

## Paul and the Church: The Relevance of Paul's Ecclesiology in India

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**Abstract:** In this exploratory article the author deals with the ecclesiology of Paul and its relevance for India. Today we are witnessing in our country a scenario where basically two kinds of politics are at play: the politics of division and the politics of unity. The former is by far the more popular even in this age of growing hate and terror campaigns spreading in many parts of the country. The politics of division seeks to form small configurations of caste, language and religion, the better to appeal to particularist identities for vested interests. Aggressive claims of dominant castes and disastrous conflicts resulting from cultural and religious differences are fomenting worldviews of exclusivism and distrust, with transcendent values giving way to pragmatic ones. There is also a new social configuration emerging, due to large-scale migration, unprecedented xenophobia, fundamentalism and terrorism.

In this context, the author opined that an examination of Paul's understanding of *Ekklesia*, of the local ecclesiologies that he developed and his theology of 'communio' will offer significant insights for questions on identity, unity and a relevant way of being church today in pluralistic India.

**Keywords:** *Ekklesia*, theology of 'communio,' pluralism, Church of God, Church leadership.

### Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is witnessing an unprecedented invasion of pluralism in every area of life. Post-modern philosophy has consciously withstood the postulate of unity, opting for pluralism in which universal and absolute values and norms simply do not exist.

But what we are witnessing in our country today is a scenario where basically two kinds of politics are at play: the politics of division and the politics of unity. The former is by far the more popular, writes the columnist of *Times of India* (September 28, 2008), Shashi Tharoor in this age of growing hate and terror campaigns spreading in many parts of the country. The politics of division seeks to form small configurations of caste, language and religion, the better to appeal to particularist identities for vested interests. Aggressive claims of dominant castes and disastrous conflicts resulting from cultural and religious differences are fomenting worldviews of exclusivism and distrust, with transcendent values giving way to pragmatic ones. There is also a new social configuration emerging, due to large-scale migration, unprecedented xenophobia, fundamentalism and terrorism.

The politics of division seeking to form configurations of caste, language, rite and ethnicity has also invaded many churches in India. Fresh challenges to the church are advanced by India's complex realities – with its diverse mosaic of peoples and languages, castes and creeds. Such exuberant diversity is often fertile ground to sow the seed of division and conflict. Domineering tendencies of some local churches or groups over others have been cause for undesirable dissonance concerning how the church should essentially be in India.

In a circular sent on 17 August, 2008, the Tamil Nadu Bishops' Council has urged Catholics "to eliminate caste-based inequalities so as to help people of low-caste origin and former untouchables fully participate in church life. The bishops want the caste-based seating in churches and separate burial grounds to end, Dalit children to serve Mass and festival processions to enter Dalit localities. The prelates also wish that Dalits should participate and lead in parish councils." [1] Concerns such as these need the urgent attention of any theological discourse engaged in constructing a relevant self-understanding of the church in India. In this context, it is a misnomer to speak of one Indian church. What we can perhaps envision is a communion of local churches in India, a communion that will welcome and recognize the distinct identity of each linguistic, ethnic, caste and ritual group, encourage fellowship and mutual support,

and strengthen a coordinated commitment to our prophetic presence in India.

Two thousand years ago, Paul also encountered situations of diversity and dissension in his mission-field. Agitators with similar strategies of the politics of division and unity - "those who unsettle you" (Gal. 5:12), "some who are confusing you" (Gal.1:7; 5:10) or with differing claims of "I belong to Paul", "I belong to Apollos" (1Cor.1: 10-12) disturbed the unity of the early Christian communities. In such situations Paul had to address conflicting local issues that threatened communion within and among the churches of his time. An examination of Paul's understanding of *Ekklesia*, of the local ecclesiologies that he developed and his theology of 'communio' will offer significant insights for questions on identity, unity and a relevant way of being church today in pluralistic India.

## **1. Paul's Theology of the Church**

Paul accepted Jewish ideas into his theology when he found that they could be assimilated into a Christian synthesis. The Jewish idea of 'God's people' is basic to Paul's theology of the church. Paul recognized Christians as God's true people, the real heirs of the privileges such as the covenant and promises, their theocratic constitution, their glory and dignity as children of God. Every *kairos* event of the Israelites prefigured the Church of God, the new Israel. In this Church of God the Christ-event unifies all Christians as God's assembly of believers, and embraces the whole body of Christians.

