

Scripture and Canon

The title of this essay is deliberate, even though at first glance one of those terms appears to be redundant, like “each and every.” Scripture and canon sound like two words for the same thing, like car and automobile. Actually, of course, car and automobile are to be distinguished, although in common parlance we use them interchangeably. So too with regard to Scripture and canon. It is useful to see that each word has its own range of associations and meanings. In the word Scripture we recognize the Latin term *scriptura*, that which is written, the writings. The New Testament uses the Greek *hē graphē* or the plural *hai graphai* to express the same idea, but normally we translate the Greek as “scripture,” not simply “writings,” in order to indicate which writings are being mentioned—the writings which are deemed special, sacred or holy, inspired, revealed. Canon, on the other hand, is English for *kanōn*, the Greek word for measuring rod, norm, or standard. When we want to connote the intrinsic special quality of a body of writings we use the word Scripture or Scriptures, but when we want to connote their standing in the community we use the word canon. Canon suggests the formal, juridical standing which Scripture does not.

This distinction locates more precisely the subject-matter of this essay: the place of the canon in the life of the church. Distinguishing Scripture from canon does not mean abandoning the one for the other. Indeed, because the word *canon* refers to a closed collection, two things at least are clear. First, this literature was acknowledged to be Scripture before it became canon; second, the canon retains its role in the church primarily because it continues to be Scripture: special writings which have a special capacity to be the vehicle for what we confess is the Word

of the Lord. No doctrine of biblical authority generates this experience of this Word. Canonicity is the formal and official acknowledgment by the community that these writings are indeed Scripture. This means that the Bible's standing in the church depends on the church's experience of it as Scripture. Where the Bible ceases to function as Scripture, as special, it ceases to be the canon and becomes instead a resource book on a shelf of great religious classics.

Conversely, the Bible can be experienced as Scripture and yet fall short of being the canon. One of the tasks before us is the rehabilitation of the Scripture as the canon of the church, as the acknowledged norm to which the community knows itself to be accountable, and with which it must come to terms. It is this task that makes the distinction between Scripture and canon significant.

Now if "canon" refers to the Bible as that body of literature with which the community must come to terms, and if "Scripture" refers to the Bible as that body of literature through which one experiences the word so intensely, so intimately, so powerfully that one confesses it to be the Word of the Lord; and if the latter is necessary for the former, then theological education for the church faces a formidable task indeed. For we are tempted by two shortcuts which at first appear to be quite different but which turn out to be quite similar.

On the one hand, our work is proceeding at a time of a strong and growing interest in what is commonly called "spirituality." Protestants have learned to use the Catholic language of formation: the shaping of the whole person into a more fit servant of the gospel. Spirituality is a great attraction today for seminars, clinics, retreats, and the like. Surely this strong interest in spirituality has many roots, but equally sure is the fact that it bespeaks a wide and deep hunger for what used to be called vital, personal religion. It is not rare for pastors to reflect rather caustically on the spiritual aridness of their theological education, on its intellectualism or lack of attention to their own personal growth in faith, or in deepening the capacity to pray. As far as the current scene is concerned, the more we have students in theological schools who themselves are looking and exploring and ascertaining whether the "Christian thing" is really for them, the more strain is placed on the seminary whose ethos is more that of a school for educating the committed than of a church for nurturing the seekers. Some schools feel themselves infiltrated by charismatics and evangelicals, and faculties sometimes reassure one another that in our shop, at least, such students pose no real problem—yet.

