Paul's Rule in 1 Corinthians 7:17–24: Contemporary Limitations and Challenges for Existing Identities in Christ

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Abstract

Paul's "rule" in 1 Cor 7:17, 20, 24, and 26, that people should "remain in the situation they were in when God called them," (NRSV) has been variously interpreted. Scholars, such as J. Brian Tucker, applying social identity theory, understand Paul's rule as highlighting the social implications of the gospel, which are largely overlooked by traditional scholars. According to a social identity framework, Paul expects Jews and gentiles (and future Christians) to live out the gospel while remaining in their own social-ethnic identity. In this way, existing social identities, including ethnicities, continue for Christ-followers despite an overarching identity in Christ. Christians coming together can "remain as they are" keeping their previous identity while pursing unity with other believers upholding their own social-ethnic identity. This paper evaluates the claim that Paul's rule pertains broadly to social and ethnic identities, as interpreted by Tucker. It then examines the limitations of one proposal for prioritizing previous identities, the Homogeneous Unit Principle. Ultimately, it describes the creation and maintenance of non-homogeneous groups, unified in Christ using tools offered by psychological and social theories to address human desire for sameness and reluctance to cross ethnic-social barriers.

Introduction

Existing social and ethnic identities matter in Christ according to Pauline scholar J.

Brian Tucker.[1] For him, they provide a "hermeneutical key" to interpreting Paul's "rule in all the churches" that "each person [ought to] live as the Lord assigned to each one, as God has called each one" (1 Cor 7:17).[2] Tucker's understanding of identity is based on Tajfel and Turner's conceptual frameworks. Tajfel defines social identity as "that *part* of an individual's self-concept which derives from his [*sic*] knowledge of his [*sic*] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership."[3] Turner describes self-categorization as the process by which group identities are internalized, prioritized, and acted upon.[4] Tucker applies social identity in Pauline studies to "describe the relationship between Jewish and gentile identity with regard to the Christ-event."[5] Influential to Tucker's work, William S. Campbell argues that particularistic identity, as opposed to universalistic identity, is more representative of the Christ-movement, meaning that believers maintained their original social and ethnic identities in Christ (1 Cor 7:17–20).[6] Thus, individual differences from diverse previous social identities came into contact in the resultant complex communities. Paul establishes his rule within this context (1 Cor 7:17–24). This paper evaluates the claim that Paul's rule pertains broadly to social and ethnic identities, as interpreted by Tucker. It then examines the limitations of one proposal for prioritizing previous identities, the Homogeneous Unit Principle. Ultimately, it describes the creation and maintenance of non-homogeneous groups, unified in Christ using tools offered by psychological and social theories to address human desire for sameness and reluctance to cross ethnic-social barriers.[7]

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1 J. Brian Tucker, *Remain in Your Calling: Paul and the Continuation of Social Identities in 1 Corinthians* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014); J. Brian Tucker, *You Belong to Christ: Paul and the Formation of Social Identity in 1 Corinthians 1–4* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010); J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker, eds., *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

2 J. Brian Tucker, *Reading 1 Corinthians* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 9. Hunt translations used throughout.

3 Henri Tajfel, "Social Categorization, Social Identity and Social Comparison," in *Differentiation Between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. Henri Tajfel, European Monographs in Social Psychology 14 (London: Academic, 1978), 61–76.

4 John Turner, "Social Categorization and the Self-Concept: A Social Cognitive Theory of Group Behavior," in *Rediscovering Social Identity: Key Readings*, ed. Tom Postmes and Nyla R. Branscombe (New York: Psychology, 2010), 243–72; Philip F. Esler, "Group Norms and Prototypes in Matthew 5.3–12: A Social Identity Interpretation of the Matthean Beatitudes," in *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, ed. J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 147–71. For more details, see Tucker and Baker, *T&T Clark Handbook*, 1–144.

5 Tucker, *You Belong to Christ*, 4.

6 J. Brian Tucker, "Diverse Identities in Christ According to Paul: The Enduring Influence of the Work of William S. Campbell," *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 38.2 (2017): 142. See also J. Brian Tucker and John Koessler, *All Together Different: Upholding the Church's Unity While Honoring our Individual Identities* (Chicago: Moody, 2018), 67. See also William S. Campbell, *Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 156–58.

