

Scripture, Tradition, Reason, Experience: The Four Traditional Sources of Theology and Their Merits.



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Scripture, Tradition, Reason, Experience

*God speaks in Christ Jesus, the biblical witness to **Christ** and the church's ongoing **proclamation** of that witness.*

There is no true being outside of God's Word.

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Four traditional sources of theology:

- Scripture
- Tradition
- Reason
- Experience

God speaks in Christ Jesus, the biblical witness to Christ, and the church's ongoing proclamation of that witness. This threefold speech of God is the "Word of God." Theology derives from this Word and is accountable to it.

We have already begun to see the living nature of God in His Word. The Word is the self-determining life and action of God. God is not a static inhabitant of a static eternity, but in Christ and the proclaimed testimony of His witnesses, God is Lord of space-time in His presence to space-time. He has His being as Immanuel, with us and for us.

In turn, we have our being entirely in Him. We will discuss it further when we come to the doctrine of humanity, but we have already begun to perceive that there is no true being outside of God's Word. There is only the rebellion, which compromises our existence per se. Strictly speaking, God is reality.

Our reality is the moment-by-moment contingency of being the recipient of God's address and favor, mortality born of immortality, bounded flesh and language born of unbounded life and light.

Human being is an event given in and corresponding to the event of God's Word, and theology is an expression of this situation. It is a manifestation of the gratitude with which alone we can have a true sense of self, as Karl Barth used to say. It is dynamic thought and speech stemming from apprehension of God's all-determinative life and action.

Theology takes place today in new language bearing witness to the ongoing truth of God's being in Christ Jesus. It participates in the motion of God in His Word, arising anew to respond to the Word as it is proclaimed here and now, with a view to how it has been understood, proclaimed, and responded to historically. It is in this sense, as organic participation in the Word, that we must

Scripture takes part in the generative power of God's Word to bring about further obedience and witness.

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Sola Scriptura – Scripture Alone

Scripture, Tradition, Reason, Experience

Canon: Rule or Standard

now consider the four traditional sources of theology: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.

Scripture

The life and action of God in Christ Jesus is not inert, but productive. As noted last time, it brings about obedience and witness both by way of anticipation and contemporary declaration. It generates a special group of people, the prophets and apostles, whose thoughts and words have a unique share in God's Word, for it is upon their witness that the church is founded and from their witness that it takes direction. In other words, Scripture takes part in the generative power of God's Word to bring about further obedience and witness, and for that reason is distinctively authoritative for our thought and speech today.

The 16th-century Protestant Reformers used a pithy expression to affirm Scripture's singular authority: sola scriptura, or "Scripture alone." We can state what they meant by this in the negative: No source of truth stands next to Scripture as a controlling norm for our thinking and speaking of God, however meaningful or historically definitive it may be. No tradition of wisdom or teaching is sacrosanct, bearing the same quality of biblical truth. It is just as well, then, to state the Reformers' intentions in the positive: the words of the prophets and apostles are sui generis, unlike all other words in their quality and potency. They alone are responsible for the existence of the community and the vitality of its faith.

In this regard, a major fault line ran between Rome and Wittenberg, between Papal Catholicism and the Reformation concerning the canon of Scripture. "Canon" is the English form of the Greek word kainon, which means rule or standard. It refers to the selected texts recognized to bear the power and authority of God, to be a secondary form of the Word of God. These are the measure of Christian faith. The question is, what makes the 66 books that we spoke of last time to be exceptional? We know there were other books written by the ancient Israelites concerning God's covenant and His engagement with His people, and still others written about Christ Jesus after His life, which are not included in the biblical canon.

Roman Catholicism answers the question of canonicity with the existence of the church. It starts with a community succeeding from the apostles, whose initial task was in part to identify the

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Reformers emphasized the Holy Spirit's influence:

- Inspired
- Illuminated

specific writings that bore authentic witness to Christ Jesus. The church selected the biblical texts from among a series of religious writings over a lengthy process, which included polemical debate fraught with political intrigue that was settled by ecclesial leadership and conciliar decisions.

