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## **The New Testament: Source of Modern Theological Diversity**

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Without exception, every historical variety of Christianity, both ancient and modern, has assumed the crucial importance of the Scriptures (however defined) for the determination of the faith and life of Christians. Since at least the third century (the time of Origen), the Scriptures in general and the New Testament in particular have been regarded both as a source for the construction of theological systems and as a body of revealed truth with which theology must deal. If it is true that virtually all varieties of Christian faith look to the Bible as somehow containing or mediating the revealed will of God, we are faced with an immediate dilemma: How can such a wide variety of Christian traditions and theologies claim to reconcile themselves to a single canonical collection of Judeo-Christian documents? Let us consider several possible answers to this dilemma.

### **I. THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY**

#### **A. Interpreting the New Testament in the Light of One's Theology**

Perhaps the most common solution to this problem, a solution which certainly has its roots in the New Testament itself, is the conviction that my faith is the only true version of Christianity; all others are distortions, perversions, or incomplete manifestations of the true faith. It would be safe to say that the great majority of confessing Christians, of whatever theological tradition, may be placed in this category. Each major theological tradition within Christianity proudly displays the oak tree diagram with its own denominational name written large upon the trunk. All other traditions are displayed as offshoots based on partial truths.

Those who hold this position consciously or unconsciously regard

the New Testament as a document whose interpretation must be constantly judged by the creed or summary of beliefs (*regula fidei*) of their particular theological position. The application of interpretive methods to the text of the New Testament is therefore largely controlled by the dogmatic or theological presuppositions of the interpreters. The New Testament witnesses are as clay in the hands of the theologian, who fashions it in his own likeness and breathes into it his own life. He then stands back amazed at the close resemblance between his own theological stance and that of the earliest Christian witnesses and regards this correspondence as a vindication of the truth of his own position. In this instance the New Testament has completely lost its integrity and functions only as a mirror reflecting the theological posture of the one gazing into the glass! And so, in the final analysis, it is not so much the New Testament which is the authority for theological utterance as it is the interpreter himself!

Although I once held such a position, I no longer do. I would, however, be the last to claim that such a position is either intellectually {11} dishonest or essentially unchristian. Those who espouse such a position have ample precedent for it, as I have already intimated, in the pages of the New Testament itself. No one was ever more intolerant of those who preached a variety of the Christian gospel not precisely in accord with his own than the Apostle Paul himself. Few have read more Christian theology back into the Old Testament than the great Apostle to the Gentiles. Shall we call him “unchristian” or intellectually dishonest? Similarly, the author of the First Letter of John spares no pains in severely dressing down those whose views of the person of Christ did not precisely coincide with his own.

Christianity does not exist in abstract form, but only in the form of specific theological traditions which are inseparably linked to historical Christian communities. Each of these Christian traditions claims to enshrine religious truth, and these various truth claims can be substantiated only by faith. The chief weakness of the position which we have just outlined is that to the degree that it appeals to an external principle of authority subject to critical analysis (i.e., the New Testament), to that degree it leaves itself open to judgment and qualification by the scientific historical method.

## **B. Searching for Theological Unity within the New Testament**

The next possible solution to the dilemma which we have posed is

that which accompanied the birth of rigorous historical criticism during the Enlightenment which began in the Seventeenth Century. The various figurative methods of interpreting the Scriptures which were employed by Christians from the very beginning of Christianity until the Enlightenment (with occasional survivals even in the Twentieth Century), came to be regarded by the educated as the subjective, inadequate, and theologically controlled tools that they in fact were. Christian scholars in increasing numbers began to feel morally bound to apply the scientific methods of interpretation to the New Testament in order to secure the greatest possible degree of objectivity for the results of their exegesis. Not infrequently the results of this “objective” exegesis of the New Testament were unacceptable theologically to the various theological traditions to which these Biblical scholars belonged. These men were, for the most part, deeply religious individuals who accepted in principle the crucial importance of Scripture for the faith and life of Christians, yet they also felt morally bound to use what they considered (and what I consider to be) the correct methods of Biblical interpretation.