7 The definition of identity used in this opening paragraph will be the one assumed for discussions of groups and identities throughout, even if the authors we are in dialogue with are less clear

Paul's Rule: Existing Ethnic and Social Identities in 1 Corinthians 7:17–24

First Corinthians 7:17–24 comes in the middle of Paul's discussion on sexuality and marriage, and the practicalities of these aspects of life for those whose main focus is the Lord (1 Cor 7:7, 15, 26, 31, 32, 35). Paul states his rule three times in this short passage, in vv. 17, 20, and 24 (and repeats it again in abbreviated form in v. 26). In the first instance, he sums up the general principle guiding his advice: "Except let each person live as the Lord assigned to each one, as God has called each one. This is also the way I am organizing all the churches" (7:17).[8]

Despite the many ambiguities in this passage,[9] only one is of interest here. While the application of this rule by some scholars makes existing identities irrelevant and invisible behind the call to salvation, others interpret Paul as referring to the continuation of such distinctions.[10] Noteworthy is Thiselton's interpretation that God has called believers in a secondary sense, beyond the entry into the community of God to "present circumstances." Joseph Fitzmyer allows for the possibility of a specific societal role or divine vocation.[11]

Conclusions on this issue hinge, in part, on the meaning of μερίζω (assigned) in 7:17 and καλέω (called) as it is carried over in 7:17, 20, 21, and 24.[12] Virtually all English translations render καλέω as "has called" or "called."[13] BDAG, citing 7:17, defines καλέω as choosing for "a special benefit or experience" and notes that both the New Testament and the LXX sometimes used this word to describe God's choice "of person(s) for salvation" (Gal 1:6, Rom 8:30, 9:24; Hos 2:1; Isa 40:26; 41:9; 42:6; 45:3–4).[14] But what is being assigned, and to what exactly are people called?

Conzelmann argues that μερίζω and καλέω are synonymous since in the church

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about their definitions. See critiques in, for example, Wayne McClintock, "Sociological Critique of the Homogeneous Unit Principle," *International Review of Mission* 77.305 (1988): 107–116. For details about the way social identity connects with ethnicity, as well as a helpful discussion of contemporary theories of ethnicity, see Aaron Kuecker, "Ethnicity and Social Identity," in *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, ed. J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 59–77.

8 For the translation "except" as connected to 1 Cor 7:15–16, as well as the concept of principles and advice rather than order and rules, see Tucker, *Remain in Your Calling,* 70, 74.

9 Brad R. Braxton, *The Tyranny of Resolution 1 Corinthians 7:14–24* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 4; Tucker, *Remain in Your Calling,* 83.

10 Tucker, *You Belong to Christ*, 157; Tucker, *Remain in Your Calling,* 6, 68–69, 75–88; William S. Campbell, *Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 91–92, 118; John Barclay, "1 Corinthians," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1119.

11 Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 549; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, AB32 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 307.

12 Tucker, *Remain in Your Calling,* 70–71.

13 E.g., NKJV, NASB, ESV, CEB, NRSV, NIV.

14 BDAG, s.v. "καλέω."

"our natural standing no longer counts"; to change one's status would suggest that status impacted salvation.[15] Indeed, he argues that the individual is liberated to such an extent that "worldly differences are already abrogated . . . eschatologically."[16] According to Conzelmann, "Paul is not advocating a principle of unity in church order." He instead suggests that Paul is "attacking precisely the kind of schematization which postulates a specific mode of *klēsis* [calling]."[17]

C. K. Barrett similarly explains that "calling" means theologically "to become a Christian," dispensing with any sense of "calling *with*," "calling *to*," or "calling *by*."[18] Barrett cautions not "to import into this passage modern ideas of, for example, vocation to missionary service"; yet for him, one's "old occupation is given new significance."[19] Thus, Barrett, while mentioning both present status and future vocation, conflates the two verbs in v. 17.[20]

Gordon Fee, however, contends that the verbs μερίζω and καλέω are not synonymous given the different tenses and subjects.[21] Similarly to Tucker, he sees both a previous social setting and a future vocation referenced in this verse, although with the previous setting assigned (μερίζω) and the future vocation called (καλέω).[22] As Fee explains, Christ assigns saved persons a place in life, and then they are called to live sanctified lives in Christ.[23] But for Fee, Paul is not suggesting it is necessary to retain one's social identity; one is not "locked into that setting."[24] Instead, such settings have no "religious significance" and are therefore "obsolete" and "irrelevant."[25] Since theology arises out of specific cultural contexts, however, the setting in which a person will most likely be living out their faith is quite relevant.[26] In fact, Paul contextualizes "an observance of the laws of God" (v. 19) in such a way that, surprisingly for Jews, does not include circumcision. He thus allows gentiles to retain at least one marker of their previous social identity.[27]

Tucker distinguishes between μερίζω and καλέω concluding that the former

15 Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 126.
16 Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 126.
17 Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 126.
18 C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 1968), 168–69.
19 Barrett, *The First Epistle,* 170.
20 Barrett, *The First Epistle,* 168.
21 Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 343.
22 Fee, *The First Epistle*, 343–44.
23 Fee, *The First Epistle*, 343.
24 Fee, *The First Epistle*, 343.
25 Fee, *The First Epistle*, 344–45.
26 Campbell, *Paul*, 52. As a contemporary example, we note that 19th and 20th century advances in science and changing Western culture have demanded complex theological discussions about life, gender, marriage, and the family.
27 Barclay, "1 Corinthians," 1119.

