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An apology and official retraction - The article “Presbyterians, Sexuality and Membership Transition in the United States” by Timothy T. N. Lim was mistakenly included in *Reformed World*, Volume 65 (2 & 3). While it had been submitted for consideration, it was not formally accepted; nor was Dr. Lim notified that it would be published.

We wholeheartedly apologize to Dr. Lim for printing an essay that was not yet ready for publication. We also apologize to anyone who found fault with this essay. We issue a formal retraction of this essay.

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An introduction to this issue

The five *solae* (or *solae*)—*Christus, Deo gloria, fide, gratia and scriptura*—were foundational concepts of the Reformation and have played an important part in our religious tradition ever since. While they were initially used to differentiate the Reformers' beliefs from those of the Roman Catholic Church they have come to be integral components of who we understand ourselves to be as Reformed Christians.

At the same time, however, the specific understanding of what each *sola* means has changed over the centuries—and misunderstandings have also arisen. Perhaps *sola scriptura*—by Scripture alone—has been one of the more contentious, especially within our tradition.

A subgroup of the WCRC's Network of Theologians, especially dedicated to exploring the ideas of *sola scriptura*, have taken a fresh look at this topic, and this issue of *Reformed World* contains their efforts.

Anna Case-Winters charts the concept of *sola scriptura* from its origins during the Reformation through to today, noting that the "affirmation of *sola scriptura* is often misunderstood as an exclusion of all other sources of knowledge."

Matthias Zeindler takes this concept a step further as he explores how "the fundamental act of God's communication is not found in the biblical writings themselves, but in a communicative divine act to be differentiated from the text."

Yolanda Dreyer asks whether theology can "bring the Reformed world together," especially through the "Reformed idea of the clarity and transparency of Scripture." She explores this idea through the "hermeneutics of being human."

Michael Weinrich sketches "a map of aspects that foster the ecclesiological relevance of an appropriate treating of the biblical diversity in the framework of its canonical acceptance."

We trust that you will find these essays rich, insightful and thought-provoking. We welcome your responses to any of the ideas put forth in them. Please send comments to: reformed.world@wrcr.eu.



***Sola Scriptura*: Then and Now**

Anna Case-Winters

Introduction

How broad, deep and demanding are the texts of Scripture, and how utterly beyond us in their richness. Karl Barth wrote of “The Strange New World within the Bible.” It is a book which “always and inescapably outdistances our categories of understanding and explanation, of interpretation and control.”¹ There is no question that these texts continue to surprise us and seize us. How do we account for that experience? How do we as contemporary Christians in the Reformed family think about Scripture? Do we still affirm, with our Reformed forebears “*sola scriptura*?” If so, what does that mean for us today? How are these texts authoritative for us? How do we go about interpreting them responsibly? Does affirming *sola scriptura* mean that there are no other sources to be consulted in matters of faith and life? This chapter will offer an exploration of these questions in three movements. The first will entail listening to Reformation era voices from the time when *sola scriptura* became a rallying cry. The second will highlight important developments between then and now. The third will inquire into what the church today may fruitfully bring forward from this historic affirmation.

Listening to Reformation-era voices

What did “sola scriptura” mean in the context of the Reformation?

An historical exploration of what *sola scriptura* meant in its origin may help us toward greater clarity regarding whether and in what sense Reformed folk may still make this affirmation today. *Sola scriptura* has been called “the formal principle of the Reformation.”² The Reformed have embraced this orientation wholeheartedly. A spotlight on John Calvin’s theology may help to illumine the particular Reformed appropriation. On the way it is well to look to Martin Luther, who Calvin took to be “the pathfinder.” Calvin appropriated key insights from Luther in this and other Reformation themes. There are, at the same time, some “differentiations” that are distinctive to Calvin.

1 Walter Brueggemann. “Biblical Authority: A Personal Reflection” (Covenant Network Conference, Pittsburgh, PA, Nov. 3, 2000), 1.

2 Fred H. Klooster, “The Uniqueness of Reformed Theology: A Preliminary Attempt at Description,” *Calvin Theological Journal* (Vol. 14, No.1, April 1979), 39.

Luther came gradually to a clear and forceful articulation of *sola scriptura*. In July of 1519, he affirmed “scripture alone” in matters of faith.³ In 1520, in the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* he went on to say that, “Whatever is asserted without scriptural proofs or an accredited revelation may be held as an opinion, but it need not be believed.”⁴ Then, at the Diet of Worms (April 1521), when he refused to recant, he took the matter further, “Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God....”⁵ What is decisive here is his bold elevation of Scripture above popes and councils.

For Luther “the content of Scripture is Christ...all Scripture turns about him as its true center.” His affirmation of the Old Testament is a function of its character as the “swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies...” (*Forward to the Old Testament*). This christological turning point meant for Luther that there is, in fact, a canon within a canon. As he says, “John’s Gospel and St. Paul’s epistles, especially that to the Romans, and St. Peter’s first epistle are the true kernel and marrow of all the books” (*Forward to the New Testament*). He dismisses the book of James as “strawy”—fit for a fire starter.⁶ He says that it would be better if Esther was not in the canon and insists that Revelation is not an “apostolic” book.

At this point, Calvin’s position on Scripture differentiates. For Calvin, it may be said that *sola scriptura* entails “*tota scriptura*.” “All” of Scripture and sometimes the very words themselves are seen by him as divinely inspired. Every part of Scripture carries the full weight of authority and validity for all times and places. Calvin, in fact writes commentaries on every book of the Bible excepting only two: Revelations and Song of Solomon. It was not that they were “strawy,” but, as he reported, he simply did not know what to do with them! Calvin concurs with Luther that Christ is the centre point of Scripture, but he has in view the larger story of God’s one covenant of grace through all times and places; a covenant mediated by Christ.

From this differentiation (Calvin’s *tota scriptura*), much else follows. Both Old Testament and New Testament carry the full weight of authority for Calvin.

³ Brian Gerrish. “Tradition in the Modern World: The Reformed Habit of Mind.” *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology*, ed. David Willis and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 54.

⁴ W.A. 6508.19; L.W. 36.29.

⁵Ronald Bainton, trans. *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, (Penguin: New York, NY, 1995), 185.

⁶ Gerrish, 55.



There is no contrasting of the Old Testament (as law) with New Testament (as gospel). The two together give an accounting of the one covenant of grace that spans these texts and their times. Because of this unity, Old Testament and New Testament writings can be read synoptically. Calvin read Christ into the Old Testament without hesitation; saw baptism and the Lord's Supper in continuity with circumcision in their Passover and identified the people of Israel as, in some sense, "the church." Because of this presumption of the unity and equal authority of the texts of Scripture, it is possible to follow the principle of "letting Scripture interpret Scripture."

Taking a "*tota scriptura*" approach has a number of important ramifications for Calvin's theology and for that of the Reformed churches that inherit his legacy. This initial differentiation from Luther may account in large part for differences around: the third use of the law, the relation of justification and sanctification, the place of good works among the justified and the place of confessions in relation to Scripture.⁷

What are some distinctive contributions we find in Calvin's approach?

We now turn the spotlight onto Calvin's distinctive view. Many who have studied closely the theology of John Calvin have been frustrated by not finding a central idea around which his theology is constructed. F. Wendel proposes a different approach altogether. As he says, "It would be better...to confess that Calvin's is not a closed system elaborated around a central idea, but that it draws together, one after another, a whole series of Biblical ideas, some of which can only with difficulty be logically reconciled."⁸ Wendel takes the paradoxes in Calvin's thought to be a reflection of his "scrupulous fidelity to the Bible."⁹

A high view of Scripture

Calvin was in fact clear that the whole purpose of theology was only to put in clear and orderly form what is already there in Scripture. That was his intention with the *Institutes* which, in contrast to the *summas* of others had the "modest purpose of being a manual for the reading of Scriptures"¹⁰ In the French edition

7 See Anna Case-Winters, "Learning from Luther: Reformed Appropriations and Differentiations," In *Luther Refracted: The Reformer's Ecumenical Legacy* Piotr Malsz and Derek Nelson, eds. (Fortress Press: 2016), 275-298.

8 Wendel, 358

9 Wendel, 358.

10 Klooster, 41.

of 1560, which Calvin prepared for a more popular audience, he spoke of the work as “a key to open a way for all children of God into a good and right understanding of Holy Scripture...(which) contains a perfect doctrine to which one can add nothing....”¹¹

Calvin has a very high view of Scripture. He said in the *Institutes* that “God in person speaks in Scripture” (1.7.4). The very words themselves may be thought of as divinely inspired. Calvin’s conviction was that to engage with Scripture is to encounter God speaking. All confessions, even in all theology, “Our wisdom ought to be nothing else than to embrace with humble teachableness...whatever is taught in Sacred Scripture” (I.18.4). Thus the work of theology is very much in the service of biblical interpretation. It is not a case of simply repeating what is there in Scripture. Rather theology arises in the confronting of issues in the life of the church resourced by Scripture. Life together in the community of faith ever leads believers back to the Bible.

Calvin’s high view of Scripture is in delicate balance with a full recognition of the limits and humanity of these texts. Calvin shows a certain reserve with regard to what Scripture can communicate. With respect to the knowledge of God, for example, it is like a “mirror” that conveys a true reflection but does not impart the thing itself. Scripture is not inerrant, it may contain errors, yet it is “infallible” in that it will not fail in what God purposes in it, namely to convey the good news of God’s saving work.

A dynamic view of Scripture

Three elements in Calvin’s doctrine of Scripture contribute a dynamic quality to interpretation of Scripture and caution the reader from literalism: the “principle of accommodation,” the reciprocal interactivity between Word and Spirit and the sense that “the Word of God” is more than the Scripture.

God speaks to us in ways accommodated to our capacity.

The “principle of accommodation” recognizes that the radical distinction between the divine and the human makes a certain “accommodation” necessary on God’s part in order to communicate with us at all. So, “as nurses are wont to do with infants, God is wont in a measure to lisp in speaking to us” (1.13.1). Calvin’s insight here is similar to one he notes from Augustine, “we can safely follow Scripture, which proceeds at the pace of a mother stooping to her child,

¹¹ John Leith, *Creeds of the Churches*. (John Knox: Atlanta, 1982), 98.



so to speak, so as not to leave us behind in our weakness" (3.21.4). This principle of accommodation allowed for a bit less concern with precision regarding "the facts." Calvin follows Augustine's unconcern over the differences among the gospels. "The truth is in no wise violated if the same events are narrated in different ways with different words" (Augustine, *Harmony of the Gospels* 2.28.67).

For Calvin, this accommodation is in no way problematic. Rather, "the creatureliness of the Bible is no hindrance to hearing God's Word but rather the completely necessary condition..."¹² The model for God's communication to humankind is God's revelation in Jesus Christ—the Incarnation. "In Christ, God, so to speak, makes himself little in order to lower himself to our capacity" (*Commentaries*, I Peter: 1:20). God's accommodation is the "completely necessary condition" of our hearing God's word at all. The creator of all things addresses humankind in our lowliness in ways that we can understand and so must "represent himself, not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us" (I 12.13).

The Spirit and the Word are in dynamic reciprocal relation.

Another dynamic aspect of Calvin's doctrine of Scripture is his understanding of the reciprocal interactivity of Word and Spirit. It is the "witness of the Spirit" in Scripture and in the hearts of believers that is the source and the confirmation of Scripture's authority. Reformed affirmation of the dependence of the hearer/reader on the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit is carried forward in our practice of offering a prayer of invocation (of the Spirit) prior to reading of the Scripture lesson in worship.¹³

In the polemics of the Reformation, appeal to the witness of the Spirit established the authority of Scripture on grounds other than church authority *granting* Scripture authority. While Scripture might have its confirmation by the church and its intrinsic reasonability and majesty, these do not establish its authority or believers. "It seriously affects us only when it is sealed upon our hearts through the Spirit" (I.7.5). From the perspective of the Reformed, in choosing the canon, the church was simply confirming what was already established on this basis. As the Belgic Confession (Article V) expresses it, believers are able to accept "without a doubt all things contained in Scripture—

¹² T.H.L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 77.

¹³ H. Vroom, "Contemporary Questions Concerning the *Sola scriptura*," *Reformed World*, (Volume 39:8, December 1987), 456.

not so much because the church receives or approves them as such but because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God.”

The affirmation of the witness of the Spirit in Scripture had the further effect of placing the authority of Scripture *over* the authority of church, thereby insuring that church tradition and practice was ever subject to critique and reform according to the Word of God. The call to *sola scriptura* was about subjecting all else to the authority of Scripture.

Another parallel implication of the Reformation polemic around *sola scriptura* was that right interpretation of Scripture is not the exclusive possession of authoritative interpreters of the church, such as the *magisterium*. Because of the witness of the Spirit, ordinary Christians could understand the divine word speaking amid the human words of Scripture. The Reformed affirmation of the clarity, reliability and sufficiency of Scripture is not applied in a general way to Scripture; rather it pertains directly to God's saving work as explicated there. As Westminster Confession of Faith puts it:

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them. (*Book of Confessions*, PC(USA), 6.007)

The Spirit's work of inspiration in Scripture has a twofold operation. It is both an *external* work of inspiring the prophets and apostles who authored these texts and an *internal* work as the Spirit inspires their reception by readers and hearers. “The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets, must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded” (*Institutes*, I.7.4). It is not the case that the “Word of God” lies there naked on the page, but rather Scripture becomes the Word of God in this dynamic encounter with the Holy Spirit. The texts of Scripture are vivified by the life-giving Spirit and the Scriptures give positive content to the inward testimony of the Spirit.

The “Word of God” is more than Scripture.

Calvin draws a clear distinction between Scripture and that to which it gives witness. “The Word of God” (God's self-revelation) is what is key and it is



something larger than Scripture; something of which Scripture is an instance—the “witness without parallel,” as we say. God’s self-revelation is present, not only in Scripture but also in the whole creation. The French Confession (1559) speaks of a two-fold revelation of God: “First, God reveals himself through his works, in creation and through its preservation and guidance. Second, and more clearly, God reveals himself through his Word, first revealed through the spoken word, and later committed to writing in the books we call Holy Scripture” (Article II).

Scripture may provide the “spectacles” that sharpen our vision to see God’s self-revelation in the wider world. By the activity of God’s Spirit, revelation can and does reliably happen in our encounter with Scripture and proclamation. Divine self-revelation, however is not limited to these instruments or captive in them.

How do the challenges of interpretation, especially conflicts of interpretations, impact this affirmation of “sola scriptura”?

The Reformers, who held deep convictions expressed in *sola scriptura*, were very cognizant of the challenges that issues of interpretation present. They were not under any illusion that *sola scriptura* diminished these challenges. Given the primacy of Scripture, in fact, and no *magisterium* to declare what is the correct interpretation, the difficulties were in some sense heightened. A conflict of interpretations is always possible. What would guide believers and the church as a whole in the work of interpretation? What wisdom may we gain from the guidelines they developed?

Calvin recommended that when there is a conflict of interpretation, the elders should gather and pray and seek to discern together the best understanding of the text. One principle that can be discerned from this recommendation is that the work of interpretation is a communal work; the wisdom of the community gathered around the Word is more likely to be reliable than the interpretation of a single individual working in isolation. The context of interpretation that serves best is the “context of the memory and hope of the Christian community.”¹⁴ Another principle evident here is that interpretation is best done when one approaches the text in an attitude of prayer. In humble reliance upon divine grace the community adopts a posture of receptivity and openness to what the Spirit may be saying to the churches.

¹⁴ Daniel Migliore, “The Authority of Scripture,” in *Faith Seeking Understanding*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 54.

