

The Book That Binds Us

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The Bible is the book that binds conservative Reformed orthodoxy, binds not in the sense of holding us together but, rather, in the sense of shackling us, immobilizing us as we attempt to address the Word of God—the Word of judgment and grace—to our contemporary situation, to present human experience.

The 1992 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church, in its anguishing debate and failure to move forward on the question of women in office, is only the most recent instance of our inability to bring the scriptural witness into fruitful dialogue with present human experience and the knowledge and insight available to us from the various disciplines of human research.

The Bible is being misused. It is being asked to function in a way it can no longer be expected to function, a way it was never intended to function. Until there is a radical revisioning of our understanding of the place of Scripture in shaping our faith and forming our practice, the church will be deadlocked, at an impasse, firing salvos of accusation and recrimination from opposing camps while the body bleeds and languishes.

It is painful to read the account of the Christian Reformed drama as it has taken shape over the past two years since the Synod of 1990. A similar drama was played out in the past in the Reformed Church in America, which now has opened its offices to women but continues to be a house divided, living in a coexistence filled with dis-ease. Advocates of both positions in the Christian Reformed Church cite Scripture and claim to be faithful to its authority. But a great gulf separates the two sides, and it is difficult to imagine them reaching agreement. Cultural...climate of opinion does work its ferment on the staunchest of orthodoxies, and time is on the side of those who seek to open the offices to women. That will come. But the Christian Reformed Church will be much like the RCA at present—of two minds on the issue. The church will live with a pragmatic

accommodation but without a unified, joyful vision of truth, of justice, energized by fresh insight and understanding.

In this journal April 1991, I wrote,

In theology old paradigms keep their adherents even when theological development has left them behind. But they can do so only by some form of authoritarian claim. In the case of Reformed orthodoxy, the authoritarian claim of the Bible has held theological movement hostage, hindering meaningful dialogue with the sciences and philosophy. We are theologically stuck, and we will not become unstuck until we learn to value Scripture as authority, but break loose from its authoritarian use.

In that same article I referred to a statement of Hendrikus Berkhof in his *Two Hundred Years of Theology* that Herman Bavinck turned away from dogmatic theology in his later years, sensing that the modern period needed a much more vigorous renewal of theology than he was able to produce. And I raised the question whether he might not have recognized that his own objective principle of knowledge—the Scriptures—blocked him from fruitful engagement with the rapidly expanding horizons of knowledge in the modern period. I stated again that the orthodox Reformed view of Scripture and its hermeneutic make it impossible either to engage the cultural assumptions that are the legacy of the Enlightenment or to be in dialogue with the probings of the present, postmodern period.

The current dilemma of the Christian Reformed Church confirms my contention. The question of women's ordination cannot be solved by appeal to Scripture alone. What must be recognized is that the Bible is not a book of propositional truths, timeless and eternal, covering the full spectrum of cosmic reality, to be applied objectively to questions of faith and practice. Rather, it must always be heard as a cumulative witness of those encountered by the God of Creation who came in judgment and grace to Israel and in the humanity of Jesus. The canon of Scripture includes that witness spanning centuries, but the canon has been closed for subsequent centuries to the present while the human story has continued on with dramatic development and amazing breakthroughs in the understanding of the cosmos, of historical development, and of the human person.

In the present debate in the Christian Reformed Church we can see the failure on both sides to acknowledge the legitimate place of contemporary experience in the discussion of women's ordination. Each side is claiming biblical authority for its position. Obviously, something is wrong, and what is wrong is the view, shared by the opposing sides, of how the Bible functions in such a discussion in relation to present experience. It is my contention that the failure to engage contemporary experience stems from a failure to recognize the function of a living tradition of faith.

Let me say clearly, I stand unreservedly with those who advocate opening all ecclesiastical offices to women. They can mount a biblical case for their position. But their opponents can mount an equally strong argument against women's ordination if it is assumed that the Bible must provide the answer for or against that ordination.

It is clear that what is at issue is not women as women in office, their giftedness, leadership capacity, or spirituality. The issue is the Bible, how it functions in the life of the church, where its authority lies.

