
UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Anatomy of An Issue

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In a recent survey of current issues in New Testament theology, the issue of "unity and diversity" in the New Testament has been described as "one of the most hotly debated issues in New Testament studies" (Hasel:141). Even more recently, it has been suggested that this issue is "at the very center of New Testament studies today" (Henry:56). In simplest terms, the issue focuses on the question of whether it is possible to find one theology of the New Testament, or whether the New Testament contains a variety of diverse, even contradictory theologies. Given the diversity which characterizes the New Testament documents, is it possible to find a "center" which binds them together as the authoritative canon of the church? Clearly, this issue has important implications for New Testament theology and exegesis.

The Discovery of Diversity

While the issue of "unity and diversity" has been raised in a unique way since the 1950's, its origins may be traced as far back as the Reformation. Its roots may be located in two major developments in the history of New Testament study: 1) the application of the historical-critical method to the documents of the New Testament and 2) the results of historical inquiry into the nature of earliest Christianity.

THE APPLICATION OF HISTORICAL CRITICISM TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

In many respects the rise and development of the issue of "unity and diversity" parallels the rise and development of historical-critical study of the New Testament. Once the Reformers had established the distinction between the Bible and the contemporary situation, the conviction that contemporary theology was in full continuity with New Testament teaching could no longer be assumed and the doors were thrown open for historical criticism of the New Testament documents. The New Testament continued to be seen as a unity without contradiction, however, down to the middle of the 18th century, and the "biblical" theologies of this period were little more than collections of proof-texts for the prevailing dogmatic theology. A Catholic priest named Richard Simon finally stepped through the doors opened by the Reformers and initiated the historical-critical treatments of the New Testament. It was not long before Johann Salomo Semler (1725-91) set

forth his famous distinction between the word of God contained in Scripture and the words of Scripture. On the basis of this proposition, it was now possible to assert that not all of the concepts and ideas to be found in the New Testament should necessarily be part of a New Testament theology. About this same time, Gotthilf Traugott Zachariä (1729-77) suggested that biblical theology was not to be found *in* the biblical writings but could be *derived from* them.

On the heels of these developments came Johann Philipp Gabler's programmatic 1787 "Address Concerning the True Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Correct Definition of Their Purposes." Here Gabler defined the task of biblical theology as the collection and differentiation of the ideas of the biblical writers. Once this had been done, it became possible to isolate those ideas which are of permanent significance for Christian doctrine. Thus, the stage was set for investigating the distinctions between different authors, separating the various conceptions which they present and going behind these diverse conceptions to distinguish the central from the peripheral, the divine from the human. This task has motivated much of the subsequent research in both New Testament theology and exegesis. Indeed, the contemporary emphasis on diversity and disparity in the New Testament is rooted in these presuppositions established in the early days of historical criticism.

Since the time of Gabler, New Testament exegesis "has moved slowly, massively, relentlessly from an underlying supposition of the New Testament's unity to an underlying supposition of its diversity" (Martin:143). As historical-critical investigation progressed, contradictions were discovered in both narrative and doctrinal sections of the New Testament, and these contradictions appeared "not only in accessory accounts but in the conceptualities stamping whole books, irremovable from their individual formulations and irresolvable into a larger organic whole" (Pannenberg:194). Seemingly "irreconcilable" differences were noted in the views of Paul and James on faith and works, the fourth Gospel and the Apocalypse on eschatology and the Pauline/Johannine and Lukan views of ecclesiology. The conviction grew that in the New Testament "various voices are speaking which are in part contradictory and which in any case speak in such a diverse manner that what they say cannot be heard in harmony from the outset without being tested" (Kümmel:16). In short, it

appeared that "the assertion of a doctrinal unity of the biblical writers had been made impossible" (Pannenberg:194) for "historical-critical exegesis on the New Testament writings forces us to conclude that they do not develop a unified teaching but offer different theological presentations" (Lohse:148). Such a conclusion seemed "irrefutably demonstrated by scientific work with the conceptual material of the New Testament since the beginning of the 19th century" (Kümmel:16), and it appeared that if any type of unity could be posited for the New Testament writings, its basis would have to be other than the "strictly historical," other than the intended meanings of the New Testament writers themselves as ascertained by methodically impartial 'strictly historical' research" (Martin:143). Thus, while earlier generations believed that New Testament theology could be expressed as an organic unity, the tendency now is to say that there is no one theology of the New Testament but rather a number of theologies, the theologies of different situations, writers and periods.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH INTO THE NATURE OF EARLIEST CHRISTIANITY

