

**Notes on Ch. 3: Sources and Norms of Theology
as Dialectical Confession and Profession**

A. It is an interrelated and continuous subject to explore the grammar of Revelation and Knowledge of God [Ch. 2] and the grammar of the Sources and Norms of Christian witness and understanding [Ch. 3].

The church, in similarity with other communities perduring over a period of time through their discourses and practices, can appropriately be asked: ‘what is your purpose?’ and ‘why this purpose?’

We have already examined my proposal concerning the mission or purpose of the church [25-35]. Intrinsic to that mission was the church’s being called into existence by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And the mission itself is to witness in word and deed to the triune God for the benefit of the world.

B. On clarifying what the Gospel is and its usefulness for the church.

A critical question for the church, and especially controversial in these modern or postmodern times, is whether the Gospel can be stated independent of Jesus—though Jesus might be an exemplary witness to the Gospel—or whether the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are essential to the content of the Gospel.

Hence, it matters to the church’s mission and witness to God that Jesus is the decisive self-revelation of God, as discussed in Ch. 2 and as will be continually discussed throughout the development of the various doctrines of the church’s discourses and practices of witness.

Again, I propose the following statement of what I call the **Presiding Model of the Gospel**:

**The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the Good News
that the God of Israel, the Creator of all creatures,
has in freedom and love become incarnate
in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth
to enact and reveal God’s gracious reconciliation
of humanity to Godself, and
through the Holy Spirit calls and empowers human beings
to participate in God’s liberative and redemptive work by
acknowledging God’s gracious forgiveness in Jesus,
repenting of human sin,
receiving the gift of freedom,
embracing authentic community by
loving the neighbor and the enemy,
caring for the whole creation, and
hoping for the final triumph of God’s grace
as the triune Ultimate Companion of all creatures.**

C. I also propose that this Presiding Model of the Gospel function as the **Material Norm for the church’s continual search for understanding in all of its discourses and practices of witness.**

It is this norm that will keep the church focused as it uses Scripture and tradition in shaping its witness to the world.

But the material norm, as so stated, is always *revisable* by the church, yet not easily revised.

Recalling the distinction advanced in Ch. 2 [87] between:

1. the **Ultimacy Proviso** of the church’s witness: **only God can reveal God**, and
2. the **Penultimacy Proviso** of the church of the church’s witness: **God has chosen or deputized some definite signs in the history of Israel and Jesus Christ as the special media of God’s self-revealing activities.**

It can similarly be said that:

the **ultimate norm** for the church’s witness is the actuality of God’s free and loving self-communicating presence,
and the **material norm** is the Presiding Model of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

D. The Basic Sources of Theology

Definition of ‘sources’: those texts, artifacts, and traditions of discourses and practices upon which the construction of Christian doctrines and the larger theological witness of the church can draw. In the order of normative priority, I propose there are **Four Basic Sources**:

1. Holy Scripture
2. Church Traditions
3. Contemporary Learning
4. Past and Present Human Cultures

Notice that, given my definition of sources, I exclude the following favorites in some traditions:

1. Experience—it can be the medium of our theologizing but not a source, lest it comes to be the only source. See this critique on 115-117.
2. Reason—I reject the notion that reason itself is a something that is identifiable as a source; rather there is reasoning of various sorts that are *tools* of our theologizing.

E. In contradistinction from some church traditions I admit the **contemporary learning and **past and present human cultures** provide much rich material for enhancing the church’s witness in the various worlds in which it might be located.**

By **contemporary learning** I mean that largely contingent and developing truth-claims that are embedded in communal practices of (a) disciplined inquiry and investigation, (b) procedures for discussion and argument, and (c) criteria of judgment about some subject matter.

Think here of natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, philosophy, political theory, etc.

I caution, however, that there is no one way in which all this learning **must be used** in formulating the church’s witness in discourses and practices; should not assume that this learning is bedrock given for the church.

By **past and present human cultures** I mean that capacious range of artifacts and arts formed in and formative of the various human cultures of the past and of the present.

Should be most useful to the preaching of the church.

F. The Bible as the Church’s Holy Scripture

The Bible is the *church’s book* and as such is *constitutive* of the church’s living *textuality*, of its distinctive discourses and practices in which it has its decisive identity and mission of witness.

The church is peculiarly that community that is constituted by the *practice* of reading the Bible as *Holy Scripture*—of listening to and interpreting the scriptures as specially deputized of the upbuilding of the church.

As so textually constituted, the church *confesses* that it is confronted with God’s self-revelations in Israel and in Jesus Christ *in* the witness of the Bible.

The grammar of the words *Holy Scripture* in the context of the church is that it has authoritative status.

The church’s confession about the Bible as witness to God’s self-revelations is a *theological judgment*, not a conclusion available to the modern disciplines of history or philosophy.

Basic grammar: the church trusts the Bible because it witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is not the case that the church first trusts the Bible as truthful witness and therefore also trusts the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Put sharply: independent of hearing the witness to Jesus Christ, the church has no compelling theological interest in the Bible, except perhaps as an otherwise important source of information about ancient life and civilization! [read that again]

G. The Bible as the Primitive Narrative of God’s Self-Revelations

Primitive means: (a) the historically closest witness we have to God’s historic acts of revelation and (b) the theologically irreducible and irreplaceable witness.

As *narrative* the Bible identifies and characterizes God in and through God’s self-communicating interaction with Israel and the church.

Yet, it is the *incarnational narrative of Jesus Christ that is at the heart of the biblical narrative* for the church.

It is in these respects that the church confesses the deputized but human character of the biblical witnesses.

Hence, the Bible is a human witness and the church must resist a falsely *docetized* Bible that has emerged as a temptation in modern forms of Fundamentalism.

H. The Bible also constitutes the church as the *listening church*.

Yet the listening of the church to the Bible is properly a *communal* activity, not primarily invested in the lonely, isolated individual reader and interpreter.

The church cannot remove or dissolve the dialectical tension between:

1. listening to the Bible as the Word of God—the hermeneutics of generosity and gratitude, and
2. listening to the Bible as only a fallible, human word—the hermeneutics of suspicion.

Precisely because the church reads the Bible through the lens of Jesus Christ, the church refuses to—or has no interest in—read the Bible as set of miscellaneous truth-claims about a sundry of topics.

I. Scripture and Traditions

The church can now refuse to be handicapped by an old Protestant/Roman Catholic debate as to whether the church is constituted by the Bible or the Bible is constituted by the church.

Yes, in the OT we see the continual work of an earlier tradition of narrative and witness reinterpreted and revised by a later tradition.

Yes, we can see in the NT that its witness is that of the apostolic church and preserved and edited by the post-apostolic church as canon.

J. Church Traditions as Sources for the church's witness

In the NT *paradosis* can mean both 'handed over' and 'handed on'. The Latin word *traditio* means 'handing on' both as (a) the *process* of handing on, and (b) the *content* which is handed on.

The primary bearers of the content of any tradition—whether the church or some other social institution—are its distinctive discourses and practices.

A tradition that once prospered through distinctive discourses and practices can become shattered when the discourses and practices become empty of distinct content or when something happens to the communal tradition that seems to falsify or render void that cohesive rationale that once constituted it as one tradition.

I aver that it is hard to find that there is one and only one authoritative tradition of the church; it appears that there are many traditions historically, yet, in contemporary times it seems that there is something to an *ecumenical tradition* that bears enough continuity to re-encompass and re-order how the various church traditions understand themselves in their commonality and in their differences.

Interlude: take notice of the following interconnected points:

1. Keep my emphasis on *discourses and practices* in clear view.
2. Reread the section—**Some Basic Theses about Language**—on pp. 17-19: those theses should make it clear that *language* and *tradition* are bound together in complicated ways, which if neglected can lead to much confusion.
3. We, whether in the church as some particular tradition or in the world under the sway of enormous social powers, are always contending with how the world is being construed and understood in our discourses and practices.
4. I am trying to remind us that the church of Jesus Christ is a thick but rich tradition of construals—perhaps *traditions*.
5. One such construal is how the Bible is to be read and understood and bearing what sort of authority.
6. One such construal, often front and center, and as often hidden and presupposed, is that the Bible is a miscellaneous set of truth-claims that just stand there on their own, available to however anyone might cite and use such claims.

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7. Hence, to counter that inclination and use, I am proposing that the Bible must be seen and read as the *church's book*, and that reading must be learned and practiced.
8. My proposal of a material norm for reading the Bible is a proposal for how to understand and interpret the *primary theme of the Bible as the Gospel of Jesus Christ*.
9. The hope is that such a way of reading and construing the Bible will empower the church to forge its way to a faithful witness to God, now understood as the God known in Jesus Christ.
10. It is these theses, rooted in how we learn and have languages, that hopefully will help pastors and congregations grasp just what sort of language—what sort of discourses and practices—are already there in the church and be capacitated, by such a clear understanding of what is already there, to bring those givens under the scrutiny of the Gospel and faith seeking understanding.

K. On whether there is a tradition concerning the possible *development of doctrine*

I am proposing that basic doctrines of the faith can be understood as developing over the times of the church's various engagements with the 'worlds' in which it lives.

Such development is rooted in the various ways in which the church gives primacy to this or that theme in the biblical testimonies as authoritative for the church.

Hence, the church can admit that in the Bible there are instances and themes of what we might call the *patriarchy of male dominance* and wonder whether such a theme has the same authority as other themes inconsistent with it.

The concepts of *grammar* and *depth grammar* are intended to help us get out of the intellectual bind we often fall into when we strive to be consistent in what we say and do as church.

Examine carefully the topics I select in this section to illustrate how such development of doctrine might and does take place.

L. Theology as the Discourse of Dialectical Confession and Profession

A tightly woven attempt to bring together some basic considerations, while we are still in the arena of discussing the grammar of *faith, revelation, Holy Scripture, theology, confession, dialectical, etc.*

Christian theology as 'confessional'

1. As communal confession in and by the church that is essential to its own sense of identity.
2. Confesses the encounter with the *givenness and priority of God's self-revelation in the Gospel of Jesus Christ*.
3. Such confession of the Gospel is considered a *new point of departure*—a new epistemic situation—from which the church's discourses and practices flow.
4. It is a confession within a *tradition of discourses and practices with their characteristic doctrines*.
5. It is *public confession*—by the church *for the world*—and thus always *before the world*.

Confessional Theology as 'Dialectical'

1. as dialogue and conversation, questioning and answering, arguing, reasoning, and explaining.
2. as the intellectual power of discriminating and differentiating among concepts, images, beliefs, and judgments and of discerning connections.
3. as the existential power of choosing to become a self or a community constituted in a decisive way.
4. as the dynamic tension between two poles which are not reducible to each other or a higher synthesis—not Hegel's dialectic.

Some Dialectical Poles within Confessional Theology

What does Jones mean by 'dialectics' and 'dialectical'?

1. the dialectic between the Ultimacy Proviso and the Penultimacy Proviso.
2. the dialectic between God's self-revelation and the corrigible human response in discourses and practices.
3. the dialectic between the Presiding Model of the Gospel as material norm and the multiplicities within the biblical witnesses.

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4. the dialectic between the Bible as the Word of God and the Bible as fallible, human, limited word.
5. the dialectic between contemporary witness and tradition.
6. the dialectic between church and world.
7. the dialectic between the imperative to witness in truth to the world and the corrigible, penultimate, preliminary but proleptic character of our witness.

Hence, confessional theology relinquishes the illusory promise of worldly epistemologies or metaphysics that we will find finally that irrefutable and indisputable argument(s) that will demonstrate to all reasonable persons the absolute truth of the Christian Gospel.

Dialectical Confessional Theology in differentiation from:

Undialectical Confessionalism:

Denies the tension between the Ultimacy Proviso and the Penultimacy Proviso.

Claims that revelation is undialectically given, negotiated, secured, and stated as revealed, incorrigible propositional truths.

Some forms of Protestant Fundamentalism and hardline Roman Catholic traditionalism.

Undialectical Rationalism:

Sees no tension between revelation and response because the only revelation that can be credited is one certified by *reason*.

Tends to believe in a disinterested, universal reason that is the sole arbiter of any truth-claim, including Christian witness.

Hegel at least, maybe Hartshorne and some other process metaphysicians.

Dialectical Rationalism:

Acknowledges God's historical self-revelations, but is confident that some aspects of revelation and its presuppositions can be certified by common reason in a noncircular fashion.

Of various opinions about the dialecticity of revelation itself.

Some forms of classical theism and in some forms of revisionist Catholic theology such as Rahner, Tracy.

Confession: many are the readers of the Grammar who have not found this particular discussion illuminating or helpful; these distinctions are included here not as dogma but as something to think about.