As the historical-critical method was applied in an increasingly thorough manner to the New Testament, the dogmatic content which was formerly read into it was slowly stripped away. The result was that an increasingly large gulf was created between the historical reconstruction of early Christianity and the various theological traditions, all of which claimed historical or spiritual descent from the earliest Church. Since the New Testament was still in principle and in practice regarded as a guide to faith and life, Biblical interpreters from various Protestant traditions fully expected to use their new insights into the meaning of the New Testament to reform post-Enlightenment Christianity, i.e., to rebaptize it in rationalism. Protestant liberalism was the immediate result of these cumulative efforts. The development of this new theological tradition within Protestantism (and one which still dominates it intellectually) is striking proof that a radical change in methods of Biblical interpretation can and do result in a radically different use of the literature of the New {12} Testament in the formation and articulation of new theological traditions, thereby adding to the variety within Christianity.

I think that it is clearly evident that here it is the way in which the Bible is understood by a Christian community which determines the kind of theological development which goes on within that tradition. It is therefore possible to suppose that one theological tradition (that

found in the canonical New Testament) has been understood in a multiplicity of ways because of the variety of interpretive methods which have been and continue to be applied to the Scriptures. There does seem to be a growing consensus among Biblical scholars of most Christian traditions that the historical-critical method of Biblical interpretation is the only correct or legitimate method of interpretation. Equally widespread, it seems to me, is the conviction that as scholars are able to apply this method with greater degrees of objectivity, so the results of exegesis will become increasingly similar, regardless of the theological tradition of the scholars. Thus the possibility is opened up that these exegetical results may be used for the formation of a truly Biblical theology which in turn may become the basis for a truly Christian theology wherein theologians from all Christian traditions will attempt to harmonize their theological stance with the revelatory witness of the New Testament. It is this attempt to find the roots of theology in the New Testament, it seems to me, that underlies a great deal of the current involvement in the ecumenical movement of reputable Biblical scholars from all segments of Christendom. The great weakness of this solution is that it assumes the theological unity of the New Testament, a unity which does not really exist.

### **C. Recognizing Theological Diversity within the New Testament**

This leads us into a third and final way of accounting for the fact that many divergent Christian theological traditions reckon seriously with one canonical New Testament, and that is the necessity of recognizing the diversity of theological traditions within the New Testament itself. Although many would certainly disagree with me, it is my opinion that the rigorous application of scientific methods of exegesis to the New Testament will inevitably lead to a recognition of its basic theological diversity. The existence of variety within Christian theological traditions cannot simply be attributed to the theological presuppositions of the interpreter (the first solution considered), nor to the divergent methods of interpreting the New Testament (the second solution considered). The situation is far more complex than that.

The New Testament is, it seems to me, both the earliest witness to Christian theological diversity and a prime source for that diversity throughout the long history of Christianity. The most elementary level at which this Biblical diversity manifests itself in Christian denominations is their tendency to prefer some New Testament witnesses at the expense of others. Many protestant denominations

look primarily to the earlier Pauline letters for basic theological insights, while liberal Protestantism rejected Paul in favor of the historical Jesus portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels. Roman Catholics have historically made greater use of the later Pauline letters and the Synoptic Gospels than of other segments of the New Testament. The Fourth Gospel seems to be the favorite of Eastern Orthodoxy. It is not that those segments of the New Testament corpus *contradict* each other, it is just that they are quite *different* from one another.

The application of historical criticism to the New Testament has shown, {13} I believe, that the first century Christian communities which that document represents exhibited no greater degree of theological unity at that time than do the theological traditions of modern Christian denominations. Since the New Testament is not merely an anthology of the favorite religious writings of various segments of Christendom, but rather was accepted as a whole by almost all Christian communities since the late second century, diversity was accepted in principle by all those who accepted the present canonical New Testament whether or not they knew precisely what they were doing. Just as it would be a misunderstanding of the nature of New Testament literature to attempt to force theological unity upon it, so it would also be a misunderstanding of the nature of contemporary Christianity to desire to force it into a monolithic theological or organizational unity. Diversity is a sign of vitality, not of decadence.

## **II. THE NEW TESTAMENT AND RELIGIOUS UNITY.**

To this point we have considered the role of the New Testament in relation to the theological diversity which seems to have characterized Christianity almost from its inception. If the various attempts to find a theological unity which underlies the New Testament (to say nothing of the modern varieties of Christianity) have been unfruitful, is there perhaps a more basic kind of unity which might be uncovered? I would submit that the real unity of the New Testament witnesses is not theological but religious. All varieties of Christianity, ancient and modern, are based on one common religious insight: Jesus Christ was sent into this world to make possible the full realization of man's potential. All world religions are predicated on the assumption of the "fallenness" or incompleteness of man as he is presently constituted. All have various ways of envisioning or achieving the alteration of that abnormal condition. In Christianity, the overcoming of man's incompleteness is indissolubly linked to Jesus. I neither know nor can conceive of any variety of Christianity which would not accept this

statement. On the other hand, the very fact that this statement is a least common denominator means that it is not really a religiously or theologically meaningful statement without considerable amplification and conceptualization. All varieties of Christianity are basically religiously meaningful conceptualizations of the basic datum of Christian religious experience: Jesus was sent into the world to meet my needs. From this basic religious conviction an infinite variety of religiously meaningful models or conceptualizations are possible. It is these religious models of Christianity which in turn provide the basic data for the further theological articulation of each Christian denomination or tradition.

An example of one such model at this point may serve to clarify our meaning. One of the earliest ways of conceiving of the religious significance of Jesus was in terms of the conception of the Jewish messiah. Many of the first Jewish Christians conceived of man's fallenness in terms of disease, war, foreign domination, barrenness of field and womb, etc. Jesus was conceived as the Messiah who would shortly conquer the enemies of Israel on the battlefield, and restore the nation of Israel to her original state of blessedness conceived in terms of longevity (not eternal life), fruitfulness of womb and field, and victory in battle. This elementary way of conceiving the significance of Jesus for restoring man to his original wholeness has little to say to a modern world, nor did it speak to many ancients. The emphasis is certainly reflected in the New Testament, along with many others. {14}

One should perhaps underline the fact that since Christianity is not indissolubly linked to one model or mode of conceptualization, no model can ever outlive its usefulness. It is only when the model is taken for the reality that the model has outlived its usefulness when times change. Those factors which take the basic datum of Christian religious experience and elaborate it into various conceptual religious schemes are religious, psychological, and sociological, as well as historical and cultural.

Let us penetrate further into the nature of these diverse religious models, these modes of conceptualizing basic Christian religious experience, which mediate between that basic experience and the contradictory theological articulations of that experience. The two foci of the basic data of Christian religious experience, Jesus and man's incompleteness, together form the axis for all theological articulation. They function together because it is the conception of the nature of man's incompleteness and his religious needs which (at least to a large

extent) determines the conception of Jesus which a particular Christian community will develop. The variety of ways in which the figure of Jesus may be made religiously meaningful for the realization of man's full potential is unlimited. The ancient Christological titles such as Messiah, Lord, Son of God, Logos, Son of Man, Wisdom, etc., are all concepts or images which were used to articulate the significance of Jesus in various early Christian religious contexts. As images or metaphors, they cannot be regarded as contradictory, but merely as diverse. They are different; but as images they no more contradict each other in the logical sense than red contradicts green. It is only when these religious conceptualizations are theologically articulated in logical and philosophical categories that contradiction becomes a possibility. We must recognize this contradiction as something far removed indeed from the basic datum of Christian religious experience and the rather elementary models which give that experience meaning and significance.

Let us take one phrase of the Christology of the New Testament as an example, the title "Son of God." Within a first century Jewish context, this title could refer to the expected Messiah, the coming King of Israel. Within a first century Hellenistic context, this title referred primarily to a divine man or one who manifested godlike characteristics. In sections of the Acts of the Apostles, and in one passage in Paul's letter to the Romans, it is claimed that Jesus became the Son of God (= Messiah) upon his resurrection from the dead. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is conceived of as having become the Son of God at the event of his baptism. In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, with their narratives of the virgin birth, Jesus is thought of as having been the Son of God from his very inception. In John and in other passages within the Pauline letters, Jesus is thought of as the pre-existent Son of God. On the logical level, these various conceptions of Jesus as Son of God cannot be reconciled with one another. Yet on the religious level, the various uses of this title are saying very much the same thing to different groups of Christians at different times and in different places. They are claiming that the man Jesus both was and is the plenipotentary of God. Different theological traditions could (and have) made very different use of the occurrence of this single title with various meanings. But to raise these differences to the status of theological contradiction is, I think, to wrongly assess the Christologies of the early Christians.

Since most of our theological language is analogical rather than

univocal, {15} or metaphorical rather than literal, it seems to me that we do a basic disservice to the theological task when we transform diversity into contradiction, varieties into irreconcilables. Diversity is not only a sign of the vitality of the Christian religion, it is absolutely necessary if Christianity is to be meaningful and living for people of radically different social, cultural and historical contexts.

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