

Beliefs: The Formation and Use of Sources and Norms

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Introduction

The goal of this paper will be to show that within the religion of Christianity central and/or core beliefs based on primary and secondary sources/norms are necessary to define authentic Christianity and validate claims of the Christian faith. The first section of this paper will address the question “Does Christianity present the necessity of sharing certain beliefs and/or the establishing of ‘common ground’ to provide a means of defining authentic Christianity and the validation of claims to Christianity?”. This will then be proceeded by identifying the various sources/norms used in the formation of beliefs from a Christian point of view and alternate/opposing views. Next, one will be presented with the recognition of what should hold the primary position of an ultimate source/norm within Christianity as it relates to the formation of beliefs. Showing in conclusion the necessity of central and/or core beliefs within Christianity and the essentiality of primary and secondary sources/norms. And finally examining the application and relevance of this topic to the contemporary church.

The Need for Establishing ‘Christian’ Beliefs

Concerning the establishment of beliefs, one must recognize the personal aspect of theological reflection as concepts about the divine deeply effect the manner in which one addresses the theological questions surrounding one’s life.¹ Differences in theological concepts and positions can result² due to the nature of theology being “the quest for the ultimate truth about God, about ourselves and about the world we live in”³. The potential differences in views necessitates a need for the identification of ‘common ground’ within Christianity to promote

1. Kelly M. Kopic, *A Little Book for New Theologians: Why and How to Study Theology*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 41 and 15-16.

2. Larry D. Hart, *Truth Aflame*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 2005), 16.

3. Shirley C. Guthrie Jr, *Christian Doctrine* (Atlanta: GA, John Knox, 1968), 11.

orthodoxy and avoid the infiltration of heresy. Without the identification of ‘common ground’ and/or unifying core beliefs any and all who claim to be ‘Christian’ and appealed to Jesus Christ and the Bible would then be accepted as equally and authentically Christian.⁴ When ‘Christianity’ is comparable with each and every truth claim made it becomes emptied of its’ meaning and indistinguishable from of other religions.⁵ Thus, the Christian church fathers, thinkers and leaders recognizing this danger, sought remedy by identifying a standard of essential beliefs [dogmas] that all claiming to be ‘Christian’ must affirm to be considered authentically Christian, hence the establishment of the Christian consensus of the Great Tradition, which holds Jesus Christ and the gospel of free salvation through Christ’s life, death and resurrection as the touchstone for authentic Christianity.⁶ It must be noted that the Great Tradition’s authority which serves as that of a guide is not independent, nor higher than that of Scripture’s authority; rather it is secondary wherein good orthodox theology “must be rooted in, sustained by and continually nourished through Scripture”⁷ as it is the foundation of Christian theology and the means of preserving and communicating the divine revelation⁸.

General Overview of Sources and Norms Used in the Formulation of Beliefs

In the process of identifying the sources and norms utilized in the formation of beliefs, one must pose the question of “What counts as authoritative sources and norms for determining proper Christian beliefs?” as it influences the decision of which beliefs are orthodox and which

4. Roger E. Olsen, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity & Diversity*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 39-41.

5. Ibid, 30-31.

6. Ibid, 39-46.

7. Kopic, 107.

8. Hart, 49.

are heretical and serve to provide guidance and provision of stability as individuals continue to examine and reconstruct Christian beliefs.⁹

Throughout the history of Christianity, the answer to the above question has not been simply ascertained as a unified voice concerning the recognition of appropriate sources and norms. Instead numerous voices spoke, suggesting the ideas of either a single source/norm or various potential sources/norms to be utilized in establishing ‘Christian’ beliefs.¹⁰ However, while there is no specific, uniform agreement about sources/norms of Christian theology for Christian beliefs, over the past centuries a rough consensus of a pattern of authority has developed.¹¹

A Christian View of Sources and Norms

During the formative periods of the development and systemization of the Christian faith the earliest Christian churches utilized several sources and norms concerning the development of beliefs and claims made to Christianity. Before the development of a specifically Christian canon, the sources/norms utilized consisted of: 1) the teachings of men and women recognized as apostles, 2) appeals to Hebrew prophets/texts, 3) messages from the Spirit to the congregation and 4) apostolic letters and exhortations by elders/teachers.¹² However, due to the arousal of doctrinal controversies, the apostolic fathers and teachers of the church began to gather the apostles’ writings and initiated the task of developing “an authoritative set of sources and norms for determining which of the contradictory teachings of the many roaming Christian ministers

9. Olson, 50.

10. Ibid, 52.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid, 53.

were truly Christian”¹³. In doing so, the church fathers appealed to three main sources: 1) the Rule of Faith, 2) the writings of the apostles and 3) the Hebrew prophets.

These sources served as the ‘springboard’ in the development of Christian teachings wherein the task is to “clarify, illuminate, cohesively interpret, and defend the convictions distinctive to Christianity that empower and enable the Christian life”¹⁴ (Mk. 7:4-9; 1 Jn. 2:12-14, NASB). The Rule of Faith - “the basic content of Christian belief that church fathers preserved, interpreted and applied”¹⁵ assisted in such a task as it aided in defining what is necessary for salvation from the whole of Scripture [Old Testament and later assimilated New Testament] through ecumenical consent and was summarized in the baptismal confession¹⁶ and later in the Apostles Creed¹⁷.

Due to the fact that church fathers could reference various apostolic writings in support of their claim to the Rule of Faith or tradition of apostolic teaching, the written sources of what later evolved as the New Testament were established; however, when the heretics began appealing to the same apostolic writings, the church fathers turned to the Rule of Faith as the authoritative distillation of Christian teaching in an effort to create/preserve unity and exclude heretic teachers, resulting in the Rule becoming “the center of the core of Christian teaching and belief – the ultimate norm drawn out of Scripture”¹⁸.

In the proceeding century and a half, four ecumenical councils were held in an effort to settle major doctrinal disputes and write definitive statements concerning the implications of the

13. Olson, 53.

14. Ibid, 181.

15. Ibid, 54.

16. Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 181.

17. Olson, 54.

18. Ibid, 54.

apostolic teachings and the Rule of Faith which resulted in the ecumenical councils' creeds and definitions being accepted as semi authoritative by sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers and termed a "canon outside a canon"¹⁹. Later the Reformers dropped the Apocrypha and proceeded to insist that the Rule of Faith expressed by creeds and in confessional statements is secondary in authority to the inspired Scripture.²⁰

Continuing in the development of sources/norms, the concept of *sola scriptura* became a part and parcel to Protestantism; however, in practice the Reformers (and most of their followers) accepted 'highs' and 'lows' concerning the directness of witness to Jesus Christ and additionally writings outside of the Bible (creeds, definitions, etc.) were accepted.²¹ A rough consensus developed among the branches and churches of Christianity holding "God's revelation to the Hebrew prophets and in the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ as carried forth in God's written, inspired Word, the Bible and as distilled in the essence of the Rule of Faith is Christianity's ultimate source and final norm for faith and life"²².

While there is a consensus view of Scripture as the touchstone and/or ultimate source/norm within Christianity wherein it is elevated to a special status of authority in determining who God is and what He wants with His people, it is not the only determinant/authority. Rather, there is a pattern of authority within Christian sects which refers to and utilizes other sources/norms in conjunction with Scripture²³ as "the study of God relies constantly upon an interdependent matrix of sources on the basis of which the confessing

19. Olson, 54.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid, 55.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid, 56.

community can articulate, make consistent, and integrate the witness to revelation”²⁴. This pattern of authority is comprised of four main, specific sources/norms and is known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral which purposes that proper Christian belief is shaped by Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, “all of which depend upon and exist as a response to their necessary premise: revelation”²⁵ from “which the whole subject matter proceeds”²⁶. If the sources/norms were lacking this origin “there would be no Christian study of God without God’s own initiative to become reliably known”²⁷ through history and in Christ the Revealer (Gen. 35:7; Ps. 98:2; Is. 65:1; Rom. 1:18, 16:25; Rev. 1:1, NASB).

It can then be recognized that within the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, there is a definitive pattern of authority wherein the affirmation of the concept of *sola scriptura* serves as primary and the remaining sources as secondary.²⁸ Scripture is seen from this view as the chief source and norm for Christian theology and as the “deposit of the sufficient and adequate witness to God’s self-disclosure”²⁹. Furthermore, it serves as the source/norm in which the secondary sources/norms are essentially dependent, as they must appeal to Scripture for the events (traditions), interpretations (experience) and the data being remembered (reason) upon which they reflect, resulting in experience that is transformed.³⁰

Concerning the secondary sources/norms, their role while not holding the same weight of authority, does still provide a level of importance in the establishment of beliefs. Tradition presents itself as the Word Remembered and provides an additional means of transmission for

24. Oden, 174.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid, 176.

27. Ibid.

28. Donald. Thorsen, "Sola scriptura and the Wesleyan quadrilateral", (*Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 41, no. 2, 2006, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost), 18-19.

29. Oden, 178.

30. Ibid.

the Word Revealed³¹ in the form of “immediate ecclesiastical church history as well as ancient tradition”³² and/or those consensus beliefs held in common by the early church fathers³³. This is essential in the development of theology as it “builds progressively upon previous generations of the study of God, using stores of wisdom both old and new”³⁴ and serves to “link us to, and separates us from, the prophets and apostles who wrote Scripture”³⁵ (Matt. 13:52, NASB).

