

CHRIST ALIVE IN THE WORLD: ROOT, SHOOT, AND FRUIT

Pastor Fred Reklau, April, 2021

The life and health of the Christian church, now as in all ages, has involved these three intimately linked parts of a healthy, productive “plant”: *root*, *shoot*, and *fruit*. For the church’s health and vitality, it is essential to identify each in itself and also to specify how each relies on the others.

That’s new and different. How is it an improvement over models we’ve known before?

Begin with the end product and work backward. Of the three, the third – *fruit* – is most visible and identifiable. Whether in an action, a word, or a way of life, the fruit of faith ripens out in the open, in daily life. St. Paul writes, in Galatians 5:22-23 (NRSV, *passim*), “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” In 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, 13, he displays the facets of love: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. . . . And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

But life in the world is not all so lovely. Skeptics deny faith as the source and power of these virtues. It has ever been so. And it is always true that finding the most faithful action, word, or path in life usually entails much time and effort, and the work never ends. We are always on the way, always striving to walk the talk and never arriving. But there is Good News: the trustworthy promise of God’s blessed future in resurrected life always lies ahead!

Yes! Nothing new there. Now then: Which is the *root*, and which is the *shoot*? Does the

faith community grow out of Scripture, or Scripture out of the faith community? Which comes first?

Getting this straight is crucial! Paying no attention to this issue has been the underlying cause of endless disagreements and conflicts in the wider Christian church throughout its history. After the earliest years of the church’s existence, the unquestioned – and, worse yet, unexamined – assumption has been that *Scripture is the root. Out of it grows the church; it’s the shoot*. The most obvious evidence is that most of us have imbibed the notion – almost with our mother’s milk – that “Jesus loves me, this I know / For the *Bible* tells me so.” But the historic reality is that the new Christian faith was spread far and wide in the world of the apostles by witnessing about Christ primarily by *preaching*, for centuries.

Why not by writing? It’s because the earliest believers expected Jesus to return in glory very soon, so at first they saw no need for anything more than their Jewish Scriptures. But when decades passed and those who had known Jesus personally were dying, the need to write down their teachings about Jesus became clear. Letters of Paul and others were collected and circulated first. Then gospels were written over a 20-year span or so. Other writings claiming divine origin proliferated, too. Many of them were centered not on Jesus and his gift of salvation through him, but on the powers and outlandish ideas of mere humans.

Chaos threatened. So church leaders – bishops – came to the fore to assert control. They devoted much attention – sometimes quite passionate argument – to defining the canon (authoritative list) of the evolving New Testament, deciding what belonged, and what did not measure up. The process was slow. It took four centuries.

But even today not all Christians agree; Roman Catholics recognize seven more books than Protestants do, and Orthodox churches

include even more. And the debate hasn't ended, even now. Some scholars are questioning whether the early church was right to reject some of those other writings.

Well, new manuscripts have regularly come to light. More may be yet to come. As long as the Gospel of Jesus' life-giving death and rising are kept in the center, shouldn't we welcome new learnings?

Yes. But any such openness stirs blasts of condemnation from so-called "Bible-believing" Christians, the fundamentalist literalists who insist the 66 books in the (Protestant) canon are inerrant, the ultimate, infallible source of *both* fact and truth. It's bumper-sticker simple: "the Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it." They assume, in today's common view, that what it says can't be trusted to be *true* if it isn't actually *fact*. Fact equals truth; that's their story, and they're sticking to it.

But they face an awkward and inconvenient challenge: trying to bring conflicting passages into harmony with one another. For a few examples among many: How can anyone explain away the seven pairs of clean animals in Noah's ark, according to Exodus 7:2, vs. the two pairs in 7:9; or beating "swords into plowshares," as in Isaiah 2:4, vs. beating "plowshares into swords," as in Joel 3:10; or engaging with fools vs. refusing to do so – compare Proverbs 26:4 with 26:5?

But Lutherans aren't fundamentalists. Right?

Some Lutherans in our day do lean toward fundamentalism, insisting on inerrancy. For support, they cite Martin Luther's *sola Scriptura* ("Scripture alone") slogan. But Luther and the other Reformers – those who gathered seminal Lutheran writings in the *Book of Concord* of 1570 – insisted over and over again that their evangelical movement stood firmly rooted in genuine orthodox traditions of the church as confessed, in particular, in the ecumenical Creeds.

