

Anchored in Christ: Beyond the scripture-tradition divide

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With the increasingly warm relationship between Catholics and evangelicals, evangelicals inevitably face this question: Can we consider Catholics—at least some Catholics—to be evangelicals? In other words, is there a species called "the Catholic evangelical"?

One of the main reasons many evangelicals are hesitant to acknowledge that one could legitimately speak of Catholic evangelicals is the belief that Catholics do not share with evangelicals their focus on scripture as the one ultimate source of authority for the church. Catholics hold to two sources of authority: scripture *and* tradition (Catholics tend to capitalize *Tradition*, while most evangelicals are reluctant to do so). And since tradition is strictly human interpretation and outworking of divinely given scripture, Catholics would not seem to share evangelicals' concern for the centrality of the Bible.

Yet I will argue that the notion of a "Catholic evangelical" is not a contradiction in terms. In fact, not only should we consider many Catholics to be evangelical, but we should urge many evangelicals to become catholic (lowercase c, to be sure) in order to be true to their claim of being evangelical. My point is that many Catholics hold to an evangelical understanding of the scripture-tradition relationship, while many evangelicals need to recover the role of tradition if they want to be really evangelical.

My argument is rooted in the work of Catholic theologians of the mid-20th century who were reacting against the dominance of scholastic thought. Theologians such as Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac, part of a movement known as the *nouvelle théologie*, sought to return to the sources of faith in scripture and the writings of the church fathers. Their work suggests how tradition can be anchored in the eternal Word of God.

Let's begin with the traditional Catholic argument. Catholics say that without a teaching authority (magisterium), the authority of scripture becomes a nose of wax, which can be twisted into almost any shape. If everyone can simply interpret the Bible according to individual insight, it becomes difficult, perhaps impossible, to retain any kind of doctrinal cohesion. And, of course, Catholics are quick to point to the relentless splintering of Protestant and evangelical denominations. That argument, though compelling, does not settle all discussion. Numerous questions about the scripture-tradition relationship remain. The *nouvelle* theologians have taught me that a sacramental approach to the issue may offer a way forward that is not only ecumenically promising but also dogmatically faithful.

Congar explicitly speaks of time as being sacramental in character, while de Lubac deliberately anchors tradition (and thus the development of doctrine) in Christ, referring to it as "cashing in Jesus." It seems to me that if we take these sacramental and christological starting points seriously, we have the proper framework within which to discuss the scripture-tradition relationship.

As he discusses the functioning of history and development in *Tradition and Traditions*, Congar makes a comment about what he calls "sacramental ontology," which he bases on the words of St. Paul that God will be "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). Congar observes that, for Aquinas, the sacraments had a threefold reference: they referred to Christ's own redemptive acts, which were active in the sacraments (past reference); to eternal life as the sacraments' aim (future reference); and to the

effect that the sacraments have in our lives (present reference). Congar then makes it clear that he believes that, according to the Christian understanding, time itself is sacramental in character:

Thus the sacraments have a peculiar temporal duration, in which past, present and future are not mutually exclusive, as in chronological time. Sacramental time, the time of the Church, allows the sharing by men who follow each other through the centuries in an event which is historically unique and which took place at a distant time; this sharing is achieved not merely on the intellectual level, as I could commune with Plato's thought, or with the death of Socrates, but in the presence and action of the mystery of salvation.

For Congar, "sacramental time" or "the time of the Church" means that past, present and future can coincide. As a result, people from different historical eras can participate or share in the same event. Congar maintains that it was the Holy Spirit who effected this transcending of ordinary temporal limits: "It is the characteristic work of the Holy Spirit to effect a communication between realities despite their limits and the distances separating them." When chronological time thus opens up, as it were, eschatological realities themselves are able to enter into it. According to Congar,

when the living God himself is the agent of historical events—not just by his general providence, but acting to constitute another element in salvation history, a "mystery"—he communicates to acts which take place in time certain possibilities and a density which surpass the conditions of earthly time. They are inserted into another sphere of existence, the eschatological order, which has for its principle the Holy Spirit.

By saying that God acted to constitute a "mystery" in salvation history, Congar was using traditional sacramental language. Mystery is the reality to which sacraments point and in which they participate. Therefore, Congar argued, God could insert the dimension of mystery into earthly events; as a result, these events were taken up into the eschaton. Earthly events became sacraments of eschatological mysteries. Their sacramental dimension allowed earthly events to participate in other events, both past and future.

Perhaps the most important reason that modernity has made it difficult for us to acknowledge any kind of authoritative role for tradition is the fact that we look at

history rather differently from the way people interpreted it throughout the millennium of the Platonist-Christian synthesis. We tend to look at time as a simple succession of distinct moments, unrelated to one another; we regard event X, which took place ten years ago, as no longer present, and thus in principle as unconnected to event Y, which is taking place today. This is not to say that we deny historical cause and effect. We realize quite well that, through a number of traceable historical causes, event X gives rise to event Y. The point, however, is that we regard the two events as separate.

Congar's reflections on "sacramental time" undermine this view of time as simply a succession of historically distinct moments. In doing so, he places himself in the long Platonist-Christian tradition, whose view of time was profoundly expressed by Augustine in Book XI of his *Confessions*. Augustine there recognizes that past, present and future are not simply successive moments of secular or univocal time. His sacramental mind-set opened him to the realization that "it is inexact language to speak of three times—past, present and future." The reason is that for Augustine, these three coexist in the human mind and, even more important, are identical in the eternity of God himself.

Henri de Lubac, deeply influenced by this sacramental perspective on time, recognized the implications for the way Christian doctrine developed throughout the tradition. He recognized that Christ is the great sacrament of God. If Christ is the fullness of the revelation of God, then future developments of Christian doctrine can never leave behind that one great sacrament. They always have to remain connected to Christ; they can never add to him, and they can only be an unfolding of his fullness. "The Whole of Dogma" (*le Tout du Dogme*), de Lubac insists, is present in the redemptive action of Christ himself. Nothing can be added to Christ. Every doctrinal development that follows Christ can only be a "cashing in" of the fullness of Christ's treasury (*monnayer Jésus*). According to this Platonist-Christian understanding, all of history leading up to Christ was a sacramental anticipation of the incarnation, while the subsequent tradition of the church is a sacramental memorial of the Christ event. There is a real participation of past and future in the person of Jesus Christ.

The view that tradition is the "cashing in" of Jesus Christ as the supreme sacrament is not limited to Catholics like de Lubac. Karl Barth, in his *Church Dogmatics*, expresses himself in a similar way. For Barth, revelation means sacrament: thus, God's revelation in Christ is "the basic reality and substance of the sacramental

reality of His revelation." Barth describes the humanity of Christ as "the first sacrament," and the Swiss theologian recognizes that this has implications for one's understanding of history and of tradition. He suggests that while the incarnation was obviously a unique occurrence, "its attestation through the existence of the man Jesus is a beginning of which there are continuations; a sacramental continuity stretches backwards into the existence of the people of Israel, whose Messiah He is, and forwards into the existence of the apostolate and the church founded on the apostolate."

For Barth, the sacramental presence of Christ stretches backward and forward, so that it ties together past, present, and future. To be sure, Barth does not say that he understands this sacramental character of revelation as participatory in nature. In other words, he does not explicitly declare that in past and future events Christ himself is really present. All the same, Barth recognizes that the Christ event is the great sacrament that gives meaning to everything that precedes and follows it.

Viewing tradition as the "cashing in" of Jesus has a distinctly evangelical ring to it. Nonetheless, the *nouvelle théologie's* Platonist-Christian perspective on time—with past, present and future somehow coinhering in one another—is not only a rejection of the modern perspective on history; it also asks evangelicals to give up their ready allegiance to this modern approach. Evangelicals have largely abandoned a sacramental view of time (as have many Catholics), and this desacramentalizing has impacted the way we have decided regarding doctrinal issues.

Because we tend to regard the time period of the biblical author and our own small moment under the sun as two distinct or separate moments, (univocally) identical in kind, we believe that it is our job simply to find out what exactly the biblical author meant in any given biblical text in order to proclaim it as authoritative. Thus we simply move back from our contemporary time Y to the biblical time X in order to establish the theological or doctrinal teaching of the church today. And where we find discrepancies between our own cultural context and that of biblical times, we try to negotiate the degree to which we should adapt or accommodate to our current situation.

The sacramental understanding of the Platonist-Christian synthesis shakes up this modern evangelical model. If the various historical moments of the church's tradition sacramentally participate in each other in and through the Christ event, theological or doctrinal convictions of the Christian past are much more than interesting ways

that Christians throughout history have dealt with the biblical text. If the church today shares, by means of a real participation, in the church's earlier tradition, that earlier tradition genuinely lives on in us, and we have a sacred responsibility to it. Earlier periods of the Christian tradition and our present time are connected via a common sacramental participation in the eternal Word of God.

A desacramentalized view of time tends to place the entire burden of doctrinal decision on the present moment: I, in the small moment of time allotted to me, am responsible to make the right theological (and moral) choice before God. The imposition of such a burden is so huge as to be pastorally disastrous.

Furthermore, to the extent that we are captive to our secular Western culture, it is likely that this culture will get to set the church's agenda. If we do not see ourselves sacramentally connected to the tradition (and thus to Christ), we sense no accountability to the tradition, and we are likely to accommodate whatever demands our culture places on us and capitulate to them. By contrast, when we are faced with a theological and moral conundrum, a participatory approach to tradition will always ask how the catholic, or universal, church throughout time and place has dealt with the issue. The widespread assumption that Christian beliefs and morals are to a significant degree malleable has its roots in a modern, desacralized view of time.

Evangelicals will be able to overcome their uneasiness with a sacramental understanding of time when they grasp the fact that this sacramental focus was simply another way of saying that tradition lay anchored in Christ. And what could be more amenable to evangelicals than an approach to doctrinal development that remains centered on Christ? Indeed, if we were to ask de Lubac and Congar what exactly it might mean to "cash in" Jesus, we would find a great deal of commonality.

What does it mean for tradition (or doctrinal development) to "cash in" Jesus? We can get a sense of what it means by comparing Congar's *Tradition and Traditions* and Kevin Vanhoozer's *The Drama of Doctrine*. Though differences remain on the relationship between scripture and tradition, these two scholars—one Catholic and one evangelical—display a remarkable degree of convergence.

Both Vanhoozer and Congar refer to the account of Philip's meeting with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40) to explain their respective views of the scripture-tradition relationship. Upon reading Isaiah 53:7–8, the eunuch does not grasp the meaning of the text, and he asks Philip: "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking

about, himself or someone else?"

Observing that Philip explains the Old Testament prophecy in the light of "the good news about Jesus," Congar comments: "Just as Jesus had done with the apostles, Philip preached to him about Jesus, taking this passage as his theme. To give the meaning of scripture is to explain it in the light of God's plan, whose focal point is Jesus Christ." Indeed, for Congar, interpretation of scripture in the light of Christ is primarily what constitutes the tradition. Thus he immediately adds that "the apostles' preaching and tradition did in fact consist in revealing the entire structure of the economy of salvation, in relation to Christ, as to its center, around whom all the rest was arranged, shaped and took its meaning." For Congar, tradition is the interpretation of scripture in the light of the Christ event.

Vanhoozer likewise takes the narrative of the Ethiopian eunuch as a biblical example of the nature of tradition. "Philip," he comments, "stands for the origin of Christian understanding and hence for the *nature of tradition*." Vanhoozer then explains that there are four ways to gain further insight into Philip's role and thus into the nature of the Christian tradition. First, the passage highlights the role of the Spirit in enjoining Philip to go to the chariot and in whisking him away (Acts 8:29, 39). Second, the passage gives a glimpse into the role of apostolic tradition when we see Philip as a link in that tradition's chain. Third, we may regard Philip as a stand-in for the church when we perceive that the eunuch comes to read scripture aright through the "external means" of the church's authority. Finally, there is the indispensable role of the canonical text of Isaiah 53 itself, which can only be understood appropriately if it is read Christologically: "Everything is the same, yet different when viewed from the vantage point of the Christ event."

It is clear that Vanhoozer concurs with Congar that the Christian tradition is what happens when, under the guidance of the Spirit and with apostolic authority, the church passes on its interpretation of scripture in the light of Christ. In other words, both Congar and Vanhoozer agree that the tradition lies anchored in Christ. Furthermore, this starting point has several additional consequences on which Congar and Vanhoozer agree. First, the tradition is essentially interpretation of scripture in the light of the Christ event. It is not surprising, perhaps, that an evangelical such as Vanhoozer would regard tradition as interpretation of scripture. But Congar—and, I would submit, most contemporary Catholics—readily agree. For example, Congar says: "The doctrinal content of Tradition, in so far as it is distinct from Scripture, is the meaning of Scripture."

In other words, both Congar and Vanhoozer are convinced that the contents of scripture are sufficient in order to arrive at Christian doctrine. This is a crucially important point for evangelicals to grasp. Evangelicals often continue to think that Catholics hold to a two-source theory of truth, as if the church derived some of its beliefs from scripture and others from tradition. While it is certainly true that this was once a common view among Catholics, especially in the period following the Council of Trent (1545–1563), this view has been almost universally abandoned. For Catholics like Congar, scripture and tradition coincide, and the former is materially sufficient for Christian doctrine.

