Conscience, Interdependence, and Embodied Difference: What Paul’s Ecclesial Principles Can Offer the Contemporary Church

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One of the perennial concerns of ecclesiology seems to be that of unity and difference. Are there limits to the kinds of diversity which church unity can sustain? Can a unified community sustain disagreement and dissent? This paper attempts to situate the current debate over homosexuality in the Anglican Communion within a biblical context of Pauline ecclesiology. Through careful exegesis of 1 Corinthians and Romans, the author identifies three core principles of Paul’s ecclesiology: conscience, interdependence, and embodied difference. The author argues that, for Paul, ecclesial unity is not a concept that precludes difference in identity or in practice. Paul’s theological and pastoral convictions led him to articulate ecclesial principles that attempt to respect diversity in identity and practice, even as he advocates for a robust and dynamic understanding of unity and mutual relationship. Ultimately, the author suggests that the Anglican Covenant currently under consideration by the Communion might be understood in this “Pauline” way—pointing toward an ecclesiology within controversy.

One of the perennial concerns of ecclesiology seems to be that of unity and difference. The question of how to respect embodied difference while maintaining communal unity in the church is especially pressing in our contemporary moment, when the cultural and religious pluralisms that characterize our globalized society function more to separate than to interconnect us. Diverse embodiments of

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race, gender, and sexual orientation are often experienced by ecclesial communities as barriers to church unity, and even occasions for division. Are there limits to the kinds of diversity which church unity can sustain? Is a unified “church” even a coherent category if ecclesial identity and practice are constituted through multiple, and sometimes conflicting, identities and practices? Can a unified community sustain disagreement and dissent? This essay considers the question of unity and difference by reflecting on the ecclesial principles of conscience, interdependence, and embodied difference as articulated in two Pauline epistles: 1 Corinthians and Romans. I argue that for Paul, ecclesial unity is not a concept that precludes difference in identity or in practice. Paul’s theological and pastoral convictions led him to articulate ecclesial principles which attempt to respect diversity in identity and practice, even as he advocates for a robust and dynamic understanding of unity and mutual relationship. Ultimately, these Pauline ecclesial principles can be helpful tools for understanding and even addressing modern problems of ecclesial unity and difference, such as the current debate over homosexuality within the Anglican Communion.

In reflecting upon the “ecclesial principles” expressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians and Romans, I do not mean to suggest that Paul has (or articulates) anything like a “systematic ecclesiology” or even a comprehensive program for church unity. The earlier of the two letters, 1 Corinthians was written to a congregation which Paul helped to found, as a response to a letter from the Corinthians themselves that sought Paul’s views on disputed matters within the community (7:1). Written slightly later, and most likely composed while Paul was in Corinth, Romans is addressed to a congregation not founded by Paul (and whom he had most likely never met), and differs in genre from other Pauline letters in which Paul directly and authoritatively deals with congregational problems. In highlighting the similarities

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1 There is a variety of opinions as to the dating of 1 Corinthians, ranging from 54 CE to as late as 57 CE. See Raymond E. Brown, An Introduction to the New Testament (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 512.


5 Jewett, Romans, 59.
in strategy and argument Paul uses to advocate for unity within difference in these disparate letters (addressed to different communities, situations, and contexts), I am taking a pragmatic, rather than systematic, view of Paul.

In other words, the fact that similar strategies and arguments, which I am calling Paul’s “ecclesial principles,” can be found in these disparate contexts should not imply that Paul had worked out a coherent systematic understanding of the church. Rather, I suggest that perhaps in addressing difference and conflict in communities all around the ancient world, Paul was required, pragmatically, to develop methods for dealing theologically and pastorally with a wide variety of ecclesial situations. If we find Paul applying similar principles in diverse ecclesial contexts, it is likely because these are arguments of which Paul was theologically convicted and strategies he found pastorally appropriate, honed through reflection and prayer on his work and experience. 1 Corinthians is perhaps the most helpful place to begin an analysis of Paul’s ecclesial principles because this letter was written earlier, and in response to specific problems in a congregation well known to Paul. Once we have identified how Paul utilized these principles in the more concrete situation of this community, it is possible to trace the trajectory of Paul’s thought as he develops and adapts these principles for later use in a different context.

**The Corinthian Context**

By all accounts, Corinth was quite a pluralistic city, religiously and racially. Situated between two ports, Corinth attracted a “cosmopolitan population” of immigrants and “freed slaves of Greek, Syrian, Jewish, and Egyptian origin,” as well as artisans, business people, and the newly wealthy. Corinth contained a number of pagan temples, representing both Greek and Egyptian deities, adding to the general “multicultural ambiance.”6 The Corinthian congregation was likely made up of both Jewish and Gentile Christians, although Gentiles may have been in the majority. Raymond Brown feels that those converted to Christianity by Paul would have most likely come from “the lower to middle strata of society, with artisans and ex-slaves far outnumbering the rich.”7 This is significant since, as Dale Martin ar-

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gues, the ideological divisions within the Corinthian church seem to have been “split along status lines, with higher-status members taking one position on several issues and lower-status members another.”8 Ultimately, as Margaret Mitchell points out, Paul describes these different Corinthian status-groups using the terms “weak” and “strong,” in keeping with the political rhetoric of factionalism, to denote who has political advantage and who does not.9

In 1 Corinthians, Paul addresses a range of moral and religious disputes, including sexual freedom (5:1–13; 6:12–20), litigiousness (6:1–11), virginity and marriage (7:1–40), the question of eating meat sacrificed to idols (8:1–13; 10:23–11:1), idolatry (10:1–22), the veiling of women (11:2–16), abuses of the Lord’s Supper (11:17–22, 27–34), and the proper use of spiritual gifts (12:1–11; 14:1–40). And while it is possible to discern common pastoral and theological principles Paul uses to deal with each of these issues, they do not each carry the same “weight” with regard to the question of diversity. While Paul conceives of some issues/disagreements (such the question of idol meat) as “legitimate” loci of diversity in opinion and practice, other situations (such as the described instances of sexual immorality) seem to fall outside the boundaries of acceptable diversity and must be dealt with as transgressions of sin. As Mitchell notes, throughout 1 Corinthians “Paul does not argue for Corinthian unity in the abstract, but in regard to the very specific practices and beliefs which divide them.”10 In other words, what makes one variance in practice and belief “acceptably diverse” and another “transgressively sinful” is highly situational to the Corinthian context and dispute, even if such arguments are always rooted in larger principles of Paul’s theological thought.