### **1.1. 'Church of God' in Paul's writings: particular and universal**

In Pauline theology, a church is the assembly of Christians, the bringing together in act of the local church. For Paul the local gathering of Christians is the focus of his kerygmatic mission as Christians did not always come together in a full gathering but formed and met in small groups. He frequently uses *ekklesia* for the community in a particular locus, such as Christians gathered in the house churches of Prisca and Aquila (Rom.16:3), Nympha (Col. 4:15) and that of Philemon (Philem. 2)[2]; in cities where Paul addresses

the church of God at Corinth (1Cor. 1:2; 2:Cor.1:2) and the church of the Thessalonians (1Thes. 1:1; 2Thes. 1:1), and in the wider region of Galatia (Gal. 1:2), Judea (Gal. 1:22) and Asia (1Cor. 16:19; Rev. 1:4, 11). *Ekklesia* may also designate congregations of a common racial and cultural origin, such as 'the Churches of the Gentiles' (Rom 16:4). In all these instances *Ekklesia* refers to a community of believing Christians gathered together in a particular place to praise God and to break Bread and the Word.

The particularity of the church – whether the term is used in the singular or plural – is implied in Paul's letters.[3] This is evident in the phrase *te ouse en korintho* which means the church of the particular place at Corinth (1Cor. 1:2), or when Paul speaks to the Romans of the church at Cenchreae (Rom. 16:1). But the attribution 'local' in Gal. 1:13f and 1Cor.15:9, where Paul speaks of "persecuting the Church of God" has been questioned, for here he seems to imply the church as a whole. However, the context suggests otherwise. Paul has the community of Jerusalem in mind when he speaks of "surpassing many of his fellow Jews in zeal for his religion" (Gal. 1:14), and later when he explicitly mentions "the Churches of Christ in Judea" which do not recognize him on his return (Gal. 1:22). Similarly, Paul's reference to Cephas, James and the Twelve, in 1 Cor. 15:5-9 also implies the Jerusalem milieu.[4] Two other instances of Paul's use of the singular 'Church of God', in 1Cor 10:32 and 11:17-22 also suggest the context of a particular assembly of Christians involved in abuses with respect to liturgical practices and the celebration of the Lord's Supper within their local community.

When Paul uses the phrase 'Churches of God' in the plural, it takes on a more concrete local nuance. It refers to several assemblies. 1Thes. 2:14, for instance, conveys the idea of local churches of God in Judea, which the Thessalonians are urged to imitate. Its parallel use in 2 Thes. 1:4 that speaks of persecutions and tribulations confronting the Thessalonians also implies that the 'Churches of God' are the local communities in Judea (Gal. 1:22). Moreover, in the expression 'the Churches of Galatia' (Gal.1:2), Paul indicates that it is possible to find more than one church in a given region, and that some sort of communication existed among them.

The idea of the 'local church' is also present when Paul, appealing to tradition, exhorts the women assembled at public worship to keep their heads covered since "we have no such custom (of uncovered heads) nor have the Churches of God" (1Cor. 11:16), and to keep silence "as do all the Churches of the saints" (1Cor. 14:33). Any question on preserving traditions would obviously be referred to the original communities of Palestine.[5]

In the above instances Paul appears to read into the expression 'Church / Churches of God' that the one church of God comes into being in and through the local churches (see LG 26). However, one cannot overlook the implied universal element of the 'Church of God'. This is particularly evident in the deutero-Pauline letters where "the Church as a whole, the universal church, not the local church, is in view." [6] Whether it is used in the singular or plural, the expression 'Church of God' in Paul's letters implies both universality and particularity of the church, none having precedence. Any theory that gives priority to either the local or universal church runs the risk of distorting the Pauline understanding of the 'Church of God'.

An analysis of the term *ekklesia* in Paul's letters reveals that the understanding of church in Pauline ecclesiology is analogous.[7] It suggests a gathering of Christians in a house, city, or a collection of churches in a region or the church as a whole. These churches are the historical evidence of the mystery of God in Christ, concretely realized in human communities.

