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AUTHORITY IN THE LIGHT OF THE APOSTOLATE, TRADITION AND THE CANON

by RALPH P. MARTIN

TO judge by a number of papers on the subject of authority which have come in for publication in the QUARTERLY of late, the subject is one of special moment among evangelicals at present. In October-December of last year we published one by Professor E. Earle Ellis and we hope to publish others in forthcoming issues. Here it gives the Editor special pleasure to introduce a study by his colleague Dr. Ralph P. Martin, Lecturer in New Testament Studies in the University of Manchester.

I

ALL Christians *ex professo* acknowledge the supreme authority of Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church and the Saviour of His body (Eph. 5: 23). It is not surprising that the earliest confession of faith known in the N.T. Church, proclaims this fact of the unrivalled lordship of Christ, both in personal allegiance (Rom. 10: 9; 1 Cor. 12: 3; cf. Acts 8: 37 which contains the Western reading) and in His cosmic authority over all created things (Phil. 2: 9-11; Rom. 14: 9; Rev. 5: 6-14). Included in the scope of this dominion is His control of His people, the Church, which holds the central place within the whole *Regnum Christi*, as O. Cullmann has shown.¹

If we would see how this authority was exercised and by what means the will of the risen Christ was made known to the Church in apostolic times, we may point to such data as the literature of the N.T. Church contains. The Gospel narratives portray Jesus as an authoritative teacher whose word was "with power" (ἐξουσία) (Mark 1: 22; Luke 4: 32). Jesus Himself, moreover, claimed to speak and to act with a decisive authority (Matt. 7: 24-27), in such matters as His right to forgive sins (Mark 2: 10), to exorcize demons (Mark 1: 27) and to oppose the venerable Jewish Torah in the antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5: 17 ff.). The force of the oft-repeated assertion ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ("But I say") has been well stated by E. Käsemann² who remarks

¹ "The Kingship of Christ and the Church in the New Testament", *The Early Church*, 1956, pp. 105-137 (128).

² "The Problem of the Historical Jesus", *Essays on New Testament Themes*, 1964, pp. 37f.

that such words, for which there are no Jewish parallels, embody a claim to an authority which rivals and challenges that of Moses.

Two other features of Jesus' ministry—perhaps less well attested—are decisively significant for an appreciation of His authority in the early Church, especially in its controversy with the Jews and therefore in its growing self-awareness and self-identity as Messiah's people. E. Stauffer³ has claimed that the formula I AM (ἐγώ εἰμι) is an allusion to the divine name (expressed in the Aramaic form *Ani Hu*), and is therefore an overt claim to deity. Secondly, at the Trial scene, Jesus claimed to be the rightful occupant of the place at God's right hand in heaven (Mark 14: 62), and so the fulfiller of Psalm 110: 1, and perhaps even more audaciously, Dan. 7: 9.

These examples of His unique authority made the early Church aware that they were living in the age of Messiah's rule. His exaltation and Kingship confirmed what was true in His earthly life, viz. that He had come to be Israel's Messiah and King, and was now exalted as Head of the new people of God. His presence was known to His followers who were called by His name as they assembled in worship and particularly at His table to share a common meal "in remembrance of" Him. Moreover His Spirit, promised before He left them and His bodily presence was withdrawn, had come to be a second Paraclete and to recall to them what they needed to remember of His earthly ministry (John 14: 16-18, 26). That Spirit was actively at work in many ways, not least in empowering their witness (Acts 1: 8, etc.) and in guiding their corporate and individual life. Two descriptions are worthy of mention. *Acts* 16: 7: "the Spirit of Jesus" restrains the missionaries from entering the territory of Pontus-Bithynia. Such a phrase is a unique specimen in N.T. literature, but it serves eloquently to show the closeness of association between the exalted Lord and the Spirit (cf. 2 Cor. 3: 17). *Acts* 21: 11: "Thus speaks the Holy Spirit". Agabus's introductory statement, prefacing his admonition to Paul, must surely recall the O.T. prophetic authorization placed before the oracle, "Thus speaks Yahweh" (*n'ê'ûm YHWH*); and such a correspondence shows the way in which divine guidance was attributed to the same Spirit who moved Israel's prophets.

