor. 12:13).”²

What the Stoics and other philosophic humanists envisioned, Christianity was able to deliver by recognizing that change begins with the individual and then permeates the community. Paul never challenged the social inadequacies or atrocities of the Roman Empire. Unlike our modern-day social gospel reformists, Paul encouraged cooperation with the governing authorities despite mounting antagonism and persecution against the early church. Paul specified that the cross of Christ “abolished the laws and commandments in decrees” (Eph. 2:15), against what? Any theory, any theology, and philosophic supposition, any socio-political misconception which undermined the redemptive power of Christ’s sacrifice and *church unity*, was emphatically condemned by the apostle (Gal. 2:11–14). What the New Testament supported in general, Paul articulated in particular—the law of love was the binding force in the newly formed church, but it is the power of the cross, the Spirit-filled life *in Christ*, enunciated by Paul, which ultimately unites diverse cultures in the Christian community (Gal. 2:15b–16; 1 Tim. 4:7).

The first step in fostering positive relationships in the early Christian community was to see past and look beyond color, ethnic traditions and linguistic divisions to the surpassing worth, the all-inclusive grace of God in Christ Jesus. Paul’s emphasis is an unremitting, progressive dynamic which corrected the intrinsic disorder of racism in the hope of adjusting social mindsets and eventually civic institutions to provide the rights of humanity to all classes of people.

There is Neither Slave or Free

Slavery was a universal institution in the ancient world. Paul Louis reiterates that “slavery is the basis of the whole economic system in the States of antiquity.”³ The conquered had no rights. The life of the slave was precarious, very much dependent upon the disposition of one’s master. Some masters were deeply attached to their slaves (Matt. 8: 5–13), but this was the exception to the rule. Slaves were considered “merely a thing” (*res*), “a mortal object” (*res mortale*), simply “chattel” (*mancipium*), not a person, and had no personal or human rights.⁴ The ancient Greek mindset divided the masses into classes

such as free or slave, Greek or barbarian, wise or foolish, and male or female. What the Greeks developed, the Romans perfected in a complex web of intricate laws regulating the various nuances of human relationships in Roman society.

The apostle Paul understood the Jewish slave heritage in the land of Egypt (Ex. 1:8–22). The Old Testament festivals were a celebration and solemn reminder of God’s deliverance of Israel from Egyptian oppression. The annual celebrations commemorating Israel’s libera-



The apostle Paul by El Greco

tion from foreign domination to statehood were utilized to Paul’s advantage when emphasizing the “slave” imagery in reference to righteousness and sin (Rom. 6:6–14). The Pauline dualism contrasting *slaves of sin* to *slaves of righteousness* (Rom. 6:17, 18) utilizes powerful imagery—to be a slave of sin is alienation from God and ultimately death; whereas, a slave of righteousness enjoys true freedom and eternal life. True Christian freedom is direct and equal access, regardless of one’s social

status, through faith in the merits of Christ—an all-inclusive acceptance and status as a son and daughter of God (1 John 3:1).

The home church provided a unique environment in which to nurture and develop a sense of community, focusing on Christ as the head of the church (Eph. 5:23; Col. 1:18). The influences of the early Christian community eventually permeated social values. Theo Preiss articulates the point, “The Gospel penetrates systems and civilizations but is never identified with them. In particular it is more realistic than all idealism and all so-called political realisms, for it attacks the heart of the problems, the personal center and personal relationships.”⁵ It was within the home church that all artificial social barriers and fabricated legal norms were subjugated to the gospel of Christ. Death to the old way of life also included death to those social norms that caused dissension within the Christian community. Paul moves on to the foundational unit in Roman society, the *familia*, “household,” to complete his social mandate *in Christ* in order to establish unity among the early Christian community.

There is Neither Male or Female

In the ancient Greco-Roman world divisions between classes constituted a natural social paradigm. While Roman institutions resembled her Greek rivals, the Roman passion for law developed an intricate web of jurisprudence which analyzed every legal aspect of human relationships. The Romans considered *libertas* (freedom) as “the most fundamental ‘divide’ in determining the legal status of an individual,” and *civitas* (citizenship), specifically Roman citizenship, as the next most fundamental, followed by the *familia* (household), of which the *pater familias* (male head of the household) exercised complete legal authority. The Roman tradition considered the family as the most essential “building block of the Roman state, since, metaphorically, the *familia* is often misunderstood as the state in miniature.” The “adult males are accorded the highest civil status, and they also predominate in legal sources, reflecting, obviously, a society that is largely male-dominated.”⁶

The “male head” maintained complete legal authority over his male descendants, wife, daughters, adopted children, and slaves. The wife was subjugated to a male, legal guardian throughout her entire life. However, a woman of Roman citizenship was under the legal

guardianship of her father, and after his death, his male descendants, not her husband's. Roman law prescribed the legal status of the male and female marriage arrangement with regard to the status of their respective marriage partner. The wife was excluded from political and military pursuits, and her legal rights were tightly regulated. Even if she had inherited money or wealth, her assets were regulated by the man who had been selected as her legal guardian.