Heinrich Bullinger, in the Second Helvetic Confession, drew out several guidelines that may still be very helpful in interpreting Scripture:

(W)e hold that interpretation of the Scripture to be orthodox and genuine which is gleaned from the Scriptures themselves (from the nature of the language in which they were written, likewise according to the circumstances in which they were set down, and expounded in the light of like and unlike passages and of many and clearer passages) and which agree with the rule of faith and love, and contributes much to the glory of God and man's salvation. (*Book of Confessions*, PC(USA), 5.010)

Several interesting features present themselves in his statement. The concern for careful study of the text in its original languages and historical context continues to be a standard for Reformed biblical interpretation. The literary and historical critical methods we bring to the texts today seem congruent with this guideline. The statement also highlights a principle of "letting Scripture interpret Scripture" that has long been a standard for us. One takes the whole of Scripture into account as the larger frame of reference and those passages which are clearer illumine those that are obscure.

Most interesting of all perhaps, are the theological investments that are brought to the text. The statement implies that a particular interpretation is more likely to be correct if it brings glory to God and is salvific in its outworking. To follow the "rule of faith" signals a concern for continuity with the faith tradition brought forward in the long history of biblical interpretation. While the Reformers are clear that Scripture is the "only rule of faith and life," they allow that the ancient creeds and confessions have a certain authority precisely *because* they are consistent with Scripture. To follow the "rule of love" implies that interpretations should be charitable. The interpretation that does harm to anyone is likely a misinterpretation. The text is not a pretext for any harmful act.

Does this affirmation entail exclusion of all other sources?

The affirmation of *sola scriptura* is often misunderstood as an exclusion of all other sources of knowledge. The Reformers themselves did not exclude other sources of knowledge as relevant for faith and life. Calvin was conversant with the intellectual currents of his day and made thoughtful use of them in his writings. He often made explicit reference to the work of philosophers engaging their thought appreciatively and critically. Ulrich Zwingli was quite clear on



the matter when he affirmed that, “The truth, wherever it is found and by whomever it is brought to light is from the Holy Spirit” (*Treatise on Providence*, 1530). Elsewhere he speaks in a similar vein saying, “All truth is from God who is the fountain of all truth” (*Commentary on Titus*, 1:2). For the Reformed there is nothing to fear from any field of knowledge. The intellectual currents of the day, the findings of science, and experience in the life of faith are all to be taken seriously. However, in all of this Scripture maintains its priority.

The affirmation of *sola scriptura* was not about excluding all other sources of knowledge, but was focused on a Reformation polemic against subordinating Scripture to any other source—most particularly church authorities and traditions in the Roman Catholic Church. The slogan *sola scriptura* reflected their commitment to be obedient to Scripture alone and to abandon all tradition that conflicted with the Word of God and to confess only what the word legitimizes. In this declaration of *sola scriptura*, tradition was not so much being rejected outright as being subordinated to Scripture. For the Reformers,

Scripture is the only clear and sufficient rule of faith. As such it decides what traditions are in agreement with the faith. Tradition itself thus cannot be elevated to the status of an authority that gives a binding interpretation of Scripture....Instead of tradition being the authority that decides the correctness of scriptural interpretation, Scripture, which interprets itself, is the authority that decides the correctness of tradition.¹⁵

Even the ancient creeds and councils are subject to Scripture's authority. *Sola scriptura* places the confessions, as *norma normata*, under the authority of Scripture as the *norma normans*.” The French Confession, for example, accepts the Apostles, the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creeds “because they are in accord with the word of God” (S 362). According to the Belgic Confession (Article VII), “Neither may we compare any writings of men, though ever so holy, with those of divine Scriptures; nor ought we to compare custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, degrees or statutes with the truth of God...” The confessions are ever subordinate standards.

The declaration of *sola scriptura* is directed against anything that would presume to assume Scripture's place of primacy. A case in point was the *magisterium* and church councils. In contrast to the assertion of the Roman Catholic Church that general councils of the church cannot err, the Reformed insisted that as human

¹⁵ Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998), 43.

councils they certainly can and many have erred. As the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it, “All synods and councils since the apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both” (*Book of Confessions*, PC(USA), 6.175).

The Reformation era meaning and practice of *sola scriptura* was a subordination of all other sources of knowledge to Scripture rather than an exclusion of all other sources. This begs the questions whether Reformed practice is founded more on a principle of “*prima scriptura*,” and, consequently, whether *sola scriptura* is still the right language for us. If Reformed theologians continue to speak of *sola scriptura* in order to maintain continuity with our Reformation heritage and the values embedded in this affirmation, then its usage should be regularly accompanied by careful explanation and delimitation in order to avoid misinterpretation.

The evolution of Reformed understandings between then and now

Sola scriptura was a strong affirmation of the authority of Scripture in the Reformation Era. Between then and now, however, a broad range of understandings has evolved concerning how this authority is best understood. Responses vary greatly. Some locate the authority of Scripture in its *intrinsic characteristics* (what it is) such as its being “inspired,” “infallible” or even “inerrant” (B.B. Warfield). Others locate the authority of Scripture in terms of its *content*, for example, its recounting of the “mighty acts of God in history” (G. Ernest Wright). Still others locate the authority of Scripture in its *function* (what it does) in conveying the good news of God purposes (Calvin) or bearing authoritative witness to Jesus Christ (Barth). This chapter will take a closer look at “inerrancy”—its background, development, and difficulties and then turn to consider “witness” as an alternative proposed by Karl Barth.

Protestant scholasticism and “inerrancy” as the locus of Scripture’s authority

17th century Protestant Scholasticism introduced a decidedly different understanding of the nature of Scripture’s authority than what was prevalent in the Reformation era. It may be that Protestants generally sensed a need for a demonstrably certain foundation similar to what the Counter Reformation was claiming for the church. Affirmations of biblical inerrancy arise in parallel to claims of papal infallibility. At the root there may have been a quest for certainty.



Francis Turretin, chair of theology in Geneva argued for inerrancy some one hundred years after Calvin's death. In a sense, his conclusions are not inconsistent with Calvin's view that the very words of Scripture may be thought of as inspired. However, Turretin let go of Calvin's understanding of "accommodation" in Scripture. Further, instead of relying upon the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit as grounding Scripture's authority, he lodged authority in the perfect accuracy of the text—of which the Spirit then served as a kind of guarantor. He insists that there can be no errors or contradictions in Scripture because it is "God breathed" (II Tim. 3:16) and the Word of God cannot lie (Ps. 19:8-9, Heb.6:18).¹⁶ This view was taken to extremes when Turretin went so far as to claim perfect accuracy for the (nonexistent) vowel points in the original Hebrew."¹⁷

The Reformation in England and Scotland carried forward the views averred in Protestant Scholasticism. In the US context the questions had a particular unfolding that has shaped conflict on the nature and interpretation of Scripture even unto the present day. There Princeton Seminary used Turretin's work as the primary text in theology. In the 1850s, Princeton Professor Charles Hodge articulated the view that theology was a science based upon the "data" of Scripture and all theological conclusions could be derived from Scripture and rendered in propositional form. Along with this he proposed that God "superintended" the writing of the manuscripts of the Bible in such a way that these were without error in all respects. For him, the inerrancy of the Bible "extended not only to moral and religious truth, but to statements of facts, whether scientific, historical, or geographical."¹⁸ Again we see a departure from the view of the Reformers, who affirmed the clarity, reliability, and sufficiency of Scripture not simply in a general way but particularly, as it pertains God's saving work.

By the time of Charles Hodge's son (A.A. Hodge) became a professor at Princeton in 1877, advances in the sciences and a closer study of Scripture had revealed errors in scientific, historical, and geographical matters. Hodge responded by shifting from his father's insistence upon the inerrancy of the traditional texts to inerrancy of the original (lost) autographs. The ad hoc answer

¹⁶ Francis Turretin, "21 Questions on The Doctrine of Scripture"(1623-1687)," extracted from Turretin's *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, J. Beardslee, J.(ed. & trans.), (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981).

¹⁷ Rogers, Jack. "The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible," in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Don McKim, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 58.

¹⁸ Rogers, 60.

was that these were all errors of “transmission.” The “original autographs”—if we could but find them—would be without error. Together with B.B. Warfield, A.A. Hodge authored a definitive statement on the inerrancy of the Bible in an article entitled “Inspiration:”¹⁹

(T)he historical faith of the Church has always been that all the affirmations of Scripture of all kinds, whether of spiritual doctrine or duty, or of physical or historical fact, or of psychological or philosophical principle are without any error, when the *ipssisma verba* of the original autographs are ascertained and interpreted in their natural sense (p. 238).

Hodge and Warfield developed and defended a full blown doctrine of inerrancy. Inerrancy here means being without any errors of fact.²⁰ Warfield argued that if any error could be found in the Bible then the inspiration of Scripture would be disproven. Any chance of this happening was eliminated with the assertion that no error could be admitted unless it could be proven to be in the “original” text of the Bible.²¹ In this way they sought to shield the text against any falsification. This was in fact, inerrancy once-removed—a strictly theoretical principle.

With these developments the authority of Scripture came to be lodged in its factual accuracy in a way that was quite foreign to the long history of biblical interpretation. Affirmations of biblical inerrancy arise in parallel to claims of papal infallibility. It may be that a quest for demonstrable certainty was at the root of both developments. This concern is very different from what motivated the Reformation era declaration of *sola scriptura*. The Reformers never intended that the Bible become a kind of “paper pope.”

One of the good outcomes of this misdirection was careful study of biblical texts with a view to getting as close as possible to the “original” texts. A deeper engagement with biblical languages and literary forms and the history of these texts in their contexts was led to reconsiderations. Discovering, for example, that so much of Scripture is narrative, poetry and song, proverb and parable made a reduction of the Bible to a “book of facts” seem an artificial constraint. Deeper study yielded a very different understanding of the meaning of divine inspiration in Scripture than inerrancy had offered.

19 A.A. Hodge and B.B. Warfield, “Inspiration,” *Presbyterian Review*, No.2 (April 1881).

20 This would be distinguished from those who think of inerrancy as being without errors in facts known at the time of the writing of these texts. This would allow greater latitude than the view Hodge and Warfield propounded.

21 Rogers, 61.



Karl Barth and “witness” as the locus of Scripture’s authority

In the early 20th century, Karl Barth offered a compelling alternative. While Barth held with the Reformer’s strong conviction of Scripture’s authority, he did not lodge authority in inerrancy as Hodge and Warfield did. Barth proposed instead that the authority of Scripture consists primarily in its serving as a medium through which God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ is made present by the witness of the Holy Spirit. This turn is a significant redirection, a shift of attention from the text itself, to the God who addresses us through this medium. Dan Migliore, concurring with Barth’s views, has pointed out, “Christians do not believe in the Bible; they believe in the living God attested by the Bible.”²² Barth’s approach is, in a sense a reclaiming of Calvin’s insight into the “event” character of “God speaking to us” in Scripture in ways “accommodated” to our understanding. Scripture accompanied by the testimony of the Holy Spirit becomes a vehicle for God’s self revelation in a dynamic interaction between the Word of God and the people of God.

Another insight that Barth brings is in his proposal that there are three forms of the “word of God:” written, proclaimed and living. The Scriptures are the written word of God. Preaching is the proclaimed word of God. The living Word of God—this is Word with a capital “W”—is Jesus Christ. Scripture and proclamation derive their authority in what they *actually do* as they give witness to him through the Spirit. The activity of the Spirit is necessary. God’s revelation comes to us as a gift—never a given.

For Barth the authority of Scripture was in its capacity as witness to the divine self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Barth’s influence has been decisive in the Reformed thinking about Scripture that came after him. His approach to the authority of Scripture carried the day for the Presbyterian Church (USA). Though there are a range of viewpoints, it is Barth’s understanding that gets carried forward in the Confession of 1967.

The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures which are received and obeyed as the word of God written. The Scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel (“Confession of 1967,” *Book of Confessions*, 9.27).

22 Migliore, 46.

In the Presbyterian Church (USA), when candidates for ordination stand before their Presbyteries, the question they are asked concerning Scripture is this, “Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ and the church universal and God’s word to you?” An affirmative answer to this question is anticipated.

With an understanding of authority as “witness” there is no need to protect the biblical texts from the results of historical-critical study and the errors such study reveals; no need for a theory concerning unavailable original autographs. The door opens biblical scholarship as a help and even an “obligation.” Such study is an obligation because it is necessary for understanding. As the Confession of 1967 declares,

The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language thought forms and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect the views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding (PC(USA), *Book of Confessions*, 9.29).

Jan Rohls, who has surveyed Reformed Confessions from all around the world, notes that more recent Reformed confessions “make a place for critical reading and interpretation of the Scriptures.”²³ Tools such as literary and historical criticism are taken to be important for understanding and interpreting the Bible. This in no way undermines the authority and uniqueness of the Bible as a book “of and for the church.”²⁴ There is a reclaiming of Calvin’s association between God’s communication with us in Scripture and in the Incarnation. “If we are embarrassed by the humanity of the biblical writers, we are also probably embarrassed by the humanity of Jesus the Jew from Nazareth....”²⁵

The assumption is that God continues to speak through these texts. God’s word is spoken to his church today where the Scriptures are faithfully preached and attentively read in dependence on the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

Insights from contemporary Reformed theologians on the authority of scripture

23 Rohls, xvi.

24 Rohls, xvi.

25 Migliore, 50.



There are a number of Reformed theologians who are offering significant insights into the matter of the authority of Scripture. Several of these will be noted here very briefly in passing.

Walter Brueggemann has pointed out that “the authority of the Bible is a perennial and urgent issue for those of us who stake our lives on its testimony”²⁶ In place of inerrancy, Brueggemann suggest that we think about the Bible’s “inherency.” “The Bible is inherently the live word of God, that addresses us concerning revealing the character and will of the gospel-giving God and empowering us for an alternative life in the world.” It has the power to make a claim on our lives. Its central claims are refracted through many authors who are circumstance situated and is continually speaking to us anew—resisting the church’s attempts to settle and close and idolize. None of our readings are “inerrant” they are inescapably provisional. The Bible in its inherent authority is ever “strange and new.”²⁷

Contemporary Reformed theologians carry forward Calvin’s emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to Scripture. There is a shared clarity that the Word is the instrument of the Spirit, the Spirit is not the prisoner of the Word. Word and Spirit are in dynamic reciprocal relation. The texts of Scripture are vivified by the life-giving Spirit and the Scriptures give positive content to the inward testimony of the Spirit. George Stroup puts it this way: “Claims to possess the Spirit separate from the Word are unreliable; efforts to read the Word apart from the Spirit are void.”²⁸

David Kelsey suggests that when we are talking about the authority of Scripture, we have to be asking about whether and how it is normative in the life of the church. Does it really function as authoritative in the way we go about being church? The “authority of Scripture” is purely theoretical if it is not actually read and applied with self-critical reflection as we test the forms of our faith and life. According to Kelsey, “Scripture has authority to the extent that it functions in the life of the church to shape new identity and transform individual and communal life.”²⁹ Others have joined with Kelsey’s insights. Vroom suggests that, “The

26 Brueggemann, 2.

27 Ibid, 2-3.

28 George Stroup *Reformed Reader: A Sourcebook in Christian Theology*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 20.

