

A Liturgical Approach to Scripture and Tradition

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Professor Donfried, as scholars go, is blue-chip all the way, by reason of the professors under whom he studied (e.g., Paul Tillich, John Knox, Günther Bornkamm, Karl Barth), the institutions at which he studied (e.g., Harvard, Union Theological, Heidelberg), the institution where he taught for decades as a distinguished professor (Smith College), the places where he has been visiting professor (e.g., Yale, Hebrew University of Jerusalem), and his participation in ecumenical dialogue (member of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic New Testament panel). Above all, he has presided in liturgical services as a Lutheran minister in the Christ Church Cathedral in the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts.

All of this makes Professor Donfried's recent book, *Who Owns the Bible?*¹ of more than passing interest, especially in view of the fact that despite its modest length (165 pages of text) it seeks to address some of the most fundamental issues in the contemporary interpretation of the Bible. Because of Professor Donfried's well-deserved stature and because of the obvious integrity behind every word he writes, this book deserves careful scrutiny by anyone who takes Biblical exegesis seriously. The present note will concentrate on Donfried's goal of recovering a Christian hermeneutic, which he makes, understandably, as a member of the Lutheran Church (but within an ecumenical context). The approach of the present writer, by contrast, will be as a member of the Roman Catholic Church, and will attempt to treat the restricted hermeneutical area of Scripture and Tradition from a liturgical perspective.

But first, listing of the book's contents will indicate the book's riches, which are much broader than the restricted one which constitutes the focus of this note: Chapter One: "The Bible and the Church: The Problem of Alien Hermeneutics"; Chapter Two: "The Bible and the Church: Christian Presuppositions"; Chapter

1. Karl Paul Donfried, *Who Owns the Bible? Toward the Recovery of a Christian Hermeneutic, Companions to the New Testament*, Herder & Herder, New York 2006.

Three: “The Bible and the Church: Scripture as School of the Word”; Chapter Four: “The Bible and the Church: Faith and the Moral Life”; Chapter Five: “The Bible and the Church: Toward the Application of a Trinitarian Hermeneutic”; Chapter Six: “The Bible and the Church: Hermeneutics Once Again”.

These titles hide a considerable, not to say an immense, amount of erudition based on a lifetime of conscientious ministering, teaching, discussion, and writing. To have this lifetime summarized in a clearly-written, modestly-sized book is something which merits the gratitude of all those who are interested in the Bible. It would take a good-sized article merely to summarize adequately the views expressed. The present review must be content to select what seems to the reviewer to be a key stance of Professor Donfried, to examine its underlying presuppositions, and to draw a contrast between this stance and the reviewer’s own stance based on an understanding of his Roman Catholic faith. The purpose is to attempt neither ratification nor refutation of Donfried’s views but clarification of these views through contrast with the reviewer’s.

Donfried answers the book’s title by quoting Tertullian from the third century: “This property belongs to me; I have always possessed it, I have possessed it prior to you and have reliable title deeds from the original owners of the estate. I am the heir of the apostles” (pp. 2, 163). Well and good. But how is one to judge today who is the heir of the apostles? Presumably the heir involves the Church in some sense, given the titles of the Professor Donfried’s chapters. And, also presumably, the heir involves a search for a proper hermeneutic for interpreting the Bible, given the book’s sub-title.

Donfried speaks of “the Church Catholic” (pp. 3-5, 14, 17-18, etc.), by which he seems implicitly to envision a Church based on ecumenical inclusiveness (including the Catholic Church). In the index to the book, Donfried’s Church Catholic is described as the Body of Christ, a Community in Christ, a Community of Discipline, a Community of Love, a *corpus mixtum*. But the fundamental formative principle for the Church Catholic would seem to be a “Trinitarian hermeneutic” (cf. Topical Index under “Hermeneutics, Trinitarian”, for ample references about the nature of this hermeneutic). This Trinitarian hermeneutic assumes a kind of mystical importance in Donfried’s thinking:

The continued presence of the risen Jesus through the Spirit in the community that worships him leads to the affirmation of a Trinitarian

theology of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the most adequate manner in which to understand the revelation of God in creation, in the history of Israel, in Jesus, and in the church. Because “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 13:8), a Trinitarian hermeneutic must of necessity be a hermeneutic of consistency and coherence (p. 8).

What Donfried seems to this reviewer to be doing here, though without his necessarily intending to do so, is to establish a Tradition (under the name of “a Trinitarian hermeneutic”) to serve as a guide for the Church Catholic in interpreting Scripture. He would seem to feel justified in doing this because of the widespread acceptance which the first four ecumenical councils meet with and the undoubted legitimacy of the councils themselves. This agreement and this legitimacy generate the justification which would seem to lie implicitly under Professor Donfried’s method.

But perhaps an even more compelling reason for Professor Donfried’s method in invoking the first four ecumenical councils is the plausibility of the hermeneutic which results from his analysis. For a Christian of faith, this hermeneutic seems to provide an excellent guide for understanding the text of the New Testament.

