

Topic 17: The Relationship between Scripture and Tradition

In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe, who is the refulgence of his glory, the very imprint of his being, and who sustains all things by his mighty word. (Heb 1.1-3a)

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. 1 Cor 11.23-26

I. The Dynamics of Tradition: Tradition [Latin, tradere, traditio: "to hand over"] involves "the successive communication of one and the same object to others, a single possessor being the first term in the series."

Tradition as transmission: the hermeneutical dialectic of scripture/ tradition maintains that scripture is produced as part of the tradition to which it witnesses. It functions as the norm of that tradition, but precisely as interpreted from within and in terms of the tradition.

Tradition as mission: Mission is the entrusting of a task to another by one who has a responsibility to see that the task is completed. "By mission and tradition, Christianity has the character of inheritance or transmission, and that of a fellowship or a people" (Congar).

Tradition as foundation: in the foundational sense, Tradition (capital "T") embodies the presence of God's Spirit in and to the church. Jesus "hands over" to his disciples what he receives from the Father; his followers continue to "hand over" what they receive from him.

Tradition as content: in the more ordinary sense of the word, tradition (as a noun) refers to the content of the beliefs which the living Church hands from one generation to the next. The distinction between the apostolic tradition and the ongoing tradition points to the distinction between originating and dependent revelation. The further distinction between the written and unwritten forms of the

apostolic tradition has a further bearing on its normative character.

Tradition as mode of transmission draws attention to two issues: The role of magisterium in handing on official doctrine and The wide range of ways in which all the faithful hand on the living faith.

II. Scripture, Tradition and the Church: Revelation occurs as an event within human experience with a dialogical structure (gift reception). Hence, the event of revelation is always historically mediated. Within the event of revelation it is necessary to distinguish the actual holistic experience from the interpretation and expression of it in scripture and tradition.

A hermeneutical dialectic exists between scripture and tradition. Scripture expresses the original revelation which governs the tradition and all later dependent revelation. It is produced by and within the tradition and functions as a norm of that tradition precisely by being interpreted within and in terms of the tradition.

As the expression of revelation, scripture functions like the authoritative constitution of the church. As such, interpretation of scripture is essential both to the ongoing reception of revelation and the ongoing life of the church that hands on what it has received.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How does scripture affect tradition?
2. How have the "dynamics of tradition" aided in forming the Church?