

The Image of Paul and Jewish–Christian Relations

CCJWA's August 1st event "The Image of Paul and Jewish–Christian Relations," held in Temple David's refurbished meeting room, proved successful on many levels. With about 30 members and guests in attendance, Pauline scholars Dr William S. Campbell and Dr Kathy Ehrensperger presented theses around Paul promoting positive Jewish–Christian relations that stimulated a dialogue, often touching at the heart of Christian and Jewish difference, leading to considerable discussion over supper.

A spousal duo, from The University of Wales, Trinity Saint David, Lampeter Campus, Drs Campbell and Ehrensperger, presented aspects of Paul in turn: "Paul's positive evaluation of his Jewish identity and its relevance for Jewish–Christian relations", and "Paul's vision of the unity of Israel and the nations."

Using texts from Galatians, Philippians, and 1 Corinthians, Dr Campbell demonstrated Paul's efforts to affirm and maintain Jewish identity and practices in his advice that Jews and Gentiles should remain in what they held upon their "call" to follow Jesus as Messiah. Naming Jewish and Gentile responders to Jesus as "Christ-followers," Dr Campbell avoided applying present religious-cultural separateness of Christianity and Judaism onto the pre-70 CE perceptions he explored. He supported his thesis by pointing to Paul's position on circumcision, a specifically Jewish practice, expressed to the Galatians (6:12–16) and the Corinthians (1 Cor 7:17–20), as applicable to Jews only, and inappropriate for non-Jews. Finally, Philippians 3:8, "I regard everything as loss...", often used as supporting forswearing, thus devaluing, one's earlier culture toward a new "Christian" uniformity, Dr Campbell showed was, rather, rhetoric employed by Paul to emphasize the strength of his feelings regarding Jesus as Messiah. This rhetoric works through comparison. A second thing (experiencing Jesus as Messiah) is elevated by devaluing a former thing (Paul's Jewishness) as "loss." The comparison only makes sense when that first thing (his Jewishness) is deemed as of high value; without this, the second thing would remain of dubious value.

Furthering Dr Campbell's assertion that Paul aimed to preserve a diversity of religious-cultural identity, Dr Ehrensperger outlined the complexity of Paul's aim in seeing "all nations worship God." To understand Paul's vision of a "unity of nations" involves understanding Paul's context, that of Roman conquerors rendering their dominated peoples as, if not sub-human, as barbaric, and understanding Paul's vision in relation to this context.

Dr Ehrensperger described Paul as mediating between culturally diverse groups in the Roman Empire. Paul was not proposing an amalgam or synthesis of cultures, a merge into a non-differentiated homogeneity, but worked as a cultural translator (for example, the word "spirit" would have resonated differently when heard from within Greek philosophy or from within Jewish tradition). Representing those Jewish people who were Christ-followers, Paul strove to convey an understanding of Christ "as Messiah" to non-Jewish cultures.

In its dominion, the Roman Empire claimed, by bringing peace and stability (including economic benefits), to have united all peoples to benefit the whole of humankind. But this ideological claim could only be seen as a benefit from the perspective of the elite, as it was achieved by violence, and maintained by military power. Rome's conquests could not enjoy this vision because of the empire's stratification. Greeks were considered as less than Romans; all others were viewed as uncivilized. Rome, however, feared its conquered

subgroups, as they had the potential to unite independently against Rome. The sense under Roman rule might be best described, Dr Ehrensperger tendered, by “Nero’s nightmare”: the fear that there might be cooperation among the conquered peoples, leading to revolt against the empire. Nero and other emperors thus hoped for, and promoted, inter-cultural animosity. Uprisings, such as the Jewish one in 66 CE, were severely punished by the Romans.

Paul’s vision, however, involved all nations in their separate values and identities coming to worship God side by side, echoing an ideal drawn from his Jewish tradition, but not subverting the imperial order in the way Nero feared. Paul drew his vision of unity from Zechariah (2:10–13; 8:20–23; 14:16) and Micah (4:1–4), where a unity of nations is hoped for. He envisaged that “nations,” by turning away from idols, yet retaining their identity, could fulfil that unity — against the diversity the Romans relied on.

Drs Campbell and Ehrensperger, whose theses rest on a “pre-temple destruction Paul,” saw Paul’s aims, amid intense conviction of Jesus as the awaited Jewish Messiah, as utterly consistent with his Jewish context. They concede that comprehending this is difficult as it means suspending later interpretations of Paul’s words and what “Christ-following” has become through history to our present day. Questions were invited after the combined address, and questioning continued for another hour over supper.

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