refers to "all the various life practices that result from different spiritual gifts."[28] God assigns different roles in life based on the gifts given (1 Cor 7:7).[29] Καλέω, on the other hand, is "an interior call to be in Christ" and both the **ὡς** ("as") that precedes it and the explanations that come afterwards (vv. 18, 20) show that this calling may come to people in a variety of social conditions.[30] "Each one in the condition in which one was called, in that let a person remain" (1 Cor 7:20). In this sense, then, one's calling in Christ supersedes but does not erase one's social location in life.[31] For Tucker, "being in Christ is the superordinate identity which deprioritizes all other indexes of identity."[32]

Tucker, who self-identifies with the post-supersessionist perspective on Paul, argues that Paul never ceased to be Torah observant, thereby maintaining his identity as a Jew even as a Christ-follower among gentiles.[33] Conversely, gentiles outside the old covenant, whom Paul instructs to maintain their identity, were not bound to follow a strict halakhah. Thus, Tucker's "approach to Paul . . . allows for previous identities to continue while maintaining the fundamental significance of oneness in Christ."[34]

Tucker is primarily concerned with how believers integrate existing social identities, culturally formed and reinforced by various local roles and responsibilities, into Christ-following identities as defined by the gospel.[35] This gospel orientation requires a reshaping of previous identities "for the glory of God" and the good of others (1 Cor 10:31–11:1).[36] Yet ongoing identities are valued because of Paul's surprising statement in 1 Cor 7:20 that everyone "should remain in the *calling in Christ* into which they were called."[37] However, these identities are no longer valued hierarchically (vv. 19–23).

The overlap with the marriage teachings both before and after this section (e.g., vv. 12–13 and 25–26) suggests that Paul has not digressed from his line of

28 Tucker, *Reading*, 83.
29 Tucker, *Reading*, 83; Thiselton, *The First Epistle*, 548.
30 Tucker, *Reading*, 83. See Barrett, *The First Epistle,* 171.
31 Tucker, *Reading*, 83.
32 Tucker, *Reading*, 83.
33 This is a wide stream with many currents including the radical perspective on Paul, beyond the new perspective on Paul, the Paul within Judaism perspective, and the renewed perspective on Paul. For Tucker's approach, see J. Brian Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism: The Continuation of Jewish Covenantal Identity*, New Testament after Supersessionism 6 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018). For more about the origins of this perspective, see Kathy Ehrensperger, *That We May Be Mutually Encouraged: Feminism and the New Perspective in Pauline Studies* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 123–60.
34 Tucker, *Remain in Your Calling,* 134.
35 Tucker, *Remain in Your Calling*, 119.
36 Tucker and Koessler, *All Together Different*, 61.
37 Tucker, *Reading*, 84, translates κλῆσις as "calling" rather than "condition" (NRSV); emphasis original. BDAG defines κλῆσις as either: 1) an "invitation to experience a special privilege and responsibility, *call, calling, invitation*," or 2) "position that one holds, *position, condition*" citing only 1 Cor 7:20.

thinking.[38] However, he illustrates his principle using identity markers beyond marriage and celibacy: circumcision and enslavement (vv. 18–23).[39] This broad application suggests that Paul is not referring to an exception in 1 Cor 7:17 but noting a general principle that Christ-followers remain in the state in which they were called. Tucker's meaning is important; it suggests that Paul does not intend to reify social hierarchies, such as slavery, because even with a new status, God's call redefines and revalues identity.[40] When Paul restates the rule in 1 Cor 7:24, he uses a vocative to insert a pause in the discourse, building anticipation and emphasizing Paul's surprising instruction, intended for all his churches, not just those in Corinth (v. 17).[41]

Therefore, this rule covers the circumstances also mentioned in Gal 3:28 regarding the measures of social status most important in Roman 1st century CE culture. Jews must understand that gentiles could keep the commandments of God by remaining uncircumcised (1 Cor 7:19). Slaves receive a reversal of the social order in which they could remain slaves and yet consider themselves freed persons in the Lord. Free Corinthians are equated to slaves of Christ (v. 22). In the broader passage about male/female relationships, it is noteworthy that in the context of a Corinthian ethic, in which it was recommended that men not even touch their wives (7:1), husbands are required to share the marital bed (7:4), not to divorce their wives (7:11), and wives are to resist being divorced (7:10–11).[42] In these ways, Paul confirms pre-existing identities and evaluates them all as honorable in God's new household.

It is important to note the practical implications of this reevaluation. Anthony Thiselton suggests that an eschatological approach such as Conzelmann's, which revalues identity only in the eschaton, "is one-sided in one direction, just as 'Remain as You Were' would be one-sided in the other direction."[43] He points instead to Dale Martin's interpretation of slavery as "upward mobility," where slaves can rise in status when supported and advanced in life by their high-status owner-patrons.[44] Slavery was prevalent enough in the 1st century CE that Corinthians of any status could appreciate the social ramifications of Paul's theological arguments. Significantly, Paul here uses "in Christ" terminology to describe the

38 Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 220.