All this in the reviewer’s opinion would seem to be the opposite of what the council fathers did: they worked from a given Tradition on the basis of their presumed authority. They did not try to prove their authority, they simply acted on it. In any event it was not something which they could have “proved”. This authority was an object of their faith and the faith of others, a given which they and others had accepted according to the customs regulating legitimacy at the time. This authority was crucial for the fathers, however, for their way of believing it assured them of the guidance of the Spirit who was part and parcel of legitimacy. They were the heirs of Christ’s Spirit and heirs of the Tradition which the Spirit used as they gave an authoritative interpretation of Scripture with, as they believed, the Spirit’s guidance. They intended to define Christian belief in terms of contemporary challenges to that belief, and this they did in ways which serve Christians still, as Professor Donfried’s use of their decisions make plain.

Donfried does not go into such detail, but simply takes the norms which he infers from the decisions of the council fathers (taking their authority for granted) as norms which for him provide “consistency and coherence”. In other words, to

the reviewer's way of thinking, if the council fathers used Tradition to provide hermeneutical norms, Donfried uses those norms to constitute a Tradition. And in so doing he would seem, to the reviewer at least, to be entirely within his rights.

This Tradition, once established, serves as a guide to what Donfried's Church is. (The relation between biblical hermeneutics and Church as an intrinsic given is implicit in the choice of the sub-title of the book.) At the risk of putting words in Professor Donfried's mouth, the reviewer would say that in the light of this approach, Donfried's Church is essentially a Church produced by a (Trinitarian) hermeneutical confrontation with Scripture. In other words, Professor Donfried's Church turns out to be, not surprisingly, the Lutheran Church. All of which, obviously, is fair enough.

But how does this go about establishing Donfried's Church as the heir of the apostles? Perhaps Professor Donfried could reply that Tertullian was using the same Tradition which guided the council fathers in their deliberations, and hence the hermeneutical norms which Donfried has worked out from these council fathers are really the Tradition of the early Church. Thus he establishes a union between his Church Catholic and Tertullian. This seems to be a legitimate inference from Donfried's words and it would prove his point. All he needs to do is spell out his ecclesiological reasoning in detail.

Further, if the reviewer is correct in his surmises about the underlying dynamics of Donfried's thought, there would still be a sticking point where Donfried's faith commitment is non-negotiable and non-provable: faith in Scripture. Scripture is that which grounds his Church Catholic. Scripture is the ecclesiological bottom-line, and accepting Scripture as such is a matter of faith. That there should be such a bottom line involving faith is, of course, entirely to be expected and entirely in order: at some point in any discussions of faith, one is faced with something non-negotiable and non-provable.

The reviewer would like to present a contrasting view of Church in order to give his own view of what it means to be the heir of the apostles. And it is a view in which Tradition is that something non-negotiable and non-provable. For the reviewer, Tradition is the ecclesiological bottom line. For him, that is to say, Tradition is the centre of his faith and as such is non-negotiable and non-provable. And so, instead of working from Scripture to Tradition, the reviewer will work from Tradition to Scripture.

Orthodox members of the Catholic Church the world over focus their faith on the Eucharist. For them it is a given, something fixed. They accept what the Church teaches them about the Eucharist, particularly as regards the Mass, even though what the Church teaches is improbable, naturally speaking. The liturgy of the Mass is the centre of an orthodox Catholic's life. Life in God without the Eucharistic Christ is no more imaginable to the orthodox Catholic than life without air. It is the basic given which is at the core of his life as a Catholic. (Donfried's book, strangely but perhaps significantly, has almost nothing to say about the Eucharist, despite the Eucharist's prominent place in the New Testament).

But what the average orthodox Catholic does not always recognize is that the Eucharist is at the basis of the Catholic Church. As the Catholic Church's own authoritative catechism states, "The Church is born primarily of Christ's total self-giving for our salvation, anticipated in the institution of the Eucharist and fulfilled on the cross" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §766). This is not to say that other aspects of the Catholic Church are not essential for the fullness of her existence. But it is to say that the Eucharist as fulfilled on the cross (and what the cross historically implies, i.e., the resurrection) in such a way as to give rise to the Catholic Church. The Eucharist, above all else, is the prism through which the Catholic Church views the death and resurrection of her Lord and thus her own *ratio essendi*.

The reviewer would like to draw an inference from this authoritatively-stated theological truth about the Eucharist as the foundational source of his Church's existence. Since this basis for the Catholic Church has come to the believers of all times and places as the words of consecration uttered by the priests who have celebrated the Eucharist for these believers, this verbal Tradition is the principal ecclesiological way in which the reviewer believes that he and his fellow Catholics of all ages have been in contact with the Lord Jesus Christ. Now this Tradition, since it grounds the existence of the Catholic Church, was never absent from the Church. There was a time when the Church existed without its New Testament Scripture. But there never was a time when the Church existed without her Tradition.

