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Sanctified by God's Word: Towards a Websterian Ontology of Scripture and Church

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Sanctified by God's Word: Towards a Websterian Ontology of Scripture and Church

Abstract

John Webster's account of Scripture grants the canonical texts an ontology determined by their divine use, discusses Scripture as an aspect of the doctrine of revelation rather than the church, and above all preserves the capacity of God's Word to question and form believers. Yet, Webster's proposal has met resistance from theologians who find his accent on sola scriptura inconsistent with his claim that interpretation (not simply "text") has ontological force as a part of "sanctification." This paper asks whether it is possible to retain a robustly Websterian account of Scripture while at the same time denying that Scripture's primacy is separable from the interpretive tradition (thus safeguarding against individualism). Taking its cues from Webster's own insistence that the clarity of Scripture emerges over time in the practices of the believing community, the paper places Webster's account in conversation with the entanglement of liturgical practices, the written word, and apostolic teaching in 1 Tim 3:14–4:16. I argue that despite Webster's assertions to the contrary, the logical telos of his account of Scripture (and what believers should embrace) is an affirmation of sola scriptura et ecclesia, since both are creaturely realities sanctified by the Spirit in the work of God's self-communication.

Keywords

John Webster, Scripture, hermeneutics, church

Disciplines

Biblical Studies | Christianity

Comments

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“Sanctified by God’s Word”: Towards a Websterian Ontology of Scripture and Church

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Los Angeles Theology Conference, January 14-15, 2016

ABSTRACT

John Webster’s account of Scripture grants the canonical texts an ontology determined by their divine use, discusses Scripture as an aspect of the doctrine of revelation rather than the church, and above all preserves the capacity of God’s Word to question and form believers. Yet, Webster’s proposal has met resistance from theologians who find his accent on *sola scriptura* inconsistent with his claim that interpretation (not simply “text”) has ontological force as a part of “sanctification.” This paper asks whether it is possible to retain a robustly Websterian account of Scripture while at the same time denying that Scripture’s primacy is separable from the interpretive tradition (thus safeguarding against individualism). Taking its cues from Webster’s own insistence that the clarity of Scripture emerges over time in the practices of the believing community, the paper places Webster’s account in conversation with the entanglement of liturgical practices, the written word, and apostolic teaching in 1 Tim 3:14–4:16. I argue that despite Webster’s assertions to the contrary, the logical *telos* of his account of Scripture (and what believers should embrace) is an affirmation of *sola scriptura et ecclesia*, since both are creaturely realities sanctified by the Spirit in the work of God’s self-communication.

INTRODUCTION

“The church is a creature of the word, and its life is an embodiment of the word rightly received. *Tradition plays the role of moon to Scripture’s sun*: what light (and authority) tradition bears is derivative, ministerial, a true if dim reflection of the light of Christ that shines forth from the canon that cradles him.”¹

I. WEBSTER’S ACCOUNT OF HOLY SCRIPTURE AND RECENT CRITIQUES

“Crucially...it is divine, not human or churchly, use which has priority in determining the ontology of the canonical texts.... [R]ecognition of canonicity is recognition of those properties which the texts have acquired as a result of their annexation into the communicative activity of Father, Son and Spirit. ...The texts *are* that which they are appointed to become, namely instrumental means of gracious divine action. The being of the canonical texts is determined by their divine use.”²

“The *clarity of Scripture emerges over time in the common life and practices of the Christian community*, as the Spirit illuminates, reproves idolatry and enables attention and obedience to the Word.”³

“[W]e might invoke the notion of the sanctification of Scripture, not as a natural property of biblical texts but rather as a relation to God that extends across the entire range of its production, authorization, and *reception*.”⁴

¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Daniel J. Treier, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture: A Mere Evangelical Account* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2015), 117; italics mine.

² John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 31.

³ Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: Bloomsbury / T&T Clark, 2012), 23; italics mine.

⁴ Webster, “Rowan Williams on Scripture,” in *Scripture’s Doctrine and Theology’s Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics* (ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 121; italics mine.