The second major development which has contributed to the development of the issue of "unity and diversity" is to be found in the results of historical inquiry into the nature of earliest Christianity. Walter Bauer's historical study of second century Christianity, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, demonstrated that the "classical" view of the development of heresy in the early church was no longer viable. Originating with the Early Church Fathers, this "classical" view held that the church originally preserved the teachings of Jesus and the traditions of the Apostles in an uncontaminated form. Heretical movements always developed as offshoots from this original orthodoxy, and were restricted to a relatively few geographical areas. Bauer proposed that originally orthodoxy and heresy did not stand in such a primary-secondary relationship. There was, in fact, no pure form of Christianity in the beginning which could be called "orthodoxy," and well into the second century there was no sharp dividing line between what was orthodox and what was heretical. Manifestations of Christianity which were later labelled heretical may actually have predominated both geographically and theologically during the first two or three centuries. At the beginning of the second century, that form of Christianity which later came to be known as "orthodox" was the form adhered to by the majority of the Christians at Rome and a few other churches under its influence, namely, the church at Corinth and several in Asia Minor. With the help of the Roman Empire and under the direction of strong episcopal leadership, this minority movement finally triumphed over the other early forms of Christianity (Marcionites, Valentinians, Basilideans, Montanists, etc.).

While the "classical" view has been vigorously

defended (see, for example, the rebuttal of H. E. W. Turner), there has been widespread agreement that Bauer's general thesis provides a necessary and provocative counter-balance to the over-simplified classical view, and while his book was devoted to post-New Testament times, his general thesis has significant implications for the New Testament itself. Indeed, it has been suggested that "the orthodoxy-heresy question has almost become a heuristic principle in New Testament exegesis" (Betz:308). The most widespread and obvious influence of Bauer's thesis is found among German scholars associated with Rudolf Bultmann in whose works the methods of historical criticism and the results of historical inquiries such as Bauer's merge. Bultmann adapted Bauer's thesis to the New Testament itself recognizing in its writings the presence of a great diversity of theological interests and ideas, some of which came to be regarded as heretical. In his commentary on the Gospel of John he worked out Bauer's suggestion that "the Gospel of John began its course as a heretical gospel" (Bauer:224) proposing that it only became acceptable to later orthodoxy because of the work of an "ecclesiastical redactor." Käsemann carried this proposal even further by suggesting that the presbyter of Ill John was actually a gnosticizing heretic and that the Evangelist was actually excommunicated from the church! When this "gnostification" of John was called to halt, interest shifted to Bauer's understanding of Paul and the lapse of many of the Pauline churches into gnosticism.

It is clear from the foregoing survey that the application of historical-critical methodology to the New Testament documents and the results of historical inquiry into the nature of earliest Christianity have together led to the increased awareness of the diversity and disparity of the New Testament writings which forms the basis of the current debate. Käsemann sums up the view of many when he writes:

The New Testament as we have it is a fragmentary collection of documents from the earliest period. . . . By and large there is no internal coherence. The tensions everywhere present amount at times to contradictions (1972:73:242).

Indeed, in what is perhaps the most extensive examination of the unity and diversity of the New Testament, James D. G. Dunn acknowledges that "the diversity is more obviously a feature of the beginnings of Christianity than the unity" (Dunn:231). In short, the modern student of the New Testament is confronted with a picture of a New Testament which is "conspicuously marked by a diversity from the very beginning" (Koester:117), and "it is becoming more and more difficult to discern where the central or essential points of Christian belief or practice in New Testament times are to be found" (Riesenfeld:36). What, then is to be made of this diversity, disparity and the "irreconcilable" contradictions?

The Rediscovery of Unity

The emphasis on diversity and disparity in the writings of the New Testament has produced two basic responses: 1) the reaffirmation of New Testament unity and 2) a quest for a "center" of the New Testament which can be discovered amidst its widespread diversity.