39 William F. Cook III "Twenty-First Century Problems in a First Century Church (1 Corinthians 5–7)," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6.8 (2002): 45; Gregory W. Dawes, "'But If You Can Gain Your Freedom' (1 Corinthians 7:17–24)," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52.4 (1990): 683.

40 Tucker, *Reading,* 84.

41 Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2010), 118–19.

42 Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Keys to First Corinthians: Revisiting the Major Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 32–42.

43 Thiselton, *The First Epistle*, 544–45.

44 Dale B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 65 (see 63–68).

identity into which Corinthians are being formed. First Corinthians 7:22 ("for a slave called in the Lord") is the first verse using a related phrase since 1 Cor 4:15–17. This wording heightens the status of a slave by relationship to Christ, a patron of the highest status.

Accordingly, Tucker argues that slavery becomes a "metaphorical" index of an in-Christ identity within the Christ movement (1 Cor 7:22–23).[45] Everyone's status has been improved by incorporation into "the household of Christ" because Christ's status is higher than that of any other head of household. But furthermore, within that household (7:22), the free (ἐλεύθερος) become slaves, and the slaves are declared freed persons (ἀπελεύθερος).[46] This index is echoed in the broader chapter, as Paul assumes women with some self-determination and gentiles who can be called law-observant without circumcision.

Thus, using gender, ethnic, and social location categories relevant to the 1st century CE, Paul provides a new identity for Christ-followers in which their existing ethnic and social identities can continue, but with equity of status. They are united into one household in which slaves, gentiles, and woman have status, but all are dependent on Christ. This means a social order where difference engenders mutuality, not stratification.[47]

Identity Challenges to Paul's Rule

Paul's rule implies churches should foster a particularistic mindset toward church development, inviting and nurturing diversity, and appreciating the unique strength each ethnicity and social identity brings to the body of Christ. However, the assumption that ethnic and socially diverse believers remaining in their existing identities can coexist within growing bodies of Christ was challenged in the mid-twentieth century by missiologist Donald McGavran's Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP).[48] Researching causes of church growth through case study, McGavran found that church growth was higher when churches concentrated on a single class, caste, or tribal group.[49] McGavran thus concluded that "[p]eople like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers."[50] He found that churches that produced racially or socially mixed congregations lacked

45 Tucker, *Reading,* 85.

46 Martin, *Slavery*, 66–67; Tucker, *Remain in Your Calling*, 86; Barrett, *The First Epistle*, 170–71.

47 "Christena Cleveland on Embodying Mutuality: A Conversation between Christena Cleveland and Tod Bolsinger," Fuller Theological Seminary, July 7, 2015; see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bpoSuhTgjIg.

48 Donald McGavran*, Understanding Church Growth,* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 163–78.

49 McGavran*, Understanding Church Growth*, e.g., 165; for a positive assessment of the HUP, see C. Peter Wagner, "How Ethical is the Homogeneous Unit Principle?" *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 2.1 (1978): 12–19.

50 McGavran*, Understanding Church Growth*, 163.

significant growth.[51] Therefore, he prioritized new and countable converts to the church rather than addressing segregation and social justice projects.[52] In fact, he believed that conversion itself would naturally address these problems: "The Christian in whose heart Christ dwells inclines toward brotherhood [*sic*] as water runs down a valley."[53] McGavran appreciated the diversity of human culture, but encouraged the diversity of homogeneous churches, a kind of imagined, universal diversity in which believers share a unified identity in Christ but avoid the discomfort of being challenged by the presence of those bearing different ethnic identities. McGavran, committed to finding salvation for the un-evangelized, concluded that church growth is directly related to removing barriers of social difference.[54] This "Church Growth" or "people movement" strategy, as it is called, has had success, but also criticism.

René Padilla, for example, criticizes the HUP, asserting that when Christians are not required to look a sister or brother in the eye, one who is different from them in some important respects, the body of Christ becomes made up of "churches and institutions whose main function in society is to reinforce the status quo."[55] Yet Padilla does not sufficiently recognize the effort required to create heterogenous churches or institutions. He asserts, for example, that identity markers such as "Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, rich and poor," as well as "race, social status, or sex," and "all the differences derived from . . . homogeneous units . . . become irrelevant," replaced by "identity in Christ."[56] So, while he argues against assimilation, the specifics of this "identity in Christ" he proposes are quite unclear.[57]

Paul exhorts believers to remain where they are and to continue identifying with their specific ethnic and social group, and McGavran's strategy appreciates the salience of these ethnic and social identities.[58] Because the HUP advocates for contextualization, Wagner can assert that "[t]he application of the

51 McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, e.g., 170.

52 McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 22–23.

53 McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 175, 177–78. He is sometimes a bit vague about this, as he recognizes that when history has obstructed such affiliations, "special action on the part of the church" will be necessary (175). But on the whole, he believes that "common sense" will address these issues, and that "[t]he church's real business is the proclamation of the gospel" (175, 177–78, 261–63).