Regarding experience, it is present as the Word Experienced both personally and socially as the Word Revealed becomes active in individuals and “seeks to enable that personal appropriation of God’s mercy”³⁶. It allows one the opportunity to partake in the awakening of God’s revelation in history as the Spirit speaks through the Scriptures which permits individuals to remember and participate in events which bestow meaning on history. However, this experience is more than personal and social, it is also inclusive of scientific and other investigations into humanity.³⁷

Concerning reason, it can be seen as the Word Made Intelligible which serves to initiate critical thinking about the Revealed Word and related matters.³⁸ From this use of reason the initiating of critical thinking proves to be essential in the study of God as it requires intellectual effort and participation to be complementary to right belief and practice.³⁹

Alternate/Opposing Views Sources and Norms

In opposition to the Christian beliefs formulated/based on the above noted sources/norms are those movements which were put forth as ‘Christian’ or have arisen within or on the margins

31. Oden, 178

32. Thorsen, 21.

33. Olson, 57.

34. Oden, 179.

35. Stephen R. Holmes, *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Books, 2002), 5.

36. Oden, 179.

37. Thorsen, 21.

38. Oden, 180.

39. Thorsen, 21.

of Christian communities but were judged to be heretic wherein they were inconsistent with the gospel and incompatible with the Great Tradition.⁴⁰ This can be identified in the following movements in that while there is a pattern of authority within the movements which claim authentic Christianity, the order of authority, specifically as it relates to the predominance of Scripture and other sources/norms, do not coincide with proper Christian beliefs.

Gnosticism was one of the earliest and most threatening alternative views to Christianity and its' sources/norms for beliefs as it appeared to offer simpler nostrums⁴¹, utilized the language of Christianity and misused the Scriptures in a dualistic manner⁴². In its' broadest sense, Gnosticism represents any religion relying on special insight and wisdom which is not available to those who are uninitiated and unprepared.⁴³ Beginning with Simon Magus and his confrontation with the apostles (Acts 8:9-24, NASB) and extending into modern times through the appearance in various forms of esoteric Christian movements and New Thought Groups, Gnostics claim a possession of a secret, special spiritual capacity and higher knowledge that "resides in an elite"⁴⁴ and eludes 'normal' Christians who must depend on written and human authorities⁴⁵. Within this knowledge the following ideas are held: 1) 'Christ' being other than the man of 'Jesus', 2) that 'Christ' indwelt 'Jesus', yet did not fully identified with him and 3) human souls/spirits are sparks of divine fullness.⁴⁶ Similar to Gnosticism is Montanism, which also arose and developed through the early Christian community and presents modern forms [e.g. Mormonism]. Montanist-like movements have arisen through history and have claimed their own

40. Olson, 58.

41. Oden, 442.

42. D. Jeffery Bingham, *Pocket History of the Church*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 2002), 40.

43. Olson, 58.

44. Robert A. Segal, "Gnosticism, ancient and modern", (*The Christian Century* 112, no. 32, 1995, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost), 1053.

45. Olson, 58.

46. Ibid, 59.

prophecies as being equal with or far beyond Scripture and have contradicted the Great Tradition of Christian teaching as they offer new doctrines out of prophecies given by various individuals.⁴⁷ Named after Montanus, who claimed the Holy Spirit utilized his vocal cords as a means of direct communication and that his prophecies were inspired like those of the Hebrew prophets and apostles, this movement presented a serious threat and challenge to the stability of Christianity as the leading bishops opposed the claimed equality with the prophet and apostolic teachings and writings.⁴⁸

Deism and/or natural theology (and Utilitarianism) arose in the eighteenth-century among intellectual ‘enlightened’ Christians who insisted that all divine revelation was to be judged by the canons of modern philosophical and scientific standards of inquiry and knowledge.⁴⁹ Originating with John Toland and entering into its purest form through Matthew Tyndal, both of whom proposed that enlightenment reasoning was to be the ultimate source and norm for Christian belief wherein “the true source and norm for determining correct Christian belief is the same source and norm for all human investigation” as “natural human reasoning functioning at its’ best leads all reasonable, reflective people to certain core beliefs about God, moral duty, life after death, etc.”⁵⁰. Consequently, in this movement because of the means of reasoning implied, while belief in God is affirmed⁵¹, Jesus Christ is no longer viewed as being a form of God, but rather is reduced to the greatest human prophet of moral wisdom to have ever lived wherein he was the ideal of humanity and well-pleasing to God⁵². Proceeding from Deism and natural religion and incorporating elements of idealism into its’ view is liberal theology. Within liberal

