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PHD THESIS ABSTRACT

UNITY AND DIVERSITY: THE STRUCTURE OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES IN THE PAULINE EPISTLES

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CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

1. Research framework and objectives

Relevance and topicality of the topic

3. Summary structure of the paper

4. Methodological approaches of the research

CHAPTER I - IDENTITY, ETHNICITY, DIVERSITY - THEORISATIONS AND CONCEPTUALISATIONS

1.1. Social construction of identity: conceptualization

1.1.1. The group-individual relationship

1.1.2. Social identity theory and its use in the biblical study of Pauline anthropology

1.1.2.1. Group behaviour

Social competition

1.1.2.3. Social categorisation and stereotyping

1.1.2.4. Social identity cross-over

1.1.3. Ethnicity, ethnicity - conceptual frameworks

1.2. Context and ethno-social structure of the Mediterranean area in the first century

The experience of ethnic diversity in the early Church (Jerusalem, Corinth, Rome)

1.4. The reasoning of ethnicity and identity in Pauline theology

CHAPTER II - CONFIGURATIONS OF CORPORATE IDENTITY IN 1 AND 2 CORINTHIANS

2.1 The social stratification of the Corinthian Christian community

2.2 Pauline grounding of the corporate identity of the Corinthians as the body of Christ. Exegetical landmarks of identity and diversity in I Corinthians

2.2.1 The body of Christ as an affirmation of Christian identity: contextual analyses of the source of the use of the notion of "body".

2.2.2. The Christian community as "body of Christ".

Identity structures: the "new man" and the "new creation" in 2 Corinthians

Contexts and difficulties in establishing the identity-diversity relationship

2.3.2. "In Christ" - the foundation of the "new creation".

2.3.3. The social significance of the "new creation" in 2 Corinthians

CHAPTER III - THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IDENTITY AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN ROMANS, GALATIANS, EPHESIANS, COLOSSIANS

Identity "in Christ" in the Epistle to the Romans. A reassessment of the significance of descent from Abraham

3.1.1. Formulating theses on the congruence of identity and multi-ethnicity of the Roman Christian community

3.1.2. The reunion of Jewish and Gentile Christians into a single unified community
140

3.2 The construction of community identity in the experience of the Christian community in the Epistle to the Galatians

3.2.1. The construction of 'community identity' in Pauline theology

3.2.2 The difficulty of applying community identity in the ethnically stratified horizon of the Christian community in Jerusalem

3.2.3. Unity and ethnic delineation of physical and cultural traits

Unity and ethnic diversity in the Epistle to the Ephesians

- 3.3.1. The process of building unity in the Christian community of the Ephesians
- 3.3.2. The significance of the identity of the "new man"
- 3.3.3. Fluid identity and its corporate dimension
- 3.3.4. Reconciliation in Christ as a resolution of ethnic tensions
- 3.4 The construction and building of Christian relationships in the experience of the First Epistle to the Thessalonians
- 3.4.1 οἰκοδομέω in Old and New Testament vocabulary and Pauline development of the concept
- 3.4.2. οἰκοδομή as a community of faith
- 3.4.3. the radicality of Christian relationship to outsiders
- CHAPTER IV - SAINT PAUL THE APOSTLE AS ARCHITECT OF THE INCLUSION OF THE GENTILES IN THE CHURCH
- 4.1. Paul's double belonging: by ethnicity, Jewish / by faith, to Christ
- 4.2. Reconfiguring identity and particularity in Christ
- 4.3. Beyond ethno-religious particularities: a new identity "in" Christ
- Possible Pauline models of the Church according to William S. Campbell
- CONCLUSIONS
- BIBLIOGRAPHY
- 1. Sources
- 2. Biblical commentaries
- 3. Dictionaries
- 4. Literature

Research framework and objectives

The new reality in Christ radically reconfigures the religious perspective of diversity and unity. "There is no longer Jew and there is no longer Greek; there is no longer bond and there is no longer free; there is no longer male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28) "Circumcision is nothing; and uncircumcision is nothing" (1 Cor. 7:19). These are some of the Apostle Paul's statements that gave rise to his acclaim as the second founder of Christianity, socially speaking, the first being the Saviour Jesus Christ, who, through his redemptive work, restored humanity to the possibility of its primordial, graceful vocation. Texts such as these underlie the fact that the Apostle Paul is seen as the one who successfully overcame the particularities of ethnic and national identities and created in their place a universal brotherhood of Christ's followers, rising above the limitations of natural descent and culture. In recent decades, however, the discourse on identity, ethnicity and diversity has offered significant new insights, some of which seem to challenge what for nearly two centuries

seemed unquestioned, the concept of a universal Christian identity. Within this developing discourse there is a growing awareness that while there is also a growing recognition of fluidity and flexibility in the construction of identity, there is also a recognition that such a construction does not occur in contrast or opposition to specific particularities, but within and in interaction with them.

