

3 SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION: SEEKING A MIDDLE PATH

Michael W. Pahl

The question of the relative authority and respective roles of Scripture and Tradition for Christian theology and practice continues to have great significance for contemporary theological formulation and ecumenical dialogue. Yet too often such reflection and conversation is hindered by misunderstanding, particularly related to defining the key terms “Tradition” and “Scripture” and appreciating the nuances of the Protestant concept of *Sola Scriptura* and the Roman Catholic teaching of “Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition.”

In the context of this debate—and in contrast to some popular Protestant misunderstandings—“Tradition” does not simply mean any longstanding religious beliefs or practices; this capital-T “Tradition” is to be distinguished from “the various theological, disciplinary, liturgical or devotional traditions, born in the local churches over time.”¹ Rather, “Tradition” in the context of this

¹ The Vatican, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2d ed.; Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), 1.1.2.2.2. The following descriptions of “Tradition” and “Scripture” are also adapted from the *Catechism*. This is a fairly recent summary of Catholic doctrine, developed since the Second Vatican Council and first published in 1992 for the purpose of developing instructional materials for catechumens. It is not without controversy in the Roman Catholic Church, with detractors claiming it neglects some traditional Catholic doctrine in favor of ecumenism. However, it has been endorsed by Pope John Paul II as “a sure norm for teaching the faith and

issue refers specifically to that teaching of the apostles of Jesus concerning the gospel for the faith and practice of the church which was orally transmitted by the apostles but not written down by them, teaching which continued to be orally transmitted from generation to generation after the apostles in a direct chain of succession, and which was occasionally committed to writing to the extent that circumstances required. “Scripture” is somewhat more straightforward. With regard to the New Testament (NT), “Scripture” refers to the writings of the apostles and others in the apostolic age which express the teaching of the apostles concerning the gospel for the faith and practice of the church. In the Christian understanding, the Old Testament (OT) as “Scripture” refers to the ancient writings of the people of Israel which point forward to the gospel and are useful for the faith and practice of the church: traditionally the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.² As “Scripture,” all these writings are “inspired” by God.³

The question of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition finds expression as early as the ante-Nicene church fathers.⁴ However, it was not until the sixteenth century, during the Protes-

thus a valid and legitimate instrument for ecclesial communion” (“Fidei Depositum,” Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992). While these are Roman Catholic descriptions, most Protestants would not have difficulty with them in general terms.

² Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and certain Protestant streams would also include a version of the OT Apocrypha as “Scripture” in some sense. However, this should not unduly complexify a discussion of the authority and function of “Scripture” vis-à-vis “Tradition”: in this discussion “Scripture”—whatever the content of that Scripture—is in some sense set over against or alongside “Tradition.”

³ “Inspiration” has been variously defined in both Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. Specific theories of inspiration range widely along a spectrum that runs from a mechanical concept of divine dictation, to a more organic concept of divine-human concurrence, to conceptions that move “inspiration” from the production of the original text to the spiritual illumination of subsequent readers. See the essays in the final section of this book.

⁴ See the Introduction and relevant patristic excerpts in *Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation: A Sourcebook of the Ancient Church* (ed. Daniel H. Williams; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

tant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation, that the modern Scripture-Tradition debate was born.

The Reformation was, without doubt, a complex phenomenon, involving not just theological but also ecclesial, social, and moral causes and concerns. In the midst of this complexity it should come as no surprise to see some diversity of thought among the Reformers on such matters as Scripture and Tradition. Nevertheless, there was some general agreement in Reformation thought and practice on this matter; Keith Mathison concludes, for example, that Martin Luther and John Calvin

asserted the Scripture as the sole source of revelation and denied the existence of equally authoritative extra-scriptural revelation. They asserted that Scripture was to be interpreted in and by the Church and that it was to be interpreted according to the ancient apostolic teaching of the church—the *regula fidei* [“rule of faith”].⁵

In response to this and other Protestant ideas, the Roman Catholic Church convened the Council of Trent. In particular, Church leaders were concerned that such an approach could lead to the free interpretation of Scripture apart from the constraint of the Church, which could result in a distortion of biblical truth—the same primary concern of the Catholic Church today. Thus in 1546 the Fourth Session of the Council affirmed the following decree:

[The council] also clearly perceives that the truth and the teaching [of the Gospel] are contained in written books and in unwritten traditions, which were received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or from the Apostles themselves to whom the Holy Spirit dictated them. [This teaching] has come down to us, transmitted as if from hand to hand. Following, then, the example of the orthodox Fathers, [the council] receives and venerates with equal piety and reverence all the books of the Old as well as of the New Testament, since the one God is the author of both, also the traditions...as hav-

⁵ Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2001), 120.

ing been dictated either orally by Christ or by the Holy Spirit, and preserved in the Catholic Church in unbroken succession.⁶

Much more could be said regarding the nature and historical development of this debate,⁷ but even this brief glance indicates that the Scripture-Tradition debate is not necessarily to be framed as “Scripture *versus* Tradition,” as if these are entirely mutually exclusive. The Reformers who strongly advocated *Sola Scriptura* recognized the validity of looking to church fathers and universal creeds in order to assist in the interpretation of Scripture or to summarize biblical truth. On the other side, the Roman Catholic Church has never denied the divine inspiration and authority of written Scripture. Rather, the Scripture-Tradition debate is about the *relative* authority and *respective* roles of Sacred Scripture and Church Tradition for shaping the faith and practice of God’s people. Does Scripture alone have infallible authority in matters of Christian faith and practice over all other possible resources, including Tradition, however helpful such other resources may be? This, in a nutshell, is the general Protestant view of *Sola Scriptura*. Or, do Scripture and Tradition hold an equal and inseparable infallible authority over all other possible resources in matters of Christian faith and practice? This, in brief, is the Roman Catholic view of “Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition.”

CONSIDERATIONS TOWARD A MIDDLE PATH

One could perhaps approach the Scripture-Tradition issue “from above,” that is, setting the question within the theological context of such doctrines as theology proper or revelation or pneumatology. However, I would like to approach this issue “from below,” setting the question of the relative authority and respective roles of Scripture and Tradition within the historical context of Christian origins, particularly in light of some relatively recent research. There are several factors worthy of consideration in this regard, factors which I would suggest point toward a middle path between

⁶ Session IV (8 April 1546): Decretum primum: recipiuntur libri sacri et traditiones apostolorum, in *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta* (ed. J. Alberigo et al.; Freiburg-im-Breisgau, 1962), 639.

⁷ For more in-depth studies see the list “For Further Reading” at the end of this essay.

the alternatives of *Sola Scriptura* and “Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition.”

Orality and Textuality

For many decades, critical biblical scholarship has flirted with the implications of the predominant orality of the ancient Mediterranean world. It is only recently, however, in the light of a surplus of broader anthropological and historical studies on orality and textuality, that this reality has begun to be a consistent consideration in biblical scholarship, if not yet the new “default setting” James Dunn has called for.⁸

At least four general aspects of this new awareness of the predominance of orality in the ancient Mediterranean world are significant for our discussion.⁹ First, behind every written text from the biblical eras, indeed behind every community collection of written texts, there was an oral pre-history. This oral pre-history could be anything from simply the prior sharing of information such as the reports Paul receives from Chloe’s household regarding the situation in Corinth (1 Cor 1:11), to the prior communication of personal testimony such as Luke alludes to in the opening lines of his Gospel (Luke 1:1–4), or to the prior formal transmission of tradition such as Paul describes regarding the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:23–25). Second, oral discourse during this period was often

⁸ James D. G. Dunn, “Altering the Default Setting: Re-envisaging the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition,” *NTS* 49 (2003): 139–175. As many have emphasized, this is not an either/or: while the first century Mediterranean cultures were predominantly oral cultures, literacy and textuality were very much alive and well, particularly among the social elite. In such cultures which have a predominant orality and a limited textuality, these factors influence one another in a variety of often unpredictable ways.

⁹ For general studies of orality and literacy and oral tradition, see Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (2d ed.; London; New York: Routledge, 2002); Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). For surveys of this research in the context of the study of the Gospel traditions, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 240–289; James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 173–254.

viewed with more authority than a written text. Of course, this would depend on the particular matter at issue and the provenance and character of both the written text and the oral discourse. However, especially in matters related to establishing the veracity of specific claims regarding the relatively recent past, first-hand oral testimony trumped written texts (e.g. Papias in Eus., *Ecc. Hist.* 3.39.4). Third, oral tradition and testimony typically followed a pattern of stability at the core and fluidity at the periphery. This was especially evident in more informal or semi-formal transmission of community traditions, with those community traditions viewed as most vital for worldview formation being more stable than others, and with the most crucial aspects of specific sayings or stories being more fixed than peripheral details (e.g. 1 Cor 11:23–25 cf. Matt 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:15–20). Fourth, written texts were typically viewed and used during this period in much the same way as oral discourse. This can be seen, for example, in the notion that a written letter functioned as a second-best substitute for the author's personal presence and oral discourse (e.g. 2 John 12), or in the way in which the Gospels were used and copied in the earliest period with a freedom to alter the perceived periphery of a given pericope in light of similar traditions regarding the story or teaching while keeping the perceived core of the pericope intact.¹⁰

