

SCRIPTURA SACRA SUI IPSIUS INTERPRES

Some Further Reflections on the Question of Scripture and Tradition.

Praeterea cum credamus Ecclesiam sanctam catholicam habere eundem spiritum fidei, quem in sui principio semel accepit, cur non liceat hodie aut solum aut primum sacris literis studere, sicut licuit primitivae Ecclesiae? Neque enim illi Augustinum aut Thoman legerunt. Aut dic, si potes, quo iudice finietur quaestio, si patrum dicta sibi pugnaverint. Oportet enim scriptura iudice hic sententiam ferre, quod fieri non potest, nisi scripturae dederimus principem locum in omnibus quae tribuuntur patribus, hoc est, ut sit ipsa per sese certissima, facillima, apertissima, sui ipsius interpres, omnium omnia probans, iudicans et illuminans, sicut scriptum est psal. c.xviii [119:130]. "Declaratio seu, ut hebraeus proprie habet, Apertum seu ostium verborum tuorum illuminat et intellectum dat parvulis." Hic clare spiritus tribuit illuminationem et intellectum dari docet per sola verba dei, tanquam per ostium et apertum seu principium (quod dicunt) primum, a quo incipi oporteat, ingressurum ad lucem et intellectum.

--Assertio omnium articulorum M. Lutheri per bullam Leonis X. 1520.
WA 7, 97, 16-29.

It will not be possible, from a Lutheran vantage point at least, fruitfully to engage the question of scripture and tradition without some attention to what is today called hermeneutics. The divergences in relating scripture to the subsequent interpretative activity of the church arise because of some quite different perceptions of the relationship between the text and the exegete (either as an individual or a collective). What I shall attempt here is to set forth for discussion what these different perceptions appear to me to be. It will not be possible in this short exercise to do that in anything other than rather facile and broad generalizations, but the hope is nevertheless that such setting forth might move our discussion in a fruitful direction.

Perhaps there is no clearer indication of these different

perceptions than in antithetical assertions about where final authority resides in the interpretation of scripture: with the church and its magisterium; or with scripture itself--especially as comprehended in the audacious claim that the sacred scriptures interpret themselves (scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres).¹ Thereby, it seems to me, hangs the hermeneutical divide we need to get at. In the one case tradition, taken as something additional to scripture--whether as extra-canonical material, or as interpretation or extension of the canonical text--plays a prominent role, whereas in the other it comes under radical critique.

The differing attitudes toward tradition are engendered by basically different hermeneutical "models," different perceptions of the relationship between exegete/interpreter and text. In the first and perhaps most universally assumed model, the exegete, as "subject," stands over against the text understood as the "object" to be interpreted. The problem immediately engendered by such a model is the subjectivism or potential arbitrariness of the exegete. How can one be assured that the interpretation or application or extension of the text is "correct," i.e., not distorted by the spiritus proprius of the individual exegete?² How is the subjectivism of the exegete to be transcended? At this point tradition in one form or another enters the picture. The tradition stands as norm of or guide to interpretation. But then what does one do if the tradition does not always agree with itself? The hermeneutic, it would seem, inevitably drives to an authoritative office to oversee the interpretive process, apply the tradition, and be the place "where the buck stops." As Joseph Lortz could put it, "...No religious objectivity is possible where it is not certified again and again, from case to case, by a living interpreter, i.e., through an infallible, living teaching office."³ The subjectivism of the individual exegete and even the ambiguities of the tradition can be transcended, therefore, only by the "objectivity" of the "collective": the church and the magisterium, culminating in the papal office. Those who persist in questioning the legitimacy of such claims to transcendence are usually suspected of subjective arbitrariness, i.e., disobedience to the church. This was the charge made against the Reformers--particularly Luther--and it persists down to the present.⁴

Sola scriptura is in the first instance a reaction to claims made to such transcendence in behalf of tradition and the magisterium, and especially the papal office. It should be noted, however, that the sola scriptura was not just a Reformation doctrine or concern. It was abroad in the church long before the Reformation. As such it was most often a sub-set of the same basic hermeneutical model indicated above. The difference is only that it finds the claim that human subjectivity can be transcended by a collective spirit or the papal office to be dubious. Thus it counters such claims with the insistence that scripture alone transcends individual subjectivism and is therefore the ultimate authority.

