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Diversity in the Bible as a Model for Lutheran Hermeneutics

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In 1996 when the Bible was translated into the Gbaya language of the Central African Republic and Cameroon, the event was commemorated with a festive cloth. In the center, people are seated in a circle around the fire, reading their Bibles together. Green leaves, symbolizing life, form the backdrop. The borders on top and bottom depict a joyful procession of people of all ages, singing and carrying their Bibles, with the words from Psalm 119:105, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

That wonderful vision for reading the Bible is one that deeply touches people in my own church, when I bring this cloth to synod assemblies. People connect with the image of experiencing the transformative power of the Bible as God’s living word; the joy of studying scripture together with others, of learning the stories in one’s own context, and celebrating in song and dance.

Yet we also know that the Bible can also become the locus of conflict. Our different biblical interpretations sometimes clash, within and between contexts.¹ Christians use “Bible bullets” to attack one another. On many issues—war and peace, creationism versus evolution, slavery, economic issues such as usury or wealth and poverty, interfaith issues of Jews and Muslims, social issues such as roles of women, divorce, or homosexuality—Christian history shows that it is possible to use the Bible to foster intolerance and justify absolutist claims for one’s own biblical position over against the reading of others.

My own church, the ELCA, is involved in a new initiative about the Bible, called the “Book of Faith Initiative: Lutherans Read the Bible,” that aims to deepen biblical literacy and biblical fluency in our church. Goals for the initiative include teaching people Bible stories, helping deepen devotional reading and contextual readings of the Bible (especially historical and narrative context), and introducing Lutheran hermeneutics.² One of my own goals for the emphasis also concerns diversity. I hope that Book of Faith will help to awaken people to an appreciation of the rich diversity of biblical texts, and to how this very diversity can be a resource for our churches today.

The stakes are high, not just in my own church but also in the global Lutheran communion. I sit on the LWF Council and the executive committee. Not a single meeting

¹ See for example the essays in Reinhard Boettcher, ed., *Witnessing to God’s Faithfulness: Issues of Biblical Authority* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1996); David Ratke, ed., *Hearing the World: Lutheran Hermeneutics—A Vision of Life Under the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2006); and the biblical essays in Musimbi Kanyoro, ed., *In Search of a Round Table: Gender, Theology and Church Leadership* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997);

² See Diane Jacobson, Mark Allan Powell and Stanley N. Olson, *Opening the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009) and *The Lutheran Study Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009).

goes by when we don’t hear about conflicts over biblical interpretation, whether the challenge of fundamentalisms or threats that some issue will be claimed to be “church-dividing” on the basis of the Bible.

Some argue that we should protect lay Christians from insights of biblical scholars about canonical diversity. In their view, to acknowledge diversity within the Bible would lead the church down the slippery slope towards relativism and confusion. I would counter that diversity in the Bible is a great treasure that we very much need for mission and ministry today.

So my question is this: How can we theologians bring into our churches and into the Lutheran World Federation one of the best and most important results of biblical scholarship—namely the appreciation of multiple voices and diversity within the Bible—in a positive way? How can studying the Bible can help us learn to view diversity in our churches as a blessing, rather than as something that leads to division?

Conversations within the Bible: a Community of Diverse Views

In this image from the Central African Republic a community of people sits in a circle, around the fire, all reading and discussing the Bible. It might be possible to claim that they all agree, or that the one man dressed in yellow has the answers and is teaching everyone else, since he is the biggest and seems to have the biggest Bible. Yet the woman who is sitting next to him seems to be pointing out something to him. Perhaps she has a new insight that illumines something in the text that he hasn’t seen. Perhaps she disagrees with him. This child across the way might also have a different perspective to bring to the circle. As they gather around the circle to read the Bible and listen to one another, multiple voices are present and multiple biblical readings are possible.

A lively conversation among different voices is also represented within the Bible itself. Both the Old and New Testament represent diverse communities and diverse authors, with different theologies and views, all seeking to be faithful to God, even while sometimes understanding God’s word quite differently. The Bible is God’s word. But it is God’s word spoken differently through different communities and authors in different contexts. It is not a single monolithic book dropped from heaven. It is a library of voices. Various communities in the biblical conversation understood God’s word in different, even competing ways. The early church in its wisdom included many voices in the canon, canonizing not just one view but a range of views.

This idea of diversity within the New Testament is not a new idea. That’s why it’s perhaps surprising that we do not often draw on it more in our church life. Already in 1951 Ernst Kasemann proposed in his famous essay “The Canon of the New Testament and the Unity of the Church” that churches engaged in ecumenism must consider the great diversity and plurality of New Testament theologies.³ Yet we scholars have not been persuasive in making the case that canonical diversity can be a blessing for people in the pews. Pastors are

³ Ernst Kasemann, “The Canon of the New Testament and the Unity of the Church,” in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM, 1964). The essay was first delivered as a lecture in Göttingen in 1951.

afraid to share the insights of critical scholarship they learned in seminary because they fear that people looking for clear-cut answers and rules will perceive biblical diversity as confusion, undercutting the authority of the Bible.

