‘I thank my God about you always’ (1 Cor 1:4): Pauline Insights Toward Pastoral Theologies of Location for the Churches of Oceania Today

Catherine Playoust

The Catholic Diocese of Port Pirie encompasses most of South Australia and part of central Australia. Its area is 980,000 kilometres, more than the area of mainland France and Germany, but it is sparsely populated; indeed, its churches number only fifty-eight. Its bishop, Greg O’Kelly SJ, explained in a 2012 interview that his pastoral visits around the diocese require a vast amount of travel: ‘I drive about 55,000 miles [90,000 kilometres] a year in the car, and fly in a small plane to other Outback cattle stations and aboriginal communities.’ He added that while the priests of the diocese do excellent work, there are few of them and some are quite elderly. The lay leadership within various facets of the Church’s ministry is therefore particularly appreciated. In a contribution to a 2013 eBook on the use of digital technology in the Australian Catholic Church to share the gospel, Bishop O’Kelly drew attention both to the benefits of the resources that reach him and the diocese electronically from the national and international Church and to how the scale and quality of communications within the diocese have been enhanced through various Internet and SMS tools, beyond the capacities of older technologies such as telephone voice calls or the postal service.

From a pastoral theology perspective, the characteristics of the Diocese of Port Pirie raise the question of how to consider location as an aspect of church life. We see the main strategies that are being adopted there in response to the wide range of locations in which the activities of the diocese occur; there are episcopal visitations, strong local leadership by clergy and lay people, and electronic communications both into and within the diocese. Negotiating the variety of places in which a community and its members are situated is a challenge that affects all church communities in some fashion, in Oceania and beyond. In some cases, as we have just seen, the church members or the smaller units of community are spread out over a considerable area; for Port Pirie, this holds true on both the diocesan and the parish level. On many groups of Pacific islands, the local churches are quite contained in physical scope but their extreme isolation from major landmasses brings its own hardships. Technology and travel can bridge such isolation, but the financial barriers are substantial.

My own experience as a Roman Catholic laywoman and an urban Australian leads me to think also of ways that Catholic parishes in Sydney and Melbourne operate—I consider some that are fragmented by age or cultural grouping into sub-communities that rarely meet together, others that have been clustered into large quasi-parishes because of the lack of priests, and still others whose members gather from all round the city because they find their official geographical parishes lacking in spiritual sustenance for them. Going further afield to my time in Boston, Massachusetts, I recall the pain of parish closures and the strong attachment that parishioners have to the site where they have been accustomed to worship. I note too the


4. An earlier version of this essay was presented at a keynote address for ‘Practical Theology in Oceania: Explorations to Recover an Ecclesial Sense of Place and Purpose’, Annual Conference of the Association of Practical Theology in Oceania (APTO), in Sydney on 28 November 2014 in Sydney, and again for a seminar at Catholic Theological College in Melbourne on 1 May 2015. My thanks to the organisers for these opportunities and to the participants for fruitful discussions. My thanks also to Elliott Gyger, Peter Golding, Denise Playoust and Sean Winter, who provided helpful feedback on written drafts.
tensions in Roman Catholicism over the last half-century in relation to the concept of subsidiarity, as the favour given at a high structural level to this ideal, whether for a diocese or for Oceania, has shifted repeatedly. And regarding Christian denominations whose polities are stronger on the congregational level or the national/regional level than is the case for Roman Catholicism, I contemplate how hard it is to foster and preserve the bonds of communion across geographical church groupings when their concepts of how to live the gospel today differ in some important ways because of their own experience in their local context. Doubtless these examples of how location plays a part in church life will have sparked your memories from your own ecclesial experience.

My academic formation is not as a pastoral theologian, however, but as a scholar of the New Testament and early Christianity. Consequently, my thoughts also turn to Christianity as it was emerging in the first century CE, and particularly to the churches founded by Paul. The Pauline communities were based in a wide range of cities in Greece and Asia Minor. Under Paul’s leadership, in which he was absent more often than present, these communities needed to function well despite their customary physical separation from Paul and other churches. They developed strong local leadership and they maintained oral and written communication with Paul and his co-workers through travels and letters. Paul, his co-workers and the churches prayed for one another and reminded each other that they were doing so. In these ways they acknowledged their multiple physical locations and took practical steps to solve the problems rising from these. They also, however, discovered that physical separation was not the whole reality of their lives. Even in these earliest decades of what would become Christianity, they were developing ways to speak theologically about their ecclesiological unity, in a way that transcended physical separation, and to pray from the stance of that belief. As those who were in Christ, as members of Christ’s body, they had what we might call the same ecclesial location by faith.

