

BEESON DIVINITY SCHOOL : SAMFORD UNIVERSITY

DOGMATIC ESSAY ON SCRIPTURE

SUBMITTED TO PIOTR J. MALYSZ, Th.D.  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
DVHD 501 – PATRISTIC & MEDIEVAL HISTORY AND DOCTRINE

BY  
JOSHUA P. STEELE  
SEPTEMBER 16, 2013

## INTRODUCTION: THE NATURE OF SCRIPTURE

As the illocutionary act which testifies to the Son of God<sup>1</sup> as the ultimate redemptive and revelatory locution of the the triune God, Scripture is used by the Spirit of God to accomplish the perlocutionary end of redemption *of, in, and through* the people of God.<sup>2</sup> The written Word of God is therefore the authority for followers of the living Word of God precisely because of its providential role in the divine speech-act, of which it is a necessary – yet not a sufficient – condition.<sup>3</sup> Practically, this providential role has worked itself out in various ways throughout the history of the Church, perhaps most notably through the development of canon in the patristic era. Theologically, the authority of Scripture is inescapably trinitarian in nature and ecclesiological in implication.

### WHAT SCRIPTURE IS FOR CHRISTIANS

For Christians, Scripture is the indispensable lens through which, with the Spirit's illumination, we view Christ, who is himself the fullest lens through which we view the Godhead. That is, it is a vital link in the revelatory chain which includes Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and humanity. However, the Bible's role *in and for* the Church is inescapably intertwined with (1) how the Bible came to be and (2) how it is properly to be accessed and interpreted.

#### **How the Bible Came to Be**

Although the story of how the table of contents at the beginning of each Christian Bible came into existence is an old one, questions of *canon* in this sense did not arise immediately after Christ's

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, I use the terms “Son of God,” “Jesus,” “Christ/Messiah,” and permutations thereof interchangeably. The same applies to “Scripture” and “Bible.”

<sup>2</sup> I here adopt J.L. Austin's speech-act theory, as put forth in *How to Do Things with Words* (2nd ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975). Briggs offers the following helpful summary: “Austin sought to distinguish between the act performed *in* saying something and the act performed *by* saying something, labeling these ‘illocutionary’ and ‘perlocutionary’ acts respectively.” See Richard S. Briggs, “Speech-Act Theory” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 763. I am also heavily indebted to Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Word of God” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 850-4.

<sup>3</sup> Theologically modifying Austin's framework, the “divine speech-act” consists of God the Father (locutor), God the Son (locution), Scripture (illocutionary act), and God the Spirit (who fulfills the perlocutionary effects).

resurrection and ascension.<sup>4</sup> The earliest Christians, persuaded that Jesus of Nazareth was the foretold Messiah of Israel, eagerly adopted the Hebrew Scriptures, or *Tanakh*, as their own Scripture. Apart from the Bible's narrative of YHWH's redemptive mission with his covenant people, the Christ-event (life, death, and resurrection) made little sense. In the other direction, however, the early Church believed that, as the fulfillment of the *Tanakh*, Christ himself was its true message. Put differently, the Hebrew Scriptures and the Son of God were considered reciprocally-interpretive, and this relationship was the first sense in which canon was considered as "the rule of truth": the Christ-event and the Scriptures illuminate each other.<sup>5</sup>

The link between this earliest consideration of canon and the table-of-contents approach begins with the role proclamation and confession of the Son of God as the Bible's true meaning – of the Gospel of Christ *according to the Scriptures* – have in creating the Church proper (cf. 1 Cor. 15:1-9).<sup>6</sup> Because Christians are primarily interested in bringing people to faith in the faithful God through Christ, the proclamation of the Christ-event according to the Word of God constitutes the Church as the divinely-ordained way in which faith is brought about (cf. Rom. 10:17). To use a spatial metaphor, this ecclesial "point" of proclamation becomes a "line" throughout history by *tradition* as "the act of passing down" and "the content of what is passed down."<sup>7</sup> The Church is thus formed by proclamation/confession of Jesus the Messiah according to the Scriptures, and preserved by tradition.

In the second century C.E., Irenaeus of Lyons relied upon the connection between Scripture and apostolic tradition to refute Gnostic heresies which threatened to destabilize the Christian community by, among other things, insisting that Scripture could not be read at face value.<sup>8</sup> This connection was so

---

<sup>4</sup> Piotr J. Malysz *From Christ to the Written Gospel: An Entry Point into the Canon of (NT) Scripture* (History and Doctrine Fall 2013 Handout, unpublished), 1-3.

<sup>5</sup> Malysz, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Malysz, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the discussion of παράδοσις in Malysz, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Book III. 2:2, from "Selections from Irenaeus of Lyons, *The Refutation and Overthrow of the Knowledge Falsely So Called (Adversus Haereses)*" in *Early Christian Fathers* (ed. Cyril C. Richardson; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 358-97. Hereafter, *Adversus Haereses* will be cited in the following form: "Irenaeus, I.1:1" or

strong that he referred to the “traditioned” teachings of the apostles as *in scripturis*, responding to those who accused these apostolic “Writings” of novel fiction by delineating the unity of Christian doctrine which had been passed down from the apostles (eyewitnesses of the Christ-event) to the Church through a clear line of bishops.<sup>9</sup> It was of crucial importance to Irenaeus that Christian doctrine was (1) unified and (2) in direct continuity with the apostles' teaching (and therefore with the proclamation of Christ and the Christologically-fulfilled expectations of the Hebrew Scriptures).<sup>10</sup>