The surge of interest in spirituality impinges on our topic in a very interesting way, for if there is one thing that seems to characterize the use of the Bible in the many forms of spirituality it is the almost complete disregard of the Bible as it is taught in the classroom. What is encouraged is the experience with the Bible as Scripture, as the means for deepening ones spirituality directly, uncluttered by any critical judgments. It is true, to be sure, that for many persons, matters of sources, dates, authorship, literary integrity, and the like, allow one to make sense of a baffling book. It is also true that for many others, the Bible comes alive only when these matters are ignored as they listen for what the Lord is saying to them or to us. What seems to be missing, and sorely needed, is an interpretive scheme, a hermeneutic, a theology of exegesis which makes clear the relation between the historical explanation and spiritual or moral appropriation. Faculties are generally much more adept at breaking up the hardpan clay of fundamentalism than they are in clarifying the relation between explanation and appropriation. What we usually say is that there is no recipe, no set of procedures for moving from one to the other. True enough. But that answer alone is no longer satisfactory; further reflection is in order.

To speak of explanation in biblical study is to speak of historical criticism, mostly done by experts. To speak of appropriation and interpretation is to speak of what is done mostly by amateurs, which is not simply a word for laity. So the question becomes, "If it is the amateur scholar who interprets for the church in accord with his or her appropriation of the text, what is the role of the experts' explanation in this process?" In explanation we try to account for phenomena in the text, and in historical explanation we do so by appealing to antecedents, to earlier sources, borrowed ideas, reused traditions, motifs, and the like. For decades experts have had an unquenchable thirst for antecedents and parallels, and they have succeeded remarkably in anchoring the biblical anthology in the cultures of antiquity. The experts have also succeeded in making it difficult to talk with one another. A specialist in the Synoptics is often reluctant to be caught with his hand in the Gospel of John. Experts in Jewish backgrounds concentrate on the Septuagint, or the Targums, or in obscure apocalyptic texts, or on Samaritans and Essenes. Experts in premonarchic Israel sense that they are strangers and sojourners in the post-Exile literature. In no way do I want to belittle the erudition that this expertise, developed across lifetimes, represents. Even though one sometimes has the impression that the flour is being ground again, on the

whole this unprecedented examination of every aspect of the Bible has brought to light an enormous amount of information and considerable body of insight. But no one can master the field anymore. As a result even the experts are amateurs outside their narrow plots. It is little wonder that the student or the pastor is bewildered by this entire explanatory process and its apparatus.

There is another consequence of this massive, explanatory work which makes bridging explanation and appropriation difficult: namely, that historical explanation, in effect, rearranges the Bible. Books are disassembled and reconstructed and put into different sequence, so that we can trace the historical development. The historical student of Paul reads him as a moving target who appears with I Thessalonians and disappears with Romans. Raymond Brown's recent book, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, disassembles the Johannine corpus and rearranges the material in order to write the history of a tradition. In both Old and New Testaments we study texts that do not even exist but that must be inferred, namely, the Yahwist and Q. So powerful is this rearranging done for the sake of reconstructing the past accurately that a by-product has emerged as well—a sense of intimidation on the part of the amateur. Instead of giving entry to the text, our sophisticated methods of explaining the data create the impression that unless all methods are mastered and orchestrated properly the Bible is more forbidding than ever. The message that seems to come through to student, pastor, ethicist, theologian, counselor is this: do it right or leave it alone.

Given these developments, it is little wonder that persons interested in spirituality find it virtually impossible to link up their concern with explanatory biblical study, and so simply abandon it when they pursue what they regard as really important anyway—direct, spiritual appropriation.

On the other hand, there is another shortcut which, as noted above, turns out to be virtually the same, namely, the rising disregard of the historically oriented explanatory process for the sake of various ahistorical explanatory efforts, whether some form of literary criticism or what goes under the banner of “structuralism.” Instead of reading narratives in order to learn what happened or to determine how much the narrative can tell us about what happened, the interest is in the narrative-world created by the storyteller, whether the story refers to an actual event or not. To encounter that created world of meaning, to enter it appreciatively, is goal enough. For these critics the goal is to understand precisely how language works, to arrive at a kind of analytical X-ray of the text as a text, to see it

