

THEOLOGY AND BIBLICAL AUTHORITY: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology. By David H. Kelsey. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975, 216 pp. plus bibliography and index, \$11.95.

Contemporary theologians appeal to the Bible in many ways to claim Scriptural legitimacy for their disparate and irreconcilable views. For this reason Professor Kelsey's discussion of the authority and normativity of Scripture is timely and significant.

Despite frequent summation, this succinct volume by the professor of theology at Yale Divinity School will be rather difficult reading even for clergymen and seminarians. But it has a fourfold importance. First, it reverses the field of neo-protestant theologians who repudiate Scriptural authority while elaborating professedly Christian theology; it therefore appears as a long-overdue recognition that non-evangelical scholars cannot hope to be regarded as authentically Christian theologians while they are perceived as hostile to Scriptural authority. Second, it exhibits the divergent uses of Scripture by recent theologians who deliberately abandon the evangelical appeal to authoritative Biblical texts and truths. Third, it does not immediately channel the discussion of the relevance of the Bible into claims about "inerrancy" or even "inspiration," but focuses on the issue of "scriptural authority" as a larger concern. Finally, it affirms "scriptural authority" only in a functional sense that displaces objective textual inspiration and thus extends the non-evangelical revolt against the propositional trustworthiness of the Bible while professing to preserve Biblical authority in the highest sense. Consequently Kelsey maintains the "normativity" and "authority" of "scripture" by philosophical mutation and semantic permissiveness that requires placing all these key terms in quotation marks.

The book is well organized in three parts. The first section, constituting half the volume, focuses on seven twentieth-century theologians: B. B. Warfield, Hans-Werner Bartsch, G. E. Wright, Karl Barth, L. S. Thornton, Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann. Four questions are put to each: (1) What aspect of Scripture is authoritative? (2) What makes it authoritative? (3) What logical force has it? (4) How does it bear on theological affirmations so as to authorize them?

Warfield and Bartsch emphasize what Scripture teaches—the former the doctrinal content, the latter its concepts or main ideas; Wright and Barth stress rather what Scripture reports—the former its recital of God's mighty historical acts, the latter its rendering of God's personal presence; Thornton, Tillich and Bultmann invoke images, symbols or myths that provide the occasion for a revelatory redemptive event. The samplings are considered representative but not necessarily

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exhaustive of the ways these several theologians appeal to the Bible. All are said to adduce Scriptural authority while differing in what they mean. Kelsey's conclusion, that each has a different concept of "authority," will not surprise evangelical scholars, whose own evaluations of neo-protestant elusiveness—especially Gordon H. Clark's useful work on *Karl Barth's Theological Method* (1963)—might well have gained Kelsey's mention.

Looked at more closely, Warfield champions the classic Christian view that the content of the Bible—what it teaches, hence centrally its doctrinal truth—is authoritative. Bartsch too comes down on the side of authoritative Biblical content, but in a more limited way focuses on distinctive concepts as revelatory where Warfield affirmed plenary inspiration (i. e., the Bible in whole and part). Wright too disavows doctrinal or propositional disclosure; Scripture is a record of God's redemptive acts, from which ontological knowledge about God is to be inferred. Yet Wright notably limits legitimate theological proposals to a contemporary linguistic translation of the Scripturally-given inferences; neither he nor Bartsch wholly escapes a retention of fragments of intelligible divine revelation somehow identified with the cognitive content of Scripture.

The shift from truths and concepts to events as the revelational center of Scripture anticipates a further disjunction; here revelational *content* is no longer objectively identified with Scripture, though Scripture is retained as a revelational *form*. So, for Barth, Scripture is a fallible witness through which God in Christ personally encounters the trusting reader or hearer. Our theological proposals are to be authorized by the Biblical narratives as a fixed form of tradition whose inner unity is found not in its doctrinal structure but rather its identity-description of a single Agent. Scripture is "authoritative," in brief, not because it communicates divinely-given information about God and his ways but because "it provides our normative link with God's self-disclosure" (p. 47). The Bible authorizes theological proposals only indirectly—as a pointer to the central revelational reality, Jesus Christ, who encounters us in Scripture—and not in view of divinely-mediated doctrines, concepts or historical patterns.

Barth is therefore a watershed, since he understands Scriptural authority in functional terms. In his view "the texts are authoritative not in virtue of any inherent property they may have, such as being inspired or inerrant, but in virtue of a function they fill in the life of the Christian community," Kelsey comments. "To say that scripture is 'inspired' is to say that God has promised that sometimes, at his gracious pleasure, the biblical texts will become the Word of God, the occasion for rendering an agent present to us in a Divine-human encounter" (pp. 47 f.).

