

Damned Disciples: The Permeability of the Boundary between Insiders and Outsiders in Matthew and Paul

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How did the earliest Christians explain the difference between insiders and outsiders?¹ Were insiders to think of themselves as potential candidates for exclusion, or were outsiders totally other, of different stock such that movement in and out was not possible? Was the current visible assembly of the elect expected to be the same as the real one as it is known to God and will be revealed in the judgment? And if the empirical *ekklēsia* is not convertible with the real people of God, how was this potentially troubling fact understood? Christians could hardly deny that insiders occasionally apostatized.² The question to be considered here is whether early followers of Jesus believed God might damn bona fide, confessing followers of Jesus if they failed to measure up in some way. This essay seeks to answer these questions by examining Matthew's Gospel and the letters of Paul, both chosen for their influence and interestingly contrasting perspectives.

Matthew's Gospel

A major concern of the First Gospel is to show that insiders will retain their position only if they do what God requires. The performance of just deeds is paramount; all other criteria for determining the difference between insiders and outsiders are relativized. Matthew's special interest in righteous deeds as the main criterion of inclusion can be seen in a number of

¹ Anders Runesson ("The Question of Terminology: The Architecture of Contemporary Discussions on Paul," in *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015], 53–77) et al. rightly warn that the label "Christian" might encourage one to think of a modern, predominantly Gentile, "religion." Nevertheless, I am unconvinced that it is better to rely solely on circumlocutory alternatives such as "Jesus followers." Though problematic in certain respects, Χριστιανοί is at least a first-century label, one which was already familiar when the author of Acts offered an explanation of its origin (11:26).

² E.g., 1 John 2:18–19; Heb 6:4–6.

uniquely Matthean passages and in his distinctive reworking of material shared across the Synoptic Gospels.³

This theme is first made explicit in John the Baptist’s chilly reception of Pharisees and Sadducees.⁴ John is in the wilderness of Judea leading crowds to receive baptism in preparation for coming judgment when Pharisees and Sadducees arrive:

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (3:7–10 NRSV; see also 3:11–12)

Matthew’s description of the Pharisees and Sadducees “coming for baptism” (ἐρχομένων ἐπὶ τὸ βάπτισμα) is ambiguous, leading some commentators to suggest they did not come to be baptized, but only to observe or even oppose John.⁵ The Baptist’s response, however, assumes that they, like the others in the wilderness, came to repent and thereby flee the coming wrath.⁶ John refuses them because their behavior is wicked. Before they can repent and receive baptism they must perform deeds commensurate (ἄξιος) with such repentance.⁷ Trees that do not bear good fruit—that is, people who do not do good deeds—will be destroyed, even if they are descended from Abraham and attempt to join John’s movement.

³ This motif is shared with Mark and Luke where it is less pronounced.

⁴ Cf. Luke 3:7–9, where these words are addressed to the crowds. See also Luke 7:29–30.

⁵ E.g., Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 96–97; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988–1997), 1:303–4.

⁶ ἐρχομένων ἐπὶ τὸ βάπτισμα could be rendered “coming for baptism” (LSJ ἐπί III.1; NRSV) or “coming to where he was baptizing” (LSJ ἐπί I.5; NIV), but John’s response presupposes the former meaning. Davies and Allison (*Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 1:304) chalk this up to awkward redaction, but appeals to incoherence are unnecessary. Discrepancy between outward shows of piety and inner wickedness is a key element in the portrayal of the Pharisees throughout Matthew (e.g., 23:3; 15:8). See Mary Marshall, *The Portrayals of the Pharisees in the Gospels and Acts*, FRLANT 254 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 117–24.

⁷ Josephus claimed that John the Baptist taught that people should cleanse themselves by living justly (δικαιοσύνη) prior to presenting themselves for baptism; otherwise the baptism would not be pleasing to God (*Ant.* 18.117). Cf. the remarks about ritual immersion and repentance in 1QS in Alexandria Frisch and Lawrence H. Schiffman, “The Body in Qumran Literature: Flesh and Spirit, Purity and Impurity in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *DSD* 23 (2016): 155–82.

Matthew's polemics against the Pharisees and other groups consistently rely on this same idea: the disobedient will be cast aside regardless of their other qualifications. After his demonstration in the temple Jesus is challenged by the chief priests and elders (21:23). In response, Jesus tells two parables which these leaders realize are about them (21:28–46).⁸ The first, the parable of the Two Sons (21:28–32), contrasts the leaders of the people, who claim to follow God but do not, with tax collectors and prostitutes, who had once refused to be obedient but came to follow John the Baptist in the “way of righteousness” (21:32). It is far better to be a sinner who turns and obeys than someone who seems to be in good standing but does not actually do what God commands. This is followed by the parable of the Wicked Tenants (21:33–44), which accuses the same opponents that they are about to be set aside because they have failed to render to God the “fruit” they owed him.⁹

That Matthew has harsh words for Jewish leaders reflecting the conflict of his own day is well known.¹⁰ More interesting for our purposes is Matthew's insistence that disobedient followers of Jesus will themselves be cast out. The status of those in Jesus's *ekklēsia* (16:18) depends on their continued obedience to the commands of God, just as it had for the Pharisees and their ilk.

The parallel fates of Jewish leaders and followers of Jesus who do not measure up is vividly demonstrated in Matthew's parable of the Wedding Banquet (22:1–14), which follows the parables of the Two Sons and the Wicked Tenants.¹¹ The parable compares the

⁸ Despite the challenge coming from the chief priests and elders (21:23), in 21:45 it is the chief priests and Pharisees who “realized he was speaking about them.”

⁹ For a well-argued case that the parable is directed against these opponents and not against Israel as a whole see Matthias Konradt, *Israel, Kirche, und die Völker im Matthäusevangelium*, WUNT 215 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 187–209. See also Tommy Givens, *We the People: Israel and the Catholicity of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 330.