29 David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 42.

deepest understanding of the gospel as the Word of God in reality comes over a people in the practice of faithful life."³⁰

Another suggestive proposal is offered by Letty Russell who observes that Scripture is authoritative for us because it "makes sense of our lives." Regardless of its fallible human instrumentality, its "patriarchal world views, its inconsistencies and mixed messages" it tells "the story of God's love affair with the world." It leads us to a vision of new creation that impels our lives. It is Scripture for us as "script" for our lives; it "prompts" us. It has authority for us because of what it "authors" in us through God's invitation to participation in the restoration of wholeness, peace, and justice in the world."³¹

Edward Farley and Peter Hodgson have suggested that the "actual authority of Scripture derives not from its content but from its power to occasion new occurrences of revelation and new experiences of redemptive transformation when used in situations of proclamation."³² They put forward a view of Scripture and tradition as *vehicles of ecclesial process* by means of which the originative event of Christian faith is able to endure as normative and to function redemptively in the transformation of human existence"³³

All these contemporary Reformed voices add insights that enhance our understanding of the nature and functioning of Scripture and its authority in our lives and our churches today.

The fruitfulness of Reformed insights on Scripture in the life of the church today

This closing section will pose several questions concerning the fruitfulness of Reformed insights for particular challenges we face in our churches today. Exploration of the questions is very preliminary and readers are invited to engage the task of drawing these out further based not only upon what has preceded in this paper, but also upon their own insights and experiences in the church's encounter with Scripture.

30 Vroom, 462.

31 Letty Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 138.

32 Farley, Edward and Hodgson, Peter, "Scripture and Tradition" in Peter Hodgson and Robert King eds. *Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 52.

33 Ibid, 57-58



Can Reformed insights guide us beyond the present impasse on the authority of Scripture?

I wonder if there is wisdom already there in Reformed tradition that could take us beyond the conservative vs. liberal impasse. At the very least, remembering the insights of Reformed forebears can broaden our repertoire for thinking about Scripture and Scripture's authority. For example, Calvin's understanding of Scripture transcends our present battle lines between those who hold with inerrancy and those who acknowledge the results of historical-critical interpretation. Calvin's concept of divine accommodation and his sensibility regarding the relation of Word and Spirit could certainly enrich our understanding. His views are "outside the box" of our prevailing views and they offer challenges to both positions in the present impasse. On the one hand, he would use the language of "infallibility" with respect to Scripture (not so attractive to progressive perspectives) but mean that *it will not fail* in communicating the good news that God wishes to communicate in it (a delimitation that challenges a more comprehensive inerrancy approach). Calvin is clear that Scripture provides a true knowledge of God, but it functions like a mirror—giving a true reflection but not imparting the thing itself. Calvin has, on the one hand, a very high view of Scripture's authority (its unity, reliability and sufficiency; its self-authenticating nature) and yet resists literalism and admits errors. He conveys the divine-human tensiveness of the text.

Calvin's insight into the dynamic relation of Word and Spirit in the work of revelation and his principle of divine "accommodation" could go a long way in reorienting our approach to Scripture. Perhaps we could find a better balance between the recognition that it is the Word of God that comes to us in the words of Scripture and the recognition that these words are human words. Each side of the current divide is invited into to reconsider.

Can Reformed insights help us better navigate our conflicts in interpretation?

The commitment of Reformed churches to be in communion with one another implies, among other things, a willingness to hear one another out and attempt to understand one another's viewpoints when there is a conflict of interpretations. This is not to say that all interpretations have equal merit, but in the face of conflicting interpretations a spirit of forbearance should prevail among us. The variety in perspectives and approaches to interpretation could potentially enhance our life together. After all, the gospels are already plural approaches and interpretations. Why is this plurality, as such, a problem for us?

When particular issues arise such as who may be ordained or how we should think about biblical accounts of creation in relation to scientific accounts of evolution there is certainly a contest of interpretations at work—a “battle for the Bible”—in which each side claims that Scripture is on their side. As the arguments are unleashed, many turn out to be grounded in fundamentally different approaches to Scripture’s authority and its interpretation. The “use of Scripture” in the face of contentious issues sometimes devolves into its use as a *weapon* against those who disagree with us. Could we together rediscover Scripture as a place of grace?

Some of the wisdom gleaned from the Reformers’ guidelines for biblical interpretation might serve us well. To sum those up very briefly, our interpretations should be *catholic* (in accord with the testimony of the whole church; the “the rule of faith,” ancient creeds and confessions), *communal* (the community gathers around the word invoking the Holy Spirit’s testimony), *contextual* (read in the context of the surrounding texts and the Bible as a whole; informed by knowledge of the original languages and historical context of the Bible) and *charitable* (following the “rule of love”). In particular, it seems to me, we are at risk of neglecting the communal and charitable requirements for the interpretation of Scripture.

Can Reformed insights help us toward identifying “interpretive keys”?

For the 16th century Reformers, authority of Scripture was “rooted in its liberating message” of the good news of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Today many identify insistence upon the authority of Scripture “with coercion rather than liberty.”³⁴ They know all too well how the authority of the Bible has been invoked to suppress free inquiry and to legitimate such things as slavery, patriarchy, and anti-Semitism. The ideological abuse of Scripture is a strike against its authority for many people. Sometimes it is the interpretation of texts that is problematic; sometimes it is the texts themselves that are problematic. As Reformed Christians we cannot simply dismiss or ignore those texts that seem to run counter to the overall message of love and liberation, compassion and justice. For us the *sola scriptura*, entails *tota scriptura*. We have to struggle with these texts, and seek to understand them in light of the whole of Scripture’s testimony. “We seek not only to understand the Bible’s message but also to “stand under” its authority.”³⁵

³⁴ Migliore, 40.

³⁵ Joel Green. “The Authority of Scripture,” Preface to the Common English Bible: Mark. (Nashville, TN: Common English Bible, 2010), 10.



The context of the writings must, of course, be taken into account. For example, we have texts that were written in patriarchal contexts and in contexts where slavery was commonly accepted. Context shapes text. Here we recognize the “humanity” of the texts of Scripture. Scripture never comes to us divorced from the context of its writing or the context of our reception. It is always already culturally embedded in both aspects. At every point in its transmission—the original authors, the translators, the interpreters and the hearers—culture plays a role. This is a fully human text, through which—remarkably—God speaks. This is not so troubling when we remember the incarnation, how God came to dwell among us in fully human form without ceasing to be fully divine.

Here again Bullinger’s guidelines in the Second Helvetic Confession prove to be wise. We are invited there to see Scripture as a whole as the framework for any text. No text is to be taken in isolation apart from the overarching message. We are urged also to interpret in ways that bring “glory to God” and are redemptive/salvific for human beings. These parameters may help us to test our understanding of the texts of Scripture when we interpret them.

It is a common observation that we always view Scripture through one lens or another. Following the principle of “letting Scripture interpret Scripture” can we together seek *in Scripture* an interpretive key? It is likely that, in practice, there are texts by which we interpret other texts. Can we have a productive conversation about where the interpretive keys may lie? Are some more fitting than others. For example, the fundamental expression of God’s will is arguably the two-fold commandment to love God and neighbour. Interpretations could be evaluated as to whether they are congruent with this Great Commandment. Potentially, we might judge any interpretation that does is not, a misinterpretation.

How do Reformed understandings of sola scriptura fare in contexts where there are many “scriptures?”

Calvin did not hold that people cannot have knowledge of God apart from the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. On the contrary, he believed that God is revealed “everywhere we turn our eyes” and that the knowledge of God has been “naturally implanted” in our minds (1.3.1). This, it seems to me, opens up the possibility that other people of other faiths may “know God.” Several of Calvin’s statements and various confessions of Reformed tradition allow for general revelation in a way that leaves the matter open and not closed even as we affirm (for ourselves) *sola scriptura*.

Our Scriptures function to make natural knowledge—available to all—more clear for us. In Calvin's view Scripture is like "spectacles...gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds...(Scripture) shows us the true God" (1.6.1).

In the Geneva Catechism, Calvin uses the metaphor of a "mirror" for God's self-manifestation in the works of creation. "Because He has manifested Himself to us by works (Ps. 104; Rom 1:20) we ought to seek Him in them. Our mind cannot comprehend His essence. But the world for us is like a mirror in which we may contemplate Him in so far as it is expedient for us to know him (T. 8). The French Confession (1559) speaks of a two-fold revelation of God: "First, God reveals himself through his works, in creation and through its preservation and guidance. Second, and more clearly, God reveals himself through his Word, first revealed through the spoken word, and later committed to writing in the books we call Holy Scripture" (Article II). As Rohls points out, "Creation is the book that is accessible to everyone and that gives a sufficient testimony to God. In creation God reveals the divine goodness, wisdom, and power in such a way that they can be known by the light of nature alone."³⁶

It is interesting to note that Reformed confessions do not limit the "gospel" to the New Testament or to God's work in Christ. The Heidelberg Catechism (Question 19) speaks of the gospel, "which God himself first revealed in Paradise, afterwards proclaimed by the holy Patriarchs and Prophets, and foreshadowed by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law, and finally fulfilled by his well-beloved Son" (*Book of Confessions*, PC(USA), 4.019). The Reformed view divine self-revelation as something more than the Bible. The two are not to be collapsed and confused, though God can and often does use this medium as a means for communication with us, (Zeindler, p.4).

There is room in this understanding to ask whether God may use other "scriptures" as vehicles of self-revelation. This is not a possibility that is in principle excluded. The witness of the Spirit is not tied to Scripture. The Spirit is not the servant of Scripture. The "Word of God" is larger than and not equivalent with Scripture.

How do contemporary churches of the Reformed traditions affirm the primacy of Scripture today?

36 Rohls, 31.



The challenges of church life at the time of the Reformation—where church authority and traditions were taking precedence over Scripture—provoked the strong affirmation “*sola scriptura*” and called the church to submit all doctrine and practice to the authority of Scripture alone. To contemporary folks who may not be familiar with the history and polemics of the Reformation, “*sola scriptura*” implies that other sources of knowledge than Scripture are excluded. In actuality, the Reformed tend to be very open to God’s revelation in the whole of creation. Following Zwingli, we affirm that “all truth is from God who is the fountain of all truth.” We take seriously the intellectual currents of our day, the findings of science and our experience in the life of faith. We do this even as we insist that Scripture has priority and remains the “witness without parallel.” Is our practice better expressed by *prima scriptura*? Or is *sola scriptura* still the right language? If we conclude that we want to maintain the language of our Reformation forbears, we will need to clarify what they meant and what we mean.

As it stands, we continue to gather around the word in study and in worship. We continue to expect that God may speak a word to us in these texts. In many of our churches, after the reading of the Scripture lesson the pastor affirms “The Word of the Lord” and the people respond, “Thanks be to God.” This practice in worship bears witness to our expectation that in the reading and hearing of Scripture we may encounter God’s own voice speaking to us.³⁷

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Revelation – Holy Scripture – Hermeneutics

Matthias Zeindler

Contrary to a common conception, Christianity is *not* a “religion of the book” in a strict sense of the word. Although the Bible has a decisive position in the framework of the Christian faith, it has that position only in a mediated way. Theological centrality is not held by the biblical text itself, but by the Word of God, by God speaking. The Bible as such, therefore, is no part of the Christian creed. We can put it this way: Not the Bible in itself does have authority for Christians, but the Bible as Holy Scripture. We will reflect on the difference between the two below.

When we state that the Bible is not part of the Christian creed, we hold that the fundamental act of God’s communication is not found in the biblical writings themselves, but in a communicative divine act to be differentiated from the text. In what sense, then, does the *sola scriptura* have to be understood? In what follows, I try to show that with a differentiation between God’s communication and the biblical text, the Bible is not getting degraded to a theologically minor position, but that only with that move the *sola scriptura* can be reconstructed as a statement of the foundational communicative activity of God for his church. Part of the reflections will be reserved to the hermeneutical consequences of such a conception of Holy Scripture.

1. Holy Scripture

There is consensus between the churches that Christians don’t expect bare information from the Bible, but the living Gospel—not interesting facts about ancient Palestine, the founding documents of two world religions or the histories of the religions of Israel and early Christianity, but the address of God to humankind. In a theological perspective, therefore, the Bible is *medium salutis*, a part of the means used by God to act upon and with humans. Methodically this means that *scriptura* can only be understood adequately within the framework of God’s salvific agency in general. Only in that context can we speak about the Bible as Holy Scripture in a meaningful way. In the words of the Anglican theologian John Webster:

Holy Scripture is dogmatically explicated in terms of its role in God’s self-communication, that is, the acts of Father, Son and Spirit which establish and maintain that saving fellowship with humankind in which God makes

himself known to us and by us.¹

Only with a wide framework like that are we also in a position to think about the relation between Bible and church and finally biblical hermeneutics.

God's agency, as narrated in the texts of the Old and New Testament, can be interpreted as a richly differentiated *social* agency: as the foundation, preservation and renewal of mutual relationships within creation. Genesis 1 depicts creation as a good order in which the different elements are wisely correlated to each other. Genesis 2 especially shows humans as beings in relations: "It is not good for the man to be alone" (2:18). The narrative of sin and fall confirms mutual relationship as the purpose of created beings in a negative way: When Adam and Eve eat from the tree in the middle of the garden, they step out of a trusting relationship to God, with the consequence of broken connections within creation: hostility between man and serpent (3:15), domination of man over woman (16), the plight of breadwinning (17-19). The following chapters can be read as a sequence of relations falling apart: fratricide (4:3-8), exaggerated revenge (4:23f.), the Tower of Babel with its confusion of languages and the scattering of the people all over the world (11:1-9). The following chapters open with the account of Abram's blessing, which ends with a great promise: "...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (12:3). With that promise all divine action is being put in the perspective of a universal restoration of mutual relationships within creation. Particularly clear this is shown by the gift of the law on Sinai—the law being that good order through which God preserves Israel within the freedom he established when he led his people out of Egypt, "the land of slavery" (Ex. 20:2).

The societal orientation of God's agency is confirmed within the New Testament. Jesus not only enforces the validity of the Jewish law, in the Sermon on the Mount he even accentuates its substance, love. Jesus' actions—his healings as well as his meals—can be understood as expressions of a radical solidarity transcending all limits. The death and resurrection of Jesus constitute a new, universal salvific reality, which has its provisional reality in the sociality of the Christian community. God fulfills his societal agency in the coming of a New Jerusalem, where the gates are never closed (Rev. 21:25).

One element within God's societal agency is Holy Scripture. When God acts, he makes himself known to humans, in other words: he *reveals* himself. Revealing

¹ John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 8.



himself, God becomes present, he opens himself for humans and enables them to freely assent to his will:

Revelation is the self-presentation of the triune God, the free work of sovereign mercy in which God wills, establishes and perfects saving fellowship with himself in which humankind comes to know, love and fear him above all things.²

Revelation, in other words, is God's agency leading to mutual relation between himself and humanity.

When God through revelation constitutes relationship in freedom, the *form* of that action needs to correspond to its aim. A relationship between two partners being that aim, the form of the action cannot be simple causality, and on the side of humanity not a mere being caused passively. Humans are neither stones being pushed nor slaves that fulfil their duty in unconditional surrender. The form of revelation is primarily language—and language is a mutual process of address and answer. And particularly it is a process that reaches its goal in a free consent of the participants. The linguistic character of revelation therefore is the outside of its content: partnership between God and humans.

But why is it that a particular book, a particular collection of texts, becomes the medium of God's self-communication? This again has to do with the nature of revelation as an encounter of God with humans. That encounter takes place where humans actually live, within the world and its history—not as an isolable event along with other historical events and experiences, but "in, with, and under" such events and experiences. Within the whole of history revelation primarily takes place in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in its previous testimony in the history of Israel and its subsequent testimony in the history of early Christianity. In Jesus Christ we again find a deep correspondence of form and content in revelation: In world and history God shows himself as a God who suffers the hardships of the human condition. Of Jesus Paul writes:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Phil. 2:6-7)

In revelation God proves to be a humane God.

² Webster, Scripture, 13.

