Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology

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It has been questioned, whether it is proper to speak of a New Testament theology at all: whether, that is, there be any theology characteristic of the New Testament as a whole; and whether it might not be more true to the facts to attempt to reconstruct theologies represented by the several writers of the documents. Such a view springs from what is considered by many to be an exaggeration of the element of variety, at the expense of the element of unity which the New Testament as a whole presents.

In general, conservative and traditional theology has inclined to overwork the idea of unity; while liberal theology has tended to make rather more of the diversity existing within the thought of the writers of the respective books. Orthodox thought was willing to recognize stylistic and linguistic differences; but it assumed, frequently with naivety, that each writer was exercising his genius, under inspiration, to say the same thing, but in a somewhat different manner. On the other hand, liberal criticism has sought to magnify the points of difference; and in the process of analysis, the fact that there is a basic homogeneity in the New Testament has frequently been forgotten. The tendency, marked especially among German scholars, to found a new “school” of criticism has issued in an atomization of the New Testament, the results of which would lead the undiscriminating reader to conclude that the Christian Scriptures are but an accidental agglomeration of writings collected upon the basis of some kind of sacrosanctity. It is unnecessary to evaluate the motives by which such scholarship is impelled. But certain criticisms may be allowed at this point.

It has frequently been assumed that the writers of the documents of the New Testament uniformly wrote with a tendency to produce tracts for the purpose of Christian “propaganda”—this term is used without intent of implying a value judgment upon the motive. Nevertheless, it is characteristic of much of liberal criticism, that the writers are assumed to have subordinated all other considerations to the matter of producing a convincing tract, and that they wrote with an “explicit aim at propaganda.” Presumably matters of historical accuracy were compelled to yield before the tendency.

Again, it may be thought by some to be more than coincidence, that the results of much of criticism have proved negative (from the point of view of traditional orthodoxy), and that scholars of the more negative type have but grudgingly acknowledged the work of contemporaries, who seemed to “give back” to a given author the authorship of works traditionally ascribed to him, but by the “new school” denied him. This procedure is not such as to elicit unanimous and unbounded confidence in the objectivity of the critics. When it is necessary to rely upon inference, why not occasionally draw positive inference, in—

stead of negative?

Furthermore, the tendency to place as large a space of time between the events recorded and the time of recording as is possible, is one capable of more than one interpretation. For instance, if a scholar decide that the Gospel of Mark was written prior to the fall of Jerusalem; and then if he place his hypothetical date of writing as near to the year 70 as is decently possible, it may legitimately be questioned whether the dating itself may not express an a priori judgment concerning the placing of the date, which is in itself a “tendency.”

In line with the same possible danger of deciding what in the nature of things must have been the case may be mentioned the apparent treatment by liberal criticism of the element of the supernatural in the New Testament. Whereas traditional theology has doubtless yielded to the (understandable) temptation to lift into prominence those features which support the supernaturalism which is one of the assumptions of orthodoxy, and to minimize or suppress those features of variety which would imperil that supernaturalism; —so also liberalism has by its dissection of the New Testament removed those traces of proper supernaturalism from the records (which is likewise a contribution to its assumptions), by giving undue prominence to the element of diversity, so that the unity of the message of the New Testament is lost; the result of this being that the Christian Scriptures appear but an aggregation, like a heap of unassorted stones thrown together.

It is not easy to compare these two tendencies; but it may be said at least, that the traditionalists have somewhat the “edge” of the matter, in that they have the substantial support of the documents as they stand, and as they have been received for centuries. It is worthy of notice also that these Scriptu-
record of the development of early Christianity. The Book of Acts has been, on the one hand, accepted uncritically as a compendium of early church history; and on the other hand, treated as a mere *tendenz Schrift*, written to establish certain *motives*, and suppressing traditions incompatible with them.  

Ernest W. Parsons, in his volume, *The Religion of the New Testament*, has carried the analysis of the religious beliefs of the New Testament writers to a fine point; it is not necessary here to evaluate his book, further than to note that not all readers would be disposed to find so little in common among (for example) the authors of the Synoptics. But it is necessary first to answer another question: were the Evangelists interested in portraying with fidelity the life of Jesus, or were they merely constructing tracts, with a quasi-historical basis, shaped toward the end of expressing a theological motif? Perhaps this would in turn require the answer to a prior question: were they in possession of any reliable information at all concerning the life of Jesus?  