## 2. Paul and Church in the First Century Context

The Pauline letters offers an overview of various approaches used by him to proclaim the Gospel and to establish Christian communities in different contexts, while responding to their distinct concerns and issues. Rediscovery of the relevance of these churches for our times requires a hermeneutic interpretation of the letters. For productive reading and interpretation, hermeneutics must depend on exegesis. It is not possible to arrive at the hermeneutic meaning of the texts without an examination of the 'text meaning'. However, a scientific historical-critical interpretation of selected texts is beyond the scope of this paper. A small attempt is made to relate text meaning with

theological discussions on Paul's ecclesiology since the two are complementary in nature.

I have selected two pertinent situations from the Pauline writings for study of the hermeneutics at work in the proclamation of Christ's message and establishment of churches at Corinth and Galatia because of their relevance for the churches in India.

## **2.1. Church at Corinth: A Polyglot Community[8]**

### **2.1.1. Its complex context**

Strategically located on the Isthmus that linked Achaia to mainland Greece, Corinth could control the land route between north and south as well as the sea route between the East and the West. 'Wealthy Corinth' as the Graeco-Roman city was often called, developed into a flourishing military, commercial and financial centre.[9]

The polyglot Christian community at Corinth included residents of the great city as well as new settlers, mainly freedmen who were formerly slaves from Rome, Greece, Syria, Judea and Egypt (1Cor. 7:20-24). With the huge influx of people from the West and the East, Corinth was a melting pot of Greek religion, philosophy and art, the mystery cults of Egypt and Asia, the Roman cult and culture and the pagan worldview and customs of the Gentile freedmen.[10] The religious spectrum in Corinth was as diverse as the population. The social make-up of the church in Corinth was largely of people of low status (1:26). Besides, as with any other great seaport of the period, Corinth was not without its lurid reputation.

In spite of the unwarranted character of this great metropolis, Paul chose to reincarnate Christianity in Corinth. In this pluralistic setting the Corinthian Christians gradually assumed a new identity based on their own language and ethical guidelines – at times even out of step with orthodox Christian teaching. The Christian message had to penetrate radically to transform their attitudes and way of life to those of Christ.[11]

## 2.1.2. Conflicting State of Affairs

The members of this young church were faced with problems concerning their Corinthian Christian identity. Paul's letters reveal his personal concern and theological conviction in addressing various issues that affected the identity, integrity and unity of this polyglot Christian community.

Internal factions resulting from a questioning of Paul's leadership (1Cor. 1:11; 4:3, 15; 9:1f), privileged treatment afforded to the affluent at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:18-22), exploitation of the poor to the benefit of the wealthy members of the church (1 Cor. 6:1-8), rejection of the Resurrection (15:12) demanded Paul's urgent attention. Other disputes threatening the integrity of the Corinthian community included immoral practices (5: 1-5; 7:1-40; 6:12-20), the attendance of believers at pagan courts (6:1-6) and pagan feasts (10:11-22), and the eating of food offered to idols (8:1-13; 10:23-30) – none of which went unchallenged by Paul.

The wider social setting of Corinth caused Paul to intervene in divisive issues in the Corinthian community. Status and power, for instance, occupied pride of place in the Graeco-Roman society. A small minority which claimed high status based on worldly wisdom, power and noble birth (1Cor. 1:26) polarized the church of Corinth. This elite minority looked down on others of lowly birth or slave origin, or because of gender or occupation.

Paul had also to deal with other socio-cultural issues such as sacrificial meat, veiling and silencing of women, etc. which continued to discredit the young church. A dispute over market-place sacrificial meat (1Cor 8:10) was the result of a clash between the indigent 'weak' and the affluent 'strong', and the conflicting perceptions held by the two groups on eating habits.[12] Paul also strictly prohibited Christians from participating in any meal of an explicitly cultic or idolatrous character (10:1-22). Since it was not the food that destroyed but the idolatry inherent in eating sacrificial food in temples, there was always the risk of converts reverting to idolatry.[13]

### 2.1.3. Re-inculturating the Gospel at Corinth

A city like Corinth could have proved an unsatisfactory milieu for inculturation of the Gospel. However, in spite of the complex and ambiguous social situation, a flourishing church came into being (2 Cor. 3:1). Paul's theological contribution to the local church of Corinth proved an invaluable chapter in the history of the church. He brought the Gospel to bear witness in the marketplace, with the truth of the Gospel tested by the demands and realities of everyday life. Paul evidently did not challenge existing political, economic and social institutions, customs and structures – except when they overtly clashed with Christian belief and conduct.