¹⁰ This basic point enjoys wide consensus, though the question of whether this critique extends to Israel as a whole or simply to its leaders continues to be debated. See, e.g., Isaac W. Oliver, *Torah Praxis after 70 CE: Reading Matthew and Luke-Acts as Jewish Texts*, WUNT 2/355 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013); Anders Runesson, “Rethinking Early Jewish-Christian Relations: Matthean Community History as Pharisaic Intragroup Conflict,” *JBL* 127 (2008): 95–132; Konradt, *Israel, Kirche, und die Völker*; and Graham N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992).

¹¹ Daniel Marguerat, *Le jugement dans l'Évangile de Matthieu*, 2nd ed. (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1995), 325–31.

kingdom of heaven to a “king who gave a wedding banquet for his son” (22:2). Those who were invited to the banquet ignore the invitation and murder the king’s messengers. The king retaliates by burning their city—often seen as an allusion to the events of 70 CE.¹² Because those who were invited were not “worthy” (ἄξιοι; cf. 3:8), the king’s servants go through the streets and invite everyone they find, both “evil and good” (22:10). If the parable ended here, as it does in the Lukan and Thomasine versions, it would be yet another charge that those who rejected Jesus would be subject to divine judgment. Matthew, however, appends a bizarre epilogue with a warning for those who were just brought in from the streets. When the king joins the new guests he notices one who is not wearing a wedding robe. He tells his attendants, “Bind his hands and feet, and cast him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (22:13). Ancient and modern interpreters have agreed that this final twist in the story cries out to be read allegorically.¹³ Wedding garments were not required for guests, and in any case these guests were just pulled off the streets. Whatever the garment signifies—many have suggested good deeds (Rev 19:8)—this conclusion indicates that Jesus’s new group of insiders can be cast out just as their predecessors had been. Indeed, in the narrative as a whole, Matthew places an even greater emphasis on the possible damnation of Jesus-followers.¹⁴

In Matt 7:13–27, Jesus claims that only those who do what God commands will avoid destruction. The way to life is a narrow gate that excludes most people (7:13–14). Not all who claim to follow Jesus are genuine; there are “false prophets,” wolves in sheep’s clothing who fail to do good deeds and will be “thrown into the fire” by God (7:15–20). In the judgment there will be “many” who have performed miraculous deeds in Jesus’s name but who will nevertheless be found wanting (7:21–23). These apparent Jesus-followers will say

¹² E.g., Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2005), 54.

¹³ E.g., Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.36.5; Augustine, *Serm.* 40.3–4; Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 56.

¹⁴ Robert Gundry, “In Defense of the Church in Matthew as a *Corpus Mixtum*,” *ZNW* 91 (2000): 153–65.

“Lord, Lord!” and cite their impressive accomplishments. Despite all this they will be sent away because they did not really do the will of God—which for Matthew would mean following Jesus’s teaching and interpretation of the Law.¹⁵ This section closes with a warning that those who hear Jesus’s words but do not obey face destruction, whereas those who hear and obey will be secure (7:24–27). According to Matthew, insiders are in this sense in no better position than the religious leaders against whom Matthew polemicizes. Both must obey to be in good standing.¹⁶

Matthew’s *ekklēsia* is, as Augustine put it, a *permixta ecclesia*, a body containing both the “bad and good,” wolves and true disciples.¹⁷ The Gospel identifies three ways in which the false members will be discovered and expelled. First, Matthew alone among the Gospels sets out instructions for how to identify and expel unrepentant evildoers. Those who refuse to repent after being found guilty of sin are to be ejected from the community (18:15–17). Second, Matthew warns that some members of the church will defect under duress. In the eschatological discourse, for instance, Jesus predicts that “many will fall away” in times of

¹⁵ Justin Martyr, a second century reader of Matthew, commented, “Let those not found living as he taught not be known as Christians, even if they speak with the mouth the teachings of Christ. For he said it is not those who only profess, but those who do the works who will be saved. For thus he said, ‘Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord’” (*1 Apol.* 16.9). Cf. *2 Clem* 4.1–2.

¹⁶ Petri Luomanen (“*Corpus Mixtum*—An Appropriate Description of Matthew’s Community?” *JBL* 117 [1998]: 469–80 [esp. 476]) argues that 7:21–23 describes outsiders, not members of the church. Regardless of whether Matthew expected such false believers in his own midst—I would suggest there is good evidence that he did (see below)—the figures in this passage are described only as those who do miracles in the name of Jesus. This suggests some affiliation with the Jesus movement.

¹⁷ *Doctr. chr.* 3.32. Augustine modifies Tichonius’s “bipartite body of the Lord” because the “body of Christ” itself will always be with the Lord. Better, Augustine maintains, to speak of the “true and mixed body of the Lord” or simply of the “mixed church” (*permixta ecclesia*). The use of the label *corpus mixtum* in modern scholarship is usually traced to Günther Bornkamm, “Enderwartung und Kirche im Matthäusevangelium,” in *Überlieferung und Auslegung im Matthäusevangelium*, ed. Günther Bornkamm, 2d ed., WMANT 1 (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1961), 17. Luomanen (“*Corpus Mixtum*”) and, regarding select passages, Klyne R. Snodgrass (*Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 320, 487–91) have challenged the label, rightly noting that some of the passages cited actually depict the sifting of the entire world, not just the *ekklēsia*. Luomanen overstates his case, however, in rejecting the label altogether. Matthew repeatedly indicates that there will be followers of Jesus who fall away in difficult times or who will be condemned in the last judgment. See Gundry’s response, “The Church in Matthew as a *Corpus Mixtum*.”