as a whole, as a work of art, and not as a quarry for either facts or dogma. Repeatedly the ahistorical mode of inquiry reminds us that so much biblical study has been preoccupied, perhaps excessively, with historical questions, with genetic relationships so that other important, useful questions have been ignored. Interestingly enough, the newer ahistorical modes can be more effective temptations away from historically oriented explanation precisely because they too operate in the explanatory mode. They too account for phenomena in the text, promise to help readers understand it and appreciate it, but do so in another mode. Indeed, whereas people who bypass historical study for the sake of spirituality can sometimes be accused of anti-intellectualism, persons who press for the ahistorical modes are highly sophisticated and much of the work has developed its own jargon, its own gurus, its own group of cognoscenti. Moreover, part of the appeal is the critique of all previous scholarship as having been concerned with the wrong questions anyway. Even if on closer examination there is considerable diversity among the participants, there is a kind of messianism in this movement away from the historical. But the point I want to make is this: that the more this kind of biblical study, suggestive and insightful though it can be, turns away from history, the more it approaches charismatic exegesis, because what matters is the transaction between the individual reader and the text. Here too, there is a quest for meaning which does not rely on understanding the text in its historic embeddedness. What matters is having one's spiritual and aesthetic and moral sense enlivened. In this mode of study, the Bible can be Scripture, but need not be canon because continuity with the historical community is irrelevant. The community that matters is the community of discourse which consists of those who read texts in the same way.

I said that theological education faces a formidable task. It is to find a way to continue the historical explanatory process in such a way as to make it more fruitful in the life of the church. This requires not repudiating the current literary, ahistorical approaches but rather incorporating them—a possibility that cannot be explored here. It must suffice to affirm that the Bible is Scripture so that it can become again the canon of the community—that anthology with which the church must come to terms again and again. And here we reach the footing on which this lecture stands—the inseparability of canon and community.

What I am proposing is that biblical scholarship can help the church move forward toward recovering the canonicity of its Scripture by following through on what historical explanation has allowed us to see, and

that theological scholarship can help the church develop a more ample understanding of canon. I want to say a word about each possibility. What historical study of the Bible has allowed us to see is that the relation between canon and community does not need to be created but recognized and released. Through historical-critical study of the Bible it has become abundantly clear that the Bible is so involved in the communities of faith that it cannot be isolated from them. The materials behind the present texts were handed on in the communities. When the books of the Bible were written they came into existence in response to the needs of the community. The books were edited and compiled into the texts we have in order to make the texts serviceable for synagogue and church. The manuscripts we have were prepared for community use, and both the formation of the canon and its actual shape is the work of communities. Even if one allows for diversity in the case of the Old Testament, the basic point remains the same. What we know as the canon is inextricably involved in the life of the community at virtually every point until modern times. In short, historical criticism has made it abundantly clear that we would not have the Bible we have without the church.

What is not so clear, however, is whether we can have the church without the canon. I am persuaded that we cannot. Societies and groups and projects concerned with religion we can have in abundance without canon. Religious experiences, even meaningful ones, and access to truths we can have without having the canon, but without canon we are not church.

Now this claim deserves to be considered a bit more. It is of course true that the church existed without the New Testament or the texts which some of its books incorporated, but even then the church used the Scripture of the synagogue. Even if the synagogue canon was not yet closed by the Jewish community, most of the books of the New Testament used the synagogue Scripture as an authoritative text. It is also true that the whole church never agreed on what books constitute the Old Testament. In any case, even if there is some variation in what constitutes the Old Testament, today each church has a canon, a closed collection. There is no way to undo this, to return to a first-century situation *de jure*. In principle, to be sure, any church can change the content of its canon. But actually this is no longer possible. Even sharply defined groups like Christian Scientists and the Latter-day Saints have provided themselves with canonical supplements rather than change the inherited canon, the former being the key to the Scriptures and the latter a parallel canon. As

the articles of faith printed on a card left by a Mormon missionary put it, “we believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly. We also believe the book of Mormon to be the word of God.” (Evidently there is no ambivalence about that translation.) The same bondedness of church and canon is reflected when liberal groups attend also to the writings of other religions: the more these other texts are valued, the less concern there is to be specifically and avowedly part of the traditional Christian church.