Since the Corinthians were tending towards positions that could threaten the unity of the church and the integrity of the Gospel itself, Paul had to convince them to change both their theology and conduct. His response to various issues that emerged was mostly in terms of advising or correcting the people with ethical warnings and imperatives, always with the addition of a theological justification.<sup>[14]</sup> He places his theological thinking within a Christological and eschatological framework – focusing on the Christ-event, his death and resurrection and the gift of the Spirit (1 Cor. 6:1-6; 7:29-31; 10:11).

For instance, concerning the question of veiling of women (1 Cor. 11:2-16), traditionally exegetes have conjectured that Paul insisted on maintaining the subordinate role of women, symbolized by the veil in respect of the Jewish patriarchal order in the church.<sup>[15]</sup> While supporting the idea of gender equality (Gal.3:28) on grounds that all forms of discrimination had been eradicated by the Cross, Resurrection and the Holy Spirit, it is more likely that Paul was simply commenting on appropriate behaviour for women and men at public worship. Man's unveiled head was a mark of his freedom, in the image and glory of God (11:7). The veil symbolized the new authority given to woman to pray and prophesy in public worship (11:5), which hitherto had been denied to her.<sup>[16]</sup> The custom of bound-up hair indicated a woman's prophetic-charismatic power, while loose hair had the sinister suggestion of uncleanness and morally lax character, in the Jewish context (cf. Num. 5:18, Lev. 13:45).<sup>[17]</sup> Paul's injunction could have been aimed at playing down



the ecstatic frenzy typical of orgiastic cultic worship. He advanced convincing theological argument for 'proper' hairstyle, as accepted symbolism for women's spiritual power and equality in the Lord. Paul's purpose and arguments were not for the re-enforcement of gender differences, but for order and propriety in the Christian worshipping community.[18]

By virtue of the pluri-religious and cultural context of Corinth, Paul's approach for re-inculturation had to constantly encounter Judaism and other religions. His preaching and argument were totally Christian but he pursued them with sensitive awareness of the environment. He for instance attempted to transform pagan festivals of communion with gods into Christian feasts of communion with the one Lord. Since the church of Corinth was of predominantly Gentile converts, Scripture held priority and was fundamental in Paul's response to social conflicts and to his instructions on ethics. Contrary to Corinthian expectations for eloquent speeches and impressive Gnostic theology he resorted to rhetorical and even aggressive language to communicate the message (1Cor. 3:16; 5:6; 6:2)

Paul's most significant contribution to the faith of the Corinthians was a comprehension of the nature of the church, especially regarding the need for using local phraseology. What was at stake in the Corinthians' theology and conduct was not only the Gospel, but also its tangible presence in the local community of believers. Conscious of a growing rift, Paul tactfully addressed the whole assembly as the 'Church of God in Corinth,' to bring unity in a divided church (1Cor. 1:26-31).

Paul appealed to imagery for defence of the integrity of the local church. He taught that the church is God's temple in Corinth (1 Cor. 3:16-17) where the Holy Spirit abides. Every believer was a sanctuary of the living God, and desecration of that temple through reversion to pagan practices, worldly wisdom, false pride and exploitation of the weak, would result in its destruction (3:17).[19] The need for unity in the church at Corinth was emphasized through the imagery of the Body of Christ (10:17; 11:29; 12:12-26). However, unity does not imply the numbing uniformity as valued by Corinthians (12:15-

20), but unity in diversity as manifested by the various gifts of the Spirit (12:4-11).<sup>[20]</sup>

Furthermore, to establish unity among the churches, Paul launched the project of a collection for the poor in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:26) as an expression of sharing and solidarity. His description of this monetary issue had all the earmarks of church – proclamation, celebration, and the sharing of new life (2 Cor. 9:8-15). The Gospel itself was re-conceived in economic terms (2Cor. 8-9)<sup>[21]</sup> with Paul's intent that the act of collection would encourage communion among the Christians in Corinth and between the Gentile and Jewish churches (Gal. 2:11-21; Rom. 15:31).