Tradition and Testimony

Two concepts which have gained special prominence in these scholarly discussions on predominant orality related to Christian origins are the concepts of “tradition” and “testimony.” “Tradition” in this context (not to be simplistically equated with the notion of “Tradition” in the Scripture-Tradition debate) may be described as verbal material important to the life and worldview of a distinguishable social group which is orally transmitted in a relatively formal and formulaic way in order to bridge a significant chronological or geographical gap. That there were such traditions transmitted among the earliest Christians is most evident from Paul's statements to this effect. As one trained in the Pharisaic oral traditions, Paul employed the Pharisaic language of tradition transmission in describ-

¹⁰ See the relevant discussions in David C. Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

ing the reception (*paralambanō*) and passing on (*paradidōmi*) of “tradition” (*paradosis*) among his converts.¹¹ The fact that Paul did receive these traditions from others, particular traditions regarding Jesus’ life and teachings for which he was in no position to have firsthand knowledge, lends support to the notion alluded to in other NT passages (e.g. Luke 1:1–4) and acknowledged in Synoptic and Historical Jesus research that such relatively formalized early Christian tradition underlies at least some of the material in the Gospels and perhaps the rest of the NT (see below).

However, much of the material in the Gospels and many of the concepts found in the NT do not necessarily represent formalized “tradition,” but rather personal “testimony.” “Testimony” in this context may be described as verbal material important to the life and worldview of a distinguishable social group which is orally transmitted in a relatively informal and more personally involved manner, normally in order to support a particular truth claim. That this sort of personal testimony was a vital part of early Christian teaching and proclamation is evident from the abundance of “witness” and “testimony” language in the NT writings.¹² Even more than with the more formalized early Christian tradition, by all appearances this sort of personal testimony was fairly widespread and underlies a good portion of the material in the Gospels and the rest of the NT.

The precise shape and scope of this tradition and testimony is difficult to discern, but it was certainly focused on the life, teaching, and significance of Jesus, with a special spotlight on Jesus’ death and resurrection. This focus is evident in at least two ways. First, when Paul as our earliest witness to Jesus provides content for the traditions he has received and passed on, they are focused on the theological and ethical significance of Jesus in the context of

¹¹ Rom 6:17; 1 Cor 11:2, 23; 15:1, 3; Gal 1:9; Phil 4:9; 1 Thess 2:13; 4:1; cf. Col 2:6; 2 Thess 2:15; 3:6. On the significance of this language, see A. I. Baumgarten, “The Pharisaic *Paradosis*,” *HTR* 80 (1987): 64–69; Martin S. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism, 200 B.C.E.—400 C.E.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 73–75, 80; Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 264–265.

¹² Esp. Luke 1:2; 24:48; John 19:35; 21:24; Acts 1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39; 13:31; 1 Pet 5:1; 1 John 1:2. On the significance of this see Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*.

his death and resurrection. In this regard one can especially note the Lord's Supper tradition in 1 Cor 11:23–25 and the Apostolic Gospel tradition in 1 Cor 15:3–5. Second, the Gospels themselves as our most extensive early Christian witness to Jesus point to this, as they have undeniably been built from these earlier Christian traditions and testimonies focused on the life, teaching, and significance of Jesus, with a special focus on Jesus' death and resurrection (cf. Luke 1:1–4; John 21:25).

