

Seminar on Authority

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Seminar on Authority

The Proceedings
of
A Dialogue Between Catholics and Baptists

Sponsored by
The Ecumenical Institute of Wake Forest University
and
Belmont Abbey College

April 29 – May 1, 1974
Wake Forest University
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

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Edited by J. William Angell

Director, The Ecumenical Institute

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Introduction

This Seminar on Authority was designed to continue the fruitful dialogue which began at Belmont Abbey, North Carolina, in May, 1973. The proceedings of that conference were published in the book, Catholics and Baptists in Ecumenical Dialogue. This publication is presented as a companion to that volume.

It should be noted here again, however, that these meetings are only a part of a process toward mutual understanding and spiritual unity between Roman Catholics and Baptists in America that has been developing for years. This is, in fact, the fifth conference between Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists co-sponsored by the Ecumenical Institute of Wake Forest University. The first was held on the University's campus in May, 1969; the second was at St. Joseph's Abbey, Covington, Louisiana, in February, 1970; the third was in Louisville, Kentucky, in May, 1970; and the fourth was at Belmont Abbey in May, 1973. A number of similar meetings have been sponsored in recent years by other groups within the two communions.

The Seminar on Authority was co-sponsored by the Ecumenical Institute of Wake Forest University and Belmont Abbey College. It was held on the Wake Forest campus, April 29 through May 1, 1974. There were five sessions.

The same persons planned and led this Seminar that were responsible for the 1973 meeting. They are as follows:

The Right Reverend Edmund F. McCaffrey, O. S. B.,
Abbot Ordinary, Belmont Abbey Nullius

The Reverend John P. Bradley,
President, Belmont Abbey College

Dr. James Ralph Scales,
President, Wake Forest University

The Honorable Brooks Hays,
Founder and Consultant, The Ecumenical Institute

The Reverend Claude U. Broach,
Pastor, St. John's Baptist Church, Charlotte,
and Consultant, The Ecumenical Institute

Professor J. William Angell,
Director, The Ecumenical Institute

The design of this meeting was purposefully different from that of previous conferences, as these proceedings

indicate. The planners were agreed that there is a need to go beyond the stage of fellowship between Catholics and Baptists, as helpful and desirable as that remains. The time has come, we believe, to probe more deeply into the elements of faith and practice that unite us or separate us, and to debate, in friendship and candor, the issues that divide us in order that they may be clarified and possibly, at least eventually, reduced or eliminated.

We are fully cognizant of the vast differences that exist between the teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church and of that varied denomination of Christians who are called Baptists. It has not been our intention either to gloss over our very real disagreements or to pretend some kind of artificial unity. But we have been unable and unwilling to ignore the increasingly obvious fact that our agreements are more profound than our differences. We have found ourselves united in a respect and affection for each other, and we have been drawn together in our acceptance of the grace of our Father given to us in our Lord Jesus Christ.

The decision was made, then, to begin our work as a relatively small group, building upon the foundations already laid in the previous, larger conferences. We decided to hold a seminar--a smaller, more intimate meeting composed of competent scholars. And we agreed that the appropriate subject for our beginning should be "Authority," since this is both a fundamental, controlling issue in all religious faith and practice, and at the same time a subject involving historically distinctive agreement and difference between us.

The papers which are recorded here were read and discussed in the Seminar. They provoked searching inquiry and, at times, sharp debate. The participants agreed that the result was at least a better understanding of each side by the other. No consensus was achieved, of course, as none was intended; but the participants expressed in many ways their happy conviction that another step was taken toward greater understanding and Christian brotherhood. The process must continue, and we have faith that it will because there is hope and love.

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The Concept of Authority
 by
 Richard A. McCormick, S.J.

My subject for this Catholic-Southern Baptist conversation is authority within the Roman Catholic tradition. But I should like to qualify this title immediately to bring it within discussable range. The first qualification has to do with the modality of authority. In the Catholic tradition, being a member of the Church means being under shepherds who possess the commission to sanctify, govern and teach. I am particularly interested in sharing some thoughts with you on this last aspect of authority, the magisterium of the Church. And that is my first qualification.

But why discuss the magisterium? For two reasons. First, not only are other modalities of authority likely to be deeply affected by the interpretation of teaching authority, but teaching authority itself is a particularly delicate matter in ecumenical conversations. Secondly, the teaching office of the Church is under question, challenge and even defiance in our time. Before the issuance of Humanae vitae, John Cardinal Heenan (London) noted that "there is no more delicate subject in contemporary theology." ¹ An article in Concilium, the Cardinal argued, is at least as likely to win the respect of theologians as a papal encyclical. The Pope is popularly pictured as a prisoner of the Vatican, victimized by the myopic views of insulated but well entrenched Vatican functionaries.

There are many understandable reasons for this crisis, as Gregory Baum has pointed out. ² The doctrinal development at Vatican II shocked and surprised many Catholics. Positions authoritatively proposed in the past were modified or reversed. Then there is the rather remarkable fate of some of Catholicism's most well known theologians. Silenced in the mid-fifties, they played a crucial role in the composition of conciliar documents. Furthermore, living in cultural pluralism, the Catholic Church embraces those belonging to different cultures and intellectual environments. The faith is formulated in different ways, closer to one tradition than to another. This is seen as partiality by the diverging tradition. Add to this the positivistic mentality of contemporary culture, its anti-rationalism and escalating antagonism to authority, and it is easy to grasp why there is a crisis

of the magisterium in the Catholic community.

My second qualification in the discussion of authority is its limitation to noninfallible but authoritative teaching. Authoritative but noninfallible teaching may seem to be continuous with infallible teaching, but actually the notions are highly analogous. Indeed, I venture to say that they are more dissimilar than similar. Infallible teaching has its own literature, vocabularily, problems and theology. I do not wish to discuss these issues here. I shall limit my remarks to the "day-to-day" magisterium.

The magisterium is the Church as she teaches, the teaching function of the Church. My thesis -- one I propose simply as a vehicle for discussion -- is that this office in the Church ought to undergo and is undergoing a rather radical rethinking and refashioning. The result of this refashioning will be a magisterium in which all have a much greater responsibility. This should hardly surprise us. If Christian life is essentially community life, life in a collectivity, then Christian teaching is simply the community trying to discover how best to formulate its religious convictions and how best to preserve and express its charity.

The notion of teaching in the Church will be affected by many factors. At any moment in history the notion of magisterium will reflect the very notion of teaching that prevails in a particular era or culture. In the past the cumulative effect of many cultural variables was a notion of teaching, and therefore teaching in the Church, that was highly authoritarian and paternalistic. I note once again that such a notion simply reflected the times which were authoritarian and paternalistic. But times have changed. Changing cultural factors are modifying the notion of teaching in contemporary societies, and therefore the notion of teaching in the Church. To describe these fluctuations, I wish to lift out seven cultural variables that have influenced the notion of magisterium in the preconciliar Church (roughly, the last three or four hundred years). I will then approach these variables as they have been modified in the post-conciliar Church (roughly since the end of the second Vatican Council).

Cultural Variables in the Pre-conciliar Church³

The self-definition of the Church. In the preconciliar past, a rather one-sidedly juridical model of the Church prevailed. The Church was often described along lines closely resembling civil society. Such a description highlighted a vertical or pyramidal structure. In this structure authority as well as truth was seen as descending from the summit down, from the popes and bishops to the priests, and ultimately to the laity. Indeed, the word "Church" was frequently identified with a small group in positions of authority.

The influence of the mass media. In the pre-jet and pre-television decades access to information and thought in other areas of the world was slow and even restricted. Thus information flow was less influential on the formation of opinion. Because opinions were formed with less exposure to other currents of thought, ecclesiastical directives did not always incarnate the full richness of varying traditions and were received less critically within the Church. This means that at times it was possible for them to retain a formative influence disproportionate to their inherent persuasive force.

The awareness of the complexity of issues. In the past Catholic education was not infrequently defensive and cloistered from the major currents of secular life. Similarly many seminaries were isolated from university life. This meant that Catholic attitudes (both theological tenets and language) were formed or maintained apart from the enlightenment that contemporary science could bring to them, and hence without a sufficiently full awareness of the complexity of the issues.

The manner of the exercise of authority in the Church. In the past authority in the Church was highly centralized both at the Roman and the diocesan level. Where teaching was concerned there was very limited consultation in the drafting of papal statements, and what there was was often the product of a single theological emphasis. (Cf. the influence of theologians such as F. Hurth, A. Vermeersch, G. Gundlach on the documents of the magisterium.) Furthermore, in the decades following the definition of papal infallibility, theologians were a bit overawed by the documents of the ordinary noninfallible magisterium. They tended to be almost exegetical in their approach to these teachings and it was nearly unthinkable (and certainly very risky) to question the formulations of such documents. These considerations

justify the conclusion of Roderick Mackenzie, S.J., that "between the two Vatican councils there has been a tendency to exaggerate, or to broaden unduly, the role of the magisterium, and that the Church has suffered on this account."

Educational status of the clergy and laity. For centuries the clergy were the best educated people in the Church. Many cultural factors -- among them the broad, non-specialized character of education -- explained this phenomenon. This suggests that the clergy might have taken on tasks that more properly belonged to a wider constituency.

Status of relations between ecclesial groups. In the preconciliar era the apologetic or defensive attitude was taken for granted. Our basic attitudes were simply unecumenical. Viewing other ecclesial groups as in some sense "the adversary," we hardly would turn to these groups for Christian or theological enlightenment. They were not regarded as a reliable source of religious knowledge. Indeed, until recently, any book on a religious or moral subject authored by a non-Catholic was automatically forbidden reading through stipulation of canon law.

The educational theories and styles dominant in a particular culture. For the past several hundred years, the "master concept" of education was (and still is in some places) dominant. According to this concept education is basically the handing down of the wisdom, experience and research of the professor to a rather passive and non-participative audience of students.

I believe that it can be argued that the cumulative effect of factors such as these (and there are more) was a notion of teaching with three characteristics: (1) it unduly distinguished and separated the teaching and learning function with a consequent almost unique emphasis on the right to teach, little being said about the duty incumbent on the teaching to learn; (2) it unduly identified the teaching function in the Church with a single group in the Church (the hierarchy); (3) it unduly isolated a single aspect of the teaching function (the judgmental or decisive). Such a notion of teaching generated a concept of magisterium which was almost synonymous with the hierarchical issuance of authoritative judgments.

Clearly such a notion of teaching influenced both the theology of the magisterium and the style of its

exercise. A heavy stress was laid on the authority of the teacher, and correspondingly less on evidence and the processes whereby it was gathered. Conclusions were said to be as sound as the authority was legitimate. Secondly and correlatively, a theology of response to authoritative teaching developed which was heavily obediencial in emphasis. We spoke of "submission," "the obligation to assent." Finally, theologians tended to be viewed as agents of the hierarchy. Their major task was seen as mediation and application of authoritative teaching. Their more creative efforts -- the more properly educational and theological task -- were viewed with distrust. The result of this, of course, was a polarization between theologians and hierarchy, a growing lack of exchange and communication.

Cultural Variables in the Post-conciliar Church

I shall now focus attention on the seven aforementioned factors as they affect the notion of teaching in the post-conciliar Church.

The self-definition of the Church. Vatican II provided a new self-definition of the Church as the People of God, a communio. In this concentric rather than pyramidal model of the Church, it is the People of God who are the repository of Christian revelation and wisdom. As Leon Cardinal Suenens has pointed out in a recent interview: "The Church, seen from the starting point of baptism rather than that of the hierarchy, thus appeared from the first as a sacramental and mystical reality first and foremost, rather than -- which it also is -- a juridical society. It rested on its base, the People of God, rather than on its summit, the hierarchy. The pyramid of the old manuals was reversed." ⁵ Obviously, such a model suggests, among other things, the need of broad communication if the wisdom resident in the Church is to be gathered, formulated, and reflected to the world.

The influence of the mass media. There is rapid communication of information and thought in a world dominated by television. Furthermore the wide circulation of the weekly news magazines and their continuing fascination with religious news has brought technical theology into the marketplace. The scholar is in our time a popularizer whether he likes it or not. Louis Janssens writes an article on the contraceptive pill in Ephemerides Theologiae Lovanienses and it is reported in Time and Newsweek several weeks later. This suggests that the Catholic community is better informed

theologically than ever.

Awareness of the complexity of issues. In general it can be said that Catholics participate more fully than before in the social and intellectual world about them. This means exposure to many modes of thought and to the enrichment consequent upon the convergence of a variety of special competences. Seminaries have drawn increasingly close to the intellectual life of the university. This type of fuller involvement in the secular world has already produced an atmosphere which highlights the depth and complexity of contemporary theological problems, the many competences necessary for their adequate analysis, and the necessarily tentative character of some earlier formulations.

The manner of the exercise of authority in the Church. With its teaching on the nature of the Church and the collegiality of bishops, Vatican II began a process of decentralization of authority in the Church. Add to this the fact that the post-conciliar Church lives in a secular world whose institutions are increasingly sensitive to the values of participatory democracy and it is easy to agree with the French bishops when they state: "We have reached a point of no return. From now on the exercise of authority demands dialogue and a certain measure of responsibility for everyone. The authority needed for the life of any society can only be strengthened as a result." ⁶

Educational status of laity and clergy. Educational specialization and the widespread availability of higher education mean that the clergy is no longer the best educated group in the Church. Indeed, there are those who argue that the ecclesial reverberations since Vatican II have seriously undermined the intellectual substance of seminary life and training. Be that as it may, many laymen enjoy special expertise, are capable of relating this expertise to doctrinal issues, and can often express themselves articulately in religious and theological matters. Vatican II explicitly recognized this competence when it stated: "Laymen should also know that it is generally the function of their well-formed Christian conscience to see that the divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city... Let the laymen not imagine that his pastors are always such experts that to every problem which arises, however complicated, they can readily give him a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission. Rather, enlightened by Christian wisdom and giving close attention to the teaching authority of the Church, let the layman take on his own distinctive role." ⁷

Status of relations between ecclesial groups. We live in an ecumenical age. We experience a new willingness of the Church to seek answers from and in association with other non-Catholic ecclesial groups. Moreover, from a purely personal perspective I can say that I feel more at home at times doing theology with non-Catholic Christians than with some Catholic colleagues. Scholars like James Gustafson, Paul Ramsey, Frederick Carney, Stanley Hauerwas, LeRoy Walters -- to mention only those in the field of Christian ethics -- have a deep knowledge of and profound respect for Catholic moral tradition.

Educational theories and styles dominant in a particular culture. Contemporary education is much more aware of the need to stimulate the student to self-involvement, to creativity, to experiment. The discussion, the seminar, the cross-disciplinary dialogue are the staples of modern educational technique.

When these cultural variables are shaken and mixed, they generate a renewed notion of teaching in the Church. In contrast with the characteristics associated with an earlier notion of teaching, this renewed approach shows these characteristics: (1) the learning process is seen as an essential part of the teaching process; (2) teaching is viewed as a multi-dimensional function only a single aspect of which is the judgmental; (3) the teaching function of the Church involves the charisms of many persons, not just that of the hierarchy. In summary, the term magisterium increasingly suggests a pluridimensional function in the Church in which all of us have varying responsibilities.

Theology itself is beginning to reflect this modification in the notion of magisterium. First of all, without denying the authoritative character of papal or collegial-episcopal pronouncements, contemporary theology devotes much more attention to evidence and sound analysis in assessing the ultimate meaning and value of such teachings. Teaching must persuade, not simply command. Secondly, we find in contemporary theological attitudes a developing notion of response to authoritative teaching that emphasizes a docile personal assimilation and appropriation of authentic teaching as the appropriate immediate response, rather than an unquestioning assent. Finally, the creative reflection of theologians and the prophetic charisms of all Christians are seen as utterly essential if the hierarchy is to express the faith in our times in a meaningful and persuasive way.