## **2.2. Churches in Galatia: Mixed Communities**

### **2.2.1. Occasion and Context**

Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia<sup>[22]</sup> is a short document packed with historical, social and theological material of the highest significance. We are distanced from its creation by two thousand years and by a vast expanse of geographical and cultural space. We shall attempt to read this letter interculturally and rediscover its significance for the many churches in India where mixed communities based on rites, castes, languages, cultures and ethnicity are found.

Paul had preached the good news of salvation available in Christ in Galatia, and founded mixed communities that included Jews and Gentiles, free persons and slaves, men and women. Paul's letter to the Galatians is about the condition on which Gentiles enter the people of God. It is about the entrance requirements for Gentile Christians who want to be recognized as full members of the new Israel that believes in Jesus, the Messiah. Must they, therefore, adopt the cultural practices of Jewish Christians in order to enter the congregation of Israel's Messiah, the church? Must they accept circumcision, practise specific dietary regulations and follow the Jewish religious calendar? Or can they be accepted as full members of the church on the basis of faith in Christ, apart from doing these works of the Mosaic Law?<sup>[23]</sup> Seen in this perspective, Galatians is not primarily a letter about individual salvation. For Paul it was

first and foremost a defence of the rights of the Gentiles to enter the church on the basis of their faith in Jesus Christ without adopting the cultural practices of Jewish Christians.

The letter is explicitly a response to a crisis in the churches of Galatia (1:2). The occasion of the letter was that Paul had received news of people who had visited his Galatian mission-field and were persuading his converts to accept a teaching different from that which he had preached.

### **2.2.2. The Crisis and Paul's Deliberative Rhetoric**

#### ***Righteousness Through Law or Faith in Christ***

The crisis in Galatia was primarily social in nature: how are Gentile Christians to interact with Christians who are Jewish by birth? Must they accept the customs, practices, and culture of Jewish believers, or do they become members of the commonwealth of the Christians solely on the basis of what God has done in Jesus Christ? The agitators supported a doctrine which might anachronistically be called cultural imperialism. This was particularly evident in their insistence that Gentile Christians observe certain nomistic Jewish practices like circumcision and in their ban on full table fellowship.

Paul's opponents[24] or Judaizers who preach a 'different gospel' (1:6) have disturbed the equilibrium of the Galatians. This disturbance has endangered the gospel message which Paul preached to the Galatians. Paul accuses the agitators of perverting the Gospel of Christ and impeding the progress that the Galatians were making in the Christian life. The Judaizers persuaded the Gentile members of the Galatian communities to believe that righteousness could be acquired through circumcision and doing the works of the Law. The Law, they claimed, is not opposed to faith in the Messiah. Rather, it brings this faith to completion (3:3) and provides a way of overcoming the desires of the flesh.

Fearing that the Gentile members would succumb to pressure to be circumcised, Paul was intent on presenting righteousness as a benefit of faith in Jesus Christ and not through the law (3:1-5; 6-14) for "if righteousness came through law, surely Christ died in vain." (Gal. 2:21). Paul urged his converts in Galatia against indulging in

the “works of the flesh” which posed the most deadly threat to unity in the churches of Galatia. He warns them, “If you go on fighting one another tooth and nail, all you can expect is mutual annihilation” (5:15). The course which he recommends to them is a larger measure of that faith which is ‘active in love’ and in that love to be “servants to one another” (5:6, 13).<sup>[25]</sup>

## **The Problem of Mixed Table-Fellowship**

The particular issue which generated Jewish hostility to the Pauline type of mixed community was the practise of Eucharistic table-fellowship, characterized by the participants sharing the one loaf and the one cup. The ban on full table-fellowship is a matter of fundamental importance for the history of the early Christian-movement and to understand the problem in Galatia that Paul is addressing. There is adequate anthropological evidence of the antipathy of Jews towards table-fellowship with Gentiles.<sup>[26]</sup> This problem arose not merely because of the existence of food laws, but also because commensality, given that it was ‘an action expressing the warmest intimacy and respect,’ involved a serious threat to the separate identity of Jewish people.<sup>[27]</sup>

Paul strongly objected to this ethnic-based discrimination practised at table fellowship. The fact that Christ had accepted Gentiles in the same way as Jews at Baptism is sufficient ground for Christian Jews to accept them also in table fellowship. It was tantamount to dividing Christ himself when Christian Jews who mingled with Christian Gentiles were accused of ‘living like a Gentile’ (2:14) and behaving like ‘Gentile sinners’ (2:15).

