

Item #4 – A Liturgical Approach to Scripture and Tradition.

This Item was originally Entry #14 in “James Swetnam’s Close Readings”.

In 2007 I published an article in *Melita Theologica* which was really a type of book review (Bibliography, §209: James Swetnam, S.J., Article: “A Liturgical Approach to Scripture and Tradition”. In *Melita Theologica* 58 [2007] 23-30). Or, perhaps better, it was a selective book review that used a book as the occasion for exploring what seems to me to be a basic area of difference between Catholics and Protestants—the question of the primacy of Scripture or Tradition in one’s faith commitments. The author of the book, Professor Karl Donfried, is an old friend of mine. He is an ordained Lutheran minister. And, of course, famous among New Testament scholars not only in his native United States but internationally as well. The book has the provocative title *Who Owns the Bible? Towards the Recovery of a Christian Hermeneutic* (Paul New York: Crossroad, 2006). It has a far-reaching scope which I outline in the article. But what I pursue in depth is the aspect of the role of Scripture in the Lutheran and Catholic traditions. My purpose is not to argue about the respective positions, but to attempt to clarify them. I conclude that as I understand it Tradition is the more important of the two realities in Catholicism. And I advance the hypothesis that the words of institution of the Eucharist uttered by Christ are the very core of this Tradition, for they are constitutive of the Church when brought to fulfillment in Christ’s death and resurrection. There was never a time when the Church did not have Tradition, for Tradition was constitutive of the Church; but there was a time when the Church did not have Scripture, for Scripture is the authorized, inspired guide for the understanding of that Tradition: Scripture does not create Tradition but elucidates it and hence is subordinate to it. As I state on p. 28 of the article:

The Tradition of the Catholic Church, then, is a given to be accepted or not, just as Professor Donfried’s Scripture (if the reviewer understands the implications of his book aright) is to be accepted or not, depending on who is doing the accepting. But where does that leave Scripture in the Catholic Church? It leaves Scripture exactly where it has always been, as the subsequent official explanation of how the prior core, Tradition, which constitutes the Catholic Church, came to be. In the order of constitutive causality the words of consecration of the Eucharist uttered by Christ at the Last Supper are supreme. But in the order in which this constitutive causality of the words of consecration is explained, Scripture is supreme. That is to say, each of these twin ways providing contact between the Catholic Church and the one Source of revelation, Jesus Christ, is supreme in its own order. But in relation to each other, Tradition of necessity is superior because that which causes a reality is intrinsically superior to that which records this causality. Being, by the nature of things, is prior to a report about that being.

This hypothesis about the origin of Tradition agrees with the assessment of Professor Scott Hahn of The Franciscan University of Steubenville with regard not to Professor Donfried’s book or my response but the New Testament in general, that in the New Testament the theologizing is in no small measure in relation to cult. **(26 November 2008; 27 June 2019)**