THE REAFFIRMATION OF THE UNITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

In spite of "the common suspicion of any thesis which harmonizes the different elements of the New Testament" (Cullmann, 1959:68), it has been suggested that the unity of the New Testament has been prematurely abandoned. Indeed, in his inaugural address at Cambridge University, C. H. Dodd called for a "reversal" of the prevailing "centrifugal movement" aimed at discriminating between various New Testament writings and strata. He insisted that such an emphasis must be balanced by "a centripetal movement which will bring these ideas, now better understood in their individual characters, into the unity of the life that originally informed them," for "the New Testament is not a mere collection of religious ideas but an organic unity" (Dodd:35). Less than a decade later, A. M. Hunter, lamenting the propensity for "analytic textbooks with their series of 'separate-compartment' chapters, each bearing its own label — Synoptic, Pauline, Johannine, etc.," called for a recognition of "the deep unity within the New Testament, which dominates and transcends all the diversities" (Hunter:121).

The note sounded clearly by Dodd and later echoed by Hunter soon became a common theme. Feeling that the pendulum had swung too far in the direction of diversity, others began to ask along with F. C. Grant if "there is not really a greater unity in scripture, especially in the New Testament, than the atomistic, purely historical interpretation of the New Testament takes for granted" (Grant:20). While recognizing that the varieties of thought in the New Testament are to be carefully observed, Frank Stagg cautions that "one does not read the New Testament with adequate discernment if he fails to see the basic concerns and affirmations which set these writers apart and make them one in their theology" (Stagg:X). Similarly, George Ladd acknowledges that "we must expect diversity" within the New Testament, but it is diversity "within a basic unity" (Ladd:33). Furthermore, the presence of diversity should not be surprising wherever development and progress can be observed, and some have suggested that even contrary views can be reconciled when viewed as stages in the formation of Christian doctrine.

Another factor which may be seen as affirming the unity of the New Testament is the reality of the New Testament canon. Bernhard Anderson suggests that the New Testament writings "are not separate and unrelated items which have been brought together to form a miscellane-

ous collection or sacred library... Somehow," he reminds us, "they hang together; they cohere" (Anderson:169). The recognition of this phenomenon points inevitably to a basic unity. Thus, Harold Reisenfeld suggests that "the most remarkable feature in primitive Christianity" is not the very real diversity but "that homogeneity which made possible the acceptance and constant use of a diversity of writings which already at an early stage were considered authoritative" (Reisenfeld:41). Dodd likewise speaks of an "original unity" which underlies the New Testament writings and points out that the canon containing these writings represents "the judgment of the early church... that in them the Christian religion as a whole received authoritative expression" (Dodd:32). In short, "the New Testament is a body of writings whose canonicity... raises the claim to unity" no matter how that unity is defined (Ebeling:10). Thus, it appears that "while a generation ago, it was customary to find in biblical theology a diversity so radical as to destroy any real unity," in some quarters at least, recent criticism gives "larger recognition to the fundamental unity" of the New Testament (Ladd:33).

THE QUEST FOR A "CENTER" OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The second basic response to the issue of "unity and diversity" in the New Testament may be seen in the quest for a "center" of the New Testament. Such a "center" may be said to serve as an undergirding aspect on the basis of which unity can be discerned amidst diversity and/or an organizing principle for New Testament theology. This quest is inextricably related to the problem of canon criticism for this "center" is often set forth as a "canon within a canon." While there is fairly widespread agreement concerning the existence of a "center," there is little agreement as to its proper definition.

A thorough-going application of *Sachkritische* led Rudolf Bultmann to conclude that "every assertion about God is simultaneously an assertion about man and vice-versa" (Bultmann:191). He suggests, therefore, that anthropology is the "center" of the New Testament. Similarly, Herbert Braun finds that anthropology is "... the constant; Christology is the vanish" (Braun:272).

Oscar Cullmann proposes salvation history as the only viable "center." Writing in *The Early Church*, he writes: "From different angles I always come again to the same conclusion, namely, that the real center of early Christian faith and thought is redemptive (salvation) history" (Cullmann:xxi).