Naturally, there was an exception to the rule; since Rome was a warfare state, the men were often away fighting their wars for state and glory, which necessitated among the elite women the responsibility of “making major decisions within family circles, especially decisions concerning the education, marital arrangements, and political careers of both their own children and the offspring of their female and male siblings.”⁷ Ironically, the wars of Rome were costly. Since women were excluded from military service, it provided opportunities out of necessity to participate in family businesses and social responsibilities solely designated for the *pater familias*—this situation was the exception to the rule. Rome was a patriarchy—its male-dominated society extended from the household to the senate and inherently the emperor. It is within this context that the Pauline social mandate “neither male nor female” reverberates with the progressive power for change and Imperial Roman suspicions.

Paul once again reaffirms in a gender specific context that both male and female have equal access to the grace of God through the merits of Christ and focuses on God's love as the centric foundation of family unity (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 5:21–33; 6:1–4). The submissive relationship between husband and wife is mutual as both look to Christ as the head of the family circle and church. Nonetheless, the submissive relationship of the wife to her husband “was called for, not because it was conventional for wives in Greco-Roman society, but because it was part and parcel of the way in which they were to serve the Lord.”⁸ It is the law of love rather than Roman patriarchal and ancestral traditions that regulated the Christian household (1 Cor. 13:4–7).

The Pauline social mandate was revolutionary without the revolutions through the subtle influences of God's transforming grace. Roman legal science, like its modern counterpart, was overshadowed by the mundane responsibilities of life. However, the attractive, liberating social

features of the early Christian community were counter-balanced by intense, intermittent persecution. This separated the curious adventurer from the genuine, professed Christian. The Christian sect grew and solidified itself in the social strata of Rome and inevitably redefined the socio-political parameters in contemporary society.

The New Humanity, and the Roman State

While the “male head of the household” was the basic element in society that solidified the ancient, religious cult and traditional values of Rome on one hand, Caesar-worship was the expressed *badge of loyalty* to certify the Roman subject’s allegiance to the state. Initially, it was less of a religion and more of a *litmus test* of national patriotism to ensure a political bond of cosmopolitan uniformity.⁹

Ancient Rome was a coherent, societal blend of paternal traditional values undergirded by a sophisticated jurisprudence and solidified by an undivided loyalty to a deified Caesar, who was in essence the Imperial State in verity. The Roman populace could worship any number of mystery cults or seek other philosophic avenues to placate their inner psyche, but Caesar-worship was a standardized state requirement which was non-negotiable. The social values, the civil and military traditions of imperial Rome conflicted with all that early Christianity espoused and ultimately were perceived by Rome as a threat to the state because of the Christian community’s social mandates and uncompromising loyalty to their Savior/God Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The church as a citadel of righteousness is a medieval concept, unlike Paul’s paradigm which focuses on the meritorious assets of Christ’s righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30–31). The biblical church is Christ-centric. The gospel of Christ is a transforming agent that changes lives, heals ethnic divisions, and strengthens human relationships. However, like the Jews of old who commended the law and the prophets and exalted in pomp and ceremony, while oblivious to the presence of Jesus Christ—we too, can overlook the obvious—that the gospel of Christ is a social as well as a moral directive. Ultimately, our relationship with each other reflects the quality of relationship we have *in Christ*.

“Caste is hateful to God.”¹⁰ Like a cancer it destroys

church unity and witness. It disguises itself in countless shapes and forms. None are immune to its devastating effects. It is an expression of power and manipulation in the guise of religious piety. It is a form of control and authority to maintain ethnic divisions. It is the subtle, pastoral power alliances, the nepotism and cronyism and the subsequent blinded-eye to unethical behavior. It is in many cases a misinterpretation and misapplication of corporate management directives which emphasize economic assets, dollar per conversion, as a requisite of leadership, rather than mature Christian character. How far have we really come?

If we can learn a lesson from Rwanda, it would be this: it is the centric power of the cross expressed in the love of God that unites the divided, that heals racial tensions. My church, your church, is our church—it is the Almighty God’s church, the true head of the body *in Christ*. ■

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