54 McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 172.

55 C. René Padilla, "The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6.1 (1982): 23–30.

56 Padilla, "Unity," 29.

57 Padilla, "Unity," 26.

58 This is the case, despite some concerning statements. The Pasadena Consultation, for example, considers that somehow Jews and gentiles all keep their previous identity despite his assertion that "their racial and religious alienation symbolized 'by the law of commandments and ordinances'" was "abolished" by Christ. However, in what way Jews might continue to embody their previous identity without the Torah is quite unclear. John R. W. Stott, moderator, "Missiological Event: The Pasadena Consultation," *Missiology: An International Review* 5.4 (1977): 507–13.

homogeneous-unit principle is a powerful antidote for cultural chauvinism, racism, and discrimination."[59] However, this is only the case when compared with assimilationist strategies.[60] The HUP stops short of the particularistic, but unifying, approach of scholars such as Tucker. Here, ethnic identities are neither dissolved nor downplayed, but "recognized and accommodated with the larger group identity."[61] Accommodation, in this sense, involves both the evaluation of previous identities in light of the gospel, and a love ethic that makes room for the other under the prioritized body of Christ.[62] As mentioned with regard to 1 Cor 7:22 above, the in-Christ identity is one that reverses the status and power that accrue to differing identities in the culture outside of the church. Therefore, within the overarching in-Christ identity, it is the least-respected previous identities whose preferences must be prioritized.

But can respect for the continuation of previous identities go too far? One concern addressed to those who focus on particularized identities that continue in Christ is that this leaves open the possibility for two separate ways of salvation—one for Jews and one for gentiles.[63] For Eisenbaum, however, this is only a partial understanding of the issue, rooted in a preoccupation with individualism.[64] When particularistic identities are valued, and God's plan for the redemption of the world is in view, both Jews and gentiles may live out Torah differently. Christ's body is still unified because "[b]oth groups are supposed to be in concord with the will of God, both are called to obedience, and in their different roles, both are being faithful to the Torah."[65] Similarly, God's call to obedience will look different in the context of differing previous identities and future gifts (1 Cor 7:17), but the faithfulness to God is the same. It is the continuing validity of Paul's Jewish identity that, in fact, prevents anti-Judaism from becoming "a legitimate or essential aspect of Christian identity, though it is often represented as such."[66]

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59 Wagner, "How Ethical is the Homogeneous Unit Principle?", 17.

60 Wagner, "How Ethical is the Homogeneous Unit Principle?", 14. For a critique of HUP from an assimilationist perspective, see Bruce W. Fong, *Racial Equality in the Church: A Critique of the Homogeneous Unit Principle in Light of a Practical Theology Perspective* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996), e.g., 163.

61 Tucker and Koessler, *All Together Different*, 149.

62 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 184–86; Tucker and Koessler, *All Together Different*, 137–41. See also Irenaeus's theory of recapitulation as discussed in Howard A. Snyder, "John Wesley, Irenaeus, and Christian Mission: Rethinking Western Christian Theology," *The Asbury Journal 73.1* (2018): *138–59. Note especially the concept of "all things together in proper relationship under Jesus Christ" (Eph 1:9–10), although Snyder does not mention cultures and identities (143).*

63 Daniel R. Langton, "Paul in Jewish Thought," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 2nd ed., ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 741–44.

64 Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul was not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 251.

65 Eisenbaum, *Paul*, 252.

66 Campbell, *Paul*, 151.

Erik Hyatt offers an example of one method of implementing this vision.[67] With representatives from twenty different nations at their one-year anniversary in 2017, New City of Nations Church in Minneapolis, MN, uses English as the common language. However, in their leadership and their preaching, they insure that "[n]o single people group dominates the leadership."[68] Furthermore, through greetings, songs, and small groups, each language of the various identities has the opportunity to be expressed and celebrated. Paul's rule suggests that churches find similar approaches to expressing the relationship between ethnic and in-Christ identities in local congregations.

Techniques for Creating an Inclusive in-Christ Identity

On the one hand, Paul's rule would encourage previous identities to continue in Christ, contextualizing the gospel. On the other hand, previous identities will also be contextualized by the gospel. In other words, a culture may embody the gospel in unique ways, but the culture itself will also be affected by the gospel. For example, previous identities should not lead to boasting, nor should they cause offense, and they need to be realigned for unity, with a preference for those of lowest status.[69] Thus, the superordinate in-Christ identity may require individuals to adapt previous identities for the sake of both holiness and unity. This may entail significant challenges.