In this essay I will be developing these ideas by drawing upon 1 Thessalonians and, more briefly, several of the other undisputed letters of Paul, so as to elucidate what Paul was advocating and what the Pauline communities were doing. As you read, I invite you to keep in mind the challenges of location for the various kinds of
churches in Oceania today. It would be unwise, however, to imagine that we could adopt the Pauline strategies wholesale and map them onto any particular modern context, or even to suppose that they simply constitute a repertoire of possible solutions from which we could choose. Rather, they can provide insights as we consider church structures and circumstances that, while in continuity with the Pauline tradition, differ from it in notable ways. If there are useful resources here, well and good, but what I encourage is that instead of remaining at the utilitarian level, we think and pray more broadly about the formation and flourishing of community in the light of the Scriptures and our own experience. In saying this, I have in mind some observations by Ellen Bradshaw Aitken:

The various texts of the New Testament represent in diverse ways experiments in the formation of Christian community . . . The letters of Paul . . . represent experiments in new community, not by telling a story of Jesus [as the gospels do], but by revealing Paul's strategies to shape Christian communities along specific lines, to negotiate difference, and to link disparate groups within a network of mutual regard. Inasmuch as Paul's letters also allow some small access to the perspectives and voices of those to whom he wrote and with whom he negotiated, we also receive glimpses into those other experiments in Christian community, into ways other than Paul's of centering communal identity and practice around the memory of Jesus . . .

If we regard New Testament texts as witnesses to various experiments in shaping or reshaping community, then it follows that in order to appreciate what a given text has to say about such issues as covenant, law, or communal identity (or anything else, for that matter), we should enter into the world and strategies of that particular text as fully as possible. We need to understand how that text 'works,' how it makes meaning, how it bears witness to an experience of God, how it remembers Jesus, how it attempts to persuade others of its point of view, and how it in itself constitutes its audience as 'the people of God.' This is a strikingly different approach to the biblical text from a more utilitarian approach that distills meaning for the present from a given passage, a story, or saying of Scripture. What I am advocating is not an approach that
lends itself easily to ‘applying the Bible’ to current problems; rather, it is an invitation to enter into other experiences of God, Jesus, and godly community in order to have our vision for the present and future refreshed, reinformed, and reinvigorated.  

Let us now look, then, at the Pauline letters, starting with 1 Thessalonians, as ‘witnesses to various experiments in shaping or reshaping community’, in the hope of refreshing our vision for the churches today and in the future.

Community and Location in 1 Thessalonians

The text known as 1 Thessalonians dates from around the year 50 CE and is probably the first letter we have from Paul. Strictly speaking, though, it is not ‘from Paul’, for the letter has co-authors, as is normal for the Pauline correspondence—this letter is from Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, as we hear in its first verse. What is unusual in 1 Thessalonians is that the joint authorship is maintained quite strongly, whereas most of the undisputed Pauline letters are ostensibly by Paul and co-author(s) but shift to ‘I’ almost exclusively after their opening verse. Only a few times does 1 Thessalonians exhibit first-person singular grammatical constructions and on these occasions the ‘I’ is always Paul; elsewhere, ‘we’ forms apply, to include at least Silvanus and generally Timothy as well. Paul’s dominance in the letter’s composition is shown by his being the referent of these occasional

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7. The letter known as 2 Corinthians constitutes another notable exception.

8. The first-person singular constructions occur at 2:18, 3:5 and 5:27. In 1 Thessalonians 3:1, ‘we’ send Timothy while remaining in Athens; evidently ‘we’ at this point means Paul and Silvanus.
'I' forms, and thus it is all the more notable how carefully he includes his co-workers in the letter for the most part. Since Paul, Silvanus and Timothy were the ones who brought the good news to Thessalonica, this jointly-authored letter strengthens their existing bond with the Thessalonian believers.

The letter is written to a particular community, 'the church (ekklēsia) of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' (1:1). As often occurs in the undisputed Pauline writings, ekklēsia is being used here to mean a church or assembly in a specific location, rather than the church throughout the world, though it will soon become clear that the Thessalonian church has strong links to other local churches. The letter takes account of this local community and its history, while also bearing in mind the community's location relative to other sites of the Pauline mission.

A considerable portion of the first two chapters of this letter is taken up with recalling the first visit of Paul, Silvanus and Timothy to Thessalonica, when they founded this local church. I summarise here what they say, because it contributes to how the letter sets forth an understanding of location. (We should bear in mind that this is how the co-authors choose to remember and construct the history for the rhetorical purposes of this letter. In another context they might have told it differently, and the Thessalonians themselves would have had their own ways to shape the story.) Paul, Silvanus and Timothy say that their presence in the city allowed them to preach the good news and to demonstrate their good character (1:5). They laboured hard, day and night, to support their mission financially without burdening the Thessalonians (2:9). With pure motives and blameless conduct, free of the desire for human praise, they acted like a father in their encouragement and like a nursing mother in their nurturing (2:3–12). The affective dimension in all this was strong: 'So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us' (2:8). As a consequence of all this, the Thessalonians 'turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming' (1:9–10). They changed their mode of

9. Biblical quotations in this essay are derived from the New Revised Standard Version, sometimes in adapted form.
life to become imitators of their founders and the Lord, even suffering persecution on account of the good news (1:6; cf 2:14).

While Paul, Silvanus and Timothy are careful to emphasise the humility and gentleness that they showed in their first visit, so as not to acquire a reputation for superficial impressiveness (cf 2 Cor 11:7–15), they are equally eager to recall the presence and action of God during that time. When they preached, their good news came to the Thessalonians ‘not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction’ (1:5). Reading this in the context of Paul’s churches more broadly, this may mean that the Holy Spirit was active in a perceptible way during this initial visit, probably in the form of mighty works and/or spiritual gifts. Whatever happened, for the letter-writers it is evidence that the Thessalonians have been chosen, that is, chosen by God who loves them (1:4). The letter says also that the Thessalonians received the message as originating not merely with humans but with God, who is also working in these believers (2:13). The preaching and encouragement that the Thessalonians heard through human means have stemmed from God’s own call to them (2:12).

