

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE QUESTION OF SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

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1. Definitions. It would be helpful, I believe, to have some discussion about definition of terms to bring what we are talking about into focus. First, the question of scripture. We have had, in the course of the dialogue, considerable discussion about scripture and its authority. But it is not yet clear (to me at least) whether there is general agreement or understanding on the matter, either within or between the two sides in our dialogue. What do we mean by scripture and its authority? Second, what do we mean by the rather ambiguous and multi-faceted word "tradition" when it is linked with or distinguished from scripture? Perhaps the most crucial question is the force of the "and." Do we mean to make a distinction between written and supposedly "unwritten" tradition(s)? Is there--can there any longer be--such a thing as an unwritten tradition? If so, how would it be normed or verified? Do we not now, in actual practice, always have to resort to something written? Or, in appealing to a tradition separated from scripture by the "and," do we mean a traditum or rather simply the actus tradendi? Does scripture convey a certain body of knowledge to which tradition makes an addition, either in unwritten or written form? Does tradition perhaps constitute an extension, or development, or growth (sensus fidelium) of the original deposit? Is the "and" actually a plus sign? Or is tradition to be taken rather in the sense of an active paradosis, the act of handing on (and being normed by) the message of scripture in ever differing situations and contexts? Is the question of scripture and tradition better put as a question of text and on-going interpretation? Would it perhaps be better to speak simply of a paradosis--a handing on of the scriptural message in the preaching and teaching of the church--which is itself mandated and thus normed by scripture? These and, I expect, still other questions indicate the necessity for careful definition to clarify what we are talking about.

2. Much water has gone over the dam since the late medieval and reformation times when sola scriptura was set over against the scripture and tradition. For both historical and theological reasons it is no longer possible to set the sola against the "and" in the oversimplified

fashion characteristic of much past polemics. Historical study of the development of the text and the canon of scripture makes it impossible for Lutherans to disregard the role of the paradosis in the formation of scripture. The sola cannot be interpreted to exclude consideration of such "handing on." At the same time, however, the very history of this handing on (e.g., the development of the canon) makes it precarious, to say the least, to claim tradition as a relatively independent or second source or norm for christian faith and practice. For if it is true that the handing on led to the formation of the canon of scripture, that very development would be subjected to futility if one were to maintain a second source or standard (a loose canon?) operating in addition to or outside its jurisdiction. For that would imply that the canon produced by the process of "handing on" was incomplete, deficient, or inadequate. In other words, the canon would not be, in fact, the canon and the very legitimacy of the "handing on" process itself would be called into question. Tradition would simply cancel itself out if it considered itself an addition to or set itself over against its own product. Historical considerations therefore suggest that whereas the sola cannot--and should not--mean exclusion of the paradosis the "and," at the same time can hardly be taken as a plus sign.

3. Theological considerations also make it impossible to set the sola over against the "and" in simplistic fashion. The "and," even if not taken as a plus sign, nevertheless does at the very least indicate the necessity of an actus tradendi. Just what that involves remains, I expect, to be discussed. So also the sola cannot be taken to mean that scripture somehow drops from heaven or promulgates itself. We have repeatedly encountered in our dialogue the fact that, in the Lutheran view, the message of scripture demands so to be preached that it may create faith. Sola scriptura, properly understood in conjunction with its companions, solus christus, solo verbo, sola fide, does not exclude, but rather includes--indeed necessitates--the oral proclamation.

4. If it is the case that the sola and the "and" do not necessarily exclude each other, then we should ask ourselves just under what conditions they need not exclude each other, and under what conditions they would. It seems to me that here we come back to the question of just what is being handed on (what, or who, is in fact being mediated,

as we put it in the previous round). The sola, that is, need not exclude the "and" if it is the case that scripture, the written word, and the paradosis as the actus tradendi can be seen as performing different, though indispensably related functions. Perhaps Ratzinger's idea that Tradition is defined only functionally as handing on the word of God, whereas scripture is the word of God is a useful beginning. But I expect it would need to be specified further to satisfy Lutheran concerns. What is being handed on in the Tradition that couldn't possibly be gotten by just reading and exegeting the scriptures? Is some additional information being conveyed? Is the "and" a plus sign? Lutherans could agree, I expect, that a Tradition defined only functionally as "handing on the word of God" is acceptable, but would want to assert that the word of God being "handed on" is the living Christ of the proclamation "for you" in the here and now, as mandated and authorized by the scriptures. The sola scriptura, that is, brings with it the solus Christus of the preached word, the viva vox. In this light, it would be said that the scripture indeed demands a "handing on," but that this handing on is itself mandated and normed by scripture. Furthermore, Lutherans would want to insist that this handing on in no way competes with or adds to scripture in its essential function, but rather does something that scripture itself neither does nor is intended to do. Scripture and the act of handing on, that is, have different, but necessarily related roles. The sola scriptura therefore does not exclude, but indeed mandates a "handing on," but this handing on, since mandated by scripture alone, is thus a handing on of the solus Christus, through the word alone (preaching and giving of the sacraments).

5. From the Lutheran perspective we would need, I expect, to review the significance of the sola with regard to the question of tradition. If a "handing on" is not denied but mandated, what is being handed on? I expect this to be the central question. Is the scripture to be looked upon primarily as a doctrinal source book whose contents can be mined, extended, developed, etc., or rather--in Luther's terms--"the cradle of the Christchild?" The sola's intend to protect that. Perhaps we need to look at them more closely in that light. We would need to investigate what was meant by insisting that scripture does not need

extraneous traditions or "authorities" to govern its interpretation, but is its own interpreter (sui ipsius interpres). I expect it might be useful to look at Chemnitz's work on the question of tradition at Trent. We need to look closely at the fact that the Reformation was an instance in which scripture was used to question and reject certain developments of the tradition. What did it mean to say that this or that tradition was contrary to scripture? Was it simply a matter of supposed contradictions "according to the letter?" Or was it a matter of "the spirit"--what offends, perhaps, against the gospel, or "was Christum treibet?" How do the scriptures function over against the on-going paradosis when one is concerned about the gospel? Some elements of the Tradition--infant baptism, for instance--were, however, accepted. On what ground? [In this connection, one might even look at the question of baptism "in behalf of the dead" (1 Cor. 15:29) as an instance where a scriptural "openness" was not taken up or extended, but raises the interesting question of whether it even could be on evangelical grounds, or what the church has to say in instances where it has been taken up, e.g., the Mormons.]

6. I am somewhat reluctant at this point to suggest particular doctrines on which to test the question of scripture and tradition because I am not certain that will provide the kind of test that meets Lutheran concerns. The procedure could all too easily presuppose that the question is one of mining the scripture for doctrinal deposits, and then gauging what the tradition does or does not do with them. In other words, it seems already to have decided what is being handed on, and what the role of scripture might be in such handing on, and that tradition has to do with "extension" or resistance to same in the handing on process. I think we need to ask some more basic questions about the subject of the handing on so that the setting of the question does not frustrate arrival at helpful understanding. With that caveat, and if we set the question clearly first in some historical and systematic discussion, George Tavard's suggestion that we take up some of our unfinished business on eschatology (purgatory, etc.,) would afford an occasion for testing the waters.