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Authority of the Bible for Theology
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The canonical writings as Holy Scripture

Standing firmly in the theological tradition of Barth and Luther, John Webster holds the highest view of the status and role of scripture of any of the authors that we have read this semester. Scripture is, for Webster, the *vive vox dei* which alone mediates God's will and plan to humanity. To formulate his dogmatic depiction of holy scripture, Webster addresses three loci: (1) the theological ontology of scripture; (2) the anthropology of the readers; and (3) ecclesiology.¹ Two points of his doctrine of God are central to the entire proposal: (1) God is Triune in the orthodox formulation; (2) God is self-revealing. Desiring to stand in fellowship and proper relationship with God's creation, God freely gives of God's self to bring about the reconciliation of humanity with God.² The authority of Holy Scripture is that it is the living word of God and no higher claim to authority can be made. Scripture's right authority is irreducible.³

Webster proposes that the most apt way to understand the canonical writings is within the ontological category of holy scripture.⁴ Isolating the canonical writings from its ontological moorings sets them adrift in a world of social constructs that we are free to accept or reject, based on our own social locations.⁵ By holy, he means that these writings are sanctified, set

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1. John Webster, *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: T&T Clark Int'l, 2005), 36.
 2. John Webster, *Word and Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd, 2001), 27.
 3. Webster, *Word and Church*, 17.
 4. Webster, *Confessing God*, 34.
 5. Webster, *Word and Church*, 13-15.

apart for the conveyance of God’s will to us in the economy of salvation. This ontological location of the biblical texts is theological as opposed to philosophical. It is centered on the Triune God’s activities in and through the world. Any attempt to introduce philosophy into dogmatic theology is seen as unnecessary at best but more likely distorting the truth that can only be found in and through God’s gracious self-giving.⁶ Natural theology, like philosophy, is completely unsuited for understanding the Truth of God. While Webster acknowledges the human authorship of the various texts—that humans decided what should and should not be in the canon and that the texts themselves have undergone revisions since they were written—the role of the Holy Spirit in bringing these texts together, in the form that we currently have them, is paramount. The texts are sanctified not because of automatic inspiration or because we have direct autographs. The texts are sanctified through the decision of the Holy Spirit to use these texts as the Word of God in communicating the divine plan of salvation. “*Holy Scripture is clear as the sanctified creaturely auxiliary of the communicative presence of God, through which the promise and instruction of the gospel are announced by the Holy Spirit.*”⁷ Note the use of the definite article in the sentence before; scripture is “chief.” Here, it becomes “the” means by which God communicates God’s presence. I freely admit that I may be reading too much into the use of the definite article here.⁸

I find the construal of scripture as sanctified texts (texts put to divine use) to be cogent and compelling. Allowing the Holy Spirit to have a role in “electing, shaping and preserving creaturely realities to undertake a role in the divine economy” seems to me to be entirely

6. Webster, *Confessing God*, 43; *Word and Church*, 26, footnote 42.

7. Webster, *Confessing God*, 46. Italics in original.

8. Along with the use of the definite article here, I was very aware that Webster capitalizes “Holy Scripture” but not “the Church,” clearly indicating his prioritization of the two.

compelling and not at all at odds with the kinds of philosophical theology that he rejects.⁹ It is in how far Webster pushes this dogmatic formulation that it becomes problematic. Before I examine my concerns, the other two loci under consideration need to be briefly discussed.

Webster has a Reformed Protestant view of the Church. As a point of contrast, recall that Marxsen described the Bible as the Church's book. Webster, on the other hand, sees the Church as scripture's community.¹⁰ The Holy Spirit uses the church to facilitate the clarification of the scripture and the Church is constituted by those for whom scripture is clear. Rather than being a product of the Church guided by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Bible is that which properly defines the Church. Scripture is not the Church's invention, "whether through the production or authorization, and still less is it because the church is Scripture's patron, conferring some dignity on it by adopting it as its symbol system of choice."¹¹ At least within our readings, there is no language of the Church being the Body of Christ in Webster's thought. Scripture, as the Word of God, stands over the Church in priority and in judgement.

The anthropology in play is one of humanity as fallen and unable to approach God by our own efforts. Unaided human reason would never be able rightly discern God's gracious communication through the scripture. It is only by grace that we are given the ability to see the clarity of God's revelation in scripture. As such, God's act of grace towards the individual believer is to give them the insights needed to make scripture clear, thus giving them the ability to understand the divine economy of salvation and share in it. The clarity of scripture

9. Webster, *Confessing God*, 47. Aquinas's dictum that 'Grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it' seems to fit here.

