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Email: christianstudiespress@austingrad.edu.

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This past February (2019), the General Conference of the United Methodist Church met in St. Louis. The primary item on the agenda was the existing language in "The Book of Discipline" regarding sexual ethics. After much debate and controversy, over 800 delegates cast their votes. Fifty-three percent favored retaining the language, and forty-seven percent voted against it, revealing how evenly divided the denomination is on this issue. At the time of this writing, it is unclear how the dissenters will proceed, but it is unlikely that the issue will go away or that unity will be the long-term result.

As many have observed, the identity crisis that the United Methodist Church and many other Christian fellowships seem to be facing is due, in large part, to a crisis of authority. Is Scripture the primary authority, and how is it brought to bear on the controversial issues of our day? This question is fundamental to the life and faith of the church and is pertinent to a wide range of topics. Because of the relevance of this question, this issue of *Christian Studies* is devoted to the theme of authority for Christian faith and practice. And this question is of utmost importance. Where does our authority for faith and practice lie? What are the proper sources for theology? What are the standards for evaluating different theologies? What should they be? What role does the greater historic tradition of the church play?

The contributors to this issue have emphasized different aspects of these questions, and various solutions are proposed in the following pages. In addition to biblical insights, these articles offer a range of theological, historical, and philosophical considerations regarding the authority and interpretation of Scripture. As always, our intent is to provide thoughtful reflection that will create dialogue about matters that are important to God's people.

Keith D. Stanglin
Editor
stanglin@austingrad.edu

The Rule of Faith as Hermeneutic

Keith D. Stanglin

I. Introduction

The rule of faith, or the rule of truth, refers to the oral proclamation of the Christian faith handed down from the apostles. Although its function is somewhat different than that of later creeds, its content is summed up well in the ancient creeds of the church, especially the Apostles' and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creeds. It had many functions in the ante-Nicene church, but we are interested here in how the rule of faith functioned as a hermeneutical key to Scripture. Before modern exegetes excluded all theological presuppositions from biblical interpretation, an essential feature of biblical exegesis was the insistence on interpreting Scripture within the boundaries set by the rule or canon of faith (*regula fidei*) and the whole of Scripture. In other words, premodern exegetes read Scripture overtly through a theological lens. The reason is simple, and it is as true now as it has always been: *nuda scriptura*—bare Scripture interpreted objectively without the interference of creeds or traditions—does not guard against false teaching.

That *nuda scriptura* (bare Scripture) is inadequate to the task is evident already in the New Testament itself. The devil himself knew and quoted Scripture to support his case (Matt 4:5-6). His was probably an intentional misuse. In 2 Peter 3:16, the writer acknowledges that ignorant and unstable interpreters have taken Paul's letters and other Scriptures and twisted their meaning. Theirs was more likely an unintentional misuse. In the second and third centuries, early Gnostic sects proved their doctrine of the ogdoad from John 1 or

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their worship of the serpent based on Genesis 3.[1] In short, without a proper hermeneutical key—or rather, with any hermeneutical key one wishes—one can take Scripture by itself and arrive at various and contradictory meanings. *Nuda scriptura*, or "Bible only-ism," does not guarantee correct interpretation, much less Christian unity in that correct interpretation. In fact, it has often been argued that it leads rather to Christian disunity.[2]

In order to counter such possible interpretations of the ogdoad and the serpent, Irenaeus of Lyons suggested that Scripture should be interpreted according to the proper *hypothesis* (ὑπόθεσις) or principle. The *hypothesis* acts as a pattern or lens through which Scripture is to be read. Irenaeus invites us to think of Scripture as a mosaic, the tesserae or pieces of which are intended to form a beautiful image of a majestic king. This is indeed the natural image, the one that makes sense of all the various tesserae. It is possible, however, to arrange the tesserae in such a way as to form an image of a hideous animal. The fit is not as natural, but it is possible.[3] The *hypothesis* is the pattern that, like the box of a jigsaw puzzle, confirms the correct image, and could even be used on the front end to steer the worker toward the correct image. For Irenaeus, the *hypothesis* or pattern that guides readers in the right interpretation of Scripture is the rule of faith.

My contention is that the doctrine contained in the early church's rule of faith and, to a degree, in the later tradition of the church, ought to play a role in the church's ongoing interpretation of Scripture, not unlike its role in the early church. The rule of faith, moreover, is not sufficient but is a necessary hermeneutical aid. That is, the rule of faith is not all one needs for the task of exegesis. It never stood alone in the life and teaching of the church, and it does

[1] On the ogdoad, or eight divine principles, see Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* I.ix.2–3, trans. Dominic J. Unger, Ancient Christian Writers 55 (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 46–47 (*Patrologia Graeca* 7:540–44). On the Ophites and the veneration of the serpent, from its first appearance in the Garden of Eden, see Origen, *Contra Celsum* VI.24, 28, 30, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 337–40, 343–46; Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* 37, in *The* Panarion *of Epiphanius*, 1:241–48; *Secret Book of John* 11, in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition*, ed. Marvin Meyer (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 116; Birger A. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 45-48.