First, as just discussed, while believers are called to identify with their existing ethnic and social identities in Christ, the call to be in Christ is a superordinate identity that reprioritizes the importance of all other measures of identity.[70] "Nested like Russian dolls," all of believers' other identities are united under one overarching identity that they share with all other believers.[71] Despite differences, "all share the same interior call."[72] As a result, national, ethnic, or political identities must be worked out (and reconciled) underneath this overarching identity, eschewing an "us" versus "them" mentality.[73] This may be quite a difficult task. In Acts 6:1–7, for example, the immediate problem was solved so that the Hellenistic widows began to receive their share of food, but it was done by putting Hellenistic men in charge of the distribution (v. 5). The question of why the Judaic

67 Erik Hyatt, "Missions Sunday: From Homogeneous to a Heterogeneous Principle," *Christianity Today* (January 29, 2017).
68 However, male identity dominates the leadership of New City New Church; see http://www.newcity.mn/meet-our-servant-leaders.html.
69 Tucker and Koessler, *All Together Different*, 137–38.
70 Tucker, *Reading,* 83.
71 Tucker and Koessler, *All Together Different*, 234.
72 Tucker*, Reading*, 85.
73 Tucker and Koessler, *All Together Different*, 235.

widows were being served while others were not is never raised in the text, nor is a deeper reconciliation attempted.[74]

Also, a narrow theology of difference may limit Paul's rule. Leanna Fuller explains:

> I propose a theological anthropology that is paradoxical in nature—one that sees human beings as both profoundly broken and participating in healing at any given moment. This vision understands human beings as individual centers of needs and desires that are often incompatible with one another, a fact which constitutes a tragic dimension to human life. At the same time, this tragic dimension may also contain within it the source for healing and wholeness.[75]

A sole focus on the tragedy of incompatibility will not only limit the effectiveness of Paul's rule, but also will limit the possibilities in multi-ethnic and multi-social church settings. Such limitations can be overcome by a vision such as Fuller's, which imagines possible forward movement within the divisions themselves.

Fuller points out that congregations in conflict can experience destructive defense mechanisms, such as splitting and scapegoating.[76] Object relations theory suggests that the mind internalizes aspects of other people, and functions based on the relations between various elements of self and others. If those relations become too complex, we may split off certain aspects of our self and project them onto others in order to reduce anxiety. Fuller notes how intense conflict in congregations causes "collective splitting," in which the larger group divides because they "are unable to tolerate the inclusion of diverse qualities within one religious body."[77] This division allows the identity markers rejected by one group to be solely attributed to the other, and this process may be further intensified by scapegoating, in which "a group displaces blame and anger onto . . . another group through defensive projection."[78] Accordingly, Fuller explains how "conflict arises so frequently in groups like congregations, which pride themselves on cultivating intimate relationships among their members."[79] The increase in familiarity is likely to result in viewing other ingroup members as complex, which makes the development of a singular group identity quite difficult.[80]

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74 With appreciation to Rev. Jeffery Harrold for this insight.

75 Leanna K. Fuller, *When Christ's Body Is Broken: Anxiety, Identity, and Conflict in Congregations* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016), 146. She elucidates the way these psychological insights generally considered on an individual level impact social identity, but also provide a roadmap towards an overall goal to glorify Christ through unified diversity.

76 Fuller, *When Christ's Body*, 75–83.

77 Fuller, *When Christ's Body*, 80.

78 Fuller, *When Christ's Body*, 80–83.

79 Fuller, *When Christ's Body*, 83.

80 Fuller, *When Christ's Body*, 83.

Christena Cleveland's work adds to the tools proposed so far for unifying diverse particular identities into one superordinate identity in Christ. She challenges congregations to negotiate complex identities by recognizing implicit bias and the detrimental effects of groupthink, and working to overcome these unconscious processes.[81] One helpful tool discussed in Cleveland's work is using "unifying language."[82] The simple creation of categories leads us to prefer those in "our" group.[83] "When different groups in the body of Christ are part of us, we like them more."[84] Thus, by referring to "them" as "us," perspectives change.

Yet, diverse existing ethnic and social identities may spark anxiety in certain people and subgroups. Fuller discusses the concept of anxiety, defined in her study as "perceived threats to *identity*."[85] Her approach to congregational group conflict is helpful because it shows the importance of both individual and collective identities "with each element both reflecting and influencing the other."[86] Tucker, somewhat similarly, notes how contemporary congregations struggle with conflict related to various aspects of identity and culture, such as "authority, sexuality, marriage, gender orientation, cultural pluralism, worship differences, philosophical doubts, leadership disagreements and economic inequality."[87] Thus, as differences along these lines become manifest, groups divide, and it is this very "*group polarization*" that "*causes anxiety*."[88] One of the ways to manage such anxiety, then, is "*differentiation*, which is the process by which individuals learn to define their selves more clearly within the context of relationships."[89] This increased self-definition provides a basis for people "to respond calmly in the midst of anxious systems, and to take full responsibility for their own thoughts, feelings, and actions."[90] As leaders develop this practice, they model to congregations how to maintain relationships with different subgroups, avoiding scapegoating while still maintaining previous group identities, which are reprioritized in Christ.[91]

Without the ability to maintain one's previous identity within a diverse, in-Christ group, members and leaders may struggle to manage the complex

