

UPHOLDING THE UNITY OF SCRIPTURE TODAY

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As it is natural for pendulums to swing, so it is also for academic opinion. Critiquing conventional wisdom and exploring alternatives that might fit the facts better is after all the name of the game, once our classes and grading are through. So it should cause no surprise that this century should have seen brisk oscillations of view regarding the unity and diversity of Scripture. Seventy years ago the liberal idea of an ultimate evolutionary pluralism in Scripture was in the ascendant. Reacting against this, Karl Barth and the pioneer British Biblical theologians developed theologically unitive hermeneutics based on Chalcedonian Christology and the concept of *Heilsgeschichte* respectively, and such theologians as T. F. Torrance on the Barthian side and Brevard Childs on the Biblical theology side still carry the torch for these approaches. (They have a good deal in common, of course.) But both these unitive approaches to interpretation are currently in eclipse, and the interest of academic Biblicalists has come to center once more on forms and items of diversity in the canonical material. The common view, it seems, is that there is more to be learned from studying differences between the things that Biblical authors say than from noting their similarities. The pendulum has not swung back to unitive theologizing as yet.

So I may as well say at once that the views that I am going to express now are somewhat at a distance from the mainstream of professional theological thought in the west today. (I see no reason why that need worry either you or me, but I thought it best to come clean about it right at the start.)

I begin, now, by observing that in both east and west, in both reformed and unreformed churches, the traditional emphasis has been on the harmonious unity of the canonical Scriptures. Historically this emphasis went with a stress on their divinity as being in truth God's message to the world, his instruction in faith and life—in other words, as being throughout God's law (torah) in the Biblical sense of that term. Showing the internal unity of the Scriptures was then seen as part of the interpreter's task. Interpretation accordingly was practiced, really if not always self-consciously, in terms of a specific model found both in Scripture and in all the cultures to which Christianity came—the model, namely, of the law of the land; and four ideas shaped and controlled the interpretative enterprise.

The first idea was of normative content. Scripture was the heavenly Legislator's *didache*, his teaching, his *doctrina* (to use the Latin equivalent beloved of Augustine and Calvin), from the explicit statements of which, both narrative and explanatory, we learn what is true orthodoxy, true worship and true obedience.

The second idea was of internal coherence. As lawcodes are to be presumed consistent, so all the contents of Scripture, originating as they were held to do from God's mind as their single source, were to be treated as harmonious and were to be interpreted in terms of the principle that the Reformers called the ana-

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logy of Scripture or the analogy of the faith (*analogia fidei*). Accordingly Anglican Article 20 states that the Church may not “so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another”—for such exposition would necessarily be wrong somewhere.

The third idea was of continuing and multiple application. What the books of Scripture said to their original recipients they were thought of as continuing to say in application to each successive generation, just as unrepealed secular legislation continues to bind each generation of citizens. As applications of secular law are made by bringing its principles to bear on particular cases under the guidance of its overall purpose and are valid whether or not the terms of the law explicitly envisage the cases in point, so it was held to be with the Bible.

The fourth idea was of the legislator maintaining his law. God was believed to watch over his Word to perform it, keeping his promises, blessing those who trusted and obeyed him, and judging any who failed to tremble at his Word.

The locus of authority on this view was quite specific. Authority belonged to texts—that is, to the specific things that God tells us in the words of texts.

The model is of course familiar, for all conservative Protestant theology assumes it, and I imagine that most of us here would rise to defend it from the way in which the Bible in both Testaments interprets itself.

By contrast, contemporary emphasis on the diversity of Scripture goes with a stress on Scripture as man’s witness to God, a multiform collection of materials that emerged from what can only be called a sustained struggle between God and his people. As such it embodies perceptions and presentations of God that are neither consistent nor coherent. The model in terms of which Scripture ought consciously to be read is the complex traditional process that occurs in any large continuing community, a process in which elements of tradition regularly get reinterpreted and revised. This model is offered, to be sure, more as a definition of the unity of Scripture than as a denial of it. Clearly, however, it negates something that the other model affirmed and sought to justify—namely, the real possibility of applying Scripture (that is, of moving from the particularity of Biblical statements to the particularity of present-day situations and questions) with genuinely normative force. On the modern view there is no way through this theological northwest passage, though there are many hermeneutical Frobeniusers who have opined the contrary and made voyages of intellectual exploration to try to prove their point. But if you start with fallible human witness in Scripture you end up with fallible human guesses from its expositors, and no more. That is surely inescapable.

Looking more closely at the diversity-based approach, we see four emphases characterizing it. The first is on the conceptual variety, both diachronic and synchronic, of the teaching and traditions that the two Testaments contain. The second is on the comprehensiveness of the historic canon, which includes so much of this diverse material. The third is on the actual selectiveness and oneness of all Biblical expositors, each working with a “canon within a canon” (a fact that, though doubtless undeniable, should surely be regretted as a weakness of the flesh rather than paraded as if it were a theological virtue). The fourth emphasis is on the instrumental effectiveness of the Biblical material in all its diversity for triggering ethical and relational insights, even if not for teaching doctrine in the sense of factual truth about the work of God. In all of this the Kantian clo-

ven hoof shows—namely, the denial that there is such a thing as revealed truth.