This perception of confusion is exacerbated by the challenge of fundamentalisms and literalism in many local contexts. Lutherans and others who seek to employ the insights of critical scholarship can appear weak in comparison with fundamentalist neighbors or family members who make sweeping hegemonic arguments about what “Bible-believing” Christians believe. Tensions between the Missouri Synod-affiliated International Lutheran Council and the Lutheran World Federation also play out in debates about the Bible in some LWF member churches.

But it has been my experience as a pastor that parishioners are more ready to learn about biblical scholarship, including the multiple authors and perspectives, than we sometimes realize.

To be sure, critical biblical scholarship has not always served the church well, nor has it served contextual voices, especially the voices of the marginalized. One of the great shortcomings of the historical critical method was that the subjectivity of the interpreter was not acknowledged. A kind of essentialism or universal objectivity was sometimes claimed for historical criticism. There was a tendency to think only the history behind the text mattered. Other newer critical methods are needed, perhaps most importantly narrative and rhetorical criticism, to help us discover not just the world behind the text but to the rich worlds within the text and in front of the text.

All these methods can contribute to helping us see the wonderful diversity of theologies in the Bible. Emphases in our churches such as the ELCA’s Book of Faith can draw on these critical insights. The challenge is to articulate the authority of the Bible, while also opening up the rich diversity of biblical voices and interpretations.

Different Types of Biblical Diversity

1. Some of the diversity is between various authors in the Bible, for example on issues of ecclesiology and church structure. While some churches and theologians today may wish that all churches had bishops in historic succession, biblical scholarship helps us see that the threefold structure of bishops, presbyters and deacons on which that model is based is not universal to all or even most churches in the New Testament. Ecclesiologies and ministry structures vary greatly, from the hierarchy described in the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus), to the beloved community of friendship that characterizes the Johannine community, to the prophetic model of leadership characterizes the churches of the Apocalypse .

I am grateful that the Lutheran World Federation acknowledged the diversity of the New Testament on the matter of ministry structure in the 2007 Lund Statement on “Episcopal Ministry Within the Apostolicity of the Church.” In the surveying the biblical tradition, the Lund document acknowledged that:

The New Testament does not describe a single pattern of ministry, which can serve as a blueprint for later structures in the church. Rather, there is in the New Testament a variety of forms reflecting developments at different places and times.⁴

I hope that similar acknowledgment of biblical diversities can be lifted up by the Lutheran World Federation in statements on other matters as well, including moral issues.

2. Some of the diversity is found within a single biblical text. Some of the most fascinating diversity is not simply between different biblical documents, but also between different voices represented within a single document. This is especially the case in the Old Testament—the way in Genesis, for example, we can identify and retrieve different theologies of the Yahwist as contrasted to the Priestly writer, as seen in their different creation accounts. We need both creation accounts, with their different theologies and contexts. The richness is lost if we simply harmonize the layers.

In New Testament documents, as well, we can identify different layers of theologies—the theology of the “Q” community, for example, that is now embedded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke; the theology of the women prophets in Corinth that can be heard behind Paul’s responses to it in 1 Corinthians; or the theology of the Philippian community that might be reflected in the Christ Hymn of Philippians 2 that was perhaps taught to Paul by the Philippians themselves as part of their mutual sharing.

Eschatology is something I am working on in relation to environmental issues and the LWF climate change program, how we can move away from the escapist, earth-denying eschatology of a text such as 2 Peter 3 to embrace a more new creation-oriented eschatology.

My students are astonished to learn the huge variety of eschatologies in the New Testament, sometimes within the same document. Robert Kysar looks at the seemingly contradictory multiple eschatologies within the Gospel of John, noting that some verses depict salvation and eternal life as a future possibility, while other verses seem to suggest that eternal life is something we already have. In Kysar’s view, the Fourth Evangelist received the futurist eschatology from the tradition but feels it is no longer adequate for the community. So the Fourth Evangelist lays alongside that tradition verses that seem to describe eternal life also as a quality of the believer’s life in the present, as seen for example in Jesus’ dialog with Martha in John 11, or the statement in the high priestly prayer that “This is eternal life, that they know you” (John 17:3)⁵

In the face of such diversity within biblical texts, is it the final author alone, and that author’s theology, that has the authoritative canonical stamp—i.e. the Priestly writer in Genesis, or the collator of Paul’s letter- collection? Or can we not also draw for our Christian

⁴ “Episcopal Ministry Within the Apostolicity of the Church: The Lund Statement by the Lutheran World Federation,” Lund, Sweden, 2007.
http://www.lutheranworld.org/LWF_Documents/LWF_The_Lund_Statement_2007.pdf

⁵ See chapter 4, “Eternal Life is Now,” in Robert Kysar, *John the Maverick Gospel* (Westminster John Knox, 1993).

life on some of the other, earlier theologies of the communities preserved in submerged layers of these writings?

