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An Ecumenical Horizon for “Canon Within a Canon”?

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Can our interpretation of Scripture be ecumenical in our pluralistic situation and still use the Lutheran Confessions’ principle of the “canon within a canon”? No, if certain prevailing conceptions of ecumenical, pluralistic, and “a canon within a canon,” prevail. Yes, if they are construed differently.

Within this different construing of the ecumenical horizon, we are ecumenical in our pluralistic situation by rendering public our specific confession, not through an appeal to some supposed irrefutable uniform common human experience, but through a thick, that is, complex, in-depth description of how we believe, teach, and confess the God who is disclosed in the Scriptures. The ecumenical question is no longer an either/or question; that is, either we have a canon within a canon, or we do not. Rather, the ecumenical question becomes, “Which canon within the canon is relatively adequate?”

This construing of a “canon within the canon” within an ecumenical horizon has three major elements. First, since being ecumenical and being public are interrelated, ecumenical conversation is best understood as the interplay of strangers rather than inti-

mates. Second, since being ecumenical and public involves the interpreter in a pluralistic situation, a model for interpreting Scripture in a pluralistic situation is needed. Third, a canon within a canon is best understood as a principle for the use of Scripture in Christian witness and an inherent part of rendering a Christian witness in a pluralistic public. Therefore, the public articulation of a canon within a canon is an indispensable part of scriptural interpretation in an ecumenical horizon.

Being Ecumenical and Public

Being ecumenical and being public belong together because, in a primal sense, being ecumenical is thinking, willing, and laboring with the world as our horizon.¹ The

¹The etymology for ecumenical is the Greek *oikumene* which figuratively extends the sense of the word house (*oikos*) to include the world of Hellenistic civilization. Cf. *Taschenlexikon Religion und Theologie* 4 (Göttingen, 1983): 38 for the development of the usage of the word ecumenical, including in the modern Ecumenical Movement.

original councils were ecumenical because they functioned with the world as their horizon. This primal sense needs to be retrieved so that Christian ecumenism, in the words of Raimundo Panikkar, "cannot be reduced to settling Christian family feuds, as it were, or healing old wounds."²

Being ecumenical means we need to act publicly.

This version of being ecumenical, which has the world as its horizon, means we need to act publicly; that is, to act in a *res publica*. "A *res publica* stands in general for those bonds of association and mutual commitment which exist between people who are not joined together by ties of family or intimate association. . . ."³ The bonds which characterize public association are the bonds of the crowd in which there are various degrees of unfamiliarity and even conflict. The question of being ecumenical is integrally tied with being public, and this implies working with strangers.⁴

Some would avoid this integration of public and ecumenical with respect to the church by understanding the church primarily through metaphors of friendship or family. And, while it is not uncommon to conceive of the church as the family of God—indeed, there is some biblical⁵ warrant—or of all people as brothers and

sisters, such images of the church and humanity can obscure the very real differences among the churches.⁶

The tendency to understand ecumenical conversation in the intimate language of friendship or family is neither simple nor benign. It exemplifies the morals of middle-class people in society⁷ and implicitly agrees to the "field of action" which has been allotted to religion in the bourgeois milieu of a secularized society.⁸ In short, religion is considered a private matter, mostly for women, children, and other intimates.⁹

Some of the dominant images of ecumenical work often use this intimate imagery and inadvertently further an imperial relationship between first world Christianity and other peoples. For example, Leonard Swidler, editor of *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, recently proposed ten commandments for interreligious dialog which can be easily understood within the intimate model

²Raimundo Panikkar, "Toward an Ecumenical Ecumenism," in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 19 (1982):781.

³Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), 3; hereafter, Sennett, "The Fall."

⁴See Sennett, "The Fall," 48, for a definition of stranger in relationship to public.

⁵Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 136–72.

⁶For an analysis of the power of metaphor in construing a world read Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975); especially, 295 ff.

⁷Cf. Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976), 8–42.

⁸Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 134–35.