Their own reform movement focused narrowly on opposing the Roman church's elevating of *tradition above Scripture*. They may have felt that they could have most impact with a stark, vivid statement: "Scripture *alone*." But it was the *Gospel* that was at stake, the Good News of God's love for all that is the true heart and core of Scripture. They put their lives and their sacred honor on the line in defense of that.

But they never intended to swing the pendulum to the opposite extreme. *Scripture above tradition* was never the purpose. Each must always be in dialogue with the other. We would do well to find that same balance.

What about Luther himself? What did he say?

It may come as a surprise that Luther did not place equal value on all 66 books in the Bible. He even questioned whether books belonged in the canon that do not proclaim the Gospel message clearly and forthrightly (He called James an "epistle of straw," and had doubts about Jude, Revelation, and others.), though all 66 are included in his German translation of the Bible. Many Lutheran scholars today question his judgments, by the way.

Reformers outside of Germany, of Luther's time and later, also argued that "Scripture alone" did not represent the church's wisdom through the ages. John Wesley, who founded the movement that became Methodism, was inspired by Luther's writings. Wesley identified four guides for Christian thought and life. Albert Outler, a 20th century Methodist scholar, labeled them "the Wesleyan Quadrilateral": Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. (*Wikipedia*, "Albert Outler")

Roman Catholicism is by far the largest Christian denomination. Where do they stand?

A major shift occurred in 1943, when Pope Pius XII issued "A Statement on Biblical Interpretation" in his encyclical, *Divino Afflante*

Spiritu. Fr. Lawrence Boadt, CSP, says it “represents recognition, by an official church document, of the importance of critical method for the study of the Bible.” (*Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*, p. 3) So Roman Catholic scholars have joined in the cause of freeing people of faith from a slavish bowing before the words just as they are written in Scripture, ignoring *when, where, why, by whom*, and *for whom* they were written. Richard Rohr, OFM, a Franciscan friar whom many non-Catholics acclaim, offers welcome clarity on how to interpret the Bible both responsibly and faithfully. Excerpts from two essays follow:

All language about God is necessarily symbolic and figurative. . . Words are never the thing itself; they can only point toward the thing, which is exactly why “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14). . . ¶ Jesus often used similes in his parables: “The kingdom of heaven is like. . .” (See Matthew 13: 31, 33, 44.) In other places, the Bible uses metaphors for God, such as *rock* (Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 62:3) and *shepherd* (Psalm 23:1; Ezekiel 34:11-16). Jesus describes himself metaphorically as the *bread of life* (John 6:35-51) and the *light of the world* (John 8:12; 9:5). The Spirit is portrayed as *breath* (Genesis 2:7; Job 32:8) and *wind* (John 3:8). Can’t literalists be honest? . . . God is not literally a rock or an actual shepherd on a hillside somewhere, yet we need these images to “imagine” the unsayable Mystery. ¶ The New Testament is a very inclusive and broad text. It builds upon pre-Jewish and Jewish history and symbols, includes “pagan” roots and stories, draws from “inter-testamental literature”. . . and has many, many Greek influences. This is the only way the pattern of Divine Revelation can and will continue—with a foundation that sets the trajectory [followed by] constant, ongoing development and example. (Richard Rohr, “All Language is Metaphor,” Nov. 11, 2017)

Biblical messages often proceed from historical incidents, but the actual message does not depend upon communicating those events with perfect factual accuracy. Any good writer knows that! Spiritual writers are not primarily journalists. . . *Whatever is received is received according to the manner of the receiver. . .* People at different levels of development will interpret . . . in different ways. There is no one right way to interpret sacred texts. . . *How you see is what you see*; the *who* that you bring to your reading of the Scriptures matters. Is it a defensive who? An offensive who? A power-hungry who? A righteous who? Surely, this is why we need to pray before reading a sacred text! ¶ Jesus consistently ignored or even denied exclusionary, punitive, and triumphalistic texts in his own inspired Hebrew Bible in favor of passages that emphasized inclusion, mercy, and honesty. He read the Scriptures in a spiritual and selective way. Jesus had a deeper and wider eye that knew which passages were creating a path for God and which passages were merely cultural, self-serving, and legalistic additions. . . ¶ When Christians pretend that every line in the Bible is of equal importance and inspiration, they are being very *unlike* Jesus. This is precisely why Jesus was accused of teaching “as one who had authority, and not as their scribes” (Matthew 7:29, RSV), and why they hated him so much. Jesus even accused fervent and pious “teachers of the law” of largely missing the point. “Is not this why you are wrong, that you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?” he asked them (Mark 12:24, RSV). We cannot make the same mistake all over again—and now in Jesus’ name. (Richard Rohr, “How Jesus Interpreted Scripture,” Nov. 10, 2017) (Copyright © 2018 by CAC. Used by permission of CAC. All rights reserved worldwide.)

