

A SALUTE FROM THE MARGIN

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Whether a chirp from the ecclesiastical wilderness of Pentecostalism qualifies as wafting from a “New Religious Movement” – and therefore appropriate for this panel – will have to be determined by each listener based on personal premises. My own religious background, however, has been life-long in the Pentecostal Movement. That fact alone may be sufficient for some here gathered to judge my words as coming from outside the pale of acceptable Christian orthodoxy, from a “new religious movement,” even. On the other hand, I have known warm acceptance as a “separated brother” by deeply respected Roman clergy.

Connected with that Pentecostal tradition, I must first say that I speak *from* that movement but have no authority to speak *for* it. Nearing the end of four decades as an academic teacher of New Testament, I can say for myself that I am very deeply grateful for this opportunity, even if as a voice from a distant margin, to join with the hundreds here gathered in celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the issuance of *Dei Verbum*.

Such a participator’s delight comes from this: that, as an academic teacher of New Testament, my professional formation and teaching service have been informed regularly and substantially by a range of scholarly technical literature that legitimates scientific biblical inquiry conducted with reverential piety. I view that premise as a feature of the Roman Catholic scholarly tradition, clearly manifested in *Dei Verbum*. So much of liberal Protestant scholarship had come to rule out religious interests as unacceptably intrusive into the inquiry process.

As long as I have been engaged in biblical teaching, a book by a Roman Catholic priest, Alfred Wikenhauser’s *New Testament Introduction*, which came into English from German in 1958 (New York: Herder and Herder: Catholic Press, 1958), has been within arm’s reach, despite its occasional errors. And so has the informative fold-out chart of early Christian authors prepared by G. Dumeige and titled *Synopsis scriptorum ecclesiae antiquae* (Uccle: Editions Willy Rouseau, 1953). Then there have been the decades of comprehensive bibliographic resources compiled in the *Elenchus bibliographicus biblicus* in the days before computerized databases. In a single issue of that journal I once counted titles in 26 different languages.

Still another outcome of Roman Catholic scholarship draws my deep admiration and regular usage. I refer to the *New Jerusalem Bible*, whose publication history in English began in 1966 – the year following the proclamation of *Dei Verbum*. (Its French origins go back to the Second World War.) That version I recommend to students and friends as “the version for thinking Christians.” I do this because it too manifests the blend of scholarship and piety that I value so much.

For example, recent use of the *New Jerusalem Bible* in the ninth chapter of the book of *Proverbs* opened my eyes to find in this chapter two offered invitations – one from Wisdom (9:1-6), the other from Foolishness, or from “Dame Folly,” as the version aptly puts it (9:13-18). The *NJB* here recognizes the tempting invitation of an adulteress as a metaphor for the attraction of foolhardy behavior, an allure subtly contrasted with the call of Wisdom. Such an insight exemplifies the deep interpretive attention to context that I find characteristic of the *New Jerusalem Bible* and very often overlooked by translators and interpreters in my circles, who are more accustomed to so-called “verse by verse” expositions. The *NJB*, I would say, translates whole books – each phrase in the light of the relevant span of context – and not merely verses or paragraphs.

The point that I make here, I hope it is clear, is that the Roman Catholic tradition of biblical scholarship has profoundly influenced even so distant a sector of Christendom as the Pentecostal Movement, which only in recent decades has come to take scholarship seriously and still views the academic enterprise with lingering suspicion.

As for *Dei Verbum*, it is less the document itself than the reality it describes that draws my admiration, my congratulation, and my gratitude. The Pentecostal tradition has endured but a century, merely five percent of the standard reckoning for the time of origin of the Roman Catholic Church. Pentecostals generally value religious experience over academic learning. Broadly speaking, the Pentecostal Movement has suffered a certain theological impoverishment often colored, where it has ventured into doctrinal statements at all, by American Fundamentalism.

With the Fundamentalist tradition, and even with certain sectors of contemporary Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism often has joined in viewing the Bible and the Word of God as unquestionably identical. The two are one and the same, in the view of many in these traditions. This opinion prevails in spite of biblical texts like this one in Acts, where Luke gives one of his accustomed historical summaries: Luke writes, "But the Word of God continued to advance and gain adherents" (Acts 12:24 NRSV). Here, the precise biblical phrase "Word of God" cannot in any way be understood to refer to the developed fourth century canon of Holy Scripture, which is what the word "Bible" means in the circles I am describing. From the Roman tradition, as compactly summed in *Dei Verbum*, I learned that while Scripture both contains and is the "Word of God," the theological and historical reality designated by the phrase "Word of God" refers to something both larger and anterior to the finished form of the canonical Scriptures. *Dei Verbum* speaks of Divine Revelation as a prior act of God in human history, the effects of which become embodied both in Sacred Scripture, and, as the Catholic tradition sees it, in Sacred Tradition. Both, in the Roman view, constitute the sphere of the embodied Word of God. Not so with the Pentecostals.