More specifically, as I have suggested elsewhere,¹³ one may well discern a “common Jesus tradition” in earliest Christianity, crossing geographical and apostolic boundaries, which included a basic narrative of Jesus' career and a basic fund of teaching material. This common tradition may be discernible from several angles which can only be summarized here. The commonalities between the Synoptics and John may point to such a reality. There are about thirty distinct episodes common to all four canonical Gospels, episodes which essentially trace a common narrative beginning with John the Baptist, moving through a Galilean ministry of Jesus involving teaching and miracles, and culminating in a final Jerusalem visit by Jesus in which he is crucified and resurrected. Furthermore, there are dozens of points of contact in the teaching material between the Synoptics and John, particularly evident in the triple- and double-traditional material. This common teaching material is especially characterized by pithy aphorisms and earthy metaphors primarily centered on the kingdom of God and life under the Torah, especially calling for love for God and others in a full devotion which is expressed in self-giving service. This common narrative and teaching material is particularly significant in light of the high probability that the Synoptics and John are at least to some degree independent of one another. It could well be that the Evangelists were constrained by a common Jesus tradition, however much they

¹³ Michael W. Pahl, “Expanded Interfluentiality: A Review of Part III: Paul Anderson's Theory of Gospel Inter-Relationships,” *JGRChJ* 5 (2008): 135–144; Michael W. Pahl, *Discerning the 'Word of the Lord': The 'Word of the Lord' in 1 Thessalonians 4:15* (LNTS 389; London: T. & T. Clark, 2009), 61–64.

may have each felt some freedom to correct and augment other presentations of that common tradition and testimony.¹⁴

This same basic narrative of Jesus' public career is reflected in other early Christian writings, some earlier than the Gospels, some later but possibly employing tradition independent from the Gospels. The kerygmatic material in Acts is significant in this regard (e.g. Acts 2:22–24; 10:36–42; 13:23–31), as are snippets of material in the letters which allude to or assume such a Jesus narrative (e.g. 1 Cor 11:23–25; 15:3–8; 1 Thess 2:14–15; Heb 2:3–4; 5:7; 12:2–3; 13:12–13). Also, the early non-Gospel Christian writings follow a similar Synoptic-like or even double-traditional character in the traditional teaching material which they employ. This is evident from Paul (1 Cor 7:10; 9:14; 11:23–25; 1 Thess 4:16–17a; Rom 14:14) and James (2:5; 5:1–3, 12) through to *1 Clement* (13:1–3) and the *Didache* (8:3–10). There is even a good possibility that there were certain blocks of traditional teaching material which were in wide circulation among the earliest Christians: a “kingdom teaching” collection approximating some of the double tradition material found in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount and evident throughout Luke, and also reflected in writings such as James, the *Didache*, and *1 Clement*; a “missionary teaching” collection evidenced in the double tradition material in Matt 10 and Luke 9–10, and perhaps also reflected in writings such as 1 Corinthians; and an “eschatological teaching” collection, seen in the triple tradition of Mark 13, Matt 24, and Luke 21, and perhaps also reflected in writings such as 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Revelation, and the *Didache*.¹⁵

At least three general points are worth noting with regard to these observations. The first is the degree of coherence of this narrative and teaching material at a basic level. The early Christian writings reflect a consistent general portrait of Jesus' public career and distinctive teachings. The second noteworthy point is the distinctively Synoptic-like or even double-traditional character of

¹⁴ On these commonalities see Paul N. Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus: Modern Foundations Reconsidered* (LNTS 321; London; New York: T. & T. Clark, 2006), 128–135.

¹⁵ These possibilities are summarized nicely in Richard Bauckham, “The Study of Gospel Traditions outside the Canonical Gospels: Problems and Prospects,” in *The Jesus Tradition Outside the Gospels* (ed. David Wenham; Gospel Perspectives 5; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 378–379.

much of this material. This is especially significant when one considers the multiplicity of available traditions and potential ways of presenting the Jesus tradition. The third point of note is the widespread nature of this material, crossing both geographical and apostolic boundaries. It is evident from Palestinian Jewish Christianity to Diaspora Jewish or even Gentile Christianity, and within Jacobean, Pauline, and Johannine apostolic circles. All this could well suggest that there was indeed a widespread, orally transmitted, “common Jesus tradition” during the earliest decades of the Christian movement—subject, of course, to the realities of orality noted above, particularly the pattern of stability at the core and fluidity at the periphery in the transmission of this common tradition and testimony.