trial, stooping so low as to hand each other over to hostile authorities (24:9–14). Those who remain faithful under persecution, however, “will be saved” (24:13).¹⁸

The third and most important sifting of Jesus’s followers will come in the parousia when Jesus returns to judge the world and “repay to each according to his deeds” (16:27), collecting debts and paying wages. Matthew compares this event to the separation of weeds from wheat at harvest time (13:24–30, 36–43) and to the elimination of rotten things from a catch of fish (13:47–50).¹⁹ Matthew’s final block of teaching material concludes with five consecutive pericopae describing this sifting (24:36–25:46). “That day” will be like the time of Noah, with some saved and others destroyed (24:36–40). Leaders in the church will be judged on their faithfulness and the remiss will be damned (24:45–36). Jesus’s followers are like ten bridesmaids watching for the coming bridegroom (25:1–12). Five bridesmaids remained vigilant and were able to go with the groom into the wedding banquet. The other five were not ready and are locked outside. They cry “Lord, Lord” but are banished from his sight. In the parable of the Talents (24:14–30), disciples are warned to do good work while the master is away or be shut into the outer darkness.²⁰ The final passage (25:31–46) describes the day when all the nations (τὰ ἔθνη) will be gathered and separated into two groups: those who served the Son of Man by helping the hungry, thirsty, lonely, naked, sick, and incarcerated and those who did not. The former group is welcomed into eternal life, the latter to eternal punishment. All other criteria are ignored in this final depiction of eschatological sifting—only those who helped “the least of these brothers of mine” avoid perdition. Even if there is rhetorical exaggeration here—that is, even if Matthew thinks there

¹⁸ In the time of the narrative the first instances of such defection is imminent, as Judas, Peter, and all the twelve are about to betray Jesus in one way or another. Even in the triumphant conclusion of the narrative when the eleven disciples meet the risen Jesus there is division, as some harbor doubts while worshipping him (28:16–17). It is likely such defections and doubts were experienced in the Evangelist’s own time. See also 13:21 which speaks similarly of those who “hear the word and receive it with joy,” but fall away because of “tribulation or persecution” (13:21).

¹⁹ These parables refer to the judgment of the entire world, not just the *ekklēsia*, but Matthew’s other descriptions of this event show the *ekklēsia* is also in the crucible.

²⁰ See Gundry (“The Church in Matthew as a *Corpus Mixtum*,” 156–60) on 24:45—25:13.

is more that determines who is in and who is out than just who helped the needy—Matthew at least gives the impression that everything depends on acts of mercy and anyone can be excluded.²¹ Matthew does emphasize God’s free forgiveness of “debts,” or sins, but the cancellation of debts comes with strings attached.²² Those who refuse to repent and extend this same forgiveness to others have their forgiveness rescinded.

It is worth stressing Matthew’s insistence on good deeds as the principal criterion of inclusion because commentators have often recast Matthew’s language of necessary obedience into vague language of affiliation. That is, whereas Matthew insists that disciples must actually do the will of God or be cast out, commentators have often attempted to make a positive outcome more or less the automatic result of association with Jesus.²³ For instance, standing in a long tradition of New Testament scholarship, Joel Green writes that Matthew does not teach “‘works-righteousness,’ as though one might be regarded as righteous on account of one’s performance.”²⁴ Instead, “Those who align themselves with the kingdom” inevitably produce the required fruit.²⁵ Another recent commentator claims that, for Matthew, one remains in not by doing good deeds but by “belonging to . . . the priorities of the kingdom” and that disciples will be acquitted on the day of judgment on the basis of their

²¹ Cf. John Chrysostom, who cites Matt 25:40 and comments, “Therefore, whatever sins you have, your almsgiving outweighs all of them.” *Paenit.* (PG 49:293).

²² Nathan Eubank, *Wages of Cross-Bearing and Debt of Sin: The Economy of Heaven in Matthew’s Gospel*, BZNW 196 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), 53–67.

²³ See the surveys of scholarship on this and related questions in Petri Luomanen, *Entering the Kingdom of Heaven: A Study on the Structure of Matthew’s View of Salvation*, WUNT 2/101 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 7–40. For critique and reassessment see Nathan Eubank, “What does Matthew Say about Divine Recompense? On the Misuse of the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (20.1–16),” *JSNT* 35 (2013): 242–62.

²⁴ “Heaven and Hell,” *DJG*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 373. For some modern theologies it is indeed very important to avoid “works righteousness” and to posit that God reckons righteousness without considering the life that person actually lived, but these concerns are manifestly foreign to the First Gospel.

²⁵ *Ibid.* The claim that “fruit” indicates works which are more or less automatically generated by those with the right “alliances” is common in this stream of interpretation, often relying on a problematic indicative/imperative dichotomy drawn from Pauline studies. One could imagine the metaphor of fruit being used to this effect, but Matthew stresses that even insiders who “align themselves” with Jesus will be damned if they do not perform the necessary deeds. Indeed, for Matthew’s John the Baptist, fruit was required prior to making the right alliance (see above on 3:7–10). On the distinction between indicative and imperative in Matthew see Marguerat, *Le jugement dans l’Évangile de Matthieu*, 215–19.

relationship with Jesus.²⁶ Some have even claimed that the judgment of the nations in 25:31–46 is not so much about evaluating people’s deeds as it is about distinguishing between those who “[f]reely receiv[e] their salvation from the grace of Christ” and those who “wear their good works on their sleeve.”²⁷ This interpretation foists on Matthew a foreign works/grace dichotomy and subverts Matthew’s insistence that disciples must actually do what God requires to enter into life. To be sure, Matthew is addressed to people who believed they had been rescued from sin and welcomed by God (1:21; 26:28), but these recipients of divine mercy were not blessedly assured of their position. If they failed to do what God required, they would be thrust into the outer darkness. The boundary between insider and outsider is for Matthew highly permeable.