II. REASONS TO MAINTAIN A “WEBSTERIAN” SCHEME

“Consecrated by God for the purpose of Christ’s self-manifestation, Holy Scripture is always intrusive, in a deep sense *alien*, to the life of the church.”⁵

“*Sola scriptura* does not extract scripture from Christian history. But it does qualify that history as one which is addressed by an intrusive voice, the voice of the one who awakens the sleepers and raises the dead.”⁶

III. 1 TIMOTHY 3:14–4:16 AND *SOLA SCRIPTURA ET ECCLESIA*

“The people are being recalled to their God; their identity as the people of the covenant is being restated, redefined for a new generation. The exceptional incidents explain the function of Scripture reading by relating the activity to the corporate identity of the people.... The function of Scripture reading in the NT era within the Christian movement undoubtedly served the same basic purpose.... Now regular public reading of Scripture also served to locate the new identity in Christ being experienced by... converts in the story that had been in process for centuries.”⁷

“[The concern in *DCDR* to secure the inspiration of Scripture] requires granting shared authority to tradition out of which the inspired authors arise. Their frail and human work is transformed by God so as to be part of his saving history, mediating his saving presence, Jesus Christ, through the power of the Spirit. The Spirit’s power is thereby promised to the New Testament writers and it is promised to the leaders of the church, so that they may preserve the witness of the New Testament. *Scripture cannot be had without tradition*, while the latter need not swallow it up, have power over and above it, or be seen as equal to it without qualification.”⁸

CONCLUDING REMARKS

“[I]s it too much to hope – for ecumenical reasons! – that...Protestant theology may not entirely forget some of what lies in its own traditions, may, indeed, look at them with more love than embarrassment, may even think of them as worth offering to the wider fellowship? If that is to happen, Protestant theologians could do worse than [to pore] over the texts of the past, and [do] so with expectancy, hopefulness and joy.”⁹

⁵ Webster, “The Visible Attests the Invisible,” in *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology* (ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier; Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), 110.

⁶ Webster, “Purity and Plenitude: Evangelical Reflections on Congar’s *Tradition and Traditions*,” *IJST* 7 (2005): 412.

⁷ Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 319–20; see further Towner, “The Function of the Public Reading of Scripture in 1 Timothy 4:13 and in the Biblical Tradition,” *SBJT* 7, no. 3 (2003): 44–54.

⁸ Gavin D. D’Costa, “Revelation, Scripture and Tradition: Some Comments on John Webster’s Conception of ‘Holy Scripture,’” *IJST* 6, no. 4 (2004): 345; italics mine.

⁹ Webster, “Purity and Plenitude,” 412–13.

1 Tim 3:14–4:16 (my translation)

3:14 I write these things hoping to come to you soon, **15** but if I am delayed, [I write] that you may know how it is necessary to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth. **16** Undeniably, the mystery of [our] religion is great:

He was revealed in flesh,
justified in spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed in the world,
taken up in glory.

4:1 Now the Spirit clearly says that in later times some will leave the faith, giving heed to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, **2** through the hypocrisy of liars, seared in their own consciences, **3** forbidding marriage, refraining from food, which God created for receiving with thanksgiving by those who are faithful and have known the truth. **4** For every creation of God is good, and nothing is rejected that has been received with thanksgiving; **5** for it is sanctified through God's word and prayer.

4:6 If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, having been fed on the words of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed closely. **7** Refuse the vile and silly myths, and train yourself in godliness, **8** for, while bodily exercise is a little beneficial, godliness is beneficial in every way, holding promise for the present life and the one to come. **9** The saying is faithful and worthy of all approval. **10** For to this we toil and struggle, since we have set our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of the faithful.

4:11 Command these things and teach. **12** Let no one despise your youth, but become an example for the faithful in word, in lifestyle, in love, in faith, in purity. **13** Until I come, give attention to public reading, to encouragement, to teaching. **14** Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the body of elders. **15** Practice these things, exist in these things, so that your progress may be visible to all. **16** Give attention to yourself and to [your] teaching, continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers.