The success of the missionaries’ first visit to Thessalonica, through the will of God, has not only founded a new church in that city. It has also reshaped the network of churches by the addition of this new node and the forging of connections between them. The co-authors refer several times to churches in other cities and regions, which suggests that part of their goal is to foster such links. Paul, Silvanus and Timothy came to Thessalonica after they had ‘already suffered and been shamefully mistreated in Philippi’ (2:1), another city in Macedonia. More recently, while Paul and Silvanus remained in Athens, a city in the more southerly province of Achaia, Timothy has made a return visit to Thessalonica. When the Thessalonians are commended for their faith that withstands persecution, the letter says, ‘you became . . . imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judaea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Judaean’ (2:14). These

10. It has sometimes been argued that 1 Thessalonians 2:13–16 (or part of this verse range) is a non-Pauline interpolation, given its sudden extreme hostility to the ‘Jews’ (Ioudaioi), but the majority opinion seems to be that the verses are authentic, though conceivably drawing upon pre-Pauline material. It
itineraries and comparisons give the context for the words of praise early in the letter: so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it’ (1:7–8). Even if they ‘have no need to speak about it’, evidently conversations have in fact been occurring, and this letter is continuing that process. Paul and his co-workers have brought into existence a network of local churches whose members take an interest in each other’s faith and sufferings, with the understanding that this is part of loving one another (4:9–10, with particular reference to the brothers and sisters in Macedonia).

From what we have seen so far, Paul and his co-workers played a major role in the early stages of founding the church in Thessalonica. By writing in this way and by drawing attention in their letters to other churches they have founded, they continue to inscribe themselves deeply into the life of the Thessalonian community. This is an authoritarian move, to be sure, though the patriarchal tone is undercut by some of the language they employ. In retelling the community’s history in 1 Thessalonians 2, they present themselves as a nursing mother as well as a father, as noted above, and they say they were temporarily orphaned by their physical absence from the Thessalonians (2:7, 11–12, 17). As Gaventa has commented, ‘The frequently changing imagery may also subvert the popular notion that Paul takes a thoroughly hierarchical stance toward the churches. Particularly in a society with highly structured perceptions of maleness and femaleness, a man who speaks of himself as an infant or as a nurse-mother or as an orphan voluntarily hands over his place

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helps to remember that in this period Ioudaioi primarily means ‘Judaeans’, a geographical/ethnic designation with religious import, and then to observe that the immediate context in the letter is geographical—they are Jews in Judaea not Jews across the Greco-Roman world. For further discussion of the authenticity and interpretation of the passage, see Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 89–103; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, First and Second Thessalonians, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 34–39; Malherbe, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 164–179; Ben Witherington III, 1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 82–89.
in the conventional gender hierarchy, however fleetingly.\textsuperscript{11} That said, the ongoing role of these founding figures cannot be discounted.

What, then, happens when these leaders are absent? As we shall now see, several strategies are adopted to deal with the fact that most of the time Paul and his co-workers are in a different location or locations from the Thessalonian church, since they are ministering to other churches they have founded or spreading the gospel in a new city. Paul does the best he can to substitute for his presence through his co-workers, his fellow itinerant missionaries. The Thessalonian church members are encouraged to support one another, following leaders within their own city. Everyone engages in prayer for one another, and the knowledge that they are being prayed for is a source of encouragement for the Thessalonian church, Paul and his co-workers. And the letter itself mediates the presence of its authors to the Thessalonian church, bringing them to the community through its words.

Since the initial visit to Thessalonica, Paul in particular has wanted to return again and again but has been blocked by Satan (2:18). One of the ways he makes up for this is to send a co-worker as his mediator when he cannot go himself. Timothy’s return visit relieves his concerns greatly:

But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us—just as we long to see you. For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith. For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. (3:6–8)

This visit entails a two-way flow of information, but also of affection. The encouragement to ‘stand firm’ and Timothy’s actual visit would also, and not very subtly, remind the Thessalonians that their life should continue to conform to the pattern that Paul and his co-workers have laid down. This is especially so in the wake of the praise

\textsuperscript{11} Gaventa, \textit{First and Second Thessalonians}, 29–30. In her statement, ‘infant’ refers to 2:7; there is a text-critical issue in that verse about whether Paul and his colleagues call themselves ‘infants’ (\textit{nēpioi}) or ‘gentle’ (\textit{ēpioi}), but either way, Gaventa’s point about gender performance stands.
given to them earlier for having been imitators of their founders and the Lord (1:6; 2:14). The Thessalonians should neither drift away through human frailty nor adopt a different set of priorities that a non-Pauline missionary of Jesus Christ might bring.

Another strategy for coping with Paul's absence is to develop strong mutual support at the local level. The members of the Thessalonian church should 'encourage one another and build up each other' (5:11), with particular attention to those who are idlers, faint-hearted, weak, or needing patience (5:14). They should 'always seek to do good to one another and to all' (5:15). Furthermore, the community has local leaders—we do not hear how they were appointed, but the letter's intended audience would have known the history. At any rate, paying attention to these leaders will also promote the strength of the community, and the letter says, 'we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labour among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work' (5:12–13). Here is an example of shared physical location operating to the advantage of the Thessalonian community: people living in the same area are supporting one another mutually and in leadership.