Above it was noted that a rethinking of the notion of magisterium would lead to a notion of teaching in which all of us have greater responsibilities. Here I should like to lift out and emphasize a single aspect of our Christian responsibilities -- that of an appropriate or proportionate response to authoritative teaching. The proper response to such teaching is not precisely obedience. We obey orders. But it would be a serious deflation of teaching to view it as "orders" or "commands." The Canadian bishops noted of authoritative, noninfallible teaching: "In the presence of other (noninfallible) authoritative teaching, exercised either by the Holy Father or by the collectivity of the bishops, he must listen with respect, with openness and with the firm conviction that his personal opinion, or even the opinion of a number of theologians ranks very much below the level of such teaching. His attitude must be one of desire to assent, a respectful acceptance of truth that has upon it the seal of God's Church." 8

That is the heart of the matter. The proper immediate response to authoritative teaching is a docility of mind and will, an eagerness and openness that attempts to escape the privacy and limitation of individual views, that wishes to enjoy the wisdom of a broader perspective. This cast of mind and bent of will will translate into several concrete procedural steps. First, there will be respect for the person of the teacher and for his office. Second, true docility demands a readiness to reassess one's own position. A frank recognition of one's own personal limitations is inseparable from docility. Third, I believe that one who is both wise and humble will be characterized by a certain reluctance to conclude that authoritative teachings are certainly erroneous. One would, in all humility, prefer to view a particular teaching for the moment as doubtful, discussable, etc. Finally, a docile response will foster behavior in the public forum that engenders respect for the teacher. If one responds to authoritative teaching in this way, he has, I believe, responded in a way proportionate to the authority of the teacher.

One's response to authoritative teaching is a part of his responsibility for and to the magisterium. That is why this response must be prayerful, arduous, reflective. Where teaching is concerned, we are, after all, concerned primarily and dominantly with the truth, with learning. We are not primarily concerned with submission to authority, a distortion supported by a one-sidedly juridical notion of the Church and hence of magisterium.

The docile attempt to assimilate a particular teaching can end in failure, in the inability to assent, in dissent. If we view magisterium as the teaching-learning process of the Church -- obviously an ongoing enterprise -- then dissent must be viewed as both an end and a beginning. It is a tentative end to an arduous reflective process of appropriation. But it is also a beginning, a beginning of new evidence. Concretely, if large and responsible segments of the Church find themselves in a position of dissent (I prefer "inability to assent"), then this dissent must be viewed as a source of new evidence. Otherwise we have ruled personal reflection out of order in the teaching-learning process of the Church. Such intolerance of personal reflection has the practical effect of ballooning papal statements to the level of infallibility -- an effect that is not only theologically erroneous, but that will render the Church's magisterium simply incredible in the modern world.

The Church has an important role to play in reading "the signs of the times" for the contemporary world. She cannot allow this voice to soften into meaningless platitudes. But if courageous concreteness is to make its mark in our world, it can no longer be wrapped in the old rigidity Roma locuta, causa finita. In the contemporary Church, authoritative noninfallible teaching must be viewed as the result of a process (in which all of us have contributed our modest share) and as a contribution to a process (in which all of us continue to have responsibilities). Within this perspective utterances of the authentic magisterium must be seen as serious invitations to a dialogue in which the pros and cons can be sorted out over a period of time.

These are the thoughts on authority that may prove helpful for our continuing discussion here. I present them for your enlightened disagreement. For if the pronouncements of the magisterium ought to be viewed as invitations to a dialogue, then theological reflections on this magisterium can claim to be no more, and ought to be presented and discussed with the realization that they are far less. They are probings only, but probings for those who take their faith seriously enough that they reject out of hand the suggestion that they ought not think about that faith.

Notes

- 1 John Cardinal Heenan, "The Authority of the Church," London Tablet 222 (1968) 488-490.
- 2 Gregory Baum, O.S.A., "The Problem of the Magisterium Today," Ido-c, Doss. 67, 30/31/32/33.
- 3 I am taking these reflections from my article "The Teaching of the Magisterium and Theologians," Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America 24 (1969) 239-254.
- 4 Roderick Mackenzie, S.M., "The Function of Scholars in Forming the Judgment of the Church," in Theology of Renewal, ed. by L. K. Shook, Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1968, 126-127.
- 5 The National Catholic Reporter, May 28, 1969, p. 6.
- 6 Ibid., p. 6.
- 7 Cf. Documents of Vatican II (Abbott), n. 43, p. 244.
- 8 I have taken this quote from a release of Documentary Service, the press department of the United States Catholic Conference.

The Concept of Authority
by
Stewart A. Newman

We have been asked to join our colleague in a discussion of the subject: A Concept of Authority. We confess at the outset that we approach our part of this assignment with more than the usual uneasiness for, with whatever other qualifications we may have been deemed able to explore this topic, from the format of the program it is evident that we have been chosen because we are a Baptist. We are expected, therefore, to represent a baptistic point of view - and Baptists are a bit difficult to represent! Perhaps all of you are sufficiently familiar with the people of our persuasion to understand that no one really tries to speak for any considerable number of his fellow-Baptists on any subject, that among us, on any given occasion, there will probably be as many opinions as there are members of our communion!

Misgivings which these semi-jocular remarks may arouse in your minds will, doubtless, be increased by another admission we are prepared to make, namely, that on this particular issue, the problem of authority, we often feel more comfortable with ideas which, traditionally, are labelled, Catholic, than with notions which are espoused by many of our own persuasion. In the light of admissions like these you have little encouragement to expect much in the way of a debate.

The program also indicates a rather sharp division of labor for the sessions of the conference. Subsequent assignments have been directed toward what we may describe as practical aspects of the topic. Here we are being asked to examine authority itself. By that we are being pushed back into that hinterland of the theoretical dimensions of the subject, an area vastly broad, whose implications are almost endless - one of the most profound precincts of any religion or system of thought. Any treatment of its ramifications, if brought within the limits of an evening's program, will necessarily be overly brief and sketchy.

We suggest at the outset that ultimately, authority is not essentially nor primarily a religious problem. In common parlance it has been defined as "the exertion of some compelling sovereignty," ¹ a phrase descriptive of myriad grades of relationship disposed on the basis of qualities such as "strength versus weakness," "ability

versus inability," "informed versus uninformed," etc. Its "exertion" in the broad areas of human affairs assumes an almost infinite variety of forms and degrees of intensity. It is an index of stratification in almost every aspect of ordinary experience. It goes without saying that, in religion, also, it is a crucial factor.

If even a casual inquirer follows its "chain of command" regressively, eventually he will be led back to an existential level of authority, a frame of reference which is, at once, for the human outlook, elemental and all-inclusive. It will assume at that point what perhaps should be called a necessary idea, what Kant would describe as a "transcendental idea." At that level will be exposed a sense of finitude which may be said to be the in-built perspective of all rational minds, a consciousness of limitation which is native to the human frame. Normally this sense of finiteness is accompanied by that uncanny ability of the mind to transcend its own limits so as to enable it, at the same time, to entertain aspirations of dependability and security. Wrapped up in the paradoxical tensions of this finite-infinite complex lie the loftiest dimensions of the human personality, its anxieties as well as its dynamic powers and prospects.

A truer sample of this "finite-infinite" ratio can be obtained by observing the behavior patterns of primitive peoples than is disclosed by following those of modern man, although in the overall evaluation of human nature it is taken to be a universal phenomenon. Early man's response to his environment was different in the sense that his reaction was to what may be called an undifferentiated flow of experience. He lived life in the "raw," so to speak.

A. M. Fairbairn succinctly summarized this primitive response in these lines:

Early man marches before us in ghostly procession, a voyager between life and death, conscious of the mystery in which his voyage begins and the tragedy in which it ends... He bears within him his supreme hopes and fears, his superstitions and agonies, his dreams of death, and deity, and bliss.... In contrast to his rude material outfit the wealth of his spiritual equipment is bewildering. His notions of spirits and gods are so multitudinous that every object he handles, everything he sees, has in it a hidden deity. ²

Early man's outlook did contain a large element of superstition, it is true - but it also contained reverence.

His superstition was born of ignorance and fear, plus the vain hope that by some device he might manipulate the mysterious forces of the world to his advantage. But it was also a reverent awe which he brought to his cosmos; he had profound respect for what he took to be meaning which was being stirred generously into his world of fact. A sense of limitation weighed so heavily upon him that he was sent scurrying after some "rock on which he might stand," an ingredient sufficiently powerful and trustworthy as to serve to assuage the anxieties which were native to his very existence. His prime aim must have been to identify this ingredient, this ultimate mainspring which seemed to be tightly wound, which he believed to be pressing inexorably upon him and all that he was or could become.

Notwithstanding the puerile levels of his outlook and the uncertainties which must have accompanied it, in one respect, at least, our early ancestor enjoyed a distinct advantage. With more instinct than insight, to be sure, he, nonetheless, seems to have lived in the confidence that, whatever this authority might prove to be, no area of his experience was excluded from it; to him it was life-wide in its contextual thrust. He took its demands to be so pervasive as to call forth a response in kind. For him faith was as broad as life; its "compelling sovereignty" was the bed-sill of his being. He accepted it without equivocation and, straightway, fashioned a celebration in its honor, a routine which more recently we have come to think of as his religion. In a word, primitive man's whole life was focused on ultimate authority; his religion became an index of how seriously that authority was believed and obeyed. Hence, out of the exigencies of his elemental responses was forged a natural sequence of priorities; first, there was a life style, then came its celebration, which we call religion, a formula which has much to commend it to succeeding generations.

It is instructive to note that authority as a force directing man's behavior has remained practically constant even while under the influence of concepts, ranging over a wide spectrum, have been employed to identify it. For example, authority has been construed by ideas as varied as extreme transcendence, on the one hand, where it is thought to function from a locus entirely removed from the human-historical, and as a thoroughgoing pantheistic immanence, on the other hand, where it is equated with the bios which flows through the veins of the natural world. But from whatever quarter it is believed to transact, its weight is formidable; it moved man constantly to seek its benefactions. And as strange as it may seem, man's interest in it has at some points sagged but it has never been destroyed, however extensively it has become overlaid with his repeated lapses into sinful defection.

He sometimes vigorously protests his independence; yet, unless totally distracted by the cluttered circumstance of modernity, he tends everywhere to conform to that inclination of the human spirit prescribed for everyman by Augustine when he exclaimed: 'My soul is restless, and it shall not rest until it has found its rest in thee, O God.'

The role played by this sense of world-force in the development of history has been so conspicuous and the designs it has inspired have been so varied, in undertaking to discern its character one is tempted, in a study like this, to dwell solely on a comparative evaluation of the forms it has assumed and the effects it has produced. To follow this method, however, one runs the risk of becoming too occupied with the vehicles which serve to transmit the concept, those societal agencies which act as catalysts of the idea of sovereignty, to the neglect of the mysterious depths of the authority which these agencies were designed to portray. To make this distinction between precincts of ultimacy and the legitimate channels of its communication is an exceedingly delicate operation, one in which the distinction is often blurred in the effort. If one fails to distinguish them, however, he runs the risk of falling into a fallacy which, in our judgment, is embarrassingly prevalent among religious bodies of all kinds. It is to contribute to a confusion which, if practiced for any considerable period of time, encourages the institution to appropriate to itself those concerns of the spirit which are normally reserved for that which is eternal. It allows the development of a disposition among its devotees to associate entirely too closely the institution and those realms of ultimacy which furnish the institution its reason for being, a development which, we repeat, few religious bodies of any persuasion have been able to avoid altogether.

It should be added promptly that in this matter the institutions probably have been sinned against more than sinners. Symptoms of avarice do seem to occur in all mundane circles and religious groups have had more than their share of the shortcoming. We are persuaded, however, that a prime occasion if not the major cause of this confusion lies elsewhere. We think it could scarcely have arisen had there not been a huge residue of reluctance on the part of the average person to have to do in any direct fashion with things that are eternal. It is a matter of record that this widespread reluctance has been sufficiently strong to persuade a few mature souls in every generation, acting in selfless intercessory compassion on behalf of their less fortunate fellows, to engage in an office, by whatever name it may be known, commonly referred to as the priesthood. Service on this order has been common to all religious bodies from the time of their inception. For most persons, we repeat, there

is little inclination to try to determine for themselves the mysterious depths of their existence. That reluctance has gone far to create an atmosphere sufficiently strong to make possible the authoritarian tendencies of which we speak.

While the church was rising in the esteem of its devotees to the point of being taken as practically equal with deity another development was occurring in the larger community which became very significant for these considerations. Whether as a movement it was a contributing cause of religious authoritarianism, or served as its chief reinforcement it is difficult to judge; perhaps it was both. It did mark a transition from a simplistic, fairly unified outlook which we have called primitivism, to what, by several counts, must be reckoned as the achievement of modernity. I refer to a ground-swell of extreme provincialism, the partitioning of the entire culture into "sacred" and "secular" compartments. It was divided as if by a great wall, a division which may have had its beginning as early as the separateness which the Hebrews insisted upon for themselves in their notion of their status as a "chosen people." It came bodily into the new faith and reached effectual levels during the Renaissance. It altered the church's approach to its mission and it redirected the attitude of the more recent generations of mankind on this problem of authority. The mood of secularity had long since become stronger than religious sanctions for it was a secular force which divided the world, not a proposal of the church. Being the larger portion, the secular section was destined to dominate human interests from that point forward.

Specific results of this bifurcation are easy to trace. For one thing, it made it possible for modern man to live practically insulated from his natural habitat. Scientific industrialization soon surfeited his life with so many artful devices he could live for days without so much as setting his foot upon the ground. This was calculated to lessen the awesome feeling of the weight which the world had pressed upon his early kin.

Again, his life was parcelled among the several societal structures, each perfectly legitimate, but all of them, save one, functioning on the secular side of the wall. Only one social institution, of all those through which his entire life was channelled, made claim of any direct involvement with the eternal. For the most part, therefore, his life was occupied with secular pursuits; he was so distracted by mundane affairs as to become practically oblivious to ultimate interests. He became a card-carrying member of the secularly oriented community.

It is fair to say that from the other side of the wall the church, with admirable consistency, has proclaimed the universal sovereignty of God and its correlative, the doctrine of universal stewardship. Its penetrations of the partition has been painfully slow, however, and the frustrations growing out of the effort have resulted in rather drastic adaptations of its mission. For one thing, it has been forced into the predicament of having to sacralize by "conquest," i.e., by making forays into the secular community, to capture, if it can, a few fragments of secular man, to induce him to come at intervals into its sacred circle, there to engage in what it calls "religious" exercises. Like the other social institutions, therefore, the church has majored on a technique of propaganda and, like the rest, it has counted its success in terms of its statistical aggrandizement, the tally of the fragments of time and interest it has been able to collect.

Also, while operating in a segregated framework, an emphasis which was always latent, sometimes quite active, has come to be practically pervasive of the church's message, namely, preparation for the hereafter. It has dwelled less and less on Christianizing man when and where he is and more and more on "other-worldly" hopes and fears. On those who frequent its precincts it leaves the impression that man's chief concern while at church is preparation for what he thinks is, for him, a remote eventuality, his death. As factual as may be the foundation of this emphasis, it can scarcely be construed as the image of a great sovereignty over all of life forever.