Until the church wrestles with the authority of Scripture in determining the shape of its faith and the form of its practice, it will not be able to make progress on any theological front or come to consensus on any doctrinal debate. The apparent issue being debated will never be the real issue; lying behind it will always lurk the question, "But what does this do to the authority of the Bible?"

In Reformed orthodoxy, the Bible carries not only authority; it is used with authoritarian coerciveness and uncritical literalness that brings every new discussion to an impasse whether the question be the ordination of women, the status of homosexual or lesbian persons, of creation versus evolution, of ethical issues such as abortion, genetic engineering, or euthanasia.

In Bondage to the Bible

The Bible is the book that binds us. In our academic, theological institutions we acknowledge that the Bible is not a scientific text, not a chronicle of history in the modern sense of historiography, that it comes to expression through human persons with all the limitations that entails. But we have never been honest with the church about the implications of our recognition of the nature of the Bible. Somehow the critical study of Scripture, the results of two hundred years of intensive study of its formation and its contents, has never trickled down to the people.

We have continued living in the paradigm of Protestant orthodoxy deriving from the Protestant scholasticism of the seventeenth century. By that time both the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches had battened down the hatches and set themselves against the emergence of Renaissance humanism, which came to full flower in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Rightfully, the church resisted the drive for human autonomy and the enthronement of human reason, but it fought fire with fire; the theological enterprise took on a strongly rationalistic character and attempted in intellectual formulation to ground certainty, buttressed by an authoritarian church (Roman Catholic) or an authoritarian Scripture (Protestant).

The historical-critical study of Scripture created a crisis for the churches of the Reformation, and a battle ensued that our churches have yet to settle. It is incredible, in light of what is widely recognized about the nature of the

Scriptures, that there should be such a prevalence of literalism in our understanding of the Bible. In his *Dynamics of Faith*, Tillich distinguishes two stages of literalism. The first is the “natural stage” before making a clear distinction between the symbolic and the factual; it consists “in the inability to separate the creations of symbolic imagination from the facts which can be verified through observation and experiment.” This represents the first naiveté, and such literalism creates no problem for the mediation of meaning.

But when the symbol system is broken or seriously undercut in the continuing growth of knowledge and understanding, to continue to assert literal correspondence between symbol and fact is to fall into a “reactive literalism.” Literalism in this second stage is “aware of the questions but represses them, half consciously, half unconsciously.” This path is chosen by “people who prefer the repression of their questions to the uncertainty which appears with the breaking of the myth.” Reactive literalism cramps the figurative language of the Bible into the narrow framework of interpretation appropriate only to the literal usage of modern science. The desire is for certainty, but not, as Barth says, the certainty of faith that is *given* and given again, but the certainty of human control. Identifying the Bible with revelation, elevating the doctrine of inspiration so that the written word is inerrant and the truth infallible represents a “lust for certitude.”

That phrase comes from Charles Davis. In his *Temptations of Religion* he discusses the social construction of all human knowledge, which excludes the possibility of “a revelation insofar as that implies an *a priori* claim to absoluteness and universality.” He contends,

Revelation in that sense is given as an absolute in the order of knowledge; it is regarded as a set of unquestionable data, from which all opinions may be evaluated. It represents an attempt to limit criticism, to put a stop to the endless questioning of human thinking by establishing an a-critical point, a point not subject to criticism because beyond criticism. (18)

To reject revelation in that sense is not, he claims, to exclude God's manifestation in our midst in word and event. It is, however, to exclude an *a priori* absoluteness and universality as violating human intelligence and freedom. Davis quotes Peter Berger:

The theologian is consequently deprived of the psychologically liberating possibility of either radical commitment or radical negation. What he is left with, I think, is the necessity for a step-by-step re-evaluation of the traditional affirmations in terms of his own cognitive criteria (which need *not* necessarily be those of a putative “modern consciousness”). Is this or that in the tradition true? Or is it false? I don't think that there are shortcut answers to such questions, neither by means of “leaps of faith” nor by the methods of any secular discipline. (*The Sacred Canopy*, 187)