⁹Patrick Keifert, "Modern Dogma and Liturgical Renewal," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 13 (1986):214–27.

for ecumenical conversation. He makes much of sincerity, trust, self-definition, and experiencing the partner's religion "from within."¹⁰ In the following issue of the journal, a pastoral counselor develops Swidler's decalogue along the lines of the therapeutic interview!¹¹ These individuals would not wish to support an imperial relationship; Swidler explicitly requires in his seventh commandment that "dialogue can take place only between equals." The problem is not in most of the ingredients of the decalogue but in the organizing metaphor. The metaphor of intimate conversation as the model for ecumenical conversation fosters an imperial relationship, since it abets a first world middle class conception of public conversation and the place of religion in society.

By way of contrast, my rendition of ecumenical interrelates being ecumenical with being public in a pluralistic situation, including socio-economic plurality. The church in ecumenical conversation is more a "company of strangers" in public conversation than a dialogue of intimates.¹² Such a pluralistic horizon implies a conflictive, though not combative, model of human communication, since conversation involves such pervasive systematic distortions as class, race, and sex.¹³

Models for Responding to Diversity

Being ecumenical and public demands a keen sense of diversity. There are, however, a spectrum of responses to this diversity. This spectrum begins with those who hold that, despite our differences, we really are all alike, and it ends with those who hold that, at least for the moment, our differences are so

profound that there is no ground for carrying on a public conversation. Most people fit somewhere in the middle. I describe four models for responding to diversity. The first three models are used to describe what I believe are unhelpful models¹⁴ for responding to diversity;¹⁵ the fourth, articulating a canon within a canon, is the one I prefer.

The Monist

The monist person or group recognizes the existence of diversity in the ways in which Scripture may be interpreted, but finally denies serious consideration of the options other than its own. The monist is quite sure that the other options are wrong. Some monists may be uninterested in conversation about interpreting Scripture. They consider it a waste of time. Others take up the conver-

¹⁰Leonard Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Interreligious Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20 (1983):1-4.

¹¹Robert L. Kinast, "The Dialogue Decalogue: A Pastoral Commentary," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21 (1984):318.

¹²Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers* (New York: Crossroad, 1985).

¹³The importance of a different model of public conversation is the subject of major philosophical discussion which is directly related to our topic of hermeneutics. Cf. Jürgen Habermas, "Zu Gadamer's 'Wahrheit und Methode,'" in Apel und Habermas *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*, 53.

¹⁴In order to avoid more abstraction, I personify these models. The danger of personification is apparent. While it is true few people function exclusively in one mode in their response to diversity, these models represent viable and common ways persons actually function, at least in specific situations.

¹⁵Cf. Wayne C. Booth, *Critical Understanding: The Power and Limits of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) for a more extensive description of these four models.

sation at great length only to confirm their own perspective.

A monist can be an irenic, gentle conversation partner. For example, the pastoral counselor who considers all conflict regarding the interpretation of God the Father in Scripture to be a result of conflicts with parents, is a monist regarding the interpretation of Scripture, since the interpretive perspective is singular. This person does not work in a critical, pluralistic horizon. In each case, the monists have confidence in the truth of their perspective. The monist intends to change the dialogue partner, but not be changed by the conversation.

The Eclectic

The eclectic person or group recognizes diversity and is quite willing to dialogue with the various positions. Unlike the monist, the eclectic to a certain extent takes seriously the conversation partners' positions. Bits of each of the diverse options are valid, while other bits are false. "It is naive to expect any one book, any one theologian, any one mode, to be fully sound or fully mistaken. Thus we should incorporate the good and throw away the bad," argues the eclectic. The eclectic picks and chooses from the many options, incorporating those which fit the pragmatic purposes of the eclectic. The eclectic intends to change the dialogue partner and to be changed but only on the basis of personal, pragmatic purposes which tend not to be a matter of public discussion.

