



Jesus Have I Loved, *but Paul?*



A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO THE
PROBLEM OF PAULINE CHRISTIANITY

J. R. DANIEL KIRK



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Introduction

In a deconstruction, our lives, our beliefs, and our practices are not destroyed but forced to reform and reconfigure—which is a risky business.

—John D. Caputo,
*What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*¹

Problems with Paul?

“Now that Paul is out of your system,” my grandfather said, “how about a book on Jesus, who actually got Christianity right, rather than writing about that rascal who mucked everything up?” I had just received a contract for my first book, a study of Paul’s letter to the Romans. And though my grandfather’s suggestion was playful, it also reflected genuine misgivings he harbors about Paul. Jesus preaches love of neighbor; Paul wants to expel the immoral brother. Jesus says, “Do unto others”; Paul is hung up on being a wretch.

My grandfather is not alone in these concerns. His consternation is likely due, in part, to the work of European New Testament scholarship from the early twentieth century trickling down from the ivory towers to the people on the streets. Scholars at that time gave more focused attention to Jesus and his proclamation of the kingdom of God. This led some experts on the New Testament to declare that a significant shift had occurred between Jesus and his

followers. Although Jesus proclaimed the reign of God, Paul (and the early church more generally) proclaimed the reign of Jesus: “The proclaimer became the proclaimed.”²² This perspective took root outside the walls of the academy in the World War II generation of Europe and North America.

In our own day there is a resurgence of attention being paid to the Jesus of the Gospels, especially among Christians who were raised in evangelical churches. In these circles, Paul has traditionally served as the primary mouthpiece for the gospel. But this new generation is discovering afresh what scholars wrestled with a century ago: Jesus came proclaiming the reign of God, and if this is the gospel, then we need to reconsider a good deal of what we thought we knew. Why is the arrival on the scene of a wonder-working Jewish prophet good news? What does it mean for God to be at work in Jesus? Why is the life of Jesus before Calvary a gospel to be proclaimed? In the process of wrestling with Jesus, and falling in love with the figure we meet on the pages of the Gospels, many have simultaneously lost their affection for Paul.

The apostle might seem to fall short of the Master on any number of fronts. Paul seems unconcerned with the stories of Jesus’s life. Related to this, some might see him as a thinker who spent too much time theologizing about Jesus’s death. Others might be drawn to the activist ministry of Jesus over against a faith-alone heart religion.

Still another challenge grows out of the history of American (and Western European) Christianity. Paul gave voice to preservation of the status quo during the era of American slavery. When he is juxtaposed with the Jesus who proclaims liberty to the captive, the contrast between the early preachers is stark. Thus, particularly in scholarly circles, Paul has struggled to find a voice among some segments within African American Christianity.

The issues of race and slavery might also be seen as simply one subject under a larger umbrella of justice where Paul falls far short of Jesus. And now we are right up against the vexing issue of homosexuality, where many Christians who are affirming find an ally in Jesus that they do not find in Paul, who condemns such practice.

So if you are someone who follows Jesus but have at some point wrestled with Paul or felt some dissonance between Paul and Jesus,

you are not alone. Some people find Paul lacking in comparison with the Master; others simply find Paul distasteful, offensive, oppressive, exclusive, confusing, arrogant, or just plain wrong. This book is, in part, for folks who at times find themselves resonating with the statement, “Jesus have I loved, but Paul have I hated.” I have been there myself.

One of my earliest memories of reading the Pauline letters is a nettled encounter with 2 Corinthians 11–12. In these chapters, Paul is defending his work as an apostle, piling up language of boasting, through examples of acting foolishly, of glorying in disgraceful experiences, of weakness and visions of glory. As I read those chapters, Paul’s litany of irony and boasting struck me as truly foolish and arrogant. When I first met Paul I simply did not like him.

Even when I began to appreciate Paul, however, he still caused me problems. In college I began investigating some of the classic theological questions, including the subject of predestination and issues of church government. Now, finally, the letters bearing Paul’s name became my friends, because they addressed most directly the questions I was asking. But this new relationship was starting to cause discord in some of my old ones; specifically, my understanding of “the church” left little room for affirming my brother’s “parachurch” ministry, and my zealous affirmation of male leadership disrupted relationships with many women in ministry, including my mother, who was ordained while I was in this stage in my theological pilgrimage. And so my relationship with the apostle continued to be uneasy.

In the process of going through graduate school in New Testament I began to read Paul differently. Though there are still some tensions between us, I not only find myself more at peace with him, but I also find the apostle to be a challenging and theologically generative partner along the way of following Jesus. This book is an invitation to join me along the present leg of my journey.

Moving toward a Storied Paul

My current reading of Paul has its roots in several complementary factors. I have spent much more time with Paul’s letters and so have

a broader understanding of those letters' purposes and arguments. This has enabled me to see more clearly that the questions I was bringing to the text were not usually the questions that the text was written to answer (even if the assumptions that broke through in the course of a Pauline argument might still pertain to the issues on which I was seeking guidance).

A second, related factor placed Paul on a broader canvas, where he made more sense. My seminary taught what it called "redemptive historical" readings of Scripture. Such an approach involves continually asking how the work of God in Christ is connected to the prior works of God in the Old Testament. I began to see that Paul was assessing the work of Jesus and the lives of Jesus's followers within a narrative that had its roots in Adam and Abraham, Moses and David. In this sense, even Paul's didactic arguments evoke an indispensable narrative dynamic.

Such a positioning of Paul within the larger narrative sweep of Israel's story prepared me for a third factor in how my reading of Paul has changed, and it is this facet of Paul's letters that frames the invitation to rediscover the apostle on the following pages. This third element is a recognition that Paul's letters themselves contain narrative dynamics: the story of Christ creates a controlling narrative in which Paul sees himself, the church, Israel, and ultimately the entire cosmos participating. In arguing for a more storied reading of Paul, New Testament scholars have undoubtedly been participating in cultural trends that tend toward a deeper appreciation of the role and value of narrative—and, I will argue, they have provided a lens for reading Paul that has tremendous potential to answer some of the most pressing questions brought to Paul by his postmodern readers.