3. There is also diversity among interpreters, sometimes due to our different contexts, sometimes to different methodologies or simply to different scholarly judgments or convictions.

I work on the Apocalypse. Some of the best work on this text comes from post-colonial insights of people from marginalized communities—for example Pablo Richard, a Roman Catholic who employs Latin American liberation insights; Brian Blount, an African American; Allan Boesak, a South African; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Tina Pippin, two feminist scholars. Using the lens of empire, these interpreters see aspects of the text that previous interpretations have not seen, even while they may also differ among themselves about other aspects of interpretation.

The insights of critical feminist scholarship have also been important in opening up and retrieving the multiplicity of voices in the Bible. The letter of 1 Corinthians, for example, is often viewed as a case study in problematic disunity. But the church in Corinth can also be viewed as an example of a church learning to live with theological diversity. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has made the provocative suggestion that “it is Paul, and not the Corinthians, who understand their debates as party or school divisions.”⁶ Instead of adopting Paul’s rhetoric of unity/disunity that can result in vilifying women and others the Corinthian community, she hypothesizes that there was in Corinth a conversation or “broad theological movement of which Paul is a part.” She suggests that we describe debates in the *ekkl sia* in Corinth not as division or disunity but rather “in terms of *parr sia*—the free speech of citizens.”⁷

Schüssler Fiorenza proposes the model of early Christianity as the “discipleship of equals,” a democratic vision of *ekkl sia* that embraces diversity: “The modification of the word “discipleship” with that of “equals” must not be understood as advocating sameness under the guise of universality. Rather it seeks to underscore *equality in diversity* as the central ethos of discipleship.”⁸

Even coming from identical or very similar contexts, and using similar methodologies, biblical scholars can come to different readings—for example, on the issue of homosexuality. I lift up for example the excellent paper written by two of my North American New Testament colleagues, Arland Hultgren and Walter Taylor, who together

⁶ “Rhetorical Situation and Historical Reconstruction in 1 Corinthians,” *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987) 395.

⁷ “Paul and the Politics of Interpretation” in Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000) 51, 54.

⁸ *Sharing Her Word*, 113.

analyzed five biblical passages often cited on homosexuality.⁹ Careful exegesis characterizes the entirety of their co-authored study, including translation questions particularly related to 1 Cor 6:9-10 and Romans 1. Yet they disagree about what church policy we should take. Exegetically the two interpreters share almost complete common ground, and each finds much to commend in the other’s position. Yet disagreement is still possible, partly regarding the question of whether texts about same-sex practice in Roman culture can even be applied to discussions of homosexuality and homosexual orientation today, because differences between ancient homosexual practice and contemporary understandings of homosexuality are so great.

Hultgren and Taylor write: “The difference between interpreters should not be understood as a conflict between those who seek to be ‘true to Scripture’ and those who seek to ‘twist the Bible’ to their own liking. The disagreements are genuine. Nor is one approach intrinsically more ‘conservative’ and the other more ‘liberal.’”

In instances such as this, when responsible biblical scholars disagree, perhaps the crucial question is whether and on what issues diversity must be church-dividing. (And I believe both Hultgren and Taylor would agree that disagreements on homosexuality are not church-dividing.)

The ELCA just issued a proposed statement on sexuality, with ministry policy recommendations. The documents are intriguing in that they lay out four different positions on homosexuality and ministry, and argue that all four positions can be held by responsible biblically-faithful Christians. There simply is not consensus right now, the proposed statement says. Although people from both extremes have attacked the document, I hope it will hold as a faithful, centrist, responsible model of honoring of biblical diversity.

The ELCA bishops have issued a pastoral letter regarding this proposed sexuality statement in which they use the term “faithful diversity.”

Faithful Diversity: Polla Onta in 1 Corinthians 12:12

To support the argument for the importance of faithful diversity in church life today I finish by looking at a text, 1 Cor 12:12, part of Paul’s discussion of the body with many different members. I propose to translate it as “Because we are many, we are one.” As far as I know, this is not a translation ever given in any published translations. The Greek is literally, “*Being* many, we are one.” The question is how to interpret that “*being* many,” a Greek participle. The King James Version leaves it simply “being many,” what we call the gerund in English (“ing”)—certainly the most literal translation. But usually I tell my students that we must try to do something with a participle, not just leave it as a gerund.

