

Emmaus Conference
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Parkland Lutheran Church
129 123rd Street
Tacoma, WA 98444

“The Women Were Right - ‘On the Third Day He Rose Again from the Dead’”

Reaction -- Steven R. Sparley, Pastor, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Grants Pass, OR

First of all, thank you Dr. Scaer for a most thought provoking essay, and one, I must say, that was great fun to read, and now, to hear. Thank you also Pastor Obenberger and those of you who were responsible for planning and making possible this convocation. It is to be hoped that this will indeed be only the first of many annual Emmaus Conferences.

Dr. Scaer began his essay with reference to being twice involved with Bethany Lutheran College’s annual Reformation Lectures, first in 1975 and then again in 1980 as essayist. In beginning my reaction I’d be remiss in not mentioning that I was present for his essay that fall of 1980. I was new to the seminary, having just escaped the political correctness of the University of Minnesota’s Graduate School - before that phrase became so much a part of our age as to be reduced to its mere initials - and still was feeling light-hearted and optimistic to be in the presence of academics who took seriously the Holy Scriptures’ claim of veracity. Dr. Scaer, I enjoyed and profited from your essay then as I have now.

I also happened to cross your path years later – not that you would know that – in a place far from southern Minnesota. The place was western Ukraine, where I had sitting before me a group of eager seminarians, some young and others not so young, who had just had the benefit of your theological insight as a special lecturer. Ironically, the course I was to teach was the Synoptic Gospels, which brings me to the first reason I found the current lecture such great fun to read.

On page 31, line 38 of the essay you said, “Though gospel harmonies are well intentioned in answering critics who relish locating discrepancies in the gospels to discredit their accounts, sadly these harmonies submerge the unique literary and theological character of those who first had to wrestle with what was for them and still is for us an occurrence which is inexplicable according to our ordinary experiences.” I certainly agree. However, with all due respect to your well-known gentleness in theological discussion, I’m not sure how well intentioned some of the harmonies actually are. In fact, given the emphasis you placed on the question of provenance when speaking of the documents that came to be adjudged canonical, and how this led to the distinction between the *homologoumena* and the *antilegomena* while at the same time excluding the truly apocryphal, I wonder about the provenance of the term “Synoptic Gospels” itself. I would not be overly surprised if it were shown to have arisen from a source that was less rather than more respectful of the doctrine of verbal inspiration.

While in Ukraine those several years ago I found myself in the position of having to teach the Synoptics class without the students having copies of any harmony of the gospel other than the one copy in their small but slowly growing seminary library. So, that year I used

Matthew's Gospel as the base text for the course. Three years later, when the curriculum cycle was repeated, I used Luke's as the base, and then three years after that I used that of Matthew again, even though by that time four or five copies of Kurt Aland's *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum* had found their way into the seminary library. By then I'd come to the conclusion that it was better for the students to proceed in this way.

There is, as you rightly point out, a "unique literary and theological character" to each of the three synoptics, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, that is obscured when they are considered together as if truly synoptic in their outlook. In fact, I would venture to say that there is a unique structure to each that is more than merely peripheral to their respective theological contents, and, perhaps, even significant to the order of their appearance in the canon and thus their mutual interrelation.

In the last ten or so years, when I've begun a course on the gospels, whether in seminary settings or congregational, I have taken to asking the question, which of the four gospels uses the term "righteous/righteousness" most frequently. As you might expect, people almost always answer, John. They are quite surprised when it is shown them that not only does Matthew's Gospel hold this distinction, but that it uses the term more often than Mark, Luke, and John together. This is not insignificant. It is not insignificant for a sound understanding of Matthew's Gospel, or of the New Testament as a whole. The reality of a righteousness the avails before God, as Martin Luther testified so famously a millennium and a half after Christ rose on the third day, is key to understanding rightly the Scriptures.

We have just concluded the Lenten season and Holy Week. How many of you during this time heard the Passion History read, especially in one of the versions that blends together all four gospel accounts? How many heard the reading of the last seven words of Christ on Good Friday? Now, please understand, I am not criticizing these practices as being detrimental to understanding. They're not. However, they can prevent us from noticing that of the seven last words, only Matthew and Mark contain the fourth, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" And furthermore, that the fourth is the only one of the seven that either contains. It is Luke who furnishes us the first, second, and seventh words, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise," and "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit," respectively; and John who supplies us with the third, fifth, and sixth, "Woman, behold your son/Behold your mother," "I thirst," and "It is finished," respectively.

