

The Authority of Scripture: Living with a Living God and Tradition

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To state it very simply, the authority of Scripture lies in Scripture's containing record of the events of God's saving action and self-disclosure, and Scripture has authority when God speaks through it and encounters us in it. Ultimately, authority resides in God and Scripture must not be above God nor detract from God and God's freedom to be God.

To understand my attempt to describe the nature of Scripture's authority it needs to be understood that in my personal history I have moved from a fundamentalist understanding of Scripture, where Scripture was literally the word of God, to the understanding which you find described below. Over the years, since my Sunday School days, I have been forced by both study of Scripture and life experience to change my views. I had to do this to continue to believe, for my faith could not survive ignoring what appeared before my eyes as I studied Scripture. Just the differences between the four Gospels, which is where historical criticism of the New Testament started, compels one to move from a simple understanding of Scripture's inspiration. However, in Moravian terms, my "heart" knowledge of Christ and God maintained a balance with my "head" or intellectual struggles over what was now appearing before my eyes in my study of Scripture. My understanding of the authority of Scripture is expressed in my book on Spiritual Formation in a chapter on "Spiritual Reading of Scripture." What follows is another attempt to explain this.

For many of us the intensive study of Scripture produces a paradigm shift in our understanding of Scripture, a new way of seeing. We see life through mental structures born of our experience and culture. When there are no challenges to these structures the style of our vision persists. To change our way of seeing involves not only challenges to cultural assumptions, but to our internal structures, with all of the threat, uncertainty and necessity for individuation which this entails. Moreover, such changes deeply touch our emotional life, often producing great pain. Hans Kung in Theology for the Third Millennium presents the history and difficulty of paradigm changes in both science and religion.¹

The early church provides us with a helpful model for coping with a paradigm shift in the way it came to terms with the inclusion of the Gentiles into a community that was originally Jewish and was under pressure from Jewish authorities to remain faithful to Jewish traditions. According to Luke's description in Acts, the church was forced to follow where God was going and include whom God was including in a mission to Gentiles they were not sure they wanted. Their reluctance is understandable, but the amazing thing is that they eventually came to terms with their new inclusive community because they felt God had legitimized it.

Paul's account of his involvement in this process in Galatians is worth treating in some detail, for it describes his paradigm shift, his new way of seeing. His conversion experience was a "revelation" which completely changed his previous opposition to the Christian movement (1:12-14). Though Paul does not share with us all the details of his struggle to come to terms with this experience, he is clear that his mission to the Gentiles rose out of it (1:16). In 1:15 where Paul speaks of the God who "had set me apart before I was born," he alludes to the Old Testament prophetic tradition by using words used by both Jeremiah and Isaiah. The context of these passages contains reference to a mission to Gentiles.² It is then likely that Paul went to Scripture to understand both his experience and the newly developing Gentile mission, seeing these passages in the prophets in new ways and identifying with them. His description of his first visit to Jerusalem includes nothing of the content of discussions with church leaders, but the description of his second visit does. He presented to them his understanding of the Gospel he preached among the Gentiles "lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain" (2:2 RSV). The Jerusalem leaders agreed with him, for they perceived "the grace" which was given. Peter and Barnabas' backsliding

1. Hans Kung, Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View, transl. by Peter Heinegg, NY: Doubleday, 1988.

2. Is. 49:1 and Jer. 1:5.

from relationship with Gentile Christians at Antioch (2:11ff) probably precipitates a magnificent extended theological treatise on Jewish Christian theology. This included the Gentiles as children of God in Christ and completely re-interpreted Paul's previous paradigm of Jewish history and spiritual life (see his description of this in Gal. 3).³

The Bible as a whole may be viewed as reflecting frequent paradigm shifts: a living, rather than a static tradition. The past action of God is continuously re-understood in the light of the present action of God and crises which call forth new insights. Both history and God cause reshaping of the forms of faith. This can be simply illustrated by calling attention to the later reflections on creation and Exodus traditions in the Old and New Testaments and the varied reflections on the meaning of Jesus in the New (eventuating in such as the four Gospels, the Pauline and Petrine presentations of Jesus, and the presentation in Revelation which almost completely ignores the historical Jesus). The crises which called God's people to reflect on and reshape the tradition were such as the failure of the Davidic Kingdom, the Babylonian Exile, the attempt of the Seleucids to proscribe Jewish religion in the second century BCE, the Roman occupation of Palestine, the Jewish Wars with the Romans in the first two centuries CE. The advent of Jesus can also be seen as presenting Judaism with a crisis of interpretation, believed by Christians to be God's intervention into history for the purpose of confronting Judaism with such a crisis. Because of this, early Jewish Christians completely reinterpreted Jewish history, reducing Moses to a historical interlude, and placed Christ in the center of the traditions about creation (e.g. Jn. 1, Col. 1, Heb. 1). For the early church there were, among others, the crises of persecution, the inclusion of the Gentiles (already discussed), and the delay of the return of Christ.