The revelatory events that take place in the context of world and history are also being communicated in the *form* that belongs to that context. It is again the outside of its content that those events are first preached in oral language and then passed on in written language. It is no accident that the word for God's Good News to humanity—the "gospel"—in the New Testament also designates a literary genre. That ambiguity mirrors the fact that the good news of God's advocacy for his creation is being spread in the historical and human way of written and spoken language. The linguistic and written form of the transmission of the gospel once more shows the correspondence between form and content in revelation: God enters the world, and the testimony of it is handed down in worldly ways. Because God reveals himself entering world and history, and because that acting is being mediated linguistically, it is finally a book—a collection of linguistic testimonies—through which God relates himself to humanity. The book is that storage medium which for centuries has made it possible to preserve and to transport large amounts of text.

It is important, though, to distinguish between revelation on the one hand and the Bible as a collection of texts on the other. The Bible in itself *is* not revelation or Holy Scripture, it *becomes* a means of God's communication whenever God *uses* it for that purpose. This cannot be emphasized enough. There is a long and unhappy history of the identification of Bible and revelation, which is partly responsible for the crisis of the authority of Scripture with the rise of historical-critical exegesis. That identification usually had its theological foundation in a specific doctrine of inspiration which one-sidedly limited the activity of the Spirit to the formation of the Bible. The legitimate concern of this type of doctrine of inspiration was to save the Bible from human disposability. The limitation of the Spirit's activity to the inspiration of the authors led to the ironic consequence that as an inspired text the Bible all the more could be disposed of. The book of the Bible, endued with divine authority, could be used for the legitimation of all possible human aspirations (their contrary included). The *divinitas* and *auctoritas* of Scripture, therefore, are misunderstood, where the Word of God and human words are directly and statically identified. Their identity is an indirect and dynamic one. Through the differentiation of the Bible and revelation alone God's sovereignty in the transmission of the gospel is being preserved. Holy Scripture is not holy in itself, but only to the extent it participates in the action of the holy God. Hermeneutically spoken: Where it is read in the expectation of God's voice within its texts.



2. *Sola scriptura*: Scripture mediates itself

2.1. The four “*solae*”

As we know, one of the central concerns of the Reformation was the exclusive authority of scripture, the *sola scriptura*. But the *sola scriptura* of the Reformers again has to be interpreted as a moment within a wider divine action. In other words: The *sola scriptura* gets its theological significance only when read together with the other “*solae*.” Only in connection with the others the four “*solae*” of the Reformation give a sketch of God’s gracious action in Jesus Christ: The *solus Christus* states that human salvation is being found in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ alone. The *sola gratia* interprets the *solus Christus* insofar as it makes clear that human salvation is founded exclusively in God and not in human action. The *sola fide* interprets the other two insofar as it makes clear that God’s action in Jesus Christ doesn’t need any human action in order to be effective but only has to be accepted passively. In the context of that “logic of grace” the *sola scriptura* interprets the other three insofar as it makes clear that the gracious work of Christ is mediated through the Word of God or, on the side of humans, through the passive act of hearing. So the four “*solae*” serve the common goal of consequently interpreting God’s salvation of humanity as God’s free grace, and to ensure that on each step it cannot be misunderstood as a human work. It is therefore not enough to understand the *sola scriptura* of the Reformation as a refutation of clerical claims to power—which it certainly was! The *sola scriptura*, interpreted together with the other “*solae*,” turns out primarily as a statement about the nature of God and only secondarily about the authority of the church or the nature of the Bible.

The Reformers already knew that the exclusive authority of Scripture can only be argued for convincingly, when at the same time there can be shown that also in its interpretation it can be preserved from human falsification and corruption. Against Erasmus’ argument that in some places the Bible is obscure and confused, Luther emphasizes the clarity (*claritas*) of Scripture. In his argument he shows that the exclusive authority of the Bible necessarily presupposes its clarity, its comprehensibility. Would we have to admit that Scripture at least in parts is unclear, we would be compelled to turn to other instances in order to clarify God’s will. The *sola scriptura* is obviously more than a methodological rule for doing theology. It is an articulation of the conviction that God, against all tendencies to exclude him from our lives, will reach us with his truth. Over and over the Word of God will overcome sinful reading, understanding and interpretation.

2.2. *Properties of Scripture*

These implications in Reformation theology were elaborated in detail in the so-called Old Protestant Orthodoxy of the following two centuries. The place to do so was the doctrine of the *affectiones scripturae*, the properties of Scripture. A whole list of properties attributed to Scripture assured its capability to make itself accessible against human *eisegesis* and misinterpretations. This is particularly the case with clarity (*claritas*) and transparency (*perspicuitas*). When Scripture may be assumed to be clear, i.e. able to *make* itself clear, then no human attempt is needed to make an allegedly enigmatic text understandable. The same is true with Scripture's *efficacia*, its capacity to actually mediate itself. With *efficacia* human interpretation of the text—indispensable as it may be—does not have the function to make it meaningful. Scripture is the agent of its meaning.

The doctrine of the *affectiones scripturae* opens up a whole range of questions. As an explication of the *sola scriptura*, though, it remains valid. Again we have to make clear that no divine properties are ascribed to a worldly book. As a collection of texts, the Bible is neither transparent nor efficacious, as with every other text it can be misunderstood and rejected. Here again we have to differentiate between revelation and the Bible. The *affectiones* have to be understood as properties attributed by God to be Bible when he makes use of it for his revealing activity. Applied to *claritas* and *perspicuitas* this means: Clarity primarily belongs to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which God has hidden “from the wise and learned, and revealed ... to little children” (Mathew 11:25). Insofar as it mediates this simplicity of the gospel, Scripture becomes clear and perspicuous. Its clarity remains secondary, borrowed from the *claritas* and *perspicuitas* of the gospel. The same with *efficacia*: Primary efficiency again belongs to Christ who opens men and women to himself by the inviting character of his person and work. Insofar as the inviting character of the gospel is mediated through Scripture, Scripture has a secondary *efficacia*, borrowed from the effectiveness of the Gospel itself.

2.3. *Inspiration*

In this context we have to return briefly to the doctrine of inspiration as developed in Old Protestant Orthodoxy. The problem of reducing the activity of the Spirit to the inspiration of the authors was mentioned already. Besides that the Spirit was assumed to be active in the hermeneutical process as the inner testimony opening to humans the spiritual truth of the text. With this, the Spirit



attains a central function in the Reformation and Old Protestant doctrine of revelation and Scripture: By the Spirit Scripture gets its place in the process of revelation, and by the Spirit both *sola scriptura* and the *affectiones scripturae* get their theological foundation.

On this basis we are able to sketch a theologically sustainable doctrine of inspiration: The Holy Spirit is God present in his creation, constituting and preserving the relations between the two. As such a Spirit is present wherever faith is founded, maintained and renewed. The Spirit, therefore, is present in the foundation of the faith of the first witnesses, in every later hearing of their witness and in every present understanding of it. Inspiration, therefore, must not be restricted to particular points of the process of the Gospel's transmission—inspiration involves God's faith-founding presence in the whole of that process. Formulated like this, it is finally the doctrine of the Holy Spirit that gives reason for the hope that in reading and appropriating the Bible, the grace of God will reach the hearts of humans. And in that sentence the Reformation doctrine of Scripture can be summed up: In reading and appropriating of the Bible God's grace reaches the hearts of humans.

3. Holy Scripture and the church

According to the well-known formulation in the Augsburg Confession, the church is the "congregation of all believers," "among whom the Gospel is purely preached, and the sacraments administered according to the Gospel."³ This short formula does not want to be an exhaustive description of the church. In his "On the Councils and the Church" Luther names the following characteristics of a church:

There God's word is preached and believed purely and ardently; the children are accepted into the kingdom of God through Baptism; there hearts assailed by sin and temptation find solace and strength in Holy Communion; there sinners unburden their conscience in confession; there ministers are commissioned in orderly fashion for preaching the Word, for administering the sacraments, and for other pastoral ministrations; there a prayerful Christian people offers God praise and thanks in public worship; there people are opposed and persecuted for the sake of Christ and there they must bear the cross of their master.⁴

³ Augsburg Confession, article 7.

⁴ Martin Luther, On the Councils and the Church, Luther's Works 41, 147-167.

Nevertheless, for Luther also the preaching of the Word is the first sign of the true church. And in Calvin, we find a most similar formulation to the one of the Augsburg Confession:

Wherever we see the word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the Church of God has some existence.⁵

For Luther and Calvin, however, it is not the simple fact of proclamation that characterizes the church. Calvin not only speaks of the Gospel “preached” but also of the gospel “heard”—believed, confessed and done. Word and sacrament do not exist without bearing fruit. Preaching the gospel and administrations of the sacraments are the central actions in the church, not because they are the only or the most important ones, but because through them God calls forth faith. They are the actions in which God speaks to humans, elicits their answer and in this constitutes the relationship—the covenant—between them and himself. Preaching and sacraments, therefore, are differentiated from all other activities in the church by the fact that they are the constituting marks, the ones through which the church originates and continually is being preserved and renewed. Preaching and sacraments are those acts in which not primarily the church herself acts, but through which God acts for the church. They are the activities of the church, in which she is—paradoxically speaking—fundamentally passive. While the church is in a particular way active, God acts upon her. In the words of Ulrich Körtner: “The church is not the subject, but the object of Word and sacrament.”⁶

God calls forth faith in speaking to humans, and he speaks to them in using the human activities of preaching and administering the sacraments. Therefore, the church is the community of believers *rooted* in the Word of God. The first thing to be said about the church is her being a creation of the Word of God, *creatura Verbi Divini*. Negatively this means that the church in no way disposes of herself. As she does not constitute herself, she cannot preserve or renew herself. As she has never renewed herself, but has always been renewed, she can only be *ecclesia semper reformanda*, when she lets herself be renewed by God. Interpreted positively, the fundamental rootedness of the church in the Word of

⁵ Inst. IV,1,9.

⁶ Ulrich H.J. Körtner, “Sola scriptura”. Schrift und Kirche aus evangelischer Sicht, in: *Ders., Wohin steuert die Ökumene? Vom Konsens- zum Differenzmodell*, Göttingen 2005, 44-70.49.



God implies her freedom: She does not have to constitute herself but is freed to the assuredness that another is steadily constituting her.

4. Hermeneutics

4.1. *The church—an interpretive community*

The church is the creation of the Word of God. Central to the life of the church, therefore, is the reference to that Word of God of which she expects preservation and renewal. Because of that the church can only be the church as a *listening* church, as *ecclesia audiens*. Other than that there is no church in a theological sense—without listening to the Word of God the church, metaphorically speaking, would never be born. And because God wants to let his Word be known through the biblical texts, listening to the Word of God concretely takes place in the continuing reference to those texts. The church that wants to hear the Word of God is the church that reads the Bible, the *ecclesia audiens* concretely lives as *ecclesia legens*. The church only exists, and only can exist, as an “interpretive community.”⁷

To be precise: Only as an interpretive community of *Scripture* can the church be the church. The action alone of reading a particular collection of text does not yet make the church the *communio sanctorum*, the Body of Christ. This she only becomes where God lets that collection of texts and the human act of reading serve his own purpose. Where that takes place, God speaks through the Bible, and in that human act of reading the hearing and appropriating of the Word of God happens. The church is the community that reads the Bible in the hope of this event of God coming in his Word.

Of course “reading of the Bible” has to be understood in a wide sense. It comprises the individual as well as the societal reading, the scholarly research as well as the meditation of a text, the text read aloud and preached or the interpretation of biblical texts in music, literature and art. The church reads the Bible in an appropriate way where it asks for the will of God for her existence in her particular time and situation. The hermeneutical implications will be reflected below.

Before that we have to remain with the question of what it means for the church to be an interpretive community of Scripture. The definition sheds light on

⁷ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1980.

the classical attributes of the church, as expressed in the Nicene Creed—the church as “one, holy, catholic and apostolic.” The marks of the church are part of the Credo, they cannot be verified in the empirical church. They are part of the invisible church, the church *believed in*. The church as founded in Christ and preserved and renewed through the Holy Spirit is only accessible to faith. The marks of the church are an expression of the fact that the church is rooted in Jesus Christ, and in that respect they are also exclusively accessible to faith. For the church that means that her marks are not her own in a strict sense but only as far as she is founded in Christ and maintained through the Spirit. It is the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church when and only when her Lord makes it that. If the church is founded through her listening to the Word of God in the act of reading the Bible, then her marks are also communicated through the reading of the Bible. Listening to the Bible, she becomes the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

The *unity* of the church is primarily her unity in Christ: “You are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). This primary unity of the church becomes a social reality, where the community listens to the proclamation of her unity in Christ. She is, however, only reached by this proclamation, where she is open for the Word of God—a Word of God that has the power to overcome her sinful limits and conflicts. This activity of the Word can take place where the church lives as a community where the Bible is read and interpreted.

Neither is the church *holy* in itself. Only God is holy, while the church is a people sanctified by God, called for a specific duty. The church is holy insofar as God calls her to be co-worker in his mission. For this God singles her out in the world and with this sanctifies her.

Catholicity and *apostolicity* strongly belong together; the universality of the church gets directly expressed in her mission. But these two marks again are not the church’s own, but only insofar as she participates in her Lord. Universal in a primary sense is the work of Christ, his death and resurrection. The church is the community of those men and women who have heard this universally valid news and therefore are sent to make it known to all humans. As in Christ universal validity and universal propagation correspond with each other, so in the church catholicity and apostolicity. The church is both, catholic and apostolic, only where she is made to be so through the Word of God. And this happens where she is primarily a church reading the Bible.



4.2. *The church—an interpretive community*

As shown above, God acts as a creator, sustainer and renewer of good relations within creation. What is true for God's will in general, especially holds for his action in Jesus Christ—and therefore in the community of the followers of Jesus, the body of Christ bound together through the Holy Spirit. It is especially Paul who emphasizes the relational character of the Gospel:

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf. (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

To belong to Christ means to belong to the community. The unity of the community of Christ can be justified pneumatologically as well: "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12)—it is the Spirit that joins the believers together to the unity of the body of Christ. This confirms what was just said about the ecclesial mark of unity, i.e. that the church is one insofar as it is *made one* by God.

The community of Christ, therefore, is communion in a fundamental sense. It is *communio sanctorum*, communion of the Saints, and as such a sign for the eschatological fulfillment of community in the whole of creation. Again this implies that communion is something primarily received by the church: The church becomes *communio sanctorum* when the Spirit makes her so. Community in the church is a passive event in the first place, and only in the second place is it an active one.

We vary things already said when we state: The Spirit joins the community together when she hears the Word of God. And the hearing of the Word of God only takes place where the community reads the Bible—not automatically, but "where and when it pleases to God." The communion of the church is directly linked to its reading the Bible; the church only becomes communion where she is an interpretive community. This again implies that the community of Christ first of all has to be a community of those who read and interpret the text of the Bible. Christ mediates himself to his church through the Bible, and reciprocally the church remains faithful to her Lord where and when she remains faithful to the Bible. Trust in Jesus Christ materializes in the trust of the Christian community, that she will always hear from Scripture what she needs.

The church lives as an interpretive community when it reads and interprets the Bible in common. To read the Bible in common, though, has not only a synchronic, but also a diachronic dimension. Through the centuries Scripture has always been *the* medium through which God communicated his truth and created faith. The church, on its way, was never without the Spirit who opened the biblical texts to her and with this sustained and renewed her. The church's interpretation of the Bible left imprints in a great number of texts: liturgies, hymns, prayers, sermons, but also in creeds and confessions. The church reads these texts in the hope that in the time of their production the Spirit opened God's truth to his community through the Bible and so kept it faithful to the truth. For this reason those texts can never replace the biblical texts, but as texts that were possibly caused by inspired interpretation of the Bible they deserve to seriously be listened to by the later church. For the same reason the church's listening to tradition also needs to be a critical, discerning listening—because the church may always have erred in its interpretation. Tradition in a Reformed (and reformational) understanding can never be more than the history of the interpretation of the Bible. Insofar as the interpretation of the Bible, though, can be understood pneumatologically, that history can be understood as the history of God's faithfulness to his church. In listening to tradition the church therefore shows her trust in God's faithfulness. And with this lives in communion with those who were church before us—and for those who will be church after us.

