

SCRIPTURE AS THE BASIS OF TEACHING AND BELIEF

Christians by no means all speak with one voice about the basis of what they teach and believe. Roman Catholics say that the tradition of the church is the channel through which divine revelation comes. They say that the sacred books of Scripture itself were written from the earliest tradition. The basis for a new doctrine such as the bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary was living oral tradition, admittedly without any word of support from Scripture. When the Pope speaks officially he is deemed to be infallible. For he is said to have divine revelation in the shrine of his heart, and so is said to have authority over the whole church. Official letters of popes as well as the decrees of councils and synods are included in what the Holy Spirit has inspired for believers. The interpretation of Scripture is not left to individual lay persons.

The debate about women bishops in the Anglican Church in Australia raises the question of authority for what is taught and believed in a different way. People from the Calvinistic sections of the church readily quote Scripture, but when people in other sections of the church talk about reaching a consensus, the hope is that informed theological minds can come to an agreement through continued discussion. For them the basis is not Scripture alone, but also Christian thought and experience over the centuries. However, the basis is obviously not past experience alone, because in the past there were no women bishops.

Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians often quote Scripture, but there is openness to continuing prophecy. Such people often speak as though God gave them immediate prompting. Many tend to look for signs in the unfolding of events as indications of God's will for the future, both to block off certain actions or to direct them to other actions. The "gift of discernment" is construed as a charismatic gift of direct intuition about the will of God in particular contexts.

Then there are many people who think it is appropriate to choose a form of religion that appeals to them personally. It is a post-modern assumption that words are merely an attractive cloak for individual self-interest. What is proclaimed as the Word of God also comes under such suspicion.

Paul wrote, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be proficient, and thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tm 3:16-17). When Paul wrote that Timothy had known the Holy Scriptures since he was a child, he meant the Old Testament Scriptures, since not all the New Testament Scriptures had yet been written. However, "All Scripture" is not restricted to the Old Testament. Through it Timothy, as a man of God, would be "thoroughly equipped." It was revealed, authoritative and sufficient.

One of the most important qualifications for a bishop (or pastor) was that he should be "skilful in teaching" (1 Tm 3:2). For that purpose Timothy should be able to "keep hold of the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience" (1 Tm 3:9). What his hearers were to believe could be readily known from Scripture. He had to embrace sound doctrine. Paul instructed Titus that he had to be cling to the reliable Word, as it had been taught, so that, by sound teaching, he might be able to encourage people and refute those who opposed it" (Tt 1:9). What the church heard from Timothy would not be derived from his pious self-consciousness or from personal experience, but from study of God's revealed Word. Timothy had to be "nourished by the words of the faith and of the good teaching that [he had] been faithfully following" (1 Tm 4:6). That would make him capable of teaching others, and enable him to avoid arguments about words and empty strife. That would enable him to "guide the Word of truth along a straight path" (2 Tm 2:15). God's revelation in Scripture would make Titus "able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradicted it"(Tt 1:9).

What people needed to hear was important, as God's sure, revealed truth. Timothy's task was not to organise pooled discussion or debate to determine the truth. Paul wrote, "Preach the Word! Be ready whether it is convenient or inconvenient. Correct, rebuke, and encourage, with all patience and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:2). As a young pastor Timothy was directed to the study of God's Word in Scripture. That was how he could "continue in what he had learned" (2 Tm 3:14). Scripture enabled Timothy to "follow the pattern of sound words" (2 Tm 1:13). His work was not to adjust his teaching to changing culture, but to "guard what had been entrusted" to him (1 Tm 6:20). That was how he could "keep the commandment without spot or blame" (1 Tm. 6: 14). His growth as a theologian came through reading Scripture attentively, meditating on it, and applying it to himself in daily living. That was how his hearers would be able to assess his progress. (1 Tm 4:13-15). The application of God's Word in Scripture would not be unsympathetic, but accompanied by prayer for himself and for the church (1 Tm. 2:1-2). All of that is included in what Paul meant when he said that a bishop or presbyter should be "skilful in teaching."

Jesus Himself left none of His Word in writing. However, He promised that the Holy Spirit would His remind disciples of His Words, guide them into all truth, and show them things to come. For some time, certainly, the teachings of Jesus and the apostles were handed over by word of mouth. However, it was no accident that within several decades the body of inspired New Testament teaching was committed to writing. Scripture was the basis of the church. The church of the living God is "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tm 3:15) because it teaches Scripture. It was not that the Church held Scripture as its piece of property that it could control or interpret for its wishes.

The claim of the Montanists to new prophecy forced the church to say on what basis they rejected the alleged prophecies of Montanus, Maximilla, and Priscilla. The early church soon learned the danger of basing teaching on oral tradition. The Gnostics claimed to have their own secret traditions. Irenaeus himself criticised the church at Rome under Victor, the bishop of Rome, for excluding the churches of Asia Minor from fellowship because they observed Easter on a

different day from at Rome (Eusebius *Church History*, V, 24,11). Obviously, when traditions differed, oral tradition on its own was unreliable. Although writers like Irenaeus still claimed that the truth against heresy was assured by Scripture, the rule of faith, oral tradition, and the regular succession of bishops from the apostles, Irenaeus' examples of oral tradition by word of mouth from the apostle John in Asia Minor were inconsequential. In his confrontation with various kinds of Gnosticism in about AD 180 Irenaeus appealed to virtually all the writings of the New Testament as Scripture.

Although the rule of faith as cited by such writers as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen was a generally accepted summary of the church's teaching, it did not have a fixed wording. Its content did not stand on its own, but Scripture itself determined it. The fact that Origen appealed to the rule of faith (or canon of truth) as something that he thought allowed considerable latitude in interpretation, even in matters where Scripture had spoken, meant that it was not useful as a final authority, even on such a point as the nature of the Holy Spirit (*On First Principles*, I, Preface, 4).

The church found that the ordination of clergy by other clergy who claimed to be in line of succession in office by derivation from Peter and the rest of the apostles was no guarantee of correct teaching as judged by Scripture. The Novatians, the adherents of Hippolytus, and the Donatists also claimed succession from Peter and the other apostles.

All of this means that Christians should maintain that the Word of God alone determines what is taught and believed, no one else, and nothing else.