

# Unity & diversity in the NT – and beyond

## Freedom in the Spirit in the earliest house fellowships

TYPE OF FELLOWSHIP	AUTHORITY	CHRISTOLOGY	LITERATURE	STRUCTURE/TENDENCY	TEMPLE/JEWS
1. Jerusalem after 50 ad - gospel & law	the 12 & elders, (then James) Hebrew (& Gk?) OT	Messiah <sup>1</sup>	Acts 15, 21:20-25; James	synagogue model, (many converted priests - Acts 6:7); great stress on righteousness	Most Holy place, covenants eternal
2. Jerusalem & Judah, Greek synagogue	Septuagint, Stephen	Son of man	Acts 6-7 <sup>2</sup>	elders	God rejects first, Spirit leads latter
3. Jew & Gentile, from Jerusalem mission, (eg Caesarea, Syria)	Twelve (Peter, Philip), Septuagint	Servant of Isaiah, Messiah	Acts 10, Mark, Galatians	elders, certain abstentions in common with mother church (Acts 15:19-16:5)	law is good, but not necessary to salvation
4. Jew & Greek (eg Corinth)	Paul, Cephas, OR Apollos. Septuagint	Son of God	Corinthians, Galatians	elders?? <sup>3</sup> Charismatic gifts (no ritual abstentions - I Cor 8)	irrelevant
5. Gentile (eg Philippi)	Paul, Septuagint	Son of God	Philippians, Thessalonians	elders	irrelevant
6. Asian Gentile	Paul, Septuagint	Firstborn of all creation	Ephesians, Colossians	little emphasis on structure, 'body' not institutional, but organic <sup>4</sup>	church is temple, barriers done away with
7. Gentile post-Paul	Paul (Luke, Timothy, Silas?), Septuagint	Son of man, Son of God	Luke, Acts, Pastorals	elders, accepts structure (but NOT at cost to Spirit's freedom) <sup>5</sup>	Jerusalem will not always be trampled
8. Jewish - post 70 ad	Twelve (Matthew, Peter), Septuagint	Messiah, Son of God – higher than #1, tending to Trinitarian	Matthew	rejecting episcopal (bishop) tendency, adhering to synagogue discipline (Matt 18)	Jerusalem/Jews will receive Christ one day
9. Jewish-dominated, but 'Jews' enemies	John, Septuagint	Logos, Trinitarian in tendency	John	avoid structure, Spirit-led, avoid even word 'apostle' <sup>6</sup>	irrelevant - John 4, 'kingdom' spiritual
10. predominantly Gentile (eg Antioch by 100 ad)	bishop (after apostles), Septuagint	nuanced, approaching 'orthodox'	Ignatius	bishop & presbyters	temple is church, Jews are rejected

## NOTES AND QUOTES

1. [on Ebionitism] ... Jewish Christianity was counted unacceptable when it *failed to develop*, when it hardened the inchoate expressions of the earliest days into a system, when it lost the flexibility and openness to a new revelation which questions of law and mission demanded in a developing situation, when it became rigid and exclusive. *One of the earliest heresies was conservatism!* [James D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 266]

2. [on Acts 6-7] It is not surprising that he was stoned, for orthodox Judaism could least afford to tolerate this kind of believer in Jesus. ... All except the apostles (Acts 8:1) had to leave Jerusalem. Thus the latter had not yet declared themselves as a body on the side of Stephen in the matter of his indictment. ... This seems to me an extremely important fact, and one which at the same time corroborates the historical accuracy of Acts at this point. Evidently the Christians at this period were persecuted with certain exceptions; none were disturbed whose devotion to the temple and the law was unimpeachable, and these still included Peter and the rest of the apostles. [A. Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity in the First 3 Centuries*, vol. 1 p. 57]

2. The decision to give the Hellenists their own leaders (men who unfortunately have been misunderstood to be deacons) represented a choice in early Christianity for a pluralism on the question of relations to the Temple, rather than a policy of imposing conformity. [R.E. Brown, *Priest & Bishop*, p. 56]

3. [on 1 Cor 12] To create unity belongs to the essential nature of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost). ... The Holy Spirit creates unity not only in spite of diversity, but precisely *through* it. ... It is the very nature of the Holy Spirit to function so as to *create diversity*. But this does not cause fragmentation, since every member is oriented to the goal of the unity of the whole body; it is the same with the members of the church. The richness of the full measure of the Holy Spirit consists in this plurality. Whoever does not respect this richness, and wants uniformity instead, sins against the Holy Spirit. [Oscar Cullmann, *Unity through Diversity*, pp. 16-17]