In whatever meandering fashion this discussion may have appeared to proceed to this point, there has been intended a fairly specific objective: To take account of two items, neatly symbolized by the two terms of our subject - Authority and Concept. We have attempted to observe the effects of the one upon the other, within the exigencies of very brief intervals of history. The first of these two ideas, authority, which from the outset acquired features more characteristic of a basic assumption than that of a substantive entity, has maintained rather consistently that status. However deeply moved one may become by his sense of the presence of the eternal, the fact remains, no man has seen God. As Sherwood Eddy remarked on one occasion, God is like the sun. By looking at it one cannot see it - but it is in its light that one sees everything else.

In the same vein Kierkegaard remarked: Trying to get along without the idea of God is like trying to sew without having a knot in your thread.

Ultimate authority is an assumption, but even as an assumption, it has acted with sufficient force to determine, largely, man's conceptual perspective. In fact, as an assumption it has been freely invoked to account for man's concepts. Consistently it has been the given in every aspect of the equation.

This assumed factor is what D. C. MacIntosh called the Divinely Functioning Reality.

"In certain phases of human experience and particularly in religious experience at its best, divine reality . . . is presented with sufficient immediacy to make possible for man a genuine acquaintance with . . . that divine reality." 3

As brief as they are, these glimpses into history have served to reveal the actions of both primitive and modern man while living under the aegis of authority. From age to age a drift in man's estimate of authority has been detected. If one may say of primitive man that to him authority was an uncertain certainty, in the same language it would be appropriate to say of his modern counterpart that authority to him is a certain uncertainty. Perhaps the primitive was surer of its existence but woefully less confident of its nature. Conversely, having "tried the spirits," modern man is often glib in his posture of familiarity with deity. He knows God's name; he catalogues God's providences; he has even been known, on occasion, to invoke God's assistance in profane expletive! Yet, as a matter of fact, notwithstanding all this chumminess, authority remains for modern man, mysterium tremendum.

It is encouraging to observe that as a meta-physical presupposition there is virtually unanimous agreement among Christian bodies that authority exists. When it comes to ascribing attributes to that sovereignty variations do occur. The crux of the division of opinion, however, is at the point of a theory of knowledge. To the question, How does man know God?, there are many answers. It is here that that other factor, concept, is called forth. The question becomes: What kind of "knower" does man have with which to have to do with God? What of the concepts man can create in terms of which he can engage in a meaningful response to this "compelling sovereignty"?

Concepts, of course, are manufactured articles, however etherial and sublime may be the cargo they are devised to handle. Ideally, they are exact copies of

their objects although we realize that, at best, they are but approximations of the things they are designed to reflect. For this reason they are constantly being tested and up-graded so as to render them at least minimally adequate for their use.

This brings us to the heart of the problem. Given an authority with qualifications worthy of the divine, an authority which is insinuated into every human-historical circumstance, what manner of concepts can be fashioned by man which are remotely commensurate with the proportions of deity? It is a problem common to all language forms. However, facile it may be under ordinary conditions, language is strained to the utmost when required to "express the inexpressable," to fashion human-historical categories in which to convey the eternal. The ramifications of this problem are as broad as the entire gamut of theological and philosophical definitions of God. Here we cannot survey even the broad outlines of what is implied. It is appropriate to underscore the problem it presents and this can be done simply by recognizing the antithetical ratios of the two factors. We are here dealing with entirely unequal factors. 'The ways of man are not the ways of God,' paraphrases an ancient adage. It is obvious that at the very heart of the problem of authority is the problem of revelation and, of necessity, like revelation, authority is a two-party transaction. And infinite though the dimensions of deity may be, its disclosures to man are limited to the conceptual capacity of the human person. No more of the divine can become active within the human frame than man is able and/or willing to receive.

The problem might be verbalized more acceptably if to what has been called man's conceptual capacity were added what is often referred to as his existential sensitivity. Some uses of this term, existential, appear to be synonymous with the intuitive capacity of man. To state it in these terms does, at least, compound the discussion by introducing that other Gordian Knot, "faith versus reason."

In any event, it is the evangelical affirmation that, while standing within the continuum of historical experience, each responsible person is capable of discerning the meaning of ultimacy, adequate for a satisfactory rapport with God, provided that he act responsible to avail himself of the resources out of which adequate conceptual knowledge can be forged. We take this to have been the burden of Paul's admonition:

For whatever is to be known of God is plain to them. God himself has made it plain, for ever since the world was created, his invisible nature, his everlasting power and divine being, have been quite perceptible in what he has made.⁴

While standing at the cutting edge of authority's disclosures, under all manner of conditions, and out of resources available to him, man has interpreted these pressures of authority's presence upon him. A list of the resources which, in times past, men, with considerable advantage, have employed is impressive. For example, to the Hindu it was Life; to Heraclitus, Logos; to Plato, Universal Forms; Aristotle called it Enteleche; The Hebrews considered it to be "Wholly Other,; then "The Holy One." Zoroaster insisted it must be dual: sometimes Light, again Darkness. Cicero found it near at hand in Wisdom, Temperance and Justice.

For the Christian mind these revelatory resources are enriched and extended immeasurably by the incarnation. It achieved a great reduction of the divine-human disparity, for from deep within the human-historical arena the incarnation created a nexus of divine-human understanding. Notwithstanding the encumbrance of an awkward finitude, in the light of the incarnation a man could affirm, succinctly and with confidence. 'God is like this man, Jesus; he is the Christ.'

We take it to be no mere happenstance that while devoutly enamored with the quickening insights which flow from the incarnation, capable minds continue to gather conceptual materials with which to "know God", from the warp and woof of their own being and from the world at large. Here are two such lists of ideas, chosen not altogether at random, but taken to be representative of man's method in his perieennial approach to ultimate authority:

I

- (1) Rationality in the universe.
- (2) The occurrence of novelty.
- (3) The nature of personality.
- (4) The prevalence of value.
- (5) From religious experience. ⁵

II

- (1) Self Existence.
- (2) Perfection.
- (3) Intelligence.

- (4) Volition.
- (5) Creativity.
- (6) Providence. 6

These two perspectives are remarkably similar notwithstanding the fact that the author of one is a distinguished twentieth century Protestant philosopher, while the other lived in the thirteenth century and is almost universally revered by the name, "Angelic Doctor."

With no thought, by the order of treatment, to denigrate a status of near-indispensability which the church has worthily won by its role in Christian affairs, we conclude the discussion with a brief application to the church of the principle we have sought to espouse. In our judgment the church has, in fact, contributed so constructively to the amelioration of the God-man problem as to have created something of a triadal relationship. To the irreducible minimum, "God and a man," there has often been achieved a formula: "God, and a man, and a church," so successfully has the church engaged in the intercessory function of its priestly ministry.

In the language of this discussion, the church has become a reservoir of conceptual experience. In all ages and under infinitely varied conditions it has become a congregation of "those who know God." It has served not only to incite and encourage revelatory experience; by the same device it has served to contain revelatory experience within credible bounds. Authority experience is not of the order of the oracular, notwithstanding those occasional flashes of insight which carry understanding beyond the boundaries of previous comprehension. As Georgia Harkness has admonished, we cannot assume "that God has poured some private information . . . into one's own mind which is not accessible to other men." 7

Wisely, therefore, the church discards tangential "freaks" while making certain always that it is possible for the dynamic freshness of new knowledge of God to flow through its own body. Concepts of authority achieved in the church, when distilled of their dross and tested over and over again within the "family of the faithful," become prime resources available to anxious spirits. Conceptual resources from any quarter, however, are designed to help persons so that they, too, become conceptually equipped to stand for themselves, responsibly responsive to a "compelling sovereignty."

Resources available for this purpose, therefore, are much like those which equipped Plato's philosopher-kings for his rule. In the hierarchy of social order set forth in his Republic Plato was careful to declare that one might be born among the hoi polloi, at the lowest level of the pyramid of population. If he paid the price to know explicitly what ante-rem Reason had implanted in him, and also in every man, by that wisdom he was qualified to rule. His wisdom as philosopher-king, however, consisted in his ability to tutor others so that they, too, might live with the wisdom purported for every man who ought, also, by that wisdom, become philosopher-kings.

Notes

- 1 Thomas A. Langford, In Search of Foundations, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969, p. 89.
- 2 Philosophy of the Christian Religion, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1902, p. 187f.
- 3 The Problem of Religious Knowledge, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1940, p. 175.
- 4 Mofatt Translation, Romans, Chapter I.
- 5 Michael Novak, ed., American Philosophy and the Future, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968, "Brightman's Personalistic Theism," Daniel Callahan, p. 219.
- 6 W. T. Jones, A History of Western Philosophy, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969, "Thomas: Metaphysics," Vol. II, pp. 223ff.
- 7 Foundations of Christian Knowledge, New York: Abingdon Press, 1954, p. 13.

The Authority of the Scriptures
By
Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm

It was to be expected that in Christian ecumenical dialogues the topic of the authority of the Bible would emerge. Expectation has become fact, to judge from a 1972 report from the World Council of Churches. ¹ Confessions in Dialogue is a survey of bilateral conversations among the World Confessional Families from 1962-1971, and it testifies to the frequency of this topic. The authority of the Bible surfaced especially in the questions of the relationship of the Bible and Tradition and the status of creeds and confessions. The other most frequent subjects were ministry and intercommunion. We may conclude then that Christians at least have come to know well their differences, and hence, the areas of dialogue.

The topic here at our Wake Forest University sessions is the authority of the Bible, and I shall present a Roman Catholic point of view. By Bible I mean both Testaments, and I shall take them as one, although I am aware of the problems of determining the authority of one Testament in the light of the other. ² But I do not think that such an issue is what divides us. I shall focus on the authority of the Bible as it functions within the Roman Catholic Church. This includes, of course, the knotty problem of the relationship of Scripture and Tradition. This is a technical theological question which, even if given a theoretical answer, would not lead us very far; in fact, I would almost venture today to call it a non-issue. My emphasis will be on what the Roman Catholic Church teaches about the authority of the Bible, and on the influence the Bible exercises upon the Church.

1. Scripture-Tradition

By calling it a non-issue, I do not mean that the Scripture-Tradition question is not important. ³ I want to suggest that dialogue has moved beyond the polarity which has customarily marked the discussion in the past. What has caused this?

First, we have all become painfully aware of the hermeneutical problem: can one truly interpret the ancient biblical text and arrive at the literal historical meaning of the words? I admit that the historical meaning is a goal of biblical scholarship--but a goal only to be approximated, never quite attained. The fruit of this biblical research is valuable, and it has posed serious questions for the Church to answer. It provides a mirror into which the Church must constantly gaze for renewal. However, aside from such reasons as

historical ignorance about the past (however much it is dispelled by archeological and literary discoveries), there is the simple fact that we cannot wipe out the twenty centuries that have molded us and which form a given out of which we naturally raise questions in exegeting a biblical text. No one approaches the Bible as a tabula rasa. Our presuppositions (Bultmann rightly recognized the role of Vorverständnis) are there and affect our understanding of the ancient word. Biblical scholars know this very well, and they admit that they interpret out of a tradition: the Catholic out of his tradition, the Methodist from the Methodist tradition, etc.

Secondly, biblical scholarship has underscored the role played by tradition, oral and written, in the composition of the Bible itself.⁴ Indeed, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the actual process of handing down or traditioning process existed before the canon was formed.⁵

Thirdly, a more supple understanding of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition seems to be prevailing in Roman Catholic thought. One speaks of coinherence, or the two being "mutually inclusive."⁶ The Bible has authority as interpreted in the community, guided by the Holy Spirit. While this point of view was not adopted by the Constitution on Revelation in Vatican II, it is surely significant that the original title of this document spoke of two sources of Revelation, in keeping with the trend of post-Tridentine theology, and this title was dropped and the view itself is not urged in the document. Hence the old simplistic argument used in Roman Catholic apologetics of the past (if it is not in Scripture, it is in Tradition) is being abandoned in favor of this view of the unity between Scripture and Tradition. But the terrain here is still rugged; more development of this point of view is needed.

These three suggestions have been made concerning Scripture and Tradition as indications of how the question has shifted in modern times.

2. The Church and the Bible

We turn now to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church concerning the authority of the Bible -- specifically, how does the Church relate to the Bible?

My personal opinion is that the Church is only now truly finding herself with respect to the Bible. I mean that it took several centuries (often marked by polemics with Protestants!) before the Church could actually say,

as it did in the Vatican II Constitution on Revelation, that the "teaching office (magisterium) is not above the word of God, but serves it" (II, 10). I believe that the example of Protestant fidelity to the word of God has been truly influential in this statement from Vatican II. It is worth noting that "word of God" in this context is somewhat ambiguous. It does mean Holy Scripture, but it does not exclude Scripture as interpreted in the Church. Nonetheless the statement clearly states the subjection of the teaching office to the Scriptures.

On the other hand, one cannot pass over the strong statements of Vatican II to the effect that the interpretation of the Scripture "is subject finally to the judgment of the Church" (Constitution on Revelation, III, 12), and that "the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church" (Constitution on Revelation, II, 10). These derive from statements of earlier Councils which are even more sharply worded.⁷

According to Trent, no one in matters of faith and morals dare interpret the Bible in a sense opposed to the meaning which the Church has held, or against the unanimous consent of the Fathers, for it belongs to the Church to judge concerning the true sense of the Scriptures (Denzinger, 1507). The teaching of Trent is reiterated in Vatican I (Denzinger, 3007, repeated in the encyclical, "Providentissimus Deus," Denzinger, 3281). The slight change in wording is typical of the hardening process that took place between the 16th and 19th centuries.⁸ Trent's negative statement is put positively ("nemo... contra eum sensum... interpretari audeat" becomes "is pro vero sensu sacrae Scripturae habendus sit"). Two short comments are in order. Firstly, Trent was attempting to be pastoral, and it warned the faithful that the interpretation of Scripture was to be consonant with the consensus of the entire Church. But no effort is made to exclude one from interpreting the Bible. Secondly, the tendency of the teaching authority of the Church during the 19th and 20th (in part) centuries was to take its cue in biblical interpretation from a limited number of theologians and was to rely upon the teaching authority of the bishops, at least theoretically. I think that historical circumstances, effecting the centralization of the Holy See, were responsible for these and similar statements (such as those concerning Modernism, e. g., Denzinger, 3401-08). But Vatican II has silently corrected an exaggerated situation when it specified the task of exegetes to work towards "a better understanding of the meaning of Sacred Scripture, so that through preparatory study the judgment of the Church

may mature" (Constitution on Revelation, III, 12). The fact of the matter is that the magisterium of the Church cannot act in vacuo. It must eventually reflect a consensus into which all (Bishops, theologians, faithful) have made their appropriate input. It is worth noting that as a matter of fact there are very, very few texts whose meaning has ever been defined by the Church.