The most profound way in which Paul and his co-workers act at a distance for the benefit of the Thessalonian church is to pray for them. After the opening greeting, they write: 'We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ' (1:2–3). Indeed, the sense of thanksgiving is so strong that some scholars would see this initial prayer as extending into the next few verses or even beyond, as the letter describes the successes of the initial mission in Thessalonica. The letter's closing lines include a
prayer for them and a request for their prayers: ‘May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . Beloved, pray for us’ (5:23, 25). In the body of the letter, too, they mention their prayers at a number of points: thanking God that the Thessalonians received the good news from them as God’s word (2:13) and for their joy about the Thessalonians (3:9); and asking God to strengthen the community’s love and holiness (3:12–13) and to make it possible for the letter-writers to see them face-to-face and restore whatever is lacking in their faith (3:10). The deep trust that the writers have in the efficacy of these prayers is evident from the warmth and confidence of their declarations about them, and it would prepare the recipients to pray for them with the same intensity and trust.

Their declarations about the prayers are effective in another way too. By reporting that the prayers are occurring, Paul and his co-workers are assuring the Thessalonians that their church founders remember them and that God is active in all their lives. The joy and concern that Paul, Silvanus and Timothy feel for this local church flow over into a prayer-filled expression of love. Even though the Thessalonian church cannot always have Paul and his co-workers physically present, it knows that it has not been forgotten by its human founders, neither spiritually nor emotionally, and that God’s care for it is constant. The Thessalonians should thus imitate the prayer and thanksgiving that their founders are modelling: ‘Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you’ (5:16–18).

We should not neglect the role of the letter itself in bridging the physical gap between the Thessalonians and their founders. The care that Paul, Silvanus and Timothy have for this local church is manifested not only by their words but also by the fact that they wrote and sent this letter, entailing time and expense. The letter allows them to address some specific ethical and eschatological concerns,
especially in chapters 4 and 5. It highlights and commends the good aspects of the local church’s life, to encourage the Thessalonians to continue in the same direction but more fervently. It recalls their past and speaks of their good reputation among other local churches. It presents this church as one that has its own excellent resources but will also continue to benefit from its links with two networks: the geographically-fixed local Pauline churches and the small, flexible and geographically-mobile community of Paul and his co-workers. Working within a Pauline theological framework, it constructs an image of the Thessalonian church’s past and present, setting forth the actuality and potentiality of the community and its relationships in such a way that the Thessalonian church may be ‘blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints’ (3:13). That is, the letter’s rhetorical dimensions should not be forgotten—it aims to persuade and transform, despite the physical absence of its authors from its recipients.14

**Concepts of Location in other Pauline Letters**

We have seen that 1 Thessalonians does not disregard the restrictions and limitations imposed by one’s physical location. What a human being or community can do is genuinely conditioned by where they are. Separation from other beloved people or communities causes practical difficulties and emotional pain. The letter also shows, however, that some of the limitations can be alleviated and that God’s power and love transcend place. Similar strategies and insights are employed in the other letters of Paul to handle the multiple locations of the Pauline churches and the missionaries visiting them. I will draw attention to some additional ways of proceeding that are not strongly represented in 1 Thessalonians but can be found elsewhere in the undisputed Pauline correspondence. Ongoing two-way communications, both oral and written, are very important to the sustained health of the churches Paul and his co-workers have

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14. Ancient Greek epistolary theory was well aware of the potential for a letter to convey the presence (parousia) of its writer to its recipient, despite the physical absence of the writer. See the classic study by Heikki Koskenniemi, *Studien zur Idee und Phraseologie des griechischen Briefes bis 400 n. Chr.* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1956).
founded. Over time, Paul also faces the fact that he will not always be available to engage in such communications, and seeks ways to preserve the memory of what he has taught the communities. Paul also helps the communities to assess the teachings of other visiting missionaries, especially in cases where they conflict with his message or seem to do so. Furthermore, he draws each local church's attention to the existence of its counterparts in other cities, constructing a network of communications for them and teaching them to provide financial support. This is not merely a socio-financial network, but the expression of an ecclesiology whereby all the believers, wherever they may be, are one in Christ Jesus.

Strong communications are very important for the health of the Pauline communities. We have seen already the importance of letters by Paul and his co-workers. What has been handed down to us in the New Testament canon is probably only a fraction of the letter-writing that Paul undertook. For instance, there are certain indications within 1 and 2 Corinthians that Paul wrote more than two letters to the church in Corinth.\(^\text{15}\) We have seen also that there are visits by co-workers who can then report back to Paul how the community is going. The local churches or subgroups within them can also instigate communications, both oral and written, as the Corinthian correspondence shows particularly well. Early in 1 Corinthians, Paul notes that reports have reached him from 'Chloe's people' that there are quarrels in the community (1 Cor 1:11). As the letter proceeds, Paul takes up at least one set of issues that has been raised in a letter they have written to him, namely, questions about marriage; the section starts, 'and concerning (peri de) the things about which you wrote' (7:1). His sudden changes of topic at some other parts of the letter, again with the peri de formula though not with explicit