Because in my own journey I have moved from taking offense at Paul, to relishing Paul as Reformed theological ammunition, to delighting in Paul the storyteller, I find that I have something to say to my fellow followers of Jesus who want to keep Paul at arm's length. I have discovered through conversation with numerous Christians during the past several years that the Paul I now love is not usually the Paul others cannot abide. Measured against the portraits of Paul that have been carefully crafted by the past

generation of New Testament scholars, many common images of Paul prove, on closer inspection, to be distortions. Some of these common images include:

- Paul the angry Reformed theologian, who delights in the God who takes pleasure in sending huge numbers of people to hell
- Paul the promoter of internalized Christianity, who leaves saved individuals with little motivation for faithful work or life in community
- Paul the Neoplatonist, who despises embodied life and the good things of the earth
- Paul the exclusivist, who undermines Jesus's missional ministry of indiscriminate embrace
- Paul the oppressor, who lends his apostolic credentials to narratives of enslavement and domination
- Paul the judge, whose whole life is lived in contradiction to Jesus's admonition against judging articulated in the Sermon on the Mount
- Paul the chauvinist, who doesn't want anything to do with women—especially not in the ministry of the church and, preferably, not in sexual relationships either
- Paul the imposer of order, who effectively squelched the Spirit-led worship and life that had characterized Jesus's first followers

In all, such assessments might be summarized as an abandonment of the sweeping vision for discipleship articulated in Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom of God. In response I would suggest that many followers of Jesus need a healthy deconstruction of their understanding of Paul.

A Storied Paul for Postmodernity

At a conference in 2007, John Caputo articulated a winsome vision of the philosophical concept “deconstruction.” Deconstruction is not destruction, at least not destruction for destruction's sake. Rather,

deconstruction is an attempt to break through hardened structures and traditions for the purpose of reengaging the stimulating, life-giving substance that gave rise to the now-encrusted traditions.³ In this spirit of deconstruction as a punching through the rocks in order to open up a well from which to draw life-giving waters, this book is about deconstructing Paul. I am suggesting here not that Paul needs to be deconstructed in order for postmodern followers of Jesus to appreciate him but that our understandings of Paul need to be deconstructed for that purpose. This will begin, as the pages that follow will show in greater detail, with an appreciation for the narrative dynamics of Paul's letters.

Having invoked the words *postmodern* and *deconstruction* in the previous paragraph, I should say a little more about why I am embracing these labels. I use the word *postmodern* as a description of the multicultural ethos one finds in places such as Western Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand in the early years of the twenty-first century. Characteristic of these cultures are ways of knowing, of defining one's values, and of defining one's community that depend on networks of relationships and other contextual factors rather than what previous generations would have seen as the implications of supposedly objective criteria.

To my mind, the advent of postmodernity as a social reality in North America is marked by the release of the film *Pulp Fiction* in 1994. The movie teems with questions about how we know, about our own roles in shaping knowledge, about our society's place in shaping the meaning of words and actions. You can't refer to a sandwich as a "Quarter Pounder" in a country with the metric system. A man giving a woman a foot massage means something, even if we act like it doesn't.

The world of evangelical Christianity provides its own numerous illustrations of the cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity. A prominent example is evangelicals' assessment of the Bible. In an earlier era, modern culture strengthened evangelicals' confidence in what could be known through metaphors of construction, what philosophy refers to as "foundationalism." Building from the ground up, so the image goes, the strength of any piece of knowledge is dependent on the strength of prior, more foundational pieces of

knowledge on which it is built. In such a world, evangelical Christianity insisted that the Bible is the foundational source of all our knowledge about the work God has done for us. Therefore, it must be true in all that it says if people are to be expected to believe its message of salvation. Without the foundation of an inerrant Bible, so the argument goes, the edifice of Christianity would soon come crashing down.

I take it as a sign of the significant cultural shift to postmodernity that innumerable evangelicals are holding on to their core evangelical convictions (including the Bible as the Word of God) without feeling the compulsion to embrace the notion of the inerrancy of Scripture. Part of what contemporary Christians have acquired is the ability to step back and recognize that their own commitment to following Jesus was not, in fact, built on a prior theology of the Bible. They see the witness of Scripture being directed primarily to something other than itself: the work of God in Christ. And the Bible is but one part of a larger whole. The person who shared the faith with them is another such witness, as is the community of believers that embodies for them the truth of the message they heard. They meet with God in song and prayer and liturgy and sacrament. For this generation (in which I include myself), a network of relationships and experiences fills the primary role of confirmation of our beliefs that earlier evangelicals would have located primarily in “objective” truths such as the inerrancy of Scripture or, to take another example, proofs of the resurrection.

Both modernity and postmodernity have the power to reach back into the history of the church and highlight aspects of the old that deeply resonate with their respective cultures. The concerns of modernity find deep resonance with the desire to “prove” Christianity found in the early church’s apologists and with the argumentative power of Augustine, Aquinas, and Anselm. And Paul is adept at building logical and complex arguments in his letters.

But what moderns too easily lost sight of was the way that all knowledge is received and assessed within complex webs of relationships that help people know what is true. If modernity’s metaphor was “building,” postmodernity’s metaphor is “story.” The impact of this is not only to cause a reassessment of how or why someone

knows something to be true. In Christian circles it has also begun to generate considerable reflection on how the narratives of Scripture function, *as stories*, to define the respective identities of God, Jesus, and Christian communities.⁴

How well can Paul possibly fare in such a context? Paul writes letters rather than stories. To make matters worse, the argumentative nature of his letters has caused Paul to be a favorite biblical source for theologians of earlier generations whom postmodern readers no longer find compelling.