How is one to understand a Church that from one point of view "serves" the Word, but is also the authentic interpreter of it? This tension is intrinsic to the growth of Christian community. As the Church lives with the Bible, she hears it in constantly changing circumstances and tries to be faithful to it. As the people of God, she can rely on the Holy Spirit for guidance, but she cannot escape the question of fidelity; she must use the Scriptures to critique herself and then answer responsibly as a community that she is faithfully transmitting the Word through history. The dialectic between reacting to the Bible and determining the validity of the reaction is built in to her own selfunderstanding. In many ways she has failed in fidelity, and it would be a welcome humility if the Roman Catholic Church would more frequently confess itself as a pilgrim Church in need of renewal, as it did in Vatican II (cf. Decree on Ecumenism, II, 6). As regards "serving" the Word, the Church -- any Church -- would not be true to itself if Scripture were for it other than the norma normans, non normata, the norm that provides the norm and is not subject to a higher norm. As Karl Rahner puts it, "there is, therefore, a norma normans, non normata, and this norm is identical with Scripture and it alone." 9

Now, let us look at the problem from a less theoretical point of view -- from the vantage point of the average Catholic. Does he view the Scriptures in such a fashion? I have no hesitation in saying: No. He does not articulate the problem that way. He does not go to the Scriptures to find out what his faith is. He receives his faith, the necessary knowledge about, and practical aid from, God, through the Church in its totality (Word and Sacrament). Indeed, I have the impression that the above description of the average Catholic fits also the average Protestant, who lives primarily from the total tradition of the Church to which he has allied himself. To what extent his faith (or the faith of a Catholic) is invigorated by the Bible is a question to which we must ultimately turn, But from an epistemological point of view, it seems to me that the average Catholic and the average Baptist receive their faith, under the working of the Holy Spirit,

through the community of believing Christians with whom they associate themselves. There are not many people who come to a modern-day Philip and ask as the Ethiopian eunuch did, if the prophet were speaking of himself or someone else (Acts 8:34).

We have been discussing the theological and doctrinal significance of the subjection of the Church to the Bible. There is another dimension, equally important, that deserves attention: what is the practical relationship to the Bible of a Christian, Catholic or Protestant?

It is beyond doubt that emphasis on the biblical word constitutes the raison d'être of Protestantism, as opposed to Catholicism. I leave it to our Protestant colleagues to make any further refinements on that statement. What is particularly important in this dialogue is an awareness of the growing role of the Scripture in the life of the average Catholic, both officially and practically.

Officially, Vatican II has held up an ideal concerning the Bible to which all Christians would wholeheartedly subscribe:

"Therefore, like the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and ruled by sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it remains the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and perennial source of spiritual life" (Constitution on Revelation, VI, 21).

It is here that Roman Catholics and Baptists come together in asserting the centrality of the Scriptures in the life of the individual Christian. One is reminded of the strong statement of Vatican II in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: Christ "is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church" (I, 7).

Despite their respective emphases upon the Scriptures, both Churches must be asked if they are succeeding in inculcating such ideals to their members. In the Roman Catholic communion one may look hopefully to the

service of the word, which is integral to the Eucharistic liturgy. It is on this very practical level, where the faithful respond to the word of God, that the Church finds herself truly the servant of her members, and the Body of Christ.

3. Suggestions for Discussion

I close this short position paper with the observation that it attempts to deal with our common topic from a fairly narrow point of view: how does a Catholic who is sensitive to the pertinent public statements of his Church understand the issues of biblical authority? But it is advisable to add here a list of observations and/or questions which arise out of the writer's experience with the WCC Faith and Order document concerning the "authority of the Bible."¹⁰ There are, in fact, more problems associated with biblical authority than either the Catholics or the Baptists are "officially" aware of. The following points may serve as issues for further discussion:

1. The authority of the Old Testament vis-à-vis the New Testament needs to be treated, and a rationale for the authority of the Old Testament has to be achieved, both on a practical level (the use of the Old Testament by the faithful), and on a theoretical or official level.

2. There is a compelling need to recognize tensions within biblical thought that are not subject to resolution merely by selective process. In other words, the emphasis on the "unity of the Bible," should not blind us to the far-reaching differences within the biblical tradition itself, that are not to be smoothed over.

3, I don't think it is faithful to the Bible itself to operate on the principle of a "canon within the canon."¹¹ Such a move restricts the influence of the Bible within the community. A long-range view is necessary here: a view that sees the various parts of the Bible as contributing to the varying needs of the Church in her long life. There can be a correspondence between the different aspects of the word and the long and tortuous life of the Church -- and the Church needs to hear different emphases in different stages of its growth.

4. Is the Bible the starting point for Christian theology?

5. What does it mean to say that the authority of the Bible proves itself and is not derived from an external authority?

6. On what basis does one separate out of the Bible the merely cultural limitations (anthropological, cosmological, ethical considerations)?

7. From the Catholic side, a serious criticism of tradition(s) within the Church is necessary. Vatican II passed over this opportunity, but it remains a task for the future. ¹²

8. The importance of the teaching on biblical inerrancy for the authority of the Bible should be noted. The Constitution on Revelation says: "the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation" (III, 11).

Notes

- 1 Confessions in Dialogue, ed. N. Ehrenström and G. Gassmann (Geneva, 1972).
- 2 Cf. R. E. Murphy, "The Relationship between the Testaments," Catholic Biblical Quarterly 26 (1964) 349-59; "Christian Understanding of the Old Testament," Theology Digest 18 (1970) 321-32.
- 3 From a Catholic point of view, see especially G. Tavard, Holy Writ or Holy Church (New York, 1959), and G. Moran, Scripture and Tradition (New York, 1963). From a Protestant point of view, see K. Skydsgaard, "Tradition as an Issue in Contemporary Theology," in The Old and the New in the Church (WCC Commission on Faith and Order; Minneapolis, 1961).
- 4 One might instance the emphasis on traditions in the work of G. von Rad for the Old Testament, and the importance of redaction-criticism for the study of the Gospels.
- 5 Confessions in Dialogue (see n. 1), p. 104.
- 6 G. Tavard, Holy Writ or Holy Church (see n. 2), p. 244.
- 7 The pertinent statements from Trent and Vatican I can be found in Denzinger-Schonmetzer, Enchiridion Symbolorum, 32nd ed. (Freiburg, 1963). The "Denzinger" references in the text refer to the marginal numbers as found in this book.
- 8 See the discussion of this in R. E. Murphy, "The Role of the Bible in Roman Catholic Theology," Interpretation 25 (1971), pp. 78-86.
- 9 Cf. K. Rahner, Theological Investigations (Baltimore, 1966) Vol. V., p. 64.
- 10 The pertinent documents have been published in mimeographed form by the World Council of Churches, from 1971-73. The writer was a member of an eight man committee on the Eastern sea coast which investigated biblical authority in the light of a specific problem: political responsibility amid violence and revolution. The basic document which guided the discussion was written by James Barr and published in the Ecumenical Review 21 (1969) 135-52.

- 11 See the clear exposition of this issue by R. E. Brown in The Jerome Biblical Commentary, ed. R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, R. E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1968) II, pp. 532-34.
- 12 See the commentary of J. Ratzinger in H. Vorgrimler, ed., Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969) III, pp. 185-186.

Baptists and the Authority of the Scriptures
by
J. William Angell

If there is any consensus among Baptists - any Vincentian Canon concerning "that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all" - it must be an insistence upon the sole authority of the Scriptures for faith and practice, along with the right and duty of private interpretation. That fact poses a double difficulty in the composition of this paper. First, it means that to write about the Baptist view of the authority of the Scriptures is to state the obvious, perhaps to thresh old straw. Second, it means to attempt the impossible, for, in the light of the principle of private judgment, no Baptist should dare to state a definitive view of what all Baptists believe.

What can be said, however, with a fair degree of certainty, is that Baptists appeared in history near the beginning of the seventeenth century in England and the Netherlands, as a part of the emerging Protestant movement that resulted from various attempts to reform the Western church. Baptists therefore shared from the beginning the general Protestant principle of sola Scriptura. Their distinctive emergence among the various Protestant groups was the result, they believed, of their more thorough application of the test of Biblical authority to all their faith and practice.

It has often been pointed out that Baptists do not hold any one view that is not also held by other Christian communions. Perhaps just the opposite should be emphasized - that by far the greater part of what Baptists believe is held in common with nearly all their fellow Christians, including Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians as well as other Protestants. Thus the only distinguishing features of Baptists is that they believe in a group of religious teachings, any one of which is held by others but all of which are held by no other communion, and all of which Baptists insist upon precisely because they are believed to be required by the authority of the Scriptures.

I. Authority in Confessions of Faith

This central allegiance to Biblical authority may be seen in all Baptist statements of faith since the beginning. A brief review of some of them will illustrate and support the point.

1. A True Confession is the title of a statement of belief, or creed, prepared in 1596 by two groups of English Separatists, one having fled to Amsterdam and the other remaining in London. They had a common background in the Separatist congregationalism of men like Robert Browne of Norwich (1580); Henry Barrowe and John Greenwood of London, who were hanged for their faith on April 6, 1593; and Francis Johnson and Henry Ainsworth, who fled to Holland in 1592. The Confession was apparently representative of both the London and Amsterdam congregations, though it is reputed to be largely the work of Ainsworth, who was elected pastor of the Amsterdam church in 1595.¹ It consisted of forty-two articles, and each one is supported by a mass of references to the Bible. The seventh and eighth are of particular relevance to the issue of Scriptural authority.

"7. That the rule of this knowledge faith and obedience, concerning the worship and service of God and all other Christian duties, is not the opinions, devises, laws, or constitutions of men, but the written word of the everlasting God, contained in the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments.

8. That in this word Jesus Christ hath revealed whatever his father thought needful for us to know, believe and obey as touching his person and offices, in whom all the promises of God are yea, and in whom they are Amen to the praise of God through us." 2

2. A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland, 1611, has been called "the first English Baptist Confession of Faith."³ It was written by Thomas Helwys, hitherto a layman in the congregation of English Separatists, led by John Smyth, who were living among the Waterlander Mennonites, an Anabaptist group, in the Netherlands. Generally Calvinistic in tone, though not completely so, the Declaration is comprised of twenty-seven articles, all of which, again, are strongly reinforced by references to the Scriptures. The twenty-third article specifically refers to the question of authority:

"That the scriptures of the Old and New Testament are written for our instruction, 2 Tim. 3:16 and we ought to search them for they testify of Christ. Jo. 5:39. And therefore to be used with all reverence, as containing

the Holy Word of God, which only is our direction in all things whatsoever." 4

3. The London Confession of 1644 was promulgated by seven Particular (Calvinistic) Baptist churches in London and probably was the work of John Spilsberg, William Kiffin and Samuel Richardson. It has been called "one of the noblest of all Baptist confessions," anticipating the later Westminster Confession. 5 The immediate cause for its composition seems to have been to answer the harmful charges of Pelagianism and radical Anabaptist anarchy which were being leveled against the Baptists, and to facilitate the rapid growth of the denomination in a propitious time of short-lived religious freedom. Like earlier Separatist-Baptist statements, this one is supported by reference and quotation from the Bible, and Article VII echoes the True Confession of 1596 in saying,

"The Rule of this Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience, concerning the worship and service of God, and all other Christian duties, is not man's inventions, opinions, devices, laws, constitutions, or traditions unwritten whatsoever, but only the word of God contained in the Canonical Scriptures." 6

4. Following the revolutionary days of the Commonwealth and the persecutions under Charles II and James II, English Baptists experienced new life and freedom as a result of the Act of Toleration promulgated by William and Mary in 1689. In response to a call to a conference, one hundred and seven Baptist churches sent representatives to a general meeting in London during September, 1689. They approved a new Confession which had been issued in 1677 and republished in 1688, a Baptist adaptation of the famous Westminster Confession of 1646. It is known in history as the Second London Confession, and it is of fundamental significance in subsequent Baptist theology. The sole authority of the Scriptures for faith and practice stands in the first of thirty-two chapters as its controlling principle; and the understanding and application of that principle is given precise expression. It follows, in part:

"1. The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience; although the light of Nature, and the works of Creation and Providence do so far manifest the godness, wisdom and power of God, as to leave men

unexcusable; yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and His will, which is necessary unto Salvation, Therefore it pleased the Lord at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that His will unto his church; and afterward for the better preserving, and propagating of the Truth, and for the more sure Establishment and Comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan, and of the World, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scriptures to be most necessary, those former ways of Gods revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

2. Under the Name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written; are now contained all the Books of the Old and New Testament, which are these, [there follow 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament]. All of which are given by the inspiration of God, to be the rule of Faith and Life.

3. The Books commonly called Apochypha (sic) not being of Divine inspiration, are no part of the Canon (or rule) of the Scripture, and therefore are of no authority to the Church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved or made use of, then other humane writings.

4. The Authority of the Holy Scripture for which it ought to be believed dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the Author thereof; therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.

5. We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church of God, to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scriptures; and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the Doctrine, and the majesty of the stile, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God) the full discovery it makes of the only way of mans salvation, and many other incomparable Excellencies, and intire perfections thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet, notwithstanding; our full persuasion, and

assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our Hearts,

6. The whole Council of God concerning all things necessary for his own Glory, Mans Salvation, Faith and Life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture; into which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new Revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God, to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word, and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church common to humane actions and societies; which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

7. All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for Salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of ordinary means, may obtain to a sufficient understanding of them.

8. The Old Testament in Hebrew, (which was the Native language of the people of God of old) and the New Testament in Greek (which at the time of the writing of it was most generally known to the Nations being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and Providence kept pure in all Ages, and therefore authentical; so as in all controversies of Religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them, But because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have a right unto, and interest in the scriptures, and are commanded in the fear of God to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every Nation, unto which

they come, that the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner, and through patience and comfort of the Scriptures may have hope,

9. The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: And therefore when there is a question about the true and full meaning of any Scripture (which is not manifold but one) it must be searched by other places that speak more clearly.

10. The supreme judge by which all controversies of Religion are to be determined, and all Decrees of Councils, opinions of ancient Writers, Doctrines of men, and private Spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Scripture delivered by the Spirit, into which Scripture ⁷ so delivered, our faith is finally resolved."

5. "The Orthodox Creed" was written in January, 1678, by fifty-four "Messengers, Elders, and Brethren" representing many General Baptist congregations in several counties of central England. Two especially remarkable features of this "Creed" are, first, its strong emphasis on Christology and second, its inclusion of the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds. Regarding the former it goes so far as to say "that the denying of baptism is a less evil than to deny the Divinity or Humanity of Christ."⁸ Its statement concerning biblical authority is similar to that of the former statements of faith:

"The authority of the holy scripture dependeth not upon the authority of any man, but only upon the authority of God, who hath delivered and revealed his mind therein to us, and containeth all things necessary for salvation; so that whatever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Christian faith, or be thought requisite to salvation,... And no decrees of popes, or councils, or writings of any person whatsoever, are of equal authority with the sacred scriptures. And by the holy scriptures we understand the canonical books of the old and new testament, as they are now translated into our English mother-tongue, of which there hath never been any doubt of their verity, and authority, in the protestant churches of Christ to this day." ⁹

6. Several other Confessions were written and used by various British Baptists, all stating or apparently assuming the same position, relative to the Scriptures, as the earlier statements. Finally, after the formation of the Baptist Union, as early as 1813, and after several adjustments in structure and membership, a brief doctrinal statement was adopted in 1888 which affirmed belief in "The Divine Inspiration and Authority of the Holy Scripture as the supreme and sufficient rule of our faith and practice; and the right and duty of individual judgment in the interpretation of it." ¹⁰

7. Baptists in America, beginning almost as early as those in England and Holland, reflected the same variations as their European brethren, especially regarding Calvinism. But they all maintained a strong conviction with regard to the sole and final authority of the Scriptures. This fact is shown, for example, by the adoption of the Second London Confession by the Philadelphia Association of Baptist Churches on September 25, 1742, when, incidentally, a new edition was ordered to be printed by Benjamin Franklin. However, the most widely used and influential Confession among American Baptists undoubtedly is the New Hampshire Confession of 1833. Written by a committee appointed for that purpose by the Baptist Convention of New Hampshire, it has been adopted, sometimes with particular theological additions, by such diverse groups as the Landmarkist American Baptist Association, the conservative General Association of Regular Baptists, the American Baptist Publication Society (a constituent of the former American Baptist Convention), and the Southern Baptist Convention. Its first article declares that

We believe the Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired, and is a perfect treasure of heavenly instruction; that it has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter; that it reveals the principles by which God will judge us; and therefore is, and shall remain to the end of the world, the true centre of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and opinions should be tried. ¹¹

These same words were incorporated into the "Baptist Faith and Message" which was adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1925 and reaffirmed in 1963.