Paul’s response to the crisis at Galatia is an example of deliberative rhetoric. In order to persuade them to adopt his point of view, he arranges his arguments in such a way that by the end of the letter the Galatians find themselves in a rhetorical maze with only one exit: an absolute and resolute refusal to be circumcised. Should the Galatians refuse to accept this, they will be cut off from Christ.<sup>[28]</sup> The heart of Paul’s argument is found in 3:7-29. In Christ they are a new creation so that the distinction between circumcision and the lack of it is abolished. He warns the Galatian Christians that to submit to the new teaching is to turn away from God (1:6), to be

severed from Christ, to fall from grace (5:4). Even if only a token measure of law-keeping is demanded from the Galatians, this demand involves acceptance of justification by works of the law which is contrary to the law-free gospel that Paul preached.

Paul was not concerned to make Gentiles into Jews, but introduce Jews and Gentiles alike into a new community through faith in Jesus as Lord. In this new community circumcision was irrelevant and any attempt to treat it as essential was unacceptable. Circumcision, with many other features of the law of Israel – food restrictions, sacred days, months and seasons (4:10), and the like – had traditionally kept Jews and Gentiles apart; such things had no place in the ‘new creation’ (6:15) where there was ‘no such thing as Jew or Greek’ (3:28).

His policy was to conform to Jewish ways in Jewish company and to Gentile ways in Gentile company, so as to commend the Jews and Gentiles alike. But to observe sacred occasions as a matter of religious obligation, making them the essence of gospel faith and church membership, was a step backward from liberty to bondage, which Paul refers to as a token of submission to the ‘elements of the world’ (Gal. 4:3, 9).<sup>[29]</sup>

### **3. Some Ecclesiological Issues**

#### **3.1. Identity of the ‘Church of God’**

Paul’s reference to the ‘Church of God’ in Gal. 1:13 indicates his understanding of the church as continuity with the people of Israel met in assembly. Paul also speaks of ‘churches’ in the plural – ‘the churches of Galatia’ (1:2) and the ‘churches of Judea’ (1:22). This is in contrast with the regular OT usage, which is almost always singular. The point here is that despite the OT precedent, Paul evidently did not think in terms of a single ‘church’. Wherever and whenever Jews and Gentiles gathered ‘in Christ’ (1:22), they were the ‘Church of God’.<sup>[30]</sup>

The identity of these gatherings as ‘church’ depended for Paul not on an organizational link-up or structure, but was given by their shared reception of the gospel and experience of the Spirit, and by

their common incorporation into the 'Israel of God'. At this stage it was evidently more important for Paul to affirm the 'church-ness' of each individual gathering of believers in Judea and Galatia than to affirm that all these churches together formed one church.[31]

### **3.2. Church leadership**

Paul held in high esteem the pillar apostles of the church of Jerusalem. However, his acknowledgement of the authority and reputation of the Jerusalem leadership (2:3, 6, 9) also includes a note of questioning. The dismissive note in 2:6 "what they once were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality" suggests something of interest about Paul's ecclesiology. The letter to the Galatians questions the practicality of a centralized authority seeking to impose a uniform church and life-style on all churches.

A gospel which can be both 'for the circumcised' and for the 'uncircumcised' (2:7) manifests great diversity in the way of being church. Galatians underline the importance of maintaining a vital tension between charismatic initiative and the constraints of tradition. Just as Paul wanted to maintain continuity with the church of God and the Israel of God, while affirming his conviction that he had been called to spread the gospel to the nations, so in the Galatian context, Paul attempted to maintain the recognition of the leadership of the Jerusalem apostles (2:2) while insisting that any authority, whether ecclesiastical or apostolic, was to be subordinate to the gospel, since the gospel of the cross and Spirit was itself the source and measure of that authority.