Tradents and Apostles

Tradition and testimony, like all oral discourse, is not self-originating and self-promulgating; behind every oral tradition or testimony stands a person, a tradent or witness responsible for developing and/or communicating the tradition or testimony. Contrary to the influential assumption of Rudolf Bultmann and others in the form critical tradition,¹⁶ there does appear to have been a somewhat select group of authoritative tradents and transmitters of early Christian traditions and testimonies about Jesus among the earliest Christians. Many of these were eyewitnesses of Jesus’ career, and many of them traveled widely among the early Christian communities. Those who were viewed as especially authoritative in terms of instruction regarding and interpretation of Jesus’ life and teachings are described in the NT writings with terms such as “witness” (*martyrs*) or even “eyewitness” (*autoptēs*), as one providing at least some measure of first-hand testimony about Jesus, “teacher” (*didaskalos*) as one responsible for instruction in these distinctive

¹⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. John Marsh; 2d ed.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1963). Cf. Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971); Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). For one response to this “anonymous community” model see Pahl, *Discerning the Word of the Lord*, 59–66.

Christian traditions, and—most significantly for our discussion—“apostle” or “envoy” (*apostolos*), as one sent by Jesus or in his name for a particular task.¹⁷

Much has been written about “apostleship” in the NT and earliest Christianity, and there has been no consensus on the precise origin and use of the term “apostle” in these writings.¹⁸ Very likely there was a similar lack of consensus among the earliest Christians on the significance of the term. However, a good case can be made for a distinctive, widely acknowledged group of people known as “apostles” who: (1) were believed to have ideally personally witnessed the majority of Jesus’ public career but minimally personally witnessed the resurrected Jesus; (2) were believed to have been personally commissioned by Jesus to this role to be his representatives in word and deed; and therefore (3) were believed to possess a unique authority in the early Christian community related to their faith and practice, an authority viewed as the mediated authority of Christ himself and therefore of God, an authority in many respects akin to that of the ancient Hebrew prophets.¹⁹

In relation to the early Christian traditions, it is unlikely that these apostles or other tradents possessed a formal authority akin to a rabbinic college—in contrast with the proposal of Birger Gerhardsson which, while convincing in most other respects, is somewhat anachronistic in this regard.²⁰ Rather more likely is that

¹⁷ On “witness,” see above. On “teacher,” see e.g. Acts 13:1; 1 Cor 12:28–29; Eph 4:11; Heb 5:12; Jas 3:1; *Did* 15:1–2. On “apostle,” see e.g. Matt 10:2; Luke 6:13; John 13:16; Acts 1:2; cf. Mark 3:14. On these authoritative tradents see Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*.

¹⁸ See Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, “ἀπόστολος,” *TDNT* 1:407–447; D. Müller and Colin Brown, “ἀποστέλλω,” *NIDNTT* 1:126–137; Francis H. Agnew, “The Origin of the NT Apostle-Concept: A Review of Research,” *JBL* 105 (1986):75–96.

¹⁹ E.g. Mark 3:13–15; Acts 1:21–26; 1 Cor 9:1–2; 12:28; 15:7–10; 2 Cor 12:12; Gal 1:1, 11–17; Eph 2:20; 1 Tim 2:7; 2 Tim 1:11; 2 Pet 3:2; Jude 17; Rev 21:14; *1 Clem.* 5:3; 42:1–2; *2 Clem.* 14:2; *Barn.* 5:9; Ign. *Trall.* 3:3; *Rom.* 4:3. Again, see the relevant discussions in Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*.

²⁰ Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (trans. Eric J. Sharpe; Lund: Gleerup, 1961). Cf. Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History—*

their authority in shaping the common tradition was more informal or semi-formal: originating some traditions, shaping others, and ensuring a flexible adherence to the core traditions as their travels brought them to the scattered Christian communities.

Narrative and Epistemology

These threads are made even more interesting when viewed from the angle of another feature of recent NT scholarship, particularly in Pauline studies: the concept of narrative epistemology. This is the idea that there is a narrative substructure to Paul's thought, a story or group of inter-related stories that form the epistemic foundation of Paul's discourse in his letters. The idea is not simply that Paul could tell stories, or that narrative was one of several ways in which Paul could relate his theology, but that an underlying story or stories is in fact the epistemic ground from which Paul proclaims, exhorts, and argues in his letters. While this idea has been challenged in some quarters—in particular, there are difficulties with discerning narrative in a non-narrative genre—the basic concept has been ably defended and more appropriately nuanced in response to these challenges.²¹

Most significant for our discussion is the repeated suggestion that central to this narrative substructure is a story about Jesus, a story about his sending by God, his life under the Torah, his faithful and obedient suffering and death, his divinely vindicating resurrection from the dead, his exaltation to the right hand of God, and his future return from heaven. This story functions not merely as a neat summary of Paul's Christology but as the ground from which Paul theologizes, a crucial epistemic authority for Paul in grounding his truth claims and ethical exhortations.²² In the context of our

History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History (WUNT 123; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000). For one response to this “rabbinic college” model see Pahl, *Discerning the Word of the Lord*, 59–66.