8. During the nineteenth century Baptists spread over

the continent of Europe and to every part of the world, largely through missionary effort from England and America. According to a report to the Executive Committee of the Baptist World Alliance in 1973, there are now Baptists in 105 nations and 23 dependencies with 33 million baptised members in churches comprising a total community of about 67 million people. A number of the national groups, usually called "conventions" or "unions," have developed Confessions of Faith. Uniformly, they assume or define a view of the Scriptures consonant with that of the older Baptist groups in England and America which have been reviewed above.

II. Reasons for this Uniform Appeal to Scripture

This evidence from history is sufficient to support the claim made at the beginning of the paper that there has always been a consistent belief among Baptists that the Scriptures are the sole and sufficient authority in faith and practice. Now another issue must be raised--one that is often avoided: why have Baptists (and Protestants generally) so believed, especially since this stubbornly held conviction is perhaps the root cause of their separation from their Christian brethren in the Roman and Orthodox Churches?

The ground for the Baptist belief in the sole authority of the Scriptures is not always stated explicitly in the Confessions, but it is usually there at least by implication: the books of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, sufficient and authoritative for all men in all ages, because they were written by men inspired by God. It was God's will that a saving knowledge of himself and his will should be provided in these particular records, and the Holy Spirit, using human agents, caused it to be done. Hence no other standard of truth is necessary, no supplement is needed, and no contradiction can be accepted.

This doctrine of inspiration is the foundation for the Baptist conviction that the Scriptures, and the Scriptures only, are the final authority in questions of faith. Although expressed in various ways, the doctrine may be found, either implicitly or explicitly, in practically all Baptist statements of faith, books on theology, biblical commentaries and church educational materials. It is frequently supported by reference to such texts as II Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness;" or II Peter 1:21: "no prophecy ever came by the impulse of

man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." This is a position that Baptists hold in common with nearly all other Protestants.

Nevertheless, certain weaknesses may be noted that call into question the adequacy of the argument from inspiration as a basis for Scriptural authority. A few may be mentioned briefly here.

1. Is it not a faulty logic, or at best a weak argument, that attempts to prove inspiration of Scripture by quoting Scripture? Further, do not the passages quoted in II Timothy and II Peter, for example, refer to the then existing Hebrew Scriptures (even the Old Testament was not yet fully canonized) and not to the yet-to-be completed Christian Scriptures, the New Testament? And what is to be made of such passages as I Corinthians 7:6, 12, and 25, where the Apostle specifically states that he is giving his own opinions instead of a "command from the Lord?"

2. Does the doctrine of inspiration cover the process of canonization also? The composition of the books of the Bible, even under the guidance of the Spirit, would not provide for an adequate propagation of saving truth unless the books were somehow preserved, transmitted and given special status by God's people in worship and mission. In the light of what is known about the writing, redaction, preservation, and canonization of the Bible, it is difficult to attribute infallibly divine guidance to the process. A theory of inspired preservation and selection is especially suspect when it is remembered that Christians have never yet agreed even as to the limits of the canon.

3. Is it to be assumed that the doctrine of inspiration refers to the autographs? If so, that leaves the Bible reader with disturbing problems concerning the text. No autographs exist. What we have are copies of copies of copies, many times removed from the original. There are considerable variations among the ancient manuscripts. The textual critics, back as far at least as Origen with his Hexapla--perhaps as early as Ezra with his Torah--have done heroic work and have given to the church a reasonably dependable text of the whole Bible. But does not the necessity of the process itself indicate a large degree of human frailty as well as human grandeur in the writing and transmission of the Sacred Text?

4. Indeed, does not the doctrine of inspiration, at least as often expressed in terms of "plenary verbal inspiration," fall into the danger of doing with the

Scriptures what the ancient Gnostics did with Christ, denying the humanity and holding to the heresy of Docetism? If the Word was made flesh in Jesus, perhaps also it is not too much to say that the Word was made flesh in the Scriptures. This is in no sense to deny the initiative of the Spirit in the birth of Jesus--he was "conceived of the Holy Spirit"--but he was also "born of the Virgin Mary," and "was made man." In like manner we may say that the men who wrote the Scriptures were filled and led by the Holy Spirit and yet what they brought forth is flesh--using the word "flesh" here in the Pauline sense of sarx, frail and creaturely.

These and other criticisms that could be presented are sufficient to indicate that other, perhaps stronger, grounds for believing in the sole authority of the Scriptures need to be found. Such stronger support is available, though too often overlooked. I am suggesting that a more convincing argument for the primary authority of the Scriptures in Christian faith and practice may be found in an analysis of the nature and purpose of revelation. This liberating and intriguing idea was first made clear to me in the reading of the brilliant and erudite essay by Oscar Cullmann, entitled "The Tradition." ¹² But of course the concept has been expounded in various ways by many others, including Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and Leonard Hodgson.

In order to sketch briefly the relation between revelation and authority, we may well begin by referring to the familiar teaching of St. Thomas concerning the distinction between natural and revealed theology, or, more specifically, between general and special revelation. General revelation is the knowledge of God, his nature and will, which is available to natural man because he is created in the image of God. It is the truth which is known to reason, which may be read in nature, which forms and informs conscience. But it is not enough because it has been refused and distorted by the wilfulness of fallen man.

Probably the clearest description of general revelation, and of its tragic insufficiency, is found in these words of St. Paul:

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived

in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles." (Rom. 1:18-23 RSV).

Because of his grace, therefore, and moved by the desire for reconciliation in spite of estrangement, God has given what is called special revelation. He has been slapped on one cheek and has turned the other. He has gone one mile and when that was not sufficient he has compassionately gone another.

Special revelation is the unexpected disclosure of God given in heilsgeschichte. It may be seen in the call of Israel, the covenant at Sinai, the warning and chastisement of a wayward people, and in the Word that repeatedly came by the prophets. It may be seen and heard supremely in the Word made flesh, in Jesus the Christ. Special revelation is the Gospel itself - the good news that forgiveness is freely offered and that transformation may be experienced. The eyes blinded by darkness may see again, and deaf ears may hear. The only requirement is acceptance of the grace God offers, in faithfulness and obedience.

We must take special care not to overlook one particular aspect of the distinction between general and special revelation. It is precisely this: the primary channel of general revelation is nature whereas the primary channel of special revelation is history. God may be seen in the things he has made (nature); but since that revelation has been perverted by the sinful idolatries of man, God has acted to overcome the effects of sin by revealing himself in a particular history and in the unique person of Jesus of Nazareth.

That distinction is crucial for the purpose of our discussion because the Scriptures are the witness to that special revelation. The Hebrew Scriptures compose a part of the Christian Scriptures because they contain the only faithful witness existing of God's self-disclosure in the history of Israel, the people of God. The Church thus correctly rejected the misunderstandings of Marcion when he attempted to limit salvation history to the work of Jesus, completely separating the Creator from the Redeemer. The Redeemer is the Creator, and it is precisely

the creation that is redeemed. But the Church also came to realize that the witness of the Apostles, which was certainly an oral tradition for many years, must also be recorded, preserved and canonized so that all future Christians might have a fixed norm, a contemporary and faithful witness to the work and words of Jesus and the testimony of his chosen apostles.

Historical revelation requires a historical record if it is to be preserved in accurate and useful form for the future. Written witness, though itself imperfect, as are all elements of creation, is certainly more dependable than oral witness. Thus the faithful witness of the Apostles, and their understanding and application of it, was transmitted first in oral and then in written form, as they were themselves filled and led by the Holy Spirit; and that written tradition, concerning what they had seen and heard and touched with their hands, became, and remains, the norm of all future interpretation, faith and practice.

That is why, though so incompletely stated, it seems to me, as it does to others, that the Scriptures should be considered the primary authority for Christians. However, it must be immediately recognized that many Christians do not agree with this conclusion. Strong and effective arguments to the contrary have been raised, and nowhere more seriously than within the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. It is with some of these arguments that this paper will be concluded.

III. Anticipation of Rebuttal

In the first place, one might ask whether the Church is not at least equal if not superior as authority because the Church, as the Apostles and their successors, both wrote and canonized the Scriptures. To this question Oscar Cullmann gives a direct and forceful reply:

"By establishing the principle of a canon the Church recognized that from that time the tradition was no longer a criterion of truth. It drew a line under the apostolic tradition. It declared implicitly that from that time every subsequent tradition must be submitted to the control of the apostolic tradition. That is, it declared: here is the tradition which constituted the Church, which forced itself upon it. Certainly the Church did not intend thereby to put an end to the continued evolution of the tradition. But by what we might call an act of humility it submitted

all subsequent tradition to be elaborated by itself to the superior criterion of the apostolic tradition, codified in the Holy Scriptures. To establish a canon is equivalent to saying this: henceforth our ecclesiastical tradition needs to be controlled; with the help of the Holy Spirit it will be controlled by the apostolic tradition fixed in writing; for we are getting to the point where we are too distant from the apostolic age to be able to guarantee the purity of the tradition without a superior written norm, and too distant to prevent slight legendary and other deformations creeping in, and thus being transmitted and amplified. But at the same time this meant that the tradition that was to be considered as alone apostolic had to be fixed, for all the Gnostics boasted of secret, unwritten traditions which claimed to be apostolic. To fix a canon was to say: henceforth we give up regarding as a norm other traditions that are not fixed by the apostles in writing. Of course, there may be other authentic apostolic traditions, but we regard as an apostolic norm only what is written in these books, since it has been proved that by admitting as norms oral traditions not written by the apostles we are losing the criterion for judging the validity of the claim to apostolicity made by the many traditions in circulation. To say that the writings brought together in a canon should be regarded as a norm was to say that they should be regarded as sufficient. The teaching office of the Church did not abdicate this final act of fixing the canon, but made its future activity dependent on a superior norm." 13

Thus Cullmann and others argue that it was precisely in the canonizing of the Scriptures that the Church itself defined its authority and in effect recognized the primary authority of the Scriptures.

A second and closely related objection to the primary authority of the Scriptures is that made by the Roman Catholic Church on the grounds that the bishops are the successors of the apostles, the Bishop of Rome being uniquely the successor of Peter the Prince of the Apostles, and that therefore the bishops retain in their teaching office the function of maintaining, interpreting and ever expanding the original paradosis. Here, of course, is the foundation for the dogma of papal infallibility.

In reply to this argument we may again listen to the words of Cullmann:

"The function of the bishop, which is transmitted, is essentially different from that of the apostle, which cannot be transmitted. The apostles appoint bishops, but they cannot delegate to them their own function, which cannot be renewed. The bishops succeed the apostles but on a completely different level. They succeed them, not as apostles but as bishops, whose office is also important for the Church, but quite distinct. The apostles did not appoint other apostles, but bishops. This means that the apostolate does not belong to the period of the Church, but to that of the incarnation.

The apostolate consists in the witness given to Christ. Of course, the Church also bears witness to Christ. But it cannot hear that direct witness which belongs to the apostles. Its witness is a derived witness, because it does not rest on the direct revelation which was the privilege of the apostle alone as an eye-witness." 14

Cullmann proceeds to show the unique office of the apostle by citing the strong defense of his apostleship made by the Apostle Paul against the Judaizers on the specific ground that he was a witness to the risen Lord and that he had received his paradosis from the Lord and not from men (Gal. 1). Thus the authority of the post-apostolic church is not that of the apostles but of the bishops. "There is consequently a difference between apostolic tradition and ecclesiastical tradition, the former being the foundations of the latter. They cannot, therefore, be co-ordinated." 15

A third objection to the primary authority of the Scriptures is that this leaves the Church with only a dead, written Word, no matter how inspired it may have been, in place of the living, infallible teaching-office of the Church in every generation. We are reminded also of the parallel teaching concerning the Sacrament of the Eucharist in which Catholics believe they receive the real Body of Christ while Protestants apparently celebrate only a memory. Such an argument, if it were accurate, would surely be damaging to Protestant theology and fatal to Protestant life and worship. But fortunately the objection does not deal with the reality of Protestant

faith and practice. We do not look upon the Scriptures as merely a record of the past, or even as an inspired deposit from the salvation history that was. Rather, we revere the Bible as the Word of God in written form, the indispensable vehicle of the message of salvation that was first revealed, then written, and now must continually be made alive by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit as the Word is proclaimed to us and to all men. In like manner, we believe that the Lord's Supper is not only a memorial to the past; it is also a genuine spiritual communion with the present Christ and with his Body, the Church; and it is proleptically a koinonia in the Eternal Banquet of the Kingdom of God. Thus the two, the Bible and the Supper, though of and in the creation, are used redemptively by the Creator.

Finally, Catholics have difficulty with the view of Baptists in particular regarding the authority of the Scriptures at the point of interpretation. Baptists insist not only on the primary authority of the Bible but also on the right of individual interpretation. That right, Baptists have generally held, springs from the fundamental principle that every person is of infinite worth to God; and the correlate of that principle is that every person is competent and responsible to stand before God without any intermediary except Jesus the Christ. This is why Baptists have always suspected and avoided required creeds, efficacious sacraments, and priestly hierarchies. Such views are unacceptable to Catholics, of course, because they would seem to result in an anarchistic individualism that in turn would lead to a dangerous fragmentation of the Church and ultimately to a tragic loss of faith itself.

Could it be that here, where we have been so far apart, we may find the place to begin a rapprochement? There are signs already that the movement has begun. Vatican II and its aftermath have brought from the Catholic Church a new understanding and appreciation of Protestant faith and practice. And there are numerous evidences that Baptists are beginning to drop their old suspicions and hostilities, even to develop a new understanding, appreciation, and love for their fellow Christians in the Catholic Church. Catholics can certainly lead Baptists to respect a continuous and faithful tradition, to learn to worship in a manner that is worthy in the presence of God, and to enlarge their vision of the Church until it matches

the biblical teaching concerning the Body and Bride of Christ. And Baptists would like to share their historic devotion to freedom -- even the right to be wrong, their genuine love of the Truth, and their fervent dedication to missions as the central task of the Church. We may all begin by recalling that apostolic and ecclesiastical traditions are united in reporting that the fundamental commandment of Christ is that we love one another.

Notes

- 1 Lumpkin, W. L., Baptist Confessions of Faith, Philadelphia, The Judson Press, 1959, p, 81.
- 2 Quoted in Lumpkin, op. cit., p. 84.
- 3 Ibid., p. 115.
- 4 Ibid., p. 122.
- 5 Ibid., p. 146.
- 6 Ibid., p. 158.
- 7 Ibid., p. 248 - 252.
- 8 Ibid., p. 295.
- 9 Ibid., p. 324 f.
- 10 Ibid., p. 345.
- 11 Ibid., pp. 361 f.
- 12 Cullman, Oscar, The Early Church, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1956, pp. 55 - 99.
- 13 Ibid., pp. 90 f.
- 14 Ibid., p. 78.
- 15 Ibid., pp. 79 f.

The Authority of Tradition: A Baptist View
by
E. Glenn Hinson

Few Baptists would claim to represent the Baptist view on any subject, much less the Baptist view on an issue as debatable as the authority of tradition. Indeed, within Christian tradition as a whole one may find a variety of attitudes and within Baptist tradition representatives who will agree with each: (1) scripture alone (the view of the magisterial reformers); (2) tradition as authoritative as scripture (the pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic view); (3) selected earlier tradition as authoritative as scripture (the Greek Orthodox view); (4) the living contemporary tradition as superior to scripture (the early Gnostic view); and (5) scripture and tradition as a single source of authority (the view adopted at Vatican II).

In the main, Baptists have inclined more toward the "scripture alone" end of the spectrum and have disclaimed the authority of tradition. However, there has not been thorough consistency on this view. The same group of Baptists can sing "Faith of Our Fathers" and "Holy Bible, Book Divine" with equal elan. Or they can publish a confession of faith which asserts that "The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience: . . ." and yet frames its statement about God in terms of the Nicene-Chalcedonian formula.¹ Or they can assert that "no decrees of popes, or councils, or writings of any person whatsoever, are of equal authority with the sacred scriptures" and yet insist that the Nicene, Athanasian, and Apostles' creeds "ought thoroughly to be received, and believed."² The fact is, Baptists have not really given serious overt attention to the authority of tradition, even their own tradition. Tradition, therefore, exerts usually an undefined and possibly even unadmitted influence in the interpretation of scripture, in shaping theological views, or in forming or conserving ecclesiastical observances. It is tradition, for example, which convinces many Baptists that their congregational polity is the only true New Testament polity and that episcopal or presbyterian polities have no grounds in the earliest period of Church history.

Recognizing the diversity of Baptist views and the lack of sophisticated attention to the question of tradition hitherto, I doubt whether it will be profitable

for this group to review Baptist views of tradition at any length. Rather, I think our discussion may produce more fruit by asking to what extent a Baptist might accept the view of the authority of tradition put forth in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation at the Second Vatican Council, namely as related to the "one source" concept of revelation. Methodologically this will mean a critique of this concept from the perspective of the nature of God's self-disclosure. The chief issue is: Can God disclose his Word, his person and his purpose, through tradition which is found elsewhere than in the canonical scriptures? Many Baptists would answer no unequivocally. However, I am going to argue that, with some qualifications, Baptists can accept the "one source" concept without doing violence to their fundamental conviction that the scriptures contain (I hesitate to assert without qualification that they are) the Word of God.

The Definitive Authority: Revelation Itself

From a Protestant perspective the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation starts in the right place, viz. with revelation itself. Most Protestants will acquiesce with the significance attached to special as opposed to general revelation, with the finality ascribed to the revelation which has occurred, and with the description of the way in which revelation has occurred. Disagreements will arise chiefly with respect to those particulars on which Protestants disagree with other Protestants.

To look at points of agreement more closely, first of all, Protestants will concur with this document in emphasizing the reliability of special as opposed to general revelation. While Protestants have typically denied the assertion that "God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty from created reality by the light of human reason," few would dispute the general tenor of the assertion that "it is through His revelation that those religious truths which are by their nature accessible to human reason can be known with ease, with solid certitude, and with no trace of error, even in the present state of human race" (I, 6). Later on, I will return to query whether suggestions of inerrancy and infallibility do not go too far. At this point, however, it suffices to affirm the intent of the document to give a normative significance to special revelation.

In addition to approving this intent, secondly, most Protestants will also subscribe to the finality which the constitution attaches to the revelation already given. "The Christian dispensation, therefore, as the new and definitive covenant," the Constitution states, "will never pass away, and we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ" (I, 4). The use of the word "public" would not, I assume, exclude private revelations which would be authoritative to the persons who experienced them, but it would not see them as normative for the Church corporate. That revelation which is fundamental for Christians has already occurred.

Protestants, too, I should think, thirdly, would agree generally with the constitution's understanding of the nature of divine revelation--through nature, but especially through historical events, and through prophetic insight into the revelatory significance of the events. It is said that "the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them." (I,2) Even more significantly, the finality of the divine revelation in Christ is made clear in a manner that would please Karl Barth himself. "By this revelation, then," it is said, "the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man is made clear to us in Christ, who is the Mediator and at the same time the fulness of all revelation." (I, 2)

Points of debate seem to me to have nothing to do with Catholic-Protestant or Catholic-Baptist but with Christian-Christian perceptions. The emphasis on natural or general revelation is, to my mind, a wholesome one, though many astute Protestant theologians, from Calvin and Luther to Barth, have denigrated it on the grounds that man's "Fall" so marred human reason as to render it virtually useless in knowing God's will. Where I find myself quibbling with the views of this document is the same place I quibble with conservative Protestants. Can we be so confident "that those religious truths which are by their nature accessible to human reason can be known by all men with ease, with solid certitude, and with no trace of error, even in the present state of the human race?" (I, 6) That doctrinal infallibility was understood in regard to revelation is made more explicit in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church when it defines papal infallibility. "This in-

fallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed His Church to be endowed in defining a doctrine of faith and morals extends as far as extends the deposit of divine revelation, which must be religiously guarded and faithfully expounded." (III, 25) This assertion, like that concerning an infallible Bible, seems to me not to take adequately into account the human side of receiving and handing on the revelation. On this matter, I would side with Hans Kung in his argument for "indefectibility" as opposed to "infallibility" in describing the receiving and handling of God's self-disclosure.³ After all, modern theology is teaching us to apply the word "infallible" to God with some caution. Can we apply it at all, then, to our knowledge of him and his purpose for mankind?

The Transmission of Divine Revelation

In the final analysis, the statement about revelation probably contains more elements with which a Baptist can agree than with which he has to disagree. The same may be said of the statement concerning the transmission of divine revelation. The one-source theory and the tri-polar conception of authority (of scriptures, tradition, and the Church's magisterium), properly understood, are amenable with a Protestant perspective of authority based on the Word of God. The chief points of dispute are related to that mentioned above regarding revelation, viz. how final and absolute the Church's own claims may be. On some points, the Constitution appears to contradict itself.

To look first at the positive side, the document falls into line with modern biblical studies in asserting the "close connection and communication between sacred tradition and sacred Scripture." (II, 9) The fact is, the reason the scriptures of the New Testament were assembled into an authoritative collection by the early churches is because they contain the apostolic tradition, the original deposit of or about Jesus which was preserved by the first witnesses. This, rather than apostolic authorship, was almost certainly the chief criterion for "canonicity." Early missionaries committed to memory some fundamental elements of tradition which they could instill in their converts. How uniform this original fund was cannot be determined exactly. Fragments of it, however, stick out in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 15:3ff., for example, Paul reminded the Corinthians that he had handed on (παρέδωκα) to them the tradition which he had received concerning Christ's death, resurrection, and appearances. The material itself bears the stamp of formal, catechetical usage.

In speaking of "tradition" in this sense, of course, we are talking about the fundamental, essential, sine qua non message of God's self-disclosure in the Christ-event. It may be distinguished, albeit with great difficulty, from the forms in which it has been enclosed in various cultures as the Church has carried out its mission. As the essential message, tradition must always exist. To depart from it is to depart from the source of the Church's very existence,

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation is also right in saying that this single source has existed all through the centuries. Overlooking for the moment the historical problems, we can agree with the general schema set forth in Chapter II regarding "the Transmission of Divine Revelation." Christ, "in whom the full revelation of the supreme God is brought to completion," commissioned the apostles "to preach the gospel and to impart gifts to men." (II, 7) The apostles, discharging their commission by oral preaching, by example, and by ordinances, "handed on what they received from the lips of Christ, from living with Him, and from what He did, or what they had learned through the prompting of the Holy Spirit." (II, 7) Other "apostolic men" and then "bishops" succeeded them. "And so the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved by a continuous succession of preachers until the end of time." (II,8) Agreement with this sketch of the process of transmission should not, of course, be interpreted as an affirmative judgment about episcopal or apostolic succession.

Furthermore, any of us who study objectively the actual transmission process within the life of the Church will recognize the operation of a magisterium, a teaching office. For Baptists, with their congregational polity, this office is difficult to define. It probably exists in individual interpretation, in congregational worship and Sunday School instruction, in denominational agencies, especially the seminaries, and in various "leaders" within a democratic political body. It is this indefiniteness which in part causes many Protestants to deny that they have a magisterium. More than that, however, many shudder at the ominous sound of the word, which provokes images of papal pronouncements and inquisitors. It is time, however, for us to admit that a teaching office has to exist somewhere, as the Constitution says, in order to preserve the word of God faithfully, to explain it, and to make it widely known.

With the basic tenor of the one-source concept and the tri-polar view of authority, therefore, Protestants may agree. Questions arise not in regard to these but in regard to the location of the magisterium, the equality or superiority of one or another of the three poles of authority, and the manner and extent of development of revelation.

First, I doubt whether Baptists, with a long heritage of suspicion of authority, will concede that "The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ," (II, 10) unless the magisterium is seen as located in the whole Body of Christ, including the laity. The ultimate court of interpretation among Baptists has been the individual conscience. This was also Luther's judgment when he declared at Worms, "Unless I am convicted by Scripture or by right reason (for I trust neither in popes nor in councils, since they have often erred and contradicted themselves)--unless I am thus convinced, I am bound by the texts of the Bible, my conscience is captive to the Word of God, I neither can nor will recant anything, since it is neither right nor safe to act against conscience." ⁴ We would have to stretch our imaginations to believe that this constitution implies anything so broad as this. As Walter M. Abbott, S.J., has noted, magisterium means "In its broadest sense all who proclaim the word with authority in the Church," and, more narrowly, "the Pope and the bishops collectively."⁵ The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, indeed, makes it unmistakably clear that the faithful are to accept and adhere to the teachings of their bishops individually "with a religious assent of soul" and to submit will and mind "in a special way to the authentic teaching of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking ex cathedra." (II, 25) Further, when the bishops, though not possessing infallibility individually, speak together with the Pope, "they can nevertheless proclaim Christ's doctrine infallibly," especially in synods. Finally, the Pope's definitions of some doctrines of faith or morals "of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church, are justly styled irreformable, . . . need no approval of others, nor . . . allow an appeal to any other judgment." (II, 25) When either the Pope or the bishops together define doctrine, it becomes revelation, and, therefore, "All are obliged to maintain and be ruled by this revelation, which, as written or preserved by tradition, is transmitted in its entirety through the legitimate succession of bishops and especially through the care of the Roman Pontiff himself." (II, 25)

This brings us to a second question, one which may be the real crux, the equality or superiority of one or another of the poles. What the passages just cited evince is that, in the end, the magisterium, meaning the bishops and the Pope, stand above the other two. They hand on to the faithful the infallible and irreformable revelation. To make matters more complicated, this conception of the magisterium in the document on the Church gives off a strange ring alongside the assurance of that on revelation that "This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously, and explaining it faithfully by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit; it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed." (II, 12) Admittedly, these two positions may be reconciled by saying that all three poles--scriptures, tradition, magisterium--fall under the word of God. But the document on the Church, and even more a dogma such as that of the Corporeal Assumption, seems to imply that for the Church, the Pope and bishops can actually produce revelation, viz. the word of God, without reference to the other two poles.

The accuracy of this judgment is confirmed, I think, in the prospect of a new revelation. To be sure, this is denied explicitly in both the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church and in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. Both disallow "that there could be any new public revelation pertaining to the divine deposit of faith."⁶ These statements notwithstanding, the possibility of hitherto undisclosed public revelations being discovered seems to be implied in article 8 of the Constitution of Divine Revelation, for it is said that

This tradition which comes from the apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. . . . For, as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.

The crucial question here is whether we can say, "This tradition . . . develops . . .," even granting that the Church may grow in its grasp of the divine revelation

which has reached its complete expression in Christ, Our answer will depend heavily upon what we mean by "this tradition." If we define it broadly enough, the answer may be yes. If, however, we define tradition as the essential deposit related to the Christ-event, then the answer will have to be no. The definition of this word thus becomes our most critical task and merits special consideration.

What Is Tradition?

On this point the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation seems to want it both ways. For the purpose of establishing the authority of tradition it uses the narrow definition, but for the purpose of establishing the authority of the magisterium it uses the broad definition.

One has to admit the difficulty of defining tradition in the narrow sense. Can it ever be expressed in an essential form, as the "essence" of Christianity? The truth of the matter is that the tradition, as an essential deposit, appears, even in the earliest period, in numerous traditions. We cannot be as confident as C. H. Dodd was, for example, that we can establish the apostolic preaching. You have, as it were, a gospel according to Paul, according to Matthew, according to Mark, according to Luke, according to John, etc.

This difficulty would seem to argue for adoption of the comprehensive definition. However, the problem of finding the apostolic tradition is small by comparison with that of ascribing definitive authority to the amorphous mass of the Christian heritage. Are we to say that tradition is authoritative if the magisterium declares it to be so? If we say that, can we ever be sure we are not acting on purely subjective whim? Whether it can do so with complete success or not, the Church would always seem to need to search relentlessly for an essential deposit of revelation. It is precisely this need which has caused Protestants to place the scriptures in the preeminent position of authority. Indeed, the Protestant principle, that is, that no human institution can claim finality, lies near the surface here. The final thing is not the Church but the word of God itself. The Church lives always on what it has received.

A way around this difficulty has been to distinguish between tradition as the essential deposit and traditions which incorporate it. ⁷ Such a distinction has the advantage of representing the problem accurately enough; certainly the essential deposit never exists apart from forms which encase it. As in an electric cable, the vital element of each of the traditions is the central tradition. Each of them has authority, therefore, insofar as it contains this tradition.

Still, does this hypothesis eliminate the need to test traditions to see whether they contain the tradition? Can we ever assume that all traditions are equally reliable or, indeed, reliable at all? Obviously the answer to both questions is no. At a given time the central tradition may become so vitiated by the form which encases it that it may be wholly ineffective or even counter-productive. Is this not, after all, what the Protestant Reformation was all about? To be sure, we cannot say that the whole Church was totally impaired and thus unfaithful. It was impaired, however, to the extent that some of its traditions needed reforming in light of the tradition. But where could one discern the tradition in a reliable or in its most reliable form? The answer of the Reformers was, "In the scriptures."

Tradition And Scriptures

This statement offers a suitable juncture for introducing a crucial consideration regarding the authority of tradition as posed by the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, that is, the relationship between tradition and scriptures. In general, I believe that Protestants should appreciate the attempt of this constitution to maintain a reciprocal relationship in which now scriptures and now tradition stand guard over one another and help to interpret one another. Nevertheless, there is still reason to question whether we do not need to ascribe a superior place to that tradition found within the New Testament scriptures by virtue of its proximity to the Christ-event. In short, is all tradition the same no matter where it comes in the stream, or do we need to test later tradition by earlier? On this point modern historical criticism forces some qualifications of the uncritical views of transmission of tradition reflected in this document.

To look first at the positive side, we can assume properly that, if tradition, defined as the essential

deposit of revelation, contains divine revelation, the Word of God, then the Church will have held on to the Word of God from the beginning. Wherever we find this essential deposit, therefore, we will find the Word of God and respond to it as our authority. We will respond to it as our authority as it is contained in the scriptures, as it is contained in the Fathers of the Church, as it is contained in medieval writings, as it is contained in any post-Reformation denomination--whether Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, or Protestant. In this sense there is a single source of authority, the Word of God, which is found in scriptures and in the whole Christian heritage. (This is not to say, however, that everything in scriptures or the whole heritage is the Word of God.)

