

## THE VALIDITY OF DIVERSITY

Readers of the New Testament are struck by the diversity it portrays. Diverse people—Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and barbarians, Africans and Europeans, rich and poor—all experience God's salvation. Despite their differences, they gather as the *ekklesia* in each city to worship Jesus, God's incarnate Son, as Lord and Christ. The early pattern of one church per city contrasts with the plethora of churches in today's urban areas. Yet, at the same time, readers find a marked correlation between modern manifestations of "Church" and New Testament descriptions. Contemporary observers regard the Corinthian Church as Pentecostal in its emphasis on miracles, prophecy, tongues and healing. Thessalonica's focus on rapture and end-time prophecy reminds some of the popular<sup>1</sup> *Left Behind* series of novels and movies. In contrast, Roman believers got a healthy dose of sound theology, while the seven Asian churches received abundant apocalyptic prophecies in Revelation. Varieties of form and freedom are also found in the New Testament. The Pastoral Epistles (Timothy & Titus) highlight ecclesiastical offices and roles, while other epistles emphasize gifts more than government. James and Jude endorse an ancient version of "Jews for Jesus," while Colossians suits the ancient "New Age" movement. Viewed from this perspective, diversity characterized both New Testament churches and believers. Certainly they are united in their core beliefs concerning God, Christ, Spirit and salvation; ministry, prayer, charity and bread-breaking are common practices. Yet, abundant variety coexisted with that unity.

### The Jerusalem Council built Diversity into the Church

The earliest phase of church history built diversity into the church. The first church council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) determined that Gentile believers could be received as God's people simply by faith, without being circumcised as Jewish proselytes. Professor Andrew Walls calls it "an astonishing decision," breaking the centuries-old convention by which Gentiles (like Ruth, the Moabite) were received into Israel as proselytes. He explains,<sup>2</sup> "The great council described in Acts 15...deliberately rejected the time-honored model of the proselyte. It was an astonishing decision. Hitherto all the believers in Jesus had been circumcised and kept the Torah [Law], just like the Lord himself. It was the standard lifestyle for believers. But the early Church decided that the Gentile believers in Jesus...should be left to find a Christian lifestyle of their own within Hellenistic [Greek] society under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They were not to be proselytes, but converts." Under that historic decision, believing Gentiles didn't have to adopt the standard lifestyle of their Jewish fellow-believers—circumcision, kosher diet, and Sabbath-keeping. This verdict, says Walls,<sup>3</sup> "built cultural diversity into the church forever." Henceforth, diversity was enshrined in the church's "constitution."

### Two Christian Lifestyles, Diverse Churches

The Jerusalem decree contained minor provisions for Gentile believers (Acts 15:20). Yet Paul accepted it, since believing Gentiles were left unfettered by the ceremonial law and circumcision. Meanwhile many Jewish believers continued to observe both. Consequently the apostolic decree<sup>4</sup> "produced two distinct Christian lifestyles...the one for Jewish society, the other for Hellenistic [Greek] society." Inevitably this produced diverse Jewish and Gentile churches. Scripture recognizes both "the churches of the Gentiles" (Rom. 16:4) and "the [Jewish] churches of Judea" (Gal. 1:22; 1 Thess. 2:14). As the gospel spread further, among Jews, Greeks and barbarians, such divinely-approved diversity increased.