In his writings, Paul does not formulate a comprehensive doctrine of sin in the abstract so much as examine sin in specific pastoral and rhetorical situations.11 It is important to make this explicit if one intends, as I do, to apply Pauline principles to a contemporary situation. What I am suggesting is that, while Pauline ecclesial principles offer guidelines for how to operate within situations of both “diversity”

10 Mitchell, Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation, 255.
and “sin” as defined in concrete, contemporary pastoral and rhetorical contexts, they cannot be used broadly, across time, to diagnose “acceptable diversity” and “transgressive sin” themselves. The contextual nature of Paul’s own definition of “acceptable diversity” as opposed to “transgressive sin” shows that he often privileged the situation of the community over even the guidelines of Scripture and church consensus. As C. K. Barrett points out, in placing the question of idol meat within the bounds of “acceptable diversity” rather than “transgressive sin,” Paul is allowing diversity for what is elsewhere—in the Hebrew Scriptures and in “church thought,” such as the so-called “Apostolic Decree” detailed in Acts 15—strictly forbidden on the grounds of sin.12 Theologically, Paul is able to do this because he draws a distinction between the practice of eating idol meat and the practice of actual idol worship. However, the larger point is that the question of how and where the limits of “acceptable diversity” should be drawn in a particular circumstance is complex, and one that Paul never purports to solve definitively in his writings.13

Since boundaries between the “acceptably diverse” and “transgressively sinful” are for Paul always drawn in reference to concrete situations, I now turn my attention to the question of idol meat in Corinth to see how Paul’s ecclesial principles are both formed by and operate within this specific situation. The dispute over idol meat—whether it is acceptable or appropriate for a Christian to eat meat that has been sacrificed to an idol—is first addressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 8:1–13. The arguments of the strong, which Paul quotes in 8:4, are that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” The strong protest that since idols are not “real,” the eating of idol meat should not be understood as theologically problematic for Christians. Building on the work of Gerd Theissen, Martin notes, “Those Corinthian Christians opposed to eating meat offered to idols were probably of lower status, whereas those who defended the practice, using arguments and slogans learned from popular moral philosophy, were of higher status.”14

Because the strong are the high-status Christians, the eating of idol meat is a pragmatic concern for them. As Martin points out, the

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strong “would have found total avoidance of meat difficult, since they would have wanted—indeed, needed—to give and receive dinner invitations from other members of higher society at Corinth,” and all the meat purchased from the market for such occasions would have been sacrificed to a deity prior to its sale.\(^\text{15}\) Indeed, according to Barrett, for a Christian to make up her mind never to eat anywhere there would be the possibility of encountering idol meat would mean she “would have had to withdraw into a self-imposed ghetto.”\(^\text{16}\) Thus, while the strong acknowledge that idolatry is wrong (8:8), they want to distinguish this practice from the eating of idol meat: first, on theological grounds (because idols are not “real”) and second, on practical grounds (because the details of their day-to-day embodied existence would otherwise have separated them from the Christian community).

However, the weak did not share the viewpoint of the strong that eating idol meat was an appropriate or acceptable practice for Christians. Paul objects on their behalf in 8:7, “Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.” The problem of the weak, as Paul has articulated it, is primarily the connection of idol meat to the defiling of conscience. Even though they objected to the practice of eating idol meat, it is likely that the weak at Corinth also recognized that, theologically, idols were “nothing.”\(^\text{17}\) However, the conflict in the Corinthian church arose over the different reactions of “conscience” by the strong and the weak to this practice. As Mitchell notes, Paul’s primary concern in his consideration of idol meat is “not the practice of eating this meat itself, but the consequences of both eating and disapproving of others who eat on the unity of the church.”\(^\text{18}\)

A number of scholars agree that Paul himself shares the theological principles of the strong, that idols are “nothing.” However, Paul differs from the strong about how Christians should behave in light of this knowledge since his pastoral concern is promoting the welfare of all in the community, particularly with regard to “conscience.”\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{15}\) Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 75. See also Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 147.

\(^{16}\) Barrett, “Things Sacrificed to Idols,” 147.


Jewett describes the situation in Corinth as one in which the strong “were so concerned to build up the weak conscience that they embarked on a program of enlightenment. They sought by means of their own libertinistic example to shame the less enlightened members of the congregation into acting against their conscience.”20 Thus, since the problem, and its pastoral “solution,” is integrally tied to this matter of “conscience,” it is necessary to explore this term in more depth to see just what this term means for Paul and how he utilizes it in promoting communal unity.