If we note these simple facts while employing a synoptic, or gospel harmony, approach we inevitably find ourselves asking why any particular word or item is missing in this or that Gospel. However, if we approach the task from the other direction, considering each book on its own merits, we are far more likely to ask why a particular evangelist records this or that word of Jesus, in other words we tend to inquire into the meaning of what is present rather than what is not. And the same picture then begins to look different.

From there we find ourselves asking a subsequent question: how is what the evangelist includes significant to his presentation of the vicarious atonement within the structure of his Gospel. And then the next question: Is it perhaps the case that Matthew, Mark, and

Luke each have a particular structure that leads their hearers to the vicarious atonement in a unique way, and then having done so, applies it to the hearers in a way consistent with the approach he has taken to bring us to this point. And this leads us to the final question: Is it perhaps also the case that Matthew leads to Mark, who in turn leads to Luke, and that there is in fact a purposeful theological progression in evidence here. And, if that is so, then the assumption of so many that Mark wrote his Gospel first is a matter of far greater importance than it at first appears, since in the course of time the church saw fit to fix its position second in the canon, and thus after Matthew's Gospel.

It seems to me that there is a systematic theology that underlies and is integral to each of the so-called Synoptic Gospels. It is certainly not the case that the theology of one differs from that of the others, but each is presented uniquely, with different emphases, yet with the atonement and resurrection always remaining central. And that is what separates the canonical Gospels from the apocryphal.

Dr. Scaer, you also make a compelling case on page 26ff. that Paul's phrase, "according to the Scriptures," refers to specific written documents physically present and known to the Corinthian congregation, and that, in all likelihood, these were the New Testament books we know as Matthew and Luke. Such an understanding surely would better explain the unusual, even stilted phrasing of 1 Corinthians 15:3 and 4, while at the same time making clear why Paul placed the witnesses in the particular order he did. The result of this understanding is, of course, nothing short of revolutionary. It would mean that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and probably Mark as well, were quite early and preceded the writing of most of the epistles. It would mean also that the apostle was identifying New Testament documents as canonical Scripture.

What is particularly noteworthy to me are the Old Testament references usually cited for these two verses. Among more popular English versions of the Bible sold today, Psalm 22:15 is usually cited as the reference for 1 Corinthians 15:3 and Psalms 16:9-11; 68:18; and 110:1 for 1 Corinthians 15:4. The United Bible Society *Greek New Testament* is more careful, citing, respectively, Isaiah 53:8-9 for the first and Psalm 16:10, as well as Hosea 6:2 and Jonah 1:17, for the second. If one submitted to a completely disinterested third party the question of which references most closely match Paul's exact phrasing in 15:3 and 15:4, the Old Testament references above or the New Testament references from Matthew and Luke suggested by Dr. Scaer, there can be little doubt that Matthew's and Luke's would be selected. This would be so for the simple reason that the question of which testament they come from would not enter into the equation.

Such things happen often in matters of historiography. When incorrect suppositions have been piled upon incorrect suppositions, simple facts are easily overlooked. Usually, such errors are corrected in the course of time. In the field, we could even say magnetic field, of biblical studies, however, the writing of history is a bit charged with presuppositions over which the march of time seems to have little effect. This leads me to something I have been pondering for the last 10 or 12 years, but haven't written about. Now would seem an appropriate time to note it, both because of the essay we have just heard and the time of the church year in which we find ourselves.

Each of the Gospels identifies the moment, we could even say, tongue in cheek, pinpoints the moment, when the Son of Man and Son of God vicariously satisfied the immutable justice of God. Matthew and Mark do so with the fourth of the last seven words, as noted above, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Luke does it differently, letting the darkening of the sun and, especially, the tearing in two of the veil of the temple, speak for itself. However, all three note that this happened at about the ninth hour, that is to say, about mid-afternoon. John, who certainly gave us what are probably the most quoted of Jesus’ last words, “It is finished,” did it still differently, but not with those famous words. No, he wrote, “After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, ‘I thirst,’” noting carefully immediately after, “Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there; and they filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on hyssop, and put it to His mouth. So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, ‘It is finished!’” (John 19:28-30)

It is important to take note that Matthew and Mark explicitly recorded that when offered sour wine earlier, Jesus pointedly refused to drink it. (Matthew 27:34 and Mark 15:23) Luke recorded the offer of wine as well, but left this thought unfinished, the implication being that it was not drunk. (Luke 23:36) Following His cry of “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me,” Matthew and Mark recorded that a certain person standing by immediately ran and filled a sponge with sour wine and offered it to Him. But nothing more is said. Luke said nothing of this.