### **4. Conclusion**

Paul's letters were in no way meant to prepare a blueprint or offer fixed guidelines to the church of Corinth or churches in Galatia or Judea. Nor did he want to comply with traditionalists or 'agitators' who wanted to plant the Palestinian church at Corinth and Galatia. He employed innovative missionary strategies at Corinth, Galatia and for that matter at other places, for addressing the needs and concerns of a cosmopolitan or multi-ethnic or homogeneous population. His technique for crises resolution was to reinforce community boundaries, appeal to unity in the Lord when groups

disagreed, provide relief to the socially exploited and voiceless in the community, and restore identity and confidence to confused groups. Paul has no specific teaching on church order or hierarchy, and no hints regarding the nature, form, frequency and leadership for worship gatherings. Rather, he stressed the communion nature of the church and the corporate nature of worship, with the participation of everyone – for the glory of God (1Cor. 11:13; 14:14-17) and edification of the whole community.

The churches at Corinth and at Galatia demonstrate unique features of ecclesial communities and different approaches of responding to issues of particular contexts. The approaches used to make the Christian message relevant in specific contexts, can be very relevant for today, though they can hardly serve as models for replication.

The theology of the church of Corinth for instance offers a paradigm of contemporary challenge confronting the church in rapidly increasing cosmopolitan and mixed settings in pluralistic India. Paul saw the Graeco-Roman city of Corinth, with its heterogeneous metropolitan culture and the mixed communities of Jews and Gentiles in Galatia as a springboard for incarnating the Christian faith, even though the complex social and religious settings presented many obstacles for the Gospel. The profound theological teachings which he enunciated concerning conflicting local issues were an important contribution to the later history of ecclesiology and ethics and apply to questions of unity, integrity and identity that are pertinent even today.

The church in India is a church divided by ethnic, linguistic, caste, gender and ritual boundaries. There are Christians who wish to keep the church in India, Syrian or Roman. There are Christian communities who wish to keep the caste divisions within the church. There are others who wish to keep the gender prejudices and discriminations of the patriarchal tradition of church and society. The theology of the church that Paul articulated in his letters to the Corinthians and Galatians present relevant theological pointers to meet the contemporary challenges of the politics of division and the politics of unity infesting the church in India. It presents

ecclesiological insights for promoting communion among and within the local churches in India as well.

Paul's vision of communion also enables us to face the problem of re-incarnating ecclesial communities in the contemporary 'Corinths' of India like Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore where migrant Christian settlers from varied ethnic and language groups and rites are found. The same tenet of Acts 2 "one faith, one baptism, one Lord" would be the foundational experience of realizing a communion of communities (EA 25) in such cosmopolitan contexts where the language of love would overcome cultural, linguistic, caste or ritual barriers. Paul believed that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, for we who believe in Him are all one in Christ (Gal. 3:28).

A church is always in a process of becoming as a result of interaction between the Gospel message and a given milieu. The churches that Paul had established had a distinct local identity without losing the catholic character of the Pentecost. Any approach of incarnating the Gospel that does not respect the presuppositions and dominant concerns of the target group will not transform anything. Dialogue with outsiders or 'trouble-makers' may be uncertain – even hazardous, but refusal to dialogue with culture and religion and in the case of the churches in India, with fundamentalists and traditionalists like caste Christians may likely result in alienation, division and impoverishment. True ecclesial communion recognizes and embraces difference and diversity of rites, races, tribes, cultures and languages, and promotes mutual understanding, acceptance and collaboration among different groups for a much-needed 'communion for prophetic mission' in India.

## Notes

- [1] *The New Leader*, Vol. 121/18, September 16-30, 2008, Chennai, p.35.
- [2] Raymond Brown suggests a possible range of house Churches resulting from different Christian missions: a house Church of Christian Jews, of mixed Jewish and Gentile Christians, of mostly Gentiles from the Pauline mission, a Johannine house Church of those who believed



they were God's children from birth. *Biblical Exegesis and Church Doctrine*, New York: Paulist Press, 1985, p. 123.