The mention of Agabus as a prophet (*Acts* 21: 10) draws our attention to early Christian prophecy as a medium through which the risen Lord communicated His mind to the Church. The earlier reference to Agabus (*Acts* 11: 28) showed him in the same

³ *Jesus and His Story*, 1960, pp. 149-159.

capacity as one specially gifted by the Spirit to deliver a predictive oracle concerning the great famine in Judaea. Perhaps Philip's daughters (Acts 21: 9) had the same gift, but the use of προφητεία in 1 Cor. 11 and 14 must warn us that predictiveness was not the only concern of the prophet's ministry. His (and her! 1 Cor. 11: 5) immediate interest at Corinth was a revelation of God's will for the Church, according to the formal definition of the prophetic ministry given at 1 Cor. 14: 3: "The prophet speaks for the upbuilding, and strengthening and consoling of men", with priority accorded to the work of upbuilding (v. 4) as the Lord's purposes for the Church are achieved. There is a happy blend of predictive oracles and a timely message to the contemporary church in the letters of Revelation 2 and 3, where clearly it is the risen Christ who is addressing His people through the prophet John (N.B. Rev. 1: 3; 22: 7 "the words of this prophecy") who, in turn, is inspired by the Spirit (Rev. 2: 7, etc.).

By way of summary. The N.T. Church lived in the conscious awareness of the unseen yet real lordship of the risen Jesus, made known to it by the Spirit's presence and leadership. The Spirit Himself conveyed that presence by uniting believers in communion (κοινωνία) with the Lord and with one another, and by opening the mouths and inspiring the writing of prophets who claimed His inspiration on the basis of O.T. precedent.

Aside from these rather vague allusions to prophecy and the passages in Revelation, we have no means of knowing what was the content of early Christian oracles. Our chief source is the literature produced by those in the Church who stood in a special relation to what they were producing, viz. the apostles and those who claimed an intimate association with the apostles either as their personal coadjutors (e.g. Mark, Luke) or (if the presence of pseudonymous writing in the New Testament is to be accepted) as members of their circle (e.g. authors of Ephesians and 2 Peter).

II

Here is the most important *locus* of authority in the primitive Church: the *Apostolate*. Απόστολος occurs seventy-nine times in the N.T., and is evidently a key-term in early Christianity. Thanks to the linguistic researches of K. H. Rengstorf (in *TWNT*, I), we are able to form a fairly clear picture of what this term meant in the N.T. period. In a sentence and using the words of J. N. Geldenhuis who has harvested the gains of Rengstorf's work, the apostles of Jesus were chosen by Him "to act as His authoritative representatives through whom He was to lay the foundations of

His Church".⁴ The same description would equally well fit the case of Paul whose consciousness of being an apostle "is essentially determined by his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road".⁵

This consciousness was apparently unshared by any other in the Church apart from those who belonged to the original apostolate—there are only four places in which Paul uses the word ἀπόστολος in regard to persons other than himself and the Twelve (2 Cor. 8: 23; Phil. 2: 25; Rom. 16: 7; Gal. 1: 19). In each case the precise meaning of the text is either irrelevant to this discussion or non-technical, as in the instance of James, the Lord's brother. The conclusion seems valid that, in the exact and unique sense of the term as referring to a person directly commissioned by the risen Lord to be His special messenger and personal representative, only the original apostles of Jesus and Paul were appointed to the office. Indirect confirmation of this conclusion is found in the following: in the way in which Matthias is elected (Acts 1: 15 ff.);⁶ in the claim which Paul makes to have seen the risen Christ (1 Cor. 9: 1); in the apostolic witness contained in Ephesians 2: 20; 3: 7 ff.; 4: 11 which on a later dating emanated from the Pauline school;⁷ and explicitly in Revelation 21: 14 which describes how the foundations of the city wall in the heavenly Jerusalem are inscribed with the names of the twelve apostles of the lamb.⁸

The unique status and function of the apostolate in N.T. times is quite clear, and we may go on to express agreement with T. W. Manson's thesis (in *The Church's Ministry*) that this function was exercised once for all and in a way which was intransmissible. The vital question, however, to ask is, What was this precise function? By way of reply we may note the way in which the apostolate and the *kerygma* are closely associated in the N.T. literature. Indeed it would not be too much to affirm that the ἀποστολή (Acts 1: 25; 1 Cor. 9: 2; Rom. 1: 5; Gal. 2: 8) is a part of the κήρυγμα in the sense that apostolic witness to the risen Lord and fulfilment of His charge to them to make the gospel

⁴ *Supreme Authority*, The Authority of the Lord, His apostles and the New Testament, 1953, p. 62.

⁵ E.T. of *TWNT*, abbreviated as *TDNT*, I, p. 438.

⁶ See K. H. Rengstorf's article, "The Election of Matthias", in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation*, edd. W. Klassen and G. F. Snyder, 1962, pp. 178-192.

⁷ Yet compare on Eph. 2: 20, Rengstorf's observation in *TDNT*, I, p. 441 and note 212.

⁸ Compare Matt. 19: 28 and Luke 22: 30; and the Qumran texts which picture the sect's cabinet-council under the imagery of foundation walls (1QS 8. 7-8) in Vermès' edition, p. 85.

known are part of the commission which they have received.

