Canon Within and Without the Canon: A Theological Consideration and Apology for Lectionary Readings

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SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY: WHAT KIND OF TEXT IS IT?

The authority of Scripture has always been one of the anchors of Christian doctrine. Scripture, including *both* testaments, has nourished and guided the church through nearly two millennia, and it must continue to do so. To deny this precept would be to place ourselves outside of the description "Christian."

Certainly, we would agree with both Jesus and Paul that not all portions of scripture carry the same level of authority: there are "weightier matters of the law" (Matt 23:23), just as there are elements of Christian preaching that are "of first importance" (1 Cor 15:3).

A problem arises when, rather than submitting all passages of scripture to an interpretive principle such as the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whole portions of scripture are subordinated to others. For example, many evangelical Protestants, including the churches of the Stone-Campbell movement, tend to privilege the book of Acts and the epistolary material of the New Testament over the Gospels.[1] In the Stone-Campbell movement the presupposition of patternism has helped facilitate the privileging of the non-Gospel material.

A more difficult issue is what *kind* of authority scripture has for us. Two options seem primary. Is it the authority of a lawbook—a legal pattern of authority or "constitution"? Or, conversely, is scripture to be treated as an archaic document with only tangential relevancy for contemporary Christian life, giving general guidelines with little or no specific instruction?

The goal of this article is to offer a theological proposal for an approach to scripture that, first, *properly* privileges some portions of the canon over others; and second, allows us to take the canon of scripture seriously without falling into legalism.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to define what I mean by the major terms of my title. By "canon within the canon" I mean the use of one particular concept, drawn from within the canon of scripture, to rule all interpretation. For example, many Protestants use the Lutheran principle of justification by faith as a lens through which to read all scripture. In the Stone-Campbell movement, the lens has traditionally been patternism—the search for a pristine pattern of doctrine and church order in the life of the "New Testament Church."[2]

By "canon without the canon" I mean precisely the opposite: the interpretation of scripture through a principle, concept, or school of philosophy, drawn from outside scripture. Bultmann's existentialism or perhaps Augustine's neo-Platonism are examples.[3] In my view, patternism has functioned most frequently as the lens through which to read scripture in the

Stone-Campbell movement. Though it can generally be said that churches in the Stone-Campbell heritage are moving away from patternism, we must ask how much of it remains below the surface of our discourse.

When in our disputes concerning ethics, doctrine, and church order and organization we approach a text of the Bible with the question of what it allows or prohibits have we presupposed that a pattern exists? Do we unconsciously turn the Bible into a legal document and therefore carry within our arguments a latent legalism? Is there a way to address issues important to the Christian life and church order by approaching scripture with appropriate respect *without* being legalistic?

My initial approach will be through historical analysis of a paradigm case: Alexander Campbell himself. By investigating Campbell's indebtedness to both Baconian philosophy and the Westminister Creed—and in particular the creed's patternistic approach to scripture—I wish to demonstrate that, first, the presupposition of patternism arises as a result of a particular historical and philosophical milieu,[4] and second, that this approach to scripture facilitated for our movement the privileging of the non-Gospel material of the New Testament.

A HISTORIC CHRISTIANITY: CAMPBELL AND THE WESTMINSTER CREED

Though Campbell's anticreedalism is well known, his affinity to the Westminster Creed is seldom mentioned. The connections are especially apparent in their respective treatments of scripture.[5] Because general revelation in the created order is insufficient for instruction of human beings in what is necessary for salvation, so the Creed affirms, God provided scripture "for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world."

Scripture is wholly sufficient for these purposes, because "the whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture."[6] Similarly, in his segment on "The Bible" in *The Christian System,* Campbell affirms that

> The Bible … contains a full and perfect revelation of God and his will. … The Bible is a book of facts, not of opinions, theories, abstract generalities, nor of verbal definitions. … These facts reveal God and man, and contain within them the reasons of all piety and righteousness, or what is commonly called religion and morality. The meaning of the Bible facts is the true biblical doctrine.[7]

The Westminister Creed affirms that proper worship is legislated in the Bible:

> the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited to his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.[8]

Campbell held that the church is governed in all matters by "the constitution which [God] himself has granted and authorized in the New Testament."

