



Sacred Scripture and Christian Unity: Reflections from a Methodist Point of View

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Introduction

Scripture is one thing commonly affirmed by the major streams of Christianity: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal. Yet it is now also divisive, the divisions being *within* the major denominations, and more deeply and passionately felt than the fault-lines of the historic divisions. Acknowledging this reality, I offer comments on three key elements of the Vatican II statement from the perspective of a New Testament and Patristic scholar whose churchmanship is in the Wesleyan tradition. In the process I develop an argument for accepting pluralism in interpretation, multiple readings being contained within creedal parameters.

1. Attending to Scripture itself

Vatican II's *Constitutio dogmatica de divina revelatione* states that "God chose men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted" (DV 11). So the interpreter

"should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended" (DV 12). Thus the statement, which also proceeds to endorse the need to attend to literary genres and social conventions of the time, embraces the so-called "historical-critical method". Those engaged in biblical studies are given encouragement, and indeed the contribution of Roman Catholic scholars to professional scholarship has since been extensive and marked.

This now common approach releases Scripture from the straightjacket of inherited interpretations, with two outcomes: the first is the challenge of its strangeness to current cultures and societies, and the second is the realisation of its potential to act as a mirror, as analogies are drawn between then and now which recognise both the similarities and differences of the human, historical settings in which Christians seek to follow Christ. To clarify this I offer an example relevant to the theme of Church unity.

At the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, held at Santiago de Compostela in 1993, I was asked to provide Bible studies by working through the epistle to the Galatians. Now Galatians makes it possible to overhear the early Church engaging in a major dispute over what was then a particularly significant issue of principle and identity but which is no longer directly relevant to our situation. It is hardly a classic ecumenical passage, arising as it does out of a contentious situation; and indeed study of it proved contentious in the context of the con-



ference. It was so much the more important for the ecumenical movement to face up to the realities of this epistle – for it proved to be a mirror in which the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for the ecumenical movement could be reflected. Some of the principal points emerging from the study included the following observations:

- The rhetorical dynamic of Galatians is towards unity – its aim is to persuade the recipients not to be seduced into exclusive or sectarian readings of Scripture.
- The premiss of the epistle’s argument is respect for the differing identities of Jew and Gentile.
- Scripture and its interpretation is already the decisive issue in Galatians; Scripture and Tradition take on a new level of meaning because of the new situation, and that new reading is inclusive not exclusive – it demands that Jews and Gentiles discover the possibility of fellowship despite difference, appealing behind Moses to Abraham, and pointing to Jeremiah’s call to the *ethne* (nations, but usually referring to Gentiles in the New Testament).
- We only know by hindsight that Paul was the true apostle as Jeremiah had been the true prophet. So ecumenicity demands the ability to hold the dangerous radicals within the tradition, but also hear the dangerous radicals, the prophets who come to stir up the Church and provoke new understandings of the ways of God.
- The argumentation suggests that ecumenicity cannot be bland, lowest common denominator toleration – rather it may involve confrontation, and a response of painful listening to those who differ.
- Integrity is non-negotiable, but does not exclude the possibility of change.
- Controversy for the follower of Christ is not to be the vehicle for conceit, competition and envy – rather it is the necessary precondition for reconciliation, for discovering how we bear one another’s burdens. Might it not be the case that the brokenness of the Church is a precondition for being a model of reconciliation in our fractured world?
- Exclusive identity is challenged in such a way that we are invited to consider whether we are provoked to look beyond inner-Christian ecumenism to an ecumenism with other faiths – for Scripture points us also to the “book of Creation” as revelatory of God, and if God is Creator of all, how can we be exclusive of any?

In the light of this, it is worth observing that the historical-critical method alerts us to the fact that all the clas-

sic passages about Church unity (such as Jn 17, 1 Co 10-13, especially chapter 12, Rm 12, etc.) were in fact penned against a background of dissension and possible fragmentation. They present an ideal that was hardly realised even then. Indeed, the New Testament, studied by this method, alerts us to the pen-ultimacy of the Church militant here on earth. What we are to be is both “now” and “not yet”. This is a profound challenge to ecclesiastical ideology. The Churches, as we know them, are institutions with the same socio-cultural characteristics as other institutions, sometimes stuck in a time-warp with characteristics inherited from earlier societies, sometimes consciously or unconsciously taking on those of contemporary institutions. Attending to Scripture itself illuminates our struggles as much as ideals. So my first point is a welcome to Vatican II’s acceptance of biblical criticism, together with a challenge to allow it to shape ecclesiology, and so ecumenical possibilities.