So in the “root, shoot, fruit” model, saying that Scripture is the root, and church life through the centuries is the shoot, is both too simple and quite misleading. Actually, the opposite is true: New believers were brought to Jesus within the community of faithful believers, where loving mentors shared not just their knowledge, but their *lived experience* of God’s love that came to life within each person and in all of them together. Acts 2:43-45 reports, “Awe came upon everyone, because many signs and wonders were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”

It makes a great difference to say they were *witnesses* in life-changing action. They had no intention to just pass along facts and teachings.

It sounds wonderful. But can real life be that ideal? Even now, in *our* present-day lives?

The reality is that those halcyon days didn’t last long. Christians suffered persecution for centuries. Their faithful witness sometimes led to the loss of their lives, particularly when they refused to worship the emperor.

But their total commitment, even to the point of death, persuaded many to embrace the faith. As the prolific writer, Tertullian, said at the turn of the third century, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” The Greek word *martyros* is translated “witness.” That refers to believers’ personal words and actions that did not – and do not – necessarily include violent death. Today Tertullian might add, “. . . and not the ink of the scribes.”

A millennium later, St. Francis made the point in memorable and oft-quoted words: “Preach the Gospel at all times; when necessary, use words.” Actions speak louder than words, then and now!

Stop to think: Jesus never wrote a word. His ministry of teaching and healing, his life that ended in suffering, death, and resurrection were

recorded by others, decades after the events. His disciples wrote nothing; at most, they shared memories verbally that were recorded by others. The 70 disciples sent out by Jesus to preach (Luke 10:1-17) carried no books or scrolls. Paul and his partners used just their voices and their love actions to proclaim God’s love and grace to Jews and Gentiles alike. In short, the church was born, grew, thrived, and spread by word of mouth for centuries. When “Scripture” is mentioned in 2 Timothy 3:16, it must have referred to the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of Hebrew Scriptures, that was in wide use at the time. We call it the Old (or better, the First) Testament.

Aha! Doesn’t that prove Scripture should be the *root*? Didn’t it “root” the church from the start?

No. That same progression, from oral to written witness, occurred in the time before Christ. Despite what church tradition taught for a very long time, Moses, who lived in the 13th century BCE, actually never wrote a word. Neither did Joshua or any of the judges or kings. Whatever royal records were written have long been lost. When prophets like Elijah arose, they themselves did not write; they preached, and their lives and teachings were recorded by others. Only with Amos, in the 8th century BCE, did writing of prophets’ words come into play, with the men we call the Great Prophets.

It took until the 6th century BCE for Jewish scholars in Babylon to feel compelled to compile and edit the books of the First Testament. That was during the latter years of the Exile (586-538 BCE) and after the new ruler, Cyrus the Persian, authorized the Judeans’ return to their own land.

Why write *then*? Because it had become crystal-clear that the full story of their relationship with God, ugly warts and all, must be put on record: God had made them the Chosen People, calling them to an exclusive

relationship of love and commitment – a sacred covenant. But they had gone after other gods, time and again. They had reneged on the covenant. So they suffered the consequences God had warned them about repeatedly.

They were deported to distant Babylon, looking back over their shoulders at the demolition of their society's former bulwarks – the monarchy, Temple worship and sacrifices, their own Promised Land “flowing with milk and honey.” (Reality check: Their land had actually been subjected, through the centuries, to domination by Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, and now Persians.)

They had come to realize that a profound reorientation was demanded. They believed God was still powerfully, graciously, and lovingly at work with them. They were still the Chosen People! And after the return, they did rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple on a limited scale. But now they needed to build their community primarily on the basis of their *personal relationships*, not on structures and institutions, no matter how glorious they had been. The bottom line: They were determined, however their circumstances changed, to keep their identity as God's people alive and active, through the grace of God and the *personal* support of one another.

Very nice. But let's get back on track. Where does the “root/shoot/fruit” model fit in – both in the First and also in the New Testament?

Start with basics. For many centuries there were no cheap, abundant writing materials. On top of that, only a privileged few could actually read and write. So foundational stories and instructions were passed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next. And, as happens in both stories and instructions, details were reshaped and modified later, in different circumstances. Recall that we've seen that in the swords/plowshares example, among many others.