> This institution has its facts, its precepts, its promises, its ordinances, and their meaning or doctrine. These are not matters of policy, of arrangement, of expediency, but of divine and immutable ordination and continuance. Hence the faith, the worship, and the righteousness, or the doctrine, the piety, and the morality of the Gospel institution, are not legitimate subjects of human legislation, alteration, or arrangement.[9]

To depart from that constitution "by either adding to, or subtracting from, the apostolic constitution a single item" would be tantamount to establishing a new sect or *heresy,* which Campbell decried. The sole

method of preventing such an event is the re-establishment of "*purity of speech,*" which is "*to speak of Bible things by Bible words.*"

> Every party in Christendom, without respect to any of its tenets, opinions, or practices, is a heresy, a schism—unless there be such a party as stands exactly upon the Apostles' ground. Then, in that case, it is a sect just in the sense of the old sect of the Nazarenes, afterwards called Christians, and all others are guilty before the Lord, and must be condemned for their opposition to Christ's own party; whose party we are, provided we hold fast all, and only all, the apostolic traditions, and build upon the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible.

This is Campbell's version of the classic *sola scriptura* statement:

> The Christian party are [sic] "built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, and on Jesus the Messiah, himself the chief corner-stone," and therefore *on the Christian Scriptures alone* … as the development and full revelation of all that concerns Christ and his kingdom contained in those scriptures.[10]

All aspects of church life are to be drawn from the words of scripture, which, as we will see, represent the "Bible facts."

CAMPBELL, BACON, LOCKE, AND NEWTON: "JUST THE FACTS"

Though there are striking similarities in both word and concept between John Locke and the Campbells, behind that agreement is the inductive method of the Renaissance thinker Francis Bacon.[11] His empirical scientific method moved from observable "facts" to conclusions rather than from speculative theory to individual things.[12] Alexander Campbell frequently recites Bacon's definition of "fact" as "something said or something done," and explicitly calls himself a "Baconian."[13]

When applied to the Bible, this method treats the text as a smorgasbord of isolated, individualized, atomized pieces of scientific data, which then must be given an order by the scientist. Locke states, "The immediate object of all our reasoning and knowledge, is nothing but particulars. Every man's reasoning and knowledge is only about the ideas existing in his own mind; which are truly, every one of them, particular existences."[14] This "Christian Baconianism" views

> the Bible as a sourcebook of facts, which any reasoning man could quarry out as the building materials for a logical system. The method presumes that epistemological, ethical, and methodological sense are common to all sensible men, so that any such man of sense is capable of using the Common Sense method to examine the Bible empirically and scientifically and to arrive at objective, unprejudiced, factual results. Its methodological assumptions transfer, perhaps unconsciously, into a literary model in which the Bible is seen as a sourcebook of scientific, empirical, factual data.[15]

In his debate with Robert Owen, Campbell clearly laid out his methodology by reiterating Newton's scientific procedure in order to apply it to the Biblical text:

> Everything … is to be submitted to the most minute observation. No conclusions are to be drawn from guesses or conjectures. We are to keep within the certain limits of experimental truth. We first ascertain the facts, then group them together, and after the classification and comparison of them, draw the conclusion."[16]

ANALYSIS: PROBLEMS WITH PATTERNISM

Reflection upon the church history, and on the Stone-Campbell movement in particular, reveals a number of failures of the methodology. First, it can be said that this method is an imposition upon scripture from

outside the canon—a "canon without the canon." It arises from a particular philosophy and out of a particular religious heritage rather than rising directly from the Biblical text.

Second, it turns the Bible into a book of autonomous "scientific facts" rather than interrelated narratives or intertwined narrative, and in so doing, violates the nature of the literature. The forms of literature contained in the New Testament are in fact ignored. The act of imposing this alien point of view upon the Biblical text forces the text into a particular mold by presupposing that a pattern both exists and can be ascertained.

Third, this approach facilitates privileging the non-Gospel material in the New Testament because the epistolary material is more easily reduced to Baconian facts. They contain more directives and theological analysis: they simply have less narrative to ignore. Acts, though a historical narrative, contains a great deal of specific direction for early Christians. The Gospels, on the other hand, are stories, and difficult to reduce to commands or propositions or Baconian facts.

Perhaps the phenomenon sometimes called "Lessing's Ugly Ditch" shows itself here. Lessing argued that one cannot move directly from historical truths to truths of reason; nor, we might add, to theology or doctrine. Some intermediate elements are necessary, such as faith and commitment.[17] The narratives of the Gospels do not reduce easily to truths of reason, but Acts and the epistles lend themselves to such reduction quite well, with the result that this material has become central in disputes concerning doctrine and church order. Because proper doctrine and church order, based on a patternistic approach to the New Testament, were central to the self-identification of churches in the Stone-Campbell movement vis-a-vis "the denominations," a natural privileging of the non-Gospel material took place.[18]

In doctrinal disputes, the approach to the New Testament frequently employed is through the question, "What does this text allow or prohibit?" This question presupposes a "lawbook approach" to scripture by assuming that the text was written for the purpose of legislating. It also presupposes patternism, and the combination of these two presuppositions too easily results in a legalism that reduces the Christian faith to "keeping the New Testament law."