If Christ is the anchor of all Christian doctrine, then it is impossible for any one interpretation of scripture to exhaust its meaning. Tradition, as the interpretation of scripture over time, takes a certain trajectory in which the church explores imaginatively the infinite implications of the Christ event. Congar explains:

For the Fathers, the councils and the theologians of the early Middle Ages and scholasticism in general, the progressive understanding of revelation entails the fullest possible disclosure of God; that is, the Church, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, gradually draws out the implications of the deposit of faith. A certain growth thus occurs, in the sense that what was involved in the deposit inherited from the apostles is developed or unfolded.

Congar maintains that doctrine develops over time because the christological deposit—the anchor of Christ—needs to be cashed in throughout the tradition of the church.

Evangelicals may well be nervous about the notion that doctrine develops. Examples of Catholic dogmas such as the immaculate conception of Mary and her assumption immediately come to mind. Isn't that where development of doctrine inevitably leads?

However, before we throw out doctrinal development, we might want to listen to what Vanhoozer has to say about it. His understanding is hardly different from Congar's. Although he does not ground development in Christology the way Congar does, I suspect that Vanhoozer would agree with Congar on the christological foundation. Vanhoozer speaks quite freely about the "meaning potential" of biblical texts, and makes this observation: "As the potential of the Old Testament is realized over the 'great time' of the canon, so too the potential of the canon is realized over

the 'great time' of church history." Vanhoozer explicitly uses "development of doctrine" language to describe this unfolding of the meaning potential of the biblical text: "The development of doctrine is thus a matter of *improvising with a canonical script*." In fact, Vanhoozer's language emphasizes development in some ways more strongly than does Congar's. We repeatedly encounter in Vanhoozer the language of *imagination*, as well as related terms, such as *improvisation*, *spontaneity* and *creative understanding*. For Vanhoozer, development of doctrine is based on the church's creative improvisation on the biblical text.

The influence that *nouvelle théologie* scholars like Congar had on the Second Vatican Council, as well as on the subsequent Catholic tradition, has been such that little or no disagreement remains with regard to the material sufficiency of scripture. Of course, some evangelicals will be inclined to push *sola Scriptura* further, arguing that we do not need tradition to interpret scripture and that, accordingly, we should abandon the notion of development of doctrine. But we have already seen that such a view would not appeal to prominent evangelical theologians like Vanhoozer. More important, such a view is based on a modern abandonment of the sacramental view of time, and it limits the interpretation of the Christ event to its historical origins. I believe that it is a great deal safer to go with the sacramental and christological consensus of the Great Tradition.

Congar's approach to the scripture-tradition relationship should make evangelicals read the statement from Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* carefully. Congar himself, along with others who held views similar to his, was quite influential in shaping the documents of Vatican II. The article begins by declaring that tradition and scripture "are bound closely together, and communicate one with the other," that they flow "from the same divine well-spring," that they "come together" to "form one thing" and that they "move towards the same goal." Each of these quoted phrases functions as a nail in the coffin of a two-source view of revelation.

Tradition and scripture, according to Vatican II, are not two separate sources: they belong together. This official acknowledgment should be incredibly encouraging to evangelicals. It's true that the document also says that "the Church does not draw her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone." And the statement even quotes the Council of Trent by concluding that scripture and tradition "must be accepted and honored with equal feelings of devotion and reverence." While disagreement over the concluding sentence, in particular, is likely to remain, these comments do not imply a two-source theory. If we put *Dei Verbum*

in the best possible light, we could perhaps interpret it as saying that scripture and tradition both participate sacramentally in Jesus Christ—himself the great revelatory sacrament of God.

Although evangelicals and Catholics can find a great deal more commonality on the subject of tradition than we sometimes assume, differences do persist—as they do between Congar and Vanhoozer. Even if we take for granted that the tradition is normative on the basis of a sacramental view of time, and even if we take the Christ event as the central historical moment that absorbs in itself, as it were, every other moment in time, we may still end up differing with each other on what is and what is not a legitimate unfolding of the Christ event.

For example, I am not convinced that the Catholic Marian dogmas are legitimate expositions of the christological anchor. But even here we need to be careful how we phrase our disagreement. In discussing Mariology, we need to remember (1) that Catholics accept the evangelical point that all doctrine is a matter of biblical interpretation, and (2) that evangelicals (at least those like Vanhoozer and me) accept the Catholic point that all doctrine is a matter of development. This means that our disagreements on Marian teaching are disagreements on what constitutes the correct interpretation of scripture. In other words, for contemporary Catholics, Marian dogmas result from the development of doctrine as *interpretation of scripture*. The Marian disagreements between Catholics and evangelicals, while they remain a serious obstacle, have in effect become exegetical disagreements. That recognition in itself means a remarkable step forward in evangelical-Catholic dialogue.

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