²¹ E.g. the criticism and response respectively in Francis Watson, “Is There a Story in These Texts?,” in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul* (ed. Bruce W. Longenecker; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); Richard B. Hays, “Is Paul's Gospel Narratable?,” *JSNT* 27 (2004): 217–239.

²² For more on this see Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1—4:11* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Bruce W. Longenecker, ed., *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A*

discussion so far, one could well argue that this narrative substructure to Paul's thought and discourse corresponds in some measure to the widespread apostolic story of Jesus, and that this Jesus-story functioned as a crucial epistemic authority for all early Christian thought and discourse.

Orality and Gospel

Another factor that needs to be part of this discussion is the primarily oral nature of the earliest Christian gospel, the distinctive Christian message of salvation focused on Jesus, his death, and his resurrection. For the earliest Christians, this "gospel" (*euangelion*) was thought of primarily as an orally proclaimed message that was only secondarily rendered in writing as necessity demanded. One indication of this is the abundance of verbs of speaking and hearing associated with the term *euangelion* in the earliest Christian writings, especially verbs of public proclamation and declaration such as *kēryssō* and *katangellō* and verbs of hearing and obedience such as *akouō* and *hypakouō*.²³ Another indication is the frequent use in these writings of "word" (esp. *logos*) language as synonymous with *euangelion*, very often clearly retaining the fundamentally oral idea of "something spoken."²⁴ Furthermore, and very significantly for our purposes, this orally proclaimed message of salvation in Christ is quite frequently described as the "word of God" or "word of the Lord," drawing on the language of the biblical prophets with regard to prophetic oracles which were originally orally proclaimed and

Critical Assessment (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); Pahl, *Discerning the 'Word of the Lord,'* 83–95; Ian W. Scott, *Implicit Epistemology in the Letters of Paul: Story, Experience and the Spirit* (WUNT 2/205; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

²³ E.g. Matt 4:23; Mark 1:14–15; 14:9; Acts 15:7; 20:24; Rom 10:14–17; 1 Cor 9:14–18; 15:1–11; Eph 1:13; 6:19–20; Col 1:23; 1 Thess 1:4–5; 2:13; 2 Thess 1:8; 2 Tim 1:10; 1 Pet 4:17; Rev 14:6; *Barn.* 5:9; *Ign. Phil.* 5:2. See Gerhard Friedrich, "εὐαγγελίζομαι, etc.," *TDNT* 2:730.

²⁴ E.g. Matt 13:19–23; Mark 4:14–17, 18–20, 33; Luke 8:11–13, 15, 21; Acts 2:41; 4:31; 8:25; 13:26; Rom 10:8, 17; 1 Cor 1:18; 2:4; 15:2; 2 Cor 1:18; 2:17; Gal 6:6; Eph 1:13; 5:26; 6:17; Phil 1:14; 2:16; Col 1:5, 25; 3:16; 1 Thess 1:8; 2:13; 2 Thess 3:1; 2 Tim 2:9, 15; 4:2; Titus 1:3, 9; 2:5; Heb 13:7; 1 Pet 1:23, 25; Jas 1:18, 21; Rev 1:9; *1 Clem.* 42:3; *Ign. Phil.* 11:1; *Did.* 4:1; *Pol. Phil.* 3:2; 9:1; *Barn.* 16:9; *Herm.* 15:3, 6; 102:2.

only subsequently recorded in writing. In fact, such “word of God” language is used almost exclusively in the earliest Christian writings through the second century for the orally proclaimed gospel, and only rarely with respect to the written Scriptures.²⁵ In short, for the very earliest Christians the gospel was, to borrow Martin Hengel’s description, “the living ‘message of salvation,’ preached orally and with a christological stamp.”²⁶