81 Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep Us Apart* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013), 61, 41.
82 Cleveland, *Disunity*, 62–64, 98–100, Note also the importance, in cross-cultural experiences, to have "a larger goal," for all participants to share "equal status," for "personal interaction," and for a leader who can navigate through the events (158).
83 Cleveland, *Disunity*, 62.
84 Cleveland, *Disunity*, 63.
85 Fuller, *When Christ's Body*, 49; emphasis original; see also 64–67 and 69.
86 Fuller, *When Christ's Body*, 106.
87 Tucker, *Reading*, 142.
88 Fuller, *When Christ's Body*, 119; emphasis original.
89 Fuller, *When Christ's Body*, 13; emphasis original.
90 Fuller, *When Christ's Body*, 13.
91 Fuller, *When Christ's Body*, 188–89. See also Cleveland, *Disunity,*112–16 and 135–37. Although Cleveland does not use the term "differentiation," the practice she describes is quite similar.

identities among them.[92] Some of the values that Tucker and Koessler propose, such as "showing preference for others, intentional self-denial, and gracious withdrawal" may mitigate this struggle.[93] However, if too many members find themselves unable to imagine an overarching in-Christ identity that encompasses those whose continuing previous identities include markers that they reject, unity is at risk, especially if one subgroup ultimately chooses to withdraw (even graciously). Such complex conflicts and responses to the clash of identities may be difficult for ministry leaders to recognize and negotiate.[94]

Fuller's research suggests that a focus on hospitality may help to manage the anxiety inherent in social differences.[95] She encourages churches to accept and even embrace the presence of multiple identities and the anxiety that such variation will sometimes produce, describe and enact the superordinate in-Christ identity as one that is able to include all of the particularistic identities of the congregation (and the surrounding area), and "cultivat[e] calm, connected leadership."[96]

In addressing the anxiety that differences produce, McGavran had argued that early Christians became Christian while remaining culturally Jewish, but that as more and more gentiles converted, less and less Jews were willing to join a "conglomerate society."[97] In order to avoid this problem, McGavran followed Paul's rule by encouraging diversification to accommodate the previous identities of new converts. He concluded that churches grow when focused on a single homogeneous people group with social relationships that create "bridges" across which the gospel can easily be communicated to other identities in the surrounding area.[98] Rick Warren advises, "[d]iscover what types of people live in your area, decide *which of these groups* your church is best equipped to reach, and then discover which styles of evangelism best match your target."[99]

Tucker and Koessler do acknowledge that "building a unified gospel-based church culture is a messy endeavor," and that "neat, cookie-cutter approaches are not likely to generate flourishing congregations."[100] However, another challenge that can stem from a singular, cookie-cutter ingroup identity is the potential for "[n]egative self-definition" against any groups not included within the ingroup,

92 Fuller, *When Christ's Body*, 13, 83.
93 Tucker and Koessler, *All Together Different*, 206.
94 Fuller, *When Christ's Body*, e.g., 188.
95 Fuller, *When Christ's Body*, 13, 161–66.
96 Fuller, *When Christ's Body*, 167–93. Note that attention to the identities in the physical and social location of the congregation must be taken into account, but the conclusions drawn will be different than those of, e.g., C. Peter Wagner, *Our Kind of People: The Ethical Dimensions of Church Growth in America* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979).
97 McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 170.
98 McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 253–64.
99 Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 188; emphasis ours.
100 Tucker and Koessler, *All Together Different*, 141.

which has historically given rise to "deplorable, even horrific consequences particularly for . . . minorities (though its malicious influence also has destructive power in those who discriminate against others)."[101] Thus, a focus such as McGavran's on "multiplication" over "Christianizing the social order" does not necessarily line up with Paul's vision in 1 Cor 7:17–24, particularly when read in the light of 1 Cor 10:31–11:1, as previously mentioned.[102]

Tucker and Campbell, instead, would most likely agree with Howard Snyder's evaluation:

> Historically, there has been a tendency in Church Growth thinking to define the church's mission (and therefore growth and success) too much in terms of the church and not enough in terms of the kingdom of God. This leads to churches that celebrate their own growth but often have little vision for the justice, socioeconomic, and ecological dimensions of God's reign in the present order.[103]

The assumption that growth rate and size are the calculators of success is not necessarily correct, as can be seen from the proliferation of insular churches resulting from the HUP.[104] "In order for them to function as ingroups, . . . it seems necessary for them to function also as producers of outgroups."[105] For Kraft, this attitude evidences a group that is "using their homogeneity badly."[106] But denigrating the outgroup is an inherent aspect of ingroup formation, such that even if leaders attempt to create an ingroup identity that values outgroups, outreach is likely to degenerate into some form of saviorism.[107]

Saviorism, then, is another challenge to the incorporation of multiple identities into one body. Liu and Baker "have challenged the ways in which heroic leadership images constructed in the Australian media may fail to address how whiteness is silently reinforced as the norm and exemplar, and in turn, sustain the marginalisation of peoples of colour from the work of leadership."[108] White

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101 Campbell, *Paul*, 175.