10. Willi Marxsen, *The New Testament as the Church's Book*, trans. James E. Mignard (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972).

11. Webster, *Confessing God*, 53.

then is not a property of the text—any honest person who has read scripture will admit that they find some passages obscure—but is a property of the relationship between the sanctified reader and the sanctified text through which God communicates. Texts in and of themselves are dirty—written, read and misread by humans.¹² Only as the texts and readers become sanctified does their clarity become evident.

There is the problem of how one becomes sanctified enough to start discerning the clarity of the texts, thus becoming able to become sanctified through the use of the text. Webster's anthropology seems to need an external dose of revelation or grace outside of scripture to enable the reader to become a patient for the text's agency. However, Webster also seems unwilling to allow other means of grace in any strong way. This may simply be oversight or dogmatic tunnel-vision, but given that everything else hangs on the authority of scripture, even the Church, this is highly problematic. The possibility that divine agency has changed over time is incoherent and, therefore, revelation and inspiration in the form of automatic dictation of the scriptures is rejected; "These kinds of accounts of the texts of the canon are similar to crude notions of eucharistic transubstantiation, in that both assume the material, historical realities can only reliably mediate God if they someone take on divine properties or even participate in the divine being."¹³ Given this claim, the assumption that God works through *only* these texts is untenable. God, it seems, could sanctify any texts and use them to proclaim the gospel. To claim that God has decided to quit sanctifying new texts since those already sanctified are sufficient would be an arbitrary and odd claim. Odder still would be the claim that God could not sanctify new texts for use in the economy of salvation. Appealing to

12. Webster, *Word and Church*, 29.

13. Webster, *Word and Church*, 30.

the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the decisions of which texts to include in the canon does not make the decision any less human nor does it make the decision final. Simply calling the Church's role in the formation of the canon an acceptance of the texts, rather than an authorizing of them, simply moves the problem from automatic dictation to automatic acceptance and denies the human role in the process of accepting the texts. The Church's acceptance of the text is as human an act as the authors writing them.

Given that both text and reader can be, and need to be, sanctified to convey the content of the Gospel, Webster's low view of the role of the Church seems puzzling. His view (construed as a community of individuals on the process of becoming sanctified via normative texts that are themselves sanctified) fails to take into account the sanctifying nature of the Church. The Church becomes sanctified anew in each generation and is also the locus of the sanctification of the individual through the various means of grace. "An account of the church's canonizing acts has to be rooted in the facts that the church is properly a hearing church before it is a speaking church, and that even its speech, when it is properly apostolic, is always contingent upon and indicative of a prior speech-act."¹⁴ If by that Webster means that the first speech-act is God commanding light to be or that Christ is the fullness of the divine Word spoken to the world; then, without a doubt, he is correct. However, if he equates scripture and the divine Word, then clearly this is problematic. Few would disagree that the Church existed before any scripture was written down. A debate over the moment of the formation of the Church at Pentecost could run on like the "chicken-or-egg" question. Was the Church first constituted by the inrushing of the Holy Spirit or by the proclamation of the gospel by those present?

14. Webster, *Word and Church*, 36.

Elevating the authority of the scripture to such a high place fails to solve the problems with which we have been struggling. It seems that we need to be open to a kind of dialectic between the role of Church and the role scripture; one in which scripture is read by the Church and the Church is read (normed) by scripture. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church canonized those texts which accurately define the Church and continue to serve as the criteria by which the Church is judged. By acknowledging that the Church is itself undergoing an eternal process of sanctification, the virtues which Webster lifts up as necessary for a reader become the same for the Church.¹⁵

We acknowledge that God works through weakness so that God's strength might be seen. Paul boasted in his weakness (2 Cor. 9-10)¹⁶. Why then do we desire a strong Church, strong scripture or to be strong ourselves? Webster's understanding of scripture as a human product that is sanctified is a wonderful concept that translates equally well to the Church (the Body of Christ being both fully human and fully divine) and to Christians (little Christs). Scripture then becomes one of the many means of grace. It need not hold a cardinal position. It simply needs to be sufficient to the task. The Word of God is Christ, spoken to the world through the birth, life, teaching, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus; scripture is words about God, useful for teaching and reproof. Scripture can be holy without being an object of worship or the final authority for all our theological claims.

15. Webster, *Confessing God*, 46. These virtues are reverence, attentiveness, prayer, sobriety and faith, following Bullinger's list.

16. See, theologians can cite scripture!