

THE CHALLENGE OF DIVERSITY: The Witness of Paul and the Gospels

David Rhoads (Fortress, Minneapolis, 1996)

Its diversity may be why Church has thrived. Judaism was multi-faceted as were 'nations' of Roman Empire. Matt 28:19 'make disciples of all nations' ~ gospel has values to make this universalism possible (unconditional love). Rev 5:9 'every tribe and nation.' Expansive inclusivity. Pluralism of Christian biblical canon ~ as of God's creation. All religious expressions are simultaneously cultural expressions. But a fear of difference – so what if we took diversity rather than unity as our starting point? Holy Spirit is strength for such adaptability. Then we'd see that as the path to embracing full measure of God's unity, for our only unity is not in human beings but in God. The NT canon teaches us to depend on each other in diversity and not pontificate about 'our' reading as God's.

1: Reading for Diversity

Church spread after 70AD into particular places, allowing phenomenal divergence and no 'given' ground-rules. We have harmed the tradition by trying to over-harmonise the outcome. (Mk's messianic secret vs. John's *ego eimi*; even a basic such as Sin understood in diverse ways ~ hypocrisy Matthew, self-concern Mark, social injustice Luke; even that Jesus died for our sins ~ no mention in Lk or Mk since it's already in Js' life, Jn sees death as restoring alienated Creation.) Similarly, 'faith' and 'justification' mean different things for evangelists. Or, 'be subject to rulers for they are from God' in Rom 13:1-7, vs imprisonment of evangelists and awareness of persecutions.

Some groups have appropriated certain readings: RC draw on Matthew & Catholic epistles. Evangelicals quote Jn on rebirth. Pentecostals use Acts and 1Cor on baptism in spirit. Anabaptists on Sermon on Mount. So let texts speak for themselves individually. Look for the uniqueness about 1. The human condition, 2. The Vision and, 3. View of salvation.

2. Galatians: justification by grace.

Predominately rural, lower classes of central Asia Minor. They nursed his Eye illness. Gentiles who inherited Abraham by faith and saw miracles and signs. (3:1-4) Judaisers then came (1:6-7) Said Paul didn't know Js. so preached second-hand gospel to please. Letter therefore ends on freedom in Spirit apart from law but Love.

‘*Justification by grace through faith*’ a legal term. God is saving people from destructive ways of justifying themselves through extensive legal proscriptions.

People cannot fulfil all Law. Can’t put God into debt to us! Paul talks of justification not forgiveness because the latter implies striving to secure God’s love and where we fail we are forgiven. But it is God’s initiative not ours. Law can restrain people being immoral but can’t make them righteous. Judaisers used Law as means of exclusion (4:17) an excuse to persecute (1:13). It leads to boasting and quarrels. Moses’ Law did not add to the promise and just a temporary measure (3:15-19)

God befriends us unconditionally (grace/gift) *Faith* is response of acceptance of gift and living out of it. Not ‘believe hard enough then God accepts’ but ‘trust’ (5:6) Since all are equally dependent on this grace, no room for boasting or faction or ‘ism’, for all are a *new creation*. Every now permissible if edificatory (I Cor 10:23) Life lived on human terms (*sarx*) produces corruption, on spiritual terms (*pneuma*) produces eternal life. Those actions not consonant with gift of Spirit produce death (wages of sin, Rom 6:23) Produces 1. Gratitude (Phil 1:27) so present your bodies. 2. Live by Spirit’s guiding. Share and care. 3. Follow any guidelines that mirror spirit – traditions, wisdom, etc. [cf situation ethics] So love without manipulation ~ all one in Christ.

Death on Cross is the way we’re saved from trying to live to Law. It rescues us from present evil age (1:4) Baptism is not to do with forgiveness from Law failings but abolishes Law – we die to it and rise with Christ. Forgiveness only deals with our guilt, Justification deals with whole person, shame and all. Totally affirming so creates solidarity with all baptised.

Medieval idea that God has to be reconciled to us since he is offended and is concerned with his own feelings. But problem not with God but us.(2Cor 5:18-19) “The act of God was an act of grace, done not to satisfy God but for the sake of humanity.” (p55) So Grace be with you (1:3 & 6:18)

NOTE: Paul wrote Romans, 1&2 Cor, Gal, 1 Thess, Phil, Philemon.

3. The Gospel of Mark: courage in the face of death

Rhoads doubts the traditions about Mark. Northern Judeans and Gentiles peasant readers around Roman/Judean War of 66-70AD. God’s rule seen in healings,

exorcisms, authority over nature. Opposition because Xn's opposed War (Judeans), or because Js had been executed by Roman authority (Gentiles).

Jesus' loyalty to his stumbling disciples encouraged readers in their tribulations.