Damned Disciples in Paul

Paul’s letters lack Matthew’s lurid descriptions of weeping and teeth gnashing. Indeed, he never clearly mentions anything like a hell, though he does speak of “death,” “destruction,” or “corruption,” even if it is difficult to understand quite what this entails.²⁸ In a number of letters, however, he argues that rejection of the gospel message would nullify his converts’ faith. He worries about Satan tempting his converts away which thereby rendering his efforts worthless (1 Thess 3:5; see also 2 Cor 11:1–4). He thinks that members of his *ekklēsiai* could be found ἀδόκιμοι, unworthy and without Christ (2 Cor 13:5), and that it is inevitable that *ekklēsiaia* would contain some who are worthy (δόκιμοι) and some who are not (1 Cor 11:19; 2 Cor 6:1; 1 Cor 9:27). He also expects believers to face a final judgment in which rewards

²⁶ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 259, 292. See also Hans Weder, *Die “Rede der Reden”*: Eine Auslegung der Bergpredigt heute (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1985), 241–45.

²⁷ Sigurd Gridheim, “Ignorance Is Bliss: Attitudinal Aspects of the Judgment According to Works in Matthew 25:31–46,” *NovT* 50 (2008): 313–331 (331). See also Bo Reicke “The New Testament Conception of Reward,” in *Aux sources de la tradition chrétienne: Mélanges offerts à M. Maurice Goguel* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux and Niestlé, 1950), 195–206, and Joachim Jeremias, *Neutestamentliche Theologie*, 2 vols. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1971), 1:209.

²⁸ E.g., Rom 6:23; Gal 6:8. Though of dubious authorship, 2 Thess 1:5–10 is a possible instance of something like “hell” in Paul.

and punishments are meted out (Rom 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10; 1 Cor 3:10-15). His letters warn that failure to “hold fast” to his gospel message would place former believers among those who are not being saved (1 Cor 15:1-2).²⁹

One of the clearest such warnings appears in his discussion of the unbelief of fellow Israelites in Romans 11. In his well-known allegory of an olive tree, he says the portion of Israel that rejected the gospel was cut off and gentiles—uncultivated branches—were grafted in their place. Paul comments:

For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness (ἐὰν ἐπιμένῃς τῇ χρηστότητι); otherwise you also will be cut off. (11:21–22 NRSV)

Like Matthew, Paul warns that the new in-group will suffer the same fate as their predecessors should they make the same error. Gentile Christians occupy a position that is no less precarious than Israel’s—if anything it is more precarious because it is not “natural” (κατὰ φύσιν) for them to belong.³⁰ God’s kindness to them creates certain obligations: they must remain in that kindness or be eliminated. So, he writes, “do not become haughty, but stand in awe” (11:20).³¹

What would it mean for the Roman Christians to fail to continue in God’s kindness? In context one thinks first of rejecting Christ as had many of the “natural branches.” There is indeed widespread scholarly agreement that Paul thought disciples could be lost if they rejected the gospel message or one of its core tenets.³² Did Paul think sinful behavior could

²⁹ See also Gal 1:6–9; 4:8–11; 5:2–4.

³⁰ Matthew Thiessen (*Paul and the Gentile Problem* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2016], 119–20) argues that the gentiles remain “sarkically” gentile despite being grafted in, just as the branches that have been broken off retain their sanctity despite lacking the Spirit. See also Benjamin D. Gordon, “On the Sanctity of Mixtures and Branches: Two Halakic Sayings in Romans 11:16–24,” *JBL* 135 (2016): 355–68.

³¹ In John Barclay’s terms, God’s gift to the gentiles does not escape reciprocity. It is circular, demanding a return. *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 74. Cf. Origen (*Comm. Rom.* 8.11), who sees in Rom 11:16–24 a refutation of Valentinus and Basilides, who are supposed to have used the same passage to argue it is in the nature of souls to be automatically bound for either salvation or perdition.

³² Even Judith M. Gundry Volf (*Paul and Perseverance: Staying In and Falling Away* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990], 159–229; 285–86), who defends what turns out to be a Reformed view of perseverance (1–2), allows for this possibility with some qualifications.

push an insider into the ranks of the damned? Judith Gundry's 1990 study, *Paul and Perseverance*, remains the most influential monograph-length study of this question.³³

Gundry argues that for Paul rejection of the gospel message is the only thing that can exclude a Christian from salvation. No ethical failure could ever do so. Gundry recognizes that Paul cautions *ekklēsiai* against various sins that exclude one from the kingdom (e.g., 1 Cor 6:9–11), but takes these passages as descriptions of what rank and file pagans will endure, not as a possible future for Paul's converts.³⁴ It is true that these passages have none of Matthew's explicit threats of the damnation of professed Jesus-followers. But if Paul thought his converts were somehow immune from becoming confirmed "thieves, greedy people, drunkards, slanderers, or robbers" (1 Cor 6:10), one wonders why Paul consistently warns those to whom he writes that such people would not "inherit the kingdom."³⁵

More fundamentally, however, one must ask whether Paul maintains a clear dichotomy between belief and behavior such that the former is decisive whereas the latter is not. Is there evidence of such a split, or is this something we have imposed upon him?³⁶

Three examples from Paul's undisputed letters will serve to query this assumption.

