

Authority.¹

NOT merely because of certain contemporary political developments and aberrations, but chiefly because it is a problem which theologians are not honestly able to avoid for long, I wish to discuss the question of authority in religion. What is the source of religious truth? To be quite precise, of Christian Truth?

Let me set the stage somewhat by referring to a book published in 1946: *The Problem of Authority in the Continental Reformers*, by Rupert E. Davies. It is an academic exercise, which seeks to assemble what counsel Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli have to offer about the problem of authority; and Mr. Davies sets out with the conviction and hope that he can thus solve what he calls the central problem of theology (op. cit. p. 9). "Its solution," he writes, "would put all other problems of theology on a clearly defined level. Could the wholly authoritative source of religious truth be discovered, the problem of the Atonement, for instance, would be no longer: which is the right theory of the significance of the Cross? But, what is the meaning of the pronouncement of the authoritative source on the subject? And the same, *mutatis mutandis*, would apply to the other problems of theology." In so far as Mr. Davies further illustrates his point by reference to mediaeval theology, fundamentalists, and those whom he is pleased to call "neo-biblicists," I suspect that he is more inclined to think of revelation in terms of revealed propositions than I should be myself, but that possible disagreement does not deter me from accepting his estimate of the importance of the problem of authority and of the amelioration of our theological problems consequent on its solution. Yet his altogether admirable analysis of the three great reformers yields disappointingly meagre results: here is the conclusion:—

"We embarked on this enquiry with the *reasonable*² hope that Luther or Zwingli or Calvin would solve for us the problem of authority. That hope has been disappointed, and the problem is still unsolved. The basic reason for the failure of these three Reformers to do what we expected of them . . . is this: not one of them was able to free

¹ Read to the Baptist Historical Society at its annual meeting on May 1st, 1950, based on a paper read to the London Congregational Ministers' Board and published in the *Presbyter*, Vol. 7, No. 3, here expanded and illustrated.

² My italics.

himself entirely—Calvin most of the three, but not even he entirely—from the mediaeval error that the source of authority is necessarily to be found in some place wholly outside the individual. While this error prevails, the problem is insoluble.

But we have learned from Luther that there is a Word of God, a revealed truth about the universe, if we can only find it. From Calvin we have picked up the hint that true knowledge comes from the interaction of the knower, the known, and the Spirit of God; and he has told us something of the nature and limitation of the State's authority. And the attempts of all of them to locate the seat of authority have enabled us to clear the ground of many untenable views which have nevertheless affected the lives of men and societies. So, perhaps, the inquiry has not been entirely useless." (op. cit. p. 154).

That is an interesting catena of important and occasionally controversial judgments; but I single out one. Mr. Davies speaks of the error of supposing that "the source of authority is necessarily to be found in some place wholly outside the individual." If he wishes to say that the truth must commend itself to and be accepted by the individual before it can become part of his mental furniture, I agree, as who would not? If he wishes, further, to say that we cannot find the source of final authority in a book, or in an institution, then I should also agree; and, greatly daring, I venture to suppose that Luther and Calvin might have agreed as well! But has Mr. Davies exhausted all the possibilities? I think not; and my criticism of his valuable work is that he seems to me to have set his problem in the wrong perspective. My suggestion is that as Christians we are committed to saying that authority belongs to Christ and to Christ alone; that ultimately the problem of authority is the problem of our submission to Him who is our Lord and Saviour; that what I might call "secondary" authorities only possess real authority as they point to Christ, and that more often than not the authority we want to ascribe to some of these "secondary" authorities is—consciously or unconsciously—an attempt to protect ourselves against the ordeal of being brought face to face with him to whom alone authority, final and complete, belongs. "Christ is the Head of the Church. . . . He is made head over all things for the Church which is his body": part of what that means, I take it, is that he has authority: rather, he is authority; and in the last resort there can be no other.

In the light of that basic assumption let me review the three

"secondary" authorities, as I call them, which in various ways and to different degrees men have found useful: in each case, we may note, the "secondary" authority has often been treated as the primary authority: (i) the Bible; (ii) the Church; (iii) individual conscience.