The Pauline Conscience

Conscience, rendered as *syneidesis* in Greek, was a popular notion in the Greco-Roman world at the time Paul was writing.21 Scholars have rightly sought to distinguish Paul’s understanding of conscience from our modern concept of a subjectivist conscience.22 For example, while the modern understanding sees the conscience as a part of the self, functioning to help one discern right from wrong, conscience for the ancients was a knowledge of the self comprised of past actions performed by that self—a kind of “conviction of past misdeeds.”23 Yet acknowledging this difference does not mean that Paul’s understanding of conscience has no resonance with our modern, psychological view of conscience. As Troels Engberg-Pedersen has pointed out in his extensive study of Pauline texts in light of Stoic philosophy, while it would be anachronistic to attribute a modern sense of “individualism” to Paul, it is also “false not to allow that Paul is in fact doing philosophy about the self (the ‘I’) and its relation to God, Christ, the world and the others to exactly the same extent as a similar philosophy (of self and others) was being done in antiquity by the philosophers who make up the ancient ethical tradition.”24 Engberg-Pedersen sees Paul as engaging in philosophical inquiry about the “self,” in much

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22 Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 178.
the same way as did Paul’s contemporaries, philosophers in the ancient ethical tradition. While the “inner attitude” of “‘self-awareness’ (syn-eidesis)” might not be strictly identifiable with our modern understanding of an “internal moral compass” used to determine future action, Paul’s similarities with the philosophical schools of his time show that conscience for him did function as a kind of internalized “technology of the self.”

Jewett believes that “Paul viewed the conscience as an autonomous agent which marks any transgression against the individual’s accepted code.” In this way, Paul’s understanding of conscience seems part way between the modern “implanted/inculcated internal moral compass” and a self-contained “ancient” conception of “internal conviction of past misdeeds.” As an individual’s internalized “accepted code,” the conscience was for Paul “socially conditioned and intimately connected with the mechanisms of self-respect, moral autonomy and psychic health.” Because the conscience is for Paul a socially contingent technology of the self, Paul recognizes that the conscience does not “reflect divine judgment or represent the claim of the transcendent authority,” but rather is one among many instances of human judgment. Because conscience for Paul “is neither God’s voice nor the agent of divine judgment,” the conscience cannot “provide assurance of justification,” which Jewett notes is what Paul appears to be acknowledging in 1 Corinthians 4:4c.

In other words, Paul sees the conscience as fallible. As a principle internalized from the social sphere through personal interpretations of what we experience to be “misdeeds,” our consciences are just as subject to sin, misdirection, and misapplication as everything else is in the human realm. As a “human phenomenon which is entirely disconnected from the divine sphere,” judgments made by the conscience may ultimately prove “incorrect when judged from an objective theological perspective.” Just because we experience it as an internal-

29 Jewett, *Paul’s Anthropological Terms*, 432.
ized “code” does not mean that judgments and experiences of the conscience are as complete as, or even similar to, God’s perfect judgment. In this way, while the understanding of the Pauline conscience as a “technology of the self” has many resonances with a modern psychological model of the conscience, it differs from the latter view in this significant respect. As an internal “moral compass,” the modern understanding sees the conscience as inherently trustworthy, if not largely inviolable. In contrast, Paul’s understanding of the conscience was that it was human and fallible—decidedly not the voice of God operating within the person. In Paul’s view, judgments of conscience could be, and in fact often were, wrong.

However, what makes the ecclesial principle of “conscience” so interesting in the Corinthian debate over idol meat is Paul’s commitment to allow one to follow the judgments of one’s conscience, however incorrect they might be. If the strong in Corinth were attempting to “build up” the consciences of the weak by encouraging them to act against their scruples, Paul rejects this program of “forced enlightenment,” and instead encourages the weak to act according to their own standards so as to avoid pain.32 Indeed, according to Stanley Stowers, Paul saw the pedagogical bullying of the weak by the strong as a theological failure. While the strong might have “correct belief” with regard to idol meat, their failure to accommodate the consciences of the weak amounted to a gross failure of rightly following Christ.33

Thus, while the weak might share the knowledge of the strong that an idol was “nothing,” Jewett’s reading of 1 Corinthians 8:7b suggests Paul recognized that not everyone in the Corinthian congregation had “assimilated” this knowledge to the same extent.34 Jewett suggests one might “have” knowledge that idols are nothing, but an individual might experience a “lag” in her “cultural and psychological conditioning,” such that her inherited dread of idols continues to operate within her conscience. In this way, Jewett sees Paul’s response about respecting the integrity of the weak conscience as a pastoral one: a person should not be forced to transgress the responses of her conscience because such a situation causes profound internal dissonance and can lead to the “destruction of the self.”35

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34 Jewett, *Paul’s Anthropological Terms*, 423.
While I find Jewett’s reading plausible, others may not be convinced, since it seems suspiciously similar to modern conceptions of “assimilated” and “unassimilated” knowledge within the self. In this regard, I think a larger point can be made about the conscience’s fallibility. According to Joyce Shin, a scholar who builds on Jewett’s work, Paul never understands the conscience to be a salvific category because of his eschatological point of view. Only God is a fully trustworthy judge of human persons. Because human nature is sinful and the conscience fallible, a self-critical humility is required whenever a person asserts a position based in conscience.\(^\text{36}\) Thus, even if we do not grant Jewett his pastoral point (that Paul makes accommodation for the conscience of the weak out of concern for the “integrity of the self” of persons with unassimilated knowledge), it seems Paul nonetheless has theological motivation for accommodating a multiplicity of views. Because “correct” judgment belongs to God and is only known eschatologically, allowing for diversity in practice based on judgments of conscience seems theologically appropriate, since one can never be entirely sure whether or not the convictions of one’s conscience truly are in line with God’s will.