A more adequate view of canon helps the church understand itself in a truly historical way. When the Bible is canon it links one specific historical community to another and the whole church at a given time to its predecessors reaching back as far as Abraham and Sarah. By sharing this canon, we, who may be Anglo-Saxons or Asians, or Africans or Melaneseans, appropriate a common funding history, a common vocabulary and imagery, common expectations and values. The more one senses the fuller scope of what is entailed in the relation of canon and community, the more aware one becomes of the impoverishment that marks much of the church’s use of the Bible as mere Scripture—as a body of important and special texts whose standing nonetheless falls short of what a more ample canonicity can entail. Even the church’s appeal to the Bible as the final warrant for doctrines falls short, for it tends to constrict the Bible’s role to that of providing right beliefs and ideas. For much of the church the chief value of the Bible is to provide revealed ideas or authorized morals. Proof-texting abounds among liberals no less than among conservatives. Inevitably, placing the primary emphasis on right ideas or proper morals leads to the idea that the true church consists of the right-minded or the morally superior. It is not hard to see why this is the case: the Bible is being used as a series of warrants, a use that is inevitably supportive because it is selective.

The two moves away from historical-critical study provide no real antidote for this, because a direct appropriation of Scripture for spirituality is even more selective and it nurtures a sense of community grounded in similar religious experiences. That is, it produces a sense of the church which is finally pietistic. An aesthetic reading of Scripture nurtures a sense of community which is essentially gnostic, an intellectually suggestive experience possible for those who have been initiated into a precise method and a rather arcane vocabulary available to the elite. This approach does not link today’s community with its predecessors apart from the forebears in the history of research.

What is called for is an approach to the Bible which does not forfeit its role as Scripture but which goes beyond so that it becomes a canon of the community in a more ample way, in a way that builds on what historical study has disclosed about it. One way to achieve this is by overcoming the selective use of the Bible in worship, whether as the basis for doctrine, morals, inspiration, or imaginative insights. Even though preaching is an essential aspect of worship I shall not repeat what I published in *The Bible in the Pulpit*. It is rather the role of the Bible at the lectern that is in view just now.

Even if the Bible is read every Sunday, the fact is that the way it is read virtually precludes the more adequate canonicity of the Bible in the community. Today the only contact most Christians have with the Bible occurs on Sunday morning. This is what makes the use of the Bible in the church and in worship so important and often so tragic. One can attend every service for years and never encounter more than a series of fragments. If a lectionary is not used, one Sunday's reading is from Genesis, the next from Philippians, the third from Amos, and so on. The Bible is read as if it were a scrapbook, an assortment of useful passages with no design, no plot, no overarching saga or drama. Even if a lectionary is used, the three-year cycles seldom add up to sustained attention to any given book as a whole. With or without a lectionary, the Bible is fragmented and the congregation deprived of a sustained experience with its canon.

The consequences are made all the worse by the general ignorance of the Bible in the community and by the way it is usually read at the lectern. One may doubt whether any literature is read in public the way the Bible is read in most cases. I refer not only to the holy tonie of voice, the mumbling of phrases, and mispronunciation of words, and the like. I refer to the fact that what is read is torn from the context and read as if it were a telephone number, intelligible in itself without any before or after. Now to be sure, announcing chapter and verse is a stylized way of announcing the context, and in some cases an invitation to read along. But if the hearers do not know their way around the Bible, it communicates nothing at all; better to have the page number. To be sure, a parable or Psalm can stand alone; but sections of narratives or parts of extended arguments, as in the Epistles, have a setting in the text. A few sentences which give the setting make hearing the lection much more meaningful because the hearer gets the sense of an intelligible whole. What we usually get instead are pious words like "Hear the words of the Lord as it is

written . . .” followed by, “May God bless this reading to our understanding”—little short of daring God to overcome what just happened. This treatment of the Bible violates what we believe and know the Bible to be, for it simply displays a fragment of a relic as if it were the shinbone of an apostle. The Bible cannot function as the canonical companion of the community when it is mistreated this way in worship.