THE BIBLE.

The authority of the Bible is too complex and difficult a theme to be dealt with at all adequately in part of a paper such as this; yet one or two points may, perhaps, be made without too much uncertainty.

The Reformers and their successors who developed what is often called Protestant Scholasticism formulated the doctrine of Holy Scripture with great care and fulness. "It is one of the most original parts of their work."³ In the ancient and mediæval Church the relations and mutual dependence of Scripture and tradition had never been completely worked out. On the one hand there is evidence that Scripture itself is a sufficient guide to the truth of God. Duns Scotus, for instance, says that "Holy Scripture sufficiently contains the doctrine necessary for the human soul"; and William of Occam writes that "a Christian is not compelled as a necessity of salvation to believe, either as a duty or in practice, what is neither contained in the Bible, nor can be inferred as a necessary and clear consequence from the mere contents of the Bible." What Protestant could have said it more plainly? Yet, on the other hand, Duns Scotus can also claim that the authority of Scripture depends on the approval and authorisation of the Church; and there are many indications among mediæval theologians that a declaration of the Pontiff or the tradition of the Church is of equal authority with Scripture. Against this the Protestant Reformers set a doctrine of Scripture only, which is expressed in these words of Luther: "the articles of faith are not to be built up from the words or the deeds of the Fathers. . . . We . . . have another rule, namely, that the Word of God should establish the articles of faith, and none other, not even an angel."

It is at least doubtful whether Luther and Calvin, for instance were what we should now call fundamentalists; I should be much inclined to argue that they were not—certainly they would not satisfy the strictest sect of contemporary fundamentalists! However that may be, Protestant Scholasticism settled down to fundamentalism. Dr. R. S. Franks has described this development in a paragraph which I quote almost in full. He begins by

³R. S. Franks in an essay, "Dogma in Protestant Scholasticism," contributed to "Dogma in History and Thought," ed. W. R. Matthews: I have used part of this essay in the succeeding paragraph.

quoting John Gerhard, a Lutheran doctor, to this effect, "Holy Scripture is the Word of God set forth in the Holy Scriptures." Here is Dr. Franks' comment: "there is no real distinction between Scripture and the Word of God, which is its whole content, so that it contains nothing else. Since Holy Scripture is God's Word, it is distinguished from all other books by having a meaning and content that is entirely Divine. The ground of this is that God by His Holy Spirit inspired its writers. God Himself is the author of Scripture; prophets and apostles are only His instruments. God supernaturally communicated to their minds not only the thoughts, but also the very words contained in Scripture. Inspiration is thus not only real, but also verbal. The Scripture down to its very last jot and tittle is divine."

The older among us can testify that this doctrine of Scripture lived and flourished long in Protestant circles; nor is it dead yet. But since it was formulated we have seen two developments: the rise and popularity of what for want of a better term we still call higher criticism; and, since then, the search for some doctrine of the authority of Scripture which shall ensure the deliverance from an infallible book, secured by the critics, and yet declare the fact, for such it is, that the Bible is inspired as no other has been or will be. It is here that the shoe pinches for most of us. We cannot go back on the critical study of the Bible; yet we cannot altogether dismiss from our minds the question: "what does the Bible say?" We can no longer treat it as our fundamentalist brethren can and do; yet we hanker after some oracular authority, and we may have a suspicion that just as some fundamentalists tend to forget the human element in the creation of the Bible, some—perhaps most—of the critics tend to forget the divine. To suggest, as many have done, that the Bible is no more than historic testimony, and that it can have no more authority over us than historical records of any sort may have is to fall into an opposite but equally great error to that which is evident in fundamentalism. The Bible has authority; and it has a different authority from such historical records as *De Bello Gallico* and *Hansard*.