³³ The literature that touches on the issue less directly is vast. See, e.g., Barclay's analysis of the "perfection" of grace in Pauline scholarship, *Paul and the Gift*, 130–82; idem, "Believers and the 'Last Judgment' in Paul: Rethinking Grace and Recompense," in *Eschatologie—Eschatology: The Sixth Durham-Tübingen Research Symposium: Eschatology in Old Testament, Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Tübingen, September, 2009), ed. Hans-Joachim Eckstein et al., WUNT 272 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 195–208; Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Reading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); Simon J. Gathercole, *Where is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1-5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); B. J. Oropeza, *Paul and Apostasy: Eschatology, Perseverance, and Falling Away in the Corinthian Congregation*, WUNT 2/115 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000); Kent Yinger, *Paul, Judaism, and Judgment According to Deeds*, SNTSMS 105 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977), 515–18.

³⁴ *Paul and Perseverance*, 131–54.

³⁵ Gundry allows that members of Paul's congregations might be guilty of these vices, but persistence in such sin may simply be an indication that "they have not yet made the initial step of repentance and conversion" (285, 135–36). Gundry thereby excludes genuine defection by definition. Cf. 1 John 2:19 which might support such a view.

³⁶ See Colin D. Miller, *The Practice of the Body of Christ: Human Agency in Pauline Theology after MacIntyre*, PTMS 200 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014). See also recent literature critiquing or refining the distinction between the "indicative" of Paul's soteriology and the "imperative" of his ethics. E.g., Volker Rabens, "'Indicative and Imperative' as the Substructure of Paul's Theology-and-Ethics in Galatians? A Discussion of Divine and Human Agency in Paul," in *Galatians and Christian Theology: Justification, the Gospel, and Ethics in Paul's Letter*, ed. Mark W. Elliott et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014); Knut Backhaus, "Evangelium als Lebensraum: Christologie und Ethik bei Paulus," in *Paulinische Christologie: Exegetische*

In 1 Thessalonians, widely thought to be Paul’s earliest letter, Paul sets out “the will of God” for the Thessalonian converts:

For this is the will of God: your sanctification; that you abstain from fornication; that each of you know how to acquire your own vessel [scil., probably, “control your own body”] in sanctity and honour, not in passion of desire like the nations who do not know God; to not wrong or defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we told you before and solemnly warned you. For God called us not to impurity but in sanctity. Therefore, whoever rejects these things rejects not a human but rejects God, who gives his sacred Spirit to you. (4:3–8)

Though Paul does not use the word ναός (temple), the picture here is of the Thessalonian converts as sacred spaces with certain obligations for maintaining sanctity.³⁷ God gives his sacred Spirit to them and requires them to live accordingly, in holiness, not impurity (ἀκαθαρσία), a word used here with both the cultic and moral senses.³⁸ They are to control their bodies—here described as “vessels”—in sanctity and honor, which requires them to abstain from πορνεία and “passion of lust.”³⁹ If they fail to follow this course of action, they will be punished by Jesus (the likely referent of κύριος in 4:6) and they will be guilty of rejecting God and God’s Spirit (ἀθετεῖ ... τὸν θεὸν τὸν δίδόντα τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτοῦ τὸ ἅγιον εἰς ὑμᾶς).⁴⁰ In short, if the Thessalonians surrender themselves to passion and πορνεία, they will become unclean and will no longer be fitting vessels for the sacred Spirit. Like other keepers

Beiträge: Hans Hübner zum 70. Geburtstag, ed. Udo Schnelle et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000); Udo Schnelle, “Die Begründung und die Gestaltung der Ethik bei Paulus,” in *Die bleibende Gegenwart des Evangeliums: Festschrift für Otto Merk zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Roland Gebauer and Martin Meiser, Marburger Theologische Studien 76 (Marburg: Elwert, 2003), 109–31. See the helpful review of the debate in Samuli Siikavirta, *Baptism and Cognition in Romans 6–8: Paul’s Ethics beyond ‘Indicative’ and ‘Imperative’*, WUNT 2/407 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2015).

³⁷ See the discussion in Christine M. Thomas, “Locating Purity: Temples, Sexual Prohibitions, and ‘Making a Difference’ in Thessalonikē,” in *From Roman to Early Christian Thessalonikē: Studies in Religion and Archaeology*, ed. Laura Nasrallah et al., HTS 64 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 109–29.

³⁸ See Christine E. Hayes’s discussion of “carnal impurity” in Paul. *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 92–103.

³⁹ The meaning of σκεῦος in 1 Thess 4:4–6 is notoriously difficult to determine. In addition to “body,” it is sometimes thought to refer to a particular part of the body (viz., the penis) or to wives. All the main alternatives possess what seem to me fatal flaws. See the discussion and cautious defense of “wife” in Matthias Konradt, “Εἰδέναι ἕκαστον ὑμῶν τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι ... Zu Paulus’ sexualethischer Weisung in 1Thess 4,4f.,” *ZNW* 92 (2001): 128–35.

⁴⁰ Cf. 2 Thess 1:7–9, which speaks of the punishment (ἐκδίκησις) of those who “do not know God” and “do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.” The gospel is something which must be *obeyed* to escape punishment. Cf. 2 Cor 9:13.

of sacred spaces, the Thessalonians needed to preserve the sanctity of their “temple”—i.e., themselves, or lose access to the divine. As Paul puts it in a similar passage in 1 Corinthians, those who belong to Christ must “flee πορνεία” because it is a sin “inside” the body (εἰς τὸ ἴδιον σῶμα), and the Corinthians’ body is a temple of the sacred Spirit (6:15–19). If some among the Thessalonians should lose their sanctity, it would not be because they simply rejected Paul’s gospel message, but because they failed to behave a certain way. In this passage, moral-cultic impurity is antithetical to the sacred, which means that indulgence in πορνεία is tantamount to apostasy.⁴¹ It is true that Paul goes on to say that God had chosen the Thessalonians for salvation (5:9).⁴² This outcome, however, is not yet in hand. The Thessalonians may yet “reject God” through their immoral behaviour.