The Relativist

The relativist recognizes diversity but believes that public discourse regarding different interpretive options is unlikely, since

each side represents values that are not subject to rational discourse. As a result of this skepticism regarding public discourse, the relativist calls together all those persons who share the same value judgments and forms a society of like-minded persons. Within this group the rules for participation may be strict or lenient, but they are set by the group which holds those value judgments. It is as if the relativist, shrugging her shoulders, says, "I know my values are no truer than any others, but what can I do? You leave me alone and I will leave you alone. Inside our groups we live by our values." The relativist finally intends on changing others and being changed only to the extent that their tolerant isolation is preserved; at all costs conflict is to be avoided. The result is a "repressive tolerance."¹⁶

The Critical Pluralist

The critical pluralist recognizes diversity, but believes that public discourse regarding religious affection is possible and necessary. Working from the roots of their own traditions, critical pluralists engage others from the standpoint of the others' own tradition and commitments. Tradition, understood as "the living faith of the dead," is no longer

¹⁶David Tracy, *Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossword, 1981), xi and Hans Küng, "Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Religions: Some Theses for Clarification," in *Concilium* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, Ltd., Feb., 1986):120.

¹⁷For a sustained discussion of tradition understood in the manner in which I use it here, especially the notion of fruitful prejudice, compare Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (J. C. B. Mohr: Tübingen, 1965), 250–84; cf. Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 234–41.

considered the enemy of public conversation, but rather the very means of such conversation in a pluralistic situation.¹⁷ Critical conflict, understood as healthy critical suspicions of the ways in which public discourse can be distorted, is welcomed rather than avoided.¹⁸

The critical pluralist expects to be changed by the conversation.

The critical pluralist expects to change others and be changed by the conversation. The conversation is understood as a public interplay of strangers where private self-consciousness is peripheral. The image of an ecumenical conversation as a company of strangers constituted through tradition and healthy critical suspicions replaces the imagery of intimacy.

This is a sketchy outline of the spectrum of possibilities. The critical pluralist model needs to be developed in relation to the others, especially the relativist. Relativism leads to individuals who are strange Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde persons. They are private legalists and public anarchists. Biblical scholars, who follow this pattern, tend to divide interpretation between what the text meant and what it now means.¹⁹ As a result, as one biblical scholar puts it, "Biblical scholarship . . . often oscillates between critical description and capricious faith calling the one 'historical' and the

other 'theological.'"²⁰ Among theologians who fit within this model, one observes a certain private dogmatism and public skepticism. They often borrow from contemporary skeptical philosophers to argue their relativism.²¹ Within their own tradition-value group, within themselves, they have a strong commitment to a very fixed set of ethical and religious beliefs and values. Publicly they make no argument for their position. At the public table they perceive their value system as private.

In contrast, critical pluralism recognizes the diversity of religious experience but assumes that it can be made public. The critical pluralist is like the monist in that the critical pluralist makes judgments regarding other religious witness. Unlike the monist, the critical pluralist chooses to make such arguments public, making arguments that are necessary and sufficient for reasonable and fair-minded people. Most importantly, the critical pluralist expects to be changed by the conversation, not on the basis of intimacy with the various conversation partners, but through the conversation itself.

¹⁸Jürgen Habermas, "Historical Materialism and the Development of Normative Structures," in *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1979).

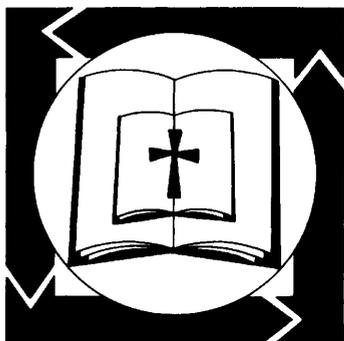
¹⁹Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible 1* (Nashville: Abingdon): 418-32.

²⁰Martin J. Buss, *Encounter with the Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 33.

²¹Cf. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-liberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984); hereafter, Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*; Cf. Patrick Keifert, "Labor Room or Morgue: The Power and Limits of Pluralism and Christology," in *Word and World* 5 (1985), 78-88.

Canon Within a Canon

The first two parts of this construing of an ecumenical horizon for a “canon within a canon” are complete. Such an ecumenical horizon is pluralistic and public. As a public conversation it is among strangers and, while dependent upon tradition, critical of both tradition and novelty as potential distortions of the conversation. The interpretation of Scripture within this public and pluralistic setting is best accomplished by a critical pluralist strategy. The critical pluralist strategy begins by thorough description of how we believe, teach, and confess the God who is disclosed in the Scriptures. This description works out of tradition with a full set of healthy, critical suspicions and expects that this tradition will look significantly different as a result of the conversation.