[2] See Keith D. Stanglin, "The Restoration Movement, the Habit of Schism, and a Proposal for Unity," *Christian Studies* 28 (2016): 7–20.

[3] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I.viii.1 (41).

not stand alone in biblical interpretation. It is, however, a minimal requirement. This article will seek to address some concerns that may arise from, and delineate some of the benefits of, a conscious use of the rule of faith and Christian tradition in the exegetical task. In the process, the hermeneutical role of the rule of faith should become a little clearer.[4]

II. Concerns

In a Christian fellowship whose identity was at its very founding forged by its opposition to creeds and confessions of faith on the principle of (as we would put it now) *nuda scriptura*, objections are bound to be raised against the suggestion of inviting an interpretive lens to come alongside Scripture. Let us consider and offer brief responses to three primary concerns.

1) The first objection may go something like this: "The Bible is the only rule of Christian faith and practice. No interpretive aid should be added to it."

But the Bible does not come with its own hermeneutic. It is not self-interpreting, at least not enough to guarantee that truth-seeking readers will not arrive at some wildly different conclusions regarding meaning and application. The only way for the early church to ensure that Scripture would not be employed in support of heresy was to interpret it through the lens of the rule of faith, or, as the apostle Paul calls it in Romans 12:6, the "analogy of the faith." Without that hermeneutical lens of the *analogia fidei* (analogy of faith), the Scriptures could be wrested to support any doctrinal or ethical aberration that one desired.

Given this indisputable reality, even restorationists have attempted to supply various hermeneutical aids, all of which are external to Scripture. The fundamental principle itself—no creed but the Bible—is of course an extrabiblical creed. On the popular level, slogans have tended to function as extrabiblical hermeneutical lenses. "Speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where it is silent" is perhaps the best known of these slogans. On the more scholarly level, leaders have felt the need to advocate and explain various methods and principles. Alexander Campbell has his seven principles of interpretation and D.

[4] Many of the themes taken up in this article are treated also in Keith D. Stanglin, *The Letter and Spirit of Biblical Interpretation: From the Early Church to Modern Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

R. Dungan his hermeneutics textbook.[5] And who could forget the celebrated threefold hermeneutic of application—express command, approved example, necessary inference? All of these are hermeneutical lenses that we have invited to come alongside Scripture.

We may discuss whether this or that hermeneutical lens is more or less consistent with Scripture or seems to be in accord with the evidence in Scripture. But, speaking strictly, any hermeneutical lens will be extrabiblical. This acknowledgment alone is no more a strike against the rule of faith than it is against beloved slogans or methods such as command-example-inference.

Among the many extrabiblical hermeneutical rules on offer, the rule of faith has the advantage of historical pedigree. In favor of the rule of faith, it must be noted that, among other principles, the early church did engage in Scripture reading and application according to the oral, unwritten interpretive traditions of Jesus and his apostles. For instance, in Luke 24:44–49, Jesus himself helps the apostles interpret the Old Testament based on the Christ event. In several passages, Paul speaks about the importance of the oral traditions for the church's doctrine and practice (1 Cor 11:23; 15:3; 2 Thess 2:15; 3:6). In Romans 12:6, Paul enjoins prophecy that is "according to the analogy of faith." The oral tradition is not an external influence with no relation to Scripture. The truths expressed in the oral canon or rule of faith come from the same community that produced, received, and recognized the written canon, Scripture.

2) A second objection may be considered: "If you read the Bible through a lens, then that lens ends up obscuring the view. Objectivity is replaced with subjectivity."

Campbell argued against reading Scripture through the lens of any creed, for interpreters will find in the Bible the content of what they already believe.

> If I must examine the Bible through the creed, then the creed is my eyes—my artificial eyes, (for it cannot be my natural eyes)—my spectacles. If my spectacles are green glass, the Bible is also green; if blue, the Bible is blue; and as is the creed, so is the Bible to me. I am a Calvinist, or an Arminian, or a Fullerite, according

[5] Alexander Campbell, "The Bible—Principles of Interpretation," *Millennial Harbinger*, 3rd series, 1 (1846): 13–24; D. R. Dungan, *Hermeneutics: A Text-book*, 2nd ed. (Cincinnati: The Standard Publishing Company, 1888).

> to my spectacles or my creed, my "established opinions, customs, and regulations."[6]

According to Campbell, presuppositions impede the objectivity that is necessary for discerning the truth. When a reader approaches the Bible through the lens of any philosophy or system of thought other than the Bible itself, it obscures the message of the Bible.