The problem with such a claim, however, is that as long as it remains simply a sub-set of the same hermeneutical model, sola scriptura becomes more or less merely a defensive position over against tradition and magisterium. To bolster its case it has to make additional formal claims to inspiration, infallibility, inerrancy, sufficiency, etc. As such a defensive position, however, sola scriptura is hard pressed to hold its ground against the advances of critical study of the scriptures, the history of the church, and the growth of tradition. It is virtually platitudinous today to point out, for instance, that scripture is itself a product of "tradition," written by human authors in differing contexts, etc. Within the presuppositions of the given hermeneutic, therefore, a kind of stand-off develops between a scripture and tradition position and a sola scriptura position, each disagreeing with the other about how human subjectivism and arbitrariness is to be overcome and true objectivity to be achieved. To put it in its most extreme form, one ends with a stand-off between Papalism and Biblicism, each disputing what appear to be the exaggerated authoritarian claims of the other.

Even though the sola scriptura became one of the most prominent slogans of the 16th century reform movement, its significance is not fully grasped until one engages the hermeneutical question. One must advance beyond the merely formal statement of the sola scriptura to the understanding of scripture as sui ipsius interpres. This claim presupposes a quite different hermeneutical model.⁵ To make a long story short, it means that the roles of the text and the interpreter are

essentially reversed. The interpreter does not remain standing simply as subject over against the text as object to be interpreted. Rather, in the engagement with scripture, it is the scripture that comes to interpret the exegete. It is the task of the exegete to allow the Spirit of the scripture, the matter itself, to speak. The exegete is put in the position of the hearer who is to let the Spirit speak through the scripture precisely by "getting out of the way," i.e., setting aside the subjective sensus proprius. The scripture, that is, is not to be understood merely as the object upon which the exegete works, but rather as the means through which the Spirit works on the hearer. The concern moves beyond the question of what scripture means to what the Word does. The movement in the direction of the oral and living Word in this is unmistakable. The exegete is a hearer, who upon being addressed and exegeted by the Word becomes in turn a speaker (preacher).

In this model too, it is recognized that the greatest obstacle to true interpretation is the subjectivism, the sensus or spiritus proprius of the interpreter. But it is not believed that this subjectivism is overcome either by the collective weight or activity of church or tradition as such, nor is it overcome by merely formal declarations about biblical authority or inerrancy, nor, for that matter, by claims to possess the Spirit. Thus Luther, for instance, saw the claims both of the individual spiritualist and of the Papacy to be of the same order: subjectivism--i.e., the formal claim to possess the Spirit outside of the external Word and thus the claim to stand above the Word and be the ultimate interpreter.⁶ The insistence that scripture be heard as sui ipsius interpres, however, means that the problem of the subjective sensus proprius can be handled only when one allows the Spirit itself speaking through the Word actually to do it: to end the claims and needs of the old dying subject and call to life a new one who hears the promise. That Scripture is sui ipsius interpres means that it establishes itself as authoritative over the hearer by claiming the hearer. In other words, Scripture establishes itself as authoritative because it is justifying Word. "The authority, sufficiency, and revelational quality of the Scripture is due, according to Luther, quite unpolemically and aposteriori, to the experience that Scripture imparted to him life, salvation, comfort, freedom--i.e., a new being in faith"⁷

Sui ipsius interpres is simply the hermeneutical correlate of justification by faith alone. In this light, formal claims made for extra-scriptural authority structures and/or formal declarations about biblical authority (inerrancy, infallibility, etc.) are constructs which in one way or another are simply a reflex of the needs of the subjective sensus proprius.⁸

What does this have to say about the question of scripture and tradition? First of all, as the slogan itself asserts, the interpreter, whether as individual or as collective, is not accorded any independent or automatically privileged status as such. That scripture is sui ipsius interpres means that the problem of subjectivism in matters of interpretation cannot adequately be met simply by placing either the collective spiritus proprius or formal assertions of biblical authority between the individual subject and the text. If the subjectivism, the spiritus proprius, of the interpreter is to be overcome, then it is the Holy Spirit speaking through the preached Word according to Scripture who must do it. The Word of God, that is, must do it. To set an authoritative office or formal claim to biblical authority between the Word and the hearer is to introduce a foreign and legalistic element into the relation. It is the task of the interpreter to be a hearer of the Word, and having heard, to be one who speaks it again effectively.

Thus sui ipsius interpres has to be seen as a critique of the place assigned to tradition in usual formulations. Tradition understood as extra-scriptural institute which is to preside over the process of interpretation and put a check on the sensus proprius of the interpreter really leaves that sensus proprius basically intact. Like the law, it may restrain sin but it does not cure it. As long as the fundamental relation between text and interpreter remains the same no real change can occur. For even if the individual sensus proprius as a matter of fact comes to agree with, or submits to the traditional institute, all that happens is that the subjective sensus proprius, in concert with the collective sensus proprius, finds a "meaning" in the text convenient to its own concerns. The subject remains the interpreter of the text, the text is not allowed to become the interpreter of the subject.