A second example illustrating the distorting effects of the belief/behavior dichotomy is found in 1 Corinthians 10, where Paul retells the story of the Israelites in the wilderness as a typological prefiguration of the Corinthian church.⁴³ The Israelites ate spiritual food and drink and were “baptised into Moses” (10:1–4). Despite these privileges, God destroyed most of them in the wilderness because of their sins (10:5). “These things happened,” Paul says, “as examples for us, so we would not desire evil as they did” (10:6).

Do not become idolaters as some of them did, as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to play” [Exod 32:6]. Let us not fornicate (πορνεύωμεν) as some of them fornicated and twenty-three thousand fell in one day [Num 25]. Let us not test Christ, as some of them tested and were killed by serpents [Num 21]. Do not grumble, as some of them grumbled and were killed by the destroyer. (1 Cor 10:7–10)

Paul’s main concern in this passage is idolatry, but he draws in other sins including πορνεία, which was commonly linked to idolatry (see Num 25) and which was among the major

⁴¹ The warning here is ideal-typical and does not address the question of the penitent recidivist or other possible scenarios. Paul does leave room for growth by degrees (4:1).

⁴² Gundry (*Paul and Perseverance*, 21) comments, “In 1 Thess 5:9 Paul declares in no uncertain terms what Christians’ final destiny will be ... God has a set purpose toward believers which God will most assuredly carry out in accomplishing their salvation.”

⁴³ See Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 91–102.

concerns of the letter (5:1–13; 6:12–20; 7:2–5). Paul drives his point home in verse 12: the Corinthians who assume they are safe from condemnation should take heed lest they end up like the Israelites who perished in the wilderness. Despite giving the Corinthians spiritual food and drink, God is liable to destroy them for these sins.⁴⁴ It is important to note that there is no question here of the Corinthians holding incorrect beliefs. Indeed, the problem of food sacrificed to idols is triggered by some in Corinth who claim that, since there is only one God, idols are non-entities (8:1–4). Paul agrees with them on this point (8:6), but warns that those who have this knowledge nevertheless invite destruction through eating, sex, and general rebelliousness.⁴⁵

A final example of Paul’s insistence on the necessity of correct behavior is found in Galatians, a letter propelled by Paul’s fear that the Galatians will allow themselves to be circumcised and perform other “works of the law” in an attempt to be in right relationship with God. Paul insists that the Galatians relate to God through Christ and that performance of works of the law would amount to a rejection of Christ. In the penultimate portion of the letter (5:13—6:10), Paul turns to moral teaching, describing the behavior that leads to “destruction” (6:8) as well as that which leads to “eternal life” and “inheriting the kingdom” (5:21; 6:8). Interpreters have long struggled to explain how this portion of the letter relates to the central argument, but recent scholarship has increasingly recognized that this passage sets out the way of life that is the alternative to the path set out by Paul’s opponents.⁴⁶

Though 5:13—6:10 is somewhat loosely organized, it is guided by a coherent focus on the opposition of the Spirit and the Flesh. The Spirit is what enables a new way of life

⁴⁴ B. J. Oropeza, “Apostasy in the Wilderness: Paul’s Message to the Corinthians in a State of Eschatological Liminality,” *JSNT* 75 (1999): 69–86.

⁴⁵ 8:7–13 warns of the potential idolatry and consequent destruction of those who do not have this knowledge.

⁴⁶ For recent arguments that 5:13—6:10 is integral to the argument see, e.g. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 423–42; Matthias Konradt, “Die Christonomie der Freiheit: Zu Paulus’ Entfaltung seines ethischen Ansatzes in Gal 5,13—6,10,” *EC* 1 (2010): 60–81; Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 131–55.

(5:5–6, 22–23).⁴⁷ *Flesh* is Paul’s catch-all word for all that is opposed to the work of the Spirit, including everything from gentile circumcision to idolatry. In the final few lines of this section Paul pits flesh against spirit in a concise warning about how to attain eternal life (6:7–10). He begins by warning that “God is not mocked” because “whatever a person sows, this also he will reap” (6:7). Paul then switches from the question of seed to soil: “For the one who sows in his own flesh will reap destruction from the flesh, but the one who sows in the Spirit will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing the good, for we will reap in the due time (καίρῳ ... ἰδίῳ), if we do not give up” (6:8–9). To reap eternal life it is necessary to remain steadfast in planting in the Spirit, which is here equated with doing the good (τὸ ... καλὸν ποιοῦντες). Those who plant in the Spirit by acts of generosity will reap eternal life in the future.⁴⁸

Thus, in the conclusion of his exhortation, Paul sets out two ways of life. Those who act according to the flesh find ruin, and those who live according the Spirit find eternal life. Living according to the Spirit is defined as working on behalf of others. Fleshly behavior would mean at least the absence of this action, and if read in light of the wider context, behavior which is socially destructive and debauched—rivalry, jealousy, factions, fornication, drunkenness, and so on. Some commentators have denied that Paul presents a choice between two ways of life, as if there were two possible paths which the Galatians have the power to choose.⁴⁹ There is little doubt that Paul thought this new way of life was enabled by God’s Spirit, but not in a way that erased human choice and striving. To follow a pattern

⁴⁷ Cf. Gal 6:15: “For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything.” This suggests that “new creation” and “faith working through love” are closely related, if not synonymous (Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics*, 177). Cf. also 1 Cor 7:19.

⁴⁸ “Doing the good” was strongly associated with material generosity, though its valence here is wider. See Nathan Eubank, “Justice Endures Forever: Paul’s Grammar of Generosity,” *JSPL* 5 (2015): 169–87.

