

CORPORATE SOLIDARITY, FELLOWSHIP, AND PARTICIPATION

“Without love I am nothing” (1 Cor 13:2)

The concepts of ‘corporate solidarity’, ‘fellowship’, and ‘participation’ bind closely together Paul’s view of salvation, his pastoral strategy of forming communities, and his whole notion of being ‘church’. Paul’s view of community grows out of his understanding of the gospel.

By gospel here, I do not refer to any of the four gospel accounts that we have in the New Testament. These were written many years after Paul had written his letters. Paul’s letters were the very first documents of the New Testament. In fact, it was Paul who introduced term “gospel” into the vocabulary of the New Testament, and it was he who used the word most often.

For Paul, “gospel” refers to *what God has done and continues to do in and through Jesus Christ*. This is the content of his message. It has a historical component— an action accomplished in the past; but also an ongoing, present component, which is what God continues to do so that the effects of the past action may reach all.

Synthesis of Paul’s Gospel

The most complete articulation of Paul’s gospel is available to us in Romans 1-8. In these chapters, Paul reinterprets the creation and fall traditions in Genesis. In this reinterpretation, Adam becomes the symbol of broken fellowship. He symbolizes all that goes wrong when human beings rebel against God. Paul’s language about salvation is always communal in scope and never individual.

He is not depicting the situation of single individuals. Rather, he is talking about bigger realities— about collective and corporate realities which we experience only by PARTICIPATION. Paul uses ‘Adam’ as the symbolic representation of humankind’s corporate solidarity in Sin.

Paul understands Sin as a power that enslaves human beings. Every time a person participates in the mystery of evil, he/she is subjected to the enslaving power of Sin. And because we are connected to one another, no person sins entirely alone and no person sins without increasing the collective burden of the human race and adding intensity to the plight of the world.

Before Jesus Christ entered human history, the only story humankind knew was the Sin-story ‘in Adam’.

The Initiative of God

God takes the initiative and intervenes in this helpless situation. He sends his Son to PARTICIPATE in the human condition of “being flesh” so that by surrendering that flesh on the cross, human beings may PARTICIPATE in his victory. God has given humanity a new founder whose vastly more positive and hopeful story can be shared by believers. Just as we were all in ADAM in a corporate solidarity in Sin, we can now be IN CHRIST in the corporate solidarity of redemption.

For Paul, the gospel envisions to create not only a bunch of pious individuals but communities of believers who are conscious of their connectedness to one another and to the rest of creation, and convinced that they are called to heal and restore all wounded relationships and broken fellowship, and thus PARTICIPATE in bringing to fulfilment God’s purposes for the world.

God’s saving work has a present, ongoing dimension, which is being accomplished through the transfer of humanity’s corporate solidarity from being “in Adam” to being “IN CHRIST.”

“In Christ”

“In Christ” is a very important expression which Paul uses one hundred and sixty-four times (164) in his letters to explain the meaning of Christian existence. The expression suggests that it is the corporate whole of believers who dwell in Christ. A Christian is not “in Christ” as an isolated

believer. Being “in Christ,” is a communal conception and not a solitary state of individual piety. It is a life shared with those who had responded to Christ.

Pauline scholars have coined the expression “Corporate Christ” to describe Paul’s language of the believers’ incorporation into Christ. The Corporate Christ may be spoken of as an energy field created by the Spirit of Christ, and in which believers live and move and have their being.

It can also be thought of as a living organism— a body of which believers are organs and limbs. It is a common existence, which is not just functional or based on common practices.

The believers’ existence is the state called “LOVE,” that is, living inside another being who is love: CHRIST. To love and be loved constitutes the identity of the Christian. Thus Paul declares, “*Without love I am nothing*” (1 Cor 13:2).

Paul’s Pastoral Strategy

It is understandable, then, that Paul would choose as his missionary strategy the establishment of communities. The community becomes his audio-visual statement to make his message believable—that new life is now available. In the living together of believers, as well as in their verbal proclamation, non-believers ought to come into contact with this new life.

Paul proceeded with a careful pastoral objective and plan to establish stable communities. He carefully chose as his missionary posts centres of attraction—strategically located and prosperous port cities.

Paul did not work on a hit-and-miss basis. He knew how to engage in strategic planning, even while discerning the movements of the Spirit. His working ethos is something we can still learn from and apply today.

By Bernardita Danzon, FSP