Against the view that they were seeking to act as conventional biographers stands the fact that they produced "biographies" of the most selective sort, the selected materials being such as to create a total impression of Jesus as a person of supernatural powers, standing at the center of significant incidents, and frequently uttering statements of high ethical and religious value. But the fact that they wrote in such a manner as to convey such an impression does not necessarily indicate that the historical matrix in which their religious and ethical message was set was unreliable.  

In other words, the writers of the Synoptics may have been more interested in presenting a brief picture of a Person, than in setting forth their own private theologies. With the author of the Fourth Gospel it is somewhat otherwise. He has evidently made the biographical element secondary, and has sought to record the longer discourses of our Lord, with a view to setting forth a sector of His teachings which were not otherwise current in written form. Hoskyns and Davey are not too convincing in stating that the Synoptics testify against the probability that Jesus uttered long discourses. For it may be that the Sermon on the Mount of *Matthew* may have been uttered on a specific occasion, and that likewise portions of it may have been repeated upon many occasions, so that *Luke* is not far wrong in quoting portions as spoken piecemeal. If this view be considered but a repetition of the blunders of the Harmonists, let it be said that the same treatment might be made of any preacher-teacher in any age.  

The question here is, it seems to the writer, whether in the Gospels the interest is primarily historical and only secondarily theological; or whether the reverse is the case. The writer is inclined to the former view, with all of the problems which it implies. It will be always necessary to fall back upon the possibility that the ministry of our Lord was of sufficient length, and above all, of sufficient depth and variety, to permit of both Synoptic and Johannine treatment. Thus, it may be questioned whether we in the twentieth century are in a position to deny categorically that the same Jesus portrayed in the Synoptics *could* have spoken as recorded by the author of the Fourth Gospel. In other words, may not both evangelistic traditions be the recording of actual sayings of our Lord, current in the tradition of

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the early Church, and selected out of larger materials which were available? This is, of course, out of harmony with the view that the author of Mark wrote down all he knew, and that the other two Synoptists added what they knew; and that the author of John employed a favorite literary device, that of putting speeches into the mouth of the character, to convey his personal theology to the reader. But it is just possible that much more concerning the life of Jesus was held in solution in the tradition of the early Church, and that the authors of the four Gospels precipitated such elements as they saw fit; or to put it another way, that these authors were guided by the Divine Spirit to record selectively such portions of the current tradition as should be of convenient size for transmission as the inheritance of the Church Universal.

Probably this view raises more questions for some than the acceptance of the opposite view. It may be argued, however, that the Christology of the four Gospels may not prove to be as diverse as many critics have thought—that the Messianism of Mark 13 may not be so completely out of harmony with the supposed "Hellenism" of the Fourth Gospel, and that the Pauline view of Christ is less easily divorced from that of the Evangelists than some critics believe. It needs to be asked, whether the theology of Mark, and especially his Christology, was an innovation, something entirely foreign to the primitive tradition. This is not a closed question; for Mark may or may not be a reading-back of later thought into the life of Jesus. Could it not be possible that the life of Jesus itself produced the later Christology rather than contrariwise?

All this represents a reopening of one basic question: was the life of Jesus marked by supernatural works, properly so-called, so that it inspired a tradition which was later recorded and which was true to the facts? Or was there an evolution of types of theology, varying with the community, which at a much later date sought to ground themselves in fabricated "lives of Jesus"—fabricated by the adaptation of legends concerning the life of some obscure Galilean peasant, who may, it is true, have possessed unique spiritual insights, but who was but a man nevertheless? Again, what did Jesus think of Himself, and say of Himself? Perhaps by judging that the words of Jesus were sufficiently varied and comprehensive to have made possible a selection by the Synoptists and by John, with perhaps some left over, we come nearer to the truth.