4. [on Paul's churches] In all this there is an element of conjecture – we just do not know in detail how the early churches were organized. But the movement is away from flexibility in the direction of rigidity; away from the spontaneity of immediate response to the Holy Spirit and in the direction of codes and rules. [Stephen Neill, *Jesus through Many Eyes*, p. 162]

5. [on Luke/Acts catholicism] ... particularly in Roman Catholicism the desire for absolute uniformity in the conception of the Christian message may not be true to the NT itself which allowed a diversity among Christians who still shared *koininía*, or “communion,” with one another. We must realize that on many theological issues Peter and Paul and Stephen could disagree violently, and yet they were all esteemed by the author of Acts as great Christian witnesses and preachers. A range of diversity is both allowed and demanded by the word of God. [Raymond E. Brown, *Biblical Exegesis and Church Doctrine*, p. 137]

6. [on John's ‘maverick Gospel’] The ultimate check upon what Kysar calls the “maverick Gospel” has been the church's hermeneutical decision to place it in the same canon as Mark, Matthew, and Luke, Gospels which implicitly advocate the side opposite to many Johannine positions. This means that the Great Church, “the church catholic” of Ignatian language, whether consciously or unconsciously, has chosen to live with tension. It has chosen not a Jesus who is either God or man but

both; it has chosen not a Jesus who is either virginally conceived as God's Son or pre-existent as God's Son but both; not either a Spirit who is given to an authoritative teaching magisterium or the Paraclete-teacher who is given to each Christian but both; not a Peter or a Beloved Disciple but both. Tension is not easily accepted in ordinary life, and we usually try to resolve it. So too in church history – but because of the church decision about the canon, attempts at simple resolutions of these theological tensions into a static position on one side or the other are unfaithful to the whole NT. [Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, pp. 163-164]

[on Eph 4, 1 Cor 12] Within this one fellowship, there is, nevertheless, room for great diversity. “To each one of us grace has been given according to the allocation of the gift of Christ” (Eph 4:7). And it is in practice in the local fellowship, rather than in the universal church envisaged in Ephesians, that the oneness is best maintained and manifested and the diversity of gifts and functions best exercised, in an atmosphere of harmony, both for the health and growth of the body. When Paul expounds this theme for the benefit of the Corinthian church, he says, “you are Christ's body, and severally members of it” (1 Cor 12:27). He does not call them *part* of Christ's body, reserving the term “body” for the sum-total of believers throughout the world, but uses in relation to a particular city church the language which is later used in Ephesians of the universal church. It is not that each local church is thought of as a separate body of Christ; this would spoil the analogy by implying that Christ had several “bodies” throughout the world. Rather, the local church is viewed as a microcosm of the universal church. [F.F. Bruce, in R.E. Guelich, *Unity & Diversity in New Testament Theology*, p. 93]

Every age, every church, every sect, every controversy, in some way or other contributes something to the working out, the testing, or the illustrating of some part of the revelation of God. [T.D. Bernard, *The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament*, p. 36]

[on the significance of the canon] ... the canon is important not just because it canonizes the unity of Christianity, but also because *it canonizes the diversity* of Christianity – not only the liberalism of Jesus but also the conservatism of the first Jerusalem Christians, not only the theological sophistication of Paul but also the uncritical enthusiasm of Luke, not only the institutionalization of the Pastorals but also the individualism of John. [James D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, pp. 376-377]

### For further information:

**Barclay**, William *The Gospels & Acts* (2 volumes)

**Bernard**, T.D. *Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament*

**Brown**, Raymond E. *Biblical Reflections on Crises Facing the Church*

**Brown**, Raymond E. *Priest & Bishop: Biblical Reflections*

**Brown**, Raymond E. *Biblical Exegesis & Church Doctrine*

**Brown**, Raymond E. *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*

**Brown**, Raymond E. *Community of the Beloved Disciple*

**Bruce**, F.F. in Guelich, Robert A. *Unity & Diversity in New Testament Theology: Essays in Honor of George E. Ladd*

**Cullmann**, Oscar *Unity through Diversity*

**Dunn**, James G.D. *Unity & Diversity in the New Testament*

**Neill**, Stephen *Jesus through Many Eyes*

**Scroggie**, W. Graham *A Guide through the Gospels*

**Streeter**, Burnett H. *The Four Gospels*

**Westcott**, Brooke Foss *Introduction to the Study of the Gospels*

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