It was left to John to confirm explicitly what Matthew, Mark, and Luke recorded about Jesus, that although He refused to drink wine before the moment of atonement, if indeed we may speak that way, He now not only did so, but in fact requested to do so. He said, according to John, “I thirst,” in order “that the Scripture might be fulfilled.” That is the way the Greek syntax reads. So, the question becomes, which Scripture? Normally, when John refers to a Scripture, he means a specific and unambiguously identifiable verse.

Popular versions of the Bible invariably give Psalm 22:15 as the reference. Amazingly, the UBS *Greek New Testament* does also. Psalm 22:15 reads, “My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and My tongue clings to My jaws; You have brought Me to the dust of death.” Is this unambiguous, as are John’s other citations? In all honesty one must say, no it is not. How does His saying, “I thirst,” fulfill this Scripture? Or are we, as in the case that Dr. Scaer has noted for us in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, looking in the wrong Testament?

We now note that Jesus is recorded to have said, in the direct context of the institution of Lord’s Supper, that He told His disciples that He would not drink of the fruit of the vine “from now on until that day when I drink it new (Greek: *kainon*) with you in My Father’s kingdom” (Matthew 26:29), “until that day when I drink it new (Greek: *kainon*) in the kingdom of God” (Mark 14:25), and “until the kingdom of God comes” (Luke 22:18). In each case, the evangelist used the strongest possible negative in Greek. Again, were we to ask a completely dispassionate and disinterested third party, which of these possibilities most closely comports to the reference made by John, that from the Old Testament or that from the New, can there be any doubt which of them would be chosen?

Consider the import of accepting this little fact. In terms of systematic theology, John was indissolubly joining salvation won (the atonement) to salvation distributed (the means of grace). In terms of exegetical and historical theology, John was clearly identifying the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke as canonical books of the Holy Scriptures, and by implication telling us that his hearers knew it to be so.

In somewhat the same vein, the relationship of John 2:19-22, “Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ Then the Jews said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But He was speaking of the temple of His body. Therefore when He has risen from the dead. His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture, even the word which Jesus had said” (my translation), to Matthew 26:61ff perhaps ought to be rethought: “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.’ And the high priest arose and said to Him, ‘Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?’ But Jesus kept silent.” Since Jesus was on trial and was directly asked by the high priest whether this statement was true, but remained silent, His silence would be taken by the court as an admission that He said such a thing.

Finally, in our age when printed materials are cheap and readily available to a degree that would have astounded the people of the ancient world, as was noted on p. 26 of the essay, we are less sensitive to many things, even as people raised in the electronic image age are less attuned to the written word than those raised earlier. In an age when literary works were fewer and copies of them scarce and expensive – though less rare and costly than many suppose due to the efficiency of Rome’s consumer-driven economy – people would naturally have dwelt on words and the manner of their presentation more deliberately and longer. The structure of an ancient text that comes to light only with difficulty for us may not have so eluded them. The import of a very few well-placed words are more likely to have penetrated their conscience more easily and tellingly than ours. Presumably, writers of that age, including the evangelists, wrote in a manner they knew would connect with those who heard their works read aloud. We are still only beginning to appreciate this.

There are many other things one could react to, but time will not allow. So the two points I have chosen will have to suffice, that is, that the use of Gospel harmonies can divert us from the richness of detail and structure in the individual accounts and that there is much to commend in your treatment of 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, which adds to our understanding of New Testament canonicity. On this last point, I would venture to say that there is much that remains to be discovered about the relationship of the individual books of the New Testament to each other.

Dr. Scaer, it has always been enlightening for me to read your work. It has been an honor to comment on your essay. It has been enjoyable to expose a little more the vein of gold that you opened by showing us that the apostles Peter and Paul cited the Gospels as Holy Scripture. And, finally, it has been a joy to affirm that, yes, “the women were right – ‘on the third day He rose again from the dead.’”