\(^{15}\) In each of 1 Corinthians 5:9 and 2 Corinthians 2:3–9, Paul refers to some letter that he previously wrote to the Corinthians. In neither case does the letter concerned seem to be the other canonical letter. Additionally, some scholars argue that 2 Corinthians is composed of several letters of Paul to the Corinthians, edited together. On these issues, see Joseph A Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible 32 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 43–44; Ralph P Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary 40 (Waco: Word Books, 1986), xxxviii–lii; and Thomas D Stegman SJ, *Second Corinthians*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 17–24.
reference to a letter from the Corinthians, are also quite likely to be responses to oral or written communications from them. Perhaps most remarkable is Paul’s response to the situation in Corinth of the man living with his father’s wife (1 Corinthians 5). Paul pronounces judgement on him, in the name of the Lord Jesus. He instructs that when the assembly acts to expel this man, Paul’s own spirit will be present with the gathered church even though he is absent in body. This is something of an exception, however; for the most part, Paul is clear that being physically absent from a community imposes limits on how he can act. His need of local leadership and travelling co-workers for communications and authority is therefore high, and we can see what a remarkable base he built when we read the catalogue of names in Romans 16, which greets many women and men (including the deacon Phoebe and the apostles Junia and Andronicus) with affection and admiration for their work.

Coping with the long-term absence of a church’s principal human founder, and finally with that person’s death, is discussed in the letter to the Philippians. Paul, a prisoner by this stage, spends much of the first chapter musing whether he will be freed or killed, and considering what the consequences would be either way for himself and the Philippians. As we saw in relation to 1 Thessalonians, he knows that sending co-workers instead will be of some avail but not a full substitute for Paul’s own presence in the local church (Phil 2:18–30).

16. The words peri de (‘and concerning’) occur at 1 Corinthians 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12. It has often been argued that each of them marks Paul’s attention to a letter from the Corinthians, but the ancient use of the formula was more flexible than that: Margaret M. Mitchell, ‘Concerning ΠΕΠΙ ΔΕ in 1 Corinthians’, Novum Testamentum 31:3 (1989): 229–256.

17. My thanks to Christopher Monaghan CP for a timely conversation about this passage.

18. This is all the more remarkable when we recall that Romans was written to a community that Paul did not found. There is, however, a theory that Romans 16 was written not to the church in Rome but the church in Ephesus, and was added to the letter to the Romans later; the theory arose because the evidence of the early manuscripts regarding the presence of Romans 16:1–23 in the letter and the location of Romans 16:25–27 is complicated. Even if this were so, this would detract only slightly from the impressiveness of the catalogue. For a detailed defence of Romans 16 having a Roman destination, followed by an extensive examination of the names involved, see Peter Lampe, Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries: From Paul to Valentinus (London: Continuum, 2003), 153–183.
He also insists strongly that the community members should humble their own preferences and opinions so as to be of one spirit and one mind (1:27; 2:1–5; 4:2). They are to have 'the same mind . . . that was in Christ Jesus' (2:5), including the humility that characterised his self-emptying and obedience (2:6–8). A more proximate model for their behaviour, however, is the way Paul has taught them to live and think; they are to continue 'just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence' (2:12) and indeed to imitate Paul and to model their behaviour on him and his co-workers (3:17; see also 4:9). Anticipating his death sooner or later, Paul is doing what he can to ensure that his notion of how to live is known by those he has brought to belief and will endure among them.

Conflicts among missionaries come to the fore in several of the letters. Sometimes, according to Paul, these conflicts are only apparent and stem from excessive focus on the principal apostle over Christ himself. The early chapters of 1 Corinthians deal with this (1 Corinthians 1–4), though there is a tension in them as to how Paul sees his importance relative to that of other missionaries who have visited the Corinthians (contrast 1:10–17 and 3:4–7 with 4:14–21), which will not be surprising given my remarks just now about Philippians. There are also times in the letters when Paul considers that the other missionaries have such different teachings or different emphases that he should warn the communities against them in the strongest possible terms. Thus he calls anathema on those preaching a different gospel to the Galatians (Gal 1:9). He even goes so far as to wish that those who are preaching the need for circumcision to them would cut off more than their own foreskins (Gal 5:12; cf Phil 3:2).

19. In Philippians 3:17, having called for the Philippians to be co-imitators of him, Paul then advises the Philippians to observe those who live according to the example or pattern that they have in 'us'. He does not specify who is meant by 'us', but presumably in addition to Paul it would include Timothy (the co-author announced at the beginning of the letter) and the local and itinerant co-workers to whom he refers during the letter. See the discussion in John Reumann, Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, Anchor Yale Bible 33B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 568–569, 592.

To the Corinthians, who find Paul impressive when he instructs them remotely by letter but think his bodily presence weak and his speech worthy of no account (2 Cor 10:10), he warns against the pseudo-apostles who are boastful of their successes, pointing out that 'Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light' (2 Cor 11:13–15).