2. Attending to Tradition

My second point challenges Protestants to accept the importance of Tradition. The Vatican II statement declares that it is by Tradition that the Church came to know the full canon of biblical books, and by Tradition Scripture comes to be more profoundly understood. Scripture and Tradition are bound together in a close and reciprocal relationship, and both are to be accepted and honoured with like devotion and reverence. Protestants, recognising here a classic re-statement of the position taken by Catholics over against the Reformation’s watchword, *sola scriptura*, may react cautiously. Nevertheless I want to urge the importance of this position for all Christian interpretation of Scripture.

Recent decades have seen a reaction against the historical-critical method on a number of counts. Some have suggested it yields merely “archaeological” readings, distancing Scripture from us and our needs. Others have objected to the way its analyses lead to the fragmentation of Scripture. Attempts to respond to these objections have been much influenced by post-modern hermeneutics, but one movement which may seem to have more immediately Christian roots is canon-criticism. The argument here is that the books should be read as belonging to one Book, and instead of focusing on Scripture as a library containing books with a multiplicity of historical backgrounds, and often a multiplicity of prior sources, the canonical meaning should be sought by reading passages in the context of the Bible as a whole.

This approach, I suggest, despite its obvious attractiveness for Christian reading, is simply not adequate. The canon does not offer a key to its own interpretation. The collection is diffuse and in some ways contradictory.



Granted the books which make up this collection often betray a deep consciousness of their own “intertextuality”, nevertheless it is only by conceiving some kind of overarching schema or framework that any overall perspective can be reached in the light of which particular passages may be interpreted. What I want to suggest is that the most appropriate external framework for Christian reading lies not in any of the 20th century frameworks, such as “progressive revelation” or “salvation-history”, but in the classic creeds.

The grounds for this claim are to be found in the situation and contribution of St. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons towards the end of the 2nd century. Anyone who pays attention to this is immediately alerted to the weaknesses of the Protestant position with regard to Tradition. Irenaeus was struggling against Gnostics, people who in his eyes selected texts that suited their purposes and interpreting them according to their own overarching scheme. As yet there was no agreed canon of Scripture, and no agreed criteria of interpretation. It was through this struggle that both began to be established. For Irenaeus the only possibility was to appeal to Tradition – to custom and usage with respect to the list of books read in church, and to the Rule of Faith as the framework for ensuring a proper Christian reading of that canon. Without paying attention to this Tradition, it was possible, as Irenaeus suggested, to rearrange the pieces of the mosaic to produce a fox rather than the portrait of a king (cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 1.8.1). Irenaeus recognised that Christian reading depends on a Tradition that embraces the Scripture, and that the canon of Scripture alone is not enough to ensure that it is read aright.

The Rule of Faith, or Canon of Truth, can be regarded as in some sense the precursor of the creeds. Without having yet a fixed form, it speaks of a single drama with three characters: the Father and Creator of all, whose purposes are being worked out in the overarching story; the Son of God who became incarnate for us and our salvation; and the Holy Spirit who foreshadowed what was to come in the inspired Scriptures. The historical-critical method outlaws a doctrinal reading of Scripture as anachronistic; yet Christian interpretation requires a Trinitarian reading. Canon-criticism on its own cannot ensure that; if it finds it, it subconsciously imports Tradition. Better, surely, that it is claimed explicitly. The notion that everything should be subjected to the test of Scripture is important, yet meaning is not confined to what is actually there – there is no single identifiable meaning, whether described as literal, plain or historical. The doctrinal superstructure of Christianity was built ON Scripture, not simply OUT OF it; and it is vital to recognise that the plenitude of Scripture’s meaning belongs to its future, not its historical origins. The riches of revelation are released by the traditional framework which enables Scripture to be read Christianly.

