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Authority.

A paper read at the Rawdon College Reunion.

AMONG the topics for religious discussion the subject of Authority has undoubtedly come into prominence again in recent years.

It will be readily conceded that all men are conscious of a higher law of life, and that the normal man orders his life under its constraining influence. The healthy life is governed by a regulative principle which gathers up the enduring significance of every experience and co-ordinates the vast complexities of life into systematic unity. Under its influence we live, *i.e.*, our thoughts, feelings and actions are under its control. Undoubtedly there are occasions of rebellion against it, due to the temporary loss of the magnetism in the ideal or because of the untoward calamitous experiences to which all life is subject. In some cases, this principle is unworthy of life's solemn obligations, but in most men there are times when it hovers around the borderland of the sublime. Its chief feature is that it is always something higher than man's actual life—something that, whether by constraint or compulsion, influences man towards a nobler form of life. Thus it comes to man authoritatively. It beckons from the heights for man to make the ascent, but behind that beckoning is a "must" and an "ought" for the man who truly lives.

For our purposes, we would discard those lower forms of Authority, such as social conventions and legal systems. They savour too oft of the negative and prohibitive. Our need is for something positive and capable of quickening the individual's initiative. If Authority be degraded to a tyrant's palace where hangs the sword of Damocles, it must inevitably fail to achieve its object, and herald in its own disaster. For Authority to succeed, it must elicit not only willing acquiescence but active co-operation. Furthermore, we would preclude those spasmodic intermittent forms of Authority, regarding some as exceptions to the general rule and others as peaks in the upland reaches of life. We would focus thought on some enduring principles to which man's life is lived in abeyance and which holds the solution for our varying experiences. This principle or law must be of such a character that its influence upon man is not only enduring but cumulative or progressive. In other words, its net result must be that the "soul of man goes marching on."

To produce such an effect it must appeal to man as a unified

entity. For good or ill, man is the arbiter of his own fate. He is so constituted that he has the capacity to apprehend, within limits, life's *summum bonum*. Life would be an unworthy existence unless we had this progressive power to comprehend with increasing fulness the nature of that Authority that demands our allegiance. As we are able to bear it the truth is revealed to us. But no true advance can ever be made until the component parts of our life are all active. It is conceivable that the fervour of a glowing ideal may hold a man in complete homage for some time. But experience, both corporate and individual, has testified to its lack of durability and sane perspective. Perspective fails equally when reason would demonstrate with mathematical precision the dictates of this overruling power. Since man both thinks and feels, Authority must evoke allegiance from mind and heart. Submission is by reason and faith, but we endeavour to give a reason for our faith, and faith supplements intellectual limitations. Thus comes life's vaster music when mind and soul are in complete accord. But submission, to be complete, depends also upon another element in man's nature. Reason and faith, or mind and feeling must together result in arousing the will to action. We must "will to do the will" of that Authority over life. Without it, there would be no progressive advance whereby reason could further explore the intricacies of Authority and faith could give its warmest allegiance.

But mind, soul and will constitute personality, and Authority makes its appeal to the whole personality, and from it seeks allegiance. Its avenue of approach may vary, but the healthy response is undoubtedly from the life in which all the phases are in harmonious co-operation.

The question arises, Is this Authority internal or external, is it simply a matter of subjective experience, or does it rest on some objective fact? Is there an inner light in my own being; or is there some reality without which controls my life? Are we qualified to decide this issue? We are the products of heredity and environment. Our life has been so made for us before we took the helm that it cannot be our judgment solely. We are so hedged in by presuppositions that an unbiased view seems impossible. Yet, notwithstanding, the unalterable fact remains. Man has faced the issue and must continually face it. Intelligent personality were a wasted gift if we refused to seek all the enlightenment we can upon so vital a problem.

The wisdom of the ages has postulated an objective authority. Our being is such that we cannot formulate any contrary statement. If in the pursuit of an unbiased judgment we could eradicate the past from man's nature, there would be no intelligent personality to deliver the verdict. We can only

deal with life as we know it, and life demands a principle, cause or power beyond itself. This something beyond must be greater than our actual life,—something that we can rest upon,—something that can speak to us with authority. The contention may be raised that this external power is only an inward idealization of our own. Life needs some such bulwark, and hence we affirm it. To accept this theory would be to shatter the whole fabric of metaphysic and religion. Our individual belief is that ultimate power is strengthened by the testimony of the ages.

Since man possesses personality he needs an ultimate power that is personal. Some may be unable to postulate more than a first cause, principle, or power. But our contention is that personality could never intelligently submit to such an Authority. Our complete confidence can only be granted to one who is like us in nature and being. He must have the warm, loving heart, the rational mind, and the good will. He must be like us, but immeasurably above us. He must be the Author of life in its highest forms—not merely the originator of cosmic forces but the creator of personality, and we discover such a one in the God of Christianity. His is the authority to which human personality can give allegiance.

But humanity can never rest content with an unknown God, and humanity of itself could never with confidence ascribe these attributes to God. The metaphysician can tell you nothing about his first cause except in so far as that cause is operative in the world. The God of Christianity would be an insoluble enigma unless He had manifested Himself unto men. Here we are absolutely dependent upon divine self-revelation and our interpretation of that revelation. God has given self-expression to Himself specifically in Nature, the Bible, the Church, Jesus Christ, and the Inner Light of the individual. All these exercise authority over us, but their authority is vested ultimately in God, and through them we are led to that final and supreme authority.

Our interpretation of these forms of divine revelation imposes a solemn responsibility upon the individual. Like the Bereans we must receive, examine and accept. Scientific methods of investigation are invaluable assets in determining how far these secondary authorities can lead us to the ultimate Authority, God. These are the subject-matter with which human intelligence can deal in its honest endeavour to discover the eternal truth in the divine nature. To discard these methods would be beneath the dignity of manhood as created by God, dishonouring unto God Himself, and flinging wide open the door to innumerable sources of error. Blind belief can never be enthroned, where belief need not be blind.

These subsidiary authorities are invaluable as correctives of each other. Assuming that each individual must build up his own spiritual world where God reigns supreme, the liability to error is self-evident. All the data at his disposal must be examined ruthlessly, and advance steps must be delayed until, as with Newton, no conflicting evidence remains. It may conceivably arise that the individual's inner light may discern a way of God, but confirmation would assuredly come from God's revelation in the Bible, Church, or Jesus Christ, before whole-hearted adherence is justified. Man's spiritual cosmos where God reigns as the supreme Authority can only include those elements or truths verified by manifestations of the deity in other media.

A unique place as an external authority has ever justly been ascribed to the Bible. The contribution of the sacred books to the individual's cosmos consists of the records of the lives of righteous people and their inspired utterances, and also of the progressive moral development of a race culminating in Jesus Christ, humanity's best and deity's most complete manifestation. Omitting the considerations of Jesus Christ as an Authority for the moment, we regard the Jewish people, individually and racially, as a human channel for divine revelation. Deity's Authority was vested in those people subject to human limitations. Admitting that divine omnipotence could use an imperfect medium for a perfect expression of His will, such a course of action would not commend itself to us. It would violate our conception of deity and the ordered intelligence with which man is endowed. The most definite declarations of Authority are contained in the Sinaitic Commandments and the prophetic "Thus saith the Lord." Declarations such as these are not deprived of authority, but rather is their force enhanced in the life of a man who examines and seeks to verify them by reference to other forms of divine revelation. To such a man verbal inspiration is an immaterial side issue. The only point at issue for him is to what extent were the divine mind and character revealed in the utterances and lives of the Jewish people. This is the message that comes with Authority to his own soul—the manifested authority of the Eternal Being.

Sections of the Christian Church have claimed external authority and exercised it over their adherents. The church is an invaluable aid to the individual in discerning the mind of God, but a sectional authority can never be applicable to the whole fellowship of believers. Priestly mediation may prove to be a help in difficulty and sorrow, but it is a delegation of our spiritual birthright of access to God through Christ. The Church cannot be infallible as long as it is composed of fallible Christians. But

the Church Universal has an authoritative message for mankind. Like the Bible its history is a record of saintly lives, and in its treasure-house is gathered the sanctified wisdom of men who lived in the fear of God.

Thus the Bible and the Church lead us to men who lived as we are trying to live—men who found God in their experience—men to whom the consciousness of God came as a supreme controlling power in life. In so far as these lives are an effulgence of the eternal glory, so far does their authoritative influence over us extend. Similarly the corporate wisdom of these men as contained in the Bible and Church teaching contains authoritative precepts for our guidance.

The contemplation of spiritual personalities in the Bible and Church leads us to the supreme example in Jesus Christ. The Christian world regards His life as an authoritative example and His teachings as authoritative precepts for all time. But let us here insist that it is the character and spirit behind their expression in life and utterance that are of primary importance. Our Lord might not turn the water into wine in modern England or advocate the gift of the cloak to him who took the coat. The incidental and circumstantial are not necessarily of permanent value, but the divine character in Christ lives and endures for all time, and as such exercises authority over man.

Our Lord is the supreme Authority for man, because He is the Perfect Revelation of God—as complete a manifestation of the divine nature as earthly limitations would admit. Such limitations are due not to Christ Himself, for He was the Son of God, but to a God revealing Himself amid world conditions and comprehensible to finite minds. Even the portraiture of Christ in the gospels has been given us through the finite intelligence of their authors.