Hans Conzelmann remarks on Paul’s lack of pedagogical impulse, noting that “Paul gives no advice either to the strong or to the weak on the question of how the weak consciences could be strengthened.”\(^\text{37}\) Conzelmann suggests Paul’s position is one that “allows our brother to stand as the man he is, not as the man he ought to be according to some ideal standard.”\(^\text{38}\) Yet, while Paul does not condemn the opinions of the strong in their stance on idol meat, neither does he fully endorse a “live and let live” approach to the situation in Corinth. Paul recognizes that present actions of both strong and weak are causing harm to one another within the community, thus threatening the integrity of its unity. In order to uphold the integrity of the weak consciences, Paul counsels the strong to modify their behavior, to refrain from eating idol meat in certain situations, out of deference for their weaker brothers and sisters (1 Cor. 8:9–13). Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 10:22–27 Paul offers suggestions for the weak to help them to honor their strong brothers and sisters. While Paul maintains that the weak should not violate their integrity (10:28–29), he also suggests that the

\(^{36}\) Shin, “Accommodating the Other’s Conscience,” 5, 19.

\(^{37}\) Conzelmann, 1 Corinthians, 147.

\(^{38}\) Conzelmann, 1 Corinthians, 147 n. 17.
weak not go out of their way to inflict their own principles of conscience on the strong. Paul counsels them not to inquire too deeply into the origins of the meat, whether sold at the market or offered at a dinner party, but instead to give thanks for it as part of God’s creation (10:24–28). Thus, Paul sees mutual love and interdependence—concern for the well-being of all in the community, even those with whom one disagrees—as the proper focus for the community, rather than the determination of who is right and who is wrong (which, after all, can only fully be known eschatologically).

Interdependence and Embodied Difference

Paul articulates his vision for mutual love and interdependence in what is perhaps his most well-known image for communal life—that of the interdependent body (1 Cor. 12:12–31). Scholars have noted that this image is not unique to Paul, but was a common trope in ancient political literature. *Homonoia*, or concord, speeches, the most famous of which was the fable of Menenius Agrippa, often described the polis or a social group as an interdependent body. 39 Martin in particular has made careful analysis of the ideological function of *homonoia* speeches. He notes that while such rhetoric used the microcosm of the body “to explain how unity can exist in diversity within the macrocosm of society,” the ideological function of these speeches was to reinforce hierarchy, and to suggest that “inequality is both necessary and salutary.” 40 The operative ideology in *homonoia* speeches was that “like the private body, the public body is a hierarchy, with different members (in this case, classes) assigned by Nature to positions in the body and to particular roles in the harmonious cooperation of the body’s parts.” 41 The rhetorical power of the image lay in the suggestion that the “physical givenness of the human body mandates the hierarchy of the social body.” 42 Yet surprisingly, Paul’s use of the body metaphor in 1 Corinthians is “at odds with the dominant goal of *homonoia* speeches, which is to solidify the social hierarchy by averting lower-class challenges to the so-called natural status structures that

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prevail in society.” Paul is able to use the metaphor of the interdependent body to promote unity, but in doing so he “turns it against its usual role as a prop for upper-class ideology.”

Paul emphasizes how the diverse embodiments of the various parts of the body are necessary to its proper interdependent functioning. “If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?” (1 Cor. 12:17). However, while homonoia speeches used this differentiation to argue for the appropriateness of hierarchy and lower status (the body needs the less desirable parts, after all, and thus it is crucial that such parts continue in their undesirable function), Paul suggests a different understanding of value and worth in the differentiated body.

On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. (1 Cor. 12:22–26)

Paul appropriates the body metaphor to show that the “normal” political assumptions about the more and less honored parts of the corporate body are not the assumptions shared by God in God’s value system. According to Paul, God has chosen that which is “inferior,” according to it greater honor, not because this inferior member has been “mislabeled” and is actually superior, but in order that “there may be no dissension within the body” (12:25). Martin deftly notes Paul is claiming “that the normally conceived body hierarchy is actually only an apparent, surface hierarchy.” However, I disagree with Martin’s conclusion that Paul’s “rhetoric pushes for an actual reversal of the normal, ‘this-worldly’ attribution of honor and status. The lower is made higher, and the higher lower.” Instead, Paul appears to be

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43 Martin, The Corinthian Body, 47.
44 Martin, The Corinthian Body, 47.
45 Martin, The Corinthian Body, 94.
46 Martin, The Corinthian Body, 96.
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attempting to describe a body in which all the members are honored equally.

In 1 Corinthians 12:24, Paul states that the more respectable members do not need the “greater honor” ascribed in the previous verse to the “less respectable members”; however, this seems to me not so much a reversal, as an acknowledgment that the already-valued members simply have no need of this extra, “rehabilitory” attention. Paul seems to envision a body in which the interconnectedness and interdependence of all the members put them on equal status with one another—“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (12:26). Notice that in this vision of interdependence, equal status does not come through erasure or denial of embodied difference because difference is not an indication of value—value to God or value to one another in the community. Paul’s argument in 12:26 suggests equality in that if the stomach suffers, all the body suffers together, not just the stomach. And likewise, if the genitals are honored by God due to their “lesser” status, then the whole body, not just the genitals, should rejoice together at this honor.

Paul is consistent in his emphasis on the maintenance of embodied difference throughout this letter. In 1 Corinthians 12:13, as Paul begins his examination of the body metaphor, he takes care to note that the many members who have been baptized into one body in the one Spirit represent Jews and Greeks, slaves and free people. That Paul emphasizes these economic and racial differences in the same verse where he asserts their unity and equality in the one Spirit seems to suggest that he did not see incorporation into the one body by the one Spirit as “erasing” Greek-ness or Jewish-ness, liberty or enslavement. In 7:20 Paul encourages the Corinthians to “remain in the condition in which you were called.” Slaves should not necessarily be concerned to seek their freedom (7:21). Married couples should remain so (7:10), and the unmarried and widowed should also remain in their single states, if they can sustain them with integrity (7:8–9). Paul even suggests that the Corinthians maintain their Greek/Jewish differentiations. Those circumcised should not seek to remove the marks of their circumcision, and those who are not circumcised do not need to become so (7:18). Thus, it seems that the interdependent unity to which Paul is continually calling the Corinthians is not precluded because of embodied difference. Paul asserts that embodiments normally accorded lower status by the world are in fact so honored by
God that all should treat one another in their difference as if they all shared the same honors and troubles, for they do in God’s value system.