Kelsey notes that in discussing "The Humanity of God" in his *Church Dogmatics* Barth affirms, in view of God's personal presence in the world, a series of theological proposals not expressly found in Scripture, yet which Barth considers indirectly authorized "by the patterns in biblical narrative that render an agent and sometimes occasion an encounter with him." "It is difficult to see," Kelsey adds, "how this way of

construing scripture can be assessed. It can in principle be neither confirmed nor disconfirmed by historical-critical exegesis.... It does not claim that every passage ... is self-evidently part of one vast rendering of one agent ... [or] that the human authors ... understood themselves to be engaged in such an enterprise. It only supposes that it is possible to look at or to take the canonical scriptures this way, without claiming that there is any historical evidence justifying such a construction" (pp. 49 f.).

This functional use of Scripture as "authority" is further exemplified by scholars who professedly discern in the Bible some particular feature—whether images, symbols, or myth—held to be "expressive" of a "revelatory event." Not an aggregate of revealed doctrines nor a report of external happenings accessible to historians, the Bible allegedly contains literary symbolism that is regarded as a semantic signal linking the believing reader with an internal revelatory event whereby he gains new creaturehood. Kelsey considers Thornton, Tillich and Bultmann as illustrative of this approach.

For Thornton, Biblical "images" are "the aspect of scripture that is authoritative for theology; he routinely accredits theological proposals by appealing to symbolic pictures, or events symbolically described" in Scripture (p. 61). The Bible's inner unity is said to lie not in a coherently revealed system of truths or in a sequence of redemptive events that it attests but, rather, in a complex network of images (cf. *The Dominion of Christ* [London: Dacre Press, 1952], pp. 16, 148, 165, 176). Restated in metaphysical language, these images, in Thornton's exposition, become propositional affirmations in some respects curiously compatible with modern process philosophy.

For Tillich, religious "symbols"—centrally the "biblical picture of Jesus as the Christ"—are the authoritative Scriptural element, and their authority arises from the function they play in "revelatory events" that transform humans into new beings. Quite apart from any stateable information, the "miraculous revelatory event" issues in transforming inner power. As religious symbols the events constituted by Jesus and his disciples, or for that matter by Buddha and his disciples, engender faith on the part of later communities in the context both of an "original revelation" and a "dependent revelation." The symbols are not to be translated into clear concepts (cf. F. E. Johnson, ed., *Religious Symbolism* [New York: Harper & Row, 1955], pp. 111 ff.; Kelsey, *The Fabric of Paul Tillich's Theology* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967]). Kelsey summarizes Tillich's explanation of symbol thus: "The picture of Jesus as the Christ points to the power of being which can be mediated to broken and estranged men, sometimes through the picture itself, so that for them it is a power for *new* being. The traditional name for this power is 'God'" (p. 68). Tillich therefore appeals to the Bible's depiction of Jesus as the Christ as religious symbol and as the authoritative element in Scripture.

In delineating "original revelation" Tillich expounds a dialectical relationship between symbols subordinated centrally to the cross and resurrection. But when Tillich further expounds the connection between this so-called "original revelation" and dependent

contemporary "revelation," Kelsey complains, he shows only that the symbols are functionally appropriate. Tillich's theological proposals are therefore very loosely related to the Biblical symbols (pp. 71 ff.). Tillich does not explain, Kelsey notes, how the Biblical symbol's asserted potency to mediate power today is related to the peculiar structure and patterns of the symbol itself, which is said to express original revelation (p. 73). Their functional propriety is asserted not in view of intrinsic properties of the symbols but in and through an ontological anthropology. "The question is left open, Why insist that saving events today depend in any way on Jesus?" Kelsey adds. "Why should the church make the biblical picture of Jesus as the Christ central to saying what it must say today? If there is no connection between what is said (with only indirect appeal to scripture) about making human life whole today and what is said (with direct appeal to scripture) about the person of Jesus, then Christology would seem to have become logically dispensable for contemporary Christian theology" (p. 74).

