

## *THE CONGREGATIONS IN THE LETTERS OF ST. PAUL*

One looks to Holy Scripture for deepening one's understanding of spirituality. As documented earlier, Walter Wink discovered insight into the "angel," the personality of the congregation through his study of *The Revelation of John*. More can be gained by considering other congregations highlighted in the Bible. We can learn from St. Paul and the letters he wrote to specific congregations.

A Bible study does not simply stay in the past. It is a vehicle for a word, a new idea, and challenge to be brought into a person's, or congregation's, consciousness. A study of New Testament letters written by St. Paul can be read in a new way for deeper insights. Identifying the personalities of congregations from two thousand years ago through using a psychologized form of literary criticism on scripture is informative primarily as one is willing to learn about her/his own congregation. Studying the congregations to whom Paul writes raises questions and possibilities not only for seeing them in new light, but hopefully raising deeper questions for today's congregations. Understanding the congregation's personality will aid the leadership team who desire to encourage it into greater health and engage it in more faithful witness and mission. There is value in engaging in a Bible study of the congregations of Paul for what one learns about Paul or the congregations. The deeper significance is achieved as the complexities of congregational ministry and the power of personality are confirmed. In these congregations Paul was dealing

with issues of life, which were theological, spiritual and cultural. Two thousand years later congregations are still confronted with the same issues of life.

The preferences determined by a person's psychological type affect how one approaches life, the manner or pattern s/he use to address issues. Individuals will address similar issues divergently. It follows that comparable issues would affect corporate entities differently as well. One assembly of people will face constitutional or procedural challenges with ease while similar circumstances will cause great anxiety for another group. One congregation may be comfortable to hold fast to traditions while another, experiencing traditions as restrictive and hollow, will create its own way. One may excel at accomplishing projects and another at creating a harmonious community.

St. Paul knew most of the churches to which he wrote letters, having spent time in the majority of them. In the letters Paul praised and thanked them for the ways they were faithful, and he addressed what he perceived to be attitudes and practices compromising and diminishing the faith in each congregation. I acknowledge it is a speculative analysis to attempt to identify a corporate personality for the congregations to whom Paul wrote. This is not a Bible study in the traditional sense. People learn from, and are encouraged by, the faithfulness and brokenness of the people in the Bible. Looking at the congregations of Paul can give similar insight into the dynamics of the congregation today. Paul did not write in a vacuum. He did not fabricate the issues he addressed. Studying the letters gives clues to both the congregational corporate personalities and of the personality

and leadership style of Paul. The purpose of this study is to give participants a new perspective, a challenge to amend their operative judgments about congregations and the role of leadership. Studying Paul's leadership style will increase awareness of one's own leadership. Observing how Paul valued the strengths in some congregations and the lesser-developed characteristics in others raises questions for clergy about how open they are to appreciate congregations as they are gifted differently. Do clergy appreciate the congregations' lesser-developed characteristics because they as pastor cannot readily identify with the congregations' preferences, or is the appreciation intended to encourage the congregation to develop balance and a greater wholeness?

It is noted that Paul's letters are addressed differently: "To the church of God that is in Corinth." "To the churches of Galatia." "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Phillipi." "To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae." "To the church of the Thessalonians." The churches at Corinth and Thessalonica might have been congregations more of the structure we are used to in a congregation. The churches of Galatia may have functioned more like what we might call a denomination or synod, or perhaps these churches refer to house churches that frequently came together as a congregation. Then there were the faithful saints at Phillipi and at Colossae whom one could presume met as congregations in those communities. These "Churches of Paul," the congregations, had different interests, different problems, and, I suggest, different personalities which shape their values, guide their attitudes toward ministry and authority, and

lead them each into being unique and different from each other. The letters address issues that came to Paul's attention because in some way the assembly, the congregation, was struggling, and/or Paul, the representative of "denominational" authority, was having difficulty accepting particular values, attitudes and behavior of a congregation.

Paul's Letter to the Romans is not included in this study neither is the one to the Ephesians. Paul's letter to the Romans is a theological discourse. It does not appear to be written to any particular congregation. For a study in personalities this letter may give more insight into the personality and concerns of the author than into any communities to which it may have been written. It would be interesting to know how different communities responded to the letter. It might be likened today to a judicatory leader writing to the congregations of his or her charge. Not all will respond with the same enthusiasm.

Ephesians presents another problem. Paul was very specific in the other letters ascribed to him in confronting congregations concerning those life issues becoming a hindrance to their Christian faith. By contrast, the style and language of the Letter to the Ephesians is markedly ceremonial and liturgical. Scholars believe Ephesians is a post-Pauline letter written by a disciple of Paul.<sup>1</sup> There is speculation that Ephesians is a cover letter for the Pauline corpus by one who had managed to collect copies of the other letters.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter an overview of the study is offered with comments. The study is printed in an appendix for those who wish to look at it more closely.