The third part of the construing remains; namely, a description of “a canon within a canon.” The argument is fairly simple: Any attempt to interpret Scripture according to this critical pluralist strategy will reveal a canon within a canon. Canon within a canon is not one portion of Scripture over another or an ahistorical idea which norms the text.

Rather, it is specifically the set of uses to which a particular interpretation puts the text and the principles of interpretation which this interpretation reveals. Every interpretation reveals such principles of use and interpretation. As a result, the ecumenical question becomes one of the relatively adequate canon within a canon. A brief description of what in principle a canon within a canon should and should not be follows.

Since the task of critical pluralists is to render public their witness to the faith, they are committed to raising the question of truth in at least two important senses. Is the witness I give truly Christian and is it true?²² Theological hermeneutics becomes an essential component of judging whether the witness is truly Christian, its “Christian aptness.” In order to make this judgment, theological hermeneutics clarifies the canon, or rule of Christian witness. This canon is Scripture.

Here it is crucial to distinguish the function of Scripture as canon and its function as source of Christian witness. Placing the focus solely on the canonical function of Scripture downplays, even denies, the historical character of these texts. Though at its worst this leads to proof-texting, it does not warrant forsaking the canonical function. Attending only to the function of Scripture as the source of Christian witness, on the other hand, leaves us with an incomprehensible collection of data about the text of Scripture. As Charles Woods puts it, “The result of this confusion

²²In the following analysis I am indebted to the work of Charles M. Wood, *the Formation of Christian Understanding* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 82–120; hereafter, Wood, *Formation*.

of source and norm may range from the uncritical enforcement of random scriptural texts as normative, to the serious erosion of any clear idea as to how Scripture might function to authorize Christian witness at all.²³ The key is to balance these two functions of source and norm with one another.²⁴

Function and Canonical Status

In considering canon within a canon, however, the canonical function is central. The canonization of Christian Scriptures is not so much exalting them to some metaphysically higher status, but more the actual practice of using them as the norm of the Christian witness. The canonical status does not depend upon the intention of their authors or even the intention of those who originally gathered them together or who spent time developing lists of canonical texts. Rather, canonical status depends precisely on their functioning in the community.

Since canonical status is tied to the function of these texts, the question becomes to what purposes do they actually and should they actually serve. Any answer to that question is what I take to be that interpretation's canon within the canon.

Since the idea of a canon within a canon is an elastic notion, it is important to note which senses of the notion are excluded by defining it in this manner. It has meant to some that a particular text or group of texts or a particular theme or affirmation of Scripture is taken as central, warranting exclusion of others. Thus at one time or another, the notion of the canon within a canon legitimated the setting of the New Testament against the Old, the synoptics against John,

the Pauline letters against the Catholic and Pastoral Epistles, etc.²⁵ While significant theological differences exist between the testaments and various parts of the New Testament witness, the canon within a canon does not warrant either one portion of Scripture being excluded by another, or some supposedly "ahistorical" idea replacing the particulars of the biblical narrative.

The whole of the narrative must be construed in the use of the canon, not just part. Therefore, the use of Scripture as canon will deploy various methods of biblical interpretation so as to understand the text as a whole.²⁶ This is not to reject the importance of the various stages of oral and textual development. However, it does mean that historical critical methods, which tend to dissect the text when understanding the text as a historical source, function differently when understanding the text canonically. They are no less reasonable or critical; they are, however, deployed to a different purpose.²⁷ In the canonical use of Scripture they are deployed so as to understand the whole text complete with its full range of referentiality.

²³Wood, *Formation*, 85.

²⁴In this regard, Gerhard Ebeling's "Sola Scriptura" and Tradition," in *The Word of God and Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 102–147, remains a significant contribution to this discussion.

²⁵Krister Stendahl, "One Canon is Enough," in *Meanings: The Bible as Document and as Guide* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 62f.

²⁶Patrick R. Keifert, "Mind Reader and Maestro: Models for Understanding Biblical Interpreters," *Word and World* 1 (1980/81):153–68.

²⁷Patrick R. Keifert, "Interpretive Paradigms: A Proposal Concerning New Testament Christology," *Semeia* 30 (1985):203–14.