4.3. Hermeneutical implications

When the church in a fundamental sense is an interpretive community, its primary act will be reading the Bible. But what do we mean with "interpretation", and what with "reading." Our thesis implies a whole range of hermeneutical questions.

First of all we have to say that the act of reading is nothing else than the ordinary process of deciphering and understanding of alphabetic characters, in which we decode messages in books, newspapers, letters, emails or texting. There is no sacred reading in addition to a profane reading. Reading, however, is "theory-laden" and full of presuppositions, an act in which theory and practice closely interact. It makes a difference to a reader whether she understands reading as finding a meaning in the web of a text, or as the construction of meaning by the recipient. Both text- and reader-oriented models of literature lead to different attitudes of reading, which are mainly focussed on the shape of the text on the one hand or by personal associations on the other.



A second hermeneutical implication therefore has to do with text-theory: If we start with the assumption that through the biblical text God reaches out to humans with his faith-founding Word, the resulting attitude towards the text can only be a radical faithfulness to that text. Faithfulness to the text—to say it again—is nothing else than trust in God’s faithfulness. Hermeneutics of the Bible will therefore aim at letting the biblical text finish speaking and not to manipulate it with personal objections. A hermeneutics of the Bible will be fundamentally receptive, undergirded by the expectation that these texts will tell us what we need for living.

There is no denying that in every act of understanding there is always a dimension of the reader constituting the meaning of the text. The productive part of reading is the necessary precondition for appropriating the meaning of a text within one’s own horizon of understanding. Theologically speaking, however, the productive part of reading can and will also be the activity of a sinner who intends to exclude the salvific and transformative truth of the Bible from his or her life. Interpretation will always be both, appropriation of the Gospel’s truth and defense against it. Provided the reader’s activity in the act of understanding, the appropriate attitude towards the biblical text can, in Webster’s term, be characterized as “focussed attentiveness.”⁸ Focussed attentiveness is the counterpart on the reader’s side to the properties *claritas*, *perspicuitas* and *efficacia*, all of them sustained by the inspiration of Scripture. Attentiveness bears witness to the trust that the Spirit will pass on God’s truth to the readers—against all human attempts to sinfully misunderstand and misinterpret the text.

The question remains of the hermeneutical implications of the fact that the church is an interpretive *community*. After all that has been said there can be no doubt that there will in fact be such implications. The church can only live as an interpretive community when and if she reads the Bible *in community*. Interpretation in community occurs where particular interpretations are put in perspective and correct each other, but also where particular interpretations enrich each other. Each interpretation of the Bible is made possible but also confined by culturally defined categories of understanding. This limitation can only be overcome through contact to interpretations made on the basis of different categories of understanding.

If the church’s reading of the Bible on principle takes place within a community of readers, we are compelled to positively assess the plurality of interpretations

⁸ Webster, *Scripture*, 90.

within that church. Interpretation of the Bible in community is the hermeneutical dimension of the Pauline doctrine of charisms, and as in the respective chapters in Paul uniformity is not the goal but *koinonia*, communion. Interpretation of a biblical text in community does not aim at the one correct understanding, but in and through the plurality of interpretations we are bound to come to communion.

Belief in the clarity, perspicuity and effectiveness of Scripture also implies that the Word of God has the power to articulate the truth of the gospel in and through the community of interpreters. It is that connection between ecclesiology and hermeneutics which makes dispensable a Reformed doctrine of the *magisterium*. The *magisterium* would have the office to watch over the unity of the church's interpretation of the Bible and its doctrine. Reformed theology, on the other hand, affirms that it is the Spirit that watches over the unity—in the plurality of the members of the body of Christ.

From here we can get an answer to the pressing ecumenical question whether the common reference to the Bible is not the only and most reliable way to the unity of the church. Undoubtedly the answer to that question must be yes. At the same time we have to be aware that if we understand the church as an internally pluralistic interpretive community, we get a clear hint as to how to understand the unity of the church. Unity of the church obviously includes a high degree of internal plurality! I therefore agree with Michael Weinrich, when he writes: "Ecclesiologically speaking plurality essentially makes part of *koinonia*. ...Not plurality in the church has to be pitied, but the lack of *koinonia*."⁹

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⁹ Michael Weinrich, *Die Bibel legt sich selber aus. Die ökumenische Herausforderung des reformatorischen Schriftprinzips oder vom verheissungsvollen Ärger angemessener Bibelauslegung*, in: Hubert Frankemölle (ed.), *Die Bibel. Das bekannte Buch - das fremde Buch*, Paderborn et al. 1994, 43-59.58 (Transl. MZ).



Hermeneutics of the Meeting of Worlds and the Principle of *Sola Scriptura*

Yolanda Dreyer

1 *Sola scriptura*—hindrance or catalyst?

The maxim *sola scriptura*, which acknowledges the Bible as primary authority, did not and does not succeed in uniting the Reformed world. Especially when it comes to ethical matters—how to treat others—there are often widely divergent views and practices among Reformed and often even among the so-called “Calvinist” churches. The question is: if unity is not rooted in *sola scriptura*, what is the root of the lack of unity?

In countries with a turbulent colonial past reasons such as *socio-political* conflict or *cultural* diversity can be given to explain the lack of unity among Christian believers. Is *theology* the main reason for the underlying lack of unity, or can theology also offer a remedy and bring the Reformed world together?

In my own context of South Africa the great majority of the people are not only religious but also predominantly Christian. The Bible is of central importance. Where Christian churches generally accept a common confession such as, for instance, the Nicene Creed, the confessions could also be a unifying factor. However, when that which we share, Scripture and commonly accepted creeds, collide with real life, stark divisions in the Christian community come to the fore. Complexities that cause division are identified by Naudé (2002:48-49) as: our political and church histories; our diverse cultures and language; our socio-economic divides. According to him, the divisions are much more than credal confession and therefore attempts at church unity is but a slow and painful process.

Since the inception of the creeds and in all the ages thereafter where they were interpreted, the survival and integrity of Christian identity has, according to Hood (1990:xi) been threatened “in this world of many and varied cultures.” Today, neither the ancient Greek or Latin thought expressed in the commonly accepted creeds or an European or American approach to the interpretation and application of Scripture can be sufficient to forge unity among the great variety of ecumenical partners.

If *oikumene* today is what the World Council of Churches envisioned it in the Toronto Declaration, namely “the whole work of the whole church” proclaiming the gospel to the “whole world,” then the unity of the church is not the main aim. The aim is service to the world (Naudé 2002:51; see Frieling 1992:6). In this era of globalization one world has already become a reality (see Huber 1980:48). How to live in unity in this one world is a profoundly ethical matter. Therefore ethics should be the primary criterion for Christian praxis which aims to mend and transcend division. This should not be hindered by “ecclesial neo-colonialism” (Naudé 2002:49; see Hood 1990:247-248). “A careful and drawn-out explication of the creeds” will not bring a divided Christian world closer to unity and harmony. Therefore Naudé (2002:52) rather emphasizes “normative praxis” which will in any case always be informed by the commonly accepted creeds and confessions. Guidelines for an ethical life are found in Scripture, and especially in the cause of Jesus. Being true to Scripture is to “live a holy and liberating life” (Horgan 1988:65).

An ecumenical perspective has to be cultivated carefully and deliberately, bringing people and their theologies together. This bringing together is rooted in the gospel. How God opens God-self to humankind, how God draws people into relationship with God and others, is what brings believers together. The term *ekklesia*, gathering, assembly, expresses such a bringing together. The *ekklesia* searches for truth together and the end result of this is rich and interesting (see Lange 1972). However, if “truth” which is discovered together is not implemented in real life but remains abstract, the result is mere institutionalized ideology. The *ekklesia* will lose the ability to be “gathered together” in fruitful dialogue.

The Reformed idea of the clarity and transparency of Scripture says something of Scripture’s potential to bring about unity in theology. Unity is not to be found “in a closed system, a bastion of ‘truths’ that has to be defended, but in an *open* system” (Geense 1987:444). This kind of theology will be rich in its variety and open to surprise. When new perspectives on truth are brought together to enrich people’s lives and faith, they are challenged to work together to put them into practice for the benefit of all. This would be the theological ideal.

In the reality of a broken world, however, socio-political power and culture are main contributors to disunity in the Christian world. Conflict of theological interpretation is another major contributor. In this regard the widely accepted idea of *sola scriptura* has not succeeded in bringing about unity. A reason for Scripture losing its “clarity” in practice could be that the Authority *behind* the authority of Scripture is not sufficiently recognized. If this Authority, the person



of Christ, remains central to all thinking and practices, the things of people and the world such as politics and culture, interpretations and customs, will always be viewed with suspicion. However, Jesus Christ is not a tangible, easily defined and unequivocally explained entity either. We do not “have” Jesus clearly tied down in Scripture. We can only catch glimpses of him throughout Scripture and try and figure out what he was all about, what his *cause* was. In the real world with all its complexities, it is the task of the faith community to identify what is central to the cause of Jesus and what is not, and then to try and live according to the spirit of what Jesus stood for, taught and lived.

2. The authority of Scripture and the listening church

Whether the authority of Scripture is intrinsic or extrinsic, comes from Scripture itself or from outside of Scripture, has long been a topic of discussion. If the authority of Scripture comes from the outside, it would mean that the *regula fidei*, the rule of faith which reflects God’s “plan of salvation,” existed before Scripture and played a role in the formation of Scripture. This pre-existing plan was then “written into” Scripture. If the authority is seen as intrinsic the *regula fidei* is to be found in Scripture itself. If it is in Scripture it can also be extricated from Scripture (see Topping 2007:101).

Related to the question of the *authority* of Scripture, is the question of how to *interpret* Scripture. Where the authority question was about extrinsic or intrinsic authority, the question regarding biblical interpretation is to what extent the Bible is of human or divine origin—the focus on it having been written by people or the focus on it having been given by God.

General principles of hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation or the understanding of a text, can be applied also to biblical interpretation. Then biblical interpretation is a hermeneutical effort like any other, about understanding this text as you would any other. However, there is also a difference. In theological hermeneutics God and the crucified and risen Jesus Christ are central to the understanding of Scripture. On the one hand, Scripture contains the *kerygma* (proclamation) about God and Jesus Christ (see Koester 1989:361-381). On the other hand, Scripture is also a product of human communication. It reflects its human origins, its cultural context. The authors’ ideologies are revealed by the way in which they present the text, which arguments, language and imagery they use.

The authors can sometimes appeal to a “higher power” (God) to give weight to their own interests and claims. This is called “mystification” (see Adam 1995:15). In spite of the very humanity of the authors, Scripture is also born of their faith in God. Their intention was not to create a system of eternal truth claims, but rather to express and convey their faith to others. The end product is therefore both born out of faith and devotion and severely “tainted” because it is profoundly human. Any attempt to interpret Scripture should be able to accommodate this tension. If not, harmful distortion will be the result.

Taking the human element seriously and still having the right reverence for the Authority behind Scripture and the divine element is not an easy balance to maintain. In order to avoid the distortion of too much emphasis on the interpreting person, Ricoeur counteracts with a strong focus on the text itself. He is interested in the structure of the text. In this way distance is created between the person and the text. A similar distance between the context of the text and the text itself is also necessary for the same reason. Neither the interpreter nor the context of the text should dominate. The text should speak for itself and unfold its own meaning to the reader. Then the uniqueness of the Bible will come to light.

Taking the God element seriously is also not a simple matter. We acknowledge that God is the centre of the Scripture. However, the way in which God is named in Scripture is not straightforward. The naming of God in Scripture is “indirect,” “multiple” and “polyphonic” (Topping 2007:114). Scripture contains a great variety of kinds of texts (genres). Each has its own characteristic ways of expression (see Webster 1992:130-131; Ricoeur 1995:228; Hayes 2003:136) and talking about and naming God. The God element in the interpretation of Scripture is what makes understanding this text different from understanding other texts. The hermeneutical principles and task remain the same. However, this philosophical-literary inquiry is done in service of Scripture because of Scripture’s “unique subject matter, God.” According to Topping (2007:115) God’s name “is the point at which biblical literature both converges and eludes our grasp.”

When the present-day faith community interprets Scripture, the biblical text has already acquired a distance or independence from the author, from the initial audience and from its initial context or world (see Ricoeur 2002:7-26; Pokorný 2011:178). In different times and contexts different interpreters of the text will attribute different meanings to the text. This can lead to a “conflict of interpretations” (see Topping 2007:117).



Such conflict should then be managed by the faith community. This can be done in different ways (see Ricoeur 2002:20-24):

- One way is for the community to gather a collection of texts that all regard as authoritative – a canon is formed.
- A second possibility is to establish a tradition of interpretation. This traditional way of interpreting then guides all subsequent attempts at interpretation.
- A third way is to elevate the status of some books above others, to identify those that are particularly worth reading.
- A fourth way is that the community decides from instance to instance how texts should be interpreted.

“Canon” is a concept foreign to the Bible itself. Scripture gives no indication of which books are to be regarded as “the rule” for the lives of believers. As far as the Hebrew Bible is concerned, the Greek translation (LXX) and the Latin translation (Vulgate) were used in the early Christian church. In circa 400 Jerome attempted to convince the church to accept the Vulgate as the “only written rule” of the church but was not successful. The process of forming a canon for the early Christian church was only completed round about the fourth century. The list of the 27 documents that today comprise the New Testament was contained in an “Easter Letter” of Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria (see Schaff & Wallace [1891] 2007:xii).

Both the community’s collection of texts and their interpretations of the texts become authoritative (see Ricoeur 2002:15). The community derives its identity from these texts in which it “recognizes” itself (LaCocque & Ricoeur 1998:xv-xix; see Ricoeur 1979:68-72, 217-218; Ricoeur 1998:142-145). This can be criticized as a “circular argument:” the faith community derives its authority from the very Scriptures to which it allocates authority. Ricoeur, however, rejects this criticism. The canon of Scripture is not imposed on the faith community. It is rather “recognized” or “received” by it (Ricoeur 2002:25-26). For Topping (2007:118-119), “these terms introduce a sense of freedom and consent into the notion of authority.” The “greatness” of the texts are *recognized*. That is why the faith community *chooses* to *receive* the texts as their guiding principle and follows its message in their way of life.

Though it represents tradition, Scripture should be read and interpret *critically* (Barr 1983:105-106) because it is not a “fixed metaphysical entity” (Topping 2007:158) but the dynamic product of a community, which originated over a substantial period of time. Which documents are accepted by the faith community as its norm for a life of faith is, in essence, a statement of what they believe, what they find important and what they hold dear. It is not a fixed system of truth claims. It articulates faith. Scripture is infused (*beseelt*) by the Holy Spirit (Schleiermacher [1830] 1960: Section 127:2). It is not a fixed and closed entity but contains the basic features (*Grundzüge*) of faith. Willi Marxsen (1976:45-62) sees Jesus as the one who brings the gospel message (*Bringer des Evangeliums*) rather than as the “content” of the gospel (*Inhalt des Evangeliums*). Marxsen’s (1968a, 1970:233-246) *Sache Jesu* which, for him, is the “canon behind the canon” is equivalent to Schleiermacher’s “basic features” of the Christian faith. It is therefore not the Bible as document which is the “true canon” or even the historical person Jesus, but rather the Word, message of Jesus Christ, which speaks through the Bible—the *kerygma* (according to Luther [1523] 1545, *WADB* 8.12.5 = 1883 *das in der Bibel sprechende Wort*). It is Jesus Christ who is the “hidden treasure” in Scripture. It is not about the book itself. Also Karl Barth ([1947/1964] 2003:62) sees the canon not as a “fixed matter” but as a dynamic expression of the faith of the community.