Money is used by Paul both to foster the growth of the mission and to connect local churches to one another. He is cautious not to request money during an initial visit, though he considers himself entitled to do so as an apostle (1 Cor 9:3–18). He has two alternative strategies: working to support himself, as we saw above (1 Thess 2:9); and receiving donations from churches he has already founded (2 Cor 11:7–9). To the Philippians he recalls their outstanding help in supplying his needs in Thessalonica and even after he left Macedonia, as well as more recently (Phil 4:14–15, 18). However, he emphasises not the practical utility of their financial gifts—the context of this discussion is Paul’s declaration of his self-sufficiency and ability to function well in any situation—but the virtue of them as an offering pleasing to God (4:18). As Paul’s ministry goes on, he develops a substantial collection project among the Pauline churches for the saints in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1; 2 Corinthians 8–9; Rom 15:25–32). He puts this forth as a way to balance abundance and need (2 Corinthians 8:13–14; 9:12; cf. Gal 2:10) but also uses it as a way to encourage friendly competition among his churches—he tells the Corinthians he has boasted about them to the Macedonians that ‘Achaia has been ready since last year’ (2 Corinthians 9:2), as a way to ensure that the Corinthians will indeed give the money that they have promised (2 Corinthians 9:1–5). By raising awareness of the needs of churches in other locations, Paul strengthens the network of churches he has founded and connects them to Jerusalem as a symbolic centre for the whole church.

Undergirding all of these ways of handling a geographically-diverse network of churches is an emerging ecclesiology that has consequences for the idea of location itself. In Paul’s time there is a developing sense of the unity of these churches as ‘the’ church (1 Cor 12:28; 15:9; Phil 3:6). Its members are ‘in Christ’ through their faith and baptism (Gal 3:25–28). Consequently, God’s spirit dwells in them and they are adoptive children of God, heirs of the promise to Abraham (Rom 4:1–5:5; 8:9–17). There is therefore a strong pull to
unity. This issues in the call to obedience and self-abnegation for the
good of the community, as we saw in regard to Philippians, and also
in the suppression of personal spiritual experiences for the sake of
building up the assembly, as advocated in 1 Corinthians 12–14. That
is, the church members are called to love one another (1 Cor 16:14;
Gal 5:14), which in Pauline terms necessitates patience, humility and
endurance (1 Cor 13:4–7). The unity should not be totally uniform,
however, as Paul’s deployment of the classic political ‘body’ *topos*
indicates: diversity of needs and gifts within the community is to be
respected and appreciated (1 Cor 12).21 The church, the one body,
demonstrates and strengthens its unity by partaking of the one bread
of the Eucharist (1 Cor 10:16–17). While I would say that many
of Paul’s *ekklēsia* statements are, in the first instance, about a local
community in a particular city, their emphasis on oneness and their
declaration of what is true for all who are in Christ Jesus, irrespective
of location (even if this is not one of the factors explicitly articulated
in Gal 3:27–28), pushes theologically beyond the constraints of
physical place. Paul’s ecclesiology constructs a new kind of location,
as it were, an ecclesial location in which all are gathered in the one
place, by faith.

**Location Today: Physical, Ecclesial, Technological**

In this essay I have been examining the role of location in the Pauline
communities, as shown in 1 Thessalonians and other undisputed
Pauline letters. I have noted several factors: the urban setting of each
of the Pauline churches; day-to-day leadership for these churches
resourced from within the community; travels to these churches
by Paul and his co-workers, providing the opportunity for oral
communications; travels by local emissaries of the churches to these
leaders, providing the same opportunity but perhaps more likely
to be driven by the concerns of the local church; letters as written
communications along the same routes; interest in the joys and
sufferings of Pauline churches in other cities; financial support from

21. On the Greco-Roman *topos* of the body in discussions of political unity and
its deployment by Paul in 1 Corinthians, see Margaret M Mitchell, *Paul and
the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and
these churches for the mission and for the saints in Jerusalem; and an ecclesiology providing a way to conceptualise an emerging unity, a church of churches. The strong emotional language in Paul's letters about his love and concern for these communities, combined with Paul's encouragement for them to use him as a model, would over time have developed churches that cared about each other's flourishing even though they were far away. All the individuals and communities in this network pray for one another, recall each other to mind and tell each other about these prayers and recollections. Paul's words near the beginning of 1 Corinthians, 'I thank my God about you always' (1 Cor 1:4), can stand here for several of the thanksgivings that he expresses in his letters and encourages the church members to reciprocate. I have argued that although the Pauline communities and their missionaries are aware of their separate locations in physical terms, their practices and their beliefs lead them to an ecclesiology such that they are unified by faith into a single 'ecclesial location'.

As I explained in the introduction, I have not undertaken this examination of location in Paul's letters in order to provide a blueprint for the church today. Anyone who wishes to serve today's churches of Oceania by discerning an ecclesial sense of place, or by engaging in a pastoral theology of location, must do so not only in the light of the Scriptures but out of the knowledge and love of the particular church that they serve. What Aitken advocates for approaching the biblical text—'to enter into other experiences of God, Jesus, and godly community'—is necessarily work that must be done by each person who is engaging in pastoral theology, in the awareness of their own experience of church and world. The work need not be done in isolation, and I would hope that by sharing my skills as a biblical scholar I have helped in the investigation, but every pastoral theologian, like any other reader, will bring their own lens to the reading.