Despite such setbacks, however, the postmodern attention to story has generated an important stream of scholarship that is now highlighting the narrative dynamics of Paul's letters. In this book I am going to mine the storied texture of Paul's writing to show how it offers a compelling reading strategy for making sense of the apostle. Moreover, I hope that the result will be a more attractive picture of his theology for those who have been put off by caricatures of Paul such as the ones I listed above. So what sort of story does Paul have to tell? And how does this mesh with the stories of Jesus we discover in the Gospels?

3

Christianity as Community

The mission of God is to establish a community of people that transcends every human division. . . . It is the vocational calling of human beings created in the image of God to anticipate this community.

—John R. Franke,
*Manifold Witness*¹

My heart. My life. My relationship with God. My alienation from God. My repentance. My faith. My allegiance. My Lord. My justification. My sanctification. My membership added to the church. My quiet time. My closed-eye self-examination at communion. My route to heaven. My escape from the coming conflagration. My soul with Jesus forever. The gospel story as so often told over the past century has relentlessly hammered away on the individual's need to get right with God, the individual's need to repent and believe, the individual's need to have a personal relationship with Jesus. In what is perhaps a caricature of historical Protestantism, which distanced itself from the Roman Catholic insistence that the church is the place of salvation, contemporary evangelicalism sometimes insists that neither institutions nor other humans have anything to do with our relationship with God. All that matters is my own faith as I stand before the Creator.

Is there an advantage to such a focus? Without a doubt. In an era in which personal responsibility is shirked in favor of a posture of entitlement, a call to take account of one's own standing before God issues a healthy corrective. And even when a sense of accountability is not lacking—when, for example, a person is struggling with a profound sense of guilt—this focus on the individual underscores that the Christian narrative tells the story of a God who desires intimate connection with each person and of a Savior who makes possible such fulfilling relationship.

But there are downsides to an individualistic gospel story. In the previous chapter we explored the cosmic dimensions of the Jesus narrative that are missed when we focus overmuch on getting individuals into relationship with God. God's work in Christ entails a full-orbed restoration of every aspect of the created order. In this chapter we are going to narrow our focus from the cosmic context of human life to its communal dimension.

Even in our individualistic Western world, people are increasingly coming to realize that our personal identity is never separable from our corporate identity. Or to put it in somewhat more dynamic terms, our identity is always part of, and shaped by, a larger narrative we find ourselves in. To be in a relationship with God is not, and can never be, solely about my own personal relationship. Scot McKnight puts it this way: “Eikons [McKnight's word for people created in God's image] can't eikon alone. Eikons are made for *relationship* and to give Eikons a life without relationships, without dependence, and without love will diminish them.”²² This is the story of both Jesus and Paul. My relationship with God is always, and must ever be, about how I am participating in the narrative of God's people.

Being in relationship to God is a “storied” affair in the old sense of that adjective: it involves one in a narrative. The story of our relationship with God is a family story. And our family history is the true tale of a Father who has acted to make us his beloved children through the act of our firstborn elder brother. Because this is a family story, it is one in which we who participate discover a new corporate identity. Because it is God's story, it is a story of grace and forgiveness. And because it is Christ's story, it is a story of embrace and unity that glories in difference and diversity. The good news as proclaimed

and lived by both Jesus and Paul is not merely the promise of power to make us new persons. It is also the promise of a new people. This new family comes into being in particular communities here and now.

We have already looked at the foundational narrative of the world gone wrong from Genesis 3. It depicts human rule being ceded to the serpent and the subsequent disintegration of the natural world. Dysfunction in human relationships is another aspect of that story. After their act of disobedience, Adam and Eve find themselves confronted by God. “Have you eaten from the tree?” God asks. “The woman,” the man replies, “she gave me fruit from the tree” (Gen. 3:11–12). In this story, whose purpose is to explain life in a fallen world, blame-shifting and finger-pointing mar the intimate relationship of man and wife. We see in Adam’s response to God’s question one of the fundamental dynamics of the economy of this world: we pursue life for ourselves even at the expense of the lives of others. But we discover in the cross of Christ that the economy of God’s kingdom is precisely the opposite: it is a giving up of our own lives in order that others might live. And, paradoxically, we learn that this is the way to life.

We will explore the upside-down economy of God’s kingdom more in depth in the next chapter. For now, we need to note that in the narrative of a world thrown off balance by disobedience to God, interpersonal relationships are one of the first casualties. We must therefore anticipate that when God acts to redeem the world, the restoration of human-to-human relationships will be part of God’s all-encompassing agenda.

How deep does this fracture between humans run? We get a hint when God predicts the couple’s future. Addressing the woman he says, “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:16 NRSV). Such is a picture of disordered relationship and misdirected power. A relationship that began with woman as a coequal helper is now one marked by desire, rule, and servanthood.

As if to underscore that fissured human relationships lie at the heart of the sin and brokenness that typify life after Eden, the next episode in the story is one of anger, jealousy, and murder. The sons of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, are the characters in this intrafamilial squabble. When Cain’s vegetable sacrifice finds less favor in the divine nostrils than Abel’s animal sacrifice, Cain is stirred to rage and kills his brother (Gen. 4:1–8).

These early scenes in the biblical drama clearly show that brokenness and sinfulness in human relationships are central components of the world's reality that the biblical narrative promises to resolve. If the gospel is truly to be good news for those of us who live in such a reality, it will have to include the creation of communities where such brokenness is healed, where such self-serving defensiveness is replaced by self-denying service, and where oppressive power relations are undone in favor of coequal relationships. If the biblical narrative is to resolve the problems articulated at its beginning, then creation of harmonious community will be an integral part of the gospel. And this is what we find.