Thus far we have been concerned with the theology (or theologies) embedded in the narrative material of the New Testament. If the narratives represent the reading-back of several theologies into a nebulous tradition concerning the life of Jesus, then we are afforded a sidelight upon the theology of early Christianity—that it was seeking a form of expression which, in spite of its diversities, could be harmonized with what "people were saying" about Jesus, now long since dead. On the other hand, it may be that the writers wrote with a primary interest in biography and history; and that the life of Jesus was such that it afforded a background for a rich and varied biographical representation—as varied as that presented by the Synoptics and by the Fourth Gospel. It would follow then, that these writers would select their material, even depend upon one another, with a general aim in view, but without conscious motive to distort, suppress, or regiment facts. This would presuppose a degree of unanimity of theological
thought in the primitive Church which could result only upon the basis of the life of a Man who was unique among men, and whose life was both well known and accurately remembered by His followers.

It will be objected, that if such were the case, why did not some early Christian write a systematic theology? We can but conjecture why it was not so; perhaps the strength of the apocalyptic hope militated against it. Again, it may be argued that the real significance of the events of the life of Jesus, and of His words, was grasped but slowly by the primitive Christian church. This is not to be wondered at; we today are slow to comprehend, in spite of the aids at our disposal. And if the Evangelists were wrestling with some truths beyond their powers of comprehension, it would not be surprising if their selection of episodes from the life of our Lord should be influenced by that factor.

Much the same thought can be pursued in the case of the book of Acts. Some may feel that its author has distorted the total picture by his sketchiness, rather than by inaccuracies. But on the whole, its author appears to have familiarized himself rather fully with the geographical and historical details in which his record is set. The degree to which his document was conditioned by theological interest is open to question. It is true that Acts contains statements concerning Jesus which could be construed to be those of a pre-Synoptic Christology. But the presence of these may be explained in more than one way: it is possible that the author was imply inventing speeches for his characters, and drawing upon some primitive sources; on the other hand, something might be said for the view that the author had access to individuals who heard the speeches, and that the speakers purposely made their messages simple, in view of the capacities of the group to which they were addressing themselves.

Much more might be said concerning the speeches attributed to Paul in Acts as compared with the Epistles of Paul. Probably the magnitude of the Pauline mind and style renders any conclusion at this point indecisive. But the author of Acts may fairly be said, in spite of an element of interpretation, to have attempted to give to his friend-correspondent a hasty sketch of the history of the early Church, selecting again material which he felt to be of interest to Theophilus, and majoring especially upon a few characters of whom he knew somewhat: Peter, John, Stephen, James, and Paul—all this without an attempt at being exhaustive — and yet not be wholly chargeable with writing from theological purpose.

The foregoing indicates no impossibility that there was growth in the theology of the primitive Church. Doubtless whatever early Christians knew of Jesus was cause for thought; and it is not to be wondered that they wrestled with these things and that their thought produced variety. But within that variety may be found, the writer thinks, a fundamental unity which renders it possible to speak of the theology of the Gospels and Acts. That unity finds its loci in the view that Jesus of Nazareth was recognized of God as a unique Person, and that He recognized Himself as being not merely one who sustained a peculiar relation to God, but as being in a class apart from all other men. This Jesus was related to the national hope of Israel; and also, His death stood in causal relation to God's redeeming purposes.

Diverse were the interpretations of

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the mode of His relation to God, and of the relation of His parousia to the events of human history. Nor was there formulation of his metaphysical relation to God, or of His nature. Some attempts were made to express these, but the whole represents rather a picture like the following: the life (and death) of Jesus created an overpowering total impression upon the primitive Church; this total impression was greater than the sum of its details, which details were at first but dimly seen. Only gradually were they perceived, pondered, and systematized; and the records of the New Testament narratives preserve for us two related trends: the development of the theological thought of the authors themselves; and the growth of theology in the Church of the first century.

II. THE THEOLOGY OF THE CORRESPONDENCE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The term "correspondence" is employed here somewhat arbitrarily to indicate those portions of the New Testament which are ordinarily styled "epistles," although I Peter is more like a sermon, while Hebreus opens like an oration and closes like a letter. It is not the purpose of this section to discuss the authorship of the Epistles, nor to trace their theology, line by line. But there are evidences of both unity and diversity in the theological thought there set forth; and it may be profitable to consider these, to discover, if possible, whether there be any basic unity in them, and whether they be organically related upon a theological basis.