⁴⁹ E.g., Martinus C. de Boer, “Paul is not asking his readers to choose between Two Ways ... they have no choice to make.” *Galatians: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 388. See also Susan G. Eastman, *Recovering Paul’s Mother Tongue: Language and Theology in Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 42–43, and J. Louis Martyn, “Apocalyptic Antinomies in Paul’s Letter to the Galatians,” *NTS* 31 (1985): 410–24.

of life governed by the flesh is here, as in 1 Thess 4, a rejection of God’s Spirit and an embrace of death.

The Inward Current

Despite Paul’s insistence that certain patterns of life lead to destruction, Paul manifests what one might call a strong inward current: all things being equal, those who are “in Christ” tend to stay there and those without may even get sucked in. This inward current is a persistent feature of his thought that manifests itself in a variety of settings. At times, Paul makes the grace already received by those in Christ all but ensure a positive outcome in the end (e.g., 1 Thess 1:4; 5:9). This dynamic is particularly clear in his letter to the Romans. In Rom 5, Paul points out that it is rare to find someone willing to die even for a good person. Christ, however, died for “the ungodly,” which proves God’s love. With this astonishing event having already occurred—unworthy recipients received God’s gift—it would be less of a surprise if these recipients avoid the coming wrath of God: “God demonstrates his love for us because while we were still sinners Christ died for us. *How much more*, then (πολλῶ ὄν μᾶλλον), being justified by his blood, we will be saved though him from the wrath” (5:8–9).⁵⁰ There is, he says later in the same letter, “no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus” (8:1). Those whom he called and foreknew, he also justifies and glorifies (8:29–30). Unlike John’s Gospel, which brings judgment into the present (e.g., 3:18–19), however, this positive outcome remains at the level of hope; it is not a fait accompli. But it does cause Paul to forecast that those who are in will remain.⁵¹

Paul also occasionally claims that God punishes or chastises insiders in a way that results somehow in their ultimate inclusion and that this chastisement can take place after

⁵⁰ Emphasis added.

⁵¹ Cf. Floyd V. Filson (*St. Paul’s Conception of Recompense* [Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1931], 90): “Although Paul seeks to establish a wholesome fear in the hearts of his readers, the general impression given by his letters is that he has confident assurance that at least the great majority of Christians will surely enter into a blessed eternal life after the judgment.”

death or in the final judgment. These ideas appear above all in the first letter to the Corinthian congregation. In 3:12–15 he speaks of the day of judgment when the work that he and other missionaries have done will be tested with fire. Workers who have done good, lasting work will receive a wage in proportion to their labour (3:8, 14). Those who did shoddy work which is burnt away in the fire will not be repaid, but will instead be punished, losing out on the payment due other workers (ζημιωθήσεται).⁵² This testing and punishment leads to the salvation of these workers, however; they will be “saved,” as it were, through fire (αὐτὸς δὲ σωθήσεται, οὕτως δὲ ὡς διὰ πυρός).⁵³ In 1 Cor 5 Paul speaks yet again of punishment leading to a happy outcome in the “day of the Lord.” After castigating the Corinthians for tolerating incest, he instructs them to hand the incestuous man over to Satan, which may refer simply to expulsion from the assembly or to a curse inviting Satan’s involvement.⁵⁴ This course of action will lead to “the destruction of the flesh, so that the spirit will be saved in the day of the Lord” (ὄλεθρον τῆς σαρκός, ἵνα τὸ πνεῦμα σωθῆ ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τοῦ κυρίου).⁵⁵ Though they are to force this man out, the purpose of this action is, apparently, his eventual, eschatological reintegration. Thus, Paul is confident that both the incestuous man and the inept missionaries will be condemned, but that this condemnation redounds somehow to their ultimate inclusion.⁵⁶

⁵² Jay Shanor, “Paul as Master Builder: Construction Terms in First Corinthians,” *NTS* 34 (1988): 461–71.

⁵³ Saved “through the flames” is often taken as a proverb meaning “by the skin of one’s teeth.” Daniel Frayer-Griggs (“Neither Proof Text nor Proverb: The Instrumental Sense of διὰ and the Soteriological Function of Fire in 1 Corinthians 3.15,” *NTS* 59 [2013]: 517–34) has shown the lack of evidence for such a proverb and has drawn attention to the passage’s echoes of purifying fire in Mal 3. See also Dan 11:35 Theod; *Did.* 16:5; *Herm. Vis.* 4.3.4; *T. Ab.* 1 3; and *t. Sanh.* 13.3.

⁵⁴ Cf. 1 Tim 1:20. For a review of possible interpretations and defense of a curse, see David Raymond Smith, *‘Hand this Man Over to Satan’: Curse, Exclusion and Salvation in 1 Corinthians 5*, LNTS 386 (London: T&T Clark, 2009).

⁵⁵ It is not clear what “destruction of the flesh” means, and the meaning of ἵνα τὸ πνεῦμα σωθῆ is also contested. Adela Yarbro Collins (“The Function of Excommunication in Paul,” *HTR* 73 [1980]: 251–63) argues that the spirit in question is the spirit of God which will be “saved” for the community by their exclusion of the incestuous man. Robert E. Moses (“Physical and/or Spiritual Exclusion? Ecclesial Discipline in 1 Corinthians 5,” *NTS* 59 [2013]: 172–91 [177]) argues that this intriguing suggestion runs contrary to Paul’s “salvation” language elsewhere: nowhere else in Paul does God’s Spirit need to be saved.

⁵⁶ References to post-mortem atonement are not uncommon in ancient Jewish and Christian literature. See, e.g., 2 Macc 12:39–45; *Apoc. Zeph.* 10–11; *T. Ab.* 14; *t. Sanh.* 13.3. In addition to the passages in 1 Corinthians discussed here, see 15:29 which speaks of baptism on behalf of the dead.