Following the lead of Ernst Käsemann, a number of scholars have suggested that "the justification of the godless is the center of all Christian proclamation and therefore also of Scripture." Käsemann is quick to point out that as a theological formula it must be seen in "correlation with Christology" but it is in reality prior to Christology because any real Christology "is to be oriented... on the justification of the godless" (405).

Ulrich Luz argues for the theology of the cross as the "center." He writes: "the cross is to be understood as the point of orientation for theology from which theological points of departure for anthropology, philosophy of history, ecclesiology, ethics, etc. are provided" (Luz:16).

James Dunn suggests what might be called a *kerygmatic* center. While recognizing the existence of a multiplicity of kerygmata, he finds in the midst of their diversity a common core kerygma consisting of the proclamation of Jesus-the-man-now-exalted, a call to faith and the promise held out to faith.

While other motifs have been suggested such as *Kingdom of God* and *covenant*, by far the most often suggested "center" is a Christological one. This view is summed up clearly in the following:

We can designate Christ as the middle of Scripture and its pivotal point, its center, its heart. No matter how we determine details of this central element, it always takes place in connection with Christ. (Maier:92)

Even Käsemann with his emphasis on diversity and disparity regards "the revelation of Christ in its progress and varied interpretations as the real clue to the New Testament," and he recognizes that "all the doctrines with varying degrees of explicitness and clarity are designed to witness to the Lordship of Christ" (244). Most recently, Martin Hengel has written of the "Christological centre" which "can be paraphrased by phrases like *solus Christus*, *sola gratia*, *justificatio impii* or *theologia crucis*" (Hengel:136). Some prefer to speak of "the Christ-event." Pannenburg, for example, writes of "the Christ-event" attested by its different witnesses "as the centre and matrix of New Testament teaching" (Pannenberg:193). Similarly, Gerhard Ebeling suggests that "the New Testament is a book whose center of gravity lies outside itself in an event to which being fixed in writing is co-ordinated in a subsidiary way," and he proposes that "the decisive event from which all the New Testament writings emerge is the coming of Jesus of Nazareth" (Ebeling:16).

The inability of New Testament scholars to arrive at any real consensus with regard to the definition of a "center" of the New Testament is at best disappointing. The very fact of the multiplicity of suggested "centers" raises the spectre of subjectivity. At the same time, attempts to curtail the spectrum of diversity represented in the New Testament by criticism of the canon are said to be "an illegitimate shortcut and not a scientific method" (Reisenfeld:36). Hans Küng charges that any formula, principle or idea that is made the "center" of the New Testament on the basis of which one engages in the selective principle of a "canon within a canon" is subject to "subjective arbitrariness" (Küng:191).

The very necessity of continuing the quest for a "center" has been questioned by some. James Barr suggests that "there is every reason to accept that a plurality of 'centres' may exist" (Barr:272). Such a pluralism in Scripture may provide the opportunity for the Bible to speak to

men in new and more effective ways to the contemporary situation. Finally, we must reckon with the possibility that no one "center" may be "sufficiently broad and thus adequate to bring about a systemization of the New Testament materials into a structural unity" (Hasel:163).

Directions for Future Discussion

Despite the lack of consensus with regard to defining the unity of the New Testament and the identification of a "center" around which such unity might be said to revolve, discussion of the issue of "unity and diversity" is bound to continue. "The inability of biblical theology to grasp and define the unity of the Bible does not mean that we have to fall back into the fragmentary or atomistic view of 'varieties of religion'" in the New Testament (Stock:70). Urging that

it is historically imperative that we resist the hypothetical unravelling of the New Testament into a multiplicity of single strands, solitary communities and isolated theologies which can no longer be correlated,

Peter Stuhlmacher has summoned biblical scholarship to re-open the issue of "a synthetic biblical theology" (Stuhlmacher:90). In a recent article and newly published book, Ralph Martin underscores the necessity of seeking "an underlying common thread that binds the twenty-seven diverse tracts and treatises (of the New Testament) into the church's authoritative canon" (Martin:267). It is interesting to note that the most recent proposal for such a "unifying element" has come independently from both Stuhlmacher and Martin. On the basis of somewhat different criteria, both have suggested that the theme of *reconciliation* would make the most adequate "center." While the theme of reconciliation appears both explicitly and implicitly in the New Testament, some will ask whether a concept which appears but 3 times and only then in the epistles of Paul can be seen as sufficiently prominent in the early church to warrant the role of a "center" of the New Testament.