Davis recognizes how fearful such a recognition of the social construction of our reality is. To become conscious of the extent to which our “knowledge” and “values” are social fictions is “to look into the abyss, the void, surrounding human life in every direction.” Such honest recognition is very rare in the church; rather, theologians and preachers reinforce reactive literalism, feeding the lust for certitude. But should there not be an honest facing of what is widely recognized in our postmodern world—that human knowledge is socially constructed and symbolically expressed? When we do so, we are faced with an alternative. According to Davis,

We can respond to the nothingness by a nihilism that interprets it as chaos, as meaninglessness, as the ultimate absurdity making everything absurd. Or we can respond to the void as positive nothingness, as mystery. That is the religious response. Faith in the last analysis is a basic trust in reality, an openness to mystery, a being drawn toward the abyss in self-forgetfulness and awe and love. Faith acknowledges the relativities of finite human existence without the nihilistic denial that these do, however gropingly, lead us toward absolute meaning and value. (21)

The Bipolar Reality of Scripture And Present Experience

The Bible contains the words of those in Israel and in the event of Jesus Christ who were encountered by God in judgment and grace, who witnessed to the Word of gracious salvation more or less adequately in their stammering words and historically conditioned understanding. But God is not dead. God still encounters us. God's Spirit still illumines the human understanding, not only in reference to the biblical witness but in the larger landscape of human experience.

In the ongoing life of the church we must take seriously not only the Bible but also authentic contemporary experiences of being human in this world. We are people rooted in history, creatures of the cosmos, whose secrets scientists are probing, bringing to light fascinating findings. What of our knowledge of history and the awesome development of human knowledge in the respective disciplines of science? Because it lies outside the Bible's primary focus and purpose, is it therefore of no account in shaping our faith and forming our practice? Is it reasonable to assume that we can engage critical questions of ultimate human concern and determine crucial action and behavior as a human family living together on Spaceship Earth by reference *alone* to the Bible?

It is precisely the theologian's task to coordinate the bipolar reality of Scripture and present human experience. Theology performs a hermeneutical function; its task is to interpret the biblical tradition in the present context of the church's life—an ongoing process that is never finished, always provisional, necessarily open-ended. All interpretation is a mediation of past and present within the history of a faith tradition. And the present is a moving target.

Breaking the Impasse: Scripture and Tradition

How can the church move forward with theological discussion that will illumine contemporary human experience and shape the faith and practice of God's people in the image of Jesus Christ? What connects the canonical biblical witness to the present? What forms the bridge between the revelatory events in Israel's history and in Jesus Christ—to which the biblical story witnesses—and our present experience of being human in this world?

We need a new understanding of the place of the living tradition of faith as lived out in the community of faith. We must recognize the elements at play here: the revelatory events, the witness to those events in the biblical canon, the church as the community constituted by that witness and the place of ongoing witness, and the whole spectrum of human knowledge and cumulative historical experience that continues to grow and develop.

As I engage anxious folk in our churches who fear faith is being diluted and biblical Christianity is being jeopardized, I get the impression they assume that there was a time of pristine revelation infallibly recorded in the writings of the New Testament and that apostolic truth was rather quickly overlaid with church tradition that distorted that truth. Then, it is claimed, in the Reformation of the sixteenth century, the apostolic Christian faith was recovered and brought to expression in its original clarity in the creeds and confessions of the church, reformed according to the Word of God.

That is a delusion, a colossal distortion of the way of the gospel in the church over nearly two thousand years. Yet it is still cavalierly asserted for popular consumption.

A more accurate portrayal of the situation must recognize the interpretation of the revelatory events in Israel and in Jesus Christ by the witnesses to those revelatory events; that interpretation was instrumental in constituting a faith community. That faith community (Israel and the church) was formed out of the witness to revelation and, in its ongoing life, that community reinterpreted its understanding of the original revelatory events and continued to translate its faith understanding in ever new historical circumstances.

We can trace the process already in the canonical Scriptures. For example, Israel's faith is reinterpreted by the prophetic word in terms of Israel's ongoing historical experience. Development can also be seen within the New Testament in Christological understanding. The primitive Christology of Acts is not at all the full-blown incarnational Christology of the fourth gospel.