It is therefore in question whether the emerging Christian identity followed such patterns or whether it uniquely followed its own original design in contrast to any other social patterns. The issue is whether the early Christians, as followers of Christ, leave behind their cultural belonging and enter a newly created universal society or whether, as Jews or Greeks, they continue to live within the same culture but under the transforming influence of Christ. According to the first view, a new postulated universal Christian identity opposes particularity and difference in favour of the higher value of unity in Christ, generally interpreted as oneness. However, Christian universalist claims, although beneficial in a specific form, in the contemporary world lend themselves both as an accessory to an imperialist conception of a dominant Western culture over other continental cultures, and to an unjustified sense of the superiority of Christianity as exclusivism, which makes the mission of the Church impossible through concrete reference to religious and cultural otherness.

Since Christianity did not arise in a historical and cultural vacuum, but has always been contextualised in diverse situations, it is interesting to investigate whether the universalist reading of the apostle Paul, as received by some biblical interpreters, is still convincing. This intention to explore such an issue is the argument of our research from a biblical perspective.

Ethnic identity and relations exist whether or not ethnic groups are competing. The first challenge of the early church in the New Testament Church was to overcome ethnicity and hostile divisions between Jews, Gentiles and Samaritans. This PhD thesis aims to explore how socio-historical influences and the nature of St. Paul's noutestament message were able to overcome ethnicity and ethnic divisions in the early New Testament Church. The research will also reflect on how the contemporary church might manage ethnicity within its structures and redefine its position on what it means to be one in Christ within the Church.

However, our analysis will explore the historical existence of ethnicity and ethnic divisions in the context of the primary church, the ekklesia, and its divine call to fulfill God's mission in the world. The goal is not necessarily to stop people from being

who they are ethnically and culturally, but to understand how the contemporary Church might manage ethnicity and redefine its position on what it means to be one in Christ within the Church.

Whether we accept it or not, ideas about ethnicity and race permeate our understanding when we talk about Christianity, especially early Christianity. An enduring and very attractive claim about Christianity is that it is universal and transcendent, open to all people. Included in society's collective understanding of the origins of Christianity is the narrative of how Christianity was formed in the Judaeo-Hellenistic-Roman, not doctrinal, space, eliminating along the way the particularities of people, kinship and territory that are so important to this ancient tradition of Judaism. The Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle played an important role in explaining how this happened; he is understood as the one who articulated a spiritual, non-ethnic faith that would become Christianity. In this view, Christian self-definition is fuelled by contrast: Christianity is non-Jewish, non-specific, non-ethnic. In other words, Judaism is a foil for Christianity and defines itself primarily in terms of particularity and peoplehood. The prevailing academic interpretations of Paul have also relied on and perpetuated precisely this evolutionary model of the development of Christianity and the role of the apostle Paul in shaping it. Therefore, the concepts of racial and ethnic identity and how they relate to religion are crucial to Paul's interpretation, whether one participates in this traditional reading or challenges it.

A historically theorized and contextual approach to the analysis of identity, diversity, and ethnicity gives us the tools to look critically at how these concepts function in the Pauline epistles, in the larger historical context, in scholarship itself, and in modern social relations. Specifically, this exercise helps us recognize the complexity of ethnic and racial identity, the way it is presented as both "natural" and malleable, often at the same time. It also shows how ethnicity can be multiplied so that people maintain multiple identities at the same time. Moreover, attention to discourses of ethnicity and race reveals how characteristics usually regarded as voluntary among modern Westerners, such as religion, are often fundamental to the construction of ethnic identity. Finally, this paper shows that claims about ethnic and racial identity are rhetorical and are put in the service of a larger argument, that of ecclesial unity. The evolutionary model in both academic contexts and popular thought is not only inaccurate but also completely inadequate to describe the complex way in which ethnic identity operates, including in the case of the Apostle Paul.