It is a legitimate concern that the lens or window through which the text is viewed becomes the very object of viewing, thus obscuring what was the ostensible object. The concern here is that doctrinal presuppositions, such as those found in the rule of faith or in later creeds, impede exegetical objectivity. And to a certain extent, Campbell is right. A green lens indeed makes the Bible appear green, and a blue lens makes it look blue. But what if those doctrinal presuppositions are right? What if the green lens is in fact the correct lens? There should then be no problem with it. With the rule of faith, readers have the correct lens, or at least the properly Christian lens. Again, the Bible is not self-interpreting. A lens will be used, and there are incorrect lenses. There is the lens of the non-Christian and the (methodological) atheist, for whom the Bible is simply a record of ancient religious thought. There are allegedly Christian lenses that see Jesus as a mere human, his resurrection as a mere myth, his words as endorsement of the prosperity gospel, Scripture's clear ethical norms as mere suggestions, and so on. All these are possible interpretations.

Recall Irenaeus' *hypothesis* and its relationship to the intended and completed mosaic. The correct pattern, like a jigsaw puzzle box top, does cause the artist to see each and every tessera through that pattern; every piece comes to look like it contributes to the picture of the king. The worker cannot help but be influenced by the pattern and indeed wants to be guided by it. At the same time, however, the lens or pattern does not eliminate all objectivity. One can still take a step back and see how the mosaic fits better with the proper *hypothesis* than it does with any alternative. Those other interpretations, though possible, do not fit as easily with the rest of the picture. One has to force the pieces together unnaturally to form a picture other than the king. The lens also should not eliminate the possibility of Scripture challenging our faith and overturning our practice in healthy ways. Our preconceptions must neither replace

[6] Alexander Campbell, "Reply," *Christian Baptist* 5 (1827): 209.

Scripture nor become a front for eisegesis or reading our own opinions into it. The point, again, is that the church for which Scripture is written provides its own lens, a lens that is unapologetically Christian.

3) For those who may be sympathetic to the rule of faith and tradition, a third question may still arise: "Whose tradition will we follow, how much authority does it have, and when does the normative tradition chronologically cease?"

My suggestion does not entail an attempt to heed everything that every church has ever said. First of all, a distinction should be made between the rule of faith and later tradition. Of the two, the rule of faith is primary, both logically and chronologically. It represents the earliest Christian consensus on the core teachings about God, Christ, and creation. By the end of the second century, the living oral memory of Jesus and the apostles had faded and the Scripture of Old and New Testaments became more prominent. The subsequent extrabiblical tradition continued to expand, sometimes in ways that were consistent with the early church's canons, written and oral, and at other times in ways that were inconsistent with these standards. Trinitarian dogma is a case of the former, and obligatory clerical celibacy is a case of the latter. In the later tradition, as in a choir,[7] some voices stand out above the others for their superior quality; other voices may be more or less off key. We are not bound to follow the voices whose tones are dissonant or wildly different from the original musical score.

Thus, it is not that the tradition is infallible, especially with regard to matters that are not specified in the rule of faith. A novel interpretation of Scripture, one that has never been conceived in two millennia, could be the correct one. For example, some advances in our knowledge of ancient history, particularly that of the ancient Near East, enhance this possibility. The point, though, is that a biblical interpreter should hear the chorus of voices and have a very good reason for differing with them. In short, of the two, the rule of faith is of primary importance, and later tradition is of subordinate importance. Like a stream, the water tends to be purer when it is nearer to the source.

[7] I am here expanding on the chorus analogy given in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 122.

III. Benefits

If potential concerns over introducing the rule of faith as a hermeneutical key can be satisfactorily answered, is there a positive case to be made for the proposal? For believers who are more or less satisfied with the status quo, what are the benefits of such an approach?

1) First, to read Scripture with the rule of faith reminds us of our primary identity as Christians and that we are to read Scripture not as disinterested scientists but as Christians. There may and should be an attempt at objectivity, but there is no such thing as pure hermeneutical objectivity. The myth of the pure neutrality of reason has been effectively debunked in philosophy now for centuries, and the similar myth of hermeneutical neutrality has been similarly debunked in biblical studies now for decades. To apply a lens through which Scripture is read is to accept the postmodern insight that no reader is entirely unbiased and that everyone reads through a lens. One's reading will be "ruled" or regulated by something. Which grid or lens should we bring to our reading of Scripture? No shortage of options has been provided. Just like identity politics, we have identity hermeneutics. While the current culture exalts identity hermeneutics—readings based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and the like—a Christian's principal and (dare I say) sole identity is in Christ. Perhaps we cannot help but be shaped by our embodied circumstances, but these identities are subordinate in Christ. To read Scripture through the church's tradition is to read as a Christian. As Robert Jenson said, the creed is our "critical theory" of interpretation.[8] A Christian reading is to be regulated or ruled by the content of the faith.

