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Authority of the Bible for Theology  
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### **“Relocating the Canon”**

The title given in the syllabus for today’s discussion is “Relocating the canon.” Once, in a serious bicycle accident, I dislocated my shoulder. The process of putting it back into its proper place was quite painful. After a period of healing and some physical therapy I was fully restored to my previous condition. In the case of the dislocation of the canon that has occurred through the historical-critical and form-critical exegetical methods of Biblical studies, no such restoration to earlier conditions appears possible. Rather than “relocation” being a restoration to the prior location, “relocation” in this sense is finding the location anew—locating that which has been lost. The prior location in this sense is the classical Protestant principles of *sola scriptura* and *norma normans sed non normata*; that is scripture alone is the authority for theological endeavors and scripture is the norming-norm which is not itself normed. Our readings for today search out a new locus of the canon for theological reflection in light of recent developments in biblical studies. Canon, as a side note, in this understanding, is not simply a list of authorized books but is itself the authorizing principle behind the use and selection of the books; canon is a selective criteria based on a normative claim.

Behind this project is the principle that Christian theology, and theology of every kind, is subject to the same criteria of adequacy as all other disciplines; “theology ought to exhibit at least some of the formal marks of any ‘science,’ including the methodical pursuit of its questions and the formulation of its answers in precise conceptuality.”<sup>1</sup> That is, theology as an

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1. Schubert M. Ogden, *On Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 2.

academic pursuit must play by the same rules as the rest of the academy. This understanding of the theological task is found mainly in the liberal protestantism of our two authors, and stands in contrast to the Barthian neo-orthodox position and the various fideistic lines (a full discussion of how it relates to Catholic and Orthodox positions is well beyond the scope of this session). The underlying claim in this conversation is that individual reason is the arbiter of all matters—the core claim of the enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> Ogden spells this out clearly, “no claim believe on authority can be authorized by that fact alone as worthy of belief.”<sup>3</sup> This is seen in the two criteria that Ogden lifts out as key to discerning if the question is proper to Christian theology, *appropriateness* and *credibility*. A claim to Christian theology is appropriate if it represents the same understanding of Christianity as expressed in the normative Christian Witness. A claim is said to be credible if it “meets the relevant conditions of truth universally established with human existence.”<sup>4</sup> That is, it must play by the rules that everyone else plays by when making truth claims. I will leave the question of there being such a thing as *universally established conditions of truth in human existence* aside with the comment that I will assume that these conditions are functionally identical with the conditions established and observed in the academy in doing ‘science’ of any sort. Ogden would, no doubt, disagree with my narrow assessment of his claim, “The whole venture of liberal Protestantism began in the confidence that one can establish a basic congruence between the essential claims of specifically Christian

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2. Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” [http://www.e-text.org/text/Kant Immanuel - What Is Enlightenment.pdf](http://www.e-text.org/text/Kant%20Immanuel%20-%20What%20Is%20Enlightenment.pdf)

3. Schubert M. Ogden, “Sources of Religious Authority in Liberal Protestantism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44 (1976), p. 412.

4. Schubert M. Ogden, *On Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 4-5.

experience of ultimate reality and the religious claims implied, if not fully explicated, by the knowledge and insights of modern secular culture. . . as problematic as this may be, this position must be maintained.”<sup>5</sup>

Theological claims, that is claims to the Christian Witness, come from three distinct areas of the discipline: historical, systematic and practical. What has the Christian Witness been through history; what is the Christian Witness in contemporary terms and frameworks and is it reasonable; how do we act in response to this witness and the claims it makes upon us? In the readings for today both Marxsen and Ogden work through all these areas in the readings, Ogden does so quite systematically, Marxsen shows how the three interplay and often blurs the lines between the areas.

What we find in these readings is that the historical work, done through biblical studies, specifically in the methods of form criticism and historical criticism, would come to challenge the principle that the New Testament as it exists is an authority in and of its own right. The study of the formation of the New Testament—an analysis of the reasons behind the selection of the gospels and letters to be included—proved to be devastating to the traditional understanding of the authority of the New Testament. The explicit criteria for inclusion in the approved books was that they were apostolic, which meant that it was written by an apostle. But apostolic authorship alone was insufficient as the criteria, those documents which claimed apostolic authorship but did not match the apostolic tradition were rejected. Those documents which disclaimed direct apostolic authorship (e.g. the Gospel According to St. Luke) but matched the tradition were included. The authority of the New Testament was derived not

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5. Schubert M. Ogden, “Sources of Religious Authority in Liberal Protestantism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44 (1976), pp. 411-412.

from claims to apostolic authorship, but to how consistently they matched the apostolic tradition—which predated the writing of any of the documents. Congruence with tradition was the ultimate criteria for determining what was to be included in the list of books approved for use by Christians. The authority of the apostles wasn't simply because they were apostles, but that they faithfully transmitted the tradition; evidence for this can be seen in Paul's early letters which draw from hymns and other elements of the tradition to make or defend his claims.