Like Thornton and Tillich, Bultmann attaches Scriptural authority to "passages that express the revelatory and saving 'Christ event' and occasion contemporary saving and revealing events" (p. 74), in his case correlating that authority with passages that lead assertedly to faith's self-understanding. The coherence of Scripture and theology follows not from any deduction from common first principles that theology derives dependently from Scripture, but because both depict the understanding of the self and of God as integral to the believer's subjectivity. Scriptural "theological statements" are normative, Bultmann holds, as the earliest expressions of Christian faith. The NT uses event-descriptions or myths, he says, to depict the mode of self-understanding that Heidegger's analysis of authentic existence illumines and refines. The concepts of reconciliation and eschatological righteousness Bultmann restates in terms of interpersonal divine-human relationships in this context of Heideggerian analysis. The so-called kerygmatic statements of Scripture serve not to elicit a truth-judgment as directly authoritative over theological proposals but only indirectly authorize theological affirmations; rather, they function as directly authoritative over the concrete existence of the man of faith; theological statements express the inward transformation involved when one personally responds in faith to kerygmatic utterances. Yet Bultmann curiously insists that when Scripture speaks of "God acting," it makes a truth claim that expresses what is analogically even if not literally the case.

Hence while Thornton locates the "revelatory event" first in the public world as a cosmic reality prior to personal faith, Bultmann locates it in the subjectivity of individual faith-response. Forfeiture of rational divine revelation and of authoritative canonical writings leads in Bultmann's case, for all his effort to differentiate from myth the thesis that "God acts," to the further loss of what likewise belongs to the Biblical teaching: the objectivity of divine disclosure. Bultmann supposedly retains some semblance of Scriptural "authority"—identified as the category of myth!—and by it routinely distorts evident and primary

emphases of the canonical writings. Kelsey comments that "the Bible clearly is talking about revelatory events occurring in a public world" (p. 84), and, we might add, that is by no means the only challenge to be posed to contemporary notions of the radical "event" character of revelation. While Tillich, by emphasizing the community context of derivative "revelatory events," seeks to avoid privatizing them, he with Bultmann, Thornton and Barth construes the Bible as "authoritative" non-informationally in its expressive force.

Kelsey does not, however, stop with an instructive survey of the different ways and different ends for which seven modern theologians appeal to the Biblical texts. His volume is more than a "Kelsey report" on what goes on in the theologically permissive society of contemporary Protestant dogmatians. To be sure, both at the beginning (pp. 8 f.) and ending he emphasizes that the work is no "theological 'programmatically' making proposals about any theological *locus*, not even the doctrine of scripture" (p. 207). But while the book sponsors no theological methodology, Kelsey's comments are laden with implications concerning the essence of Christianity, and what he says about revelation and Scripture has the structure of an argument.

In "the unprecedented theological pluralism marking the neo-orthodox era" Kelsey refuses to see a sign of "breakdown in consensus about the nature and task of theology" (p. 163). He concedes that the divergent ways in which contemporary theologians claim Scriptural legitimacy for their theological proposals blur the conception of authority no less than that of Scripture. Yet he disagrees with those who contend that negative scientific-historical criticism of the canon and its content makes it "impossible to use the text as authority in theology" (p. 158); loss of the Bible as a theologically unified canonical authority, he insists, does not jeopardize "scriptural authority."

How then is Biblical authority to be conserved? We need only redefine the technical sense of "canon" and "authority." The divergent views of modern theologians, who concretely construe Scripture in irreducibly different ways, can all be squared with the authority of Scripture—provided only that we expeditiously rid ourselves of the conception of Biblical authority held by B. B. Warfield and evangelical Protestants generally. To rescue "scriptural authority" Kelsey ventures specific proposals that erode the Biblical and standard evangelical view of Scripture and advance a contemporary alternative.

Kelsey denies that there is any "normative" meaning of Biblical "authority." He appeals to the diverse patterns through which recent modern theologians view Scripture as "authoritative" and insists, moreover, that "there is no one 'standard' concept 'scripture'" (p. 103). "The suggestion that scripture might serve as a final court of appeals for theological disputes is misleading," Kelsey writes, "because there is no one, normative concept 'scripture'" but rather "a family of related but importantly different concepts 'scripture'" (pp. 14 f.). What modern scholars mean when "scripture" is decisively invoked assuredly varies with their multitudinous and conflicting conceptions of its nature and function. The logical consequence, one would think—were the

confusion regnant among neo-protestant theologians really decisive for the fortunes of Christian theology—would be an open and unapologetic repudiation of Scriptural authority. Not so for Kelsey, for whom the highly imaginative visions of the basic character of Christianity so prevalent today require a rejection of the historic view of Scriptural authority and the enthronement of an alternative.