But the uniqueness of the apostolate is not to be sought in terms of witness and preaching, for many saw Him according to 1 Cor. 15: 6, 7, and the company of N.T. preachers extends far beyond the boundaries of the Twelve and Paul (e.g. Phil. 1: 12ff.). The originality must be found in connection with the exercise of their authority in the churches, and in particular in their custodianship of the traditions, whether as oral instructions or written communications.

We know that Paul believed his ministry to be clothed with an authority none should gainsay. The data may be set down: 2 Thess. 3: 4, 6 speaks of his "commanding" the Thessalonian church, with an even clearer implication given in his dealing with the recalcitrant group at Corinth (2 Cor. 10: 8; 13: 10; cf. 1 Cor. 4: 21; 5: 3ff.).

On this basis Paul can hold himself forth as a pattern to be accepted and imitated (1 Cor. 11: 1; 4: 15ff.; 1 Thess. 1: 6; cf. W. P. de Boer, *The Imitation of Paul*).

In particular he expects that his writings will be received as authoritative and binding on the moral decisions which his readers are called upon to make, as well as determinative for an acceptance of the gospel message over against its spurious rivals (as in Galatia, Gal. 1: 6-12, and at Corinth, 2 Cor. 11: 4 ff.). In a clear statement (1 Thess. 2: 13) Paul reveals the measure of concurrence which his words are entitled to receive, because he speaks on the authority, and in the name, of the risen Lord.

That the Pauline letters were treated with respect as containing authoritative pronouncements is shown by the witness of the later church (e.g. 2 Peter 3: 15, 16 and such apostolic fathers as Clement of Rome (1 Clem. 47: "Take up the epistle of the blessed Paul the apostle", who is then carefully distinguished from Apollos as "a man approved in their sight"), Ignatius (*Trallians* 3: 3: "I do not think myself competent . . . to give you orders like an apostle"; *Romans* 4: 3: "I do not command you, as Peter and Paul did. They were apostles, I am a prisoner") and Polycarp (*Philippians* 3: "For neither am I, nor is any other like unto me, able to follow the wisdom of the blessed and glorious Paul. . . . If you look diligently⁹ [at the letter he wrote to you], you shall be able to be built up unto the faith given to you").

And it cannot be without significance that Paul himself expected

⁹ The verb is ἐγκρίπειν = "to look closely at, study, pore over" (P. N. Harrison). For this verb in reference to scripture-study, cf. 1 Clem. 40: 1; 45: 2; 53: 1; 62: 3.

that his congregations would read out his letters in public worship (1 Thess. 5: 27) and that these letters would be passed around the churches (Col. 4: 16) with a view to their acceptance as authoritative literature (cf. 1 Cor. 14: 37) written by one who claimed the Spirit's insight and inspiration (1 Cor. 7: 40; for the earlier verses which make a distinction between "the Lord" and "I say", see Geldenhuys, *op. cit.*, pp. 82f.).

So much for the Pauline writing which has survived, later to become canonical "Scripture". Some of his writings have been lost (e.g. parts of the Corinthian correspondence and the letter mentioned in Col. 4: 16 as the "letter from Laodicea"); and later attempts to supply the deficiency, as in the so-called third letter to the Corinthians, produced only fictitious specimens.

It is more problematical when we come to enquire about the apostolic "traditions" which existed in oral form in the Pauline churches and are attested in references which are found in the apostolic Fathers and later Christian writers; e.g. 1 Clem 7: 2: "Let us come to the glorious and venerable rule (κανόν) of our tradition"; *Epistle to Diognetus* 11: 6, which speaks of the "tradition of the apostles"; frequently in Irenaeus (παράδοσις, *traditio*, 30 times; παραδούνα, *tradere*, 14 times); and Tertullian for whom *tradere* carries a rich overtone, discovered chiefly in his writing against Marcion, Clement and Origen.

"Tradition(s)" is a term which is attested in the N.T.; and to an examination of its usage there we may now turn.

III

Tradition: N.T. Evidence

Among the various usages of the verb παραδούνα (listed by Büchsel in *TWNT*, II) the relevant one for our purpose is that in which the verb has as its object some allusion to teaching. The use of the noun παράδοσις in the N.T. is in line with this verbal connotation, for "tradition" occurs in the N.T. only in the sense of what is transmitted, not of the act of transmitting. Our attention, therefore, is drawn to references to the content of the tradition.

Of the thirteen places where παράδοσις occurs, nine refer to the Rabbinic practice based on the existence of a scribal tradition which had been elevated to a position of authority above the Law itself. It was this "tradition of the elders" which Jesus condemned (Matt. 15: 2, 3, 6; Mark 7: 3, 5, 8, 9; cf. Gal. 1: 14). The point at issue is well described by Büchsel: "The Pharisees regarded unwritten tradition as no less binding than the Law. . . . The Sadducees rejected it (Josephus, *Ant.* 13. 297). So did Jesus. He agreed with the Pharisees that the good demanded of men is obedience to

God's commandment. As He saw it, however, men could not add to this commandment, since they were too seriously in conflict with God."¹⁰

"Tradition" is also used *in bonam partem*. It is found in three places (1 Cor. 11: 2; 2 Thess. 2: 15; 3: 6) to denote Christian practices rather than Christian teaching, although other verses have reference to some body of truth without specifying exactly what this is. Cf. Rom. 6: 17; 2 Peter 2: 21; Jude 3. Presumably the latter existed in oral form, although the parallelism of *διὰ λόγου* and *δι' ἐπιστολῆς ἡμῶν* is to be noticed in 2 Thess. 2: 15. These two phrases pinpoint the vexed problem of our discussion, *viz.* how far, if at all, there developed a tandem relation between oral tradition and written authority in the early centuries of the church. Is it valid to speak of two sources of authority, with apostolic oral teaching surviving side by side with apostolic writings which later became recognized as canonical scripture?

Two other passages are important because they bear upon the ultimate source of Christian tradition. 1 Cor. 11: 23 contains the key-term *παρέδωκα* coupled with a complementary verb *παρέλαβον*. What Paul had received, that he saw as his duty to pass on to others. The origin of this *paradosis* is given as *ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου* which apparently means, according to the conclusions of O. Cullmann which are now widely shared, that Paul is acknowledging the mediation of the church in the transmission of the tradition, with the living Christ as the one who stands behind it and is actively at work in it. So "the *Kyrios* appears as the content of the *paradosis*, but he is at one and the same time its *content and its author*".¹¹

In the reference in 1 Cor. 11, the theme has to do with the Lord's Supper setting which is taken back to the Upper Room and the dominical words of interpretation over bread and wine. In a later chapter (1 Cor. 15) the associated verbs ("delivered"/"received" in verses 3ff.) are again brought together in a statement of early Jewish-Christian creed-like formulation. This statement, clearly detachable from its immediate context, full of semitic echoes and undertones, and laying bare the skeleton-structure of what is perhaps the first Christian confession of faith, is invested with special importance by the introductory verse 2. For it is by its adherence to the saving truth which confesses Christ crucified, buried and risen that the salvation of the Church is assured. Guided by Cullmann, R. P. C. Hanson (*Tradition in the Early*

¹⁰ E.T. in *TDNT*, II, p. 172.

¹¹ "The Tradition", *The Early Church*, p. 68.

Church, p. 11) rightly draws attention to the varied content of early tradition in the N.T. Church. The elements to be seen are:

(a) Moral rules to regulate Christian ethical and church practice (1 Cor. 11: 2; 2 Thess. 3: 6; Rom. 6: 17; Phil. 4: 9; Col. 2: 6).

(b) A summary of the Christian message expressed as a formula of faith and combining the facts of the life of Jesus and their theological significance (1 Cor. 15: 3ff.).

(c) At least one specimen of a single narrative from the earthly life of Jesus (1 Cor. 11: 23).

All of this is stamped with authority which derives from a twin fact. As far as the ultimate source of tradition's authority is concerned, this may be traced back to the Lord who first set the process in motion and is active at every stage in its continuance. This solemn reminder, echoed in the phrase ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου (1 Cor. 11: 23), explains the importance of handing on the tradition in its untouched entirety (we may observe τινὶ λόγῳ εὐηγγελισάμην in 1 Cor. 15: 2 and the carefully arranged formal structure of 1 Cor. 15: 3ff. which are evidence of care taken over the actual words used in this statement of essential christological and soteriological teaching). The immediate background of this careful preservation of the precise terms is to be found in the Rabbinic method of transmission, now fully explored by H. Riesefeld and B. Gerhardsson, but earlier noted by W. D. Davies in his book *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, pp. 248ff. The latter shows, however, that in Paul's method of delivery, the emphasis falls not on the actual words spoken by Jesus at the Supper but on the essential gist of those words as interpreted by the apostle in his dealings with Corinthian community.

Lest it should be inferred from this discussion that Paul exercised an unbridled right to adapt and modify the original tradition received "from the Lord", we should proceed to state the second way in which the traditions he passed on were clothed with authority. This lies in the status and privilege of the apostolate.

R. Bultmann¹² has shown the close connection which there is in the N.T. between tradition and apostleship; and it is worth a mention that the passages which deal with tradition also contain statements of the Pauline apostolic authority. Clearly in 1 Cor. 11: 23 the introductory ἐγὼ is not slipped in accidentally, but has a purpose within the context of passing on the eucharistic tradition. "The reason why he does so . . . is that it was vital, in opposition to the false conception of the Lord's Supper current at Corinth, to stress the dignity of his apostolic office as bearer of the correct

¹² *Theology of the New Testament*, I, pp. 59f.

tradition" (Cullmann, *The Early Church*, p. 73). In other, non-polemical passages, the same reason for the authority of the tradition holds good. Paul can appeal to his readers for a full acceptance of the tradition and their obedience to it on the ground that he *qua* apostle is "the legitimate and authorized mediator of the paradosis of Christ" (Cullmann, *loc. cit.*, p. 74). See 1 Cor. 15: 2; Phil. 4: 9; 1 Thess. 2: 13, 14; 1 Cor. 4: 17; 7: 10; 14: 37, 38.