## “There are many different expressions of Christianity within the New Testament.”—Prof. James Dunn

The New Testament’s portrait of diversity is not merely the first impression of Bible-readers. Eminent Bible scholars concur with this view. Professor James D. G. Dunn studied the unity and diversity of first-century Christians and their church-life portrayed in Scripture. He affirms that<sup>5</sup> “there is a fundamental unifying strand running through earliest Christianity and the New Testament...that unifying strand [is] Jesus himself.” Yet this “unifying strand” is matched by plentiful variety. “Our study has...forced us to recognize *a marked degree of diversity* within first-century Christianity. We can no longer doubt that there are many *different expressions of Christianity within* the New Testament,” he says.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, that variety is not incidental. Professor Dunn describes it as<sup>7</sup> “wide-ranging diversity” with “minimal unity.” “The distinctive unifying strand running through the New Testament and first-century Christianity is narrow, the surrounding diversity is broad,” declares Dunn.<sup>8</sup> The Christian faith described in Scripture is not “one size fits all;” uniformity did not characterize first-century Christians. “*There was no single normative form of Christianity in the first century,*” Professor Dunn concludes.<sup>9</sup> This observation also applies to the first churches portrayed in Scripture. “Even when we looked at individual churches,” he says,<sup>10</sup> “the picture was the same—of diversity in expression of faith and life-style...” In fact, Dunn suggests<sup>11</sup> the range of diversity among the earliest churches exceeds that between New Testament documents. This scholarly study confirms Bible-readers’ impressions—wide-ranging diversity characterized the earliest churches, even as they shared crucial core beliefs.

## Does One New Testament Canon imply Uniformity?

Some Bible-teachers assert that all local churches should be the same, identical in all aspects. One teacher claims “*The churches...should be the same because they ...all received...the same New Testament.*” However, if more than one church-form is sanctioned in Scripture, this statement is false, it is a *non sequitur*.

Is this assertion of uniformity scriptural? Certainly it is not explicitly taught in the Bible; Scripture does not prescribe a uniform expression of the Church in every place. Perhaps this isn’t an explicit teaching, but a pattern illustrated in Scripture. Hence, we ask--does the New Testament portray the churches as uniform? How many Bible-readers reach this conclusion? Don’t they typically conclude exactly the opposite? The Jerusalem Church was distinctly Jewish, meeting in the Temple precincts with James (like Moses) presiding over a leaders’ council. The Church in Corinth resembles modern Charismatic churches. Even stripping away their problems, Corinth is still strikingly different from other churches. The churches in Philippi and Antioch look like evangelical churches with a gospel and/or mission focus. While Thessalonica was interested in end-time events and the rapture, Ephesus had the ability to receive profound truths. Yet, despite each church’s distinctive traits, Scripture recognizes each one as a *bone fide* local church. These examples illustrate the diversity among churches evident in the New Testament. *The Bible does not approve a single expression of the church* matching God’s ideal standard; it does not condemn all the others. Such an unscriptural concept is dangerous—it produces Laodicean pride in those who feel *they* match that unique pattern, while all others are sub-standard.

Diversity does not imply that any and all expressions of the church are equally valid. The New Testament writers prescribed boundaries defining valid church expressions. E.g. Christian liberty is not a license for drunken disorder nor to despise the poor (1

Cor. 11:20-22); genuine Spirit-inspired worship never denies or degrades Jesus Christ, rather it exalts Jesus as Lord (1 John 2:22; 1 Cor. 12:3). Nevertheless within such boundaries there are many valid expressions of the church. Scripture allows a multiplicity of church-expressions. The teaching of identical churches, the concept of one divinely-approved pattern, contradicts the New Testament's portrait of diversity.

**"The New Testament...bears witness to diversity...recognizes the validity of diversity...it canonizes the diversity of Christianity"—  
Professor J. Dunn**

Professor Dunn concludes that<sup>12</sup> "The New Testament...bears witness to a diversity ...within Christianity more or less from the first." He classifies early expressions of the Christian faith into four broad categories,<sup>13</sup> each represented within the canon of Scripture. Significantly this means diverse church expressions were not merely tolerated, they were recognized and endorsed by the canon of Scripture—the 27 books which constitute the New Testament. As Professor Dunn states<sup>14</sup> "The canon of the New Testament...*recognizes the validity of diversity*; it canonizes very different expressions of Christianity...It canonizes the unity of Christianity, but also...*it canonizes the diversity of Christianity*." This conclusion directly contradicts the position that "The churches ...should be the same..." Since the New Testament canon neither prescribes nor describes a uniform pattern for the local church, the doctrine of identity contradicts the Bible. On the contrary, the New Testament describes and canonizes diversity among local churches. "If we take the canon of the New Testament seriously...we must take seriously the diversity of Christianity," says Dunn.<sup>15</sup> Instead of an iron-clad mould forcing every local church into a uniform pattern, the New Testament allows churches considerable scope for variety. In Dunn's words,<sup>16</sup> "To recognize the canon of the New Testament is to affirm the diversity of Christianity" and (we would add) the diversity of the local churches.