102 McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 22–23; Tucker and Koessler, *All Together Different*, 61.

103 Howard Snyder, "A Renewal Response," in *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: 5 Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 62–64. See further Howard Snyder, "Renewal View," in *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement*, 209–231.

104 C. Douglas McConnell, "Confronting Racism and Prejudice in Our Kind of People," *Missiology* 25.4 (1997): 387–404 (e.g., 396). Note that this was beginning to be addressed, at least partially, in, for example, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, "The Pasadena Consultation: Homogeneous Unit Principle," *Lausanne Occasional Paper* 1 (1978), 5–7.

105 Charles H. Kraft, "An Anthropological Apologetic for the Homogeneous Unit Principle in Missiology," *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 2.4 (1978): 121–27.

106 Kraft, "An Anthropological Apologetic," 125.

107 Kraft, "An Anthropological Apologetic," 125; Helena Liu and Christopher Baker, "White Knights: Leadership as the Heroicisation of Whiteness," *Leadership* 12.4 (2016): 420–48.

108 Liu and Baker, "White Knights," 440.

culture, or the dominant culture in a given community, constructs the values and norms of leadership and concurrently neglects to recognize or value the norms of other cultures. Christena Cleveland, for example, describes two pastors of different races who attempted to create an ingroup identity for their two congregations. However, each group and associated pastor judged the other on their own "very different criteria for . . . leadership, criteria they thought were clearly superior."[109] Once they addressed these identity differences, their congregations moved towards acceptance, healing, and growth.

For successful cross-cultural interactions, different groups must have a common goal that they could not accomplish alone.[110] Members of each culture must also have equal status, echoing Paul's examples from 1 Cor 7:22.[111] Individuals from each group need to have opportunities to interact with one another.[112] Accordingly, leaders must offer a common narrative that will facilitate these interactions.[113] For Paul, this included: "Let each person live as the Lord assigned to each one, as God has called each one. This is also the way I am organizing all the churches" (7:17), a narrative in which particularistic identities were valued within a common, in-Christ identity.

Identities are intersectional and sometimes fluid.[114] People strive to self-determine their own belongingness, as much as they are able, and make complex distinctions between aspects of out-group identities. Furthermore, they decide which aspects of their previous identities must remain salient and which are more readily suppressed.[115] The immigrant and refugee groups that worship at New City of Nations Church (NCNC) live at the intersections of their own different identities—the one created in interactions between immigrant communities (who share a common experience of displacement), and a common identity as inhabitants of Minneapolis. Some of these identities create bridges between people who otherwise belong to different groups.[116] Yet, this church has not tried to found their

109 Cleveland, *Disunity*, 72. See also 164–65.
110 Cleveland, *Disunity*, 158–64.
111 Cleveland, *Disunity*, 164–71.
112 Cleveland, *Disunity*, 171–73.
113 Cleveland, *Disunity*, 173–75.
114 Tite Tiénou, "Reflections on Michael A. Rynkiewich's 'Do Not Remember the Former Things,'" *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 40.4 (2016): 318–24; Kuecker, "Ethnicity," 68; Halvor Moxnes, "Identity in Jesus' Galilee—from Ethnicity to Locative Intersectionality," *Biblical Interpretation* 18.4–5 (2010): 390–416; Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989): 139–67; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 21.
115 Cleveland, *Disunity*, 84–85. For more details, see Philip F. Esler, "An Outline of Social Identity Theory," in *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, ed. J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 13–39.
116 Tiénou, "Reflections," 321.

practices only or even primarily on their common identities, nor have they imagined that a superordinate in-Christ identity would erase distinctions. Instead, NCNC illustrates how multiple identities can be successfully incorporated within one congregation where minority identities, often devalued in society, are revalued in Christ.

Conclusion

Paul's rule in 1 Cor 7:17–24, although delivered to the Corinthians and all his churches of varying backgrounds, is relevant today as Christians struggle to integrate the gospel and different ethnicities within God's kingdom. The goal is to live in Christ as part of a culture with ethnic and social differences. Existing identities continue to matter in Christ, presenting ethical implications for ethnic and social groups striving for peace, understanding, and unity in a diverse world. Valuing the identity of those who are different, not only within the church but beyond its borders, has the potential to impact the "well-being of contemporary society."[117] As a corollary to Paul's rule, an in-Christ identity includes the acceptance of different identities without bias, even amid different expressions of faith.[118] Different ethnic and social identities can challenge the balance of evangelism and unity. Helping others acknowledge that differences are part of being human while increasing one's tolerance of anxiety enables diverse ethnic and social identities to add strengths, wisdom, and gifts toward the unity of Christ-followers.[119]

117 Campbell, *Paul*, 174.
118 Campbell, *Paul*, 174.
119 Fuller, *When Christ's Body*, 139.