For the traditional view of the Bible as a divinely-inspired source of revealed truths Kelsey would substitute a “functional” view oriented to the life of the Church and correlating “scripture” and its “authority” dialectically with the existential concerns of the believing community and individual. He writes: “The ‘authority of scripture’ has the status of a *postulate* assumed in the doing of theology in the context of the practise of the common life of a Christian community in which ‘church’ is understood in a certain way. In short, the doctrine of ‘scripture and its authority’ is a postulate of practical theology.... The least misleading conceptual home of ... doctrines about biblical authority, would be as part of the elaboration of doctrines about the shaping of Christian existence, both communal and individual ...” (pp. 208 f.). This deliberately abandons the historic evangelical location and explication of Scriptural authority in terms set by the doctrine of divine revelation, an orientation preserved—although in a self-defeating way through their dilution of revelation into conceptual incoherence—even by recent neo-orthodox theologians. Kelsey disbelieves that any single concept of revelation pervades the Bible and specially excludes divine revelation in the form of truths. “‘The Bible is the church’s book’ makes what is apparently an accurate historical claim,” he writes, “but ‘Biblical texts are the church’s scripture’ makes an important *conceptual decision* (i.e., self-involvingly to adopt a certain concept ‘church’), and ‘scripture is authority over the church’s life’ makes a conceptual claim that is *analytic* in the foregoing conceptual decision” (p. 177). Here “scripture” is no longer identical with the whole Bible; moreover, none of the Bible is viewed as Scripture or as authoritative except in a functional sense.

It is noteworthy that Kelsey considers his dialectical relating of the trusting Church and “functionally authoritative” “scripture” as specially significant for the organic unity of the ecumenical Church (p. 176). He unconvincingly claims to be neutral in the controversy over whether, as Protestants historically claim, Scripture creates the Church, or whether, as Catholics claim, the Church’s tradition is authority along with Scripture (p. 94); his emphasis clearly has more in common with the latter view.

Kelsey dismisses as “meaningless” any effort to establish “standards by which to decide when a ‘theological position’ *really*” accords with Scripture (p. 5). The question, “Is scripture the authority for that?” or “Is it based on scripture?” is virtually pointless, he says, since “one would have to specify in which sense(s) of ‘authority’ one wanted to know the answer” (p. 145). He thinks it preferable to say that theological criticism is guided “not by a ‘norm’ or ‘criterion’” but by “a *discrimen*” which involves a configuration of criteria rather than an absolute or exclusive principle or single authority like *sola scriptura* (p. 160). “The results of

close study of the biblical texts ... are not decisive," he says. "More basic ... is a decision a theologian must make about the *point* of engaging in the activity of doing theology, a decision about ... the subject matter of theology ... determined ... by the way ... he tries to catch up what Christianity is basically all about in a single, synoptic, imaginative judgment" (p. 159). This is not simply an acknowledgment that every system of thought has its controlling axioms through which it explains all else; the first principles through which theologians read the texts are undeniably important. But Kelsey's stance is basically existential, and his emphasis on "an imaginative act in which a theologian tries to catch up in a single metaphorical judgment the full complexity of God's presence in, through and over-against the church's common life and which both ... provides the *discrimen*" whereby theology criticizes the Church's current witness and "determines" the distinctive shape of theological proposals (p. 163) excludes in advance the understanding of Scripture on its own terms, and is antecedently erosive of evangelical orthodoxy. This extravagant presupposition prevents Kelsey's taking seriously the view that, though imaginative elements encroach upon all post-biblical theological elaborations, the inspired Scriptures provide a body of divinely vouchsafed truths to which all creative theology is answerable and that Scripture is the objective norm to which all the Church's truth claims are to be conformed. Although theologians do indeed make different policy decisions about "the essence of Christianity" and "the point of doing theology" (p. 177), such talk about "the essence" and "the point" is pointless unless all policy decisions are judged by the prophetic-apostolic disclosure of revelational truth as a superior and logically prior principle.

Kelsey contends that Scripture "deserves" to be considered the theological norm and that theologians "ought" (he puts both these verbs in quotes) so to regard it. But he swiftly adds that "this 'objective normativity' of scriptural authority is not undercut by taking its 'authority' in terms of scripture's functions rather than of its properties" (p. 152). It follows that "'normativity' is relative"—"relative to a specific activity, viz., doing theology. It is not some sort of 'normativity-absolute'" (p. 152). The concept of normativity is here no less radically altered than that of Scripture and authority. The consequence, of course, is that theology is left without absolute truth.