With the setting of the limits of the canon, such reinterpretation and development did not cease. We distinguish the biblical witness from the post-canonical tradition, but it was a historical decision of the church that determined the breakpoint. And the lines are blurred. Common agreement as to the canonical books was not reached until around a.d. 400.

The problem of the canon reopened at the time of the Reformation. The Protestant churches excluded the Apocrypha, a whole series of Old Testament writings that had been recognized as canonical for over a thousand years. Luther, in his September Bible of 1552, openly separated Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation from the other New Testament writings, thereby constituting a dual canon. Erasmus questioned the authenticity and authority of Hebrews, James, Jude, and 2 and 3 John. Zwingli thought Revelation should be rejected, and Calvin's expositions cover every book except Revelation. In the introduction to his commentaries it is clear, according to Barth, that he had doubts not only about the books mentioned by Luther, but also concerning 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John.

The history of the canon indicates a shifting and a questioning that denies the possibility of a claim of absolute certainty regarding its limits. But even within the present Protestant canon we can see the process of translation and reinterpretation of the faith traditions, as stated above, and that process has never ceased. The preaching of the church is the bridgehead where the biblical text comes to contemporary expression. The heart of the preaching task is the hermeneutical moment when the words of the text that witness to the Word that once sounded find fresh expression in the hope that through the preacher's stammering words the Word might again be heard—that the living God might speak here and now.

Every historical formulation is provisional; to absolutize an interpretation at any point on the historical continuum is idolatry. The historically conditioned interpretations of the Christian faith through the centuries vary in the degree to which they express a faithful interpretation of the originating revelatory events in Israel and in Jesus Christ, in the degree to which the original revelatory luminousness shines through. Sometimes there is clarity, sometimes distortion. There is action and reaction; the pendulum swings.

In the nineteenth century the climate of opinion dominated by Newtonian physics and historicism smothered the witness to the newness and freedom of God's engagement with our world. Against a truncated, liberal faith expression, Barth boldly proclaimed the "Wholly Other," the God who shatters "our little systems."

In the wake of the renewal of the church and the rediscovery of God's liberating grace in the sixteenth century, Reformed orthodoxy fell into the sterility and rigidity of Scholasticism. It absolutized its interpretation of the faith as though it were a statement of timeless and eternal truth unalloyed with the cultural assumptions of its day. Reformed orthodoxy failed to recognize that this interpretation was forged out of the crisis created by the ascendancy of rationalism as the Enlightenment was coming to flower, and so it declared the autonomy of the human person and human reason as the measure of truth.

What we must recognize is the constant interplay of the biblical witness and contemporary interpretation and the fact that we are part of a faith community that is living out of and carrying forward a living faith tradition. We have an anchor in the past; the church has demarcated certain writings as canonical. Present interpretation of the Christian faith and shaping of Christian practice will always involve serious listening to the biblical witness. But the present determination of faith and practice will not treat the intervening centuries between biblical times and our own as a vacuum. The history of the transmission of the faith will also be mined for wisdom, insight, and guidance.

But neither do *we* live in a vacuum. Our contemporary expression of the faith and the shaping of our practice will finally have to be our truth. Finally, our witness and life must be authentically our own, our voice bringing to expression the living tradition.

Jaroslav Pelikan differentiates that sense of the living tradition from traditionalism. Tradition, he says, is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. If we would move forward in our understanding of all reality before the face of God, we must come to a new appreciation of the living tradition of biblical faith as a dynamic movement.

Hendrikus Berkhof acknowledges that as a rule Protestant dogmatics has no separate chapter on tradition. But this disregard of the concept of tradition cannot be maintained, he argues. In *Christian Faith* he writes,

Revelation means that God enters the field of history to bring about an encounter with men which transcends human history, and which therefore goes far beyond the temporal spatial bounds of the original field of revelation. The encounters which took place at that time were means and suited for leading to further encounter in other times and places. Hence the revelation of Christ in the New Testament, in spite of, or rather because of its definitive nature, is not the end but calls forth as its sequel the coming and the work of the Spirit. The Spirit proceeds from Christ to continue and interpret his saving work world-wide. This coming of the Spirit is a new redemptive act, of the same importance as the coming of Christ of which he is the complement and counterpart. It is one continuous revelational event. Fixation without interpretive transmission petrifies the faith....