Approaching the text in this manner also tends to separate "commands" from their surrounding narrative, that is, to take them out of the context, which gives them their particular sense. For example, removing Paul's rhetorical question, "Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink?" (1 Cor 11:22) from the historical context of the problems faced by the church in Corinth at that time has resulted in contemporary disputes over kitchens in church buildings.

Forcing the text into the patternistic mold has the further consequence of making commands of statements that were not intended as imperatives. In essence, *everything* in the New Testament is reducible to a command under the patternistic approach, including not only exhortations but also incidental historical matters. The New Testament has then become what Luther feared: a more demanding law than that of Moses.

How to Find the Best Canon Within the Canon: A Proposal

The task of this article is not to provide a complete hermeneutic but to offer theologically informed suggestions that should guide our use of the canon. Theologically, the first thing to be said is that the Bible per se authorizes nothing. Only God authorizes. All authorizing belongs to God and to God alone.

This does not mean that we must throw away our Bibles. It means that we should not repeat the error of the Pharisees described by Jesus in John 5: In our searching of scripture, we must never forget that scripture is not an end in itself. It is a window through which we peer in order to seek God. Our model of authority has all too frequently been one of God pointing to scripture; properly speaking, though, it is the other way around: scripture points to God.[19]

Our task is to relate each doctrine to the nature of God, which for Christians is expressed fully in Jesus (Col 2:9), and specifically in his death, burial, and resurrection (1 Cor 2:2, 15:3ff). Just as the Ten Commandments reflect the nature of God, so also our doctrinal precepts must be clearly traceable to his

nature. We must train ourselves to focus on the God behind the text, the God who showed his nature in the crucified and resurrected Christ, rather than on the text itself.

Second, as Christians we are committed to using *all* of the canon rather than only those portions that suit our preferences, dispositions, or prior doctrinal convictions. But, are all parts of the canon equal in their relation to the nature of God? Certainly not. As Christians we are obliged to hold sacred and to make use of the entire canon, but we are not called to flatten it. Certain parts of the canon must be central to who we are as God's people.

But which parts? And how can we decide? Can we trust such a decision, or will it always be suspect as having arisen from non-Biblical presuppositions? We cannot empty ourselves of presuppositions: Bultmann was right on this point.[20] Because we will always have presuppositions, the question becomes one of better and worse, or perhaps even right and wrong: which presuppositions are right? But again, how would one decide? Churches will be shaped by the preaching they hear; and as preachers, we must recognize that to decide based merely on our own thoughts, convictions or preferences will shape the church in *our* image rather than the image of Jesus Christ. In other words, we must privilege what God would privilege.

Here, we must learn to rely on the workings of the Holy Spirit *within the church,* and not just within our own particular congregations or in our own particular time, but in the church through history. Historically, Christians have privileged the Gospels in their worship, as is evidenced in the lectionaries that have been employed. These systems of reading and preaching through the Bible are anchored in the Gospel selections for each worship service. The Gospel selection governs the choices of the Psalm, the Old Testament reading, and the selection from the epistles or Acts.[21]

Centered on the Gospels, the readings lead to reflection on the great themes of the Bible—the mighty saving acts of God, his creative power, his continual work in the world through his Spirit, his power and plan to bring history to an end and to judge the world, etc—always focused on God's self-expression in Jesus the Messiah.

Perhaps learning to privilege the Gospels in our worship will inform our disputes. Rather than approaching an issue armed with the question, "What does this text allow or prohibit?" we will begin with Jesus. Rather than approaching a text with a pattern theology, we will ask what it tells us of God and begin our disputations with a discussion of who God is. A consequence of doing so will be that our theological method will have arisen from *within* the canon rather than having been superimposed from without, from a humanly created philosophy that asks humanly created questions that control the agenda of the conversation. Superimposing an external mode of thought results in wrong answers—because we have asked the wrong questions.

For Christian theology, scripture is not a legal code. Yet the church historically has placed herself *under* scripture. The New Testament is not a lawbook, but it is "normative" for life and faith. Its purpose is not to provide a pattern, blueprint, or constitution for the church but to provide us with examples, both good and bad, of how the earliest followers of Jesus Christ fleshed out their faith. It describes *lives* of faith in all their concrete, pedestrian struggles, not an abstract "Life of Faith."

Theologically, then, we begin with God, and theologically, we work, live, read scripture, and at times dispute within the body of Christ, the church. These theological precepts lead us to the concrete history in which God has acted and in which his church has lived—guided and empowered by his Holy Spirit.