Not surprisingly, the kind of "wholeness" that functionalism ascribes to the texts as canon does not consist, as in historic evangelical orthodoxy, in the logical and historical interrelations of inspired writings conveying divinely-given truths, but rather in other aspects that supposedly function in dialectical or existential correlation with faith. Kelsey acknowledges that theologians who agree that Scripture—in diverse ways, to be sure—is "authority" for theological proposals disagree widely over the extent, content and meaning of canonical Scripture other than to assert its "sufficiency" for an indicated use, "the occasion for the presence of God among the faithful" (p. 106). Hence canonical "wholeness" is not here to be confused with "unity" understood as "a coherence or even consistency" of content but rather as

functioning to “preserve the church’s self-identity” in ways alternative to doctrinal uniformity. Once the notion of “canon” is functionally restated and subjectively grounded, no rational necessity remains for discussing and logically relating parts of a so-called whole, and the very notion of wholeness would seem to be irrelevant and misleading.

Kelsey would displace “the standard picture of the relation between scripture and theology as ‘translation’ ” of the logical content or teaching of the Bible into a consistent doctrinal system, and instead regard a theologian’s appeal to the Bible as “part of an *argument*” (p. 123), an appeal “in the course of making a case for the proposal,” an “informal argument” not to be formalized in traditional logic (pp. 125-129). The covert assumption here is that prior claims for intelligible divine revelation and Biblical authority on the ground of inspired texts are invalid. He repudiates the analysis of theological systems by whether their first principle is revelation or Scripture or ontological speculation or religious experience or self-understanding (p. 136). “There is no one distinctively ‘theological method’ ” (p. 134). “Several logically different kinds of statement may all serve to help authorize a given conclusion, although in different senses of authorize”; a theological proposal might be authorized “by data provided by an ontological analysis and also authorized by warrants backed by direct quotations from scripture” (p. 135). It is therefore “pointless,” Kelsey contends, to pose the issue of Biblical authority as an either/or requiring Scriptural confirmation for theological proposals in contrast to some other appeal, whether to experience or ontology or something else: “A given theological proposal will necessarily be ‘authorized’ in several different ways all at once” (p. 145). “An appeal to an ontology (or to a phenomenology or to historical research)” as genuinely authorizes a theological approach as an appeal to Scripture; Scripture is not, therefore, to be regarded as conferring divine authorization. “Taken as wholes” theological systems are to be regarded “in a quasi-aesthetic way as a solicitation of mind and imagination to look at Christianity in a certain way” and not as logical expositions of the essence of Christian faith (p. 137). Theological evaluation is therefore more illuminating if instead of probing questions of logic and objective truth we ask what roles or “uses” the several theological loci and the appeals to “various kinds of intellectual inquiry such as historical research (including biblical scholarship), phenomenology of religious experience, metaphysical schemes, etc.” fulfill “within the ‘system’ as a whole” (pp. 137 f.). This proposal, that theological analysis concern itself with the structure of argumentation rather than with the validity of truth claims, is reminiscent of a now-dated era in Biblical studies when documentary scholars competed to dissect the form of the Scriptural writings, only to realize belatedly that they had stifled a living body of truth. Moreover, for the underlying validity of Kelsey’s own method of doing theology it can offer no basis other than private preference.

Kelsey repudiates the emphasis “that there is necessarily a kind of conceptual continuity, if not identity, between what scripture says and what theological proposals say” (p. 186). Since he approves discontinuity

of concepts and meaning between Scripture and theological proposals and admits Scriptural authorization only by indirect appeals (pp. 186 f.), "scriptural normativity" for Kelsey involves the dispensability of any and all logical continuity between Scripture and theology. Scripture is normative authority not because it preserves an unchanging content but because it serves rather as the "starting point" and "model" for theological elaboration (p. 196). It is "relevant" to theological proposals but not "decisive" for them (p. 206). Kelsey approves redescription of what the Bible says, as by Tillich and Bultmann, "in *different* concepts" (p. 189), meaning different conceptualities. In short, Kelsey spurns the view that "meaning has only one meaning" (p. 190) and that the Biblical texts have but one meaning that theological proposals are to reproduce in order to be Scripturally authorized.

The epistemological relativity underlying this notion not only dissolves any fixed meaning for Kelsey's own proposals about "normativity," "authority" and "scripture," but also whatever fixed meaning he would attach to meaning itself under any and all circumstances. It therefore reduces theology to an intricate exercise in futility and nonsense.

The historic alternative to the functionalist notion of normativity does not at all, contrary to Kelsey, beg the root questions "what 'scripture' and 'authority' are to mean" (p. 194); it is Kelsey's view of multiplied meanings that precludes attaching any definite sense to them. For all its utility, Kelsey's volume does not help us much with the overarching concern of the transcendent truth of the Christian religion. And one may debate whether Christian truth is better served by a redescription than by a repudiation of its classic concepts if one no longer finds these palatable.