What is needed is a sustained encounter with the entire Bible, be-gats and all. This requires us to surround the public hearing of the whole canon with a familiarization of it in the classroom. Only then will the church be able to come to terms with it as its canon. The coming to terms with the canon entails more than studying those passages which can easily serve as warrants for things we already believe and for a course of action to which we are already committed—little more than extended proof-texting. Such carefully screened, selective attention to the canon is as reprehensible in the hands of liberals as it is in the hands of conservatives. Coming to terms with the canon entails a serious encounter with the Bible as it actually is, not with the Bible as we wish it were.

Only if the community of faith deals with all of its canon can it come to an adequate understanding of what it is and what it has been. Only such an understanding allows the community to deal with both its identity and its history in a responsible way. Coming to terms with the Bible also entails allowing our perceptions and convictions to be challenged by the canon, a process in which we know ourselves accountable to it. The sheer diversity of the Bible, as well as its particular contents, elicits from the community reflection on fundamental questions because while the whole Bible is equally canonical it is not all equally binding for faith and action. By distinguishing what is authoritative for our own faith and life from what is no longer mandatory, the community comes to maturity.

Three current issues make this point concrete. One is the awareness that in many ways the Bible is a patriarchal book, and that at certain points the translations make the matter even worse. Coming to terms with this aspect of the canon should be the occasion for the community of faith to think through fundamental matters, not simply to tinker with the translations in order to make them more accurate or palatable, and certainly not simply to ventilate outrage. Another issue concerns the manifest antipathy toward the Jewish community expressed in important parts of the New Testament. Rather than issue an expurgated edition from which these passages are removed, as was done for the Fourth Gospel some years ago, it is better to leave the text as it is and to declare that

these passages reveal how our forebears reacted to polarized situations and that their reactions are just that—theirs not ours, and reactions not revelations. Thereby the community today can mature in its identity and take responsibility for its past. A third issue concerns the New Testament disinterest in matters of public policy such as the abusive Roman system of taxation, police brutality, the imperial system itself, and slavery. Nowhere does the New Testament call upon Christians to ameliorate these things, let alone restructure society. To hide behind the silence of the New Testament is as irresponsible a use of the canon as it is to make John a liberation theologian or Jesus a Jewish freedom fighter. Both ways proceed on the basis that the Bible must say what we want it to say and need for it to say. Neither claims the freedom to let the past, including the canon rooted in the past, be what it actually was. Relating to the Bible as canon does not require the community to perpetuate the past but does require it to come to terms with its past as a necessary and unavoidable aspect of mature faithfulness today. Having this anthology as our canon does not settle questions but raises them in perpetuity.

We can now return to the port of entry for these remarks—namely, the role of scholarly explanation for interpretation in the community. In the first place, the process sketched is indeed a community process, one in which there is conversation and argument, not simply propaganda for points of view. That conversation in turn rests on the fact that no one is only right and that no one is immune from correction. The difference between the expert and the amateur is relativized when both are members of this community, when each is prepared to learn from the other. Moreover, the pastor's work includes developing the emotional maturity and stability which such a conversation assumes and requires. Furthermore, just as there is no risk-free historical explanation, so there is no risk-free interpretation. In interpretation we rely as much on justification by faith as we do in redemption. Finally, this view of the canon rests solidly on the historical-critical method which has exposed the ways in which the canon is rooted in the multiple cultures in which it was written. The same method has made us aware that we ourselves are no less rooted in our own culture, with its prejudices and blind spots, than the prophets of Israel or the apostles of the church. Consequently the community of faith has a stake in the ongoing health and vitality of the historical-critical study of the Bible and the history of its interpretation. Far from being the great danger to the church and its canon, historical criticism is the

essential method if the church wants to understand itself as a historical community with a historical canon bearing witness to a historical faith.

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