A critical reading can make a positive contribution to the “theological function” Scripture fulfils for the church. With this the academy, which is free from institutional and ecclesial restrictions, can assist because it “prevents the imprisonment of the Bible in the categories and language of the present religious community and positively enables the Bible to speak afresh to the church” (Topping 2007:159). Flexibility is necessary if Scripture is to speak meaningfully not only to the people for whom it was written, but also to people of different cultures and eras, including to the people of God today (see Topping 2007:161). A fixed entity interpreted in a fixed way over centuries could not keep communicating meaningfully over time, especially not to our rapidly changing contemporary world.

The faith community expects to hear the voice of God through Scripture. It needs the great distance between the world of the text and the world of today to be overcome in a viable way. This bridge between then and now is built by knowledge and understanding of where the text comes from. The hearing of believers today “should be modified, refined and clarified through our knowledge of the actual character of the biblical text, as mediated through critical, historical and other sorts of knowledge” (Barr 1983:118). Regarding



biblical texts as living texts that speak to our lives today, attempting to get to know and understand their contexts, cultures and languages better, is being respectful to the text. The way in which Scripture is used by the church should not be in conflict with what Topping (2007:167) calls “the actual nature of the texts.” That would be disrespectful. Reading and interpreting Scripture as a joint venture between the living faith (the faith community) and gathering knowledge in service of a better understanding (the academy) can be a fruitful relationship which will ensure the freedom of and respect for the text.

3. The meeting of worlds

The two worlds, that of text and that of the contemporary world, are far apart. Hermeneutics, which searches for understanding and viable ways to interpret, can help to bridge the divide. It is that great distance, the otherness of the ancient texts, that makes them difficult for us to understand. However, it is exactly because they have stood the test of time that they are so attractive to us. They have “retained their weight for so long a time, because they can be a path to understanding the past, but above all because it is precisely their authority and durability that lead us to associate with them an expectation more important to us, namely, that they may even open a path ‘ahead,’ to the future (they may be a ‘memory of the future’)” (Pokorný 2011:178).

Interpretation, our effort to understand respectfully, is what constructs the bridge between the two worlds. The text as it presents itself is studied, and we reflect on the differences between the world of the text and the contemporary world. This is a “double movement” of understanding: the text is understood by us in relation to its world, and the text is understood by us in relation to our world. Because the text is the norm, our understanding should be tested against the text (Pokorný 2011:178-180).

The task of hermeneutics is to gather building material for the construction of a bridge between the two worlds. It is to find commonalities so that a connection can be established. There are two parties, two voices, that take part in the communication, which is a mutual affair. One party in the communication effort is the contemporary reader who approaches the text from two angles: with a measure of knowledge of the text (what we already know), and with the expectation to be surprised, informed and guided by the text. The other party is the text which communicates in two directions, namely back to its own world for which the message was intended and also outwards to the other worlds. Subsequent readers from different contexts and eras can come to a

new self-understanding on account of their communication with the text. The expectation is met. The text does something with the reader. This “independent power” of the text to affect change in the reader is what Ricoeur (1984:52-87; 1985:157-179) calls *mimesis*³ or re-figuration. Each reader will refigure the message of the text in their own unique way.

In order to achieve this new self-understanding the reader’s task is to interpret the text reflectively and methodically. This process is a “fusion of horizons,” a merging of the worlds of the text and the reader (see Gadamer 1989: 286-289). This creates a “third world” for the contemporary reader which should not differ substantially from the world of the readers for whom the text was first intended (Pokorný 2011:181). According to the “Faith and Order Paper No. 99” (in Flesseman-van Leer 1980:57) of the World Council of Churches (WCC), “the contemporary interpretative process is in fact simply the continuation of the interpretative process which begins in the Bible itself.” If the message of Scripture is not constantly interpreted anew in the real contexts of real people, it becomes “a dead letter.” The challenge, according to the WCC, is to interpret Scripture in such a way that, simultaneously “its authority is respected and it sets us free to understand the demands and opportunities of our present time.” If the integrity of the message is not preserved in the process of interpretation, the authority of the text will be compromised.

The two worlds do sometimes have enough in common for the modern-day reader to be able to identify with the text. This is especially the case with texts that express an “overall orientation in life” as well as those that express “some basic human feelings and experiences” (Pokorný 2011:181). If it is about a common humanity or common human experiences and emotions, people over a great divide of time, place and culture, can nevertheless relate. These common human traits are called “anthropological universals” (see Pokorný 2011:182).

However, there are many more factors that create difference between the worlds. The modern-day reader is tempted to distort the other world in order for it to fit into the world as it is known to the reader. Therefore it is necessary for interpreting readers not only to be open to the world of the text but also to be critical of their own thinking processes and interpretation (see Tracy 1981:64). Pokorný (2011:184) puts it as follows: “It is a matter of the reconstruction of the reader’s thinking, in which confrontation with the text and its world has led to the ‘opening up’ of the reader’s life world, to the discovery of the reader’s own situatedness, to the de-ideologization of our pictures of the world, and to insight into the historicity of our pictures of the world.” This “opening up” of the text



points to the future (see Bayer 2002:103-120)—the message will have its effect and exert its influence on a future world that is yet to come. The meaning of the text therefore also goes beyond the contemporary reader's present horizon.

Reading and interpreting a text affect a *change* in one's understanding of oneself and one's world. As Pokorný (2011:186; see Thiselton 1992:272) puts it: "To understand something means to understand oneself." Understanding enriches the reader's life. An insight is discovered that makes a difference. It is a discovery of new meaning. The emphasis of the interpretation of biblical texts should therefore not be so much on what the text itself says but rather on the self-understanding to which the text can bring the reader (see Bultmann 1967:22). Understanding a text is not only a subjective *individual* meaning making effort, but also has a *social aspect* and is handed down collectively as *tradition* (Pokorný 2011:188).

4. The role of the reader

Where hermeneutical theories assist with understanding the *text*, reception theory (European origin) or reader-response theory (North American origin) focuses on the role of the *reader* in the process of communication and understanding (see Lategan 2009:457). It is about the interaction between the text and the receiver. Readers approach a text not only with a certain pre-knowledge of the text itself, but also as persons with their own history, culture, social location, psychological make-up and life circumstances.

Readers play a pivotal role in bringing an ancient text to life in the contemporary world. They are the one's who "decode" and understand the communication of the author. If the worlds of the author and reader are similar, the process of decoding can be more competently done than when there is a large divide between the two worlds. Meaning is imparted by means of a variety of techniques and strategies and also on different levels. By means of these strategies the reader is drawn into the world of the text. The reader experiences certain reactions and emotions. The value system reflected in the text can offer readers a new way of looking at their world and bring them to a new self-understanding (Lategan 2009: 461).

Readers' attitude towards the text will affect their understanding of the text. Dormeyer (1987:120) distinguishes between a naïve and a critical reader. The naïve reader experiences the text and is open to be changed by the text. The critical reader has a more analytical and cognitive approach to the text. Readers

find themselves somewhere on a continuum between these two extremes. Even a single reader's approach can vary from time to time.

Reading is a "mysterious merger of text, reader and context" (Fowler 1983:45; see Todorov 1980:67). The text is not a clear-cut and uncomplicated message from one person (the real author) to another (the real reader). In the text itself, the real reader has to go in search of cues that point to meaning and message that are conveyed by the text. The process is that of a back and forth movement among cues in the text, rather than a linear progression of understanding.

The reader does not only "absorb" the text as stands but actively interacts with the different codes in the text. The result of this processing is that the text itself and how the reader understands it are not the same. Readers tend to process a text as visual images rather than as abstract cognitive concepts. While reading, the reader forms a picture of the world of the text. That narrative world is experienced visually while a person reads. It is as though the reader participates in the real world of the story. According to Petersen (1984:42-43), "reader response criticism must therefore take into account not only the relationship between readers and texts, but also the relationship between readers and the worlds they create from texts."

Reading is not an innocent activity. Readers come to the text with their own ideological orientation, their own existential situation, their life experience and reading experience. All of this plays a role in how they read and understand the text. It is also not only about their reading and experiencing the narrative of the text. What they make of it in their world can have "far-reaching consequences." Therefore Lategan (2009:480-482) cautions that reading of the biblical text should be approached with "the utmost responsibility and respect."

5. The hermeneutics of being human

In order to understand and interpret their world and their holy Scriptures and find what "truth" means for them, a variety of contexts are relevant. People's own context is not simple or straightforward but rather complex. The same goes for the contexts of the Scriptures. These two sets of "complicated" obscure the process of understanding. Who human beings are and what one thinks of being human plays a role in the hermeneutical enterprise (Thiselton 2007:177).

If understanding another world requires a coming together of the two worlds, a "fusion of horizons," the term "horizon" in hermeneutics refers to the "home" location. This is a social world of shared meaning. If people did not



share meanings, the result would be utter confusion. Thiselton (2007:177-178) describes such confusion as occurring “when language slips from its moorings and ‘goes on holiday’” (Thiselton 2007:177-178). A “home horizon” is already complicated and not simple to understand. For an interpreter of Scripture who does not even quite understand the “home horizon” to venture out in an attempt to understand an unfamiliar world becomes a daunting task.

In Christian thought the “home horizon” has been securely moored in an understanding of human beings as relational—both in relationship with God as Creator, as the one in whose image they exist, and the God who chooses to relate out of a radical love (Moltmann 1985:13-40, 57-60, 215-275)—and in relationship to others.

In the contemporary world’s understanding of what it means to be human, faith and a relationship with God are not necessarily the point of departure. There are other “home horizons,” such as a bio-physical understanding of what it means to be human. These two different points of departure need not be mutually exclusive but can be enriching. For those with a “home horizon” of faith and a relationship with God, it is relevant to also “enter into” the horizons of others (see Schleiermacher 1977:42). If understanding is not about being in the world with concrete human (physical or relational) problems and circumstances, “*hermeneutics* comes to be replaced by brittle, abstract, *a priori* systems” (Thiselton 2007:182).

Some horizons cannot, however, be compatible and enriching but are conflicting. For instance, Thiselton (2007:193) regards the “home horizon” of Christian faith and its understanding of the human condition (original sin in the Augustinian sense and, according to Schleiermacher, “humankind without a God-consciousness”) as incompatible with “the horizons of understanding nurtured and shaped by individualism and pragmatic progressivism in the late modern West.” If there is a distance of otherness between horizons, the question would be whether the gap can be bridged and, if it is a possibility, then how? Western thought has, for instance progressed past the individualistic and progressivist understanding of humanity. The perspective of postmodern philosophers such as Michel Foucault’s (1970; 1977; 1981:93) on the human condition is no longer that incompatible with the Christian viewpoint. Both agree that the human condition has corporate, structural and communal dimensions (Thiselton 2007:196). According to Ricoeur (1981:62) all horizons have some flexibility

1 See Schleiermacher [1821-1822] [1830-1831] 1999: 364.

and “can be contracted or enlarged” in order to create a mutual space where differences can meet and find some commonality.

6. The listening church and the *Sache Jesu* as “principle of Scripture”

If God’s action in Jesus Christ is the “principle of Scripture” then Jesus, rather than Scripture, is *the revelation* (see Marxsen 1968b:284). Jesus is “God’s becoming event” (see Van Aarde 2001:153). According to William Thompson (1985:115), “Christianity is not a religion of a book, but of a person, Jesus the Risen One.”

A religion of the book would focus on a divinely inspired Bible and the teaching (dogma) that can be distilled from it. Bible and dogma together would become a system. Scripture should rather be seen as a dynamic, living word of a *spiritual* nature (see Bultmann 1932:145-165). A system would be, in the theology of Paul, caught up in the *sarkikos* existence of humanity. As 2 Corinthians 3:6b puts it: “The written law brings death, but the Spirit gives life.” The life-giving Word communicates with living people who, in a dynamic interaction with the Word, receive it, respond to it and proclaim it in order to bring life to a world which is caught up in a deathly existence.

Jesus is not captured in Scripture. Only traces of God’s coming event in Jesus can be found in Scripture. The New Testament which witnesses to Jesus, therefore, is the document in which the “normative codification of the Jesus event” (Thompson 1985:115) can be discovered. Believers go to Jesus *through the biblical text*. From the first century and through the ages, the cause of Jesus is normative as “principle of Scripture” and is normative for the lives of believers. By participating in the cause of Jesus believers participate in God. According to Schleiermacher, it is the sharing of Jesus’ God-consciousness (see Oseka 2015:40). This participation takes place by means of the witness of other believers as codified in Scripture (see Van Aarde 2001:150).

It would be gross misappropriation to make the witness of other believers that is codified in Scripture into an instrument of power and use it against others (see Altieri 1990; Chapman 2000:93-97; Ter Borg 1998:411-423). Power and the way it was used and abused over the ages has been an impediment to the centrality of Jesus and his cause in the life of the faith community. It is not only about how Scripture has been used as an instrument of power that is the problem, however. Scripture itself is in some ways an obstacle to the cause of Jesus. An



example is the “twisted claim to authority and the submission of women” in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and Titus 2:5 (see Van Aarde 2001:153). To this day, the matter has not been resolved in Christian and Reformed faith communities all over the world.

A possible biblical theological solution to the problem regarding the full humanity of women today, is to distinguish between (though not separate) the “proclaiming Jesus” and the “proclaimed Christ” in order to critically discern whether what is proclaimed about and in the name of Jesus is of the same mind as that which Jesus taught and modelled (see Van Aarde 2001:154). A minimum consensus with regard to the cause of Jesus would include the following:

- *all* people have unrestricted access to God;
- *no mediator* is necessary—God makes unrestricted access possible;
- the gospel of Jesus Christ requires righteousness and a boundless love;
- life in God’s presence is meaningful even amid the reality of transience.

The *cause of Jesus* is not the same as the *historical Jesus*. For Gerhard Ebeling (1959:224-251) the proclamation (*kerygma*) of the church is the key to understanding Christ. The historical Jesus is the key to authentic human existence (Ebeling [1959] 1967:300-318). Authentic human existence cannot be fathomed by “knowing historical facts” about Jesus (*what* he did), but rather by relating to *who* he was. The fact *that* he was is more important to faith than what he did (see Bultmann ([1960] 1965; Ebeling [1962] 1963:52). What he did is about his bodily existence (*sarx*), which came to an end. Who he was has to do with the realm of the spirit (*pneuma*), the realm of God, his God-consciousness. What the followers of Jesus believe (the realm of the spirit), is expressed by faith assertions about his life and what he did (his bodily existence). What his followers believe and proclaim is *that* Jesus is the becoming event of God, and, as such, the ground of Christian faith. Redemption is the participation in Jesus’ God-consciousness through “hearing and believing” (Rom 10:14-15) the *kerygma* about God’s kingdom. His cause is rooted in the historical person of Jesus. He, a transient human being, opens the door to the intransient God, so that other transient human beings can enter.