The Reformers, while recognizing the human role of debate and the work of the emerging church, emphasized the Spirit's influence. As we discussed, the Holy Spirit not only inspired the composition of the particular writings eventually granted canonical standing but also illuminated a distinct people to obey these writings. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Scripture claims its own hearing, so that the emergence of the church was coordinate with the emergence of the Bible. The church comes into being as an event, as a dynamic collection of hearers who perceive the voice of God here and not elsewhere.

The Reformers argued that there would have been no church to adjudicate books of Scripture had not the Spirit already been at work in the prophets and apostles and at work through them to guide the thinking of the Fathers. Thus we might say, without trying to oversimplify the matter, that whereas for Rome the church made these books to be Scripture through a process of canonization, for the Reformers these books and not others make the church in the ongoing event of communal faith.

The church does not grant authority to the Bible. Scripture demonstrates and defends itself by its actual participation in the generative power of God's Word. These writings are singularly authoritative not because the church declares them to be, but because they declare themselves to be the unrivaled source of all knowledge of God in the event of making and sustaining the church.

Tradition

God's Word, including His Word in the form of Scripture, is alive and active. It is not that the thought and speech of the prophets and apostles once generated a church in the first century, which then became the custodian of these old documents as it gave birth to successive generations of Christians. This is a key point, for many in the church mistakenly think of Scripture as something of the Christian equivalent to an Egyptian spell book, guarded and kept over the centuries by its special devotees.

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Tradition

The Bible guards and keeps itself as it generates hearers of the Word today.

We do not read the Bible in a vacuum but in welcome conversation with it treatment over the centuries by its obedient listeners.

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The communal nature of theology does not contradict the Reformation principle of sola scriptura, but reinforces it.

- Critical acceptance
- Charity

In fact, the Bible guards and keeps itself as it generates hearers of the Word today. Scripture is limitlessly productive. It brings about obedient disciples in each new era and it maintains this essential relationship in so doing: its precedence and the church's subsequence.

This is a positive statement about the church and not a negative one. It affirms that the church's historical engagement with Scripture is of continuing value, for it is the same kind of engagement that we enjoy—the confessional, responsive, dialectical, and exegetical work of thinking and speaking after God's revelation in these texts. We do not read the Bible in a vacuum, but in welcome conversation with its treatment over the centuries by its obedient listeners.

The theologian finds herself not to be the first to encounter Scripture, not alone in encountering it today, thus not without the influence of others in her understanding of its themes and content. And she does not recoil before this situation. She does not seek to be free from her sisters and brothers in order to attain a vantage point of judgment over them. Rather, the theologian begins her task by acknowledging that the voice she hears in Scripture is the common Word of a common people bound together by a common Spirit. She takes her bearings from this shared Word so that any critique of the community comes from within its same Spirit and is offered to build up and not to tear down.

Confession, response, dialectic, and exegesis are, in short, public and not private. They occur in constructive dialogue with the text and, necessarily, with the faith that the text has animated over the centuries.

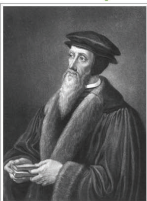
The communal nature of theology does not contradict the Reformation principle of sola scriptura, but reinforces it. Once again, it practices the humility brought about by Scripture as the contemporary theologian gladly accepts her place in the church of Jesus Christ. She seeks not to articulate a doctrine or revelation at variance with or in contrast to the teachings of the church, but to understand them in the light of Scripture and to continually reformulate them in the logic and vernacular of her time and place.

Her task is not uncritical endorsement of the tradition, but critical acceptance: critical in that she constantly reexamines the tradition in the light of Scripture; acceptance in that her

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It acknowledges the **historical** work of the **Word** by the Spirit to produce **true** thought and **speech** of God over time.

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Reason and Experience



John Calvin
1509 - 1564

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The Word remakes our reason and experience in the event of faith.

- The Word takes up human faculties and exists in them.
- God makes our reason and sense to be adequate vehicles of His life and action.

examination is guided by the disposition of charity toward the work of earlier theologians rather than suspicion, expecting that their thought and speech also derive from and orient around the voice of God heard in Scripture.