Authority on this view is not specific. It belongs to the tradition as a whole viewed as a matrix of insights, and accepting its authority means only committing oneself to reach one's final views in dialogue with the Biblical material.

On this approach methodological perplexities arise if norms for faith and life, authoritative truths for evangelistic proclamation and pastoral direction, are sought. Thus:

(1) How can Biblical theology as a discipline yield norms? How can study of the thought of Biblical authors ever be more than phenomenological description, a chapter in the history of ideas?

(2) How can systematic theology as a discipline yield norms? How can study of alternative conceptual grids for formulating the faith ever be more than phenomenological description?

(3) How can hermeneutical endeavors yield norms? The so-called "new hermeneutic" of Ernst Fuchs makes the text interpret you creatively, in such a way that what emerges from it is not intelligibly controlled by what is meant historically: That might be thought extreme. E. D. Hirsch assures us that no utterance means more than its writer thought he meant by it at the time, which would rule out all forms of *sensus plenior* and all forms of the claim that the meaning of some OT prophecies was unclear to the prophets themselves and is only made clear by NT facts and teaching, and would call in question the apostle John's declaration about Caiaphas unwittingly prophesying salvation when he spoke of one man dying for the people (John 11:49-52): This might be thought extreme too. But where between these extremes can norms ever appear if no text is in itself the normative message of God?

Many exponents of the modern approach see that it can never answer these questions, and so they conclude that the quest for norms of truth is inherently improper and that any attempt to derive norms from Scripture is an abuse of the intellect and something of a confidence trick. Conservative theologians battle against this attitude in liberal circles all the time.

Such then are the two models, side by side. Now my question is: How should those who embrace the first, as I do, believing that there are good and necessary reasons for doing so, respond to the emphasis on the internal diversity of Scripture that marks model number two? To this question I offer the following answer.

The first main point is that all the observable differences between theologians and theologies in the canon to which attention has been called ought to be acknowledged and assimilated. That, for instance, the gospels draw four distinct theological portraits of Jesus, and that Paul and John and the writer to the Hebrews had different vocabularies and thought forms, and that all three possessed architectural minds whereas Peter and James did not, are facts of importance about the form in which God's instruction reaches us. But if within this material contradictions of theology or empirical fact are alleged, the proper reply (so I judge) is that the allegations are unwarranted. Here let me voice three of my own convictions.

First, as regards theology in Scripture, I think that the differences between the expressed thought of the NT writers in particular are often absurdly exaggerated through concentrating exclusively on matters of linguistic form and neglecting to study the directional thrust and persuasive purpose (for specific pas-

toral situations) of the things they wrote. It is the implications that a man draws from his own statements rather than their verbal form as such that show what he meant, and the implications for faith and life that the various NT authors draw from their doctrinal statements are strikingly homogeneous and consistent—which surely suggests that the theologies on which those practical inferences rest cannot really be so very different in meaning.

Second, as regards statements of empirical fact and detail in Scripture, I am sure that we often make difficulties for ourselves in two ways: (1) by not seeing that the question of the truth of these statements relates precisely and specifically to what they were meant to communicate to their own first readers in their own culture; (2) by not realizing that the meaning-content of these statements was less in the ancient oriental world than would be the case in a history book written in the modern manner, where every detail counts, and also by failing to realize that we really cannot know how much or how little each such statement asserts without logical and literary, over and above merely grammatical and philological, study of the larger semantic unit—that is, the book—to which it belongs.

Third, as regards our inerrancy claim itself, I judge that, while inerrancy ought always to be held as an article of faith not capable of demonstrative proof but entailed by dominical and apostolic teaching about the nature of Scripture, we have now reached a point in technical evangelical scholarship at which the possibility of an entirely harmonious exegesis of the whole Bible has been shown in such conclusive detail that the century-old liberal assertion that this position cannot be held with intellectual integrity may safely be dismissed as refuted.

It is not an adequate response to the questions that the emphasis on diversity raises, however, merely to reassert the inerrancy of Scripture, and so I move on.

The second main point is that while appreciating the phenomenological, descriptive method of studying canonical material, which highlights its diverse literary types—sermons, songs, poems, prayers; works of theological history, prophecy, wisdom and pastoral didactics; letters, lists, statistics; liturgies, laws, visions, etc.—as well as highlighting the different emphases, interests, nuances and purposes of each item, I think we need to see this method—which I am sure we all of us use—as calling us to renewed reflection on the idea of canonicity. Model two treats the canon as essentially a human compilation, a sort of heritage collection of literature, brought together in the interests of maintaining and deepening a sense of group identity by constantly presenting to the group (in this case, the Church) the traditions that made it what it is, and to be valued now because of its proven power to trigger insights about living to God. But model one, which sees Scripture as divine communication—God's revealed witness to his own work, will and ways in the form of human responsive witness to these things—entails that God himself created the canon as one of his saving acts, a stage in *Heilsgeschichte*, and that he did this first by inspiring the various books and then by enabling the Church to discern them as being inspired and therefore to acknowledge them as the divinely given rule of faith and life. From this it follows that Scripture as a whole, with all its internal diversity, must be viewed as an organism of divine instruction, and that along with proper recognition of the historical particularity of each Biblical book and its contents a canonical style of interpretation must be consciously developed, as by Irenaeus and Augustine and Calvin and Barth and Brevard Childs in their different ways, and that we must frankly ad-