Since the authority of the New Testament derives from the authority of its fidelity to the apostolic witness, the project then becomes the search for the original apostolic witness. The logic behind this is that the most historically accurate (for modern concepts of history) version of the apostolic witness, without adornment added by the gospel authors necessary to suit their context and purposes, will allow contemporary theologians to faithfully reframe and restate the true apostolic witness in such a way that is appropriate and credible.<sup>6</sup> Marxsen calls this earliest witness the Jesus-kerygma, the later additions are the Christ-kerygma. The search for this Jesus-kerygma and its distinction from the Christ-kerygma and other additions becomes the focus of the exegetical and historical activities. "Therefore, if we are still to speak of a canon at all, in the sense determined by the early church's own criterion of apostolicity, we have no choice but to locate it, not in the New Testament as such. . . but in the earliest layer of Christian witness accessible to us today by the way of historical reconstruction of the tradition of the witness lying behind the New Testament writings."<sup>7</sup> This is a shift from the

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6. Ogden claimed that reason is universal, but yet admits that our understanding is contextually bound. A pair of claims I'm unable to reconcile cleanly.

7. Schubert M. Ogden, "Sources of Religious Authority in Liberal Protestantism," *Journal of the*

earlier form of liberal protestant position which located the canon in the historical Jesus. For Ogden and Marxsen the locus is the witness to Jesus, not the historicity of Jesus. This shift seems to have come about given that the earlier projects at recovering the Jesus of history have failed.

With Jennings, I cannot but wonder if the search for the Jesus-kerygma-of-history is not also doomed to the same failure, for the same set of reasons.<sup>8</sup> Jennings points out that the witnesses of the synoptic Evangelists have a generally unfavorable tone towards the disciples and that the concept of apostle was fluid in the early Church with individuals who had in no way encountered the living Jesus being called apostles. Given this unclear understanding of what the apostolic witness actually was by the third century, the gulf of seventeen centuries seems insurmountable. Jennings also aptly points out that in Ogden's other writings he does not limit himself to the Jesus-kerygma but frequently relies on Pauline categories and thought, which are derived from the Christ-kerygma.

Ogden's reply is simply that he acknowledges the difficulties, but his proposal is better than any other current proposal out there, "I have every confidence that such a proposal measures up rather better than any of the usual alternatives."<sup>9</sup> As for the question of the apostolic witness being key, Ogden uses John Knox and Marxsen's understanding of Paul's formulation of apolicity—which seems to be somewhat circular. One would need to accept the

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*American Academy of Religion* 44 (1976), p. 414.

8. Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., review of *On Theology*, in *Perkins Journal* 40/4 (October 1987), pp. 39-40.

9. Schubert M. Ogden, "The Problem of Normative Witness: A Response," *Perkins Journal* 41/3 (October 1987), pp. 23.

authority of scripture in some way to come to Ogden's understanding of apostolicity to form the claim that the apostolic witness, rather than scripture is the authoritative.

It seems that the long-standing Enlightenment problem of search for a foundation, (epistemic or authoritative) is at the problem behind the problem. Ogden does not propose a single authority-foundation for Christian theology, but two: the implicit authority of individual reason and the explicit authority that resides in "entire Christian tradition, including Scripture, but also, finally and decisively, the earliest witness of the Church, which is the real canon."<sup>10</sup> The question with which Ogden is contending is one of determining what is authentically Christian, the normative witness, rather than contextual baggage keeping us from the systematic task of restating the truth of the gospel in a way that is both faithful to the normative witness and contextually significant. Put in language my Mennonite grandmother would appreciate, *what is from God and what is from us?* This is a laudable goal and a task which should be part of any theological effort. The post-modern critique of Enlightenment foundationalism may be problematic. The evidence within the body of writings accepted by the Church as faithful to the apostolic witness is that the apostolic witness itself was not univocal—rather it seems to acknowledge that the witness was always contextually bound and to try to locate a "pure" version of this witness is contrary to the witness itself.

The incarnation of Christ in Jesus was a contextual event. To try to locate the normative apostolic witness without the incarnation in all its messy context in the Jesus kerygma seems to me to be a self-defeating endeavor.

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10. Schubert M. Ogden, "Sources of Religious Authority in Liberal Protestantism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44 (1976), p. 416.