Images of the Church in the Letters of St Paul

In view of earlier conflicts, St Paul the Apostle knew that after his repose the Gentile churches founded by him would be under assault from the Jewish-Christian leadership in Jerusalem and Antioch to bring them into observance of the Mosaic Law. By writing his letters to these churches he wished to remain present with them, since ‘his’ gospel encapsulated the Gospel of Jesus Christ more than any other interpretation before or since. After St Paul’s repose his letters were collected under the leadership of his disciple St Timothy. This project represented the first step towards the creation of a fourth and last Scripture of Israel, which would eventually become the Christian New Testament.¹

The Church as one community of Jews and Gentiles
Throughout the Pauline epistles the Church is portrayed as one community of God comprising Jews and Gentiles on the same footing. St Paul emphasised this truth symbolically by making the Jewish convert Timothy and the uncircumcised Greek Titus his main travelling companions in executing his mission. When he went to Jerusalem to defend his gospel before the Jewish-Christian leadership he took with him the Gentile Titus; when he went into the heart of Gentile world he took with him the Jew Timothy whom he had circumcised.² Thus the Apostle wrote regarding the Gospel of Christ, “It is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek” (Romans 1:16); and “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him” (Romans 10:12).³

After preaching the Gospel in Athens, St Paul went to Corinth, the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. Corinth was not only a major port for east-west trade, but also had a reputation for low morals.⁴ The cardinal Pauline teaching of the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ was applied in practice in Corinth. It is exemplified, for example, by the Jewish couple Aquila and Priscilla who had just arrived from Italy (Acts 18:1-2); and by a debate in the synagogue, where Paul persuaded both Jews and Greeks (Acts 18:4). Paul stayed in Corinth for at least 18 months (Acts 18:11) and from there wrote his first letter to a Gentile church, namely 1 Thessalonians. The Apostle thus

² Tarazi, p 10.
³ Scriptural quotations are from the New King James Version, unless otherwise indicated.
wished to implant in the heart of the Gentile world one Church of the one Gospel, one community of Jews and Gentiles of the one God, gathered around the one crucified Lord, as Father Paul Tarazi so aptly put it. This community stands outside of the synagogue, for not all who are descended from Israel are truly Israel (Romans 9:6).

St Paul later settled in Ephesus, the capital of the Roman province of Asia. The city was also located at the geographic centre of the Apostle’s Gentile churches in Galatia, Philippi, Thessalonica and Corinth. In addition, Ephesus was situated at the western end of the old Seleucid kingdom and across the sea from Greece, thus on the border between Jews and Gentiles. From Ephesus St Paul wrote his letters to the Galatians and the Corinthians, and possible to the Romans.

The Letter to the Philippians
The church at Philippi occupied a special place in the Pauline mission, having been the first church founded by the Apostle on the European continent (see Acts 16:11-12). It was also the only one of the Pauline churches from which he accepted support (Philippians 4:15-16). The letter to the Philippians was written from either Ephesus or Rome, while St Paul was in captivity (1:7, 13, 17). In the introductory greeting mention is made of bishops and deacons, the Greek terms episkopoi and diakonai meaning literally ‘overseers’ and ‘servants’, respectively. Outside of the so-called Pastoral Epistles (if they are in fact genuinely Pauline, which is a disputed claim) this is the only place in the Pauline corpus where such a reference is found.

The letter was written after the Jewish-Christian leadership in Jerusalem had rejected St Paul’s gospel. This may be seen from the Jewish-Christian missionaries to Philippi being branded as ‘dogs’ (3:2), which was a Jewish term of contempt for pagans. Furthermore, St James and his followers had cut themselves off from the olive tree (i.e. the true Israel), being ‘enemies of the cross of Christ’ (3:18). In contrast, those Gentiles who have accepted the Gospel have been grafted onto the same olive tree, and therefore are the true circumcision (3:3).

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5 Tarazi, pp 13-14.
6 Tarazi, p 15.
7 OSB, p 1487.
8 OSB, p 1490.
9 Tarazi, p 104.
In the letter to the Philippians the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ is symbolised by the names Euodia and Syntyche, who are admonished to find agreement in the Lord (4:2). They are derived from the Greek *eu* (well) and *hodos* (way), and *syn* (together) and *tykhe* (fate), respectively.  

The Letter to the Colossians

The city of Colossae was situated in the Roman province of Asia, near Laodicea and Hierapolis. The church in it was founded by Epaphras (Colossians 1:7). According to Father Paul Tarazi, this letter was probably written by St Timothy after the Apostle’s death as a charter for all the Pauline churches. He refers to the injunction in 4:16 that the letter should also be read in the church at Laodicea. However, in view of several points of contact of this letter with the Letter to Philemon, which is genuinely Pauline, it is possible that Paul wrote to the Colossians from his Roman imprisonment (around the years 61-63).  