By way of demonstration, though, I would like to offer some pastoral insights that have emerged for me through this enquiry in relation to the contemporary church context I know best, namely, Roman Catholicism in urban, Western-cultural settings in the early

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twenty-first century. Firstly, there are enough broad similarities between the Pauline situation and my own context that I recognise and affirm certain elements of wisdom easily; possibly you too will recognise these with respect to the churches that you serve. Just as the Pauline communities found, so today as well, both physical presence and physical absence of fellow believers are normal experiences. Engaging in communication and support can alleviate the disadvantages of absence and separation. Both the people and the ideas should keep flowing; some concepts and encouragements can be transmitted at a distance and some work best when the people concerned are in the same physical space. Beyond all this, the love bonding the churches and the prayers sustaining them will allow each local church to honour the reality of its location, yet also to transcend the limitations of place to realise its shared location with other churches in ecclesial terms.

Now for some points of distinction. The existence of these is only to be expected, for the church structures and circumstances most familiar to me differ from the Pauline churches in certain ways despite being in the Pauline tradition; this is chiefly because of the historical and cultural gap between them. The communities I know are composed of people whose cultures are more individualistic than Paul's. There may, therefore, be churches today for which Paul's strictures about conformity and insistence on the community over the individual would be excessively harsh and ultimately unproductive. Perhaps the insight we might glean from the Scriptures for such churches is the viewpoint of certain members of the Pauline communities rather than that of Paul himself. This is not the way the Bible is most often used, but I would argue that the practices and beliefs of first-century churches, as gleaned from the New Testament, are part of our ecclesial heritage and thus worthy of our attention to see what they might offer us as we reflect upon them theologically and prayerfully. Recall that Aitken's notion of 'experiments in Christian community' includes the perspectives of all members of the community, not only its leaders.

My other points of distinction arise from the role of technology in today's world. Biblical scholars sometimes joke about how Paul would

23. Oceania does still contain some collectivist cultures, mostly of people who are marginalised by the dominant cultures, but even these collectivist cultures are now influenced by modern Western assumptions through globalism.
have loved the Internet. I fear that the combination would have been unhealthy, for he would never have stopped watching and checking on the churches he had founded. This observation is difficult to make in the current climate, and I do not wish to be misunderstood. We know that in our churches and other societal institutions, those who have been entrusted with the ministry of supervision, both bishops (episkopoi, ‘over-seers’) and others, have all too often chosen to overlook rather than to oversee, and so have failed to protect the vulnerable. It is right that we are taking steps to address this and we must never forget the horror of what has happened. However, going to the other extreme, of rigorous control over every action and utterance, would be unwise. We live in an age of electronic surveillance, from CCTV monitoring to ‘helicopter parenting’, and I would not like to see such modes of operation become normal within the churches at any level of authority. Those whom one is supervising need room to breathe and experiment, lest they fail to develop their gifts and to discover new ways to act in an ever-changing environment. By the principle of subsidiarity, local groups need some degree of autonomy, so that they do not constantly reach outside themselves for advice and so that decisions are not made for them centrally without due consideration of the needs of the specific place.24 I speak here principally of electronic communications, but the same kinds of opportunities and dangers hold for travel between formerly remote places. Considering the way that the cost and speed of intercontinental travel have changed even in my lifetime, it can no longer be said that Australia is ‘a long way from Rome’, as used to be claimed by Roman Catholics in Australia.

In my discussion of the Pauline communities, I sketched two concepts of location: physical location (which separated them) and ecclesial location (which united them by faith). I would suggest that it is now possible, by means of the Internet and related technology,

24. Pope Francis has written: ‘Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world. It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound “decentralisation”. Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, Apostolic Exhortation (2013), n16, <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html>. Accessed 1 July 2015.
to conceive of a third sense of location. The term 'cyberspace' is hopelessly dated now, but what it sought to express was the notion of a quasi-spatial realm of contact mediated through technology. Current technology allows for a group of people who might be physically located all over the world to share words and images with one another almost instantaneously, as if in the same room. Human beings have had access to aspects of these capabilities for a long time, between the broadcast mass media of radio and television and point-to-point devices such as the telegraph, the telephone and the fax, but the newer technologies bring groups together better and share the data much faster. For world-spanning communications, whether email conversations or social media discussions, the obstacle now to seemingly-instant receipt of a message is no longer the delay in transmission but the difference in time zones—being embodied, we still need to sleep on occasion.

Such electronic communications should not be derided as trivial, as a mere shadow of face-to-face communications. The assumption needs to be questioned, especially given how much time and passion is devoted to email, texting and social media these days. The specialised computer terminology of 'real' and 'virtual' has at times been misleading in discussions of online communication, as if communications were not 'real' unless expressed in the same physical location. In our world, connections are made and strengthened electronically that cause behavioural changes reaching far beyond the screen. Whether for good or ill, electronic communications are neither insubstantial nor inconsequential. Yet they are often spoken of this way, in both religious and secular discussions. For example, Pope Francis' new encyclical, *Laudato Si*', excellent though it is and so important for our world, slips for a moment into this way of categorising modes of communication:

Real relationships with others, with all the challenges they entail, now tend to be replaced by a type of internet

25. My thanks to Elliott Gyger for a conversation that helped me crystallise my thoughts in this regard.

26. This presumes that the infrastructure is present and the individuals concerned have the technical and financial means to take advantage of it. In the church contexts about which I am speaking, the barriers are now quite low; I realise this is not the case everywhere.
communication which enables us to choose or eliminate relationships at whim, thus giving rise to a new type of contrived emotion which has more to do with devices and displays than with other people and with nature. Today's media do enable us to communicate and to share our knowledge and affections. Yet at times they also shield us from direct contact with the pain, the fears and the joys of others and the complexity of their personal experiences.²⁷