The words of consecration handed on in memory of Christ at his command clearly do constitute a Tradition, an oral Tradition, and it is at the very core of the Tradition of the Catholic Church. This core Tradition developed in time into something more all-embracing, for many things besides the Eucharist are necessary for the integral existence of the Catholic Church (e.g., the other sacraments, the hierarchy – in the sense that these further elements were prior preparations, not

subsequent inventions). But the core Tradition, responsible as it is for the existence of the Eucharist, is the non-negotiable and non-provable centre of the Church. It is a given, to be accepted or not accepted. And the Church, precisely insofar as it is dependent on this Tradition, shares in these traits: it is to be accepted or not accepted as a reality in which the cross and resurrection are seen through the Eucharist. Acceptance of this reality depends entirely on God's free gift, but an acceptance viewed in the context of God's Providential care for all mankind, believers and non-believers alike.

The Tradition of the Catholic Church, then, is a given to be accepted or not, just as Professor Donfried's Scripture (if the reviewer understands the implications of his book aright) are to be accepted or not, depending on who is doing the accepting. But where does that leave Scripture in the Catholic Church? It leaves Scripture exactly where it has always been, as the subsequent official explanation of how the prior core Tradition which constitutes the Catholic Church came to be. In the order of constitutive causality the words of consecration of the Eucharist uttered by Christ at the Last Supper are supreme. But in the order in which this constitutive causality of the words of consecration is explained, Scripture is supreme. That is to say, each of these twin ways providing contact between the Catholic Church and the one Source of revelation, Jesus Christ, is supreme in its own order. But in relation to each other, Tradition of necessity is superior because that which causes a reality is intrinsically superior to that which records this causality. Being, by the nature of things, is prior to a report about that being.

It may be objected (though probably not by Donfried) that such a hermeneutic, ultimately based on faith, is an exercise in fideism. But the Catholic Church does not understand herself as a victim of fideism, and neither does the reviewer (*CCC*, §36-38). Faith is a gift of God, in no way merited. The reviewer cannot prove his faith; he can only accept it as it is, focussed on the Eucharist and the Christ-initiated Tradition which enables the Eucharist to exist. But this faith intrinsically calls for a further understanding of what it involves because in itself it is a matter of acceptance or non-acceptance based on a bare minimum of understanding of what is accepted or not. This further understanding is called Scripture, the way in which the Catholic Church officially offers an explanation of how she came to be, and of those who accepted this being. And by its very nature Scripture is subject to rational critique the way in which the Tradition of the Catholic Church is not, because the very nature of Scripture is to provide something to be understood, i.e., to be critiqued.

Critiqued, but not patronized. If Scripture is to be understood as an explanation of faith-based Tradition, it itself must be understood in the context of faith: a biblical hermeneutic according to the perspective of the Catholic Church, would seem to demand an approach explicitly based on that Church's Tradition, i.e., focussed on the cross and resurrection as realities not just to be lived according to the Preached Word but according to the Eucharistic Word. Such a hermeneutic would of necessity involve the faith-based use of Scripture in order to understand better the bare minimum of what is believed. But it is the use of Scripture as explanatory of the Church's existence, not as constitutive. And ultimately, any explanation based on Scripture would be no more "probative" than the acceptance of the Tradition which Scripture seeks to explain.

Other decisions about the ownership of the Bible are, of course, possible. For example, if the Bible is taken as literature, all who are interested in literature own it insofar and precisely insofar as it is a literary classic. If the Bible is taken in an ecumenical context, all the member Churches own it insofar and precisely insofar as it is a unifying ecumenical element. If the Bible is taken as a unique treasure-trove of philological, geographical and historical information, any scholar of the world owns it insofar and precisely insofar as it is a source of scholarship in which he has a legitimate interest. The ownership of the Bible, in other words, is in function of how the Bible is viewed. Thus, for one who believes that the Bible is the divinely-inspired account of how the Catholic Church came to be and is accordingly to be interpreted in the light of that Church, the Catholic Church is the one who owns the Bible, insofar and precisely insofar as it is the official explanation of what constitutes the Catholic Church. The reviewer's belief that the Catholic Church owns the Bible as the official report on her own constitutive Tradition is, obviously, true insofar and precisely insofar as it is an explanation (not a proof) of this belief. And with regard to that Tradition is no more subject to proof (or negotiation) than that belief itself, though with regard to its nature as Scripture it may offer explanations more or less plausible.

Thus the reviewer offers a view which contrasts with the view of Donfried on the basic supposition underlying Professor Donfried's argumentation. It would seem that an attempt to answer the question "Who owns the Bible?", if based on Tertullian's understanding of the answer, has to confront the challenge of how the heirs to the apostles are to be identified. And this means, how one understands what constitutes the Church. Donfried would doubtless agree, but, of course, in terms of his own core belief. And as to what this core belief implies in ecclesiological

terms more explicitly developed than given in his book, Professor Donfried must obviously have the final word on what Professor Donfried thinks.

When all is said and done, however, only God owns the Bible in an absolute way, just as he owns Tradition, the Bible's twin. But he makes both available to the world on permanent loan.

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