Each of three times Js predicts giving life (relinquishment) they exemplify what people want for themselves (acquisition): 1. 'Lose your life to save it' (8:35) 2. 'want to be important, will be least' (9:35) 3. 'be great, will be the servant' (10:43-45)

Many minor characters who come to Jesus exemplify former, authorities the latter.

FEAR motivates quest for power – Herod fears Baptist, Pilate the crowd, Authorities Js' popularity and losing face. All this is the opposite of Faith/Trust.

Disciples are afraid of storm, how to feed followers, Jesus' death, fear for themselves. They rebuke those coming to Js.

LIFE FOR OTHERS: is God's will. Jesus' method is to reverse cycle of oppression with cycle of service. Servant has not chance of power over. Minor characters often act as servants and bringing others to Js. Disciples too serve him. Mark's Jesus is exemplar of this life for others. Hence crucifixion is therefore God's will ('Abba.. not my will but yours 14:36) No concentration on Js' suffering but rather to pray that persecution does not come, but proclaiming this good news leads to encounters with oppressors, and this is taking up ones cross.

METHOD: 1. *Receive* the Kingdom. Entire story is showing Kgdm which saves from oppression. Complete about-face in living for others. 2. Jesus helps them *See* it's worth dying for. 3. Narrative *Empowers* readers by leading them to identify with him and away from Judean and Gentile leaders. Jesus is the one heroic figure to be like. Mark leads readers through the final conflict with Jesus, so we want to emulate him. (for they were afraid..) We are left to tell the tale. Death is not for 'forgiveness' but liberation from grip of self-preservation and to live like him. In 16:7 the promise is that Jesus will go ahead to Galilee to get them started afresh.

4. The Gospel of Matthew: righteousness before the Law

Urban Judean Christians. Antioch of Syria? 80-90 AD. Survivors were Liberal Pharisees and Liberal Judean Christians. They opposed War and open to Gentiles. Pharisees had just founded Jamnia School under Rabbi Johanan ben Zakai to address outcome of War and offer their findings as 'normative'. Matthew's group likewise felt their Xn interpretation of Law should be normative and he writes

accordingly. If populace had listened to Js they would have avoided war: 'those who live by sword, die by sword' (26:52) whereas Xns were inheriting earth by spreading to all nations (28:19-20)

Gospel is story of opposing groups: Jesus' followers and Jesus' rejecters.

Precursor = Herod pretends to worship; Pharisees who pretend Woes; Exonerates Pilate with hand-washing but 'let his blood be on us' and thus the War destroyed them. Weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Precursor = Magi sincerely worship; Sermon on Mount as new Law as love without hypocrisy. Establishes this community as his Church (16:17-19) But they stumble at death so Jesus re-affirms them to establish world-wide mission. At final judgement they sit on 12 thrones (19:28)

Yet, Mtt is not rejecting Judaism and insists on interpreted Law in 'true' Judaism. Preserves Sabbath, dietary laws not nullified.

Hypocrisy 1. Inner motives contradict outward behaviour. "had their reward" in being seen holy. 2. Inner attitudes contradict actions. Murder/anger. 3. Act morally only sometimes. Don't swear but *always* be honest. (5:33-37) Tithe herbs but neglect important Law. 4. Loving God but hating neighbour. Faith in God but worry? Storing treasure of wrong sort. Worse of all is combination of blind hypocrisy and missionary fervour. Shut door to Kgdm on people (23:13) Fail to self-examine behind religion. Remember, Righteousness = Justice.

Matthew's vision is Righteous Integrity. 'Be perfect.. as .. father is perfect.' (5:48)

Deeper than external fulfilment and exemplar is Jesus. Sermon on Mt depicts.

(But Jesus condemns after saying we mustn't: perhaps he sees Js as Rs judge.)

So strive for excellence – as we would for health, business, arts etc.

1. Sermon begins with Blessing which confers power to follow and obey.
2. Sermon Law exposes failures and helps us overcome self-deception. (Gandhi's story of son must give up sugar, sends him away until Gandhi says 'I did not realise how long it would take me to give up sugar.)
3. Emmanuel nurtures and supports. Israel always knew Father as king, but now intimacy.

The Gospel of Luke: society of mercy

Upper class urban Asia Minor with social justice concerns. Weak traditions. Theophilus a patron or 'God-fearer'. Inclusive call to repentance and forgiveness.

Concern for Israel's fate as a nation. God's compassion 'to seek and save the lost'(19:10) Nation did not know way to peace (19:42) so a reversal, a disastrous upheaval in life of nation. Magnificat spells out reversal in present tense. As do blessings and Woes. As do his actions: straightens bent woman, shames rulers, Lazarus goes to Abraham, 'self-exalted will be humbled' (18:14, 14:11) Also reverses who is in and out ~ banquet, kingdom hidden from learned, stable, shepherds, and Luke realises that after War the leaders are ultimately humbled.