A conclusion may now be stated. In the N.T. Church "tradition" stood for principles and precepts of Christian living, partly doctrinal but chiefly concerned with practical issues and concerns (cf. 1 Cor. 7, 11, 14 for well-known examples of areas in which there was some dispute and disorder). Paul addressed himself to these matters, partly by writing to the churches (2 Thess. 2: 15; 3: 14; cf. 1 Thess. 4: 9; 5: 1, 27; 1 Cor. 4: 6 (?); Col. 4: 16), partly by communicating to them by word of mouth (1 Cor. 11: 2; 1 Thess. 2: 4; 4: 1, 2; 2 Thess. 2: 15; 3: 6), and by his personal presence (1 Cor. 11: 34; cf. 4: 21; 2 Cor. 13: 1) and example (1 Thess. 2: 10, 11; Phil. 4: 9). Such "charges" (παράγγελλαι) as he gave and the quality of his life displayed before them were not only effective as reminders of what the Christian fellowship should be and do, but were enforced by his apostolic standing. Paul is able, therefore, to appeal to "traditions" as divinely authorized because they proceed from the exalted Lord who is present with His people and solicitous for their highest well-being as they live their life ἐν χριστῷ. He is able to cite the example of himself and his fellow-apostles as the living embodiments of what "living by the tradition" means (1 Cor. 11: 1; Phil. 4: 9); and to claim his authorization (cf. 2 Tim. 2) as an apostle by the sufferings he has endured (Rom. 15: 18; 2 Cor. 12: 12) and by his insight into the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2: 16) as a possessor of the Spirit (1 Cor. 7: 40) and by his election to the high office of apostle (Gal. 1: 1, 15f.; cf. Eph. 2: 19, 20; 3: 7f.). He can confidently lay claim to τὴν ἐξουσίαν ἣν ὁ κύριος ἔδωκεν μοι εἰς οἰκοδομήν (2 Cor. 13: 10).

Up to this point in our study we have been concerned to trace and pinpoint the *locus* of authority in the church of the N.T. period. The scheme which is apparent from the N.T. records reads something like this:

Jesus in His earthly ministry was viewed as possessing Messianic authority. This dignity was subsequently understood in the early Jerusalem church and made the substance of the post-Pentecostal preaching (e.g. Acts 2: 36; cf. Rom. 1: 3) which looks back directly to God's action in raising Him from the dead and installing Him as Head of the Messianic community. The apostle Paul,

accepting the further enlargement of Messiah's status made possible in Hellenistic-Jewish thought which is represented by the preaching of Stephen and his school (cf. Acts 7: 56ff; 11: 19-21; and for specimen of a new expansion of Christ's domain to include the spirit-world, see Phil. 2: 6-11 as a pre-Pauline tribute to the heavenly Kyrios),¹³ carried the range of Messiah's cosmic authority still further and drew out the implications of the exaltation of Jesus and its application to the entire cosmos. Hence Paul's favourite designation is that of Lord (κύριος) which receives, in his writings, a new connotation which is not emphasized in the pre-Pauline usage of the term. As Werner Kramer¹⁴ has shown, the early references to κύριος are mainly found in a liturgical context and (if we include the witness of *Acts*) in connection with the Church's mission to the Hellenists; Paul uses the title to reinforce his ethical appeals and to show what type of practical conduct is befitting for those who acknowledge the lordship of the Church's Head. Thus Paul's "Kyriology" accentuates and spells out "the authority to whom men are accountable for their every decision" (op. cit., p. 181; sect. 52).

As far as Paul is concerned, the Lord's authority is embodied in and mediated by two means. First of all, there is the personal presence of Paul himself and the authority he claims as Christ's delegate. He has most realistic understanding of what his presence can mean to the congregation, and regards himself as almost tangibly real to them as they assemble for worship and congregational discipline (1 Cor. 5: 5; cf. 1 Cor. 4: 21: "Shall I come to you?"; 1 Cor. 14: 34; 2 Cor. 13: 1; Col. 2: 5). His enemies by casting doubt on the legitimacy of his apostolic authority (cf. E. Käsemann, *ZNTW*, 41, 1942, pp. 33-71), can only point to the weakness and misery of his personal presence (2 Cor. 10: 10). But Paul retorts that the *viva vox* of his presence is the same as his admittedly effective letters (2 Cor. 10: 11).