The Roman Context

Having identified the ecclesial principles of conscience, interdependence, and embodied difference which Paul applies in his work with the church in Corinth, I now turn to a brief examination of these principles in the context of Rome. As previously noted, Romans differs in genre from other Pauline letters in which Paul directly and authoritatively deals with congregational problems.47 As I have also argued above, because Paul is highly situational in his pastoral interactions, it is important briefly to consider some elements of the Roman context, and how Paul adapts himself and his rhetoric to this context in his letter. Like Corinth, Rome was a religiously pluralistic city—respect for the Greek deities existed in a complex relationship with the civic cult.48 Historically, Rome had been home to a significant Jewish population.49 The earliest congregations seem to have developed in the synagogues, suggesting that the first Roman Christians were Jewish Christians. However, in 41 CE the synagogues were closed because of internal (perhaps Christian) agitation, and so a decade after these events the makeup of the Christian congregations became increasingly Gentile.50 Indeed, Stowers sees Paul’s letter to the Romans as a “clarification” for gentile followers of Christ [of] their relation to the law, Jews and Judaism and the current place of both Jews and gentiles in God’s plan through Jesus Christ.51 In other words, religious and racial interactions in the Roman context were notoriously complex. In Romans, Paul attempts to provide a coherent theological worldview for a situation in which Jews, Gentiles, Jewish Christians, Gentile Christians, and Roman authorities all attempted to co-exist with relative measures of success.52

While Paul also applies his ecclesial principles of conscience, interdependence, and embodied difference to the Roman context, he

47 Jewett, Romans, 59.
48 Jewett, Romans, 48.
50 Jewett, Romans, 58–59.
51 Stowers, A Rereading of Romans, 36.
52 Jewett, Romans, 72.
does so in a slightly different way than was evident in his interactions with the Corinthians. This difference is due mainly to the difference in context. As noted above, in Romans Paul is introducing himself to churches he has not yet met and which he hopes will help him in his upcoming mission to Spain. It seems likely this would have influenced the manner in which he dealt with the Romans. Also, Paul is not addressing one specific pastoral situation as he was in 1 Corinthians, although he seems to know something about the situation “on the ground” in the Roman churches. Jewett notes Paul’s categories of the weak and strong in Rome are much more vaguely drawn than in 1 Corinthians, so that these categories in the Roman context actually encompass “a wide range of congregational viewpoints.” But while Romans required “an indirect and diplomatically nuanced address to the issues in a congregation that Paul had not founded,” this should not imply that Paul’s pastoral suggestions were inapplicable to the Romans’ difficulties surrounding unity and difference.

**Unconditional Welcome**

As in 1 Corinthians, Paul argues that unity among Christians is not precluded by embodied diversity. Jewett believes Paul’s stance in Romans with regard to pluralism unabashedly allows it to flourish. Jewett sees Paul’s stance on pluralism in Romans as slightly different from that in 1 Corinthians. While in 1 Corinthians Paul recommends behavioral modifications for the strong and the weak to help them overcome the divisive aspects of pluralism, in Romans Paul offers no such modifications, “allow[ing] that pluralism to stand on a permanent basis.” For Jewett, Romans 15:7 represents the theological center of Paul’s program for tolerant acceptance of pluralism: “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” Generous welcome is possible among Christians, welcome even “to competitors and ideological opponents within the congregation” because, for Paul, the essence of Christianity is “the ‘welcome’ shown to God’s enemies.” Jewett theologically locates this unconditional

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54 Jewett, *Christian Tolerance*, 125.
welcome of the enemy in the justification of humanity (all of whom are equally sinful; 3:22–24) by Christ’s death on our behalf while we still remained sinners (5:8, 10), and thus enemies of God. Undoubtedly this is a theologically sound reading. But more significant, I think, to a reading of Romans which sees unconditional acceptance of diversity as a constitutive part of the Christian community is the way in which Paul describes God’s unconditional acceptance of the Gentiles.

From the very beginning of Romans, Paul describes the Gentiles as the enemies of God. In 1:18–23, Paul describes a kind of Gentile proto-myth, in which the Gentiles reject the truth of monotheism, received through natural revelation, and instead fall into the worship of idols, nature, and pagan gods. Paul then details how this rejection of monotheism led the Gentiles to fall into all kinds of sinful and debased behaviors (1:24–32). Yet, despite all this, despite their shameful and debased history, these Gentiles are the “wild olive shoot” which God has chosen to graft onto the root of the olive tree representing God’s covenant relationship with humanity in Israel (11:17). Paul sees this action as a part of God’s larger plan for the ultimate salvation of all Israel, and ultimately of all people (11:11–12). While this interpretation is not something which can necessarily be embraced by modern Christians seeking to promote tolerant pluralism (most modern proponents of interreligious pluralism would likely balk at the supersessionist suggestion, preferring instead to affirm the integrity of both religions), the larger point is not about Judaism or Christianity per se, but about the character of God as understood by Paul.