Communities of Grace: Disciples and Churches

If Jesus had come simply to call individuals to follow him, his message would have been incomprehensible to first-century Jews, and God's promises to Israel would have failed. When Jesus comes on the scene, the Jewish people are expectant. In the early chapters of Luke's Gospel we meet people such as Simeon, who was waiting expectantly for God to "comfort Israel" (2:25). We meet Anna the prophetess, who gave voice to those waiting for the redemption of Israel (2:36–38). God had promised that he would restore a people, gather those who had been scattered, reign over them, and pour out the Spirit on all of them, transforming them into a people who would reflect his glory to the world. For all the ways that Jesus's ministry is a genuine surprise to his audience, he upholds the collective character of these promises. Jesus comes to create the kind of community that will be a light to the world, a (re)new(ed) family of God.

In one early story we catch a glimpse of the surprising way that Jesus is redefining the people of God. When his family comes to see him but cannot get through because of a crowd, Jesus looks to those who are sitting around him and says, "Here are my mother and brothers; whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:34–35). He is renarrating the identity of the people of God. Anyone in Jesus's Jewish audience would have agreed that doing God's will makes one part of God's family; however, Jesus has displaced other measures of doing God's will (such as keeping the law that God

gave to Israel) and has placed himself in that position. It is those who are following Jesus, attending to his words, who are doing the will of God. The significance of this claim is fully seen only once one realizes that Jesus is providing an alternative reading of Israel's narrative, one in which he takes to himself the role previously assigned to Torah as the defining marker of the faithful people of God.

Perhaps some of the collective force of Jesus's words and actions is lost on us because standard written English does not have a plural form of the word "you." Had we the wisdom to more broadly adopt the Southernism "y'all," we would be confronted with proclamations such as this one from the Sermon on the Mount: "Y'all are the light of the world. . . . Let y'all's light so shine before people that they will see y'all's good works and glorify y'all's Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:14, 16). For those whose imaginations had been formed by biblical imagery, such words would likely evoke the promise of Israel's glorification. In the prophecy of Isaiah 60:1–5, the people of God shine because God has shone on them and so the nations are drawn into the presence of God. What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? Following Jesus means being part of the people who are living into the promises of restoration, the people through whom God is on mission to the nations.³ Each of us as an individual can claim this vocation for ourselves only if we belong to the people about whom it is true. To be a disciple of Jesus is, inherently, to be part of a community. Better: to be a disciple of Jesus is, inherently, to be part of a family.

Jesus invokes familial language in the Sermon on the Mount, telling those gathered to hear his proclamation that God is their Father; they are God's children. This reinforces the idea of the familial redefinition we saw above from Mark 3. Through his words and actions, Jesus communicates that those who follow him have a new collective identity as the family of God, and that only those who follow him can claim such kinship.

In the next chapter we will delve more deeply into the actions that define such communities, after which we will wrestle with issues of inclusion, exclusion, and universalism. For now, I want to draw attention to two important dimensions of communities that are defined by the Christian story. First, since they are communities living into the story of the God of the Bible whom we call Father, these groups must reflect

the character of this God by acting like this God. And second, since this God was acting definitively in Christ, we know what it is to act like God by looking to the narrative of how God has acted through Jesus. Or as a friend of mine likes to say, “God is a verb that acts like Jesus.”

Acting like God

On the more general point of acting like God, the Sermon on the Mount has this to say: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you [= y’all] so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven; for he causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. . . . Be perfect, therefore, as your [= y’all’s] heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:44–45, 48). What it means to be like God cannot be dissociated from the mission of God in Christ. This call to love one’s enemies, to be agents of blessing to them, sits in a potentially awkward tension with Jesus’s earlier allusion to Isaiah 60 and its vision for restoration. Such visions in the Old Testament often entail indications of military victory, of defeating Israel’s enemies as though they are God’s own adversaries. And yet Jesus invites us to see that the story of the world, and the story of God’s actions in Christ to save a people to himself, depicts God as one who repays insult with blessing, offense with forgiveness, persecution with prayer.

What types of actions might typify a community that is generating the sort of light that would cause onlookers to see their good works and glorify their Father in heaven? To take but one specific example, to be like this grace-extending God is to be a community of forgiveness. In the next major section of the Sermon on the Mount, we find instructions on how to pray, including the so-called Lord’s Prayer. There we find God’s forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of other people in tightest possible connection: “forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors” (Matt. 6:12). Wittingly or no, whenever we pray this prayer together in Christian communities we are inviting God to measure our own posture of forgiveness against his own character as a forgiving God. Even starker than mere comparison, however, is Jesus’s word of warning and promise. To a community that is to be defined as a forgiven people, Jesus proclaims that our ability to receive God’s forgiveness is contingent on our own ability to extend such forgiveness to others. If

we are not imitating the heavenly Father, then we are not his children: “For if you [= y’all] forgive people their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you [= y’all]; but if you [= y’all] do not forgive people their transgressions, neither will your Father forgive your [= y’all’s] transgressions” (Matt. 6:14–15).

Extending forgiveness to one another is so central to the community’s vocation to enact the story of God that Jesus calls us to be agents of forgiveness even when we are not the ones who need to extend this grace but the ones who need to receive it. This is the startling message of Jesus’s warning against anger (Matt. 5:21–26). He begins by saying that anger, not merely murder, makes one liable to judgment, and that acting on anger by name-calling brings one to the brink of judgment in hellfire (Matt. 5:22).

Jesus follows this admonition, however, by telling people not how to deal with their own anger but how to mollify the anger of someone who has taken offense at them: “And so, if you’re offering your gift and remember that your brother or sister has something against you . . .” (Matt. 5:23).

Notice the familial language, “your brother or sister.” Jesus is concerned about the kinds of relationships that typify the family of God’s children, the family that he is reforming around himself. This is a family that does not live by principles of self-interest, as though the only thing that really matters is seeing oneself preserved from judgment. On the contrary, this family is driven to pursue the good of one another, even leaving one’s own worship of God behind to see that the family is embodying the forgiveness that God offers us. The most striking thing of all is that this is not an abandonment of worship driven by the realization that one’s own heart is not right with a brother or sister; rather, it is a forsaking of personal communion with God driven by the realization that we are the burden on someone else’s heart.