Different personalities, whether individual or corporate, have gifts and abilities that are realized based on personality preferences. Equally, under the guidance of the personality, each frames the challenges confronting them in dissimilar ways. Paul identifies the issues and response, or lack thereof, in each congregation. Considering these factors and dynamics allows an assumption to be made about the corporate nature of each church or congregation. Using the MBTI, I have identified the corporate personalities of these early congregations as follows:

<i>Corinth</i>	E S T P	<i>extraverted Sensing with Thinking</i>
<i>Galatia</i>	I S F J	<i>introverted Sensing with Feeling</i>
<i>Philippi</i>	I N F P	<i>introverted Feeling with Intuition</i>
<i>Colossae</i>	E S T J	<i>extraverted Thinking with Sensing</i>
<i>Thessalonica</i>	E N F J	<i>extraverted Feeling with Intuition</i>

Paul tended to begin his letters with the same pattern. He introduced himself, greeted the congregation by name, shared an invocation with them, and he affirmed them. Paul usually had heard something positive about their faith journey which he mentioned to them: “Enriched in Him, in speech and knowledge,” “for all of you share in God’s grace,” “love you have for all the saints,” “your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord.”

Paul knew the importance of affirming the congregation for they were, and how they were living out the Gospel. If you were writing a letter of affirmation to

the congregation in which you participate, what would you say about them? What would you lift up as noteworthy about their faith journey and mission?

Then, in most cases, Paul prayed for them. The prayers are the first glimpse of Paul responding to the congregations' personalities. For the Corinthians, "...so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end..." ESTPs, like the Corinthians, have a difficult time waiting for anything. Further study of these two letters will reveal that while the Spiritual posture for this congregation was one of an Accomplishing spirituality, their time orientation was to the present. Too much of their "doing" had been self-serving, and self-indulgent. The lack of Intuition produced a milieu wherein the consequences of action were not considered. Weakness in the development of the Feeling function creates a climate where people are hurt by immorality, lawsuits, and a lack of understanding the dynamics of love.

Paul prayed for the Philippians, "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best..." INFPs would benefit from strengthening the Thinking function to increase knowledge and full insight. This letter was truly a love letter from a former pastor to a congregation he founded. The letter was intimate and supportive. As with other INFPs, they could be idealistic and optimistic. They functioned with a Harmonizing spiritual posture. This opened them to be blindsided by those that would use them or hurt them. One has to wonder how closely Paul's personality aligned with the corporate personality of the Philippians.

For the Colossians Paul was, "...praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord..." ESTJs are grounded in the past, in tradition and focus on practical knowledge. Their Accomplishing spirituality, which had orientation needing to know what was expected of them and how they should respond step-by-step, left them open to be attracted to Gnostic philosophy. They could become focused on the brokenness of the world around them and not see the brokenness within. The ideas and structure of Gnosticism may be easier for the ESTJ to grasp than concepts of grace and God's love.

For the Thessalonians Paul prayed, "And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all...And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness..." This ENFJ congregation already possessed the Christ-like quality Paul held dearest, love. They do displayed a Harmonizing spirituality, as did Paul, with a time orientation to the future. This orientation led them to focus on the second coming of Christ to the exclusion of being vigilant about continuing to live a moral life today. Their gasping of the imminent future in Christ's coming had fostered a sense of superiority in them. This attitude not only supported excusing immorality, it encouraged condescension toward those who labored. For some with the ENFJ personality the desire for harmony pushes them into going along to get along. Paul found it necessary to remind them in his second letter to "stand firm and hold fast to the traditions which you were taught by us."

Paul addressed the congregation by name, affirmed their growth in faith and prayed for them. He also addressed the areas of congregational life he judged were less than whole and far from holy. In both the congregations at Corinth and Thessalonica he addressed sexual behaviors that, while culturally acceptable, were immoral for Christians. What becomes obvious is that he treated these two congregations quite differently. In the letter sent to Corinth Paul went into detail concerning their immoral behaviors. Obviously the situation in Corinth was out of control and damaging to the very soul of the congregation. The tone is scolding and warning. It could be that Paul sensed he had to spell-out his assessment and every aspect of his expectations in great detail for the Corinthians. This would be true for ESTP congregations, as well as other types that focus on the Sensing preference. Immorality was acknowledged in the letter to the Thessalonians without the need to go into great detail. While there is warning in his words, Paul addressed the subject more in terms of encouragement.

In his letters Paul displayed an ability to respond to each congregation with some sense of its unique personality. He was clear about the different challenges that each faced. He appeared to understand he had to be much more attentive to details with the Corinthians and the Colossians. He structured his language to their Accomplishing spirituality frequently using words like work and labor. Both of these congregations prefer Extraversion and Thinking. Paul addressed the personality preferences these challenges posed as he encouraged the Corinthians to “Examine yourselves...” and the Colossians to, “Let your speech always be

gracious.” Conversely the Philippians and Thessalonians appeared to be Intuitive Feeling personality types with a Harmonizing spirituality similar to Paul. He was on the same “wave length” with them. Paul spoke their spiritual language. He had no need to go into great detail; confident they understand. He did not have to explain love to them, as he did for the Corinthians, rather he affirmed they understood and knew how to love, and how to be *love* in Christ.