For Paul, God is the God who has accepted God’s enemies—those who rejected God’s revelation and sinned in the most debased ways—and chosen to graft these enemies into life with God’s very self. This is why Paul is so stern in chapter 2 about refraining from judging others within the community. If God accepted God’s enemies into fellowship with God’s self, how much more should sinful human beings follow this principle in their relationships with one another? Paul is not suggesting that God’s acceptance of the Gentiles means that God no longer judges them; rather, Paul is emphasizing the inability of human judgment fully to comprehend God’s perfect judgment. As

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60 Indeed, Paul’s constant admonition throughout Romans is to refrain from judging one another within the community. See 2:1; 8:33–34; 12:3; 12:19; 14:3–4; 14:10–13.
Jewett notes, Paul’s argument in Romans is “that divine love is completely inclusive and nondiscriminating. It comes to those who least deserve it, regardless of their conformity to the law.”

If Paul’s theological approach to diversity in unity in Romans is that of unconditional welcome for the physical (understood as constitutive physical racial/religious difference—circumcision versus no circumcision; 2:25–29) and ideological (those who follow dietary restriction and those who do not; 14:1–23) other, how does he use his ecclesial principles in this different context? The word for conscience, *syneidesis*, appears in 2:15, 9:1, and 13:5. In 2:15, Jewett sees the conscience operating for Paul much as it did in 1 Corinthians—as an autonomous, internalized standard,62 operative within Gentiles whose social appropriation of certain principles of Jewish law has caused them to follow it “anonymously.” The conscience functions similarly in 13:5, as the internalized standard which might be violated if one were to defy one’s inherited respect of authority by acting against the government.63 The usage of conscience in 9:1 is trickier, given Jewett’s insistence that for Paul, conscience is a purely human phenomenon, not to be confused with the voice of God. Jewett maintains this reading in 9:1, suggesting that because Paul normally assumes the conscience to be “an erring human function,” the confirmation of the Holy Spirit in this verse serves to prove that the determination of Paul’s conscience is in fact true.64 In this instance, Paul is not mistaken in thinking his conscience is leading him to speak the truth in Christ because this fallible standard has been subjected to the independent confirmation of the Holy Spirit.

Though the word *syneidesis* does not appear in chapters 12 or 14 of Romans, Jewett nonetheless sees the principle of conscience as operating here as well. Jewett notes Paul’s suggestion that a person live with sober judgment “according to the measure of faith that God has assigned” (12:3) is consistent with “the principle of varying conscience structures.”65 In other words, in this verse Paul is encouraging all Christians, weak or strong, to live according to the internal measuring rod operative within themselves. Likewise, his insistence

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61 Jewett, *Christian Tolerance*, 94.
63 Jewett, *Romans*, 797.
64 Jewett, *Paul’s Anthropological Terms*, 446.
that those who follow restricted diets and those who do not should refrain from judging one another (14:3–4) seems consistent with the principle of conscience which Paul espoused in 1 Corinthians. No one should have to violate his or her internal standard with regard to dietary practices (14:14–15), but Paul’s ultimate focus is not on the correctness of the determination of the (always fallible) conscience—whether to eat meat or not—but on the good of the interdependent community (14:17–20).

Paul also uses the body metaphor in Romans (12:3–8), albeit in a more abbreviated form than it appears in 1 Corinthians. Nevertheless, Paul’s emphasis in using the metaphor seems to be to promote mutual care and interdependence within the community (12:5), while maintaining the integrity of embodied difference (12:4). As Stowers notes, the “examples of varied gifts that constitute abilities to contribute to the good of others and of the social whole” found in verses 6–8 represent a Pauline “ethic that balances individual difference with social unity.”66 Difference, when embodied individually for the sake of the body, is what serves the body, both as a whole and as instantiated in the body’s individual members.

Ultimately, the principle of respect for embodied difference, which is prevalent throughout Romans, is part of Paul’s larger theological commitment to the unconditional acceptance of the other, even the other as enemy. Perhaps nowhere is that more explicit than in 12:14–21. Here this unconditional acceptance ranges from blessing those who would curse you (12:14) to feeding your enemy if she is hungry (12:20). It seems even the enemy has integrity in her difference as enemy. While God will be the ultimate judge of sin, injustice, and wrong (12:19), God’s own example of acceptance of the enemy, as well as the flawed character of human judgment, mean that ideological and physical otherness is to be unconditionally accepted within the Christian community.

A Contemporary Case Study

Finally, I now turn my attention to a brief consideration of Paul’s ecclesial principles in light of a contemporary ecclesial conflict over diversity and unity: the debate over homosexuality in the Anglican Communion. It is worth noting that Paul’s writings, particularly

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1 Corinthians, have been used by Christians and scholars in various settings to advocate for acceptance of all different types of pluralisms. In the context of the Anglican Communion, my own proposal is perhaps curious because I argue for the legitimacy of a plurality of practice and identity with regard to the issue of homosexuality—which many believe Romans 1:26–27 expressly forbids. While a full consideration of the history of interpretation of these verses is not possible here, it is important to acknowledge the scholarly opinions which caution against reading “modern” understandings of homosexuality into these verses. Martin sees Romans 1:18–32 as a “Jewish mythological narrative about the origins of idolatry” and its resulting consequences, including sexual immorality, while Stowers sees in these verses a description of the depravities of Gentile life, “an ethnic caricature developed by certain Jews” in order to characterize Gentiles as the “moral opposites of Jews.” In other words, while it is clear that Paul has much to say on the issue of sexual morality, and while it is understandable that modern Christians would look to Paul in formulating their own theological and ethical understandings of homosexuality, Romans 1:26–27 does not self-evidently describe the origins of anything which resembles current conceptions of “homosexual desire.”