3:14 Ταῦτά σοι γράφω ἐλπίζων ἐλθεῖν πρὸς σέ ἐν τάχει· **15** ἐὰν δὲ βραδύνω, ἵνα εἰδῇς πῶς δεῖ ἐν οἴκῳ θεοῦ ἀναστρέφεσθαι, ἥτις ἐστὶν ἐκκλησία θεοῦ ζώντος, στῦλος καὶ ἐδραῖωμα τῆς ἀληθείας. **16** καὶ ὁμολογουμένως μέγα ἐστὶν τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον·

ὃς ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί,
ἐδικαιώθη ἐν πνεύματι,
ὤφθη ἀγγέλοις,
ἐκηρύχθη ἐν ἔθνεσιν,
ἐπιστεύθη ἐν κόσμῳ,
ἀνελήμφθη ἐν δόξῃ.

4:1 Τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα ῥητῶς λέγει ὅτι ἐν ὑστέροις καιροῖς ἀποστήσονται τινες τῆς πίστεως προσέχοντες πνεύμασιν πλάνοις καὶ διδασκαλίαις δαιμονίων, **2** ἐν ὑποκρίσει ψευδολόγων, κεκαυστηριασμένων τὴν ἰδίαν συνείδησιν, **3** κωλύόντων γαμεῖν, ἀπέχεσθαι βρωμάτων, ἃ ὁ θεὸς ἔκτισεν εἰς μετάληψιν μετὰ εὐχαριστίας τοῖς πιστοῖς καὶ ἐπεγνωκόσι τὴν ἀλήθειαν. **4** ὅτι πᾶν κτίσμα θεοῦ καλὸν καὶ οὐδὲν ἀπόβλητον μετὰ εὐχαριστίας λαμβανόμενον· **5** ἀγιάζεται γὰρ διὰ λόγου θεοῦ καὶ ἐντεύξεως.

4:6 Ταῦτα ὑποτιθέμενος τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς καλὸς ἔση διάκονος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ, ἐντρεφόμενος τοῖς λόγοις τῆς πίστεως καὶ τῆς καλῆς διδασκαλίας ἥ παρηκολούθηκας· **7** τοὺς δὲ βεβήλους καὶ γραῶδεις μύθους παραιτοῦ. Γύμναζε δὲ σεαυτὸν πρὸς εὐσέβειαν· **8** ἡ γὰρ σωματικὴ γυμνασία πρὸς ὀλίγον ἐστὶν ὠφέλιμος, ἡ δὲ εὐσέβεια πρὸς πάντα ὠφέλιμός ἐστιν ἐπαγγελίαν ἔχουσα ζωῆς τῆς νῦν καὶ τῆς μελλούσης. **9** πιστὸς ὁ λόγος καὶ πάσης ἀποδοχῆς ἄξιος· **10** εἰς τοῦτο γὰρ κοπιῶμεν καὶ ἀγωνιζόμεθα, ὅτι ἠλπίκαμεν ἐπὶ θεῷ ζῶντι, ὃς ἐστὶν σωτὴρ πάντων ἀνθρώπων μάλιστα πιστῶν.

4:11 Παράγγελλε ταῦτα καὶ δίδασκε. **12** Μηδεὶς σου τῆς νεότητος καταφρονεῖτω, ἀλλὰ τύπος γίνου τῶν πιστῶν ἐν λόγῳ, ἐν ἀναστροφῇ, ἐν ἀγάπῃ, ἐν πίστει, ἐν ἀγνείᾳ. **13** ἕως ἔρχομαι πρόσεχε τῇ ἀναγνώσει, τῇ παρακλήσει, τῇ διδασκαλίᾳ. **14** μὴ ἀμέλει τοῦ ἐν σοὶ χαρίσματος, ὃ ἐδόθη σοὶ διὰ προφητείας μετὰ ἐπιθέσεως τῶν χειρῶν τοῦ πρεσβυτερίου. **15** ταῦτα μελέτα, ἐν τούτοις ἴσθι, ἵνα σου ἡ προκοπὴ φανερὰ ᾖ πᾶσιν. **16** ἔπεχε σεαυτῷ καὶ τῇ διδασκαλίᾳ, ἐπίμενε αὐτοῖς· τοῦτο γὰρ ποιῶν καὶ σεαυτὸν σώσεις καὶ τοὺς ἀκούοντάς σου.