It is precisely at this point that one is confronted with a number of issues which must be clarified before the quest for the "center" and unity of the New Testament can be adequately continued. There is, first of all, the matter of criteria. The plurality of "centers" which have thus far been proposed are a testimony to the lack of any attempt to establish any type of consensus with regard to the criteria by which a proposed "center" should be evaluated. The attempts by both Stuhlmacher and Martin to set forth the criteria on the basis of which they have worked is to be commended, and provides a pattern which should be emulated by all who are involved in the continuing quest, for the very presentation of such criteria cannot help but encourage discussion with regard to their adequacy.

A second issue requiring further clarification revolves around the question of whether the sought-after "center"

must be *contained in* the New Testament documents (either explicitly or implicitly) or merely *based on* these documents. One's answer to this question will be dictated by one's motivations for seeking a "center." On the one hand, one may be seeking a "center" which lies in the New Testament itself and functions as an underlying structure on the basis of which the unity of the New Testament can be discerned amidst its diversity. On the other hand, one may be seeking a "center" merely to act as an organizing principle for the writing of a New Testament theology. Finally, there is the possibility that one is seeking a "center" to act as a criterion for content criticism and thus assume the function of a "canon within a canon." Even if no consensus is possible with regard to the validity of these various goals, it is important that each writer indicate clearly the presuppositions and motivations which have prompted one's work.

A third issue which calls for further discussion relates to the question of whether one ought to limit oneself to the language and ideas proper to each individual author or attempt "to grasp that content of revelation which is common to them all" (Schackenburg:23). Schackenburg suggests that anyone who writes about New Testament theology cannot help but introduce new and more universal concepts "which are not to be found formally in the New Testament, but which do express New Testament thought" (Schackenburg:23).

Yet another issue relates to the need to arrive at some consensus with regard to the extent of relevant material from which one may properly draw in a quest for a "center." While some would limit this relevant material to the New Testament canon, others would adopt Wrede's suggestion that "all material from this period (the period of early Christianity) is relevant" for "assessing the development of Christian belief at a particular point in time" (Wrede:101).

Each of these issues calls for further discussion and clarification if future efforts with regard to the quest for a "center" of the New Testament are to be fruitful. At the same time, several notes of caution must be sounded. First of all, lest contemporary scholarship fall prey to the temptation to which Protestant Orthodoxy succumbed, it is essential to remember that "no predetermined center can ever function as an organizing principle for the presentation and arrangement of a theology of the New Testament" (Kümmel:17). The ever-present danger of projecting a given preunderstanding about the nature of the Christian faith onto the biblical material must be avoided.

Second, one must beware of the temptation to sacrifice divergent views in the New Testament writings to dominant ones. The various voices which one discovers must be allowed to speak for themselves and the diversity which they announce must be allowed its proper place in the spectrum of New Testament Christianity.

Third, any "center" which may be forthcoming must be

"broad, deep and wide enough to do justice to the whole canonical New Testament" (Hasel:164). As Hans Küng has reminded us, "the true Paul is the entire Paul, and the true New Testament is the entire New Testament" (Küng:192).

Fourth, if one adopts a "center" which is *based on* the New Testament rather than *contained in* it, that "center" must at least be "rooted in" the New Testament, which means "it should inhere in the New Testament, not necessarily at the surface level but at least in such a way that it could be brought to the surface" (Boers:10). If one adopts concepts which are not found formally in the New Testament, one must recognize the danger of destroying the vitality of the New Testament concepts by forcing "living forms into clothing which does not suit them" (Schackenburg:23).

Finally, the following warning from the pen of Herbert Braun must be heeded:

We escape the perplexity and the problems indicated by the disparateness of New Testament theological views too cheaply and too simply if we merely state that these differences must be neutralized in a higher unity. This is certainly the case. But we must be cautious lest we locate the point of coincidence, the higher unity, as too close at hand, shortsightedly and over-hastily (Braun:174).

Heeding this warning and cognizant of the guidelines suggested above, the continuing quest for a "center" can offer valuable insights for a clearer understanding of the New Testament.

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