For instance, the contemporary theologian does not come to the doctrine of the Trinity, which is not explicitly stated in the Bible, with suspicion that it is an artificial construct made by an apostate church. On the contrary, she examines the text looking to prove and not disprove the doctrine. Once again, that is not to make theology into a rubberstamping of traditional teaching. It is, rather, to acknowledge the historical work of the Word by the Spirit to produce true thought and speech of God over time, and to cultivate the humble desire to take part in this truth even as, by our own investigations, we sift and refine the truth and thus make it our own. Remarkably, the overwhelming majority of theologians over the centuries who have read the Bible have indeed discovered the triune God to be revealed in it. Not a biunity or quaternity, not three gods or one god playacting as three, but a Trinity, one God eternally existing in three persons. And having done so, they have been in place to extol the traditional truth of this God in terms appropriate to their particular settings.

Reason and Experience

John Calvin spoke of God accommodating Himself to our human faculties. God “lisps” to us, Calvin famously said in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, as a parent lisps to a babe. In this way, God’s Word engages human reason and experience. It is known in human thoughts and received by creaturely sensation.

It does not, as we have been noting, simply come to our faculties in themselves, as if we enjoyed a working capacity for God’s life and action. Rather, the Word remakes our reason and experience in the event of faith. As Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 1, we know God according to reason, yes, but God’s reason, the wisdom of the cross, which makes our native creaturely understanding, framed as it is by self-service and not self-sacrifice, into foolishness.

The Word takes up human faculties and exists in these, but faculties that it constitutes each moment. God makes human reason and experience adequate to Him. He is not simply a product of human rationality or a phenomenon of human sensation. Here again we observe the dialectical character of theology patterned after the Word: It acknowledges both God’s no to our sinful and

Faith is the event of our receiving the disposition and apparatus to know God as He knows Himself.

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Natural Theology: Refers to thinking and speaking of God on the basis of unaided reason and experience.

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Apostle Paul

malformed reason and sense, and His still greater yes to remake our reason and sense to be adequate vehicles of his life and action. He rewires our neural circuitry according to His precedence. He changes our pre-reflective notions of sequence and consequence, transforming our if-thens in light of His factual priority to all being and doing.

The order, once more, is critical: from God to humanity, from God's all-determinative life and action to our being and doing. His awareness, judgment, and perception structure ours as He comes to us, or there is no knowledge of Him. Faith is the event of our receiving the disposition and apparatus to know God as He knows Himself. It is not the subjective predilection to think and speak religiously, not a pious intuition or an unnamed spiritual sensitivity. When human religiosity is taken for granted as the starting point of knowing God (rather than being the endpoint of His knowing humankind), it does not arrive at God but an idol. That, at least, is what I take Paul to be saying in Romans 1. Romans 1:19ff present one of Scripture's strongest statements on natural theology. Natural theology refers to thinking and speaking of God on the basis of unaided reason and experience. It is the counterpart to natural revelation, the idea that God discloses himself to humanity in the beauty and order of creation and in the inclination of the human heart to the transcendent, the numinous, or the spiritual.

Many who read Romans 1 contend that Paul is advocating for natural theology on the basis of natural revelation. Verses 20-21 say:

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Paul seems to be contending that God has revealed Himself to humanity in nature. We ought to perceive in creation. Presumably, this "ought" means that we can perceive God in creation, but at least some of us have refused to do so. Some humans should have known Him as their Creator and Preserver, as their reason for being and hope, but did not. It would seem that the choice is there for us either to repeat their futile and foolish mistake, or to

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Martin Luther
Duplex cognitio
dei means "twofold
knowledge of God"

"The knowledge gained through creation must not only be informed by that given in Christ but must also be corrected by it."

- Martin Luther

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Romans 1: Paul diagnoses the human condition and warns us against allowing unaided reason and experience to provide and structure our knowledge of God.

acknowledge and glorify God in creation as we were created to do. We should think and speak of God properly on the basis of what he has revealed to all mankind in the stars, the seasons, and so forth.

