

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Nature and Seat of Authority.

BY THE REV. CANON D. E. W. HARRISON, M.A.

I HAVE long felt that the problem of authority was fundamental for us Evangelicals, and that a real attempt to come to grips with it was long overdue. There are, I believe, historical reasons for our present lack of clarity, and it may perhaps help if I try to set out what these historical reasons are.

Our present Evangelicalism is in fact an amalgam in which we can distinguish three constituent elements. There is first the old Protestant orthodoxy—roughly the theological position of the articles or for that matter of the Savoy Declaration, the fruit of the Reformation. That, as Forsyth points out in his own analysis (*The Person and Place of Jesus Christ, cap 7*) rested on the objectivity of a given revelation: it is to use a modern phrase a Biblical theology. Secondly, in historical sequence, there is the influence of the Evangelical revival, with its emphasis on experience, coming very close in some of its phases to Pietism. Thirdly, there is the influence of the enlightenment which only came to us as Evangelicals in the nineteenth century through the influence of German theological thinking. At the risk of over simplification we may say that the first constituent element in our theological inheritance rests upon the objectivity of a given revelation, the second on the subjectivity of Christianised human nature, the third on the radical subjectivity of human nature or thought. In so far as we are really Evangelicals and not modernists our difficulties are bound up with our lack of clarity in distinguishing between, and rightly evaluating, the essential and permanent truths enshrined in the first and second elements in our inheritance. But for the purpose of this conference I think it is well that the third should be adequately dealt with at the outset.

Forsyth has done it so well that I shall paraphrase his analysis. Contrasting the influence of the Reformation and the enlightenment, he points out that “the one laid fundamental stress on guilt and grace, the other on native goodness and human love; for the one, man was the best thing in the universe and the greatness of his ruin the only true index of his nature; for the other, man was the saving thing of the universe and his progress the index of his greatness. The one lived by redemption and regeneration, the other by evolution and education. For the one, the incarnation is nothing but miracle, inexplicable but sure; for the other it is, in the last analysis, universal immanence. For the one, Christ is absolute, for the other He is but relative to the history from which He arose. For the one, Christ is the object of our faith, for the other He is but its greatest instance. In the one He is our God, in the other, our brother.” And his closing sentence I would make my own, “It is well that the issue should be clear if our choice is to be as intelligent and effectual as a faith should be.”

I wonder if in hearing that you felt, as I did when reading it, that much of what we call Liberal Protestantism savours of the enlightenment rather than the Reformation. And that Liberal Protestantism,

let us remember, is not yet dead in the Evangelical Churches of this country both Anglican and Free. You meet it in almost every clerical study group, because it is the tradition in which the vast majority of clergy over the age of forty were brought up. Dare I go further and suggest that it is the outlook which has become subtly associated with critical scholarship, with the consequent danger that true criticism will suffer from the association? And finally is this association not due to the fact that Biblical criticism was largely the work of men, especially in Germany, the background of whose thought was the Enlightenment rather than the Reformation, and who, therefore, largely unconsciously, found in the Bible the reflexion of their own image, and made that insight the criterion of rejection or acceptance.

Now I take it that our theological situation is that this "modernism", if I may use a dangerous word, has been smashed, and inevitably smashed, by the hard rocks of contemporary history, because the world is God's world, and history the field of His activity. Fundamentally, it is the theology of the Enlightenment which is bankrupt: critical scholarship is only in danger in so far as it rested upon the Enlightenment for its "insight" into the Bible. Some of you may not agree. But if there is, at any rate, a great measure of truth in what I am saying, then it is high time that we looked to our foundations.

In doing so we must, I think, recognize a second radical weakness, this time in our equipment. Most of us received our theological training in Oxford or Cambridge, and in neither is there any dogmatic or systematic theology. We have all been trained in historical theology, except for such doctrine lectures as came our way in a theological college. The result is that when we tackle, let us say, Karl Barth's "Doctrine of the Word of God," we find ourselves in a new world and acclimatization does not come easily. Now I do not suggest that there are not some compensating advantages. The discipline of history is well worth while, but a man may be an excellent historian without being a profound theologian. He may achieve a certain detachment, freedom from the bonds of any one theological system, and English theologians have always been a little proud of that kind of independence. But my point is that in our present situation it is not enough. We must become in the full sense of the word theologians, men who confront our own world with the Word of God. And that, at least for me, raises the problem of authority, the subject of our present conference, and the reason why it was chosen.

In reality there is no one problem of authority, but rather of authorities and the relation between them. I want to go on to speak of these under familiar heads; but before I do so I ought to try to say something of the nature of authority. When we use this term as Christians we are always, I take it, contemplating the meeting-place of God and man. We recognize that that confrontation is mediated as well as immediate, else our problems would not arise. But, however it is mediated—that is, whatever authorities we recognize—it is that presence of God into which man comes which is determinative, and it is the presence of the Triune God. Moreover this is universally true—of Christian, Jew, Mohammedan or pagan, whether man knows it or not. If this is true, we can go a step further as Christians and say that through Christ, in the Spirit, we know God to be holy love. Authority

is, therefore, the impact of Divine love upon our being. I have, I am aware, omitted some steps in this argument. I am assuming the revelation of God in Christ, and I am assuming that the New Testament contains a sufficient and substantially accurate record of that revelation. But that, amongst us, can be assumed. We can then say something, and something definite and final about the nature of authority; that it is the kind of authority which Christ Himself exercised in His ministry.

Perhaps we ought at this point, to stop and study the Gospels, but there are some conclusions to which I hope we shall all agree. It seems to me clear that our Lord sought to elicit rather than to impose, to appeal rather than to instruct. His temptations are sufficient evidence that he rejected all other conceptions of Messianic authority and power. His use of parable points in the same direction, and the supreme evidence is that of His death. It is deeply significant that in St. Mark, it is His death which elicits the great confession, "Truly this man was the Son of God." Can we agree that authority for us must always be so conceived?

But secondly, can we agree that our Lord assumed that there was that in man which could respond to His authority of love? Or rather, to put it more exactly, that His authority was such that it enabled men in His presence to respond. "Why do ye not even of yourselves judge τοδικαιον" with its implicit background of His own presence and word, seems to me to justify such a conclusion. The authority of Christ then is not such as over-rides my judgment, but rightly forms it. *Credo ut intelligam* is true if *Credo* means faith in its New Testament sense.

But thirdly, because Christ is holy love, to come into His presence means the realization of guilt. "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" is the authentic response of man as he truly is. Authority, that is, essentially implies judgment, and response to it means acceptance of judgment. The ultimate truth is not that we judge, but that we are judged. That conclusion is going to involve us in difficulties at a later stage, but is it not an essential for all our thinking? And its necessary implication is that we need justification and it is God alone who justifies. We arrive at the *sola gratia, sola fide*.

Now what I want to suggest to you is that what has already been said of the immediate activity of God in Christ incarnate—that is of authority in its fundamental evangelical setting, must also be true of all mediated authority; that is, of all the authorities which we recognize as legitimate and, in their measure, binding upon us. To them let us now turn, taking them under the familiar heads of conscience and reason, the Church, experience and the Bible. The list could, of course, be extended. Let me say two things before I begin. First, that all I can or ought to attempt is an introduction, and that tentative. The detailed study will come in the papers to follow. Secondly, that I am primarily concerned with what I may call the hierarchy of these authorities, all of which we recognize to be real.

First then, conscience and reason. I start with the admission that I am not really clear here, myself. What Brunner has to say (The Divine Imperative p.156 ff.) seems to me profoundly true, but I have not included it in this brief analysis. My own starting point is the

recognition that apart from the context of a personal relationship with God, neither conscience nor reason can properly be called authoritative in the sense in which we have used the word. If we start from man as he is, then we must take the doctrine of original sin seriously, and that means that conscience is essentially the witness to the inner contradiction in which man is involved by his fallen nature. So at any rate the New Testament seems to imply. Conscience is not the Voice of God; to say that it is, which is the theology of the Enlightenment, confuses the issue of revelation straightway. Conscience is not a part of man which has remained sound. However we define it, it is itself involved in sin. But, on the other hand, it is true that even in his sin man remains man, which means that in him there is the inherent capacity to be activated to response, to be drawn by the good and the true: and to discriminate between good and evil, the true and the false. I have tried to use words carefully: and it seems to me that even on this view, fundamentally different as it is from that of the Enlightenment, it remains true that conscience must be followed, even though it is vitiated by sin, as and when God acts upon it. From our side we have no other "criterion" in moral judgments.