47. Olson, 59.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid, 60.

50. Ibid, 61.

51. Josh, McDowell, *A Ready Defense*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993), 318.

52. Olson, 61.

theology, while Christian sources/norms were not neglected, modern thought/reasoning and human experience were elevated to the status of a source/norm equal to that of special divine revelation in Scripture⁵³; however, Scripture and its authority was viewed as “nothing supernatural, completely unique, or absolutely authoritative”⁵⁴ and is “inspired insofar as it is inspiring”⁵⁵. Thus, one can recognize the driving force of liberal theology is much the same as that of Deism/natural theology as modern reason, investigation and experience play determinative, regulative roles in belief establishment.⁵⁶ In countering liberal theology and Deism/natural religion, appeals to the supremacy of special divine revelation – Scripture, were made in addition to reason and experience by placing emphasis on the Great Tradition in an effort to show the manner in which these forms of ‘Christianity’ undermine the essences of Christianity itself through neglecting/rejecting essential dogmas.⁵⁷

From the above sections concerning sources/norms, one may recognize the various patterns of authority given to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral sources/norms as it is associated to the formation of beliefs. The order and primacy placed on the sources/norms lays the foundation of the validity of the religious sect/movement in accordance to authentic Christianity.⁵⁸ This can be identified by the emphasis place on Scripture as being the primary source/norm as those religious sects/movements which qualify as authentically Christian.

53. Olson, 61.

54. Ibid, 96.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid, 62.

57. Olson, 62.

58. Oden, 180.

Christianity's Uniting Ultimate Source and Norm for Belief Establishment

Concerning the formation of beliefs which constitute authentic Christianity, one may deduce that the role of Scripture is to be the central uniting factor and/or the ultimate source/norm wherein the remaining sources/norms – tradition, reason and experience, are to be secondary.⁵⁹ The Spirit of God having been the divine inspiration for the human writers of the Bible and the guiding force in authentic Christian belief development ensures “a trustworthy and potent witness to truth”⁶⁰ wherein the “paramount question is not whether the Bible is true in the sense of being fully accurate in everything it reports, but whether the Bible leads us into truth. But the Bible could not lead us into truth unless its central claims were true, unless its overall witness were reliable and dependable”⁶¹. The majority of the early Christian thinkers recognized this as such, resulting in the defining of the canonical Scriptures being considered the unique source/norm for determining proper Christian belief⁶² and the consensual tradition of Christian thought and teaching regarding Scripture “as uniquely inspired and authoritative for determining what Christians’ should believe as well as how they should live”⁶³ as “the alternative divine or human approach applied to the Bible is a false one that has led to unnecessary... polarities of belief about Scripture”⁶⁴.

Scripture is dependent on faithful theology. Its’ entirety was and is the voice of God for his people as this is where God’s presence is clearly reveals.⁶⁵ This unique self-identity of God within the Scripture places the Bible as central because it is here that God teaches one to

59. Kopic, 112.

60. Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration & Interpretation*, (Christian Foundations 2, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 199.

61. *Ibid*, 299.

62. Olson, 71.

63. *Ibid*, 90.

64. *Ibid*.

65. Kopic, 109-110.

cultivate an interdependence for His holy text.⁶⁶ One must never forget the fundamental purpose of the Scripture so that as individuals grow to cherish and delight in the Scripture as their purpose so that they “might know the triune God and respond to him in repentance and faith, being drawn into communion with him”⁶⁷.

Conclusion

From the above it can be recognized that the religion of Christianity is based on core beliefs supported by primary and secondary sources/norms which define and validate the claims made to the Christian faith wherein the need for establishing core and/or central beliefs is addressed. The Christian consensus and the establishment/refinement of theological concepts were initiated in order to avoid heresy which ultimately placed Scripture as the primary source/norm for orthodox beliefs in which tradition, experience and reason are secondary in the pattern of authority.

Application to the Contemporary Church

With regard to the application and/or implications of the subject matter covered in the above, one must ask the question of “How does this impact the life of the Church?” and subsequently “How does this impact one’s personal life?” In answering these questions, it must be noted that the role of theology is central to both, with differences located only in the context. Concerning the impact placed on the church, the identification of the primacy of Scripture as a source/norm with the addition of secondary sources/norms serves to provide a clear sense of orthodoxy wherein the “the church’s life is shaped by devotion to “the apostles’ teaching and to

66. Kapic, 110.

67. Ibid, 117.

the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42)”⁶⁸ so as to guide the church as a whole and prevent the distortion and denial of basic Christian beliefs⁶⁹. From this identification and establishment of orthodoxy, one is then able to readily recognize the personal application of an authentically Christian theology and assess, construct/reconstruct, refine and if needed alter their personal theological construct to be in accordance with authentic Christianity.⁷⁰ Furthermore, additional spiritual growth can occur as one develops right beliefs and knowledge of God at both the head and heart level and is drawn into a deeper relationship with God.⁷¹

68. Oden, 691.

69. Olson, 43.

70. Ibid, 50 and 66-69.

71. Hart, 22.

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