Luther and Calvin are occasionally thought to have interpreted Paul in this way. Luther spoke of a duplex cognitio dei, a "twofold knowledge of God." By this he meant that which comes through God's natural revelation on the one hand and His special revelation in Jesus Christ on the other, suggesting that both are appropriate means of thinking and speaking of God. Calvin identified a sensus divinitatis, a "sense of divinity" written on the human heart. He observed that no civilization has ever been without religion, which he took as evidence that God has revealed Himself to humanity by implanting a general knowledge of Him, or inclination toward Him, within each of us.

I am not convinced, however, that if we systematically think through Luther and Calvin's ideas, they intended to endorse natural theology on the basis of natural revelation. Luther was clear that the knowledge gained through creation must not only be informed by that given in Christ, but also corrected by it. For his part, Calvin recognized that the sense of divinity within humankind has not produced a true, saving knowledge of God, but false religions.

Continuing in this vein, I am inclined to read Romans 1 not as advocating for theology sourced in unaided reason and experience, but just the opposite. The verse is not inviting us to try our hand at thinking and speaking of God on the basis of nature's beauty and order as others should have done, as if we can get it right by consistent effort or the like. On the contrary, the verse is a description of what has transpired across history when humans have thought and spoken of God outside of the faith he gives, and thus what we should expect to happen if we neglect that faith. Our minds and hearts too will become dark and futile; we too will exchange "the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (v. 23).

Paul is diagnosing the human condition and warning us against allowing unaided reason and experience to provide and structure our knowledge of God. God provides and structures our knowledge of Him in His Word and the faith it brings about. At the very least, we ought to be aware of what we are contending about God if we think that we are able to know Him apart from

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*We humans think in pride,
not obedience.*

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*The book of **Scripture** interprets the
book of **nature**, not vice versa.*

His Word. We must not make Christ's life, ministry, death, and resurrection superfluous—a message nice and beneficial for those who encounter it, but utterly unnecessary when it comes to robust, fulfilling knowledge of God. Such knowledge can be had by meditating over a pretty sunset or taking a nature hike. If this was true, if Christ's life and work—particularly His violent and excruciating execution—are extraneous to God's plan of making Himself known and loved, then God suddenly becomes quite an arbitrary and even sadistic figure.

Along these lines, we have to be conscious of our sinful predilection to project our ideas and experiences into infinity and call them, "God." We humans think in pride, not obedience. We are subconsciously inclined to make God after our image rather than the other way around.

Isn't it striking that when we extol the knowledge of God in creation, we point to Rocky Mountain vistas, deer sipping out of forest streams, waterfalls, and island breezes. Why do we not point to desert wastelands, jackals and hyenas prowling in the brush, or dried-up riverbeds? Are these not also part of God's creation? Do they not therefore also speak of Him? Why should Barstow not be as revealing of God as Denver? Is it because we have prefigured what we count as beautiful and ascribed it to God, instead of the opposite? It is worth noting that modern atheism feeds on the assumption of just this act of self-projection.

It is for good reason that orthodox Christian theology has always taught that the book of Scripture interprets the book of nature, not vice versa. Be sure, if nothing else, to know this minimal rule. Any experience, however moving and defining, must be under the corrective tutelage of God for it to count as a legitimate resource for our knowledge of God.

There is, in fact, only one source of theology: God's Word. But that Word is God's self-defining history. It is the life and action in which and by which God exists and is known. Thus the Word engages human beings across space-time. It calls forth response in each new generation. Theology is the work of responding to reason and experience aided and corrected by God's speech in the Old and New Testaments.

It gladly engages the response to this speech as it has been passed down, the tradition of the church, even as it sifts that tradition in the light of the Old and New Testaments. Theology affirms that

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Theology: *Responding by reason and experience aided and corrected by God's speech in the Old and New Testaments.*

reason and experience are still being brought about and taken up by God in His Word, that tradition is alive and continuing to be formulated, and thus also gladly engages the operation and outcome of contemporary reason and experience even as it also refines these in the light of Scripture.