mit that Jews studying the OT as a closed literary unit and Christians studying it as the foundational and preparatory section of a two-part literary unit will not have the same overall view of the significance of its contents, however far they may be able to walk together in the formal descriptive exercises of phenomenological analysis. Can this approach to the phenomenon of the canon be vindicated today? I am persuaded that it both can be and must be, though evangelical scholars seem slow to take the task in hand.

Let me add explicitly that this approach does not forbid us to distinguish and compare and contrast the theologies of different periods and different Biblical authors, nor to abjure the stimulus of finding relatively polar emphases in these different theologies, as for instance Paul D. Hanson does in his book *The Diversity of Scripture* where he works with the form/reform and visionary/pragmatic polarities that he sees emerging in the OT. Nor does it forbid us to recognize that particular emphases in this or that Biblical writer may become specially relevant at particular times, over and above the general relevance that they have at all times—as did Paul's teaching on justification by faith without works in the sixteenth century, and as I think his teaching on the revelation of the mystery of the cross in 1 Corinthians 1-2 has become today. The approach I describe does, however, require that we recognize as complementary rather than contradictory all the different emphases and theologies that Scripture yields, and that we finally seek to integrate them all into a single texture of thought about the living God whose character and purpose do not change, whose value system for human life remains constant, and whose work is ever to be understood within the paradigms and parameters of interpretation that the canonical Scriptures yield.

The third main point is this: When we emphasize the internal diversity of Scripture, and in particular the difficulty of blending all that Scripture tells us about God himself (so that sometimes we have to throw in the towel here, as did Calvin when he said of the Creator-turned-Redeemer: "In an ineffable way [*ineffabili quodam modo*] he loved us while he hated us") we are alerted to the inescapable inadequacy of all theology in this world. "Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood" (1 Cor 13:12)—so said Paul, and if that was the truth about him, much more is it the truth about us.

Now I am not implying that theology does not in fact advance. The contrary is true. Certainly there is a sense in which, in the great John Robinson's phrase, fresh light and truth break forth again and again from God's holy Word, as new existential questions get brought to it. Then, as Gadamer states the matter, its horizons mesh with ours, and fresh light does indeed come our way. In our day, for instance, it seems that fresh light has broken forth from the Word on ecological ethics, a matter on which Scripture was not interrogated till very recently. And perhaps (though here I speak less confidently) light is currently breaking forth also on the meaning of womanhood, and the place of women in the Church and the world. Certainly, too, God uses controversy to stir up the questioning through which deeper insight comes, as was shown to have happened when Paul challenged the Galatian and Colossian heresies, and Irenaeus challenged Gnostic dualism, and Athanasius challenged Arianism, and Augustine challenged Pelagianism, and Luther challenged medieval works-religion, all working with insight that had come to them, as it seems, through the provocation of the error they attacked. Perhaps Christians of the twenty-second century, if the world lasts that

long, will perceive that fresh light and deeper insight broke forth from the Word through the debates of the past hundred years about revelation and the Bible. Who knows? Certainly, also, insight into divine things is deepened through dialogue with the historic traditions of Christian thought, as we see the cases of, for instance, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin and Karl Barth. And here I feel bound to say that I wish some of the exponents of my model two, described earlier, would dialogue more deeply with the traditional expositions of my model one rather than march on in resolute disregard of the older position, taking it for granted as good evolutionists that they must be better and wiser than their fathers because they arrived later. Tradition, after all, is the fruit of the Spirit's teaching activity from the ages as God's people have sought understanding of Scripture. It is not infallible, but neither is it negligible, and we impoverish ourselves if we disregard it. I am bold to say that evangelicals, even those of Anabaptist polity, should be turned by their own belief in the Spirit as the Church's teacher into men of tradition, and that if we all dialogued with Christian tradition more we should all end up wiser than we are.

But when all is said and done, surely Barth was right to say that "the dogma" (he meant the definite understanding of God's revealed Word) is an eschatological concept. Here we are on the way to it; it is only in glory that we shall actually have attained to it. Though it is possible (as I think) for our theology to be true as far as it goes, we can be sure that we do not at present understand anything about God perfectly. Here we know only in part. God is to us mystery, a reality that transcends our understanding, and in the same sense so is Scripture. When we look at either we cannot see all that we are looking at, since the light that shines forth from both is too bright for our spiritually dim eyes. Highlighting the diversity of Scripture will remind us that this is so, and that our theological reach exceeds our present grasp, just as Romans 7 shows us that the moral reach of men of the Spirit also exceeds their present grasp, and by thus reminding us it will keep us humble and hard at work, theologizing in hope. Therefore we should be grateful for it. In truth, such highlighting serves us well and does us good.