

Topic 18: The Use of Scripture in Theology

I. From Classical to Historical Consciousness: The classical understanding of the status of Scripture is summed up by the doctrine of Scripture as the norm for theology, the *norma normans non normata* ["the norm of all other norms which itself is not governed by another norm."] Along with this doctrine reside the doctrines of the inspiration, inerrancy, universality/clarity, comprehensiveness and closure of scripture. These six doctrines can be summarized as follows:

- Inspiration: Scripture is inspired and dictated by God. Consequently, scriptural texts include God's own knowledge and objective information about God.
- Inerrancy: Because it is inspired by God, scripture contains no errors.
- Universality/ clarity: Scripture's religious truth is transcultural and self-interpreting.
- Normativeness: Scripture is the normative authority for doctrine/ theology.
- Comprehensiveness: Scripture has the answer to all relevant religious questions. Closure of scripture: What is revealed in scripture is final and closed.

Historical consciousness has rendered the status of the scriptural doctrines problematic:

- Historical consciousness allows us to view scriptural writings as human artifacts produced in concrete, historically specific contexts.
- Scripture includes numerous factual inconsistencies and contradictions, and even religious sentiments which appear unpalatable today. How can it be inerrant?
- The books of scripture are historically particular and unclear; they require extensive study and elicit multiple interpretations.
- The bible itself and the history of its interpretation manifest radical plurality.
- Scripture does not and cannot address problems that emerge in different or later cultural historical contexts.
- A theology of faith and revelation based on the turn to the subject necessarily implies that revelation is intrinsically ongoing.

Retrieving the status of Scripture within the context of historical consciousness

- The divine-human character of scripture has a structure like that of Christology: God's presence is grace at work within historical human freedom. Moreover, the specifically Christian content of revelation is mediated through Jesus.
- Inerrancy resides in God: scripture is to revelation as belief is to faith.

- The universality and clarity of Christian revelation point back to Jesus: all revelation from God is and must be historically mediated; as a human being, Jesus can be recognized by other human beings; hence, Jesus' message has a potentially clear meaning and relevance for all.
- Scripture is authoritative insofar as it mediates a real encounter with God.
- Scripture is sufficient to the task of mediating encounters with God.
- The closure of revelation refers ultimately to a christological reality: Jesus is the final medium of God's revelation, and God is the way Jesus reveals God is to be.

II. The Use of Scripture in Theology: Problem: How can historically conditioned scriptures attain authoritative applicability for later times and completely different cultures? Approach: We need a logically coherent and theologically sound explanation of how scripture can be used in theology.

Logically coherent: The authority of scripture rests on the authority of faith. The authority of scripture hinges on the recognition of the church as a community of faith whose faith is expressed by, crystallized in and normed by scripture. The use of scripture in theology depends on an a priori imaginative judgment about how scripture makes God present to human existence. First, one experiences God "speaking" to the faith community through scripture. Second, one explains that experience by implicitly or explicitly drawing upon an image of how God "speaks" to the church through scripture. Scripture is an authoritative norm for theology, but not the exclusive norm. Theology does not merely repeat what is said in scripture. Theology interprets scripture for new contexts and in light of new questions.

Theologically sound: Scripture as the expression of revelation can function as the constitution of the church. Revelation occurs as an event within human experience that is initiated by God. This event manifests the dialogical structure of gift-reception. The event of revelation is always historically mediated. Its content emerges when the human subjectivity-flooded-by-grace intersects with the revelatory medium. Within the event of revelation it is necessary to distinguish the actual holistic revelatory experience from the interpretation and expression of it. Scripture expresses the original revelation which governs all later dependent revelation. Interpretation of scripture is essential to the reception of revelation. In this light, scripture functions as the authoritative expression of the event that constituted the church. As the expression of that constitutive event, it has the character of a "written constitution" for the later tradition. Insofar as the later community wants to "enter" the original event, scripture has an intrinsic authority.

III. Scripture as the Norma Normans non Normata: Mediating Real

Revelatory: Encounters The use of scripture in theology depends on a nuanced theology of mediated presence. Thesis: Jesus is the founding medium and historical source of Christian revelation, while scripture serves as an ever-present second-order medium for dependent revelation. The religious medium (person, event, thing, concept, etc.) gives form and content to the experience of transcendence makes it possible to say something about that experience. Scripture mediates an awareness of and an empowerment by God's presence. Scripture is authoritative because and insofar as it mediates real encounters with God.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to say that scripture is inspired by God?
2. How is scripture universal and clear?
3. How can the bible serve as an absolute, normative authority?
4. How are we to understand the doctrine that the canon of revealed scripture is closed? So how can scripture be considered comprehensive?