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Three Tributaries, Exploring the Reformed, Baptist, and Catholic Branches: A Review of The Church's Book

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Three Tributaries, Exploring the Reformed, Baptist, and Catholic Branches: A Review of The Church's Book

Abstract

"If our conversations about the Bible, its meaning, and its authority seem always to prove fruitless, perhaps this is a better place to start."

Posting about the book *The Church's Book* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/three-tributaries-exploring-the-reformed-baptist-and-catholic-branches-a-review-of-the-churchs-book/>

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Comments

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Three Tributaries, Exploring the Reformed, Baptist, and Catholic Branches: A Review of *The Church's Book*

David Westfall

August 31, 2022

Title: The Church's Book: Theology of Scripture in Ecclesial Context

Author: Brad East

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When I teach Biblical Studies Methods, I begin the semester by confronting my students with “pervasive interpretive pluralism”—a concept coined by sociologist Christian Smith, the same guy who came up with “moralistic therapeutic deism.” The phrase describes the simple and undeniable reality that competent and faithful readers of Scripture arrive at different and even wildly divergent readings of the Bible, despite their claims or beliefs about Scripture’s clarity of meaning. If that is so, then how can we interpret the Bible wisely and in full recognition of its authority?

While the rest of my semester is largely devoted to familiarizing students with appropriate rules and methods of interpretation, I am painfully aware of methodology’s ultimate inability to “solve” this problem on its own. At the end of the day, intractable debates about the meaning and authority of Scripture owe to deep theological commitments more than to exegetical expertise, or a lack thereof. If we may imagine contemporary debates about the Bible as an attempt by people on opposite banks of a river to cross over to one another (pretending for the moment that there are only two sides to these debates), the reason we find the task impossible is partly on account of the many tributaries adding to the river’s breadth—logically prior discussions about related issues. If there is to be any hope of making it across to one another, the conversations needs to happen farther upstream.

In his recent work, *The Church's Book: Theology of Scripture in Ecclesial Context*, Brad East attempts to do just that. Dividing the Christian tradition broadly into three branches (the reformed, the catholic, and the baptist) his goal is to show that these traditions’ various understandings of biblical authority owe mainly to their divergent ecclesiologies—an insight that he believes may allow attempts at rapprochement to gain more traction. Rather than trying to engage with these traditions in the abstract, East selects a spokesman for each: John Webster (reformed), Robert Jenson (catholic), and John Howard Yoder (baptist). For each of

these, he develops a corresponding image of the church's relation to the Bible as "beneficiary," "deputy," and "vanguard", respectively.

For Webster and the Reformed tradition, the church is first and foremost the *beneficiary* of Holy Scripture. Webster's central concern is with the Christian doctrine of God as Holy Trinity, the ultimate object of Christian faith and reference point of all reflection that can justly be called "theological." God is wholly self-sufficient and replete in himself, unknowable in himself and knowable by humanity apart from himself only by virtue of gracious divine revelation. The church, therefore, is first and foremost the *object* of God's gracious self-address, the *creatura verbi divini* whose fundamentally receptive posture in turn governs Webster's bibliology: "Holy Scripture serves and attests the self-communicative presence of God, through which God speaks, as from a human temple, the good news of the gospel of Christ."¹ Vital to this conception is the recognition of two of Scripture's functions: the *critical*—acting as "judge" over all the church's thinking and acting— and the *saving*—"in being the means of Christ's conduction, by the Spirit, of reconciled sinners from all manner of folly and ruin into covenant fellowship with, and saving knowledge of, God the Father."²

For Jenson and the catholic tradition, the church is Scripture's *deputy*, entrusted with its contents and directives so that it will be equipped as God's faithful representative to the world.³ The church, considered as a whole in union with Christ (*totus Christus*), functions as the "Spirit-filled communal prophet" capable of speaking God's word with a voice of authority. Fulfilling this duty, however, requires that the church faithfully discern Scripture's directives, which is a grace provided through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. In practice, this means that the church's interpretation of Scripture, by virtue of its "deputized" authority, will function magisterially *alongside* Scripture to guide the people of God in faithful reading: "The magisterium, then, has final authority rightly to interpret Scripture for the community—not, that is, authority *over* Scripture, but authority *vis-à-vis* the *believing community* regarding *how to read* Scripture as the final authority on the truth of the gospel message."⁴ Historically, this takes the form of dogma, which establishes the boundaries of what constitutes an acceptable (i.e. authentically "Christian") reading of the Bible.

For Yoder and the baptist tradition, the church acts as the *vanguard* of Holy Scripture, which constitutes "the set of orders from the commander for those elite units tasked with leading the charge, spreading out, and infiltrating enemy territory."⁵ This image effectively captures the "self-sufficiency, independence, and situational judgment" that the church on mission requires. The church must discern, in new and ever-changing circumstances, what it means to embody the kingdom of God faithfully, acting as "the herald and forerunner of the divine alternative to the world's lust for violence and death."⁶ In this context, the Bible's function is mainly *practical*, guiding the church as "the sociopolitical charter of the Christian community, at once binding it historically to the community's founders, (the apostles) and predecessors (the prophets), while norming its response to challenges on the mission field and serving as a locus of unity for all the many divided branches of the one messianic tree."⁷ For Yoder, this analysis amounts to a

“deflationary” account of biblical inspiration and authority: a particular theory or formulation about what the Bible *is* is less important than what it characteristically *does* in the life of the Christian community. This, in turn, seems to go hand in hand with Yoder’s deep suspicion of most of the church’s traditions and theological development over the centuries.

I was unsurprised to find myself most in sympathy with Webster’s position, though I also found much to appreciate in the views of the other two, notwithstanding the fairly predictable points of disagreement. Despite his evident preference for the views of Yoder and (especially) Jenson, East offers a thorough and admirably balanced critical engagement with each figure. Some of the book’s weaknesses, meanwhile, are perhaps unavoidable, given the breadth of the subject matter as well as East’s decision to choose a single spokesman for an entire “third” of the Christian tradition. As he himself observes, these interlocutors are “simultaneously idiosyncratic and representative.”⁸

Accordingly, it is not always clear where representation ends and idiosyncrasy begins, particularly when the perspectives of each figure come up for criticism: is Webster’s affinity for high degrees of abstraction or his neglect of Israel’s role in redemptive history distinctively “reformed” shortcomings, or more broadly shared across the Christian tradition? If the latter, then how does the critique serve the present discussion about divergent ecclesiologies? Meanwhile, in the case of Jenson, I found myself wondering about the degree to which his ecclesiology might be more indebted to his rather unconventional understanding of the trinity (e.g. “God is a story”) than to his “catholic” sympathies, and would have liked to see this connection explored further. I suspect that some readers from across the Tiber might take exception to having their views represented by a rather eccentric (albeit brilliant) Lutheran. In Yoder’s case, I wondered if the majority of baptist readers would feel well represented by a Mennonite, not to mention one whose theology may be implicated in his own life’s moral complexities (as East himself thoughtfully acknowledges).

Notwithstanding these issues, I found that East’s book offers a helpful vantage point from which to regard the church’s historic and ongoing debates about Scripture, which in no small part, turn out really to be debates about the church itself. If our conversations about the Bible, its meaning, and its authority seem always to prove fruitless, perhaps this is a better place to start.

1. pg. 74

2. pg. 87

3. pg. 304-8

4. pg. 156, emph. orig.

5. pg. 311

6. pg. 196

7. pg. 197

8. pg. 248