It was not until later that the “gospel” (*euangelion*) was thought of both as something written (i.e. the Gospels) and as something spoken (i.e. the gospel), both proclaiming the salvific significance of Jesus, his death, and his resurrection. The shift to this can be seen as a series of points on a trajectory: (1) the opening lines of Mark’s biography of Jesus (1:1), where it is not the writing itself which is described as “gospel” but the story which is narrated in the writing; (2) the use of the term “gospel” in the *Didache* (8:2; 11:3; 15:3, 4) and Ignatius (*Smyrn.* 5:1 cf. 1:1), possibly in reference to a single written narrative of Jesus’ life and teachings which was known to the Syrian Christian community, possibly a version of Matthew’s Gospel; and finally (3) Justin Martyr’s description of the “memoirs of the apostles” as “Gospels” (*1 Apol.* 66.3).²⁷ All this suggests that it was not until at least the early second century C.E. that Christians thought of the “gospel” as something written; for the earliest Christians the “gospel” was the orally proclaimed message of salvation centered on Jesus, his death, and his resurrection, an orally proclaimed message which was communicated by the earliest Christians in various forms but only authoritatively through apostolic testimony and tradition.

²⁵ For more on this see Michael W. Pahl, “The ‘Gospel’ and the ‘Word’: Exploring Some Early Christian Patterns,” *JSNT* 29 (2006): 211–227; Pahl, *Discerning the ‘Word of the Lord,’* 122–139.

²⁶ Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels* (London: SCM Press, 2000), 61.

²⁷ Cf. Graham Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 52–59.

Scripture and Intertextuality

In using the term “Scripture” (*graphē*),²⁸ the NT authors reflect the widespread early Jewish perspective on a particular body of writings believed to be sacred and normative for religious belief and practice. While there does not seem to have been a formalized canon of Jewish Scripture in the first century C.E., there are clear indications of a widely (though not unanimously) recognized functional canon grouped together as the Law and the Prophets, and in some cases also including the Writings.²⁹ The precise contents of these divisions may have been fluid and disputed, particularly the Writings. Also, one should certainly not think of these as collected within a single “book,” or even easily and widely accessible as a unified collection or collections.³⁰ Nevertheless, conceptually the NT authors apparently worked within these proto-canonical categories, as is evident from summary phrases such as “the Law and the Prophets” as well as from their explicit Scriptural citations which include representation from all three major sections of the Jewish Scriptures.³¹ The earliest Christians were predominantly Jewish and thus naturally continued to look to their Scriptures for their religious belief and practice, and even Gentile Christians to some degree viewed the Jewish heritage as their own and thus looked to the Jewish Scriptures as their own Scriptures.

²⁸ Mark 12:10; 21:42; 22:29; 26:54; Mark 12:24; 14:49; Luke 4:21; 24:27, 32, 45; John 2:22; 5:39; 7:38, 42; 10:35; 13:18; 17:12; 19:24, 28, 36f; 20:9; Acts 1:16; 8:32, 35; 17:2, 11; 18:24, 28; Rom 1:2; 4:3; 9:17; 10:11; 11:2; 15:4; 15:3–4; Gal 3:8, 16, 22; 4:30; 1 Tim 4:13; 5:18; 2 Tim 3:15–16; Jas 2:8, 23; 4:5f; 1 Pet 2:6; 2 Pet 1:20; 3:16.

²⁹ E.g. Sir prologue; Matt 7:12; 22:40; Luke 16:16; 24:27, 44; Acts 13:15; 28:23; Rom 3:21; Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.40.

³⁰ Christopher D. Stanley, *Arguing with Scripture: The Rhetoric of Quotations in the Letters of Paul* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2004), 41–43.

³¹ There are approximately 150 NT citations from the Law, 110 from the Prophets (mostly the Major and Minor Prophets, rarely the Historical Books), and 90 from the Writings (almost exclusively the Psalms and Daniel). See Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *The Greek New Testament* (4th ed.; Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; United Bible Societies, 1993), 887–888.

The way in which the Jewish Scriptures were read and used by the earliest Christians is, of course, a matter of ongoing scholarly interest with little consensus in sight.³² Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the language, motifs, and stories of these divinely authoritative Scriptures provided the NT authors with their richest resource for thinking about and expressing their convictions regarding what God had accomplished in Christ. Often this can be seen explicitly, as the Scriptures are employed as a primary epistemic authority for the NT authors in supporting their truth claims and ethical exhortations, for example with phrases such as “just as it is written” (*kathōs gegraftai*). Often this occurs more implicitly, as echoes of the Scriptural texts call the reader to the broader context of the allusion, or as the thematic structure of Scriptural texts shapes the NT author’s framework of thought and discourse.³³ Regardless, one thing is clear: the Jewish Scriptures, viewed as divinely originating and divinely authoritative, continued to be a crucial epistemic authority for the faith and practice of the earliest Christians.