In principle, the focus in canonical use of Scripture is on the plain sense of Scripture (*sensus literalis*). Such use presumes that the purpose of conversation is a commonly held interpretation of the text.²⁸ The goal is what Clifford Geertz calls a “thick description” of the biblical witness. It is, first, a description of the details which make up the whole. Second, it is description from the participant’s point of view.²⁹ The interpreter recognizes that any description that the interpreter makes “from the participant’s point of view,” will be the interpreter’s version. The focus for this method of interpretation is to understand the text as a whole taking seriously, rather than explaining away, its details and point of view. In short, the text is understood as a whole: the whole truth and nothing but the whole’s truth.

What uses are appropriate for Scripture?

But, as Ernst Käsemann has pointed out, it is one thing to say that all of Scripture should be heard, but it is something else to say that one can or should preach it all.³⁰ All of Scripture should be taken into account when determining how the critical pluralist bears witness in the public place. But the canon itself raises serious questions as to the propriety of “preaching” some of its constituent parts, that is, of commending and explicating them as sources or standards of authentic Christian witness. So while the whole of Scripture

must be construed in its canonical use, not all of it will be used in the same manner or force in the ultimate Christian witness.

Appropriate use is the question addressed by “canon within a canon.” What uses are appropriate for Scripture? What is Scripture authorized to do and what can it authorize? The Lutheran Confessors took these questions as critical. They regularly balanced the principle of *sola scriptura* with those of *solus Christus*, *sola fide*, and *sola gratia*, not as external principles imported into the text but as their interpretation of the Scripture’s central witness. This interpretation neither excludes one portion of Scripture nor creates ahistorical ideas as criteria. It does provide explicit criteria for the canonical use of the Scripture in the church. Especially in the American setting, where the Protestant tendency is to exalt Scripture to “the status of absolute norm,” it is important to contribute the Lutheran refusal to fixate on canon. It is Jesus Christ, not Scripture, who is *norma normans sed non normata* for he is the appropriate end and content to any canonical use of Scripture.

²⁸Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology*, 65–70, where he accurately critiques Wood’s and Kelsey’s functional reductionism precisely on the issue of the plain sense of Scripture. He is dependent here on Hans-W. Frei, “Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative: Some Hermeneutical Considerations,” paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, New York, December, 1982.

²⁹Clifford Geertz, *the Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 13–27.

³⁰Ernst Käsemann, “Kritische Analyse,” in *Das Neue Testament als Kanon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1970), 366.

The Confessors' Public Commitment

This version of the principle of canon within a canon within an ecumenical horizon places the interpretation of the Lutheran Confessions in a different light. They are not canon law or its functional Lutheran equivalent. Their varied and occasional character within their complex social, economic, political, and theological context, functions as a superb example of how Christians, under extremely hazardous and systematically distorted circumstances, make their public witness. These confessors' commitment to a public, ecumenical horizon is as important as the particular way they put their witness. As Robert Bertram so eloquently put it in an address before the 1968 Assembly of the World Council of Churches:

In my own immediate tradition, to cite but one example, over four centuries ago our confessors challenged their posterity to what could have been the boldest sort of ecumenical dialog. It could still be that. In full view of the empire of their day, they invoked on their confession not only the verdict of "God" and of His "Christ" but of "all nations" as well, "of all pious people" (Apology, Preface 17, 19; Art. XXVIII, 27; Art. IV, 398). In effect, they were opening their books to public audit by the whole church.³¹

In this sense, the Lutheran Confessions commit their posterity to a public and ecumenical Christian witness. Their witness under their circumstances criticizes today's privatization and individualization of the Christian religion in major portions of Christianity and urges us not to accept these boundaries.

Once we accept this public commitment in our pluralistic setting, the inevitability of a canon within a canon arising in any attempt to render public a Christian witness also becomes evident. It is better to have a canon within a canon be an explicit part of the public conversation, as it is in the Lutheran Confessions, than for it to be a covert part of that conversation. An explicit canon within the canon compels a more critical, truthful, and helpful ecumenical conversation.

³¹Robert W. Bertram, "Our Common Confession and Its Implications for Today," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 39 (Nov. 1968):715-21.



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