The call to leave the gift at the altar and be reconciled with our siblings is offered as an illustration of Jesus’s teaching against anger. The upshot is that the family of God is so aware of the dangers of anger that we are called to forsake the worship of God in order to ensure that none of us is keeping another from experiencing the forgiveness of God. We are called to pursue reconciliation, not for our good but for the good of our sister or brother. This is what it means to be a family that lives out

its identity as children of the God of grace and forgiveness. And what we should never lose sight of is that this type of community derives its identity from the gospel narrative itself. This is the story of Jesus, who comes to save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21) and pursues their reconciliation even at the cost of his own life.

Acting like Jesus

Although each Gospel offers a unique portrait of Jesus, they are in agreement that the ministry of Jesus is to be embodied by Jesus's followers. The community he forms around himself is the continuation of Jesus's presence on earth. In the previous chapter we noted how Jesus's mission to teach and thereby make disciples is entrusted to his own disciples at the resurrection: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples . . ." (Matt. 28:18–19). Jesus was a disciple-making teacher, and his disciples are to continue that mission. Similarly, we see nearly one-to-one overlap between Jesus's mission and the mission on which he sends his disciples during his life. After showing us a Jesus who gathers people to himself, preaches, and exercises authority over demons, Mark tells us that Jesus calls twelve to himself in order to be with him, preach, and have authority to cast out demons (Mark 3:13–15).

Of course there is one thing Jesus did for us that we could never do for one another: he died on the cross for us. But in a calling that is just as surprising to us as it was to his first disciples, Jesus summoned his disciples to embrace even this narrative of the cross, the most unrepeatable act of his ministry, as the hallmark of life in Christian community.

As the story goes, a dispute arises among Jesus's disciples concerning greatness in the kingdom of God; specifically, this is a debate about which of them is greater. We can safely assume that they are not humbly exalting each other to the positions of greatness. And so Jesus demands that their understanding of greatness be turned on its head. The greatness in his community of followers is not the greatness of the world. Out there, among the nations, those who are great lord it over others and wield their power as a sign of greatness, "but among you, it shall not be so" (Mark 10:42–43). What will be the difference in Jesus's community? The upside-down nature of the dominion of God is put

on display in the person of Jesus: “Whoever wants to be first among you must become servant of all, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:44–45). This community is to shine its light by continuing Jesus’s vocation of giving himself so that others might live.

The stories and teachings of Jesus show us not only how he formed a family during his lifetime but also ways in which his ministry will be extended through the communities that continue to follow him after his death and resurrection. Matthew, in particular, anticipates a community called “the church” (Matt. 16:18; 18:17). And each Gospel depicts a community that bears the title of God’s family, brothers and sisters who find their oneness in a God whom they call Father; its identity is shaped by the story of what this God is doing and has done in Christ to gather a people to himself. With these pieces in place I want us to turn our attention to Paul’s letters, where we will see that his vision of the people of God is no less a matter of participation in community than the Gospels’.

Reassigned to Israel’s Drama

Paul’s story of a community of Jesus followers contains many of the same narrative dynamics as the Gospels, though with two particular points of difference. These differences are, first, that though Paul tells the story of discipleship as one of being part of the people of Israel, his churches are comprised not of Jews but mostly of non-Jews (gentiles). The other major difference has to do with how Paul depicts the church as the continuing presence of Jesus in the world: it is Jesus’s own body. As Paul reflects on the story of Israel that preceded Jesus, and reflects more deeply on the church story that comes afterward, he walks a wide, common ground with Jesus in calling for an imitation of God through an imitation of Christ.

Children of Abraham, Family of God

Stories from the Scriptures of Israel form the well that Paul draws from as his letters narrate the life and identity of his communities. Israel’s story becomes the story of the church. It is precisely God’s commitment to a corporate people, Israel, that causes Paul to articulate

salvation in an inherently communal manner. To be part of the church is to belong to a community whose identity is being molded into the shape of that people of God whose story is written on the pages of the Old Testament. And that story, in turn, is being shaped by Paul's convictions about Jesus as the crucified and risen Messiah.

When we turn to Paul to probe his writings for indications of Christian identity, we must always remember that he is writing first and foremost to churches. What narrative do these communities locate their identity in? First, it is a story of God's promises. When we read the Gospel narratives, we find them easily referring back to God's vows to make Abraham into a numerous people with a territory for its own possession. In Mary's song in Luke 2, the birth of Jesus is anticipated as the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham and his descendants (Luke 1:55). The identity of those who will be saved by the work of Christ is the seed of Abraham whom God has helped.

But here Paul, the missionary to the gentiles, has a problem. (And we discover in Romans that this is God's problem too, though that is a story for another day.)⁴ His converts are not physically descended from Abraham and do not bear the mark of the covenant people—they are not circumcised. And so, in one of Paul's most daring moves, he renarrates the story of Abraham so that it will include his gentile converts as well. The story of Abraham is one of the most formative narratives for Jewish identity, and Paul tells it in such a way that non-Jews can become part of the family.

Paul renarrates the Abraham story in two places: Galatians 3 and Romans 4. And here we are about to walk over ground that has been well trod during the past five hundred years but that we need to reassess using our narrative framework. These are the places in Paul where he tackles the issue of "justification by faith" head-on. But what may seem strange to anyone with experiences of Paul influenced by Protestant churches in the modern West is that these passages, which have fomented so much debate and division, were written for the purpose of defining all the followers of Jesus as one unified people.

The question of unity will concern us more directly in chapter 7. Here we will lay the groundwork by taking stock of how Paul's treatment of Abraham reveals that the church has a narratively constructed communal identity: we are the people of God, which is to say that we are

the children of Abraham, which is also to say that we are the children of God and brothers and sisters of one another.

Paul presents two visions for how it is that we become Abraham's children. What this tells us, in part, is that the core conviction is that all Christians are part of this family and therefore recipients of God's promise, and there are many possible ways to conceive of how and why this is true.

The first time Paul tackles this issue is in Galatians. In chapter 3 of that epistle, we find Paul capitalizing on the specific language of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 17:7. There, God tells the patriarch that the covenant is not just between himself and Abraham but between God, Abraham, and Abraham's seed. "Seed" in this case is an image for descendants.

In Galatians, Paul exploits the singular form of the noun *seed* and finds in it a hint that the covenant promise is going to be established through one person: Christ. The covenant is between God and Abraham and Christ. Therefore, the way for anyone else to be part of this promise, to be the "seed" of Abraham, is to be part of the one seed—to be "in Christ." As Paul works it out here, Christ defines the family of God, and everyone who is "in Christ" is a child of God, a recipient of the promise to Abraham.

If the God of Israel has acted to redeem a people for himself, this action must be read as the story set in motion when God bound himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And yet God has also done something new and unexpected: he has poured out the promised Spirit on uncircumcised gentiles.

When we keep the issue of circumcision on the table, we catch our best glimpse of why Paul makes the somewhat strange argument he puts forth and the brilliance of his rereading of Genesis 17, which states in no uncertain terms that circumcision is absolutely necessary to be part of the covenant people of God. Circumcision itself is the covenant: "This is my covenant with you and your seed, the covenant that you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised" (Gen. 17:10). And as if to underscore the point, God goes on to say that those who are not circumcised will be cut off from the people (Gen. 17:14). The passage that promises a seed, that ensures the covenant promise will pass to the seed, makes circumcision the indispensable marker of the people of God.

Paul, though, insists that gentiles are participating in the story without being circumcised, without becoming Jewish. In order to both affirm the story and write his gentile converts into it as gentiles, he rereads the story in light of what God has done: God has sent Christ as the fulfillment of the promise—he is the one seed.

But if the seed is *only* Christ, where does that leave us? It places everyone on the same ground: needing to be joined to Christ in order to participate in the covenant promises. Paul says: “You are all God’s children, in Christ, through faith” (Gal. 3:26). To be a follower of Jesus is to be “in Christ” and therefore to be part of this family of God that has Abraham as its father. This is precisely how Paul concludes the chapter: “If you are Christ’s then you are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise” (3:29).

The story of God’s family is the story of Abraham. Paul retells this story, insisting that belonging to Christ makes us part of that community because he understands not only that communal stories determine our individual identities but also that this particular story is the one story that God has wrought salvation with. To follow Jesus is to be written into the story of the one worldwide family of God.

With this reorientation of gentile identity on the table, making gentiles part of the story of Israel without making them become Jews, we can begin to understand other passing comments. Recall our discussion from chapter 1: gentiles are being written into the story of Israel. In writing to the church at Corinth, Paul recalls part of the Old Testament exodus narrative, insisting that the story is “ours,” a story that holds currency for both him and his non-Jewish converts. When he begins to recall this piece of Israel’s Scripture, he writes, “I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our fathers were all under a cloud, and all passed through the sea” (1 Cor. 10:1). “Our forefathers.” Paul does not say, “The Jewish people.” He does not say, “Their forefathers.” He calls the gentiles his siblings and calls their attention to their common ancestral lineage. The gentiles have been written into the story of Israel.⁵

Christ’s Body, No Longer Gentiles

We have looked now at how people’s union with Christ writes them into the story of Israel: they are Christ’s and therefore the story of

Abraham and his seed is their own. Throughout, we have been using the term *gentiles* (i.e., non-Jews) to speak of Paul's churches. We discover in 1 Corinthians that this might not make the apostle entirely happy. Paul sees the transformation of identity as being so complete that he can refer to his converts as "gentiles" in the past tense.

Leading into the famous chapter on spiritual gifts, Paul says, "You know that when you were gentiles you were led astray to mute idols" (1 Cor. 12:2). Christian community is a certain kind of community. Other kinds of communities, with other kinds of practices and identity markers, stand at odds with it. At the heart of this antithesis is whether one worships the true and living God of Israel or, instead, the idols that are not gods. The living God is the God who is not mute but speaks, and who not only speaks but also gives the gift of speech. The community that the true God has set apart for himself is defined by a common confession ("Jesus is Lord") that indicates a larger reality: the members of the community are recipients of the Spirit. These are some of the layers Paul puts in place as he tells the Corinthians that their identity is inherently corporate: by the Spirit they are united to and become the body of Christ. And so the word *gentile*, which used to characterize them as lying beyond the pale of the people of God, no longer applies.

As we saw when we reflected on Jesus's selection and sending of his disciples, the church, as a body and as a community, is the continuing story of Christ. In a passage famous for its discussion of spiritual gifts, Paul appeals to Jesus as the answer to the church's struggles against self-aggrandizement.

Divisions and self-promotion deny the story of salvation. In 1 Corinthians 1 Paul had condemned such factionalism by asking rhetorically, "Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" No, the Christian story is one of incorporation into Christ, not Paul, and the lives of believers are to dramatize that reality.

And so when we read in 1 Corinthians 12 about the "body of Christ," we need to pause and absorb the magnitude of what Paul is claiming. Although other passages in Paul will speak of the church as those charged to represent and speak for Christ where Christ cannot be physically present, that is not the image here. Although other passages speak of the church as a body in closest relationship to Jesus such as that of a

husband and wife, that is not the image here. When Paul talks about the church as the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12, he speaks of the people being related to Christ in the same way that my ear is related to me. The members of the church make up Christ's body in the same way that my eyes, ears, fingers, legs, and other parts make up my body. This might be putting it even too mildly: Christ *is* the body that is made up of the parts. "Just as the body is one yet has many members, but all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so also is Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12).

Jesus is a body with many members. And we are those parts. By the Spirit, through baptism and the Lord's Supper, we are joined to Jesus's body and thereby become "the many" that comprise "the one." This is the mystery behind Paul's insistence that we are many and varied while at the same time one and therefore bound to use our gifting in service of one another.

When exploring our corporate identity, Paul first focuses on the notion that if we are to be a fully functioning community we must be different from one another (1 Cor. 12:14–19). If each person were the same, we would be deprived of sight or sound, of touch or smell. There is no room for a false humility whereby a member would see himself or herself as useless due to that member's apparently less important role. More important, because our identity is found in community, we must anticipate that God will bless this group with diversity. The one person who has everything that the church needs for life and health is Christ, and we are the members who embody those needful things. Diversity expressed within community is both inherent to our identity and essential for our health.

And so Paul goes on to explore the flip side of his claim. Not only do we need diversity, but we also need to recognize our oneness as well. In 1 Corinthians 12:20–26 he countermands our tendency to see certain members of the community as less important and therefore dispensable. The high calling not only to endure one another but to participate fully with one another in the use of gifts, in life's joys and sorrows, is a narrative we are called to live based on the part we play together in God's story. To paraphrase 1 Corinthians 12:27, "As a group you are Christ's body, and individually you are its members." Because of his focus on Jesus, Paul's gospel is inherently communal.

No Soloists

This communality is one of the most significant points about which postmodern cultures have prepared us to better read, understand, and appreciate Paul's vision of the Christian life. Of course, to claim that Christianity is inherently communal is not a "postmodern" claim at all, and those of us in Protestant contexts could have learned this much earlier had we listened more carefully to our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters. But the Reformation's insistence that salvation is not tied to one particular church, coupled with the individualistic quest for knowledge that typified the Enlightenment, eventually bore fruit in a self-centered understanding of salvation: all that matters is who I am in my heart before God. But this vision is not Paul's (nor was it the Reformers', though that is another discussion for another day).

Let's stick with the "spiritual gifts" discussion in 1 Corinthians 12 for just a moment longer. An overarching question of this book is whether the Paul we have previously encountered is a faithful depiction of the Paul we find on the pages of the Bible. How have we met the Paul who speaks of "spiritual gifts"? In one of the most profound ironies of my own experience, talk of such gifts has usually been part of a larger vision of self-discovery. We take inventories to see what gifts each one of us has. We sit down with a list of tasks wherein we might find ourselves well employed within our gifting. In the process, what for Paul was an inherent part of life in community is co-opted by our individualistic Christianity as a means to self-fulfillment.

When I speak with people who have struggled with Paul, many of them have a strong sense of the place of community in their lives, especially in their vocation to follow Jesus. As we approach Paul from various angles, we are going to see again and again that he shares this concern for community. To be saved is to be "in Christ," and to be "in Christ" is to be in his body, the church, a community of people who need one another not only to thrive but even to live. The story that determines my identity has as its fountainhead that I am inscribed in the story of Christ and thereby written into the story of the people of God.

So far we've explored ways that the narrative of Israel is determinative for our corporate identity, and some ways that the story of our reception of the Spirit and incorporation into Christ determines our corporate identity. If the former brings Paul's converts to an even

playing field with Jesus's Jewish audiences, the idea of incorporation into Christ's body seems to take us away from the story as Jesus told it. Do we find in Paul what we saw in the Gospels, that the stories of a gracious Father and of a self-giving Messiah are themselves determinative narratives for Christian identity?

The Family Story

As God's family, we are called to live out the family story. For both Jesus and Paul this means imitating our Father, who receives us with welcome and forgiveness. As we saw with Jesus's calls to forgiveness, we also see in Paul that God's reception and forgiveness of each of us calls forth a way of life that puts community before self. And this imitation of God involves us also in embodying the story of Jesus.

Romans 15:1–13 lays out the options that confront a church standing face-to-face with a possible split along ethnic and cultural lines. The tendency to trumpet our own position, to pursue our own agenda for spiritual formation and obedience to God, is confronted with the cross of Christ. Paul insists that we are not to please ourselves and calls each of us to look to our neighbor, to act to please the other and to build others up (15:2). Such a call beckons the community to continually reenact the narrative that formed it.

The first part of the narrative that Paul alludes to is the crucifixion. Paul reads Psalm 69:9 with Jesus as the speaker: "The reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me." In bearing the scorn heaped on another, in his death on the cross, Jesus models the self-effacing humility that is to characterize the family of God. Because we are written into the story of Christ, his own self-humiliation for the good of the other becomes our model—the scriptural injunction applies to us, propelling us forward and granting us hope. We have hope because Jesus's fulfillment of the Scripture resulted in his resurrection from the dead. We can therefore be sure that when our communities enact the self-giving narrative of the cross, we too will be given new life by God (both here and now and in the hereafter).

A surprise awaits us as we start delving more deeply into Paul's call that we imitate Christ's self-giving. The psalm Jesus "recites" in Romans 15, Psalm 69, is a song of a righteous sufferer, a song addressed

to God: “The reproaches of those who reproach you, *God*, have fallen on me.” In Romans 15 the reproaches that fall on Christ do not refer to the sins we humans should have borne. Instead, they introduce the mockery heaped on the God of Israel.

When Paul calls us to dramatize the story of Jesus in our community, he is not calling us to look at ourselves as the savior and our brothers and sisters as sinners who need us to deliver them. Yes, Paul calls us to play the role of Christ. And yes, he calls us to see the fellow members of our community playing the role of the ones scorned in the psalm. But recognizing the divine audience in the psalm, Paul profoundly implies that he wants us also to bear ridicule directed at God, and that God, in turn, is known as he indwells his earthly family.

Paul summons us to bear with one another because when we look at the faces of our brothers and sisters we see in them the image of God. They represent God on earth. We view them as though their future were realized in the present, “perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.” We imitate Christ, who bore the reproaches of those who ridiculed God. I seek my sister’s good, I seek my brother’s good, rather than my own because in so doing I live into my family’s story, the story of the elder brother who died for the honor of the Father. When I set aside my own desires and seek to please my siblings, I also am giving up myself for the honor of my Father, whose likeness I see in them.