This last-named reference brings together the other aspect of Paul's apostolic authority. Alongside the *viva vox* by which the oral traditions were conveyed to the assemblies, his letters were sent as extensions of his pastoral and didactic ministry and were intended to complement the apostolic work which he did in fulfilment of his God-given task. The Pauline letters (as we have observed) were occasioned by the needs of the congregations, yet

¹³ For some tentative suggestions regarding the provenance of the Phil. 2: 6-11 Christ-hymn and its relation to Stephen's thought, the present writer may be allowed a reference to his *Carmen Christi: Philippians ii: 5-11*, pp. 304 ff.

¹⁴ *Christ, Lord, Son of God*, pp. 169ff.: sect. 47.

once composed and sent, they constituted the literary deposit of his apostolic influence. Only on this assumption can we explain the authoritativeness of what he writes, the expectancy he cherishes that their contents will be heeded, and the future he assures for them by requiring that they should be preserved and circulated among the churches.

The apostle's person, with his living presence and voice transmitting the traditions as the embodiment of the Kyrios, and the apostle's writing (thought of as his *alter ego*)—these were the two effective means by which the heavenly Lord's authority was known in the Pauline communities (cf. "When he was among you in the presence of the men of that time taught accurately . . . and also when he was absent wrote letters . . .", Polycarp, *Phil.* 3: 2), and with the close of the apostolic age, the new situation was bound to deal with the pressing issue of how the apostolic authority was to be handed on in concrete and permanent form.

IV

The way in which the later church grappled with these problems is not exactly clear. Many historical and theological factors enter into the situation which gave rise to the establishment of the canon of N.T. Scripture. The reasons usually given for the composition of the Gospels are perhaps relevant here, for with the expansion of the church and its geographical distribution throughout the Graeco-Roman world and the delay in the Parousia (itself a major problem in early Christianity!), the church became increasingly aware of its destiny *on earth* and its commission to carry the Gospel to the uttermost bounds as a prelude to the Lord's return. Included here should also be the fact of the death of eyewitnesses and the gradual disappearance of the original apostolic witness. The desire to conserve this witness in easily identifiable and permanent form is one motive behind the composition of the Gospels (certainly so in the case of the Fourth and Mark's Gospel; hence the traditions of a Johannine and Petrine authorization). Yet Papias who records this tradition, according to Eusebius (*H.E.* III, 39), as late as the third decade of the second century is still optimistic about being directly in touch with an eye-witness report: "for I did not suppose that information from books would help us so much as the word of a living and surviving voice".

The church of the sub-apostolic period inherited from the N.T. era and in particular from the example of Jesus Himself a deep respect for the Old Testament scriptures. It is a commonplace that Jesus found direction for His Messianic ministry in the pages of the O.T. and that the apostolic preaching was undergirded by

an appeal to "the law and the prophets" (Rom. 3: 21) which bore testimony to the Gospel events and their saving significance. The church took over this attitude, usually in a restrained fashion but occasionally lapsing into fanciful allegory and strained typological exegesis (e.g. *Barnabas*).

The growth of canonical authority was slow and sporadic, Not until A.D. 367—the date of Athanasius' 39th Festal letter—did the Church agree on the exact limits of the N.T. canon. He designated three classes of Christian literature: canonical books; rejected books (ἀπόκρυφα); and books which may be used in baptismal instruction as wholesome. Athanasius is the first to define the collection of Holy Scripture as a canon (κανών).

There are many historical circumstances which led to this fixing of the canon. Undoubtedly the chief impulse came from the challenge of Marcion, who in the middle of the second century A.D. propounded a version of Christianity which denied all connection with the O.T. Earlier heresies, like Docetism, had been checked by a recital of the evangelical facts, drawn mainly from quasi-credal formulas (as in Ignatius' replies to Docetic influences among his correspondents). What was new in Marcion's heresy was his appeal to his own canon of Scripture, consisting of a mutilated Gospel of Luke and ten epistles of Paul. This action led directly to the important question, Which are Christian books to which the orthodox Church appeals? Whether Marcion chose his canonical books out of a larger number then available or whether he was the first to advocate the notion of a fixed canon at all is not known. What seems clear is that his canon "did not occasion the ecclesiastical formation of the canon, but it did encourage it" (W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 343). Hard on the heels of Marcion's threat came an allied danger, viz. gnosticism in its more refined and complicated form (e.g. Valentinianism which is credited with the honour of producing the first written commentary on the Fourth Gospel). These gnostics took over the orthodox canon, but made their appeal to a secret tradition which, they claimed, went back directly to the apostles. The anti-gnostic writers in the church, mainly Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.*), counter this claim by a denial of any such tradition, and retort that the gnostics' esoteric teaching is contrary to the message of the apostles. It is very important to observe the basis of Irenaeus's stand against the gnostics. In effect, he says that if anyone wishes to know what Jesus Christ taught, he can discover it either in the written scriptures or in the public preaching of those churches which rest on apostolic foundation (a side-glance at Marcionite conventicles and Montanist

groups in Phrygia, *Adv. Haer.* III, 1, 1). Irenaeus's counter-claim means that the existence of a secret tradition emanating from apostolic times as a second source of authority is a fiction. The apostolic doctrine to which Irenaeus appeals is, as R. P. C. Hanson concludes (*op. cit.*, p. 168), "not the doctrine taught by the men who are successors of the apostles, whatever they teach, but the doctrine of the essentially apostolic book, the New Testament".