A brief note on terminology: many scholars have avoided the term "race" when discussing categories of human difference, especially in antiquity. Race is often seen as too closely linked to biology and also to racist ideologies that have served oppressive and violent regimes in recent history. Some argue that the ancients simply did not operate with these kinds of ideas about identity. The term "ethnicity" has served as a replacement, implying that the problems associated with the concept of race disappear. This practice is dangerous, however, because it can mask the ways in which these terms are similar, but also the ways in which racial assumptions can still influence our lives. It is important to recognise the differences between modern and ancient contexts, but it is disingenuous to think that these two can be completely absent in our interpretations: we cannot encounter antiquity other than from a modern context. While these terms are not identical, they are nevertheless analogous in important ways: they are used to talk about human difference in terms that are both essentialized and flexible, and, importantly, both terms are constructs used to describe social relations. Therefore, following Denise Kimber Buell's analysis, our research uses both ethnicity and race, not as synonyms, but as terms that are used in similar rhetorical contexts. The use of both terms draws attention to the constructed nature of both ethnicity and race and signals an attempt to address racial issues from the outset.

We make a methodological note: our intention is to decipher how diversity, unity, identity, ethnicity intersected in the experience of the new Christian communities formed by the preaching of the Holy Apostles, especially the Pauline one. The exercise of their preaching took place in a multicultural and multiethnic space, a space where Romans, Jews, Greeks met politically, religiously, economically. Each of the three ethnic identities had different constituted structures, which paradoxically metamorphosed, not substantially, but relationally into the corpus of the Church, whose unity is founded on the Saviour Jesus Christ. The principle of unity in diversity, reiterated in the policy of the European Union, is the reality of the relationality and congruity of the plurality of identities in the early Church. Christ did not intend to unify or abolish the social and cultural particularities of each individual identity, but brought them together by His transfiguring grace in a way of unity that preserves particularities and differences.

2. Relevance and topicality of the theme under study

Social and psychological research in recent decades shows that identities are not fixed in an immutable way throughout history, but that they are constantly being constructed or, rather, reconstructed according to the pace of life, cultural, economic and political contexts. Thus, it is important to revisit our understanding of historical Christian identity in its social, cultural and theological dimensions and to reflect on it in the light of today's pluralistic reality. Accordingly, what we propose in our PhD thesis is to reconsider St. Paul in the creation of Christian identity in the light of these new perspectives. Therefore, we will consider some important areas of discourse highlighted by these new social, cultural, psychological perspectives, which are of crucial importance for a new understanding of Paul.

It should be noted that within the diversity of Judaism and the plurality of Greco-Roman religions of 2000 years ago, Christians were only one of a variety of groups claiming an entirely special membership as God's new people. These various Jewish groups differed in how the Torah was to be interpreted in relation to everyday life, but these were "internally Jewish" differences among Jews themselves, even if they also related to the status of Gentiles attached to synagogue groups. The new challenge presented by the Apostle Paul's mission to the Gentiles was that these followers of Christ had to be accepted as Gentiles and not become proselytes. This involved a major innovation, because the Apostle Paul did not impose any obligation on these newcomers to conform to the requirements of the Torah, but only to the Noahide rules. Such an innovation was seen by many Jews as a threat to the very identity of their faith, a threat to their distinctive way of life. This would seem to be the conflicting situation the Apostle Paul faced when he attempted to adjust or alter the self-understanding of his Jewish contemporaries by presenting the Gentiles who followed Christ as children (Gentiles) of Abraham. For the apostle, this radical step is justified by the dawn of a new era in Christ, despite the fact that it seems to dilute the secular ethnic boundary between Jews and "Gentiles". In this revision of the Israelite self-conception, the Christ event is added to events that were central to their history, not as a mere additional element, but rather as a decisive factor that demanded a reconfiguration of the entire narrative. Previous centuries of conflict with distinct ethnic dimensions, however, were extremely damaging to such a project, as they produced strong resistance among some groups of the Jewish people to any overt attempt to redefine the boundaries between Jews and Gentiles, thus jeopardizing their distinctiveness as a "chosen people." Although physical descent from Abraham was theoretically indispensable, the strongest

opposition came against those whose pattern of life seemed to threaten the established mores of the community. In first-century Judaism, especially in the Pharisaic faction, the religious and emotional element was strongly fueled in maintaining or attempting to maintain a distinct pattern of life that tended to isolate them somewhat from their neighbors. Thus, as a distinct and somewhat separate minority, some Jewish communities developed strong beliefs that severely limited the choices available to them and, in many cases, eliminated many things that were a viable option for other groups. Such a view of these communities is essential to avoid trivializing the beliefs of groups such as those described in Romans 14-15, for whom keeping the Sabbath or eating meat was an extremely serious matter. On the other hand, this position does not exclude the well-documented fact that there were strong and self-confident Jewish communities in places like Alexandria, that they were or could be extremely flexible, and that to this extent they managed to coexist with Gentiles, though not without conflict.