This early Christian perspective on the Scriptures relates in some significant ways to the concepts sketched out in the previous sections. As the apostles witnessed to the gospel of Christ crucified and risen via tradition and testimony, and as they interpreted and applied this gospel for the faith and practice of their churches, they looked to the Jewish Scriptures for the language, motifs, and stories for the framework of their apostolic discourse and for support for their claims regarding the gospel and its implications for belief and practice. The gospel of Christ, crucified and resurrected, is “according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3–4); the Law of Moses and the Prophets testify to the fact and significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection (Luke 24:26–27; Acts 26:22–23; Rom 3:21; 16:25–26; 1 Pet 1:10–11); the Scriptures testify to Jesus and the eternal life which is found in him (John 5:39–40); the Scriptures were written for the instruction of the eschatological people of God in Christ

³² See e.g. Kenneth Berding and Jonathan Lunde, eds., *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

³³ On these uses of Scripture in Paul, see e.g. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2004); Stanley, *Arguing*.

(Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11); indeed, the overarching purpose of inspired Scripture is to provide wisdom for salvation through the faith which is in Christ Jesus (i.e. the gospel), a salvation wisdom which includes sound doctrine and righteous living (2 Tim 3:15–17).

A SUMMARY PROPOSAL AND EVALUATION

Our mad scramble through the variegated terrain of some recent scholarship in Christian origins—with some of this ground undeniably more solid than other ground—can be summarized with a proposal.

I would suggest that there was a distinct body of orally transmitted teaching material which was common to the earliest Christian communities established by those who had been personally commissioned by Jesus to be his authoritative representatives in word and deed, those legitimately considered “apostles.” Some of this teaching material originated with Jesus, some could only have been developed by these apostles after Jesus’ resurrection. This body of teaching material included formal tradition and personal testimony, expanded by individual apostolic interpretation, and was employed with the fluidity and stability characteristic of traditional material in a predominantly oral society. The focus of this teaching material was the “gospel,” that is, the orally proclaimed message of salvation centered on Jesus, his death, and his resurrection. Around this kerygmatic core was a variety of supporting material, in particular a summary narrative of Jesus’ public career especially focused on his passion, and distinct collections of teaching material related to the kingdom of God, its missionary proclamation, and its eschatological fulfillment. This apostolic tradition, testimony, and interpretation—in particular the kerygmatic core—was set within the narrative-theological context of the Jewish Scriptures, providing additional divine witness to God’s saving action in Christ on behalf of his people. *It was this Scripture-testified, apostle-witnessed, gospel-centered tradition—an “Apostolic-Kerygmatic Tradition”—which functioned as the primary authority for the earliest Christians in shaping their faith and practice.*

So how well do the notions of *Sola Scriptura* and “Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition” hold up when viewed against this tentative model of early Christian authority? The Roman Catholic notion of “Sacred Tradition” fares rather well. The Catholic teaching emphasizes the reality of gospel-focused living tradition inter-

acting dynamically with written Scripture in the early centuries of the church, with the apostles as the initial Christ-commissioned guarantors of that tradition—ideas which fit reasonably well with the model proposed above. However, the Catholic ideas of Magisterium and Apostolic Succession could be seen to be unnecessary, perhaps even misguided. One could well argue that the apostles held a unique personal authority by virtue of their direct commissioning by Christ, and the authority of their message is not conveyed by personal succession but rather through the apostolic writings, our New Testament.

The Protestant concept of *Sola Scriptura*—properly understood—also holds up well against this proposed model. There is good reason to hold to the unique, even divine authority of written Scripture in witnessing to the gospel of Christ crucified and risen, both the Jewish Scriptures looking forward to Christ in preparation and the apostolic writings looking back in announcement and explanation. However, the extreme notion that there is no place for any other authority in legitimately witnessing to Christian faith and practice—including the universal councils and creeds of the post-apostolic church—is difficult to support.

In the end, then, we may find ourselves in a Protestant-leaning middle path between the *Sola Scriptura* and “Scripture and Tradition” views: nuancing *Sola Scriptura* in some important ways while acknowledging the legitimacy of some fundamental aspects of the “Scripture and Tradition” view, maintaining an emphasis on Scripture as the inspired and only remaining infallible witness we have to the authoritative “Apostolic-Kerygmatic Tradition” while drawing the line at the concepts of Magisterium and Apostolic Succession.

FOR FURTHER READING

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