Leaders have no MERCY but love money (16:14) Speak well of themselves (7:39, 6:26) Condemns the rich when there are poor (18:18-30) and protect themselves as pious children of Abraham when they will perish if they don't repent.

METHOD: 'Be merciful as your Father is merciful' (6:36)

place MERCY of compassionate God above all else as Jesus does. He's about his father's business from start (2:49) in desert (4:8) Filled with Spirit enters Galilee (4:14) and central to Luke 4:18-19 statement of Mission. Prays before every major event. Zacchaeus shares money so Jesus says: 'Today salvation to this house' 19:10. God likes to empower us with HS (11:13) and Kingdom (12:32)

Forgiveness major theme of Jesus ministry ~ sinners to repentance (5:32) (His Death is because he fights oppression not to forgive sins) Leaders had labelled peasants as sinners but now because they do not repent the leaders are seen as sinners. Most beautiful of Luke's stories are repentant sinners: Prodigal, Zacchaeus, Peter.

Disciples can do nothing till Holy Spirit is given: (24:48, Acts 1:4-8) God's HS takes initiative always ~ birth of John and Jesus, baptism, empowering for ministry (Lk4). Israel has failed on social justice but new community can get this right. Widows cared for Acts 6:1-7, people healed, demons driven out, dead raised. Open to all nations. Women highlighted but little for them to *do* !?

The Gospel of John: eternal life in the present.

End of first century, perhaps Ephesus. Late date so not 'disciple Js loved' but a follower. Group faced persecution; Jesus still with them; eternal life already with

them; had own metaphorical language of bread, light, water, etc. Not much ethical teaching but seem to have been deeply immersed in Spirit among them. Foot-washing, Js often at Temple, death as glorification, unique bits on Thomas, MaryMag and Peter. Conflict of light and dark, knowing God and not knowing, in cosmic context. God loves world so much he acts to restore it now. Jesus embodies this for all creation. Extended dialogues because on trial by authorities throughout. People choose one or other. This reading community very different from world around, even Pharisees and scribes etc all in together as 'Judeans'. Outsiders just don't understand ~ Nicodemus mistakes 'rebirth', woman at well on living water, temple as building, bread to eat, Pilate thinks king. No relationship with the eternal therefore condemned ~ sin is not believing in Jesus so not knowing God which is immorality which light will expose.

Eternal life does not just last forever and boring but is full loving relationship. (17:3) In John every ordinary thing vital to life points to the creator of it.

Focus is on community not just individual 'believer' which offers mystical knowing. (as in foot-washing) Love expressed in concrete action. And identity is in abiding, not just a mystical absorption. In Jesus, we each now belong to community of love for one another and the world.

HOW: by being in Jesus relationship. Also Jesus comes as judge so as to press for decision. In his death Jesus is 'drawing all people' to himself (12:32) Characters in story are at different stages of response to Jesus so he moves them to decide.

Second Coming is immediately after Jesus' death, when risen Jesus returns in spiritual form through presence of HS. Eternal life only possible after HS comes, when after death Js is able to manifest himself as Spirit. When Js dies he is able to offer his own relationship with God to others ~ 'into the earth and dies... bears much fruit.' (12:24) The cross is not suffering humiliation followed by exaltation but death is itself exaltation of majestic figure; this self-sacrifice for others is supreme manifestation of God's love for world. 'many mansions... I will come again and take you to myself' (14:1-5) refers to life here after his death, not ours. They now worship in Temple of his body, neither in Jm nor Mt Gerizim, but in spirit and in truth (4:21-24) So John's community mission is simply by their presence in the world, saying you must be born again. Small groups marked by mutual love ~ 'come and see'.

7. Reading for Renewal

Other modes and moods in NT: Holiness model of 1 Peter; Pilgrimage Theology of Hebrews; Condemnation of Idolatry in Revelation. In physics we need both wave model and particle model to understand light. Either adopt *via negativa* or take all models seriously but not called to follow all. To discount all is idolatry of own perspective and life-style. Indeed, why not create new model from own context?

Epilogue

Statements of 'Agreement' can be norms for inclusion and exclusion. Find unity in participation, predicated on allegiance to Jesus' love as great unifier of diversity?

Canon also limits diversity rightly: 'Jesus was not man?' 'Jesus was not Judaeen', are discounted by canon's common evidence. A group labelling self as Christian when hatred held sacrosanct. But we also reject parts of Canon that are sexist etc.

ONLY GOD is our unity as common creator and lover, all our ideas of unity only human constructs. Paul sees us as ambassadors of Reconciliation. Justification is an accomplished fact now and so he can be open to Jew, Gentile, Male Female, slave or free – all people for whom Jesus died. So the Spirit is the bond of peace (Eph 4:3)

Such unity lies in the Mystery of God ~ unity beyond our words and actions, but longing to do God's work.

[Study Guide pages follow]