Further, we must assume that the Holy Spirit has aided the Church in remaining faithful to this tradition during all of these centuries, sometimes despite itself. The Spirit surely guided the Church in the writing and collection of the scriptures. He guided the Church in its proclamation of the Word and in its incorporation and instruction of converts. He guided the Church in its continuous task of interpreting and applying the Word of God to human life during many centuries of shifting cultures and customs. I am inclined to agree with Petrarch's "Jew" who was converted to Christianity after he saw Rome in its most sordid state: Surely Christianity must be of God, he concluded, for, with all of its corruption and deficiencies, it could never have survived otherwise.

The chief question which has to be raised here is whether later tradition does not have to be checked against earlier tradition, the Church's teachers of the post-biblical era against its teachers of the New Testament era. The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation seems to give a negative answer to the question. It does so by an explicit statement which pulls the one-source theory backwards in the direction of the two-source theory of Trent.

To the successors of the apostles, sacred tradition hands on in its full purity God's word, which was entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. Thus, led by the light of the Spirit of truth, these successors can in their preaching preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently,

it is not from sacred Scriptures alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and sacred scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of devotion and reverence.

With one aspect of this statement I am in hearty agreement, that is, in its supposition that the Spirit has continued to guide the Church in its handling of tradition. The Protestant emphasis upon scripture alone is based upon a subtle but erroneous underlying assumption that the Spirit died about A. D. 100 or with the closing of the canon. This position, most forcefully stated in Protestant dispensationalism, sets the apostolic age apart from the rest of history in respect to miracles and other direct "evidences" of the Spirit. It hardly allows room for a consistent view of God or his self-disclosure in history.

While assenting fully to this emphasis, however, I would ask once more: Does the tradition found in the scriptures hold a unique place, so to speak, above other tradition and even above the Church's magisterium? My own answer has to be yes. I trust that it is yes not merely because of our long Protestant tradition of scriptura sola but because this answer agrees with our understanding of divine revelation.

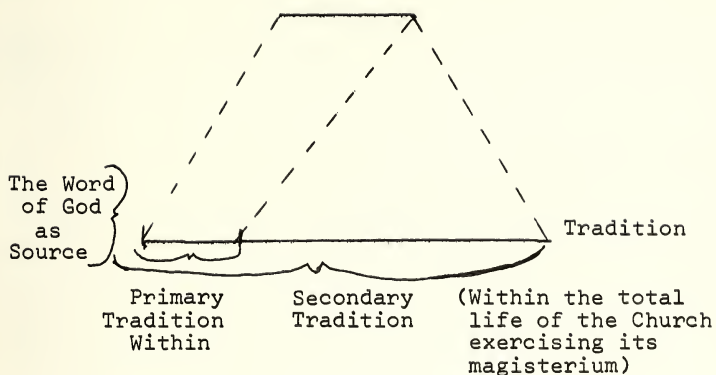
As I noted earlier, it is God's self-disclosure, his Word, which is authoritative, i.e. determinative for faith and practice. Although this self-disclosure occurs in nature, general history, and in other aspects of human experience, it has been concretized and particularized in the history of Israel, in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, and in the history of the Church. It has reached its definitive expression in Jesus of Nazareth.

For our contact with this last event we are dependent upon the testimony or tradition handed down by those who participated in and experienced God's self-disclosure through the eyes of faith. Not even in this tradition, to be sure, do we have the "bare facts." Rather, we have faith-history, the "facts" of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in a confessional package. Nevertheless, we are dependent upon this tradition for whatever we know of this event which is the basis of our salvation. Later generations may reproduce the testimony and apply it to their era, but they cannot experience and give their own testimony to it as did the first believers.

There is, therefore, a chronological factor in the question of the authority of tradition. The earliest tradition, based as it is upon eye-witness participation, holds a unique place vis-a-vis God's self-disclosure in Christ. As Hans von Campenhausen⁸ has argued, the first witnesses' experience of the resurrection of Jesus differed in kind from our belief in God's raising him from the dead. Consider in support of this observation Paul's recitation of the kerygma in I Corinthians 15:3ff. with the appended note that "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me." Paul saw his own experience as unusual, beyond the time for the risen Lord's other disclosures. He seems to have expected no recurrences of this type. "To all appearances," von Campenhausen judges, "he holds the series to be closed--ecstatic experience and whatever 'visions' may have occurred are on quite a different plane."

The unique nature of this apostolic tradition, therefore, establishes for it a uniquely normative position for Christian faith and practice. Since the New Testament scriptures, as collected by a process of elimination over several centuries, contain this never-to-be-repeated deposit, the Church must continually bring its traditions there for testing. It is a question of returning again and again to the source, resourcement. In formulating its faith subsequent to the apostolic age the Church should never be presumptuous enough to deviate from the sine qua non tradition found in scriptures. It may interpret and expound upon and draw out the implications of what it finds in that tradition, but it cannot create new dogmas which have no basis in it.

It seems to me that modern historical method suggests a useful paradigm for the issue of authority. A historian distinguishes between primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are those which give direct, first-hand testimony about an event. Secondary sources are those which give indirect, second-hand testimony. The historian's rule of thumb is that he will rely insofar as possible upon sources and that he "will be suspicious of secondary works in history, even the best ones."⁹ As applied to the matter of primary and secondary tradition, the following diagram may help to clarify this conception:



Using this historical model, we are obligated to ask whether we are to see all of the scriptures as primary sources? The answer is, of course, negative. Scriptures, too, contain both primary and secondary tradition. What this means is that scripture differs from scripture as regards the value of each in bringing us God's self-disclosure. Some are to be treated as primary, others as secondary, even if early secondary witnesses. Indeed, portions of the same writing are to be distinguished in this way.

The Use of Tradition

By this model differing degrees of authority will be accorded to primary and secondary tradition. Primary tradition, by virtue of its proximity to the Christ-event, will hold a uniquely normative character. The Church continually must test its faith and practice by this tradition. Indeed, it will test all traditions by this tradition.

How to apply the authority of secondary tradition is a more difficult question. The truth of the matter is that it is extremely hard to decide which portions of the Christian tradition, in the broad sense, one will use in formulating Christian doctrine or practice. In Christian history several answers, both theoretically and practically, have been given:

(1) That which confirms what we already believe

The Reformers used the scriptures and the early Fathers in this way to support Protestant doctrine and to attack Roman Catholic. By the same token they rejected and/or polemicized the medieval schoolmen, pointing up especially the deterioration of doctrine in their writings.

(2) That which is orthodox

Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox have all employed this approach with somewhat different results. Protestant theologians have used creeds, usually of the first four centuries, the early Fathers, and the Reformers. Anglican theologians, who in some respects bridge Catholic and Protestant traditions, have relied especially on writings of the period up to A.D. 451, terminated by the Council of Chalcedon, and certain Anglican reformers. Roman Catholics have used the whole western Catholic tradition, but, by way of reaction to Protestantism, have elevated the scholastic synthesis of Thomas Aquinas, along with about twenty-one ecumenical councils, to the most eminent place. The Orthodox have employed the first seven ecumenical councils and especially the synthesis of John of Damascus as normative.

(3) Christian thought

It became fashionable in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for Protestant theologians to write histories of Christian thought. Thence, either by critique or by praise, even the "heretics" had a hearing. Many whom earlier generations had condemned, e.g., Origen and Nestorius, were re-appraised and restored to places of significance in the formulation of theology.

(4) That on which we agree on the basis of the Word of God

In the fifth century Vincent, Abbot of the monastery at Lerin, tried to define Catholic doctrine in terms of consensus, "That which has been believed always, everywhere, and by all." On the face of it, such consensus appears unattainable. Recently, however, Jaroslav Pelikan has begun publication of a five-volume work on the history of Christian doctrine in which the matter of consensus has again come to the fore. He defines doctrine or tradition as "What the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of

the word of God: . . ." 10

Pelikan's formula may be useful in our discussion here. Notice how his statement both (1) projects the inseparable inter-relation of God's self-disclosure and the whole heritage of Christian interaction with it, and (2) assures always the preeminence of the former. In practice, this would mean that we would scrutinize the whole Christian heritage with a view to what it had to teach us concerning the interpretation and application of God's word throughout the ages but that we would never become enslaved to any segment of it, for we would at the same time judge it by the self-authenticating Word of God. This approach appears to me to meet the principal objection which Baptists have voiced regarding tradition, that is, that the authority of tradition tends so often to supplant the authority of God's self-disclosure and to lock us into a prison built of creedal orthodoxy. Baptists have not opposed the use of tradition, but they have opposed assigning it a normative place alongside scripture. Thence, they have preferred to use the designation "confession of faith" rather than "creed" because it emits a less dogmatic ring. The preface to the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message, a revision of the 1833 New Hampshire Confession of Faith prepared in the midst of the evolution controversy for use in the Southern Baptist Convention, explains in some detail the reservations Baptists hold with reference to formal statements of faith. According to this preface, confessions are framed and circulated by Baptists with the understanding: (1) "That they constitute a consensus of opinion of some Baptist body, large or small, for the general instruction and guidance of our own people and others concerning those articles of the Christian faith which are most surely held among us, . . ." without intending to "add anything to the simple conditions of salvation revealed in the New Testament, . . ." (2) That they not be considered "complete statements of our faith, having any quality of finality or infallibility. . ." and be subject always to revision. (3) That any group of Baptists may draw up their own confessions and publish them as they think advisable. (4) That the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments constitute "the sole authority of faith and practice among Baptists . . ." while confessions are "only guides in interpretation, . . ." (5) That confessions "are statements of religious convictions, drawn from the scriptures, . . ." which should not be used to hinder "freedom of thought or investigation in other realms of life,"

In actual practice, the proposed approach will have an effect upon both our selectivity in the use of our heritage and upon the manner in which we use it. As regards selectivity, although the whole Christian heritage will be open for our examination, we will take a particular interest in that which bears upon the interpretation and application of the divine self-disclosure attested in the scriptures. This principle tends, therefore, to validate the special attention given in the Baptist tradition to the early Fathers and the Protestant Reformers, in that both of these, however successfully, sought to place scriptures at the center in formulating both faith and practice.¹¹ Other writers and epochs where study of the scriptures has broken through with fresh insight, likewise, merit special attention. Need one mention monastic piety which has nourished itself on the Psalms, German Pietism, the Wesleyan era, the Great Awakening, the Barthian epoch, the epoch of John XXIII in Rome? Yet a study of these will, of necessity, carry us into the whole stream of the Christian heritage. The whole stream has some light to shed on the way the Church has put into practice its understanding of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. It would be erroneous to narrow the range too much in view of the fact that we recognize that our fathers, too, have erred in judging their contemporaries.

As regards manner of use, the larger Christian heritage would seem in the main to offer hermeneutical help. To be sure, Baptists have utilized their own traditional formulae for many reasons. They have formulated confessions of faith, for instance, to defend themselves against false interpretations or slanders, to provide the basis for uniting in associations and conventions, to distinguish and identify themselves in relation to other Protestant or even Baptist groups, to instruct their constituency in Baptist principles, to affirm ecumenical ties with other Christians, and to maintain some standard for determining orthodoxy. In a very real way, however, all of these should have been subsidiary to faithful interpretation and application of the divine self-disclosure recorded in the scriptures, as virtually every confession has explicitly claimed. Beyond that, everything is annotation. The authority of the Christian heritage is a derivative authority, one that originates in the faithfulness of Christians in various eras under their particular circumstances to God's self-disclosure. None of it is authoritative in

and of itself; it is authenticated by whether it has shown accurate interpretation and application of the Word of God.

This position, I believe, would win an essential consensus both in theory and practice in the history of the Church, although there would be notable periods of deviation. It is not possible to run through the entire history of the Church to ferret out the evidence on both sides, but it may be profitable to offer a brief statement from the patristic era. In this period, as R. P. C. Hanson has shown, the early Fathers normally spoke of confessions as "the rule of faith" or "summaries of faith."¹² In the pre-Nicene period, the consistency of confessional statements on major items evidently arose from their dependence upon the apostolic tradition preserved either orally or in the scriptures, but the Fathers saw an essential link between the two. Thence Irenaeus could say: "If the Apostles had not left to us the Scriptures, would it not be necessary to follow the order of tradition, which those to whom they committed the churches handed down?"¹³ It is even clearer that Origen used a summary of what he thought to be essentials of the biblical revelation as "the form of those things which are manifestly delivered by the apostolic preaching."¹⁴ In the post-Nicene period, as the great theological controversies heightened the concern for doctrinal norms, insistence upon faithfulness to scriptures increased. Nothing reveals this more clearly than the heated debate over the use of the term homousios in the Nicene Creed. Arius and his supporters argued vehemently against its inclusion in the creed on the grounds that it has no scriptural precedent. In response to their contention, Athanasius was careful not to question the centrality of the scriptures. Instead, he argued that homousios was true, if not to the letter, than to the sense of scriptures. The bishops of Nicaea were "compelled on their part to collect the sense of the Scriptures, and to re-say and re-write what they had said before, more distinctly still, . . ." in order to cut off Arian subterfuges.¹⁵ If anyone has a complaint about the expression, "let him know, that, even if the expressions are not in so many words in the Scriptures, . . . they contain the sense of the Scriptures, and expressing it, they convey it to those who have their hearing unimpaired for religious doctrine."¹⁶

In the patristic era the creeds functioned in the main, once a collection of scriptures existed, as guides to their interpretation and application. There were, of course, varied special usages: catechizing and baptism, worship, exorcism, guidance in persecution, and refutation of heresy. ¹⁷ The most salient usage, however, was in catechizing and baptism, and this accounts for most of the creedal development of the first centuries. ¹⁸ By the fourth century the exposition of the creed involved a phrase by phrase scriptural commentary. In his famous Catechetical Lectures, delivered in A.D. 348, Cyril of Jerusalem lets us know that he considered the creed to be derived from the scriptures and to point to them. Having commented from scriptures in a summary way on each article of the creed, he noted that "the remaining subjects of our introductory teaching" are taught by "the divinely-inspired Scriptures of both the Old and New Testament" and enjoined his hearers to read them. ¹⁹ Augustine expressed a similar sentiment in A Treatise on Faith and the Creed. The creed exists, he explained, so that

individuals who are but beginners and sucklings among those who have been born again in Christ, and who have not yet been strengthened by most diligent and spiritual handling and understanding of the divine Scriptures, should be furnished with a summary, expressed in few words, of those matters of necessary belief which were subsequently to be explained to them in many words, . . . ²⁰

In actual usage creeds sometimes did assume a normative importance of their own in the patristic era. This is because it was more convenient and conclusive to apply the "summary" than to go through the labyrinth of interpretation which scriptures sometimes required. Having such a point of reference could work both to the advantage and to the disadvantage of individual interpreters. On the one hand, it did pose a point of discipline which would cut off speculations. On the other hand, by delineating what were counted essential items, it laid out a path for the interpreter which, once he knew danger points, he could safely tread.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I am in relative agreement with the concept of the authority of tradition which is suggested by the one source model of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Authority. As I understand this concept, the Church's authority originates in the divine self-disclosure in nature, in general history, in salvation history, but, above all, in Jesus of Nazareth. For what we know of the last mode of God's self-disclosure we are dependent upon tradition. This tradition flows as a single continuous stream from the beginning on. It is embedded, however, in numerous traditions. It is embedded in the canonical scriptures. But all of these, insofar as they are valid, have their source in this tradition. The safekeeping of this tradition lies in the hands of a magisterium, however defined.