Perhaps the clearest instance of judgment as restorative chastisement appears in Paul’s warning about “unworthy” reception of the Eucharistic bread and cup (11:27). Here God is said to use judgment to chastise or instruct God’s people, thereby sparing them the condemnation due the rest of humanity:

Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will be liable for the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself and thus eat from the bread and drink from the cup. For the one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. For this reason many of you are weak and sick and a good number of you have fallen asleep [i.e., probably, “have died”]. But if we judged ourselves (διεκρίνομεν), we would not be judged (ἐκρινόμεθα). (11:27–31)

Paul interprets illnesses and deaths in the Corinthian congregation as the punishment due to those “liable for the body and blood of the Lord.” Interestingly, he goes on immediately to say that these ailments show God’s special care for the *ekklēsia*: “But when we are judged (κρινόμενοι) by the Lord, we are disciplined (παιδευόμεθα), lest we be condemned (κατακριθῶμεν) with the world” (11:32). That is, the “judgment” experienced by those who failed to test themselves is in fact a form of discipline or chastisement which protects the *ekklēsia* from being condemned along with everyone else.⁵⁷ Even those who died in sin will escape the condemnation due to outsiders because their death was itself a form of divine instruction.

On two occasions Paul’s “inward current” leads him to suggest that even those outside the *ekklēsia* might be drawn in. When Paul addresses the problem of mixed marriages in 1 Corinthians he claims that the “unbelieving husband is sanctified by his wife and the unbelieving wife” by her husband (7:14). One might expect him to say that a pagan defiles his or her believing spouse. Instead, sanctity overwhelms uncleanness in this case, extending to the spouse and their children. Paul does not go so far as to say that the unbelieving spouse will certainly be “saved”—this too remains at the level of hope (7:16)—

⁵⁷ Wolfgang Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, 4 vols., EKK 7 (Zürich: Benzinger, 1991–2001), 3:55. Cf. punishment as παιδεία which protects God’s people from the vengeance due the gentiles in 2 Macc 6:12–16. See also Judith 8:27; Wis 12:22; *Pss. Sol.* 13.6–11; Heb 12:5–6; and Rev 3:19.

but the expected movement is in the direction of the inclusion of the unbelieving spouse rather than in the loss of the believer. The second example appears in Romans 11 when Paul says the “disobedience” of Israel will result in its salvation (11:26). Just after warning Roman gentiles of their possible exclusion from the olive tree, Paul claims that the natural branches could easily be grafted back in. This leads to the revelation of τὸ μυστήριον: the exclusion of some of Israel—while tragic in itself (9:1-5)—is part of a larger plan to bring in the gentiles and ultimately “all Israel will be saved” (11:26).⁵⁸ As with the incestuous man and the inept apostles, God turns disobedience into the occasion of mercy (11:32), pulling those inside who do not appear to belong. It is not clear who is signified by “all Israel”—all Israelites throughout time? Those Israelites who accept Paul’s gospel in the future?⁵⁹ Nevertheless, it is yet another example of Paul straining to find a way to include those who appear to be excluded, presuming that God’s mercy will lead to the inclusion of those who would seem to be hopeless.

Conclusion

Both Matthew and Paul warn that ostensible Jesus followers may yet become outsiders. Both use the example of those who had already rejected Jesus to warn current insiders: if God punished the Jewish leaders (so Matthew) or “broke off” the branches of Israel that did not accept God’s kindness (so Paul), then God will not hesitate to do the same to current insiders. Matthew stresses the necessity of “doing the will of the Father” to remain inside. Paul puts less emphasis on necessary behavior, but he warns that believers can “fall from grace” (Gal 5:4) or “reject God” (1 Thess 4:8) by apostatizing, accepting a rival version of the gospel, or indeed through immoral behavior. The most striking difference between the two is that

⁵⁸ See T. J. Lang, *Mystery and the Making of a Christian Historical Consciousness: From Paul to the Second Century*, BZNTW 219 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015).

⁵⁹ Commentators often cite *m. Sanh.* 10:1 to show that “all Israel” need not mean every Israelite. For a survey of recent proposals see Christopher Zoccali, “‘And So All Israel Will Be Saved’: Competing Interpretations of Romans 11.26 in Pauline Scholarship,” *JSNT* (2008): 289–318.

Matthew insists many ostensible Jesus followers will be found wanting, whereas Paul never says any of his people will be excluded and articulates a strong hope that none of them will be. If Matthew’s “narrow way” threatens to exclude most, Paul hopes for just the opposite: a strong inward tug, keeping the faithful inside and possibly even pulling on outsiders. This difference is not merely a matter of tone but is indicative of a cluster of substantive differences in their thought. Eternal life is for Paul a consequence of union with Christ in the present.⁶⁰ This eschatological framework—which does not go so far as John’s Gospel to say that the judgment has already occurred—provides a measure of confidence that the current visible *ekklēsia* will be found blameless in the parousia (1 Thess 3:13). Moreover, though Matthew affirms that Jesus came to “save his people from their sins” (1:21) and that the God of Israel shows kindness even to the wicked (5:43–48), Paul is much more concerned to describe his gospel as divine mercy to the undeserving.⁶¹ This conviction encourages his tendency—not consistently followed through—to say that divine mercy will overcome human disobedience, leaving some of his later interpreters at a loss to explain who could ever be excluded.⁶²

⁶⁰ On resurrection as reward for the righteous versus resurrection of all in early Judaism and Christianity, see Tom McGlothlin, “Raised to Newness of Life: Resurrection and Moral Transformation in Second- and Third-Century Christian Theology” (PhD diss., Duke University, 2015).

⁶¹ A distinctive concern of Paul rightly highlighted by Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*.

⁶² E.g., 1 Tim 2:4; 4:10; Origen, *Comm. Rom.* 8.12.8.