St. Paul the Apostle did not share these concerns about identity, either because he believed he had found a better alternative (and therefore rejected Judaism), or perhaps because he himself did not share the pessimism of some Jews about the effects and outcome of the novel "revolution" produced by Jesus Christ in relation to ongoing Jewish identity and distinctiveness. There are many voices in biblical scholarship that go on the assumption that what eventually emerged as a church predominantly made up of Christians from among the Gentiles was not what the Apostle Paul had in mind or intended. For him, Jews remain Jews in Christ, and he also opposed all attempts to force Gentiles to Judaize. For the apostle, the community of Christ is a place where ethnic distinctions are recognized, but not allowed to become a means of discrimination. Of course, he did not and could not see the long-term future, but we must distinguish between what the apostle Paul attempted and worked for and what emerged as a combined result of mission among the Gentiles, opposition from both Jews and Gentiles, and the political factors that constrained them, both individually and corporately, as a result of Roman imperial domination.

One of the challenges of a Christian faculty in the contemporary academic landscape is the extent to which the research it conducts, whether on the text of Holy Scripture, the Holy Fathers or contemporary theologians, has a contextualized impact on the world in which we live. In other words, is what we do relevant in any way and could we contribute to society and academia? Our research aims to argue that the

answer is, without a doubt, yes. Christianity has something to offer, and when we turn to ancient history and wisdom, we also find inspiration for the present. What benefits do we gain from studying the relationship between identity, ethnicity,, race in Pauline thought? First, we gain additional resources for understanding the apostle Paul in his historical context. Theorizing identity and ethnicity, provides a better understanding of the apostle Paul's categories of human difference and how he uses ethnic discourses for specific purposes. It helps us to dismantle problematic dichotomies such as those between Christians and Jews, between faith and works, between race and religion. When we see religion not as separate from racial and ethnic identity, but crucial to the constructions of Christian identity, then we can understand how important ethnic categories are in the apostle Paul's vision of salvation.

Second, Paul's discussion of race and ethnicity provides an opportunity to think critically about ethnic, cultural, national, and race relations in our day. Even though scholars have largely rejected the idea of a biological basis for race or ethnicity, these ideas still pervade society at large. Therefore, some have found it liberating to read Galatians 3:28 - "There is no Jew or Greek; there is no slave or free; there is no male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus" - as erasing differences. However, others have warned against this erasure and have appreciated interpretations that see identity particularities persisting even when they are in Christ. It is necessary, on the whole, to draw attention to the continuing link between race and religion and to see in Paul's ethnic discourse and theology a model of interdependence between Jews, Gentiles and Christians that might be instructive for our own day. Indeed, if we understand that ethnic identity is malleable and multifaceted, at the same time as it holds real meaning for people, if we understand that identity can change according to context, then we can imagine "a vision of human relations in which difference is reimagined as a source of power and a ground for transformation, rather than as something that should be erased in the name of a homogenizing universalism."

3. Summary structure of the work

The PhD thesis is structured in four chapters, each chapter framing a series of sub-chapters in order to layer the ideas analysed, as many of them contain wider spaces for argument. Chapter I - Identity, Ethnicity, Diversity - Theorisations and Conceptualisations - is intended as an introduction to the contemporary terminology of

the vocabulary with which we operate in the paper: identity, ethnicity, diversity, group, etc. Accordingly, this chapter sums up the analyses of the following themes: the social construction of identity; the group-individual relationship; the theory of social identity and its use in the biblical study of Pauline anthropology; the context and ethno-social structure of the Mediterranean area in the first century; the experience of ethnic diversity in the early Church (Jerusalem, Corinth, Rome).