His actual targets here appear to be the weak concept of 'friends' on Facebook and similar platforms and the more trivial end of social media communications, but the language runs the danger of ranking the quality of communication according to the technical means employed for it.²⁸ The passage acknowledges the capacity of new media for intellectual and emotional communication but then undercuts this by comparison with 'direct contact' with others' emotions and experiences. Of course, it is true that many electronic communications are trivial and ephemeral in their content—they do not attempt to be otherwise. The same could be said, however, for the face-to-face conversations at a barbecue in a backyard or at morning tea after a religious service. Their primary purpose is not to exchange information but to create and strengthen social bonds within an informal and leisurely context. In so doing, they may prepare the conditions for the provision of emotional support—and on occasion spiritual support too.

Some of the recent papal statements for World Communications Day are more sanguine about the communicative possibilities of the Internet. In his 2013 statement, Pope Benedict XVI wrote:

Social networks, as well as being a means of evangelisation, can also be a factor in human development. As an example, in some geographical and cultural contexts where Christians feel isolated, social networks can reinforce their sense of real unity


²⁸. The large quantity of time that people spend on electronic communications these days has attracted various critiques, and this factor, along with 'information overload', is probably also of concern to Pope Francis in the paragraph from which I am quoting, but my focus here is the quality of the interaction.
Catherine Playoust

with the worldwide community of believers. The networks facilitate the sharing of spiritual and liturgical resources, helping people to pray with a greater sense of closeness to those who share the same faith.  

This would ring true with what I have observed over the last several years: the Internet is extremely effective at linking up people who are relatively isolated within their immediate geographical location, according to whatever the axis of their isolation is (for example, academic specialty, artistic taste, politics, ethnicity, occupation or religion). In the case of Internet connections to offset religious isolation, the effect is precisely to construct the kind of shared technological location of which I have been speaking. Many Christian churches and communities have started to recognise this, and are devoting substantial human and budgetary resources to mission and ministry in the sphere of digital technology.  

Modern communications make it possible to form strongly bonded communities that are brought together online rather than in a physical space. The interaction is what counts, not its mode.  

I would like to conclude by returning to the Scriptures and Pope Francis, though this time it is a different papal statement and the biblical text is the Gospel of Luke rather than the letters of Paul. The parable of the Good Samaritan emerges from the question, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ (Lk 10:29). This is, I suggest, a question about location: ‘To whom am I adjacent? Who is near enough to me that I should care about them?’ For the 2014 World Communications Day, Pope Francis wrote:

Today we are living in a world which is growing ever ‘smaller’ and where, as a result, it would seem to be easier for all of us to be neighbours . . . The internet, in particular, offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity. This is something


30. These major decisions have arisen in part from the success of the pioneering smaller-scale projects documented in works such as Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Communications Office, ‘Word Made Flesh and “Shared” Among Us.’
truly good, a gift from God. How can we be 'neighbourly' in our use of the communications media and in the new environment created by digital technology? I find an answer in the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is also a parable about communication. Those who communicate, in effect, become neighbours. The Good Samaritan not only draws nearer to the man he finds half dead on the side of the road; he takes responsibility for him. Jesus shifts our understanding: it is not just about seeing the other as someone like myself, but of the ability to make myself like the other. Communication is really about realising that we are all human beings, children of God. I like seeing this power of communication as 'neighbourliness'. It is not enough to be passersby on the digital highways, simply 'connected'; connections need to grow into true encounters. We cannot live apart, closed in on ourselves. We need to love and to be loved.31

Earlier in this essay, we saw that Paul's ecclesiology added to the normal concept of physical location another idea, which I termed ecclesial location, according to which all members of Christ's body are gathered as if in one place. In these closing pages, I have argued that within our modern, Western-cultural church contexts, we have access to a third kind of location, technological location, whereby people anywhere in the world can be together in the same discursive space. Given the importance of the Internet in the lives of so many people today, our churches and faith communities should make creative use of this new form of location to deepen their spiritual lives and spread the gospel. 'Those who communicate, in effect, become neighbours,' as Pope Francis says. Loving communication calls into being the new location in which they are neighbours.

The final footnote in Catherine Playoust’s chapter was omitted inadvertently and should be as follows:

. . . Given the importance of the Internet in the lives of so many people today, our churches and faith communities should make creative use of this new form of location to deepen their spiritual lives and spread the gospel. ‘Those who communicate, in effect, become neighbours’, as Pope Francis says. Loving communication calls into being the new location in which they are neighbours.32

32. This essay is dedicated to the community gathered around the Rev’d Prof. Ellen Bradshaw Aitken in May–June 2014 during what proved to be her final illness, and especially to those whom she so graciously brought together via CaringBridge (<http://www.caringbridge.org>), an online platform designed to help people with health issues to share their journey with family and friends. Some of us were nearby and some of us were in other cities or even other continents, but through our prayers, our communications using various media, and our hospital visits in the case of those who were able to be present physically, we informed, cheered and consoled Ellen and one another.
Explorations in Practical Theology

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The Church in Oceania

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