Coming now to reason, we shall be equally careful with Farmer to define our terms. "Reason *per se* is an abstract idea to which nothing corresponds in the existential world: there are only rational personalities. If we mean by reason what the Greeks meant by *νοῦς* as distinct from *διακονία*, namely man's whole personality considered as functioning self-consciously, then even when, again, we recognize that it is vitiated by sin, we shall recognize that on our side of the personal equation—God and man—reason is the necessary and God-given means of receiving revelation—of responding to divine activity. "If, however, we mean by reason the mental processes by which the mind withdraws from the personal situation with its urgency of activity and decision, and substitutes for it an abstract pattern of logical or cause-effect relationships, then it cannot, as so defined, become the organ of revelation."

The position then to which I come seems to be this. If we are speaking of authority we mean that we envisage the personal confrontation of man by God. In that situation, man is confronted by holy love—that is with judgment and absolute demand, and this is true even though, to use Baillie's phrase, the confrontation be mediated immediacy. In so far as man's only organs of apprehension, judgment and response are conscience and reason, however vitiated by sin, he can only respond in loyalty to their dictates; in that sense, their authority is real and final, but only in the context of revelation, and never in isolation from it; and even in that context the element of divine judgment is always present. Even when man judges, he essentially does so in consenting to judgment.

I pass on to my second heading, *The Authority of the Church*, in which I include the authority of tradition. Here we meet the first of what I call inexactly our mediating authorities: and there is a general consensus of opinion that in experience, religious belief always rests upon such an authority. Baillie makes the point well—*Our Knowledge of God*, p. 181 f. "The Knowledge of God first came to me in the form

of an awareness that I was not my own " but one under authority, one who " owed " something, one who ought to be something which he was not. But whence did this awareness come to me? Not out of the blue. I heard no voice from the skies—it came from my parents." But he goes on to say, " I knew that they were under orders : that what my parents demanded of me and what they knew to be demanded of themselves were, in the last resort, one and the same demand." It is, therefore, important to recognize that the Church's authority is real, and that we are all dependent upon it. We shall further recognize that where there is wide consensus of Christian opinion we shall be wise to hesitate before setting it aside ; that when that opinion comes to us—as for example in the creeds—with centuries of confirmation in Christian life and experience, the weight of that authority is so great that only as a last resort can we diverge from it, and then not as ministers of the Church. I think as Evangelicals we ought to say this, and say it unhesitatingly.

Further, I believe we should recognize that the Holy Spirit is still at work in the Church, that the tradition is constantly being formulated afresh under His guidance, and that to His work in our midst we need to be sensitive. There should surely be no such thing as a merely static orthodoxy. The Church does not live by fixed dogma, but it must in the right sense of the word be dogmatic. That does not, however, mean that the Church is in any sense set free from the historical revelation, or free to reinterpret it.

The real problem comes when we ask whether this authority of the Church is, even for practical purposes, and much more from the standpoint of theology, ultimate. Is the dictum, " the Church to teach and the Bible to prove " true, as many Anglicans assert? Has the Bible a static role while the Church remains dynamic? Put another way, is the authority of the Bible always at two removes from us, that of the Church only at one? Now we have already, I hope, agreed, that faith is only possible in the context of the Church, we only know the Bible in and through the Church. But do we recognise with Baillie that the authority which is binding upon us is also binding upon the Church : that both in history and in life the Church is created by and dependent upon the Word ; that in fact our function as Churchmen and more particularly as theologians is to bring the Church's dogma and proclamation into ever renewed relationship to the Word (by which I here mean the Bible) in the light of the Spirit's guidance? If we do, which is, I believe, the fundamentally Evangelical position, can we go further and say that the light of the Spirit shines only from the Word—that His function is " to take of Mine and show it unto you " ? To this we shall return. But, meanwhile, it is important to recognize that under the influence of the Oxford Movement, the ground has shifted, even for many Evangelicals, and that we cannot exclude the problems raised by the widespread return to-day to an ecclesiastical authority as primary.