Scripture, as the faith assertions of human beings over many ages, is not “innocent” or perfect. It should not be romanticized as is often the case among faith communities that pride themselves on being “biblical.” Luther ([1522] [1963] 1990:63) already cautioned that both the traditions of the faith community

as they develop, and also the traditions in Scripture itself, should be carefully examined. If such critical reflection is not undertaken the result is often that, in an attempt to defend the Bible out of “respect,” conflicting and opposing elements in the Bible that make people uncomfortable are harmonized and explained away. This in effect distorts the reality and truth of Scripture in a controlling, and therefore disrespectful, way. Such distortions do not serve God, Jesus or Scripture but serve people’s ideologies about the Bible. These ideologies then dictate the approach to and interpretation of Scripture.

Should “the cause of Jesus” be accepted as a kind of “canon within the canon” (Luther’s “Kanon des Kanons”—see Strathmann 1970:41; Gloege 1970:26; Maurer 1960:77) this strategy could be criticized as reductionist, impoverishing rather than enriching the Jesus tradition. However, Adriaanse (1998:320) explains that such an approach can make two things possible:

- to acknowledge that some of what is in the canon as we know it, does not serve the biblical message;
- to recognize that some of what does serve the biblical message, can also be found outside the canon.

The authority to which Scripture witnesses lies therefore not in the Bible itself. It also does not lie in how the church interprets the Bible. It rather lies in the appeal that believers’ words and deeds should be in accordance with the cause of Jesus. This goes not only for the lives of believers who read the Bible but also for the biblical authors whose witness so profoundly influenced the lives of believers throughout the ages (Van Aarde 2001:160).

Imbued with the Spirit of God, it becomes possible to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (1 Corinthians 12:3). To Christian believers this means that they encounter God through the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The Christian faith is not a book religion. Christians do not “believe in the Bible.” They believe in God. Scripture is the medium through which they encounter God because of God’s becoming-event in Jesus Christ. Christians take up the cause of Jesus and his message of the kingdom of God.

The question should not be: “What is historical?” It should rather be: “Where do I find God?” Faith built on what is historical, would be rooted in the realm of the material world, on what is human, transient and leads to death. Faith built on the coming event of God in Jesus is to ground one’s faith in the grace of God, the realm of the spirit, which leads to life.



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Biblical Multiplicity and the Unity of the Church

Approaches to a wide ranged agenda

Michael Weinrich

The Bible is one book consisting of many books. Oneness and multiplicity are closely related to one another. As such it is seen as the witness of the Word of God. This witness originates from many different voices. The one book embraces the testimony of many different human witnesses from a historical period of some three thousand years and preserves a wide ranged variety of traditions represented by people and communions scattered all over the Near East and Asia Minor. The Bible mirrors the diversity of various local and historical circumstances. Obviously there is an enormous distance or even gap between the narrative on Moses keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro in the desert at the mountain Horeb (Exodus 3) and the Revelation to John at the end of the New Testament. Nevertheless the Bible has been and is still seen as an appropriate basis for the self-clarification of the Christian profession of faith through the centuries—through the times and throughout the world. The church claims the biblical canon to be the singular and peculiar scale, the *norma normans* for a contemporary and vivid understanding of Christian faith. And at the same time there is an obvious tension between the uniqueness of the Word of God compiled in the peculiarity of one emphasized book and the plurality and diversity of its presentation and unveiling in a wide range of different testimonies and narratives.

If we turn our attention to the Christians, we also face a multiplicity of churches, confessions, denominations and Christian patterns intermingled in religious patchwork-identities. In a particular manner they all are related to the Bible as a special source of orientation. And at the same time every church insists on its special characteristics accompanied by more or less clear ideas regarding the demarcations to other bodies of faith. They all take themselves as church in the full sense and assume at least in mind that all the other bodies suffer this or that deficit, legitimating the division or at least the publicly cultivated distance. The gravity of the resulting separations is very different; in some cases it is just a matter of an accidental historical development, and in other cases the separations are the result of severe doctrinal controversies. But all in all the situation regarding the diversity of the churches is hopeless compared to the observed diversity of biblical testimonies of the one Word of God. The latter are kept together in the unity of the canonical received Bible, while the churches



split up into separate pieces, in which each is more or less living on its own. The enormous variety of different biblical testimonies is embraced as a focused diversity in one Holy Scripture, while the ecclesial bodies establish borders and moats between themselves to indicate their own indispensability or even uniqueness as the true church. The situation is well known, but as long as the churches do not realize that none of them can be the true church as long as it continues to accept the separation from the other brothers and sisters in faith. In this point we observe a ridiculous peace under the separated churches, in which they all share the same deficit of unity and real solidarity.

Actually it is not enough to state that a church provides everything what makes a church a church as long as one is not in the position to say at the same time that it includes all who truly believe in Christ. Here we face the tension between providing everything and failing concerning the inclusion of all. Mind you, this tension is not a deficit in terms of quantity but a deficit in terms of quality. This is my thesis to be explicated: this tension results from the unrealized complexity of the substantial oscillation between diversity and unity as it is met in the biblical canon. As long as our dealing with the diversity of the biblical witness has no correspondence in our ecclesiological dealing with the diversity of churches we fail the appropriate usage of the biblical witness regarding a realistic catholicity of the church. We fail the specific character of the catholicity of the canon. From the very beginning the constitution of the biblical canon was related to a specific ecumenical awareness, which was lost by the empowerment of a centralized church and its claim for the uniformity of its unity. The reason for this claim is basically more related to a political than to a theological vision. Still today we favour our confessional ownership above the biblically inspired needs about a vivid diversity within the catholicity of the church.

The following chapters are the attempt to sketch a map of aspects that foster the ecclesiological relevance of an appropriate treating of the biblical diversity in the framework of its canonical acceptance. Every aspect of this outline needs its own further explanation.

1. The canon's emergence as an ecumenical process inclusive character of canonicity

It is widely accepted that the emergence of the New Testament is not so much the result of theological judgments related to clear theological criteria but rather a more or less silent process of collecting and keeping the Scriptures in use in the life of the widely scattered congregations of the early church. If

there was a dispute on the acceptance of one of Scriptures—such as the letter to the Hebrews or the book of Revelation—the crucial question was: are these Scriptures in use in the life of concrete congregations or not, and if this was given, they were taken even if there were many congregations not using the respective Scriptures. One of the main purposes of the coordination of a collection of Scriptures being accepted by the whole church was that this collection could serve as a convincing reference for the catholicity of the church. The collection of New Testament Scriptures emerged as a kind of bond, which ties all the different congregations in one church together, which is professed as the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.” Its affection aims more on inclusion than on exclusion; its protection is directed more to the wholeness of the communion (*koinonia*) than to the completeness or correctness of doctrinal motifs. It is more characterized by a tendency to social than to theological dimensions.

Also the pragmatism of collecting the proper Scriptures was likely more about the age than about theological correctness. Even apostolicity was not really a theological criterion but an attribute of originality in terms of closeness to the decisive origins of the profession of the risen Christ. The process of acknowledgement was mainly informal, and the collection got its authority in the course of self-impressing evidence by the Scriptures themselves.¹ The respective resolutions of synods (383 Rome, 393 Hippo Regius and 397 Carthage) are more or less a later confirmation of a decision that was already made silently by usage much earlier.

This does not mean that there were no debates about the theological quality of the used Scriptures. Especially the controversies with gnostic circles played an important role already in the very beginning, but they should not be overestimated at the expense of the diverse practical factors involved. There is no doubt that especially Marcion’s radically reduced selection of relevant Scriptures was an important challenge for identifying theological criteria for a proper Christian witness, but even the critical dispute against Marcion was not conducted only by theological arguments. Also Marcion should not be overestimated as it was emphasized by Adolf von Harnack and later by Hans von Campenhausen: Marcion’s influence was important, but as single person he was by far not the only steering force to establish a proper selection of Christian Scriptures.²

1 Cf. Heinrich Karpp, *Schrift, Geist und Wort Gottes. Geltung und Wirkung der Bibel in der Geschichte der Kirche*, Darmstadt 1992, 16.

2 Cf. *Wilhelm Schneemelcher*, *Bibel III*, in: *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* Vol. 6, Berlin 1980, 22–48, 37.



The undoubted basis of the Septuaginta was a decisive criterion for the acceptance of Christian witnesses, because they had to prove themselves as proper commentaries to the ancient tradition and its undoubted authority. The reliability of the proven old tradition provided much more confidence, which was used as the needle of the compass, than any sophisticated and philosophically differentiated Christology or Trinitarian dogma. And it really turned out that the faithfulness to the old traditions also was a reliable teacher in terms of theology.

The authority of the biblical canon as the unifying reference of the church becomes still stronger if we do not just speak in terms of church history but in terms of dogmatic evidence especially when the church claims to be the church of the Word of God. The situation of the church is not about ruling the biblical witness but being ruled by the Scripture—this exactly is the meaning of the apostolicity of the church.³ As the church is constituted under the Word of God it is called to listen to its canonical witness without denying that both are obviously handed down by fallible humans in always ambivalent historical circumstances (we have the treasure only in earthen vessels; 2 Corinthians 5:7). In theological perspective biblical canonicity does not only stand for a decision of the church but at first for its privilege of being addressed by the triune God and its obligation to hear what God is speaking to it and to the world.⁴

2. One Message – many witnesses

The Gospel's inexhaustibility

“Christ is risen”—this is the nucleus of the confession of some Jews from the circle of the itinerant preacher and miracle-worker Jesus from Nazareth, who was crucified beyond the gates of Jerusalem by the local Roman authorities due to the alleged claim of being the Jews’ king. “God raised Jesus from the dead” is the often used abridged version of the first Christian profession (Romans 4:24; 8:11; 10:9; 1 Corinthians 6:14; 15:15; 2 Corinthians 4:14; Galatians 1:1; Colossians 2:12). On the one hand, this unifying profession includes everything that is important for Christian faith, and, on the other hand, this certainty is open enough for different approaches and understandings. Already the New Testament provides different perspectives. But nevertheless, this profession stands for the centre of all Christian confessions. There will be no church rejecting this profession. Beyond all diversities and even contraries this basic

3 Cf. *Michael Weinrich*, Die Apostolizität der Kirche aus reformatorischer Sicht, in: Martin Illert u. Martin Schindehütte (eds.), *Theologischer Dialog mit der Rumänischen Orthodoxen Kirche* (Beihefte zur Ökumenischen Rundschau 97), Leipzig 2014, 65–82.

4 Cf. *John Webster*, *Holy Scripture. A Dogmatic sketch*, Cambridge 2003, 58ff.

profession unites all confessions and denominations in one faith. This is really worth mentioning even if it seems to be a matter of course. If we are looking for something we all have in common we should refer to the profession: “Christ is risen.” It is not just a marginal point; actually it is crucial for everything that claims importance for Christian faith and the understanding of Christian life.⁵ “If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:14). It is a kind of Christian mantra like the Jewish mantra about God as the “God who brought Israel out of the slavery in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 18:1; Leviticus 22:33; 25:38; Numbers 15:41; Deuteronomy 5:6; 6:12; 8:14, etc.). The Exodus is Israel’s opening experience from its encounter with God in His uniqueness. And it is exactly this faithful God “Immanuel,” who is professed as acting in Jesus as His incarnated Word fulfilling His covenant with Israel by enlarging it to all humankind. The profession of Jesus’ resurrection as the resurrection of Christ was made recognizable in reference to promises from God’s way with Israel. In life, crucifixion and resurrection—and deriving from this horizon also already in the birth—of this Jew God was seen as confirming His vivid affection to His people as the precursor to the entirety of humanity. And it is especially the morning of Easter that reveals the fulfillment and confirmation of the promises of this unique God.

This seems to me to be the centre of Christian faith and the specific dynamics of the flow of the Jewish-Christian tradition. It is about the resurrection of this Jew that Christians profess as the decisive key to the revelation of the God of Israel. Theologically there is something like a midst of the Scripture or like the centre of faith. But at the same time we have to admit that there are different ways of realizing this midst and of approaching and explaining this centre. Actually this goes so far that even the word “resurrection” is not in common within the witnesses of the New Testament. For example the probably very old Christ-hymn (*Christushymnus*) quoted by Paul in his letter to the Philippians (2:6-11), does not mention the resurrection and speaks instead of Christ’s exaltation. There is also the terminology of glorification, which also aims at the centre of Christian faith without speaking of resurrection. In any case we are using metaphors for the confession that Christ did not remain in death but rather was translated by God into His own living reality so that he is with God as God was and is with him; the Apostles’ Creed says: “He ... is seated at the right hand of the Father.”

⁵ It is not by accident that the pivotal hinge of Karl Barth’s theology as a whole is the resurrection of Christ; cf. *Michael Weinrich*, *Die bescheidene Kompromisslosigkeit der Theologie Karl Barths* (FSÖTh 139), Göttingen 2013.



All the witnesses are concentrated on one gospel, but this gospel goes beyond our possibilities of understanding because it is about something beyond death. We all live before death, and we all are inevitably going to die. As far as we can see by nature we are limited by death. Our experience gives us no evidence for something beyond death. Our imaginations as well as our language are restricted by our life in the face of death. In principle we are captured in the limits of our experiences and this makes us limited to the world of our modern empirical sciences, including its speculative potential. All evidences we use are shaped under the prerequisite of the relentlessness of time. Even our fantasy is strictly fixed by the world in front of death; this is proven by the fact that all pictures we use for an imagination of eternal life stem from our temporal life, and we lack any possibility to open any window to the world beyond death—if there is any. In this horizon eternity seems to be endless time which means that even eternity is ruled by a particular variety of time. But this is quite an inappropriate imagination, which lies in any attempt to find a way from time to eternity. Starting with time you never will come to eternity in a reasonable sense. It just goes the other way round, but this way is closed by being submitted to time.

Eternity has to be revealed to us because we have no access to it by ourselves. Eternity is a matter of revelation and by this a matter of faith. The gospel of Christ tells us that there is life beyond death, there is eternity beyond time, because time is not the ruler and the sovereign of everything but God: He is the creator and the Lord of time so that time has its limits in Him. Revelation theologially means that eternity enters time, which as such is unable to integrate the emergence of revelation into its own categories. It is about seeing reality in a new light; a light which is not the result of our own efforts but which comes to us from outside of our possibilities. That is the reason why we indeed never are in the position to know revelation; revelation is not a matter of knowledge. It produces its own acknowledgement by faith. In this case we are not the subject of cognition but the revelation is stimulating our recognition. Revelation is subject and object of our recognition at the same time. As its subject revelation makes us being recognized by what we recognize.

It is the gospel that puts our knowledge and our possibilities into perspective and enables us to transcend our own possibilities at the same time. “God raised Jesus from the dead”—this is the one gospel revealing God’s attitude, God’s will and self-assertion, which were already manifested in His merciful presentation of His covenant to Noah and to Moses, which was renewed and confirmed again and again and finally fulfilled in Christ as the proxy for the outstanding

human part. In other words: God is able to achieve what He wants—this is the *potestas* of His omnipotence.⁶ Knowing God means knowing the gospel that reveals His relationship to us. The gospel is the revealed part of God’s uniqueness. As God is one—even if we have distinctly different ways of His being as we do in our Trinitarian understanding—we have one gospel—even if it is witnessed in a multiplicity of different testimonies. But this multiplicity does not hint in any direction but provides its own concentration. We face diversity that is concentrated in the specific uniqueness of God and that means in the uniqueness of the gospel: “God raised Jesus from the dead.”

The gospel opens a new reception of reality but is not reducing reality to one dimension. This is what the biblical witness is also like. It points to Christ as God’s eternal light and enlightens all dimensions of life. It is not enough to run to the empty grave and witness the absence of death. It is rather the other way round: we have to go to the many different places where death still is at work and witness the promise of the death-breaking presence of God in the risen Christ. This is why the biblical witness puts the whole variety of human life in front of us—and decidedly not only the bright sides of life—to give us some idea of the wide-ranged meaning of the gospel. On the one hand, the diversity of the biblical witness is the mirror of the diversity of life and, on the other hand, an expression of the inexhaustibility of the gospel. This is for my understanding an appropriate reception of the traditional saying about the inexhaustibility of Scripture.