A consideration of the correspondence of the New Testament will concern itself most largely with the letters of Paul. To trace in any detail the Pauline treatment of the several doctrines which he develops would expand this article beyond tolerable limits. But to select one specifically

Pauline doctrine as an example for study, as for instance his view of the death of Jesus and its significance, will afford a basis for judging the nature of his thought as a whole—especially with respect to the element of unity and diversity, and its correlate, the element of growth.

In handling this subject, Paul frequently speaks in terms remarkably like those of the writers of the Synoptics. For example, the element of ransom, stated thus: "ye were bought with a price," is not foreign to the thought of Mark 10:45. In this and similar statements, he seeks to be conscious of the need for giving some explanation of that which he frequently takes for granted, namely, that the death of Jesus stood in causal relation to the salvation of men.

In setting this forth, he employs a number of figures: that of the ransom price, the propitiatory offering, the "becoming a curse for us," the being "made sin for use," etc. This indicates that the Apostle was wrestling with a matter which was too pregnant with meaning to be adequately stated in any single formula. Nor did he overlook the relation between the death of Jesus and the sacrificial institutions of Judaism." His method is not that of the author of the First Gospel, who seeks specific references from the Old Testament to substantiate his statements. Before deciding just what use Paul made of the Old Testament in his interpretation of the death of Jesus, it would be necessary to decide his meaning in I Cor. 15:3—whether by "received" he is speaking of a direct and personal revelation, or whether he is indicating that he secured this information from a written revelation. This cannot be decided; but there is weight in favor of Scott's view, that his own personal experience of forgiveness through Christ may have shaped his

10 Parsons: op. cit., p. 79ff.
11 Ibid., p. 81.
thought in this matter;\(^{12}\) and, like George Fox, he may have turned to the Scriptures after his experience, and "found them agreeable thereto." Paul certainly had pondered the meaning of parts of the Old Testament during his training; and it is possible that his later interpretation of the death of Jesus as a sacrificial transaction may have been the result of several currents in his life and experience.

A consideration of Paul's Christology reveals likewise the same phenomenon: that he was wrestling with problems of great depth; while giving no indication that he considered either explanation to be exhaustive. But his experience on the Damascus Road brought him into contact with a somewhat "different Jesus" than the early apostles has known. Some have felt that Paul emphasized the fact that Jesus was declared the Son of God by the Resurrection, and that hence he tacitly acknowledged the inadequacy of a true view of the life of Jesus to afford any confirmation of the Messianic claim. Perhaps this also may be capable of another explanation; that his interest in the whole question was conditioned by the overpowering vision afforded him on the Damascus Road; and that he left the publication of the details of Jesus' life to experts who knew Him.

His concern with the pre-existence of Jesus parallels that of the Fourth Evangelist in that pre-existence is connected with creation. And this interest in pre-existence is essentially a metaphysical interest: and may fairly be said to challenge Parsons' statement, that Paul's monotheism was so rigid as to preclude any interest on his part in the metaphysical implications of the terms: "Son of God," "Lord, and the like.\(^ {13}\)

Thus all of Paul's thought manifests a development; and his statements are frequently partial, given in didactic or hortatory settings. Whether beneath this variety of expression can be found any basic unity of view (e.g. with respect to the death of Jesus or of Christology) or not is a matter open to debate. There is, however, something to be said for the view that all of his statements concerning the death of Jesus presuppose a vicarious view, and that those concerning the nature of Christ presuppose a belief in Jesus as a transcendent Being. The details were worked out gradually, being elicited by individual situations, and (we believe) elaborated under the guidance of the Divine Spirit, as Paul was compelled to deal with the doctrinal and administrative problems of the Church. And his conclusions may well prove to be less inharmonious with the views of the primitive Church than some have supposed.