Our Lord's Authority is supreme because He Himself was completely surrendered to the Divine Will. Was it spiritual vision that impelled the centurion to discern this characteristic in Christ, when he declared that he himself was "*also* a man under authority"? We behold Him in nightly prayer and Gethsemane's garden. "Not My will, but Thine be done," was the undercurrent of His life. Life thus surrendered unto God could not fail to learn the divine will and become the highest revelation of God to man. Inasmuch as God was "Lord of the conscience" to Christ, so He stands in that same relationship to us.

One gracious characteristic of our Lord's Authority is that it is persuasive in method. Authority in its noblest forms must succeed not by compulsion, but by constraint. It must win allegiance, not drive men to it. Though in Christ's sway over

men, there is the dark background of stern penalties for human sin, yet the foreground is radiant with the picture of a supplicating Lord. He reasoned at length with honest enquirers, He taught in parables, He strove to interest the soul through the healing of the body. He gave His life on Calvary as the sublime example of a love that sought to win men. Acclaiming Himself Lord and Master, He becomes for man's sake the suffering servant. Love has an Authority all its own, and it is this form of Authority that has enthroned Christ in the lives of men.

We ascribe supremacy to our Lord's Authority because it tends to impart a moral grandeur to life. There is a growing consensus of opinion that the world's salvation lies in a better way of life. We are the grateful recipients of moral precepts from every uplifting religion, but we see them reach their zenith in the Christian teaching. We become disciples of every inspired teacher, but the character of the Christ stands as a lone star in the firmament. It is the *ne plus ultra* of human aspiration, and the human ideal reaches its noblest in the Christ way of life. The disciple would be as his Master, not in doing or saying what He did, but in being what He was in nobility of character. Men visualise life at its best. The Christian consciousness ever touches up with fresh details the soul's picture of the Christ. Living in the fellowship of that ideal, we grow consciously and unconsciously more like unto it, until finally alienation ceases and we acclaim Him, "My Lord and my God."

We discover, moreover, an Authority in Christ that gives stability to life in all its phases. The two chief causes of unrest are intellectual and emotional. When youth would find a reason for its faith, it oft turns away sickened at heart from the old shibboleths, but it clings to a true-hearted man who has fought his way through to a deeper faith. Then it contemplates Jesus calmly thinking things out in the quiet seclusion of the Nazareth home, beholds the unruffled serenity amid growing hostility of that unconquerable personality, and finally sees the ultimate surrender in Gethsemane. Though youth confesses its inability to comprehend it all, yet it does feel that here was One who was true to Himself and had found what it wants to find. Thus the conviction steadily grows that it must hold on to Christ, until like Him it wins its way through to moral peace. Similarly we turn instinctively to Him in life's calamitous experiences. We behold a wondrous wealth of sympathy. Sympathy unlocks the door of rebellious hearts, and once again the fevered mind and tortured soul find peace. From His Gethsemane He comes to us in ours, and His mantle of victory and peace falls upon our shoulders. So through Him we reach the Christian's goal and become men well-established in the faith.

Finally, Christ's Authority is supreme, because it persuades the will to action. Christian progress ensues when there is a definite determination on the part of the individual to make the Christ life his own standard. Men fall under the spell of the magnetic splendour of the Christ and passionately long to be more like Him. Or thinking Christ's thoughts after Him, they are led by reflection to make Him the foundation of their reasoned faith. But both avenues of approach lead to that fuller way of life where the definite stand for Christ is taken. Thus by successive decisions, the surrender of the human will becomes so complete that the moral shock is experienced not when some fresh act of self-abnegation is demanded, but in the momentary lapses from rectitude. By this means we approximate nearest to the example of Christ, who in life's darkest hour could pray, "Not My will, but Thine, be done."

For these reasons we regard our Lord as the supreme manifested Authority of God. Looking unto the latter we are led to say, "Our Father," and give to Him the children's obedience. Some aspects of that divine authority we cannot fully comprehend, but eternal wisdom and love so permeate the known that with filial love we follow Him into the unknown. He has given His Son as the supreme objective standard for man. Our aim to realise within ourselves its subjective counterpart—"the Christ in the heart." In this we are helped by the gift of the Holy Spirit—which some would describe as the Inner Light—which shall guide us into all truth. In the truest sense every man must make his own Christ—the Christ of his own soul verified by the great objective standards. Such a subjective Christ must inevitably fall below the objective standard, but God has ordained that this should be the Christian procedure, and man's privilege and glory consist in bringing his human limitations down to an irreducible minimum. To such a Lord Jesus Christ and to God through Him we accord the highest type of Authority, for in them "we live, and move, and have our being."

S. R. WARD.