As we learn to eschew points of view that are alien to scripture, we cannot pretend to read without a point of view, but we must place ourselves within the proper point of view—in the perspective that treasures and honors scripture and submits to it, the perspective that gives greater honor to portions of the canon to which greater honor is due. We must choose Christian rather than non-Christian philosophical presuppositions.

Certainly, not all of the church's problems will be solved by adopting the system of lectionary readings. But just as certainly we must find a way to navigate the hermeneutical impasses against which we find ourselves so frequently in our disputes. If we truly believe in the power of the Gospel to change lives, and in

the guidance of the church by the Holy Spirit, we must find a way to open ourselves to each of these things. We must find a way to open ourselves to the whole canon of scripture and to privilege the proper portions. I propose that the lectionary method will move us in those directions.

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ENDNOTES

1 Martin Luther, based on the precept of "justification by faith," privileged the Gospel of John and Paul's letters, especially Romans and Galatians, over other portions of the canon. See Luther's "Preface to the New Testament" of 1522, revised in 1546. It can be found in Timothy F. Lull, ed., *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 112-117.

2 I place this phrase in quotes because I hold it doubtful that we can speak of a singular mode of doctrine or organization in the first-century church.

3 See Rudolf Bultmann, et al., *Kerygma and Myth* (reprint ed., New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), especially Bultmann's contributions to this volume. On Augustine, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, vol. 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 295-297.

4 That patternism does not arise directly from the biblical text can be seen by examining the biblical use of the concept: nowhere does scripture use it to refer to itself or to the early church.

5 On anticreedalism, see Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System*, 2nd ed. (reprint, Cincinnati: Standard, n.d.), 85-90. For a valuable discussion of the Campbells in relation to the Westminister Creed, see Michael Casey, "The Origins of the Hermeneutics of the Churches of Christ Part One: The Reformed Tradition," *Restoration Quarterly* 31 (1989): 75-91.

6 Westminister Confession of Faith, I.I, I.VI, in John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books,   1963), 193, 195.

7 Campbell, *Christian System*, 3, 6.

8 Westminster Creed, XXI.I, Leith, 216-217.

9 Campbell, *Christian System*, 55, 57.

10 Campbell, *Christian System*, 82, 84, 103-4. All emphases occur in the original.

11 On Locke and the Campbells, see Michael Casey, "Origins of the Hermeneutics of the Churches of Christ Part Two: The Philosophical Background," *Restoration Quarterly* 31 (1989): 193-8; Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, rev ed (np: College Press, 1994), 24-29. On a connection between Bacon and Locke, see Hans Reichenbach, *The Rise of Scientific Philosophy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1964), 78-85; and Edwin Arthur Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955), 31, 125, 168, 194, where an indirect influence of Bacon upon Locke through Robert Boyle and Locke's friend, Sir Isaac Newton, can be traced.

12 Francis Bacon, *The New Organon and Related Writings*, ed. Fulton H. Anderson (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1960), Aphorism XIX, p. 43. Also note Aphorisms XX-XXII.

13 Campbell, *Christian System*, 90, 96ff.; also Campbell, *Popular Lectures and Addresses* (reprint, Nashville: Harbinger Book Club, n.d.), 395.

14 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1959), IV.17.8.

15 Russ Dudrey, "Restorationist Hermeneutics Among the Churches of Christ: Why Are We at an Impasse?" *Restoration Quarterly* 30 (1988): 24. He notes that this approach is transmitted to Campbell through Common Sense Realism and calls it "Christian Baconianism," a phrase borrowed from Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), p. xiii. Dudrey also refers to Bozeman's chapter 7, "Baconianism and the Bible" on p. 23, n. 26.

16 Robert Owen and Alexander Campbell, *The Evidences of Christianity* (reprint; Nashville: McQuiddy, 1946), 281-282. See Casey, "The Origins of the Hermeneutics of the Churches of Christ Part Two," 198-200. I must make it clear at this point that I am not charging Alexander Campbell with legalism. Campbell was too much centered on the gospel to be guilty of it. However, the shape of his thought lends itself to such application.

17 See the discussion of Gotthold Lessing in James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Vatican II* (New York: MacMillan, 1971), 30-35, especially 32.

18 While Dudrey ("Restorationist Hermeneutics Among the Churches of Christ," 17-42) emphasizes the "flattening out" of the New Testament literature into a series of Baconian facts or propositional truths (and there is truth to that analysis), it is also true that behind this flattening is a presuppositional privileging of certain texts over others.

19 From a sermon heard long ago, preached by Jim McGuiggan. Though we must state that God does speak through his inspired and written word, the concept of "transferred authority," i.e., God having transferred his authority to the text of the Bible, is ruled out on this basis.

20 Rudolf Bultmann, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" In Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, ed., *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present* (New York: Continuum, 1989), 242-248

21 See Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 101-105.