**Genuine local churches are not uniform, they differ by locality—  
Watchman Nee**

Some people assert that only one form of church has divine approval. They declare "all the churches on this earth should be the same." This position contradicts Watchman Nee's teaching concerning the local church. He recognized there would be legitimate differences between local churches. W. Nee declared,<sup>17</sup>

The churches have their local situations, and there is no way we can unify their conditions...The more sectarian a group is, the more uniform its members are. But the more a local church is according to God's standard, the less uniform it will be. If the churches are churches at all, they are different from locality to locality.

Watchman Nee decisively rejected the concept of one model church embodying God's unique standard for all local churches. This underlies his statement,<sup>18</sup> "When God's people throughout the earth really see the local character of the churches, then they will appreciate their oneness as never before. **The churches of God are local, intensively local. If any factor enters in to destroy their local character, then they cease to be scriptural churches.**" The assertion that churches should be the same world-wide, identical in all significant aspects is the polar opposite of W. Nee's declaration "the churches of God are local, intensively local."

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NOTES:

- \* This paper summarizes, from a positive perspective, points which have been previously made elsewhere in the context of critical evaluations of LSM's teachings and practices.
1. *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* is the best-selling 1995 novel by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins which starts the *Left Behind* series. A film version appeared in 2000. It is based on J. N. Darby's teaching concerning the pre-tribulation rapture of the entire Church. Of course this doctrine is at variance with Bro. Lee's teaching of the overcomers' rapture. We are not discussing that issue here.
  2. Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2002, p. 68
  3. Andrew F. Walls, "Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Jan. 2004) p. 5
  4. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1996, p. 76. Elsewhere Prof. Walls observes "Each Christian lifestyle, representing a culture converted to Christ, expressed something the whole body needed. Hellenistic Christianity was not a [Lawless] soft option for benighted heathen who could do no better...Nor was Judaic Christianity a system of legalistic bondage...Each was necessary for the other...for each was an expression of Christ under certain specific conditions." Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, p. 78
  5. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, (second edition) SCM Press, London, UK, p. 370. Dunn was (at the time of publication) Professor of Divinity at the University of Durham, UK.
  6. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 372, emphasis original
  7. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 374
  8. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 374
  9. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 373
  10. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 374
  11. Dunn's states the "opposite side of the coin"—"The diversity of the New Testament documents is narrower than the diversity of the earliest churches." [James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, (second edition) Foreword, p. xxi]
  12. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, (second edition) p. 374. Elsewhere Dunn says, "The major New Testament documents...were 'chosen,' canonized as they were in all their diversity, despite the range of their diversity. I do not hesitate to claim that it was the leading of the Spirit which enabled [the Church councils] to acknowledge as canonical a range of documents, which so richly embody the diverse vitality..." [Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, Foreword, p. xxxi]
  13. Dunn writes, "It is a matter of fact that in the second half of the second century, there were, in very simplified terms, four main claimants to the title 'Christian.' My question is simply, How did this come about? What does this tell us about the character of first-century Christianity? [Dunn, *Unity & Diversity*, Foreword, p. xxvii, emphasis added] He classifies these "four claimants" as [1] Jewish Christianity, [2] Hellenistic Christianity, [3] Apocalyptic Christianity and [4] Early Catholicism
  14. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, (second edition) p. 376, emphasis original The quote in context reads: "The canon of the New Testament has a continuing function also in that it *recognizes the validity of diversity*; it canonizes very different expressions of Christianity...In other words the canon is important because it canonizes the unity of Christianity, but also because *it canonizes the diversity of Christianity.*"
  15. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, (second edition) p. 377
  16. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, (second edition) p. 377
  17. Watchman Nee, *Collected Works*, vol. 58, p. 161
  18. W. Nee, *Normal Christian Church Life*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 30, p. 61