3. Attending to the point of Scripture

The Vatican II statement declares, “God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph. 2:18; 2 P 1:4). Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col 1:15, 1 Tim 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex 33:11; Jn 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself.” (*DV 2*), adding a string of Scripture references to support this statement. It affirms that easy access to Holy Scripture should be available to all the Christian faithful and translations are encouraged in collaboration with Christians of other denominations. The word of Scripture, it says, is a source of healthy nourishment and holy vitality for the ministry of the Word. The point of Scripture as the conversion of minds and hearts, and indeed communities, is thus accepted, a point deeply enshrined in the approach of my own Wesleyan tradition, as well as the patristic literature. If Scripture is to convert hearts in many different ages and cultures it must be open to all, it must speak “for us and our salvation” in many and various ways in order to address our different conditions, and so inevitably it must be plurivocal – there must be many ways of reading oneself into the text, so as to be convicted and transformed.

Recent literary criticism has emphasized the importance of interpretative communities – the way that texts may be read variously in various contexts and differing traditions of interpretation are thus formed. If we look at the history of exegesis, or ponder the disputes about the meaning of Scripture in our own world, we can see this happening. It is vital then that we learn respect through dialogue – even fundamentalists may have something to teach us! We need to find the humility not to pin Scripture down. The canon itself invites us to ponder the fact that there are four Gospels, not one, and an Old and a New Testament, which are not the same but interpret each other. As the Fathers never tired of pointing out, you need the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to read Scripture. Augustine insisted that Scripture can only be interpreted in and through love. The Fathers also reflected theologically on the fact it is only because God accommodated the divine self to human limitations that we have received any revelation.

Ephrem the Syrian almost speaks of a double incarnation – in flesh and in language. The Word clothed himself in our metaphors, types and symbols in order to communicate with us. Gregory of Nyssa likewise explores the inadequacies of human language for expressing the divine, recognising that human language has to be stretched beyond itself to produce anything like the truth, and even then our comprehension of the



divine is limited – for God is infinite and cannot be reduced to the size of our own minds. Scripture constantly points beyond itself, and there are layers of meaning through which to progress. Ephrem speaks of Scripture being an inexhaustible fountain, and no-one should imagine that the single one of its riches he has found is the only one there is: “a thirsty person rejoices because he has drunk: he is not grieved because he proved incapable of drinking the fountain dry”. It is no wonder that the Fathers found multiple meanings in any given text.

If we are to attend to the point of Scripture, however, the most important interpreters must be those who have learned to live the Gospel authentically. Scripture is not meant to be a scientific or even doctrinal textbook – its point is the creation of saints who live out its meaning in a variety of different callings. So embodied exegesis is the most important of all. Someone once defined a saint as a person who makes you feel ten times taller and better than you really are – that kind of humility, respect and love embodies the point of Scripture, while allowing for many and various ways in which it speaks effectively for the transformation of the fallen.

Conclusion

The Vatican II statement is headed *de divina revelatione*. Its opening paragraphs emphasize the priority of God. It concludes by hoping that the Church’s “spiritual life will receive a new impulse from increased devotion to the Word of God, which ‘abides for ever’ (Is 40:8; 1 P 1:23-25)”. The reading of Scripture needs to be both ecumenical and for God’s sake, not our own. The Bible is easily turned into a weapon with which to attack others; when it is, it becomes a tool for self-justification, or its reading becomes defensive and distorted. Because of its focus on God the Vatican II statement contains the ingredients for a rapprochement over Scripture, at least between the historic streams of Christianity so long divided by issues that now belong to the past. May we find ways of turning those ingredients into food for the future!

To do that requires

- intensive scholarship – for the origins of Scripture in historical circumstances cannot be gainsaid and its reading is refreshed by disciplined attention to this reality
- acceptance of the traditions of doctrinal reading – for Scripture cannot stand alone, the canon being itself the product of Tradition, and Tradition providing the over-arching framework within which Christian reading takes place
- commitment to live as believers and believing communities according to the ways set out in the Word of God in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

Thus we need to accept pluralism in interpretation while insisting that multiple readings are contained within creedal parameters. Vatican II points the way. ■