- [3] W. F. Orr & J. A. Walther, *I Corinthians, Introduction with a Study of the Life of Paul, Notes and Commentary*, London: Doubleday, 1976, p. 141.
- [4] L. Cerfaux, *Church in the Theology of St Paul*, New York: Herder & Herder, 1959, pp. 109-110.
- [5] *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- [6] The captivity letters of St Paul have specific references to the Church as the Body of Christ, and particularly describe its eschatological and mystical aspects. The idea of Christians as God's people strongly affirms the organic and universal dimensions of the Church. R. Brown, *Biblical Exegesis*, p. 125. In the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, *ekklesia* is further developed in a specifically cosmic sense where the Church realizes itself not only in human space but in the heavenly city as well.
- [7] For a more detailed study of this, see Evelyn Monteiro, *Church and Culture: Communion in Pluralism*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2004, pp. 4-8.
- [8] Evelyn Monteiro, *Church and Culture*, pp. 93-99
- [9] J. Murphy-O'Connor, *The Theology of the Second Letter to the Corinthians*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 4.
- [10] G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987, p.2.
- [11] *Ibid.*, p. 3-4.
- [12] For the indigent weak consumption of meat was cloaked in taboo. It was eaten only at pagan religious celebrations. However, the wealthy 'strong' had no taboos attached to meat eating. G. Theissen, "The strong and the Weak in Corinth: A Sociological Analysis of a Theological Quarrel," *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982, p. 128.
- [13] G.D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp 357-363, 387
- [14] *Ibid.*, pp. 4-7.
- [15] Contemporary feminist exegetes might interpret it as an argument for the 'creational' or 'symbolic' difference between women and men despite their equality in Christ, or as advocacy for the emancipation of women. E. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, New York: SCM Press, 1983, pp. 227-230.
- [16] C.K. Barrett, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 250-251, 255. In the Graeco-Roman society, as in many modern veiling cultures, the veiling of women constituted an important symbol system. It represented the honour-shame culture with multiple meanings of social order, hierarchy, authority, subordination, sexuality, etc. related to it. The actual practise of veiling and its ideological functions, however, vary with time

and place. D. B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, Michigan: Yale University Press, 1995, pp. 233-35.

- [17] E. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, p. 228.
- [18] The exegetical misrepresentation of the androcentric note of Paul's injunctions (1 Cor. 11:2-16, 14:34-35, 1 Tim. 2:11-15) gradually led to the exclusion of women from ecclesial office and to the patriarchalization of the whole Church. E. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, pp. 230, 233.
- [19] The imagery of the temple (*naos*) was pregnant with meaning both for the Jews and the Gentile Christians. It reflected the OT concept of God who chose to dwell among the people (Ps 114:2). It was also familiar to the Corinthian Gentile Christians who often frequented the pagan temples and shrines (*naoi*) in the city. G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 146-147.
- [20] G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 18-19.
- [21] Gunton and Hardy, *On Being the Church*, pp. 227-229.
- [22] In addition to addressing his letter to the 'ekklesiai of Galatia' (1:2), Paul also refers to other groups, especially Israelites, sinful Gentiles and those advocating circumcision of the Gentile Christ-followers (6:12-13), who in various ways constitute a threat to the communities he had founded in Galatia.
- [23] Frank, J. Matera, *Galatians*, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1992, p. 29
- [24] There are about five texts in which Paul directly refers to the agitators as misconstruing what God has done in Christ in the Church of Galatia: 1:7; 3:1; 4:17; 5:7-12; 6:12-13.
- [25] F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians*, p. 25.
- [26] As a general rule, Israelites in the first century CE did not dine with Gentiles. This prohibition is reflected very clearly in Acts and Galatians, and is implied in Mark 7 and Matthew 15. There is also evidence of Jewish sensitivity to ritual purity at meal fellowship in Dan 1:3-17, Judith 10-12, Esther 14:17, in many non-scriptural Israelite works and in the Mishnah and Talmud.
- [27] Philip F. Esler, *Galatians*, New York: Routledge, 1998, p. 94
- [28] Frank, J. Matera, *Galatians*, pp. 18-19.
- [29] F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians*, p. 29.
- [30] James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul's Letter to the Galatians*, Cambridge, 1993, p. 125.
- [31] *Ibid.*, p. 125.

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