3. Truth is concrete – the threats of abstraction

At first glance “inexhaustibility” sounds abstract and universalistic. Seemingly the Scripture fits for everything. And indeed there is nearly nothing for what we wouldn’t find a proper verse in the Bible smoothing every irritation. Obviously the Bible can be used as an inexhaustible source of affirmation silencing every anxiety. Or it can be used as a box of bricks for any political or ideological worldview; e.g. fundamentalists use the Bible for their concepts of self-stabilizing that are already almost complete before they consult the Bible. At least in this area it becomes obvious that there is an inappropriate use of biblical texts.

⁶ Regarding God’s omnipotence we have to distinct *potestas* from *potentia*. *Potentia* as the characterizing ingredient of His power would mean that God claims to have the possibility for everything, even for rejecting everything He created. Karl Barth relates *potentia* as power as such to the ambitions of the devil as the principle of his satanic game. In the contrary *potestas* as the basic characterization of *omnipotentia* is the power of being able to achieve everything what one wants (cf. *Karl Barth*, KD II/1, 589ff.). In difference to humans God is able to achieve everything He wants but He does not want to be honored as one who wants everything. He wants the covenant and His kingdom – He wants life and not death.



Even if we are not in the position to identify the one way of using the Bible properly, because there are indeed different approaches,⁷ we are able to name some guidelines. One of these guidelines for biblical hermeneutics that we should keep in mind is the specific biblical tension between the diversity and its specific centredness. This tension can be understood as the mutual correspondence between truth and concreteness. We don't have to refer to Georg W.F. Hegel, Vladimir I. Lenin, Berthold Brecht or Dorothee Sölle, who all emphasized the concreteness of truth in their own way. The Bible itself demonstrates that its reasoning functions from the particular to the general—and not the other way round (as we are used to think in modern history). Already the old church fathers underlined: *Deus non est in genere*. And they felt themselves led by the Bible not as a book of philosophical insight and general ideas but of contingent concrete encounters with acts of God's self-disclosure in the history of the world. God is no abstraction including our idealistic or realistic hopes as a kind of *summum bonum*. The biblical witness does not make us look into the heavens—this would be the way of abstraction. Instead we are encouraged to see our concrete world in the light form above that means in the light of God's specific affection and attention to it.⁸ Theology is not about investigating God's being in the heavens but God's acting in our world. It is not about the range of the human capacity of divine knowledge but the understanding of our world as a place, where God has revealed himself through His performative Word. We are not empowered to a generalized worldview that functions in every situation all the time. Instead we are confronted with the surprising and world-changing power of God's living Word in real situations of our life.

Beside some exceptions we find narratives referring to particular situations and circumstances in the Bible, where God is encountered as the surprisingly acting driving force. In no case it is God himself who is met—"No one has ever seen God" (John 1:18; cf. Genesis 33:20; John 6:46)—but probably a burning bush attracts our attention because it is not consumed by the fire (Exodus 3:2), and we get something important to listen to that changes everything. In the majority of cases it is God's Word that was not only heard but it *happened* (Luther: "es geschah") (Genesis 15:1; Ezekial 1:3; John 1:1; Micah 1:1; etc.). This also fits to

7 Cf. for example: Das Buch Gottes. Elf Zugänge zur Bibel. Ein Votum des Theologischen Ausschusses der Arnoldshainer Konferenz, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1992; *Ulrich Luz* (ed.), Zankapfel Bibel. Eine Bibel – viele Zugänge. Ein theologisches Gespräch, Zürich 32002.

8 Cf. *Karl Barth*, Das erste Gebot als theologisches Axiom, in: Ders., Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1930–1933, hg. v. Michael Beintker u.a. (Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe), Zürich 2013, 209–241, 234.

the Christological dimension of God (his revelation in Christ) because Christ is not simply God himself but the incarnation of the Word of God (John 1:14).⁹ In Christ's being, his preaching, healing, suffering and rising from the dead God's Word happens (*geschieht*) in its characteristic performative way. As God creates by His word His will gets its way by His Word. And everywhere where His word occurs things are fundamentally changed straightaway or put in a different light.

Everything the Bible witnesses from God is connected with His interventions in concrete, worldly circumstances. These interventions catch the attention of the witnesses by the specific tension to our normal perception caused by the particularity of God's involvement, which provides a specific clarity and includes a mystery at the same time—a not-consuming fire. We remember the earlier mentioned tension between the uniqueness of God and the vast multiplicity of its perceptions, which are understood as the perceptions of the same and unique God. A proper understanding of God is concrete, because of His concrete intervention to the circumstances of our world—abstractions inevitably deviate from His reality.

4. Contextuality as punctual catholicity

A special aspect of concreteness is contextuality. Actually, referring to the biblical witness, contextuality has two sides that are inevitably different, sometimes so different that there is no bridge from one side to the other. On the one hand, it implies a historical dimension, on the other hand, it provides an existential dimension for nowadays' understanding. The biblical traditions and narratives mirror to a certain extent the context of their origins, while the reader or listener perceives the handed-down tradition with his or her eyes and ears, which are tuned by quite different circumstances with little or no resonance for the historical context of the text's origins. It is as hardly possible to get a clear picture of the real situation of the biblical authors and their addressees due to restrictions of reliable historical knowledge as it is to neglect that all our perceptions are influenced by our respective contexts and experiences. This causes many of the difficulties of understanding and is at the same time the prolific basis of all our exegetical efforts. In this chapter we want to concentrate only upon the side of our contemporary understanding.

All our perceptions of biblical traditions or narratives are contextual; that means they are not only driven by the respective text but also by the fears and

⁹ The Barmen Declaration: „Jesus Christ, as he is testified to us in the Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, whom we are to hear ...“



hopes, the apprehensions and convictions, the resignations and possibilities of our situation and the circumstances, in which we view our reality. There is no objective recognition. What one realizes depends highly on his or her special perspectives and awareness. If we stress the insight that truth is concrete we also have to emphasize positively that truth is contextual. It only affects our life if it is able to illuminate its evidence in our very context. The Word of God is concrete because it speaks to our context and puts our situation in a new light. If it really meets us it meets us here and now and has to tell us something about the reality in which we live. If it would be silent about our conditions of life it would be silent at all whatever it may say.

On the other hand, contextuality can be used as a kind of *carte blanche* to accommodate the biblical tradition to any context as a useful supporter of one's respective opinion. We come back to the earlier mentioned problem, now in a different perspective. Biblical multiplicity seems to make the reference to biblical tradition arbitrary. It is not just a temptation but a problematic reality that almost every opinion may be reasoned by biblical references. The question is how can one make sure that the context does not convert unnoticed into the text? How is our contextuality protected from becoming a sectarian acquisition of the Bible? These are the crucial questions that led the church to put the core substance of its understanding of the Bible's content into words by formulating creeds. The central purpose of the creeds is to safeguard the relationship to the biblical witness against its usurpation for private interests and sectarian distortion. By giving a short but concise characterization of God witnessed in the Bible as creator, reconciler and comforter the church provided a tool for an appropriate dealing with the Bible that itself was basically shaped by the Bible. The creeds tried to formulate the common basis for an appropriate approach to the biblical witness that prevents the church from a distorted usage of the text. It is about the catholicity of the church as it is about the catholicity of the Bible's usage.

This reference to catholicity is not at least meant as a regulatory principle for the range of the respective contextuality of the church and the contextuality of its usage of scripture. If truth achieves its appropriate concreteness it has to prove itself to the context. And on the other hand, the contextuality has to validate that the church remains really a church as a part of the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church" and not only an accidental private enterprise of some self-inspired people. Contextuality and catholicity of the church belong together. Contextuality is catholicity in concrete life as catholicity represents the link of the contextuality to the universal truth the church has to witness. Contextuality is

punctual catholicity, and catholicity is the reliability of contextuality.¹⁰ Catholicity without contextuality remains abstract, and contextuality without catholicity is sectarian. They belong together as the two sides of one coin. We cannot read the Bible in another way than contextual, but we read as members of the church that reaches beyond our specific context. And we have to preach the truth in our context, but we preach a truth that is not restricted to a specific context since it is ruled in the end by the sovereignty of the triune God Himself. This leads us to the question of biblical inspiration.

5. The reader within the text About the inspiration of reading and listening

We have learned that the message of a text and also of biblical texts is not constituted only by the text or even the author of this text and his or her intention, but also by the reader of the text, who also contributes to its meaning. That means a text is not finalized by the author. The author finishing his or her work has to leave the text to an open space where it waits for different finalizations by different readers. It is the crucial insight of the reader-response theory that the readers participate in the constitution of the text and its intention.¹¹

In the horizon of biblical hermeneutics it is not only about the readers' subjectivity (or the authors' subjectivity) and its impact to the understanding of the text. A crucial prerequisite of a theological appreciation of the Bible is the insight that also the content of the text implies its own subjectivity if it seriously will be taken as the Word of God and not only as a document, in which people of the past express their historical piety. To get in touch with God Himself is something different and requires God's own liveliness. If we assume that the Bible conveys the vivid Word of God it is required that God makes Himself impressive through the activity of the Holy Spirit who is seen at work whenever we hear God speaking to us. In this perspective it is not to the authors as it is not to the readers that we are able to identify the authenticity of the text. It is the same Spirit that made the authors give their witness and the Spirit that

¹⁰ Cf. also *Michael Weinrich*, *The Church between Contextuality and Catholicity*. Protestant Considerations on the Ecumenical Significance of the Reformational Principle, in: Richard Chartres et al. (eds.), *Reformation Then and Now* (Beihefte zur Ökumenischen Rundschau 109), Leipzig 2016, 55–64.

¹¹ Here is not the place to discuss the Anglo-Saxon reader-response theory or the German-French discourse on "Rezeptionsästhetik" (esthetics of reception). We just draw the attention on a specific adaption of these theories in the theological framework of our hermeneutical question.



makes the reader not just expecting human words who makes God's Word in the human witness audible and receivable.

For a proper dealing with the Bible as the Holy Scripture we need some kind of understanding of its inspiration. From the time of the ancient church up to our contemporary usage of the Bible, the church always knew about the mystery that only the presence of the Holy Spirit may enable humans to really give witness of God or to read a text as a real witness or to realize the Bible as the Word of God.¹² Without inspiration we are restricted to ourselves and our incapacity to speak about God. Theologically we have to state that the efficacy of the Holy Spirit goes beyond the subjectivity of the authors and the subjectivity of the readers. This is not to deny their subjectivity and some of the truth of the reader-response theory; actually we have to be aware of it. But the decisive aspect remains for additional attention to the fundamental theological claim that God is only recognizable by Himself. If we really allege that the Bible does not speak only about pious speculations to foster our own pious speculations we have to be convinced that God really has spoken and still speaks today. This conviction nurtures the trust in the promise that God Himself confirms His witnesses by His Spirit whenever His Word can be heard.

As God accommodates Himself to us in the manner he reveals Himself in His Word, we have to listen attentively to what He told to the people of Israel, the Apostles and the other authors of the New Testament in the well-reasoned expectation that through the witness of those words He also may speak to us due to the eternal dimension of His Word, which never can be offset against any conditions of time. The eternal character of the Word of God grants its presence in the present. God's Word never occurs without this challenging dimension. As He is the living God His Word is a living word not only up in the air but above all in real life. Time is confronted by eternity, temporal and mortal life touched by eternal life. The inspiration of the witness¹³ has to inspire the reader, yet the inspiration of the reader discovers anew and anew the inspiration of the biblical witness.¹⁴

12 Referring to this mystery *John P. Burgess* speaks in a fundamental perspective about 'scripture as sacramental word': *Why Scripture matters. Reading the Bible in a Time of Church Conflict*, Louisville/Kentucky 1998, 38ff.

13 *John Webster* is right when he stresses that it is not enough to speak only about the author's and the reader's inspiration; if the understanding of inspiration shall not become docetic one cannot avoid speaking also about the inspiration of the text and its wording. In this direction it is helpful when Webster also emphasizes that the Holy Spirit is sanctifying the human text as an instrument for God's self-revelation: *Holy Scripture*, 11ff.

14 Cf. also *Ulrich H.J. Körtner*, *Der inspirierte Leser. Zentrale Aspekte biblischer Hermeneutik*, Göttingen 1994.

6. The ecumenicity of the Bible About the ambitious unity of the church

This is the thesis: The Bible represents ecumenicity par excellence. It could help us to find an appropriate understanding of the unity of the church.

Still the churches are searching for their unity mainly in a complicated and rather accidental comparison of their doctrinal identities. Even if they try to emphasize what they have in common, they are fixed to themselves and not so much to the message they are called to promote. Ecclesiology seems to become more an obstacle than a support of Christian unity. One could have the impression that the churches' faithfulness in the continuity of their own identity is more important than the joint praise of the one Triune God in the world. The problem seems to be the lack of a convincing model of a unity or communion of churches that comprises different identities without threatening the catholicity of the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church."¹⁵ The visibility of this unity is not of that kind that we can expect an institutional, centralized organization, but it should be noticeable that all churches are really celebrating and serving the same God.¹⁶ The question of unity is not so much an ecclesiological question but at first the question how the churches actually allow God to keep His identity.¹⁷

In all Christian churches the Bible is accepted as the decisive criterion of what is seen as God's identity that is revealed in His relationship to humankind in His creation.¹⁸ In all its multiplicity and diversity the Bible is concentrated on the one Triune God and His eternal Word spoken and still speaking through the times. This concentration makes its uniqueness, and the multiplicity and diversity makes its richness. It is its particular closeness to concrete life that originates its multiplicity, since life has many sides and cannot be grasped from one perspective. And it is its particular concentration on the living God that embraces this multiplicity, brings it together and keeps it focused on the

¹⁵ The model of 'reconciled diversity' could show in the right direction but has to be spelled out much more to become a realistic ecumenical perspective.

¹⁶ There are different kinds of visibility. It is not only about optical evidence but also about a realistic understanding of a promise that can be grasped by faith.

¹⁷ If we put the question this way it becomes obvious that also Israel as God's elected people belongs to the range of Christian unity as it was claimed by *Karl Barth*, KD II/2, § 34 (the congregation consists of Israel and the church); cf. *Michael Weinrich*, *Ökumene am Ende. Plädoyer für einen neuen Realismus*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1995, 149ff.

¹⁸ Perhaps they do not refer to the polemical reformatory phrase 'sola scriptura', but affirm theologically more reasonable 'scripture first'.



relationship to the living God. Exactly in this sense the Bible can be seen as a paradigm for Christian unity.

With this background it is superfluous to say explicitly: Unity is not uniformity. In all areas of social life we have to learn this lection. Instead of latecomers the churches should be forerunners and shining examples of a dynamic human communion. If we take up the Greek term "*koinonia*" the understanding of communion achieves a higher qualified commitment, since it is not only about the acceptance of one another and living side by side but also about an active and engaged shaping of living together. Every church should be a "*koinonia*," but also the churches together should perform a convincing "*koinonia*" in making its ecumenicity and its catholicity visible, and, last but not least, it is about the "*koinonia*" of the whole of humankind.

A very profane Epilogue

It is not enough to highlight unity again and again; there also must be the will to achieve it. Otherwise we have to assume that the churches' will is to keep the situation as it is, like it was the will of the churches (and not God's will) to go apart, e.g. in the 11th and 16th centuries. It is not enough that theology may be right. Theology could become an excuse for deficits in reality. Instead it also should promote the necessary soberness in these questions.

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