Dei Verbum of course grants higher value to Tradition than I have been able to allow. Some of the harshest words of Jesus apply to the potential for exaggerated valuation of tradition: "So, for the sake of your tradition," He thundered to the Pharisees, "you make void the Word of God" (Matt 15:6 NRSV).

But I can report a pivotal exegetical discovery of my own. Whether as a theologically uninformed Pentecostal impacted by American Fundamentalism, or even as an enlightened, educated "new Evangelical," my taxonomy had always been that ultimate religious authority, for conservative Protestants lay in Scripture. For Roman Catholics, by contrast, authority lay in the teaching Church as embodied in Scripture and Tradition. For liberal Protestants, on the other hand, no external authority is necessary – whether Church or Bible: human reason alone offers a sufficient guide to truth. So I thought.

But in the study of the book of 1 Corinthians I made a startling discovery. It is that Scripture itself teaches – the Bible, remember, is *my* habitual standard of authority – that Scripture itself teaches that, within limits, tradition does indeed have authority. That insight came when I was examining the Apostle Paul's arguments to the women at Corinth who were eager to abandon existing societal standards of appearance. The passage is 1 Corinthians 11.2-16. When the Apostle has exhausted a varied barrage of arguments from reason, from something he calls "nature" (*phusis*), from Scripture, from social custom, and more, he comes to a final argument at verse 16 (and I paraphrase here): "If anyone remains unconvinced," he says, "we have no such practice of abandoning social custom, *nor do the churches of God.*" At that moment of discovery, I could hardly believe what I was reading. Paul makes for his final argument an appeal to the practice of the churches, to tradition it seems. The Corinthian women are not to abandon customary social appearance, whether by hair style or form of dress, because

that is not the practice, the “tradition,” the Pauline way of doing things, among the apostolic churches.

Tracking elsewhere in Paul’s letters the use of the plural form “churches” strengthens the conclusion that tradition bears authority, within limits. “This is my rule in all the churches,” he writes when giving an assortment of marital advice in 1 Corinthians 7 (see 7:17). Whatever an interpreter makes of the plea for women to keep silence in the congregation, Paul argues the standard with the twice repeated words “as in [all] the churches” (1 Corinthians 14:33-34). Clearly, a biblically oriented Protestant must agree to unavoidable exegetical warrant for the authority of tradition.

On one occasion, I described this discovery that Scripture legitimates the authority of tradition to a group of United States Navy chaplains that included Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Jews. In the discussion that followed, one Catholic priest remarked that I should not be so surprised to discover that Scripture warrants the authority of tradition. “Some of us,” he said, “Some of us Roman Catholic priests have been discovering the authority of Scripture.”

But it is a different conclusion to pair Scripture with Tradition as twin components of the Word of God, as *Dei Verbum* clearly does.

As a student of the New Testament, however, I must say that although I perceive limits to the authority of tradition, I must also admit that the very notion of “biblical authority” has an historical feature that seems to me often overlooked by Pentecostals and Evangelicals. Affirmations are readily made in the evangelical and Pentecostal traditions about the character of the Bible. It is, as an Evangelical civil war of adjectives once posed, “inerrant” or “infallible.” The Bible is “sufficient,” many Protestant traditions assert. The Bible is the Word of God, and by reverse logic, the Word of God is the Bible. These and other theological assertions are applied regularly to the “Bible.”

But I think such statements are often made uncritically, without sufficient historical attention to the development of the Biblical canon. “When--,” I am accustomed to ask students, “At what date did it become true that the Bible is *inerrant* or *infallible* or *sufficient* or *inspired* – or any other relevant theological adjective?” Surely not before AD 367 when, in the 39th Festal letter of Athanasius for the first time were specified the 27 books, and only those 27, of what has come to be called the New Testament. Any of these theological descriptors could, over the earlier Christian centuries, be applied to the *character* of Scripture but not to its developed canonical *extent*, until the fourth century canonical codification. What then can be said of the fluid shape of what is called “Scripture” from the time of Jesus to that of Athanasius? I have to say that the tradition of the Church prevailed during the period of canonical formation. Tradition, whether I like it or not, played a dominant role in the literary sorting that resulted in the formation of the biblical canon. I am willing to call that the beneficence of Providence. My Roman colleagues will name it the reliable authority of Sacred Tradition.

Hear then a mingled voice, from the Christian margin, from the grateful heart of an academic beneficiary of the Roman Catholic heritage, joining in the celebration of the grand gift of the Speaking God. That gift comes not from the graven images that topple from a cart unless bolstered by human hands, nor from the vacant silence of a speechless carved idol. Rather, that gift is the very Word of God, the *Dei Verbum*, of the Living and Speaking God who in times past whispered haltingly but in these last days has spoken unto us by His Son, our common Lord, Jesus Christ – who as the Living Word of God so often comes to us through the sacred pages of the Written Word of God, now portable, available, vernacular, and inexpensive, the very Word of God in our own human words.

Indeed, the Word of God, the *Dei Verbum*, abides forever.