Chapter II - Configurations of Corporate Identity in 1 and 2 Corinthians explores the theological aspects of the unity of the "body of Christ" in which Christians are incorporated. The first part of the chapter is reserved for hermeneutical analyses of 1 Corinthians ch. 12, and the second part is devoted to an exegetical-theological analysis of the identity structures "new man" and "new creature" in 2 Corinthians, followed in chapter III - The Relationship between Identity and Ethnic Diversity in Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians - by a more articulate exploration of the particularities of the following sub-themes: The formulation of theses on the congruence of the identity and pluri-ethnicity of the Roman Christian community; the construction of "community identity" in Pauline theology; the unity and ethnic delimitation of the physical and cultural traits of Christians; the significance of the identity of the "new man"; fluid identity and its corporate dimension; the radicality of Christian relationship to those outside the space of the Church.

The last chapter - St Paul as architect of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Church - is intended as a synthesis of Pauline theology with reference to the relationship between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in the same space of community. Four points are touched upon here: the Pauline double belonging: by ethnicity, Jewish / by faith, to Christ; the reconfiguration of identity and particularities in Christ; beyond ethno-religious particularities: a new identity "in" Christ; possible Pauline models of the Church according to William S. Campbell.

4. Methodological approaches to research

The approach we have followed in our analyses is one that seeks to take into account both the social, cultural and societal context and theology, especially biblical theology, in a fusion of horizons that reveals the reality of the time contemporary with St. Paul and the first Christian communities established by him. There is no doubt that

Pauline interpretation benefited enormously from the application of social-scientific and other models to biblical texts. One cannot return to a position that treats texts or theology as formulated in a historical or ideological vacuum. The influence of historical context cannot be ignored. Nor can the dynamic interaction of social factors be neglected in favour of a simpler static scenario. Our intention is to point out that the apostle Paul takes into account the concrete realities of existence as a fundamental dimension of his theology. He writes in the context in which his community existed and the issues that arise from and are associated with that context. Seen from this perspective, social factors, or a sociological approach, do not stand in the way of a full understanding and elucidation of the Apostle Paul's theology, but they are not a priority. The social dimension is an indispensable factor in understanding Paul's letters. However, our intention is not to allow sociology to replace theology. It is undeniable that within the Pauline letters theological factors are equally important. There can be and sometimes is a conflict between the results obtained by applying socio-historical or theological approaches. However, both are necessary for Pauline interpretation. A close look at Paul's statements in his epistles demonstrates his response, indeed his reaction to social factors. Social dynamics are the subject of his theology, whether it is relational disintegration in Corinthians or ethnicity in Romans. However, this interaction with that context is not the whole substance of Pauline theology. Alongside it, inextricably interwoven, is the newness produced by Jesus Christ as a radical insight into the real context and the vital relationships taking place. From these complex circumstances emerged context-related epistles in which theological and social factors are dramatically fused to provide practical guidance within an implicit and/or explicit eschatological framework.

As a consequence, the methodological approach to the analyses is carried out in an interdisciplinary spectrum, and the concrete methods I have used in addressing the theme are the following: the historical method, the systematic method and the comparative method, all three of which are congruently interwoven in the constitution and argumentation of the theme under investigation. It should also be pointed out that, as we have noted, the theologizing of the apostle Paul did not take place in a vacuum, nor was it an additional abstract structure of thought imposed from outside. Rather, the apostle Paul theologised on the basis of concrete realities, i.e. identity, ethnicity, political reasoning, plurality, etc. His theological formulations were not subsequent, systematised and therefore separate reflections on his and his communities' activities.

Rather, they emerged from and were inextricably intertwined with the life and events within his communities in the context of the wider Greco-Roman world.

The vector of research is not only to consider historical and social aspects of identity, ethnicity, unity, diversity and difference at the multi-national and multi-cultural intersection of the first century, but also to include, in association with these, Pauline theology and its outcome in the formation of Christian identity. Saint Paul, perhaps without doubt, can be considered an architect of the construction of Christian identity "in Christ" through the theological arguments set out in his epistles. Thus, the theology of the Apostle Paul in the context of and in relation to similar issues we face in contemporary, essentially global, multi-religious and multi-cultural society, is his incomparable legacy for posterity and one that needs to be understood anew in order to prevent us from inheriting and repeating the shortcomings of the past in relation to otherness.

As regards the bibliographical apparatus, we mention that we have mainly used books, studies and specialized articles in English, since such a theme has been very tangentially approached in Romanian biblical research, of course without minimizing the contribution of biblical studies on the spiritual meaning of the new life in Christ. For a good framing and clarification of the key terms in our research (social identity, ethnicity, diversity, unity, etc.) we have called upon specialized dictionaries.

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