The participle in 1 Cor 12:12 can be interpreted concessively, “Although we are many, we are one”—That is the decision of the Revised Standard Version and the New Revised Standard

⁹ Arland J. Hultgren and Walter F. Taylor Jr., “Background Essay on Biblical Tests for ‘Journey Together Faithfully, Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality,’” 2003; <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements-in-Process/JTF-Human-Sexuality/Resources/Historical-Documents.aspx>

Version and many translations in other languages as well. (I invite you to look up this verse in the Bible in your own first language you brought with you, to see whether the word “although” is used.)

The participle can also be interpreted temporally, perhaps the most common use of the participle, “When we are many we are one.” Or it can be interpreted causally, also a very common meaning for participles, “Because we are many we are one.” Paul may intend all three meanings. That is the genius of Greek participles, that they can hold together multiple, even contradictory meanings. But for purposes of this lecture I want to try out the causal idea, “Because we are many we are one.”

That underscores a key question for formulating Christian theologies today—for us as in Corinth: the relationship of our many-ness to our one-ness. Is many-ness a problem, something that must be overcome, as the concessive translation “although” would seem to imply? Or is many-ness a blessing to celebrate, something that we can celebrate as a gift that we bring to the one table? I think that is what “because” would imply.

The letter of 1 Corinthians is strongly concerned with church unity. The question is what the role of diversity is in that unity. Romans 12:5 is the closest parallel passage, another discussion of the metaphor of the body with many members. Here Paul does not use the participle at all, so there is less ambiguity. He simply writes “We who are many are one in Christ.” Nonetheless, the Revised Standard Version (mistakenly, in my view) inserts the word “though” here—“we, though many, are one body in Christ”—as if to imply that many-ness is a problem, a concession, that must be overcome in order to find one-ness. But surely Paul is saying that diversity is a gift from God, a vital asset for mission.

How can we tell the biblical story, the story of God’s mission, in such a way as to truly honor faithful diversity today? How can we cherish transformative communion in the midst of our differences? My colleague David Rhoads wrote a wonderful, accessible, non-technical treatise on New Testament diversity aimed for congregational use.¹⁰ His hope is that “experiencing the diversity in the New Testament will help to revitalize the church.” He picks up on the insight put forward already in the 1934 by Walter Bauer, namely that the multiplicity of theologies and practices reflected in the New Testament reflects a diversity that was there from the very beginning of Christianity.¹¹ Diversity was not the result of a fall from some earlier pristine unity. “God has provided for such diversity in the New Testament,” Rhoads argues, “and we need it for our life together.”

Diversity in the Bible is a rich celebration of the complexities of the human condition and of the manifestations of God in our midst. The multiplicity of belief and practice in the New Testament promotes openness and leads us to welcome others who are different and to learn from them. The diversity in the canon undercuts the human tendency to claim absolute truth for any one Christian belief system. It stands against intolerance and urges us to depend on each other for a full witness to

¹⁰David Rhoads, *The Challenge of Diversity: The Witness of Paul and the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

¹¹ See Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971; German original J.C.B.Mohr, Tübingen, 1934)

the truth of God. It is a call to respect and celebrate diversity in the church and in the world as an expression of God’s love of diversity in creation.¹²

Rhoads uses the analogy of biodiversity to argue that canonical diversity may be important for our very mission and survival.

I keep going back to the handshake of *koinonia* in Galatians 2, a text I first worked on when working on a LWF study project on communion in preparing for the 1997 Assembly in Hong Kong. This narrative tells the story of what was perhaps the most contentious church meeting in history. The two biblical versions of the meeting do not even agree.¹³ Paul is furious with the Jerusalem leaders, and they are certainly furious with him. Neither side gives in. Yet their deep differences do not become church-dividing because they are able to recognize the grace of God in the other person. “When they perceived the grace was given to me,” Paul writes (and we hope he also recognized the grace given to James and Cephas and John), they “gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of *koinonia*” (Gal 2:9). That handshake must have been an amazing moment. Paul and the Jerusalem leaders saw God’s grace in the eyes of the other person, across their differences. The only concession that Paul says he made was not doctrinal or moral, but rather a commitment to “remember the poor, which very thing I was eager to do.”

That kind of “Aha” kind of experience of seeing God’s grace in the other person, across the circle, can happen as we study the Bible today, as we seek to discern God’s will. The goal is not to obliterate diversity, whether the diversity within the Bible or the diversity between interpreters. The goal is not even agreement, although agreement is wonderful. Rather, the goal is *koinonia*, communion in Christ. Across the table, across the circle, across the world, across our disagreements and differences, as we study the Bible in all our diversity of methods and perspectives and insights, we can look into the eyes of the other and see God’s grace. That is true communion, true *koinonia* in Christ.

¹² Rhoads, *Challenge of Diversity*, 11.

¹³ Acts 15 suggests that Paul made dietary concessions, agreeing to abstain from meat that had been strangled. Paul himself insists that he never made such a concession.