The test of apostolicity in regard to any book which the church subsequently admitted as canonical is one which may be interpreted variously. Obviously not all the N.T. literature can claim a direct apostolic authorship; and even for a book to have been ascribed to an apostolic circle was no guarantee of a permanent place in the canon (e.g. Clement of Alexandria treated as apostolic the Apocalypse of Peter, 1 Clement and the Didache). Complications in any straightforward theory of canonicity arise from difference of opinion between the Christian East and West; from a change of attitude over certain books whether by exclusion (e.g. Shepherd of Hermas) or by adoption of some books previously suspected (Hebrews, 2 Peter); and last of all, from differing understanding of "oral traditions".

The Council of Trent (A.D. 1546) settled the question for the Roman Catholic Church by declaring the entire O.T. and N.T. books in the Vulgate to be canonical, and treated canonicity as equivalent to apostolicity by ascribing Hebrews to St. Paul and James to the Lord's brother. Luther's norm turns on the peculiarly oscillating meaning he gave to "apostolic". Sometimes the term stands for "apostolic authorship"; at other times, and this perhaps is the characteristic attitude of the Reformer, it means "what has apostolic nature" (Kümmel, *op. cit.*, p. 355). "The correct touchstone by which to criticize all books is to see whether they promote Christ or not (*ob sie Christum treiben oder nicht*). What does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even if Peter or Paul should teach it; on the other hand, what preaches Christ (*was Christum predigt*) is apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod should teach it" (*Preface to James*). By this criterion—what urges to Christ—Luther constructed "a canon within the canon" by rejecting four of the seven writings which had been disputed in antiquity and so regarding them (Hebrews, James, Jude and the Apocalypse) as inferior to "the truly certain principal books of the New Testament", because only these "present to me Christ bright and clear" (*mir Christum hell und rein dargeben*). Opinion will vary as to whether the application of Luther's norm in eliminating the four books mentioned is the right one, even if we agree, in view of the gradual

and irregular evolution of the canon, that for us today the final criterion must be that "the books of the N.T. are canonical insofar as they make so audible the testimony to God's historical act of salvation in Jesus Christ that it can be further proclaimed" (Kümmel, *op. cit.*, p. 358). Such a statement follows the principle enunciated in embryo by Ignatius when he took as his basic authority "the gospel" (*Smyrnaeans* 7: 2: "give heed to the prophets and especially to the gospel, in which the Passion has been revealed to us and the Resurrection has been accomplished"; cf. his reference in *Philadelphians* 8: 2 which anchors the gospel in the Lord's death and resurrection).¹⁵

This Lutheran conclusion, *viz.* that canonicity and so authority is determined by the kerygmatic nature of Scripture's content is marked off from two rival views.

The one view, taken by O. Cullmann, is that the Apostolic rule of faith has a parallel place with the N.T. in its witness to Christ;¹⁶ and the other is the Roman Catholic acceptance of "oral tradition" which should (it is held) be received "with equal affection and reverence of piety" (Trent, *Sessio IV*). The Tridentine doctrine of tradition which juxtaposed a secondary authority alongside scripture by holding that the canon must be interpreted and modified by "the sense which the Holy Mother Church has held and holds" clearly opposes what the early church believed about the place of tradition and is open to criticism on a number of grounds, e.g. there is no evidence of an independent tradition held to be on a par with scripture, in early Christianity; and (as Hanson, *op. cit.*, p. 238, stresses) tradition regulates praxis, not doctrine.

A modification of the usually accepted Roman Catholic view that scripture and tradition are in tandem relation with each other and form a double source of doctrinal and ecclesiastical authority has been offered by Yves M.-J. Congar in his book *La Tradition et les Traditions. I, Essai historique*.

This Roman Catholic writer denied that there are orally transmitted "truths of faith" which have survived, and maintains that "tradition" today is not a rival or parallel source of canonical authority; rather (*op. cit.*, p.76) tradition is another way (*une autre manière*) complementarily of communicating the truths of scripture. The 'complementary' function of tradition is made clear from the apt but ambiguous illustration he uses. Tradition, he

¹⁵ See Bruce Shelley, *By What Authority?* pp. 37-39.