Galatians is a unique letter. Through the study a type designation of ISFJ was identified for this congregation. That is not unique. Paul’s response to this congregation was what is uncharacteristic. Paul did not affirm them. He did not pray for them. Paul was frustrated with them to the point of calling them fools. He was responding to more than simply the Serving spirituality of this congregation, which was different than his own. One could read this letter and conclude that Paul was extremely jealous of the attention being given to the one to whom they had now turned for leadership. I doubt that jealousy was the issue. Rather, I suggest Paul’s reaction is based in his sense that something unhealthy had developed between the new “pastor” and the congregation. This new leader had not replaced Paul. He had replaced Christ. I have learned ISFJs and ESFJs are the two types most likely to marry an alcoholic and try to facilitate a recovery for their loved ones. They accept the loyal number two position in a hierarchical relationship. They will relinquish some of their freedoms to support one who is needy and has power or position over them. Their serving appears not to be grounded in Christ’s love but in an unhealthy need to be needed. This is a sign of low, or no, self-esteem. The issue is not the

Galatians personality of ISFJ, it is that they are unhealthy. They seem to have lost, or never developed, their sense of being a self-differentiated. They did not have a healthy sense of their identity, of who they were as a congregation. Their sense of identity was dependent on being in a serving relationship with a leader. They were in the survival mode of freeze focusing on maintenance.

The issues, with which one is confronted, personally or corporately, may not have anything to do directly with type. Healthy response to those issues has everything to do with personality type. Type, however, does not describe fully who we are individually or corporately, nor does it explain our every action. Yet, the study of type may afford us an experience of grace as we, through greater self-understanding, accept the unique way God has gifted us individually and corporately. This giftedness will shape and inform our processes for gathering information and making decisions; how we live out our faith as individuals and as congregations.

Lay people and clergy, as they associate with various congregations, may discover how and why they more naturally identify with one as opposed to the others. There are a number of reasons for this. Cultural or economic similarities, educational background, theological orientation, and size are important identification factors. The corporate personality type is also important. When one finds a congregation with a ministry emphasis, a spiritual posture, appealing to her/him, more than likely it may have corporate personality preferences similar to one's own. Conversely, the greater number of preference areas of personality type which

differ between a person and the congregation, the more the person may sense that they are not in sync with each other. This does not diminish the importance of the individual's gifts in and with this congregation. It does mean that the individual, especially the one serving as pastor, or a lay leader, will have to learn the language that speaks to the spiritual posture of the congregation. A congregation's health is greatly increased in proportion to its ability to accept and affirm those who have gifts and interests more inline with the lesser-developed areas of the congregation. Too many congregations, lacking self-differentiation, have worked to dismiss a particular member or pastor, judging they are not a "good fit." Greater understanding of type at both the individual and corporate level will reduce the occurrence of judgments leading to exclusion.

While it is important to be guided by our understanding of the Gospel, it is also essential for health to recognize and affirm the giftedness in others. God gifted the congregations differently. Paul could not expect them to be carbon copies of one another. So too, engaging in this Bible study, creates increasing awareness of the benefits of acknowledging the giftedness of both the individual and the congregation. For one to try to shape the congregation to match her/his ideal denies the congregation the unique giftedness it brings to the whole body of Christ. Ignoring type and trying to use personal power or position to shape and change the congregation will ultimately lead to the burnout of the leader and/or the congregation.

Finally, it is important to realize how difficult it can be to be inclusive and fair in use of our language. In reading the Letters of Paul I continue to be impressed how he was able, in some degree, to change his language as he wrote to each of the congregations. Yet, his preferred Harmonizing posture appeared to be his norm for their faithfulness. I make value judgments on what Paul wrote or on the situation to which he wrote as I peer through the rose colored glasses of my own personality preferences. In that regard I am no different than Paul, or you. In so doing each one of us fails to fully realize and appreciate the other's perspective and gifts. Paul was equally human. It is important to remember that no one pastor, congregational member, or judicatory leader ever has the full picture of the congregation. Leading a Bible study, preaching, acting in a leadership role is always a bit distorted while wearing those rose colored glasses, if not blinders. Potentially all sixteen types are represented in the membership of any congregation. Leaders may work to develop an understanding and appreciation of various issues, values, and concerns as they arise out of different personality preferences; however, do they recognize how they naturally make judgments and operate first-and-foremost out of their own preferences? The challenge is to continually look past our own preferences and appreciate and honor the personalities of congregations and individuals who are gifted differently. Leaders desiring their congregations to function with a higher degree of health will consciously strive to honor and engage the preferences with the gifts that differ in the congregation.

*We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us*

*– St. Paul, Romans 12:6*

*Endnotes*

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1. Robert A Spivey and D. Moody Smith, Jr., *Anatomy of the New Testament* (London: Macmillan Company, 1969), 306.
2. *Ibid.*, 357.