The Authority of the Bible and the Authority of the Theological Tradition

Kevin Giles

A perennial and difficult question for conservative evangelicals to answer is the relationship between the Bible and the creeds and confessions of the church. We evangelicals say that we believe in the ultimate authority and sufficiency of Scripture. We thus often hear evangelical teachers saying, “What we believe and teach comes directly from the Bible.” I frequently heard these words as a young theological student, and they rang in my mind for twenty years until one day, when writing an article on “the how” of doing evangelical theology, I came to see they were inherently untrue. We evangelicals draw on a rich theological tradition that impacts heavily on how we interpret Scripture on doctrinal matters. Scripture is our ultimate authority in matters of faith and conduct, but we always come to Scripture with the theology or doctrine we have inherited from our teachers and mentors in our minds. This theology does not spring directly from the pages of Scripture. It is the product of a long process of reflection and debate over many centuries as to what is the primary emphasis, the fundamental insight, given the diverse teaching of Scripture on specific doctrinal issues.

For most Christians, the content of their theological beliefs is first of all summed up in the three historic creeds; the Apostles, the Athanasian, and, most importantly, in the Nicene Creed, which is accepted by Eastern and Western Christians. These deal mainly with the doctrines of Christ and the Trinity. They express what the church came to conclude, after a period of sharp and divisive debate, is the teaching of Scripture read holistically on these two doctrines. For churches stemming from the Reformation and post-Reformation period, their “confessions of faith” endorse what the creeds say on Christ and the Trinity, but they also define many other doctrines, especially those disputed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Like the creeds, they document what the church has concluded is the primary and foundational teaching of Scripture on specific issues when this has been contested.

What the creeds and confessions teach is called “the theological tradition,” or “the interpretative tradition,” or just “the tradition.” Evangelicals agree this codified body of prescribed doctrines is a subordinate authority. Scripture is the ultimate authority. This is true, yet, in practice, these two authorities cannot be sharply separated. For many if not most evangelicals, the creeds and confessions sum up what the church has agreed is the teaching of Scripture when this has been disputed. They reflect the collective mind of the church on how Scripture is rightly interpreted on the great doctrines, in opposition to those who quote the Bible selectively to uphold an idiosyncratic doctrinal position. Possibly, the best way to express what has just been said is to say that, for all evangelicals, the Bible is divine revelation and thus supremely authoritative, and, for those evangelicals who accept the creeds and confessions, that they are the most authoritative interpretation of what the Bible teaches on the doctrines they define.

The term “tradition”

Confusion comes from the fact that the word “tradition” in church life can mean many things. It can refer to differing customs on which the Bible is silent, such as what time the church should meet, what hymns are sung, or how the church building is configured; or to doctrinal beliefs that have no biblical warrant, yet cannot be absolutely condemned, such as clergy robes, candles, and crosses, or to longstanding church teaching that is contrary to Scripture, such as purgatory, praying to Mary, and salvation by works. These we may lump together and call “church traditions.” The sixteenth-century Reformers and most evangelicals today give no weight whatsoever to church traditions and, when they contradict Scripture, they reject them.

The Reformers, and historically informed contemporary evangelicals, sharply distinguish “church traditions” and “the tradition,” understood as the theological or the interpretative tradition that articulates the communal mind of the church on what the Scriptures teach on the great doctrines of the faith, now codified in creeds and confessions. As communal agreements on what the Bible teaches read holistically, these creeds and confessions are (for those who submit to them) prescriptive both of what is to be believed and of how the Bible is to be interpreted rightly on the doctrines they address.

When we come to doctrines that were not disputed in the early church or in the Reformation age, we may not have any theological tradition to guide us in the doctrinal interpretation of Scripture. The contentious intramural evangelical debate about the status and ministry of women is an example of this. What the Bible teaches on the sexes was not discussed or contested until very recently, and no creed or confession speaks on this matter. Theologians in the past generally reflected exactly the cultural view of women that prevailed and then found an interpretation of a text or two to support their patriarchal mindset. Neither side today wants to endorse their many very negative comments on women, but many women are driven to split with the men with whom they worship.

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on women, or their interpretation of the texts they quoted, or their selective appeal to Scripture. No contemporary evangelical endorses “church tradition” on this matter. We are, rather, all pioneers seeking to discover the central and primary teaching of Scripture read holistically on the sexes. In other words, we evangelicals are striving to establish a *doctrine or theology of the sexes* that will make sense of the varied comments in Scripture on this issue. As the church has discovered in the past, this cannot be done by proof-texting or by choosing arbitrarily our starting point. The approach that will bring consensus is to follow faithfully the methodology of biblical theology. We begin our study of what the Bible says on the sexes where the Bible begins, Genesis’s chapter 1, and end where the Bible ends, Revelation’s chapter 22.

Theologians can have all sorts of ideas as to what the Bible teaches on this or that issue, but their views are only opinions until there is communal consensus. For a theological opinion to become a doctrine, the Christian community must decide that what is being taught accurately captures the primary and foundational teaching of Scripture amid its varied comments on the issue in contention. This observation reminds us that doctrine or theology is always an expression of the mind of the church. It is communal belief. Once consensus has been reached, this consensus, now called “the tradition,” becomes the best guide we have for rightly reading Scripture. It is what the church has determined after a long and painful debate, invariably involving the best of theologians, is the right interpretation of the whole scope of Scripture.

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