¹⁶ Cullmann's view (in *The Early Church*, pp. 59 ff.) has been critically scrutinized by writers as different in their approach as S. F. Winward (in *Christian Baptism*, pp. 44 f.) and J. Daniélou, *God and Us*, pp. 147 ff.

avers, is a *midrash* on the text of scripture which is available in the church only in an interpreted form. Fact and interpretation go hand in hand; and such 'midrashic' activity is the Holy Spirit's way of preserving 'alive' the original deposit of the faith (the *παράθήκη* of the Pastoral epistles; (op. cit., pp. 32f.).

Congar's appeal is made to the putative existence of "an unwritten part of the tradition of the apostles" (op. cit., p. 49) which survived the fixing of the canon and continued as a court of doctrinal and ecclesiastical appeal into the time of the Apologists and Fathers and made a chief point in the argument of Athanasius and Basil in the fourth century.

R. P. C. Hanson, op. cit., pp. 239-245, has shown the varied weakness of Congar's position.

(a) The analogy of *Torah-midrash* is calamitous because by this confusion and commingling of scripture and ecclesiastical tradition, the church has abandoned the one objective check on its doctrine and life. "Every attempt to exalt the authority of the Church at the expense of that of Holy Scripture is not only illogical but suicidal" (A. L. Lilley, cited by Hanson, op. cit., p. 241) because then the church is shut in with itself and when it speaks on the authority of scripture hears only the echo of its own voice.

(b) The elevation of tradition to a rank on a par with scripture results only in a subverting of the canon, and (as Hanson pointedly says) "ends by putting the whole possibility of revelation in jeopardy" (op. cit., p. 240). Compare his remarks on p. 242.

(c) Moreover, on the ground of historical evidence, it has *not* been shown that the *earlier* (i.e. 3rd century) fathers believed in the validity of this unwritten apostolic norm. The contrary is the case: "none of the fathers (in the earlier period) . . . imagined that the Bible and the Church's interpretation together formed one indistinguishable whole. . . . Irenaeus could hold that the Church's teaching was equivalent to the contents of Scripture; he did not believe that revelation consisted of the Church's interpretation of Scripture *in addition* to the contents of Scripture" (op. cit., p. 242); and "there is something almost ludicrous in the fact that Congar can find more references to an unwritten tradition among the fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries than he can among those of the second and third" (op. cit., p. 244).

The argument against Congar's variant theory is compelling. "The Church has always interpreted the Gospel, and always will do so, sometimes with more success and sometimes with less. But the interpretation is not the Gospel, and never can be" (Hanson, op. cit., p. 245); and the notion of a tandem relation between

scripture and tradition is false because it denies the place of the church and ecclesiastical customs rightfully "under the judgment-power of the Word".

Our final conclusion may be stated simply. The cry *sola scriptura* may be misunderstood, and is wrongly conceived, if it implies a static, mechanical view of inspiration, a doctrine of factual and textual inerrancy, and a forgetfulness that we cannot willy-nilly recapture apostolic Christianity and retroject ourselves into the halcyon days of the primitive church, nor can we overleap the centuries as though nothing of value had transpired across the twenty centuries of Christian history (cf. S. F. Winward, in *Christian Baptism*, pp. 48ff.).

Sola Scriptura means that the literary deposits of the apostolic era—the period of *Heilsgeschichte*—are by divine providence and inspiration and uniquely authoritative in all matters of faith and practice and in those matters of lasting and essential value, i.e. matters which bear directly on our understanding and communication of the *kerygma*. As Hanson phrases it, for us the N.T. "has become . . . the successor of the apostles" (op. cit., p. 236).

We cannot, therefore, appeal to the New Testament for justification of any Church practice adopted today. Nor is all the Church polity and custom of the New Testament period obligatory for the modern church. The test of what is mandatory and what is optional (and indeed of what is to be discarded) is straightforward, although we are often slow to see it and apply it. The question is, Can this rite, custom or piece of ecclesiastical polity be shown to be an essential part of the *kerygma*, and does it outwardly express it? "Essential apostolic practice", writes Winward, "is the *kerygma* in action, whether in personal or corporate conduct, in worship or in the sacraments" (*loc. cit.*, p. 51). By the application of this test the living church is assured of (a) the guidance of the Holy Spirit who leads us into a deepening apprehension of God's truth for His people, encapsulated in the Gospel, and (b) a check on any extraneous outgrowth and malformation of belief and practice within the Christian society. So our custom and traditions must be brought to the bar of apostolic tradition, embodied in the scripture which in turn is centred upon Christ and His saving work. Only in this way does the church become and remain *ecclesia semper reformanda*.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- TWNT*—*Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (founded G. Kittel, edited G. Friedrich).
- TDNT*—*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (translation of *TWNT* by G. W. Bromiley).
- ZNTW*—*Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*.