This means at the very least that tradition as extra-scriptural

institute claiming absolute or unquestioned authority over the interpretation would have to be rejected. The "and" in Scripture and Tradition cannot be a plus sign which elevates Tradition to the same level as Scripture or in actual practice, above it. If we are not permanently or irrevocably to install some particular instance of human or collective subjectivity over the Scriptures, or even between the Scriptures and us, then it would seem that we could best consider ourselves as the company of hearers of the Word, straining to hear what the Spirit has to say to us through the Babel of other voices--including our own discordant notes. The tradition, perhaps it could be said, is an account of what the company of hearers has heard, the intent of which should be to summon us to the task of listening ever more carefully and exactly. As such it is to be taken seriously and even given a primary place in the discipline of listening. It is, you might say, a "hearing aid," but not itself the source or judge. It may be a norma normata, but not a norma normans. It must always be open to better hearing, and must stand under the Scriptures.⁹ Tradition properly understood, that is, does not exist to call attention to itself, or to insert itself between us and the scripture (or even to call attention to its own "development" and growth), but rather to clear the way, to point us toward a proper hearing of the text.

The fact that scripture is to be understood as self-interpreting in no way means therefore that the interpreter has nothing to do. On the contrary, it makes the task of interpreting much more demanding and exacting. "The intensity of the exegetical work is directly proportional to the acknowledgement that scripture is sui ipsius interpres."¹⁰ Luther could put it this way in a passage from the Assertions Against the Bull of Leo just preceding the one quoted at the outset: "So we must therefore strive, not to set aside the scriptures and ^{to} norm ourselves by the human writings of the Fathers, but much more to set aside the writings of men and all the more persistently dedicate our sweat to the Holy Scriptures alone. The more present the danger that one might understand them by one's own spirit (proprio spiritu) the more this must be done, until at last the exercise of this constant effort conquers the danger and makes us certain of the Spirit of Scripture, which is simply not to be found outside of scripture."¹¹

Notes:

1. The quote from Luther's "Assertio....per Bullam Leonis X" above is a locus classicus for the sui ipsius interpres but the same can be found in other places: WA 14, 566, 26-29; WA 10 III, 238 10f, etc.
2. Luther uses the term spiritus proprius (which is apparently interchangeable with sensus proprius) in the Assertio (WA 7, 96:5). It appears there in a quote, but no indication is given as to what he may have been quoting. The bull of Leo X does identify Luther with heretics who interpret scripture according to their own wisdom rather than that of the church and the fathers and that no doubt occasions Luther's response in his Assertio.
3. Joseph Lortz, Die Reformation in Deutschland. Vol. 1., 3rd ed. 1948. Freiburg: Verlag Herder. 402.
4. See, for instance, Paul Hacker, The Ego in Faith: Martin Luther and the Origin of Anthropocentric Religion. Franciscan Herald Press. 1970. The book carries a commendatory preface by Joseph Ratzinger. The basic charge of subjectivism persists even in so positive an interpreter of the Reformation as Joseph Lortz. See Lortz, loc. cit. and also Die Reformation als Religioeses Anliegen Heute, Trier: Paulus-Verlag. 1948. 144 et passim.
5. For a more thorough explication of the issues raised briefly here, see the excellent article by Walter Mostert, "Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres," Lutherjahrbuch, Helmar Junghans, ed., 46: 1979. 60-96. Hereafter cited as Mostert.
6. See Luther's Smalcald Articles, Pt. III, Art. VIII, Book of Concord, ed. and trans. T. Tappert, Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1959. 312-313.
7. Mostert, 70.
8. Ibid. 70.
9. Thus, even though Luther accepted the homoousion of the Nicene Creed without personal reservation, he could also say (in Against Latomus), "Even if my soul hated this word, homoousion, and I refused to use it [because it was not scriptural], still I would not be a heretic. For who compels me to use the word, providing I hold to the fact defined by the council on the basis of scripture?" LW 32, 244.
10. "It is well known...that polemically Luther had in mind the sensus proprius in the form of the Roman Catholic and enthusiast concept of

Spirit. What he criticized thereby was that a criterion was introduced into scriptural exegesis that was foreign to the concern of scripture. Now in the context of Luther's theology as a whole the Roman concept of tradition and the enthusiast concept of Spirit are seen not just as isolated historical phenomena, but as historic appearances of the general human inclination towards sensus proprius, to enthusiasm. If Luther sets the self-asserting power of scripture against traditionalism and enthusiasm, one must see this in the overall view of his whole theology, which crystallizes around the self-seeking sinner after his own salvation versus the God who simply gives his salvation." Mostert, 74. 11. WA 7, 97:3-9.