In this letter the Church is described as a new creation – the vocabulary used throughout the letter (e.g. at 1:6, 1:9, 2:3, 3:10) reminds one of the creation account in Genesis 1. Wisdom terminology such as *sophia* (wisdom), *gnosis* (knowledge), *epignosis* (full knowledge) and *epignosko* (to know fully) is employed by the author. Verses 15-20 of the first chapter provide us with a hymn to Christ, thematically grounded in the Old Testament and Jewish Wisdom literature. The divine Wisdom, as depicted in Proverbs 8:22-31 and Ecclesiasticus (also known as the *Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach*) 24:1-22, is seen here as anticipating Christ as creator and redeemer. Furthermore, Christ as the image of the invisible God and as the intermediary through which everything is created reflects *Wisdom of Solomon* 7:26 and 7:22 respectively.

Christ is declared to be the head of this new creation (1:18). It is interesting that in the earlier Pauline letters, such as 1 Corinthians, Christ and the Church form one body (see 12:12), while in Colossians and Ephesians a distinction is made between the body (the Church) and its head (Christ). Also, whereas in earlier Pauline usage the Church refers to a local church, here the term has come to indicate the whole Christian community. These shifts in emphasis should not be seen as St Paul contradicting himself, but rather as a refinement of his ecclesial thought.

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10 Tarazi, p 103.
11 Tarazi, p 105.
12 OSB, p 1493.
13 Tarazi, pp 105-106.
14 OSB, 1493-1494.
15 OSB, p 1494.
The Letter to the Ephesians

This letter was probably written from St Paul’s captivity in Rome (around 61-63). In the earliest extant manuscripts the words ‘at Ephesus’ in the introductory verse are lacking, prompting some scholars to view the letter as intended to many churches instead of the one at Ephesus only. The Pauline authorship of the letter has been disputed, with some scholars suggesting that it was written by a member of the Pauline ‘school’ around the year 100.16

Be that as it may, the main theme of the letter is the Church as the body of Christ, in which Jew and Gentile have been united into a single new humanity. The election of this people of God is traced back beyond creation: “Just as He [God the Father] chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world” (1:4). This unity in Christ extends to the whole universe: ‘He has made known to us his secret purpose, … namely that the universe, everything in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ’ (1:9-10, Revised English Bible). The present acquisition of the Holy Spirit is the pledge or guarantee of the coming full possession of their inheritance by the people of God (1:14). There is thus a unity of Christ, the Church and the world: ‘He put all things in subjection beneath his feet, and gave him as head over all things to the church which is his body, the fullness of him who is filling the universe in all its parts’ (1:22-23, REB).17

Because the Mosaic Law had been a barrier between Jew and Gentile, Christ annulled the Law in order to create a single new human being (Greek anthropos) in himself (2:15). The author of the letter employs the image of a building: the Church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ as cornerstone holding the whole building together. Thus the Church is built into a holy temple or spiritual dwelling for God (2:20-22). The unity of Jews and Gentiles in the body of Christ, which is the Church, is the mystery or secret of the ages that has now been revealed – not only on earth but also among the angelic powers. It may be seen from this passage that the Church has a heavenward dimension (3:10).18

A variety of ministries have been given to the Church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. This serves to equip God’s people for work in his service, for building up the body of Christ (4:11-13). Paradoxically, the variety of individual gifts contributes to the unity of the

16 OSB, p 1481.
17 OSB, pp 1481-1482.
18 OSB, p 1483.
church. One could argue for an analogy between God and the Church in this regard: just as the Godhead is a Trinity-in-unity, so the Church is a multiplicity-in-unity through the operation of the Holy Spirit within her.

The cosmic dimension of the Church also extends to her struggle against evil: “For our struggle is not against human foes, but against cosmic powers, against the authorities and potentates of this dark age, against the superhuman forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (6:12, REB). In this struggle the church is equipped with the armour of God: the belt of truth, the breastplate of integrity, the shoes of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the word of God (6:14-17).

Conclusion
In the letters of St Paul the Church is portrayed as a new community, a new creation and a new humanity. Uniting these images is his central image of the Church as the one body of Christ consisting of Jews and Gentiles on an equal footing, united around the crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus as its head. May we within the Holy Orthodox Church strive towards that unity in Christ of which the great Apostle to the Gentiles was such a fervent advocate.

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March 2007/March 2013