In several vital points Protestants will be likely to question the concept of the authority of tradition presented in this constitution. A fundamental one is the ascription of infallibility to either tradition, scriptures, or the Church's magisterium. Where Protestants have conferred infallibility, they have done so only upon the scriptures. Even this, stands in direct opposition to the Protestant principle, viz. that no institution with which we as human beings have contact can claim to have the last word. That which is utterly reliable is the Word of God, God himself. A second concerns the location of the magisterium. Baptists especially, influenced as they are by the Reformation, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment, will insist upon the right of each Christian or group of Christians to search for and interpret God's Word. A third has to do with the interrelation of the three poles of authority--tradition, scriptures, and magisterium. The issue here is shaped by the way in which we define tradition. If defined both narrowly as the essential deposit of revelation, and broadly as what the Church teaches on the basis of the Word of God, then the tradition contained in the scriptures will have to be assigned a superior place. It is, insofar as we can find a primary source, the primary source against which all other traditions, even those within the scriptures, have to be tested. This conception, it seems to me, suits well the Protestant view that the Church always stands in need of reform.

Notes

- 1 Second London Confession, I.1; II.3.
- 2 "The Orthodox Creed," 1678, arts. 37, 38; W. L. Lumpkin, ed., Baptist Confessions of Faith (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1959), p. 326.
- 3 Infallible? An Inquiry, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1971).
- 4 In A History of Christianity, ed. Clyde L. Manschreck (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1964), p. 31.
- 5 The Documents of Vatican II, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: Guild Press, 1966), p. 118, v.26. Other papers and discussion in this conference, however, show that Catholic theologians see an "ordinary" magisterium which all the faithful exercise. The constitution evidently is talking about the "extraordinary" or definitive magisterium.
- 6 Church, 25; Abbott, p. 50; cf. Revelation, 4; Abbott, p. 113.
- 7 So Yves Congar, O.P., Tradition and Traditions, (New York: Scribners, 1966) and The Meaning of Tradition, trans. A. N. Woodrow (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1964).
- 8 "The Events of Easter and the Empty Tomb," Tradition and Life in the Church, trans. A. V. Littledale (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), pp. 53f.
- 9 Louis Gottschalk, Understanding History (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), p. 116. We should recognize, of course, that even primary witnesses require initial evaluation. However, we are dependent upon the data they contain, however inadequate, for all later reconstructions.
- 10 The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine; Vol. I: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600) (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 1.

- 11 I wonder if this has not also been the method which Roman Catholics have applied in the renewal of the Church which came to a focus in Vatican II. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium), for instance, has a fully scriptural text footnoted by tradition. This appears to me to be the correct approach.
- 12 Tradition in the Early Church (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962).
- 13 Against Heresies, 3.4.1; in Philip Schaff, The Creeds of Christendom (New York: Harper & Bros., 1877), II:15.
- 14 On First Principles, 1, pref. 4-6. See further the extensive study of Origen's views of tradition by R. P. C. Hanson, Origen's Doctrine of Tradition (London: S.P.C.K., 1954).
- 15 Defence of the Nicene Definition, 20; NPNF², IV:163.
- 16 Ibid., 21; NPNF², IV:164.
- 17 See Oscar Cullmann, The Earliest Christian Confessions, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949).
- 18 See J. N. D. Kelly, Early Christian Creeds (London: Longmans, Green, 1950).
- 19 Cat. 4.33.
- 20 On Faith and the Creed, 1.1; NPNF: III, 321.

The Authority of Tradition
 by
 Ephrem Carr, O. S. B.

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings; for it is well that the heart be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited their adherents. (Hebrews 13:7-9).

It is common today to speak of the Church as a pilgrim people on their way. One might expect that this pilgrim people would carry along no excess baggage. Can we dismiss tradition then as so much extraneous weight? The Church and its faith has now and always its biblical and historical origins which it cannot afford to jettison and still retain its identity as the Body of Christ. Without such an historical referent the Church would always be in danger of a lack of perspective in losing sight of its origin, its self-understanding through the ages and today (Tradition in its broadest sense) and its direction for the future.

If we wish to speak about tradition, it is within the historical dimension, the radical historicity of Christianity that it exists. The text from Hebrews sets out in brief the elements of any discussion of tradition and its authority: a) it involves an anamnesis, remembrance, of the past based on the reception of the spoken word of God and on Christian experience and reflection which becomes a living faith; b) it encompasses the reality of the "apostolate," i.e. Christian leaders as certified witnesses to revelation whose direction in teaching aids in avoiding the danger of unauthentic teachings; c) it relies on the central reality and definitive revelation of Jesus Christ which is permanent for all times; d) it is yet at root eschatological, future oriented, "still to come;" e) its continued strength depends on the Holy Spirit and his grace.

As Albert Outler has noted, "Tradition, both as act and process, constitutes both the source and the method by which Christians, since Pentecost, have been enabled to know and to respond to the revelation of God in Christ." ¹ In this broad task, what is understood

by tradition? Tradition is the Church's self-consciousness, her understanding who and what she is at any given point in time. In its most basic sense, tradition is not noetic, i.e., articulated doctrines or "truths" but the community of interrelated experiences flowing from the historical revelation of God in Christ that shapes its contemporaries and conditions its successors. It is a living tradition communicated between contemporaries and generations by contact and understanding reflected in texts. Tradition is the active presence of revelation in the Church living by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is therefore an apostolic and biblical tradition handing on both the realities of salvation (Baptism and Eucharist) and the message which grew into Scripture.

Tradition is an inevitable necessity because we lack the historical and immediate experience of the apostolic Church. To deny its necessity is to say that the Body of Christ, the Church, and what goes on in it, in its life, its thought, its liturgy and its dogmas is insignificant, useless or even dangerous. If one grants the work of the Holy Spirit, the essential authenticity of the Church's understanding and expression of herself cannot be denied or contradicted. To be herself the Church must bear within herself and transmit all that is needed for salvation in the Word/event of Christ. No ecclesial community starts from scratch. We are baptized into the Body of Christ and are at the same time situated within a heritage of tradition, within a very definite horizon of ecclesial self-consciousness. Every ecclesial community puts a religious value on orthodoxy however arrived at and excludes heretics. This orthodoxy is not just scripture but at the very least a particular understanding of it. To belong to a visible Christian community means to accept tradition and accord it some value and meaning. Neither historically nor theologically can we speak of a direct immediate relation between the wondrous works of God in the Old Testament and New Testament and ourselves.

The issue of tradition has been clouded by two extremes: a) a total lack or denial of tradition either 1) in the questionable direction of "secular" theology which is oriented to the present world and discards tradition offhand and displays no interest in the future or 2) in literal biblicism and intuitive mysticism -- but to point the Church without its historical dimension is ultimately a denial of the principle of the Incarnation; b) a mechanical conservation of tradition in an unconditioned, rational, mathematico-scientific

way -- but to cling to this variety of non-historical orthodoxy is similar to Monophysitism if not Gnosticism and it becomes an unbounded relativism in which everything and yet nothing has value since everything has become equivalent.

If we accept the legitimacy of tradition and its radical historicity we can lay down some of its pre-suppositions and implications. There is a basic "conservationism" ² of the Catholic Church as it seeks to preserve and hand on tradition. The Church sees itself as a community in constant relation to Christ, a historical person: she was founded by him, she lives in him, in the Spirit she is directed through him toward the Father. As the very understanding of Christ is that he is God and man, the Church also finds itself with two differing dimensions of life: 1) a certain a-historical direction, i.e., a relation to God here and now, and 2) a radical connection to history, to materiality, to everything that constitutes man and his society in the world.

Tradition depends on a real union of these two dimensions. If the Word/event of Christ is the core reality of tradition and the sustaining principle is the Holy Spirit, tradition is an interaction at a given period between the reality of salvation in the Church, the living community of faith of the Church, the Scriptures preserved and handed on in that community, and the succession of qualified and certified witness and teaching in the ecclesial community. In a narrower sense tradition is the structures through which an individual continues to be present within a Church community in its thought or teaching, in its practices or life, in its celebration or worship.

In light of the above we can distinguish between Tradition and ecclesial traditions. The labyrinthine diversity of traditions as they have taken shape in history is an undeniable fact. The image of a telephone cable (Tradition) with its numerous interwoven lines (traditions) comes to mind. The whole cable and each line is trying to hand on viva voce the message of Christ which grew into the Scriptures and the realities of salvation. Considering the temporal and historical framework of tradition in whatever sense, however, any demand on it for "pure fact" or "absolute truth" is an intrinsically impossible illusion.

The question of the authority of tradition is a modern problem. In early Christianity and the Middle Ages authoritative tradition was taken for granted and automatically accepted. It was also common in the Middle Ages to distinguish between the one real authority of the Lord living and present in the faith of the Church based on Scripture and the numerous authorities, e.g., Scriptures, Councils, Fathers of the Church, Liturgy, etc. that represented and exemplified the one authority. The acceptance of authoritative tradition as of a piece was vigorously attacked by Humanism with its concern for historical criticism and by the Reformers with their concern for the Gospel alone and rigidly upheld by the unconditioned, mathematico-scientific approach of the counter-Reform and its aftermath.

Is there any way of going beyond this impasse? Our Christian heritage is handed down in concrete forms from generation to generation within the community of the "people of God on the way." In the midst of the challenging changes of history and in confrontation with these it assumes new forms and expressions. Yet God is faithful to his promise of salvation and the realization of this promise in men's lives. Tradition is tentative and yet authoritative, and it is the obvious tension between these elements that can perhaps help clarify the issue at hand.

The absolute correlatives that form the basis of the authority of tradition and its related continuity are fourfold: Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Church, and the Scriptures. The authority is God and the basis is his faithfulness. The Father sent his Son and manifested himself in him. With Jesus Christ we have the Word of God spoken for all time, definitively given. The constant presence of Christ is promised in Mt. 28, 20.

The Holy Spirit abides hiddenly in the Church as the true bearer and clarifier of the Word (cf. Jn 16, 13). He is constantly active as the life-giving principle in the Church. As such he is the guarantee of the authenticity of the Church's witness.

The revelation of Christ was entrusted to his Church as Christ sent his disciples as certified witnesses to himself. For the Word of God to fulfill its purpose in the Church's mission it must be assured of being proclaimed rightly and heard clearly. This demands the "sufficiency" of the Church's faith and teaching. It

must embody from the beginning to the present all the principles of Christianity necessary for salvation. Equally the Church can never definitely relapse into the state of apostasy and deny Christ. Also in the communion of saints all who in the course of history have contributed to the Church's progress in time are alive today in Christ with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit and endow the Church with all the richness of their experience and their sanctity.

The Scriptures also partake in the historical "once for all time" of revelation. They are a normative witness because both as to time and authority they stand before and above other witnesses to faith and they are inspired by the Holy Spirit according to Christ's promise.

On the other hand, the evidence of tradition wears a historical form and is subject to the laws of history. This necessitates the critical work of selecting, rejecting, interpreting and contemporizing. Tradition (including Sacred Scripture) is not necessarily and in every respect God's word. The spirit of the Church is not necessarily the Holy Spirit. What were once regarded as binding traditions now carry little or no weight. Any critical assessment of tradition must approach at least the following areas: 1) the centrality and weight of various traditions, 2) historical methodology and reaching the "core" of tradition, 3) the relationship to Scripture, and 4) the role of the teaching office in the Church.

The central reality of faith and tradition is Jesus Christ the revelation of the Father to save us. This should give dimension and direction to any analysis of tradition. What is secondary and peripheral in comparison with this should be put in proper perspective. We also need to distinguish carefully and clearly between doctrinal opinions which of themselves have no claim to any kind of permanence and dogmas of the Church. Even the latter partake not only of authoritativeness (permanence) but also of tentativeness (transience) because they speak through historical concepts and respond to historical questions. Furthermore the dogmas are not meant to be ends in themselves but instruments to serve and point to the pristine Word of God, Jesus Christ. They have a "service role."

The historical-critical method familiar for the exegesis of Scripture applies equivalently to tradition

and particularly dogmas. This work of interpretation in changing circumstances is done somewhat automatically in the sensus fidelium. Within the history of traditions we need to demythologize, to grasp the historical, conceptual, ontological perspective in which and from which the tradition evolved its theological intent and scope and express it in contemporary terms. Having done this we need to set out to collect the varied traditions and probe in them for the one unarticulated Tradition underlying them. Needless to say this is not an easily realizable task.

To bring Scripture into the picture elicits more than one reflection. 1) In the critical process of using Scripture as a normative witness measuring traditions it is not a question of material identity of the traditional element with Scripture, nor that it be derived by deductions from what is implicit in Scripture, nor just that it be not contradictory to Scripture. The criterion has to be that the tradition must stand in line with the whole perspective of the apostolic testimony to Jesus, i.e., that it fits the intentionality of Scripture and its revelation of God's promise of salvation through Christ is the Holy Spirit. 2) Christ is present formally not in a book but in the consciousness of a living believing community directed toward the reality of the mystery of Christ. In that sense the Scriptures do not have "independent" value as if salvation is found in the Scriptures alone. The Scriptures are not by themselves the word and message of God. The Scriptures must be read as the Church's book. 3) The Scriptures are sufficient but not self-explanatory. There is a formidable problem in interpreting the Scriptures. Heretics in all ages appealed to the Scriptures, and there is a danger of misunderstanding even by people of good will. The locus of the meaning of Scripture communicated by the Spirit is the Church, the body of those who have converted to Christ. The text of Scripture is a dead letter, a "thing" unless unfrozen in the believing community by the Spirit's warm breath through the spoken and received word.

Christ communicated and certified certain witnesses to his life, death, and resurrection. He also brought into being a structure for giving expression to this authentic witness for preserving the gospel from alterations in its course in the Church: the "apostles." They formed a collegial body but not an undifferentiated one as certain apostles played a primary part. The original purpose of this structure was to continue the

authentic witness in its accuracy, to safeguard it, to transmit it, and to hold unity around it. This purpose would be vitiated if the structure as such died out with the apostolic generation. The commission must be seen as an ongoing reality to make any sense of it. Their mission is first and foremost a hearing office, a receiving of what is revealed and then only a teaching one (magisterium) for us.

The originally collegial work of defining dogmas according to the norm of the apostolic witness was and is subordinate to the Church's primary task of preserving and preaching the witness itself. The magisterium is not above Sacred Scripture, but it does stand above our interpretation of Scripture. The entire Church carries out tradition but the critical function is ultimately that of the continuing teaching office -- when faced with a reaction on the part of the people of God to judge if it is an "apostolic," "evangelical" action or an all too human reaction.

May I conclude this brief consideration of the teaching office with a note on that not altogether happy term: "the Church's infallibility." It means at root that it is impossible for the redeemed people of God as Church to falter. It refers to the imperishable, and unfailing quality of accomplished salvation in Christ. None of the Church's dogmas lead away from Christ or bar the way to him. This does not exclude the fact that some dogmas sometimes point in an obscure and imperfect way to Christ. Any new ways of expression must finally lead to the same goal, and thereby the initial and fundamental sense of the dogmas is always retained. In this one must posit an indissoluble unity between the sufficiency of the Church's faith and the charism of the college of bishops and the pope as head of the college. In establishing an agreement among qualified and certified witnesses of the faith the decisive point in early Christianity as at present is not the numbers but the representative quality of the testimony; the testimony always represented, a quasi-personification of the whole Church at the time.

Notes

- 1 A. C. Outler, "The Sense of Tradition in the Ante-Nicene Church," Journal of Ecumenical Studies I (1964) 460.
- 2 "Conservationism" seems preferable to "conservatism" which while more commonplace carries with it so many political and emotional overtones.



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