As so often in Paul, the path of faithful Christian living ultimately leads to the worship of God. The purpose of our communal harmony is so that as one people, with one voice, we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 15:6). When we so accept one another, and give ourselves for one another, the result is not merely the absence of discord but the production of a chorus of voices joined in harmonious praise to God. Once again, community is essential. More than this, Paul is intent to show us that such a God-glorifying community is the reversal of humanity’s primal failure to glorify God (Rom. 1:21; 3:23). The story of the fall as it highlights our failure to worship God is undone only when God acts in Christ to overcome the effects of the fall as it has marred our relationships with one another. Worship is not simply about my heart before God or my voice being lifted up—it is about my heart as part of a community, my voice as part of our song. Like Jesus calling us to leave the gift at the altar if someone else needs

to extend us forgiveness and then come back to worship, Paul calls us to submit ourselves to our brothers and sisters so that as one unified body we might offer our collective praise to God.

In the second paragraph of Romans 15, verses 7–13, we discover something as profound about God’s identity as we discovered about our sisters’ and brothers’ identity in the first paragraph. If our siblings’ identity is most truly known in God’s identification with them, it is also true to say that God is most truly and fully known in his identification with us. Here, we are not talking about the incarnation of Jesus, though that event makes the same point in a different way. Romans 15 tells us that the existence of a unified community, specifically one that brings together Jews and gentiles, confirms the truth of God (Rom. 15:8).

God is known in such a community because God has chosen to bind himself to, and write himself into, the story of Israel. God’s promises to Israel are confirmed when God embraces them in the embrace of Christ, but in order to truly show itself as the work of the true and living God, the community must be a unified group that embraces gentiles as well. Our existence as a unified yet diverse people shows that God is alive, that God is at work, and that this living, working God is a God who can be trusted to write the story of the world so as to redeem every part of its sinfulness and brokenness.

To the surprise of many of us who grew up thinking of God in abstract categories such as *omnipotent*, *omniscient*, *infinite*, and *unchangeable*, the God of the Bible has written himself into the story of a particular people and has linked his fate with theirs. God’s identity is narrated for us in the story of Israel, and especially in the death and resurrection of Jesus, which bring this story to its climax. But God has not only staked his character on the one-off work of Jesus on our behalf; he has also joined his reputation to the community that is formed by being united to Christ.

Where we are tempted to say that Jesus’s death on the cross itself is the reason for God to be praised, Paul says that it is the risen Christ’s acceptance of us that results in glory to God. While our default mode is to say that Jesus’s death and resurrection show us that God is faithful and true, Paul here says that the community formed by this service, a community of Jews and gentiles together, affirms “the truth of God and confirms the promises given to our forefathers” (Rom. 15:8–9).

Community could not be of any more vital importance to Paul. Not only is our life together an imitation or reenactment of the story of Christ, but the continuing narrative of the church continues to show (or call into question) the very character of God as one who embraces, loves, forgives, and keeps his promises. And so Richard Hays is right to conclude that Jesus's death and resurrection function, in part, to point beyond themselves, signifying "God's eschatological intention to create a messianic *community* of those who know themselves summoned to welcome one another, as the Messiah has welcomed them, for the glory of God."⁶

What Is Our Life Together?

Christian identity is inherently communal. Followers of Jesus are the family of God, brothers and sisters of one another. The postmodern current that places a high premium on community as shared life, shared spaces, recognizing the ways that these shape us and therefore carry us along in our efforts to create sustainable and vibrant webs of social interaction, finds ready allies in both Jesus and Paul. But where Jesus and Paul might call us to repentance is in the self-seeking tendencies that underlie even many of our endeavors toward community.

Above I mentioned the irony of investigating spiritual gifts as a path to self-fulfillment. Similar narcissistic tendencies might underlie other efforts at community. To take but one example: what sorts of communities are formed through social networking? As someone with a blog and LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook accounts, I have found tremendous value in connecting over the internet. But more often than not, these media are incapable of hosting truly Christian community because it is rarely possible in such contexts to enact our vocation of setting down our own lives so that others might live. Most often, the currency of such tools is that of self-promotion. Again, this is not always bad. Telling people our stories; allowing them to see that we possess the gifts of wit, irony, and sarcasm; and sharing our reflections on the world can cultivate relationships that blossom into true community.

But true community begins when I stop telling you what I think and begin to help you live out the fullness of what you believe (this is

the point of Rom. 15). True community begins when I stop obsessing about myself long enough to help you walk the road you have before you. Christian community is recognizable in a oneness of purpose and worship that brings glory to God. I have even seen such acts of love and worship occur on the internet—worship united in the wake of a Twitter friend’s suicide, oneness of purpose to give and pray in the aftermath of an earthquake in Haiti, and evidence of a church that knows no boundaries based on race, gender, nationality, language, or skin color. But we must not assume that being “connected” means that we are in community any more than we may assume that our belonging to a church means that ours is a healthy family. Even there we may be called to leave our worship aside in pursuit of our calling to be a people who, corporately, live into the forgiveness that God has extended to us in Christ.

What is Christian community? It is a family formed around Jesus. It is a family that has a certain look. Like a human family where unique persons bear a common family resemblance, so the family of God is comprised of an unmitigated diversity of people who are called to look like their Father, which means, in turn, to look like their brother Jesus. As a people we are called into a community. As a forgiven people we are called to be agents of forgiveness. As a Christian people we are called to continue the work of Christ in embracing one another so that our light will shine, giving glory to God or, in the words of Paul, so that with one accord we might with one voice glorify our God and Father.

Many of us living in the postmodern Western world are becoming increasingly aware that community is an inherent part of our story and that community is good. But community at arm’s length is not enough. Simply being connected must not be confused with faithfully playing our roles as the engaged, committed, and invested family of God, the body of Christ. People looking on must be able to see the family resemblance, to see a people imitating God our Father by living the story of Christ our brother. This communal identity plays itself out in myriad decisions that we might speak of under the umbrella term of *ethics* or, perhaps, *spirituality*. This is where we must turn next.