Thirdly I come to experience, and here we reach an important place, for here the influence of the Evangelical revival is, as I have said earlier, an essential part of our inheritance. Is there such a thing as the *testimonium Spiritus sancti*? Forsyth might have had Karl Barth in mind when he wrote. " Some scholars, to judge from their

writings do not seem even so much as to have heard of the Holy Ghost. They have a fatal dread of pietism, methodism and most forms of intensely personal evangelical faith. . . . They are . . . the victims of an intellectualism which means spiritual atrophy to Christianity." "Am I forbidden," he goes on to ask, "to make use of my personal experience of Christ for the purposes even of scientific theology?" He answers "If certainty do not lie there, where can it be found in life," and so must we. "We speak that we do know." "The Spirit beareth witness with our spirit." "Ye shall receive power, and ye shall be My witnesses." Only from within the evangelical experience can we speak in Christ's name "livingly" to Christian or pagan. This authority is indisputably real. But again the vital question is, is it ultimate? Or, put another way, has it any criterion of authenticity? I think we may find the answer in terms of preaching. Is it a perversion of St. Paul's words "We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus" to insist that in fact we do not preach our experience? Our experience enables us to bear witness, that is vital: but we do not set our experience before men as that in which they are to put their trust. In the last analysis, in mission preaching (the nearest we come to *κηρυγμα* except in the sacraments) do we not set before men Christ and His Word as the ultimate object of their trust? Is not our ministry essentially the one ministry of the Word and Sacraments, and does not the congruity of its two elements consist precisely in their objectivity? "Christ was the Word who spake it, He took the bread and break it, and what His Word did make it, that I believe and take it." Ultimately, I believe, that though apart from experience we can do and say nothing—for the Spirit is the life-giver—we are thrown back upon the Word.

And here in my last division all the deepest problems lie. What do we mean by the Word? Do we mean the whole Bible as it stands? Do we mean that part of the Bible which seems to us congruous with the Gospels? Do we mean Christ Himself, and if so, how do we relate the Bible to Him? Or again, do we mean the Bible statically conceived as a document to be analysed and its contents reduced to a set of propositions, or do we mean the Bible received dynamically as the medium of revelation as well as its record? In what sense do we take the revelation (or rather its content) as final? In what sense are we bound by the Biblical interpretation of events as well as the events themselves? I hope a later paper will answer these questions for us. I shall confine myself to making some preliminary suggestions.

In the first place we shall, I believe, be agreed that in its primary sense, Christ is the Word of God, and He only. Our approach surely is that the heart of our religion is the Incarnation and Atonement: Christ's person and work. Secondly, we shall understand the Old Testament essentially in the light of the New: but that means we shall approach the *whole* Old Testament in the light of the New. One of the most pernicious trends in critical study, as I see it, is the tendency to throw out of the Old Testament everything except the prophets, and to regard everything after deuterio-Isaiah as virtually retrograde. I suspect that the unacknowledged reason for this is an aversion from a sacrificial doctrine of atonement. Thirdly, if we are true to our

starting point in speaking of authority as inherent in the meeting of God with man, we can only conceive of the Bible dynamically as the organ of revelation—or if you will as effective through the concursus of the Holy Spirit. The twin heresies are surely Fundamentalism and Transubstantiation, and both leave out the work of the Spirit. So far I hope we may agree. If we do, several new books on the Old Testament ought to be written.

But vital problems remain, and for me one of the most vital is this. Put bluntly, “Have I any right to say that St. Paul or St. John is wrong? Am I free to depart from the New Testament interpretation of the work of Christ? Can I, by critical study, dig down to events and then re-interpret them?” We are agreed that Christ is the final and sufficient revelation of God to man, and that revelation consisted in His Person and work: but is it not true that the classic interpretation of both is to be found not in the synoptic Gospels, but in the apostolic testimony of Paul and John and the Epistle to the Hebrews; and are we not bound by that interpretation, by the apostolic testimony? If the Church is apostolic, and if we as Evangelicals do not interpret apostolicity in terms of continuity of ministry by ordination, are we not bound to take our stand upon continuity of apostolic testimony? If we desert it are we not preaching another Gospel, a different Christ? Put another way, have we any right to say that the work of the Holy Spirit is such that we are made free even from the New Testament interpretation of the Christ?

So I come to a close. Our real need is to be able to say with Paul, “We have the mind of Christ.” That does not mean freedom to think, it means a theology. It does not mean a laying bare of the foundations by critical study and the erection upon them of a 20th century superstructure. It does mean, as I believe it meant for the Reformation fathers, the acceptance of the record of revelation given us in Holy Scripture, and the sustained attempt to understand it as a coherent whole. But it also means a sustained effort to relate to it the present life and witness of the Church of God as both built upon it and standing under it. For that task we can rightly pray that the Holy Spirit shall take the things of Christ and show them unto us, giving us grace to accept, and accepting to grow.

I am aware that I have raised more questions than I have solved. I am sure that I lie wide open to criticism, but perhaps I have said enough to provoke discussion.