

The place of Scripture in Receptive Ecumenism, and the potential for scriptural engagement as a place of receptive ecumenical encounter

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I. Scripture as both Common Ground and Battleground

Not every Christian tradition will define 'Scripture' or the 'biblical canon' in the same way. And yet, even despite varying definitions of the biblical canon, and a vast and heterogeneous body of modern translations and transmissions of Scripture, it can be described as a Christian common ground. Scripture is one of, if not in some traditions *the* basis for doctrinal development and Christian teaching. One would like to think that this should make it the ideal place for ecumenical encounter.

However, rather than a common ground, we often encounter Scripture as a battleground. What Mike Higton calls our different 'scriptural settlements' can clash in very painful and destructive ways when we try to defend our perceived 'truth'. These scriptural settlements, the places in which we inhabit Scripture, are complex and dynamic, influenced by institutional authorities and individual experience.

Last weekend, I attended the German Lutheran Committee's 75th anniversary celebrations. The Committee could not have chosen a more poignant place: The castle Wartburg in Eisenach. Those familiar with Martin Luther's biography will know that it was there that he translated the Greek New Testament into German, exactly 500 years ago this year. Subsequent movements like Pietism pushed Scripture and its interpretation into the realm of private households, thus adding individual engagement to the layers of interpretation conveyed by the institutionalised church.

In Lutheran theology, Scripture is called the 'norma normans', that is the norm which determines all other norms regarding the life of the church. It is of the utmost importance, therefore, to not just know but to *understand* Scripture – so what happens if someone comes along and understands it in a different way? Even if I am conscious of the fact that my scriptural settlement is different from that of the person I encounter, will I perceive this in the spirit of receptive ecumenism as an enriching gift, or in the spirit of many current debates as an existential threat to my own truth that I need to defend?

This leads me to my second part:

II. The Place of Scripture in (Receptive) Ecumenism

Receptive ecumenism opens our eyes to one particular aspect of Scripture that is often overlooked. In the life of the church across the ages, Scripture has always been something that needs to be given and received, rather than something that needs to be possessed. It is the dynamic transmission and communication of Scripture in the power of the Spirit that enables the church to live. This is in stark contrast to a possessive attitude which is statically exclusive rather than dynamically inclusive.

Christian traditions move towards Christ in different ways, coming from different directions and with differing degrees of closeness to one another. All traditions use Scripture in one way or another in this movement towards Christ, both on an individual as well as a collective level. I find this relation between Scripture and the movement towards Christ beautifully summed up in Ps 119:105: 'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light on my path'. However, Scripture should not be misunderstood as a mere instruction manual, a thing written in the past, a physical object passed on through the generations. God the Word with a capital W dynamically transcends the physical restraints of the inscribed words. Scripture as *transmitted and received* is a crucial aspect of the dynamic embodiment of divine-human relation. As such, the Word of God is a gift that needs to be received.

Therefore, the transmission of Scripture not only *has* a place in receptive ecumenism but somewhat *is* the place of receptive ecumenism because it embodies its fundamental principle of giving and receiving so that, to quote Paul Murray: "we can become more fully what we already are".¹

The gift of Scripture can of course also be used to look at receptive ecumenism from a biblical perspective. In his essay on 'Reciprocal Asymmetry in the Body of Christ', John Barclay aligns the metaphor of the body in 1 Corinthians 12 with the practice of receptive ecumenism.² Pointing to the Pauline connection of the body with the Lord's Supper (in the phrase: we are many but we are one body, because we all share in one bread, 1 Cor 10:17), Barclay points out the need for mutual recognition of people coming to the table both ready to give and to receive.³ Ecumenism, receptive or otherwise, has not yet reached full communion between

¹ Cf. Paul Murray, Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning: Establishing the Agenda, in: RECCL, 6.

² Cf. John M. G. Barclay, RETEL, 404-413.

³ Ibid., 412.

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all Christian denominations. However, perceived through the lens of 1 Cor 12, receptive ecumenism is not only able to define this as a goal (or currently unfulfilled ambition), but also to point towards the need for mutual recognition at the Lord's table in a coherent and approachable way.

If I may briefly return to what I said above, it can be difficult to receive the scriptural gifts of others from the security and assuredness of our own scriptural settlements. Receptive ecumenism, however, points very markedly to the need to do so, as it underlines the nature of Scripture as a gift that needs to be received. Difficult as it may sometimes be to perceive the insights of others as a gift, we are called to recognize the need for each other.

The question remains though, how we can actually *make* Scripture a place of receptive ecumenical encounter in practical terms. This is the third and last part of my talk.

III. The Potential of Scriptural Engagement as a Place of Receptive Ecumenical Encounter

I have been in bible study groups for most of my adult life. This is usually with people from my own or a very similar tradition. One summer, however, I had to do research in another city for a few months. On the first Sunday, sheer laziness made me go to the geographically closest church rather than the one closest in terms of tradition. It was a Baptist church – the first gift I received was a very warm welcome, the second an invitation to join a Baptist bible study group. I curiously accepted. We had seriously challenging discussions that happened on a level of mutual trust and respect and I will look back on this time as one of the most enriching encounters with Scripture I have ever had.

One does, however, rarely stumble into a bible study group of a different Christian tradition. So how is it possible to encourage Christians to *actively share* Scripture with each other?

Let us turn to Mike Higton's essay on 'Receiving Scripture Again from One Another', in which he outlines three possible ways to embed sharing Scripture into receptive ecumenical encounters.⁴ I share these here because I find them a good starting point for further reflection.

⁴ Cf. Higton, RETEL, 390f.

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Higton's first suggestion is to develop a practice of shared devout reading. He points out the difficulties of finding a sharable practice that is not trite. However, a focussed way of reading Scripture together may also encourage mutual trust and respect in such a way that sharing Scripture in a less defined manner may be possible.

His second suggestion is to deliberately focus on the different scriptural settlements we inhabit. Beyond the shared gifts of scriptural insights, this approach has the potential to share the gift of *how* we come to these insights, thus enabling one another to find new ways of negotiating Scripture. In my experience, looking at a topic from a meta-level can be very helpful. To start with a more descriptive approach of how we encounter and understand Scripture in our own traditions rather than starting with sharing Scripture itself can help to build appreciation and trust for one another as it does not immediately threaten an unwanted intrusion into someone's scriptural settlement.

Higton's third suggestion is to pay attention to and share our scriptural settlements relating to discussions of other topics in receptive ecumenical encounters. How do our respective traditions and churches argue certain matters and what might we learn from each other without necessarily looking for consensus?

This leaves open the question on what level we might want to place these scriptural encounters in a setting of receptive ecumenism. Should we do this on an individual level or an ecclesiastical one? This is a question we must answer in relation to the context we find ourselves in. Both are possible. However, if receptive ecumenism does not want to remain at a stage of giving and receiving, but wants to actively encourage churches to move towards transformative ecclesial learning, finding a way of integrating scriptural encounter in receptive ecumenical encounter is essential.