Berkhof contends that if the concern of revelation is the continuing encounter between God and humankind, then tradition is theologically of the same importance as Scripture. The redemptive work of God must be “handed over,” faithful to the fixated form (Scripture) but verbalized such that it becomes intelligible in other times and places.

The current impasse in the conservative Reformed churches is the result of fixation with the biblical writings and a failure born of fear to find fresh expression for contemporary faith.

Sola Scriptura. That was the clarion call, the battle cry of the reformers. Faith will be shaped, practice formed by reference to Scripture alone. The claim can be easily understood given the historical context, and the return to Scripture as the authoritative witness to revelation proved fruitful in the life of the church. But there was a loss as well: it was the sense of tradition as the living, ongoing, mediating, and interpreting expression of biblical faith as it is confessed and lived in the community of faith, the church.

Tradition. In *Fiddler on the Roof* Tevye booms out the word claiming that life is as precarious as a fiddler making music on a perilously steep roof and that balance is maintained by tradition. According supremacy to tradition over Scripture in the Roman Catholic Church allowed it to drift from testing its faith and practice by the Word of God and to lose the clear sound of the gospel. Tradition and Scripture were a dual source of authority, but tradition had the ascendancy. The recovery of the authority of Scripture to exercise its critical function was a great contribution of the Reformation. But such movements as the Reformation are reactionary; often there is such a strong reaction to the status quo being attacked that the pendulum swings too far.

How does the cumulative, growing experience of humankind become incorporated into faith's vision and practice? The witness of prophets and apostles continues to be heard in the pages of the Bible. But what of the ongoing encounter of God's Spirit with the church as it moves through history confronted by new questions, immersed in circumstances beyond that of the biblical world? It is in the living tradition of the faith community that new experience and fresh discoveries are brought into dialogue with the biblical witness. The tradition, like a fiery river of lava, moves with the current of history, a stream continuous with the erupting volcano, yet ever moving through new landscapes.

This function of tradition was brought home sharply to me by the New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl, who joined Rabbi David Hartman in an all-day, Jewish-Christian dialogue on the theme "Faithful Interpretation." Stendahl spoke of tradition as an instrument of continuity and change. Continuity was obvious to me; tradition connects backward to the past. But is tradition an instrument of change? Indeed, he argued. By means of the tradition we enter the new and negotiate the future.

Stendahl spoke warmly and charmingly of a visit to Swedish relatives in Minnesota. There he experienced life as he remembered it in Sweden when he was a child and visited his grandparents. In Minnesota the Swedish tradition is frozen, as is true in most immigrant ethnic communities. If you want to see a piece of Sweden past, he said, visit Minnesota, for there the tradition has become a museum piece. But Stendahl has recently returned to the United States after

serving for a time in Stockholm as Bishop of the Swedish Lutheran Church. If you want to experience the living tradition of the Swedish people, you must go to Sweden where the dynamic tradition is continuing to evolve, he pointed out.

Stendahl offered a vivid image: a boa constrictor periodically wriggles out of its skin, leaving the skin behind, an empty shell. He pictured a biologist taking the skin, measuring it, analyzing it, and then having it stuffed and mounted—a museum piece. Someone exclaims, “There’s a snake!” But, says Stendahl, that’s not the snake. The snake has wriggled out and away and is still living—in new skin—still making history.

The living tradition of Christian faith is the contemporary reinterpretation of the biblical witness in light of the cumulative historical experience of the church and the growing store of human knowledge. In *Words Around the Table*, Gail Ramshaw writes,

Tradition is not like an obsolete edition of the encyclopedia, full of half facts, and old prejudices. Tradition is not like a 1948 etiquette book that lists the activities and even the fabrics forbidden a widow in deep mourning: All we can do is grimace and ignore it. The tradition of the church lives. We can read medieval books being discussed, we can unearth attitudes that were subsequently buried, we can make tradition different tomorrow than it was yesterday or today. Where “tradition” repeats tired slogans out of context, when “tradition” yells louder and louder to drown out queries, it becomes a sarcophagus that the dying church deserves. But when tradition is the history of the movement of the Spirit, darting here, hiding there, migrating halfway around the world, it can serve as one expression of God’s Truth.