One neglected aspect in understanding the biblical traditions and their ongoing interpretation is role of the Spirit, as expressed in the New Testament. The role provided for the Spirit means that revelation is ongoing and that all answers are not to be found in the Bible. Under the leading of God (the Spirit) throughout history there is to be a "maturing" and "contemporization" of the "truthful reality" experienced in the early church but conceptualized in a limited way. This is frequently difficult for Protestants to deal with since a major impetus for the Reformation was a rediscovering of Biblical authority. In the Gospel of John 16:12ff this is well expressed in what is said of the Spirit. The Spirit is not only to bring to remembrance what Jesus has said and done, but is to "guide you into all truth", even telling the church the things Jesus could not say while he was with them.

Another reason that interpretation varies from one period to another and that religious paradigms may shift is that the person who understands is involved in the understanding. It is in this way that the activity of God and the Scriptural tradition becomes "relevant". The political, social, cultural and historical context affects the answers that are needed and the way questions are seen and answers perceived, and thus our interaction with the text. Moreover, culture is usually multi-form in any one historical period and so one cannot describe single meanings to singular epoches. Paul in I Cor. 9:19ff recognized that he had to speak different ways within different cultures, thus differently interpreting the tradition. An interesting example of this is his different treatments of the meaning of cross in Gal. 3 and Col. 2. The "maturing" and "contemporization" of the "truthful reality" within the church then takes place in many ways, influenced by various contexts. And the individual appropriation of all this happens in ways related to the life experience of particular persons. Thus there is "a different world in every head", containing perspectives more or less in common with others.

In I Cor. 2 Paul discusses a theory of communication which he believed would work in his multi-cultured and -personed world, and which has so many common elements with a theory of interpretation of the biblical tradition that we can use it that way here. He tried it "with fear and trembling". Understanding must take place from those who have the Spirit to those in whom the Spirit is working, because it is only the presence of the reality of the God of which the Gospel speaks (i.e. the Spirit) that allows the difficulties of interpretation to be transcended. For interpretation this means that within the text one looks for the "Spirit" of the text and that the interpreter must be in contact with the same reality ("Spirit") in order to understand. Though communication about God is difficult, the presence of the One who is the

³. Galatians was likely constructed from a theological statement prepared by Paul at Antioch after the argument with Peter and then modified for sending to Galatia. This document would begin at 2:15 and might have concluded at 6:5. When the portions addressed to the Galatians in this section are removed, the theological argument flows with great clarity.

focus of understanding means that the reality can be grasped on a level "in, with and among" (to use the language of Consubstantiation) or beyond the words used. That is why Paul will not merely base his communicative efforts on the eloquence of rhetorics contemporary to him, but allows the Gospel to be the power of God to those it is saving. The reality must communicate itself in ways within and appropriate to the context in which it is to be perceived and understood.

This leads to the need to treat the importance of the devotional interpretation of Scripture. Historical-critical study of Scripture is necessary to understand the historical meaning of Scripture and its rigorous application must never be neglected. However, as an end in itself it does not nourish the life of the church, but frequently analytically distances those from the text who use it and leaves one with only "so much historical information." The question then is how does what we know about the text, and the text itself, become "relevant"? A crisis is then confronted which if seen properly allows the text the opportunity to again become living tradition, to be reinterpreted for the present. This is partially a thinking of what the text and its message means to us now, but it also involves what Paul described in I Cor. 2. The living reality in the text (i.e. the Spirit or God) must be allowed to become powerful and to bring to awareness what God is doing in the life of the interpreter. One of the best ways to do this is in the devotional interpretation of Scripture. The Benedictine method follows as this is applicable to all Scripture, while methods using imaging are particularly appropriate to passages which are narratives or contain images.

BENEDICTINE METHOD OF PRAYER -- LECTIO DIVINA

This devotional approach to Scripture has been associated with St. Benedict and Benedictine spirituality, though it really is earlier. It uses a "ladder" of four steps which provide it with a broad appeal. It may be used with the Bible or with other devotional literature.

First, choose the passage with which you will be working. It should be a pericope or sense unit from the biblical book that you wish to approach devotionally. Before beginning the exercise it is important to choose a place free from distractions, to take a few moments to relax, to reflect on the present issues in your life to which God might wish to speak (but not so as to let these completely determine your reaction to the text -- in other words - stay open), and then to proceed with the exercise. You should have a notebook handy to make notes on your experience with the text.

Lectio (Reading)

Read the passage, paying special attention to words and phrases to which you intuitively respond. I would suggest first reading the passage through rapidly and then going back and reading very slowly, stopping with phrases or words which "draw" you.

Meditatio (Meditation)

Here we welcome the words that have drawn us into our lives and "chew" upon them as a cow chews a cud, i.e. mentally say them over and over again until our mind becomes saturated with them. Another method might be to mentally focus upon them and hold them in the center of the mind for a while.

Oratio (Prayer)

This prayer is in the form of a spontaneous dialogue with God or Jesus about these words and what they might mean to you, and how they might be incorporated into your heart.

Contemplatio (Contemplation)

Contemplation means directly turning one's attention to God, without the use of words and images, in silence: a loving silence before God. Relationship with God is the ultimate purpose of all devotional exercises.

If portions of the passage still remain after the words on which the Meditation was made, then one might go back and continue in the passage to the next words that attracted one, repeating the above process as time allows.