

Many different Gospels, or one and the same Gospel, throughout the New Testament?

Colleagues,

Chris Repp, ELCA pastor in Carbondale, Illinois, and former theology professor at the Lutheran Seminary in St. Petersburg, Russia, keeps sending me stuff. To my delight. Here's another one that is too good to keep just for myself. So it comes to you as this week's ThTh post.

Peace and joy!
Ed Schroeder

Review of David Rhoads, "Diversity in the New Testament,"
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by Chris Repp

This brief article in the 2nd Festschrift edition of Currents for Ralph Klein caught my attention because it would seem to have radical implications for anyone who might be interested either in the Lutheran project or in ecumenism.

Dr. Rhoads, professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (ELCA), writes that he has "struggled much of [his] career to understand and appreciate diversity among different writings of the New Testament." (354) He has now concluded that this diversity amounts to "multiple 'gospels.'"

In order to demonstrate this, he takes his reader through seven short case studies: the four gospels, Galatians, James and Romans.

But does the undeniable diversity of these texts really rise to the level of distinct gospels? Dr. Rhoads' presentation is unconvincing. In fact his case studies do not reveal as much diversity as one might expect based upon his premise. According to him, Mark seeks to "create a society in which people served each other," (355) while Luke seeks to empower his hearers to "provide a countercultural community that models what the world *should* be like," (356) and John, in Revelation, "calls for people to 'withdraw' from the Roman Empire—by refusing to engage in economic activity that has anything to do with the empire and its coinage." (360) The latter sounds rather like the countercultural communities of Luke and Mark. (Matthew's obvious concern for community is omitted in Dr. Rhoads' presentation, in favor of an emphasis on individual integrity. Also overlooked in this regard is John's overt concern for unity among the disciples.) Other unifying themes also emerge, such as the concern for the poor shown by both Luke and James (but not Matthew? – particularly chapter 25?)

At the root of the problem in this article lies Dr. Rhoads' use of the word gospel. He does not use it in the classic Lutheran sense of God's unmerited act of forgiveness/reconciliation in Jesus, or even – so it seems to me – in the broader sense of the message of God's saving activity. In fact, it's difficult to pin down just what gospel means for him. A case in point is his survey of Mark, where he writes of the gospel as "God's power to heal, exorcize, forgive, transform, and restore community," but also writes of "the gospel of the kingdom" (which does not seem to be the same thing) and "the gospel of power in service." This latter "gospel" is further explained as Jesus' call to take up the cross and follow him: "Those who will save/secure their

lives will lose them, but those who will lose/risk their lives for me and the good news will save/secure them.” Is Dr. Rhoads suggesting that even a single New Testament document may contain multiple gospels? Interestingly, he does not see the death and resurrection of Jesus in Mark as gospel (or at least he does not say so here) – an act of God that removes the barrier between God and humans, as revealed in the tearing of the temple curtain (Mk 15:38). Instead, the death of Jesus functions as *model* of the “gospel of power in service”, “a model that forged a covenant with all who would follow.” (355) In considering Matthew, Dr. Rhoads does not speak explicitly of gospel, but of a challenge or a call to be perfect/righteous, which in Lutheran language is usually called law.

At the same time, there is an overarching sense of God’s activity throughout Dr. Rhoads’ presentation, which to my mind implicitly argues against his multiple-gospel thesis. In the Gospel of John he identifies God’s action in Jesus to “restore the relationship between human beings and the creator.” (357) In Galatians, Jesus’ death removes the curse of the law. In James, God seeks to “rectify and reverse the inequities in the world that result from the mentality of limited goods.” (359) In Revelation, God is in the process of ending the imperial order and creating a new heaven and earth. (360) These are not different gospels, in my view, but aspects of the one gospel: God at work in Jesus Christ on our behalf, to undo the consequences of our sin and to restore/renew the good creation.

Dr. Rhoads concludes his article with five reflections. In the second, he writes: “Our contemporary denominations are based, in part, upon different writings in the New Testament. As such, the differences among church groups today are not a mark of the brokenness of Christ (except when we are in conflict with each other) but are rather a sign of the rich diversity that was there from the beginning of Christianity. Because diversity is

constitutive of Christianity from its inception, we can celebrate the differences among us, seek to honor them without collapsing them into one church, learn from one another, and work for a unity that preserves our differences. It takes many different churches to bear the full witness of the New Testament writings.” (361) Dr. Rhoads has rightly concluded here that if there are indeed different gospels, then there must be different churches as well. And although he speaks of “seeking unity,” he does not give us any idea of what we might base such a unity on, given our different gospels. Perhaps he should have taken his thesis to its logical conclusion and asserted that the different denominations really amount to different religions, worshiping, effectively, different gods.

Given the state of affairs that Dr. Rhoads suggests, I wonder why a given denomination should even bother, in its reading, preaching, and teaching, to venture beyond the one text from which it draws its identity, its distinctive gospel. And I wonder which we Lutherans would be forced to choose, given Dr. Rhoads’ assertion that “Paul develops a different theology in each of his letters in response to the local situation he is addressing in each church.” (358) We cannot even have both Romans and Galatians! But he does not seem to be aware, or at any rate to believe, that this follows from his multiple-gospel thesis. His fourth concluding reflection begins: “...when we as Christians teach and preach the New Testament, we will grow most if we seek to preserve the distinct vision of each of its writings. If we do not, the danger is that we (as Lutherans say) will preach law-gospel sermons not only on Paul but also on Mark and Matthew and John and James and all the other writings.” (361-2) So, Apology, article 4 is in fact wrong when it insists that “All Scripture should be divided into these two main topics: the law and the promises” (Kolb, Wengert, 121), and the entire Crossings endeavor is misguided. In fact, the entire

Lutheran endeavor is misguided, particularly its assertion that what unites the church catholic is the gospel that it preaches (Augsburg Confession, article VII). And not only that, but the modern ecumenical movement, and its goal of visible unity among Christians, lacks any reason for its existence and any chance of success.

Dr. Rhoads continues: "What I want to promote is the idea that we know the world view of each writing well enough to see each passage in its own literary context. Then we will preach Markan sermons on the Gospel of Mark and Lukan sermons on the Gospel of Luke and Galatian sermons on the Letter to the Galatians ..."
(362) Of course it is very important to understand the "distinctive visions" of each NT writing, and not be quick, for example, to interpret Mark in Matthean terms, or Revelation in terms of 2 Peter (see Dr. Barbara Rossing's very good article that follows Rhoads' in the same edition of Currents). But if we give up the idea that there is one gospel at the core of these NT writings, we give up what makes us Lutheran. Maybe even what makes us Christian. I just don't know how to "honor the diversity" of "another gospel." Nor does Paul – which makes the inclusion of Galatians as a test case for Dr. Rhoads' thesis particularly ironic. The topic sentences of that writing are the following: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel ... But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!" (Gal. 1:6-8) I wonder how Dr. Rhoads "honors diversity" in this case? (Can the intolerant really be tolerated?)

Dr. Rhoads concludes with this paragraph: "There is no denying the diversity of the New Testament. The question is: How will we see it and what will we do with it? To face it squarely, to

honor it, to struggle with it, to learn from it, and to see our own diversity mirrored in it will only serve to benefit the church and the world of our time.” If I had not read what precedes this paragraph, I could wholeheartedly agree. Diversity is there. It must be acknowledged, even appreciated. But what I celebrate is what we have in common as Christians in spite of our differences, which I continue to hope is “one faith, one Lord, one baptism...” (Eph. 4:5), in other words, one church created and sustained by one gospel. And I have to answer “the question” above in a way that does not contradict Galatians 1:6-9 or Ephesians 4:1-6. That’s where I’d have to stand. (Unless persuaded by Scripture and clear reason, of course.)

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