Concerning the Pastoral and the Johannine and Petrine Epistles, it may be said that a minute dissection of them can be made which will render plausible the view that they represent the fabrication of a theology out of dim recollections or of second-hand traditions concerning Jesus. But it is possible that there may be found lying deeper beneath their surfaces a unity with the primitive tradition. Even if these writings were pseudepigraphic (which seems by no means a necessary conclusion), then the coincidence of general teaching is no less remarkable. The Pastoral, agrees Parsons, are written by one under the spell of Pauline influence;\(^ {14}\) and the chief points of divergence from his thought and phraseology lie in the treatment of administrative problems. On the other hand, the Johannine Epistles concern themselves primarily with the refutation of the heresies which attacked those beliefs which were current from the times of the primitive Church. Hence, it may not be out of bounds to

\(^{12}\) Scott, op. cit., pp. 104ff.

\(^{13}\) Parsons, op. cit., p. 86.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 233.
suggest that they presuppose the general tradition of the Church. That is, as Parsons suggests, such ideas as the pre-existence of Jesus and of His sonship are in harmony with those of the Pauline writings, the Fourth Gospel, and the Epistle to the Hebrews.  

The Epistle of James concerns itself with questions of exhortation and admonition—that is, with practical matters, and hence does not deal with many of the details which concern the writings just mentioned. 1 Peter, while covering a range of interests, gives chief concern to the question of the sufferings of Christ. It is clear that the writer is here concerned with the same problem that had engaged Paul and the writers of the Synoptics, namely, that of the significance of the death of Jesus.

The Epistle to the Hebrews approaches the religious question from a different angle, that of the _a fortiori_ argument for the superiority of Christianity. Here interest in the saving work of Christ takes precedence over the question of Christology; and it may be asked whether the development of the soteriological element is or is not in harmony with that of, for example, Mark or Paul. The author of _Hebrews_ has specialized in his field, and it is not therefore surprising that he carries the question of the death of Christ, in its setting of Jewish sacrificial structure, further than did the other writers. Scholars have not found it easy to decide whether his conclusions are parallel to, or divergent from, the views of the other writers. Their interpretations at this point seem to be governed largely by _a priori_ considerations, as for example, their private views concerning the variety of the theology of the New Testament. Scott finds the Epistle to reflect a "changed attitude of mind" in the Church, and terms it "the first manifesto of . . . Latin Christianity."  

Parsons finds _Hebrews_ to express qualities more in harmony with those of the primitive Church.

**Conclusions**

From the foregoing, several generalizations may be drawn, with respect to some of which much legitimate difference of opinion may exist.

1. That the New Testament is a collection of documents of great external variety. Historically, earnest and honest men have derived from them widely varying results and conclusions, as is witnessed by the rise of denominations and sects.

2. That the documents present at the same time great variety and (we believe) a significant unity. This unity centers in a belief that on the stage of human history, God appeared in the person of Jesus Christ.

3. That the life and character and work of this Jesus were so vast and significant than men, themselves spiritual giants, wrestled with the meaning of that Life.

4. That there was preserved a vigorous, and accurate tradition concerning the life of Jesus, which life had been marked by manifestations of a transcendent character.

5. That the early Christians attempted to interpret that Life in terms of their total impression of the Jesus in Whom they saw, dimly at first, God at work among men.

6. That in interpreting the Life of Jesus, these men were conditioned by profound experiences—personal experiences which they believed to have been conditioned in turn by the death and subsequent exaltation of Jesus.

7. That in developing its theology, the early Church was exercised by practical and administrative problems which elicited additional interest

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and spiritual search concerning the meaning of the life and person of its Founder.

8. That the diversities of personalities, plus the variety of circumstances calling forth these writings, resulted in expressions of belief which are to be read synthetically, rather than with a hostile and analytic temper. When so read, they represent the varied—and for this reason more attractive—expression of great central principles, adherence to which formed the doctrinal basis of the early Church.

9. That the element of unity in the early Church was more significant than the elements of variety.

10. That the progress of belief in the early Church was analogous to the personal progress of belief which occurred, for instance, in the thought of St. Paul; hence the element of diversity in expression of the belief of the Church as a whole was no more surprising, nor no more indicative of a hit-and-miss procedure, than was the development of the theological thought of its great thinkers.

And finally,

11. That such a development was what might logically be expected in the growth of a movement of this kind; moreover, that it was the type of development which the Divine Spirit both could and would superintend. Out of the struggles of human thought, under His direction, was born a theology, not of dull monotony, but of sparkling variety, all pointing to One in whom God and man met.