The debate over homosexuality in the Anglican Communion has largely focused on whether non-celibate homosexuals should be ordained and whether homosexual relationships should be blessed as marriage by the church. Despite all the scholarship and discussion the issue of homosexuality has attracted in the past decade or so, each “faction” within the Anglican Communion (“for” and “against,” “liberal” and “conservative,” to grossly oversimplify the wide variety of positions on this issue) remains largely convinced of the validity of its

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own position. Because of this, I would like to suggest that, rather than “sexual immorality,” “tolerance,” or even “rights,” “conscience” might be the most appropriate category for considering this issue in light of Pauline ecclesial principles. For descriptive purposes, reactions of “conscience” seem to be what characterize the intractability of people on all sides of this issue: the “liberal” conviction that sexually active homosexuals can be understood as leading godly lives and the “conservative” conviction that sexually active homosexuality does not fit with their understanding of God’s intentions for human sexual relationship.

Interestingly, understanding the disparate “positions” on homosexuality as a matter of “conscience” may in fact be one thing that “conservatives” and “liberals” hold in common. The public rhetoric of this debate has already utilized the language of “conscience,” although not in the Pauline sense that I am suggesting. For example, the subtitle of the Manhattan Declaration, a statement that seeks to reinforce the definition of marriage as necessarily heterosexual, is A Call of Christian Conscience. Similarly, the election and consecration of Mary Glasspool, a partnered lesbian, to the office of bishop despite the requested moratoria on such elections and consecrations has been categorized as an act of “conscience” by none other than the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. Acknowledging the public, if underappreciated, way that “conscience” has operated in corporate understanding and articulation of this debate raises the larger issue of religious language. In applying Paul’s ecclesial principles to the current situation in the Anglican Communion, what I am suggesting is a reform in religious rhetoric. The point is not fun-

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71 Note that while many Anglican bishops and priests have signed the Manhattan Declaration, it is an ecumenical document. Found at: http://www.manhattandeclaration.org/the-declaration/read.aspx

damentally about the “validity” of either “side” of the argument, but rather about the terms in which the argument has been articulated. If using Paul’s ecclesial principles to think through the current controversy over homosexuality in the Anglican Communion is indeed a valid project, then my argument is that the terms which have been used to facilitate this debate have been theologically mistaken. Rather than understanding homosexuality as a matter of “sin,” the churches of the Anglican Communion would be better served by considering it as a matter of “conscience.”

To adopt a Pauline pragmatism, the terms of “sin” have not functioned theologically to clarify either “side” of the debate. Broadly, “conservative” arguments utilize the language of “sin” in the conviction that uncritical acceptance of a pattern of sexual relationship outside the bounds of “traditional” heterosexual marriage represents the more general failure of the church to call all people to “repentance and amendment of life in accord with the pattern of Christ.”73 Broadly, “liberal” arguments emphasize “homophobia [as] a socially constructed sin”74 whose consequences are seen in the failure of a gospel-mandated social justice. While “sin” might be a conceptually and theologically coherent category through which to understand each of these arguments on its own terms, using the rhetoric of “sin” makes the “positions” unnecessarily oppositional. It denies the deep concern “liberals” have for repentance and holiness of life, and it suggests that “conservatives” are not profoundly convicted to work to enact social patterns of justice such as were demonstrated in the life and ministry of Jesus. Within the terms of each of the arguments, “conservative” and “liberal,” “repentance” is the theological mechanism that would make renewed relationship possible across ideological lines. However, given the fundamental disagreement over the nature of “sin” in this issue, it is hard to imagine a situation in which the terms (or the various views) of repentance could be communicated and mutually understood.

It is important to remember that to suggest that the issue of homosexuality in the Anglican Communion is one of “conscience” and not one of “sin” is not de facto to remove the notion of sin from our

theological reflections. Paul’s great insight is that “conscience” is an entirely human element, subject to sin, and decidedly fallible. In labeling the issue of homosexuality a matter of “conscience,” “liberals” and “conservatives” would each have to concede that their position on the matter might be wrong. Certainly those whose conscience tells them that active homosexuality is not a hindrance to a godly life as an ordained or married person believe, as did Paul in Romans 9:1, that the Holy Spirit has made independent confirmation of the truth of this claim. I would venture that those who take the opposite side, understanding sexual morality through the “traditional heterosexual paradigm,” similarly feel that the Holy Spirit has independently confirmed their feelings of conscience. Paul’s understanding of conscience as an ecclesial principle is that it is never equivalent with the voice of God, and indeed is always subject to God’s judgment. In Romans, Paul particularly makes clear the inherent limits of human judgment, and that God’s perfect, final judgment is fully realized only eschatologically.

However, Paul also makes clear that not all divisive matters within the church can be considered as matters of “conscience,” and thus are open to a plurality of opinions and practices. In the contexts of both 1 Corinthians and Romans, Paul formulates his consideration of unity and diversity with explicit reference to sin and the holiness of the community. In fact, the “kind” of sin with which Paul is often expressly concerned would seem to be sexual sin. I have already mentioned the references in Romans 1. Additionally, in 1 Corinthians 5:1–13, 6:12–20, and 10:8, Paul admonishes Christians who engage in sexual immorality. The clear implication is that sexual sin is not within the boundaries of “acceptable diversity” which can be sustained within a relationship of interdependent church communion. Inevitably, in using Paul’s ecclesial principles to shed light on the situation in the Anglican Communion, my argument raises a question of whether considering homosexuality as a matter of “conscience” rather than “sin” in some way violates the integrity of the Pauline insistence that sexual morality affects the integrity of relationships within the Christian community.

In other words, is it conceptually coherent to insist both on a robust call to self-examination and holiness of life (in all areas of life, but particularly in the realm of sexuality), and to affirm the modern question of homosexuality as a matter of “conscience” admissible of an acceptable diversity of opinion and practice? Yes, but only with the
assumption that homosexuality *per se* (either as acts, or orientation, to generalize broadly and unhelpfully) is not a sin—or at least, is no more inherently sinful than is heterosexuality *per se*. Certainly, both homosexuality and heterosexuality (either sexual acts or sexual relationships) may be sinful in any given situation (such as those of rape, coercion, non-mutuality, and so on), and the church only maintains the integrity of its diversely embodied, interdependent community when it abhors sin and promotes amendment of life. However, conceptual clarity requires making explicit the assumption of this essay—that homosexuality is no more a hindrance to fostering amendment of life and sexual integrity than is heterosexuality.