Then, as their ancestors in the faith had done before through the Spirit's power and guidance, Jesus' followers put in writing God's mighty acts in his life, death, and resurrection, and in the life of the early church.

One way to put it is that they often *repurposed* material from the First Testament to connect with people who had grown up in that thought world.

And that was nothing new! Jesus himself pointed to a precedent in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18. In the first, he speaks to Peter, and in the second, to all the disciples. He gave them authority to set aside biblical laws in some cases. Mark Allan Powell, a Lutheran New Testament scholar, says, “Jewish rabbis ‘bound’ the law when they determined that a commandment was applicable to a particular situation, and they ‘loosed’ the law when they determined that a word of scripture (while eternally valid) was not applicable under certain specific circumstances.” (*Currents in Theology and Mission* 30:6, December, 2003, p. 438)

Much more broadly and deeply, Jesus *reconstituted* life with God. Matthew's Gospel has the inaugural address of his ministry in what we call the Sermon on the Mount, chapters 5-7. Before, on Mount Sinai, the people Moses led out of Egypt were given the Law – rules to live by as freed slaves. Some – the Pharisees – had expanded Ten Commandments to 613 laws, a crushing burden. Jesus, the “new Moses,” offers the rule – kingdom – of God in his own living Person! Six times in chapter 5, he says, “it was said . . . But I say to you. . . .” Jesus makes it singular and clear: “Follow *me*.” He rules with grace and love; he has “filled full” the Law.

Finally, we often see, especially in the book of Acts, that apostles and others in the early church felt free to interpret (repurpose) First Testament passages as prophecies naming Jesus as the Messiah, even though those passages originally had quite different meanings.

Down to our time, the Holy Spirit keeps on breathing life into the church through sustained “conversation” between the people whose voices are recorded in Scripture and believers today. They don’t lecture us, and we don’t just passively listen. Because the Spirit is just as alive as always, we must believe and trust that *inspiration* – the indwelling of the Holy Spirit – still happens!

Actually, that’s what happens with sermons each and every Sunday. Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience – the Wesleyan Quadrilateral – is put into play. The same text is preached using very different words in the worship services of widely diverse and unique faith communities. Proclamation – the inspired, embodied Word! – grows out of the unique life of God’s people in their own places and groups.

Didn’t Luther warn not to get carried away with fanciful “inspirations”? He said Thomas Müntzer, an “enthusiast,” had “swallowed the Holy Ghost, feathers and all.”

He did have a way with words. He was warning about people who claimed (and some still claim, today) that they *alone* had received unique, special revelations from God. “Listen to me! I have the *real* truth!” They dismissed the long-held orthodox traditions of the church, the widely shared beliefs of those in their own time, and the questions and warnings from people who were concerned for them and for the truth. Luther cherished and embraced them all.

So, with Luther and the great “cloud of witnesses” who have gone before us, we affirm the church as the root. Newcomers to the faith, whether children or adults, come to be rooted in the love and grace of God through believers’ *witness* in their words and especially in their lives. “Jesus loves me, this I know / For *God’s people* tell me so.” This must be stated boldly and clearly: Scriptures will always be *essential* for keeping all on track, both new and lifelong believers. But the invitation, “Come, live the faith together with us,” can never be replaced by “Just read this ‘holy book.’ It’s all you’ll

ever need.”

What’s your closing argument?

In the ELCA, both the churchwide and synod constitutions have an identical Fourth Article (S4.02 a., b., c.) that defines “Word of God.” It declares that Jesus, “Word made flesh,” is the *primary* definition of the Word of God among us. It’s *personal*!

Second is the Word as proclamation, the live, person-to-person speaking of the Gospel in churches and in the world. It’s *communal*!

Third (last, but not least) is the Word in the canonical Scriptures. It’s *trans-generational*!

There can be no clearer statement that the church community and its people are the *root* – the source of the growth and thriving of the church, in the power of the Spirit. After all, the Holy Spirit, we believe, is as fully active today as in the days when the Bible was in formation. So we believe that the Scriptures continue to “grow” and bear fruit by Spirit power, as Scriptures are interpreted and applied to our lives, day by blessed day.

Conclusion:

The faith community is the *root* of Christian faith and life.

Scriptures are the *shoot*, as the Spirit uses them to guide and enable growth.

Together – always and only *together* – they produce *fruits*!

To God alone the glory!