

Based on: Roger Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002.

Christian Belief: Unity *and* Diversity (chap. 1)

Sources and Norms of Christian Belief: One *and* Many (chap. 2)

In discussing theology, we must begin before we begin. In other words, before we get to the particulars (God, creation, revelation, eschatology, etc.) we must begin with the generals (terminology, approach, sources, etc.). Roger Olson's approach in his book *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, which I'm using to develop the material for this class, is a helpful one. He recognizes the great diversity of thought in Christian tradition, and chooses to embrace and appreciate rather than deny and denigrate it. To do so, in each chapter he offers up what he considers to be mainstream or orthodox views about the particular topic followed by alternate and possibly heretical views, and concludes with a discussion of the various perspectives and a way to hold them together in some unified whole while maintaining the diversity.

To me, this is how you learn and develop. Too often in churches and seminaries the approach is to set forth one's views as the only valid perspective, and if one mentions another view it is only to argue against it. Yet I believe we only learn and grow when we are exposed to new thoughts, ideas and perspectives that challenge our own. I'm not saying you will wholly agree with the other views (in fact, you may completely disagree), but we at least need to consider them. Maybe nothing will change for you or perhaps much will change. Either way, exposing ourselves to the ideas and approaches of fellow Christ-followers from different denominational traditions and theological perspectives is always a positive and healthy endeavor.

Perhaps an example would help. Take two people who grew up in different denominations. One is from an Episcopal background, where liturgy is up-front and central to everything they do. One is from a Baptist background, where liturgy is present (though often unacknowledged) but the approach is a bit more open to adjustment and variety. The Episcopal likely will appreciate and learn from the Baptist approach, as he/she has only been exposed to more formal liturgical services his/her entire life. In the same way, the Baptist likely will appreciate and learn from the Episcopal approach, as he/she has only encountered more informal, changeable services his/her entire life. It's not that they'll change denominations or approaches entirely, but they will appreciate and possibly seek to incorporate some elements into their method as a result.

I think theology works in the same way. If we only encounter the same views and perspectives over and over again, we won't grow by being challenged by another way of looking at a subject. We need to embrace all of Christian thought on a topic in order to appreciate the rich diversity that exists among those of us who confess "Jesus Christ, Savior and Lord."

A good motto for us as we begin our study is the oft-used phrase: "in essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things charity." Put another way, "unity in the essentials and diversity in the non-essentials." It's a useful statement, but it's not without its complications. Despite the seeming simplicity, distinguishing between essentials and non-essentials proves quite difficult. Ask ten Christians to list the central, essential tenets of our faith tradition and you'll likely get ten different lists. So, it's more complex than it may first appear, but the basic concept is sound and one we should keep in mind as we proceed. The reality is that the list of essentials is much, much smaller than the list of non-essentials, and the resounding call should be "in all things charity" since it's unlikely that we will ever come to agree on the list of essentials within a local church congregation, much less the Church worldwide.

Having set forth a proper approach, Olson provides a helpful division of beliefs using three categories: dogma, doctrine, and opinion.

Dogmas are beliefs common to all Christians. The core, central, basic or mere Christianity as it is often called. These are essentials, because if they were to be removed we would no longer be able to label it Christian. Again, individuals and groups will vary on which items should be placed in this category, but a good “rule of thumb” is to keep this list rather minimal and as all-encompassing as possible. Doing so allows for a relatively small, unifying core complemented by a large, diversifying array of Christian beliefs. The size of the categories should grow larger as we move from dogma to doctrine to opinion.

Doctrines are beliefs common to a particular group of Christians. Though not essential to Christianity, these beliefs are important to the given denomination or local church community and can be supported by a given interpretation of the biblical texts. In this category there is consensus among significant segments of the Church (often, though not always, manifested along denominational lines), but no all-encompassing or universally accepted view. This category is broader than that of dogmas, but smaller than the final category of opinions.

Opinions are beliefs about which there is no consensus. These are views held by individuals that are not central to Christian faith or denominational affiliation, and cannot be supported (at least definitively) by the biblical witness. Olson defines opinions as ideas “not clearly taught in Scripture and they do not touch on the gospel itself” (44).

By way of example, let’s look at the idea of the creation. A Christian *dogma* regarding creation would be that God (YHWH) created everything that exists. The *doctrine* and *opinion* categories blur a bit on this topic, since these categories often arise by forcing questions upon ancient texts that were not aware of, much less concerned with, providing answers our modern-day wonderings and speculative interpretations of these texts. Views of creation in these categories result from a certain biblical interpretation of the relevant texts based upon reason and/or pure speculation and interaction with the sciences. Doctrines/opinions regarding creation would include the exact process by which God created, the time it took for God to create, God’s relationship to time, the literalness or figurativeness of the Adam-Eve narrative, the origin/necessity of sin and evil, and so on.

Now that we’ve touched upon approach and terminology, let’s look at possible methodologies, of which Olson offers two—the “bounded-set” and “centered-set” methods.

The ***bounded-set method*** requires a rigid establishment and maintenance of boundaries and an exclusion of those outside these bounds. This is the approach used far too often in my opinion, and it leads to several problems.

First, it creates the idea that the Christian faith is about having all the right theological and doctrinal opinions. If you think or express a wrong thought—that is, a view outside the established boundaries—you run the risk of being outcast and labeled “heretic” or “un-Christian.” One is simply left to wonder how such an approach fits with Jesus’ statements that loving God and neighbor is central to his redemptive way of life called the Kingdom of God rather than having the most righteous, rigid, and structured theological formulations and opinions. After all, is that not what he critiqued the religious authorities of his day for the most?

Second, it limits diversity and can lead to Inquisition-like actions by the majority that stifles the views of the minority. In other words, this can lead (and often has led) to unloving, uncharitable actions that often pejoratively label any dissenters as “heretics.” A cursory knowledge of church history proves this to be true. Tragically, these “heretics” have often *not* been men and women who denied anything fundamental to the Christian faith (though that has happened too), but people who disagreed with a non-essential view of the majority and were branded and outcast because of it. We need to learn from past mistakes and be careful about overusing and abusing the term. It needs to be redeemed from the pejorative name-calling that is often connected with its application, and reserved only for those views that are absolutely incompatible with the most fundamental, universal tenets of the Christian faith and not simply “pet” doctrines or opinions that individuals or groups desire to impose on the rest of us.

This leads to the final problem, namely, this approach eliminates the possibility that the majority opinion could be wrong. You’ve heard the adage “history is written by the victors.” Well, this approach is largely the same—“theology and doctrine is determined by those in the majority or in positions of power” because the boundaries are set and immovable. To offer another perspective is to reject the foundations and will lead to rejection as an un-Christian heretic whose views can then be summarily dismissed.

The second, and, I believe, more appropriate, approach is the *centered-set method*, which stresses fluidity and flexibility of thought around a central core of teachings. The center—defined by Olson as “conversion and commitment to Jesus Christ and the basic message about him proclaimed by the apostles”—becomes essential, not the boundaries. This method recognizes that list of essential dogmas is rather small and the list of non-essential doctrines and opinions is rather large. It knows that the majority can be (and has been) wrong at times, and believes a free marketplace of ideas is vital to allow for a rich diversity of thought around the central, unifying confession of “Jesus Christ, Savior and Lord.” This is the approach taken by Olson in his book, and which this study will take as well.

Finally, I want to close with is a brief overview of sources and norms of Christian belief. This deals with the question, what are our sources for considering the diversity of ideas about the Christian faith and formulating our own theological perspectives on the various topics that we will look at in the weeks ahead? Put most simply, we encounter and make use of four sources—Scripture, Tradition, reason, and experience.

Scripture, for Protestant Christians, refers to the 66 biblical texts, while Roman Catholics also affirm several other texts known as the Apocrypha or Deuterocanon. Tradition, in Olson’s words, refers to “the consensus beliefs held in common...as expressed...by the ecumenical creeds and Reformation confessions of faith.” This includes the dogmas—ideas and beliefs central to Christianity—as well as doctrinal positions central to particular denominations. Reason refers simply to logic, and experience refers to our individual and collective human experience.

All four elements are involved when we discuss theological matters, and they interact with and influence one another. They are each essential, though should be weighted differently. In other words, each of the four sources is not equal. Scripture and Tradition supersede reason and experience, though it should be evident that the writers of the biblical texts used reason and experience in writing just as we use them in reading and interpreting.

Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox often place Tradition on the same level as Scripture. More specifically, Scripture is encapsulated in the Tradition, which Olson reveals is “the entire process of God’s Spirit speaking to and within the church” (63). Tradition, then, encompasses the movement of God by means of Scripture, experience, and reason that has been formulated into dogmas and doctrines.

Protestants, by and large, place Scripture above Tradition, reason, and experience, an idea often expressed in the phrase *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone). While it is correct that Scripture should be our leading source and *sola scriptura* sounds straightforward and simple, the reality is that Tradition, reason, and experience shape how we interpret the Scriptures so the principle proves untenable. In other words, the very statement proves devoid of meaning because we can never approach Scripture without being influenced by our tradition, reason, and experience.

Here's an example of how all four sources are essential in approaching and interpreting biblical texts. During Lent this past year I spoke at FBC about Jesus' parable of the talents in Matthew 25.14-46. I had heard someone at a conference offer a different interpretation of the passage, and it led me to re-examine the text for myself to see if I agreed with her view.

The traditional view (and the view I found in all the commentaries on Matthew I possess) interpreted the story as a lesson about using the gifts and abilities God gives us—if we don't use them, we lose them. It's almost always how the story is understood, yet this woman's insight caused me to look at the text again, and I came to agree that the traditional understanding misses the point. I'd always read the text one way because of Tradition, and never considered that it may be wrong. Tradition had put theological blinders on me, so to speak, and it took hearing another perspective for me to be able to remove the "blinders" and apply reasoning (logic) in considering the parable in light of the biblical and historical context.

In so doing I noticed that the parable is connected to Jesus' subsequent statement about separating the sheep and the goats (Mt 25.31-46), which changes how you interpret the parable. It is no longer a story about using our God-given gifts, but a rebuke of the manner of business commonly practiced in Jesus' day (and ours), where the rich and wealthy take what is not rightly theirs. In other words, the parable exposes and critiques the well-to-do who exploit the less fortunate, and abuse and/or cast out anyone who refuses to do the same.

I checked that interpretation against other texts in Scripture and found support in the OT prophets and elsewhere. I also checked the interpretation with my reasoning skills as well as with my experience and saw that it fit there as well. It disagrees with tradition, yes, and that will always be a response of some to my new understanding of the passage. Yet, in this case, I have to disagree with tradition because Scripture, reason, and experience require me to do so.

As this example illustrates, the interplay between these four elements (Scripture, Tradition, reason, and experience) are always present and unavoidable. Scripture may be exalted as primary, yet reading and interpreting Scripture is done in the context and through the aid of Tradition, reason, and experience. More often than not, those who claim the "high ground" by using the phrase "Scripture alone" fail to recognize that they are influenced by the cultural, sociological, political, denominational, experiential, and reason-based traditions into which they have been born, and their understanding of Scripture has been colored and shaped by all of these elements. Therefore, it's never as simple as *sola scriptura*, and recognizing this will help us a great deal in the weeks ahead by allowing us to approach these topics, in the words of Kierkegaard, with "fear and trembling."