2) Second, reading with the Christian tradition opens up true interpretive possibilities. The American Restoration Movement began to flourish at the same time that modern exegesis came to dominate, especially in the academy. As a result of this coincidence, some principles of the so-called historical-critical method, particularly the emphasis on human authorial intent, have been taken for granted in the movement. The search for human authorial intent excludes all meanings that could not possibly have crossed the mind of the human author. To be sure, human authorial intent, when it is discernible,

[8] Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 81.

should remain the starting point for exegesis, but it should not end there. Premodern Christian exegesis reminds us that the biblical text can be read on multiple levels and thus open itself to multiple meanings, all of which may be true.

3) Third, reading with the Christian tradition helps to limit false interpretations. As noted already, such regulation of the range of possible interpretations was the only way to ensure that Scripture would not be used in support of heresy. Timothy George compares it to a guardrail that helps keep travelers on the right path when they find themselves on a dangerous highway.[9]

4) Fourth, reading Scripture alongside the Christian doctrinal, moral, and liturgical traditions could help bring greater unity to divided churches. The old saying, "In necessary things, unity; in non-necessary things, liberty; in both, charity," begs the question of what falls in which category. The categories are indisputable, but what goes where is not. Scripture gives a few answers. The line may remain somewhat blurry, but tradition is an aid that confirms which doctrines are more central and which more peripheral. The content of the rule of faith or ancient creeds alone may not guarantee the kind of unity that is only possible eschatologically, but it might have prevented "Bible-believing" churches in the past from acrimoniously dividing over, say, whether to worship with an instrument, support missionary societies, or use multiple cups.

5) Finally, to acknowledge the role of the rule of faith and the influence of the Christian theological and exegetical tradition in biblical interpretation is simply to make explicit what is likely already implicit and practiced. In other words, exegetes are in fact shaped by the Christian tradition, including those who deny the influence. Even the most anti-creedal, traditionless Christians, on occasion, unwittingly read Scripture through the lens of received tradition. The Christian reader of Genesis 3 who just knows that the serpent is the one lying, the reader of John 1 who knows that the Logos is equal with the supreme God and that there are not eight aeons, the reader of Acts who understands that the time is more important than the place of Eucharistic observance, and the reader of 1 Corinthians 15 who knows that Paul was not endorsing baptism for the dead—they are already reading Scripture through the lens of the rule

[9] Timothy George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 123.

of faith and Christian tradition.[10] They may as well do so with clear eyes and welcome rather than mute the voice.

IV. Conclusion

It is good to acknowledge and welcome the voices of the Christian past into the life of our churches, for therein is much wisdom, perspective, and truth to inform our faith, ethics, and liturgy, as well as biblical interpretation. It is an alternative to *nuda scriptura* in favor of *prima scriptura*; that is, Scripture is the first and primary authority for faith and practice, but not necessarily the only voice to be heard.[11] In addition, the influence of the rule of faith and the ancient creeds in exegesis is also an alternative to the hermeneutic of simple restorationism or to that of vague, evangelical or mainline ecumenism that eschews all dogma.

This proposal assumes, of course, that Christians know both the Scriptures and the ancient tradition of interpretation. Restorationists, who have typically been known for their biblical literacy, have ignored church history and tradition. In other words, their biblical literacy has usually been accompanied by a willful, general Christian illiteracy—that is, ignorance and rejection of the traditions, creeds, doctrines, and influential figures of the church's history, as well as ignorance of the doctrines and practices of the wider contemporary Christian world. More recently, this ignorance of the greater tradition is being addressed in some of these churches. But it is troubling that, as some restorationist churches are perhaps becoming slightly more literate in general Christian faith and tradition, their biblical literacy is sharply declining across the board. As a fellowship, Churches of Christ, like others, are in the midst of an identity crisis. Being anchored in both Scripture and the Christian tradition could help prevent this denominational identity crisis from mutating and becoming simply a Christian identity crisis.

[10] For a discussion of this point along with some concrete examples, see Keith D. Stanglin, "Restorationism and Church History: Strange Bedfellows?" *Christian Studies* 26 (2013–14): 21-32.

[11] For more on nuda scriptura and prima scriptura, see Stanglin, The Letter and Spirit of Biblical Interpretation, 130-32.

Contributors

Scott Adair is Associate Professor of Bible at Harding University

Frederick D. Aquino is Professor of Theology and Philosophy at the Graduate School of Theology, Abilene Christian University

Allan J. McNicol is A. B. Cox Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Richard A. Muller is Senior Fellow, Junius Institute for Digital Reformation Research, and P. J. Zondervan Professor of Historical Theology Emeritus, Calvin Theological Seminary

Jeffrey Peterson is Jack C. and Ruth Wright Professor of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Keith D. Stanglin is Professor of Historical Theology at Austin Graduate School of Theology