As much as any contemporary theologian, David Tracy has addressed the question of the faithful interpretation of the Christian tradition to make it accessible to a serious and reasonable public. As I have been contending, he sees systematic theology’s task to interpret, mediate, and translate the meaning and truth of the continuing living tradition in dialogue with the biblical witness in light of present human experience. Where this is not the case, the notion of authority shifts from a truth disclosed to mind and heart to an external norm for the obedient will. Then theologians can no longer interpret and translate the tradition but “only repeat the shop-worn conclusions of the tradition.”

Eventually, the central, classical symbols and doctrines of the tradition become mere “fundamentals” to be externally accepted and endlessly repeated. (*Analogical Imagination*, 99)

In an earlier work, *Blessed Rage for Order*, Tracy calls for a revisioning of the Christian tradition. He explains:

[T]he revisionist theologian is committed to what seems clearly to be the central task of contemporary Christian theology: the dramatic confrontation, the mutual illuminations and corrections, the possible basic reconciliations between the principal values, cognitive claims, and existential faiths of both a reinterpreted post-modern consciousness and a reinterpreted Christianity. (32)

The revisionist theologian is not motivated by the desire for relevance, Tracy argues. Rather,

The reality of the situation is both more simple and more basic: when all is said and done, one finds that he can authentically abandon neither his faith in the modern experiment, nor his faith in the God of Jesus Christ. (4)

The church lives in a creative tension because it lives in a bipolar reality of Bible and present experience, an ancient faith and the undeniable reality of the modern experiment. We need a new understanding of the Bible and a new appreciation of tradition if we would be faithful to the Word and present to our world.

In *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, John Henry Newman describes the church, tradition, the cosmos itself after the manner of an organism. Their development is seen as an organic process. This view was in contrast to a fundamentalistic view that regards revelation and tradition as a fixed, unchanging body of truths and rejects all change and pluralism. Newman was able to accommodate ongoing human experience in his organic view of tradition.

In *What Is Living, What is Dead in Christianity Today?* Charles Davis comments on Newman's view:

The result was a concept of tradition as cumulative experience, subject therefore to change whether as development or as decline, which distinguished [him] as conservative, from reactionaries, who did not acknowledge history and development. In a religious context the conservatives... were those who saw tradition as a dynamic process rather than as a static deposit. (33)

This is not enough for Davis to meet the situation we face today. He calls for a more radical revisioning of faith, raising the question,

Are we not in a situation that cannot be met by an orderly development of traditional categories; but which demands something radically new? (34)

One may lean more to Newman's view of a growing organic process or to Davis's with his call for radical revisioning, but the option not open to an honest facing of the present crisis of the church is a conception of the Bible, theological

formulation, and Christian practice as fixed, into which contemporary human experience and present human knowledge on all fronts must be crammed.

In a recent issue of *Context*, Martin Marty lifts a quotation from Newman from Ian Ker's *Newman on Being a Christian*. Marty writes, "With development and change in mind—over against a static picture of God, the human, faith, and doctrine—we read:

It is indeed sometimes said that the stream is clearest near the spring. Whatever use may fairly be made of this image, it does not apply to the history of a philosophy or belief, which on the contrary is more equable, and purer, and stronger, when its bed has become deep, and broad, and full. It necessarily rises out of an existing state of things, and for a time savours of the soul. Its vital element needs disengaging from what is foreign and temporary.... It remains perhaps for a time quiescent; it tries, as it were, its limbs, and proves the ground under it, and feels its way. From time to time it makes essays which fail, and are in consequence abandoned. It seems in suspense which way to go; it wavers, and at length strikes out in one definite direction. In time it enters upon strange territory; points of controversy alter their bearing; parties rise and fall around it; dangers and hopes appear in new relations; and old principles reappear under new forms. It changes with them in order to remain the same. In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.

References: