

Diversity: A Biblical Paradigm | BY REINDER BRUINSMA

PENTECOST_OLDTRACTORINSHED.NET_BY MARKA HEWITT



In any serious study it is important to carefully define the terms we intend to use.¹ That is most certainly also a “must” when we discuss the topic of diversity and intend to make a case for diversity as a biblical paradigm.² Some will rather uncritically welcome the term *diversity* and are prepared to “celebrate” any amount of diversity, in our society as well as in the church. For others, the term *diversity* is closely associated with

such concepts as pluralism and relativism and is therefore often quite suspect.

The need to carefully define what we mean by diversity is all the more urgent since it has become a key word in our postmodern culture. Modernity longed for *harmony* and *unity*. Postmodernity, on the contrary, accentuates *difference*, *plurality*, and *diversity*. This does not apply only to the arts, but also to other aspects of Western culture. Moreover, this

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shift is accompanied by another postmodern characteristic. Postmodern people are no longer interested in exploring how different elements or ideas may be connected, or to determine whether one idea has more value than another. Since there is no Absolute Truth, they say, and everything is a matter of *interpretation*—my interpretation is as good as yours. These diverse interpretations may be totally incompatible, but that is not considered a problem.

When I claim below that diversity is a biblical paradigm, I do not want to take this *post-modern* understanding of diversity as my point of departure. I do not speak of the kind of diversity that has no desire to differentiate between ideas that are informed by a Christian, Bible-oriented worldview and that which is hostile or, at best, indifferent to this worldview. The kind of diversity I have in mind is rather a matter of *differences in perspectives* that may complement each other, and not the kind of differences that do not worry about any truth claims and that can easily slide from tolerance into indifference.

The kind of diversity that, I believe, represents a biblical paradigm does not lead to a defense of a pluralism that rejects all specific truth claims.³ It does not suggest that “anything goes” and that we all can have our own individual corner of the truth, without any need to define Truth as best as we can. It reminds us, however, that we do not hear the Truth alone, but that we need each other, and that we can learn from each other as we listen to one another.⁴

This article focuses on *diversity as a biblical paradigm*. It is a diversity in approaches and perspectives that enriches our understanding but does not destroy the underlying unity of the biblical revelation. It leads us to conclude that not every instance of diversity in theology and in the church is necessarily a problem to be overcome, but rather may be a blessing of God, who invites all people, in all their diversity, to participate in the church’s ministry and in enhancing its understanding of the truth.

A history of diversity

It is important to realize that Christianity has, from its inception, been greatly diverse—whether we think of first century Christianity,⁵ medieval Christianity, the church in the Reformation era, or the modern church. Many Adventists do not sufficiently appreciate the fact that in its very beginning their church was very diverse. Early Adventism was far more diverse than many Adventists today realize or would be comfortable with.⁶ The undeniable reality is that, in spite of its constant insistence on the need for unity, contemporary Adventism, worldwide, shows a great amount of diversity—both in its outward forms as well as in the interpretation and application of many of its beliefs.

One may disapprove of some of the developments in Adventism, but this, I believe, does not mean that all diversity is, by definition, always a regrettable threat to the cohesiveness and unity of the church. My contention would be that a healthy church needs a healthy degree of diversity,⁷ *and that diversity, as such, is a biblical paradigm.*

A diverse God

The foundation of biblical religion and of true worship is the nonnegotiable premise that there is only one God. Over and against the belief in many gods by the nations around Israel was Israel’s insistence that “the Lord is our God, the Lord alone!”⁸ It was the principle that no other gods beside him were to be worshipped.⁹ Later, the followers of Jesus would echo this same uncompromising monotheism: There is only one Lord, one faith, one baptism.¹⁰

However, soon the Christian church came to understand that the biblical evidence indicates that God’s unity must somehow be understood in terms of a differentiated plurality. The Christian church wrestled with this mystery, and over time developed the doctrine of the Trinity as the best possible human formula to describe the deep mystery that God is one essence in three persons. But whatever words we use, and whether we speak, for instance, of an ontological or an economic trinity, we will have to do justice

to the oneness of God on the one hand, and to the diversity within that oneness, on the other.¹¹

The infinite distance between God and man makes it impossible for us to have a full comprehension of who and what God is and to speak about him in adequate terms. To get a glimpse of God, we must depend on divine revelation—in the person of Jesus Christ, the *living Word*, and in the *written Word*. The information we receive about God through the written Word comes to us in a multitude of images and metaphors. The names that are given to God and the metaphors that describe aspects of his nature demonstrate a diversity of aspects that allows us to much better appreciate his greatness, his infinite power and love, than any one single human term could ever do. The fact that some of these metaphors carry male, and others female, connotations, reiterates this even further.¹²

The diversity of man

God's creation gives evidence of an astounding diversity. In a special way, this diversity is reflected in us, human beings, who constitute the crown of God's creation.¹³ This diversity is, of course, seen in our outward appearance—in the fact that the shape of our body and of our face ensures that we can be recognized as unique individuals among thousands of other people.

Surely the biblical view of man is holistic, or monistic. The human being is a unity of body and spirit. She cannot be separated into a temporary material shell and an eternal nonmaterial element. She is a "soul."¹⁴ Yet, the human being is characterized by a fundamental diversity that goes beyond the color of the eyes or the shape of the nose. There is, most notably, the fundamental difference of gender. Male and female God created man.¹⁵ This fundamental diversity is God's wonderful gift to humankind. It was not a divine afterthought. "God created the bipolarity of the sexes from the beginning."¹⁶ The diversity is further highlighted by the fact that the individual human being is not complete without being part of a family. He/she exists in relationships and needs a community, where the individual differences complement each other.

The diversity in the living Word

When sin entered the world, the plan of salvation was ready. From eternity, the divine Son of God was prepared to become the Savior.¹⁷ God became man. The second person of the Godhead miraculously integrated a divine and a human nature in his one person. No more baffling demonstration of glorious diversity can be imagined. The eternally preexisting God emptied himself¹⁸ and became fully man, even to the extent of experiencing death. And yet, he remained fully God. As the church formulated it at Nicea: Christ was "of one substance with the Father."¹⁹ The Chalcedonian fathers affirmed that he was and remained "the one Lord Jesus Christ. . . true God from true God."²⁰ Yet, at the same time, while being "very God," he was and is "very man."

Christians, it was concluded, were to confess Christ as fully divine and fully human, to be acknowledged in two natures, "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation."²¹ Other church councils further elaborated upon, and refined, these formulas that attempted to describe the indescribable: the miraculous diversity in Christ that is the ground for our salvation.

The diversity in the origin of the written Word

The diverse character of God's revelation is also very clearly discernible in the Bible. The sacred Scriptures consist of a number of very different documents, divinely inspired, but reduced to human language by a highly diverse group of people. Although there is a marvelous harmony in God's written Word with regard to the main themes and its overall message, there is no denying that the writings that make up the biblical canon demonstrate a wide variety of literary approaches and manifest conspicuous differences in literary ability on the part of the authors. Adventists have long recognized this. Ellen G. White left us in no doubt about her position in this matter, as we can read in her well-known statement in *Selected Messages*, vol. 1. I quote a few significant phrases:

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The writers of the Bible had to express their ideas in human language. It was written by human men. . . . The Scriptures were given to men, not in a continuous chain of unbroken utterances, but piece by piece, through successive generations. . . .

There is not always perfect order or apparent unity in the Scriptures. . . . God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen. Look at the different writers [emphasis added].²²

It seems worthwhile to quote one more paragraph from this book. It should be noted that the editors have appropriately put "Unity in Diversity" as a heading above this paragraph:

There is a variety in a tree, there are scarcely two leaves just alike. Yet this variety adds to the perfection of the tree as a whole.

In our Bible, we might ask, Why need Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the Gospels, why need the Acts of the Apostles, and the variety of the writers in the Epistles, go over the same thing?

The Lord gave His word in just the way He wanted it to come. He gave it through different writers, each having his own individuality, though going over the same history. Their testimonies are brought together in one Book and are like the testimonies in a social meeting. They do not represent things in just the same style. Each has an experience of his own, and this diversity deepens and broadens the knowledge that is brought out to meet the necessities of varied minds. The thoughts expressed have not a set uniformity, as if cast in an iron mold, making the very bearing monotonous. In such uniformity there would be a loss of grace and distinctive beauty.²³

When I was reading the words of Ellen White about the diversity in the gospel stories, I remembered how, during my early experience in theological studies, my teachers tended to downplay this element of diversity. During the academic years 1963–1964, one professor at Newbold College ordered us to cut up two Bibles and glue a "harmony of the gospels" together. This activity was to convince us that all gospel stories fit beautifully into one single time line. But a year or so later, Sakae Kubo, then my teacher in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, in fact made sure that his students would appreciate the diversity of the New Testament, both in writing style and content.

The diverse content of the written Word

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament exhibit great diversity in the subject matter they present, but also in the theologies of the different writers. How one regards

this *theological* diversity does, of course, depend to a large extent on one's position regarding the origin of the various books of the Bible and their relationships. The person who accepts most of the ideas of the higher critical approach to the Scriptures, and emphasizes the value and findings of redaction criticism, will more readily acknowledge and emphasize the theological diversity in the Old and in the New Testament than the person who continues to support the traditional views regarding matters of authorship, and who tends to doubt the existence of different sources and different strands of material in what has traditionally been ascribed to a single author.

It would go beyond the scope of this short article (and beyond my expertise) to deal with this in any depth. But it would seem fair to *at least* accept that different parts of the Bible often manifest different emphases and that theological developments over time are clearly discernible, in both the Old and in the New Testament. Some might say that John Goldingay, a fairly conservative British Old Testament scholar who presently teaches at Fuller Theological Seminary, goes too far when he refers to " 'the multiplex nature of the Old Testament tradition,' which includes representatives of 'completely divergent 'theologies'' and 'struggling contradictions.' "²⁴ Yet his book on theological diversity in the Old Testament offers a most illuminating and quite convincing survey of this diversity.²⁵

Every Bible reader soon becomes aware of the fact that the New Testament contains four different versions of the story of Jesus. While there are significant differences between the three Synoptics, the difference between these three and the Johannine version is particularly striking. It is quite generally accepted, including among most Adventist scholars, that the Pauline writings, which originated when the gospels were not yet written, offer many theological insights and interpretations that are not readily found in the Gospels.²⁶ The conclusion must be that diversity "is fundamental to the biblical witness."²⁷ The New Testament writings emerged from particular communities and addressed particular, and diverse, situations.²⁸ The "unity of New Testament theology," Frank J. Matera maintains, "is a diverse unity that expresses itself in a multiplicity of ways because no one way can fully capture the mystery that is God in Christ."²⁹

In his book, *The Challenge of Diversity*, Lutheran scholar David Rhoads suggests with regard to the New Testament that



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—Ellen G. White

the later Christians who decided which writings to include in the Christian canon were well aware of the differences among the books they selected. Instead of choosing only those books that agreed with one theology and church order, they chose the writings closest to Jesus in time and influence, and they allowed the pluralism to stand.³⁰

Diversity in the biblical view of atonement

One of the important biblical topics that manifest a wonderful diversity in the ways the various authors grappled with the miracle of grace is the atonement. How can the astonishing fact that God restores the relationship with fallen human beings, through the intervention of his divine/ human Son, be explained?

If anywhere, we here find that the biblical material offers a wide range of perspectives. Among the images the Bible uses, some were inspired by the Old Testament sacrificial system: Christ is the Lamb who is sacrificed. Another image is that of the death of Christ as a ransom that is paid. Some terminology is borrowed from the judicial system, while still other terms are related to the motif of war and victory over the enemy.³¹ The various images help us to understand the process of salvation:

We should remember that they are metaphors rather than exact descriptions of what took place. They are each capable of explaining some facet of truth. . . . The truth of what Christ accomplished for us is far more comprehensive than either their individual and composite suggestions.³²

Through the centuries theologians have developed a range of theories about the atonement (approaches based on substitution, satisfaction, moral influence, etc.), all employing (part of) the available biblical evidence. Just as the biblical metaphors highlight different, but not contradictory, aspects of the atonement, the existence of these diverse theories is a further illustration of the enormous challenge of finding adequate human categories and words for describing the miracle of God's grace.

Diversity in the biblical view of the church and its mission

We find a similar situation when we look at the biblical concept of the church. Paul S. Minear, an eminent American Catholic New Testament scholar, who died in 2007, made a list of almost one hundred different metaphors for the church that can be found in the New Testament.³³ Among the most well known of these are such concepts as the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, God's temple, the people of God, and the priesthood of all believers.³⁴ The body of Christ may be in itself the most powerful illustration of the diversity in the church. There is one body. Christ is the head, but all members have their diverse roles and functions.³⁵

The aspect of diversity is not just found in the metaphors used to characterize the church but is especially prominent in the gifts with which the Spirit of God has equipped the church.³⁶ While the *unity* of these spiritual gifts is stressed—the charismata are all given by one and the same Spirit, and for one and the same purpose—the *diversity* is particularly highlighted. The Spirit does not equip all church members in the same manner but distributes the gifts in a variety of ways, as he sees fit.³⁷

Directly linked to the diversity of the spiritual gifts is the ethnic and cultural diversity of the church and the all-inclusiveness of its mission. This is foreshadowed in the Old Testament, when Abraham receives the promise that in him "*all the nations*" of the earth were to be blessed.³⁸ We discover in the Old Testament many instructions that specifically target the non-Israelites. This shows that God does not limit himself to one people. We see this most distinctly also in the stories that relate to Israel's mission to the world outside its borders, of which the story of Jonah may be the most striking example. The book of Jonah clearly shows God as One who cares deeply about nations other than his special people, Israel.³⁹ It is definitely not God's intention that other nations should cease to exist but that eventually all people,

in all their diversity, should worship him. The covenant concept emphasizes the element of kinship on the one hand but, on the other hand, always underlines that there is a place for the stranger. Moreover, the temple, the center of the JHWH worship, was built as a spiritual home intended for all peoples.⁴⁰ And then: what could better illustrate God's positive attitude toward diversity than the fact that He included non-Israelite women in Christ's ancestry?⁴¹

The all-inclusiveness of the mission of God's people is abundantly clear in the New Testament. Jesus associated with non-Jewish people: with Roman soldiers⁴² as well as a Syrophenician woman⁴³ and a Samaritan woman.⁴⁴ Moreover, the gospel commission makes it clear that God is interested in all nations and all cultures and language groups.⁴⁵ The apostles meet their first mission challenge when they are confronted with the immense cultural and linguistic diversity on the Day of Pentecost, and the Spirit enables them to preach the gospel to as diverse a crowd as they will ever meet.⁴⁶ Soon afterward, deacon Philip witnesses to the Ethiopian eunuch,⁴⁷ and the apostle Peter to the Roman centurion in Caesarea.⁴⁸ It is not long until the church has members who are of Jewish origin but also many who have Greek or other non-Jewish roots, and the church will have to deal with that new reality of diversity.⁴⁹ Paul will have to write about this increasing diversity in several of his letters.⁵⁰

The book of Acts recounts how the gospel spreads into the world of antiquity. It is the beginning of the realization of God's plan, which will ultimately find its complete fulfillment when a diverse multitude, coming "from every nation, tribe, people and language,"⁵¹ stands before the throne of God, and when "the nations will walk by the light of the Lamb," and the kings of the earth will bring "their splendor" into the new Jerusalem.⁵²

Diversity: a biblical paradigm

It is important to emphasize the unity of the body of Christ. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has made this a constant priority, and rightly so. But let us remember: The oneness of the flock is in the fact that we have one shepherd, not in the fact that all sheep are clones. We are a diverse people. This is not just a reality to be tolerated but rather a fact that we should celebrate. This does also imply that, because of our diversity in culture, history, language, tradition, etc., we may also have a diversity in theologies. We cannot avoid the question: Is theological diversity an asset

or a threat? I tried to answer that question in a recent article in *Ministry* magazine.⁵³ I argued that theological diversity should not be perceived as a threat but rather as an asset, if some clear parameters are established.

In concluding, I want to offer a suggestion that, I believe, emerges from what we discussed above. If God decided that he needed to use a great diversity of methods, images, and metaphors; if he felt that he needed diverse people with diverse skills and diverse backgrounds to put his Truth into human words; and if we discover in our reading of the Bible how comfortable our God is with diversity, does that not inevitably lead to the idea that even in our days—yes, in our own faith community—we must welcome a diversity of approaches and perspectives in our study of the Scriptures, in order to help us to grow in our understanding of what God wants us to know about him and what he wants us to communicate about him to others? After all, even though we can gratefully build on the work of the inspired authors of the Bible, we are still faced with the humanly impossible challenge of trying to put God's truth into human thoughts and words in such a way that it can be understood by, and be relevant for, contemporary people. Would it not be in line with the biblical paradigm of diversity to enthusiastically welcome a diversity of perspectives amongst us? Should we not realize that we need each other in our communal attempt to reach ever further into the depths of God's revelation?

The words of Loma Linda University theologian Richard Rice are well worth quoting:

*A great natural wonder like the Grand Canyon or the Himalayas invites us to look at it from many vantage points. It never ceases to impress us, and no one perspective captures its grandeur. To a far greater degree, Christ's accomplishments defy our powers of description.*⁵⁴

Is John Franke, an American professor in missional and biblical theology, not at least partly correct when he suggests that we cannot bear witness to the truth alone: "No single individual, no single church, no single culture or tradition" is able to do that. "We need each other."⁵⁵ By quoting this, I do not want to imply that the Adventist voice must cease to claim uniqueness, or that the Adventist tradition should not carefully protect its precious heritage. But I would challenge us to always admit our human limitations, and to continue to pursue our pilgrimage on the path of Truth

together. In our diversity we can complement each other. We must realize that all our speaking of God and of what he does always remains approximate. We never have the last and final word. We always proclaim the truth as far as we can grasp it. It would therefore seem that we follow a biblical paradigm if we decide to let the plethora of ideas that arise from our diverse scholarly community help us to arrive at a fuller picture.

I conclude with a quote from Ellen G. White that specifically refers to the Bible authors but does seem to have a wider application:

*The creator of all ideas may impress different minds with the same thought, but each may express it in a different way, yet without contradiction. The fact that this difference exists should not perplex or confuse us. It is seldom that two persons will view and express truth in the very same way. Each dwells on particular points which his constitution and education have fitted him to appreciate. The sunlight falling on these different objects give those objects a different hue.*⁵⁶ ■

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