If the reader does not find this conclusion tenable—that a church concerned with holiness of life can, with theological and conceptual coherency, maintain a position of dissent over homosexuality as a matter of “conscience” and not “sin”—she may be comforted by the fact that the rhetoric of conscience also obliges me to acknowledge that the terms of this essay (on any number of arguments) might be wrong. If the point can be made performatively, what the term “conscience” makes clear is that “conscience” versus “sin” is a reformation in rhetoric designed to promote unity through interdependence within the reality of an embodied difference of opinion and practice. In 1 Corinthians, Paul formulates “conscience” by making a distinction between the practice of eating idol meat (a matter of conscience) and the practice of idolatry (a matter of sin). But, as I have noted, Paul’s ultimate concern is never “the practice of eating this meat itself, but the consequences of both eating and disapproving of others who eat on the unity of the church.” In the context of Corinth, “conscience” is not about the theological or conceptual clarity of either one of the positions of the “factions” (for or against eating idol meat), but instead operates as a mechanism to keep people of varying conviction and practice in relationship with one another. Paul is concerned about the physical and spiritual consequences that such varying approval, conviction, and practice can have for the unity of the body of Christ. Thus, in utilizing Paul’s principle of “conscience” to consider the current situation of varying approval, conviction, and practice over the ordination and marriage of homosexual people in the Anglican Communion, my argument is concerned to identify principles that

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offer theological and conceptual clarity, not to “positions” but to an ecclesial reality—an interdependent church of differently embodied opinion and practice.

If “conscience” is the theological mechanism that can allow for diversity of opinion and practice within ecclesial union, while still maintaining the integrity of how these differences are embodied, difference of “conscience” also seems a fit description of the journey already taken by the Communion in terms of this issue. Certainly, people representing a myriad of positions within the debate would affirm the fallibility of “conscience” as it has been articulated and practiced “on the ground” in any number of situations. Indeed, many have questioned the coherence of an ecclesiology that would let stand seemingly opposed theologies and practices surrounding homosexuality. Whether or not one agrees with the policies and practices undertaken by the Archbishop and the other Instruments of Communion in dealing with the situation, a reality of differing “consciences” does seem descriptively to match the path the Communion has taken. In other words, both the Windsor Report (which offered suggestions for behavioral modification such that no one “side” offended the other’s “conscience”) and the proposed Anglican Covenant (which seeks to make explicit a relationship of interconnected yet autonomous churches which often disagree with one another on matters of both theological identity and practice) are quite Pauline in their attempt pastorally to protect the different “sides” from transgressions of conscience, while attending to structures which promote interdependence in the maintenance of embodied difference.

Conclusions

While Paul clearly had no comprehensive model for church relationship, throughout this paper I have argued that in 1 Corinthians and Romans we can discern some of Paul’s ecclesial principles, principles he used to address the question of diversity and unity within church communion. Specific to each ecclesial situation, Paul sought to distinguish between “matters of sin” (in which a plurality of

behaviors is not acceptable) and “matters of conscience” (in which a plurality of behaviors is acceptable). While Paul understood the “conscience” to be an autonomous human capacity, distinct from the voice of God and subject to error, he nonetheless recognized its constitutive role as a “technology of the self” and guarantor of personal integrity. Paul recognized that transgressing one’s conscience, even when this conscience is “unenlightened” or “wrong”—such as in the case of the weak who did not want to eat idol meat—was destructive to the integrity of the person. Because one could never be sure of the trustworthiness of one’s conscience and because Paul believed that only God could have perfect, final judgment (realized only eschatologically), Paul’s theological and pastoral instincts were to create ecclesial situations in which multiple stances of conscience could coexist. True interdependence, based in mutual love, was only theologically coherent to Paul if it respected embodied difference. Paul understood God to be a God who brought enemies into relationship with God’s self, and this theological claim put human beings under profound obligation to love and unconditionally welcome one another, leaving final judgment to God.

I have applied these ecclesial principles—conscience, interdependence, and embodied difference—to the debate over homosexuality in the Anglican Communion not because I believe they can help “solve” the controversy, but because they might point the way forward to an ecclesiology within controversy. Reframing the rhetoric of the debate in terms of “conscience” rather than “sin” has a twofold benefit. First, “conscience” can help structure an ecclesial model in which a diversity of conviction and practice can coexist while maintaining a strong sense of human sin and fallibility, as it looks not to human structures or opinion but to God for eschatological confirmation of truth. Second, “conscience” is descriptive, in that it offers a conceptual model within which to characterize much of the work of unity that has already been done within the Communion. It is not yet clear whether the proposed Anglican Covenant (which I have characterized as “Pauline” in its attempt to provide a framework for interdependence which respects embodied difference while protecting against transgressions of conscience) will be sufficient to promote an ecclesiology in which differences of conscience can coexist in mutual love. Yet, neither do our biblical resources of 1 Corinthians and Romans make clear whether Paul was fully successful in his attempt to establish church communities in which radical difference of opinion,
practice, and identity could coexist interdependently in mutual love and still allow for the integrity of embodied difference. All we can tell from Paul’s ecclesial principles is that he was deeply committed to this kind of vision of church community—one which protected diversely embodied people from transgressions against their conscience, but which nonetheless offered radical and unconditional welcome for neighbor, stranger, and even enemy.