Thus the Gnostic controversies of the second century led to canonization in its second sense: the Church's recognition/acknowledgment of writings which already had authority due to their coherence with the complex dialectic between Scripture, the Christ-event, the apostles, proclamation, and tradition.<sup>11</sup> Canon's final sense, as a list of included and excluded books which comprise the Bible, came into being in the fourth century. The Church's recognition of already authoritative writings culminated in C.E. 367 with the *Thirty-Ninth Festal Epistle* of Athanasius - the first canon list to include “all, and nothing but, all [sic] the books of our New Testament.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Scripture's Proper Interpretation and Role**

In interacting with the Word of God, it is imperative that the people of God resist the impulse to jump behind the text – either to a Gnostic-inspired and disembodied spiritual narrative, or to historical criticism's rationalistic insistence on verifiable facts. Properly handled, the Bible results in proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in order to produce faith in the faithful God.

Arguably, the best interpretive method accounts for both Christ as the fullest truth of Scripture and the varied ways in which the Bible has been used by God through his Spirit to accomplish his redemptive mission in manifold ways. That is, in terms of my thesis above, the best biblical

---

“Irenaeus, I. ch. 1”

<sup>9</sup> Irenaeus, III. 1:1; chs. 2-3. *In scripturis* is noted by Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, 370 n.47.

<sup>10</sup> Irenaeus, III. 3:3.

<sup>11</sup> Malysz, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Malysz, 3.

hermeneutic accounts for both the central locution (Christ) and the varied perlocutionary effects accomplished in/through the Church by the Spirit throughout history. It does not leave Christ behind in its insistence on esoteric behind-the-text matters, nor does it refuse the Spirit its right to bring the written Word to bear on the interpreter's present context in fresh ways. In this way, interpretation of the Bible leads to faith through the faithful proclamation of the Christ-event according to the Scriptures.

#### SCRIPTURE'S OWN AUTHORITY

As mentioned above, Scripture's authority comes from its providential role in the speech-act of God, of which it is a necessary – yet not a sufficient – condition. That is, although the illocutionary acts of the Bible are an indispensable link in the revelatory chain, they do not comprise the entire chain. Any discussion of Scripture's authority must therefore take place with its discursive context in mind, by including a discussion of the Christological locution and Spirit-empowered, ecclesiological perlocutionary effects of the divine speech-act.

Christologically, the illocutionary acts of the written Word of God bear witness to Christ the living Word as their central meaning: the ultimate locution of God. Jesus himself never shied away from claiming that he was the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures (Matt. 5:17; Lk. 24:25-27, 44). Indeed, he chastised the Jewish leaders for thoroughly studying the Scriptures, yet failing to see that the *Tanakh* bore witness to him (John 5:39-40)! Likewise, in Acts, Peter (3:11-26), Stephen (7:1-53), and Paul (13:16-41) all portray Christ as the fulfillment of YHWH's previous interactions with Israel in the *Tanakh*. The written Word of God is authoritative in that it bears witness to the Living Word as the zenith of God's redemptive revelation – the “image of the invisible God” in whom “the fulness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:15, 19, ESV).

When the Bible speaks of its own authority, it never does so apart from the life of the faithful, the Church. The two favorite passages for the inspiration (and often, the inerrancy) of Scripture both refuse to reduce the Bible to a set of propositions to be debated within a correspondence theory of truth.

The Scriptures were “breathed out by God,” not to be profitable for scientific analysis, but for “reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16, ESV). Furthermore, “men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit,” (2 Pet. 1:21, ESV) for the sake of the people of God, that they might know Christ (2 Pet. 1:12-21). Arguably, then, the ties between inspiration and sanctification are stronger than those between inspiration and certain common notions of inerrancy.

At this intersection between the inspired illocutionary acts of Scripture and their perlocutionary effects lies the Spirit of God, who empowers the “inscripturate” Word to become “incardiate,” or “taken to heart” by God’s people.<sup>13</sup> Pneumatologically, then, the Bible is able both to *be* and *become* the Word of God, as its written words are used in various ways by the Spirit throughout the ages to effect God’s mission of redemption *in* and *through* his people.<sup>14</sup> The christological, ecclesiological, and pneumatological elements of the divine speech-act thus enable the written Word continually to be an indispensable part of divine discourse, instead of a merely static word.<sup>15</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Throughout the ages, God has used his Word – living and written – to do everything from creating the world, to redeeming it; from calling a people, to establishing orthodoxy and orthopraxy in his Church; from inspiring reformation, to drawing people from every tribe, tongue, and nation to himself. In order best to appropriate the written Word of God and submit to its continuing authority in their lives, the people of God should focus on proclaiming its central message as the Gospel of Jesus Christ and allowing the Holy Spirit to accomplish fresh perlocutionary effects *in* and *through* them as God’s redemptive mission moves toward its consummation – when the written Word of God will be in their hearts and the living Word of God in front of their faces, forever (Jer. 31:33-34; Rev. 21-22).

---

<sup>13</sup> Vanhoozer, 854.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. the discussions of Karl Barth’s and Vanhoozer’s own views (850-1, 4).

<sup>15</sup> Vanhoozer, 853.