What, then, is this authority? Biblical scholarship, now well entered upon its post-critical but not anti-critical stage, begins to point to the answer, though it often occurs to me that Forsyth and Denney anticipated a great deal of what is now hailed as novel; part of the authority of the Bible is that it records—and here it is unique—the story of our redemption. Here, beginning with the call of Abraham and continuing until the Body of Christ has begun its work after the life, death and glorification of the Redeemer, is the story of God's mighty acts for our salvation. This in fact is witness to Christ, to all that he began to do and

to teach, to all that went before him and, so to put it, made his ministry possible; and this, ultimately just this, not any alleged verbal inerrancy, is at least part of the authority of the Bible: its witness to Christ. Searching the Scriptures, with whatever intention, will not give us life save as we find him.

But this is only part of the authority of the Bible; and what I need to say more, let me introduce with a moving passage from P. T. Forsyth's address to the Autumn Assembly of the Congregational Union of England and Wales in 1905, entitled: "The Grace of God and the Moral Authority of the Church." "When I read: 'He loved me and gave Himself for me,' do I trouble (when these words are most powerful and precious with me) about their value for Paul's type of religion, or their bearing on the theory of Atonement? Their Gospel of Atonement leaps out of the book and clasps me. Who shall separate me, with all my wretched schism, from Christ's love? Who shall dislodge me from the security of God's love in Christ? I am secure, not because it is written, but because the writing becomes luminous with the passage through it of the Holy Ghost. The wire glows with the current. I have a measure now for the whole of Scripture in the living word which that phrase carries home to my soul. The whole soul of the Bible looks out through that eye, and searches mine, and settles and stills me with the Grace of God. The Bible has done its great work for me (and for the world), not as a document of history, but as a historic means of grace, as the servant of the Gospel, lame perhaps, and soiled, showing some signs of age, it may be, but perfectly faithful, competent, and effectual always for God and man" (op. cit. p. 65. 66.) The words which impress me most are these: "I am secure, not because it is written, but because the writing becomes luminous with the passage through it of the Holy Ghost. The wire glows with the current"; and I could wish that someone would write on the authority of the Bible with that as a text, for I think I can see here how much the real authority of the Bible is the authority of the Gospel, and so of Christ Himself, who is the Gospel, and that the Bible only has authority so far as it has *this* authority; and I suppose that here we see happening what was promised of old: The Holy Spirit . . . will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you . . . He will bear witness to me . . . He will take what is mine and declare it unto you (*John* xiv. 26, xvi. 14.).

THE CHURCH.

It might be supposed, perhaps, that Congregationalists and those who are close to them in churchmanship would dismiss the authority of the Church with a mere passing reference; on the

other hand, surely, in some ways we give the Church much more authority than other communions. We need to clear our minds at this point.

I remember arguing with an Anglo-Catholic about the authority of the Creeds. I wanted to know what made them authoritative. Was it, as he suggested, because the General Councils had accepted—even promulgated—them? Or was it, as the XXXIX Articles declare, because they are convenient summaries of Scripture? I told him that I might understand the authority of the Creeds as expounded by the Articles of Religion; but what I could not understand was that the deliverance of any Council, however ancient or august, could be regarded as absolutely final. I think that was right. We are not iconoclasts. We are not “agin the government” just for the sake of it. Indeed we are wise if we have a great reverence for history. But confessions of faith and conciliar decrees can have only provisional authority. They must be constantly scrutinised. The work of Reformation is perennial; and all traditions and all ecclesiastical authority, especially that of our own communions, must be judged constantly by the faithfulness with which they serve the Gospel.

Here let me cite John Owen. In *The True Nature of a Gospel Church* he has a chapter entitled: “Of the polity, rule, or discipline of the Church in general.” “The rule of the Church,” he maintains, “is, in general, the exercise of the power or authority of Jesus Christ, given unto it, according to laws and directions prescribed by himself, unto its edification. This power in *actu primo*, or fundamentally, is in the church itself; in *actu secundo*, or in its exercise, in them that are specially called thereunto. . . . It is in itself the acting of the authority of Christ, wherein the power of men is ministerial only”; and this, he declares, is evident “for (i) all this authority in and over the Church is vested in him alone; (ii) it is over the souls and consciences of men only, which no authority can reach but his, and that as it is his. . . .” Again, “the power of rule in the Church . . . is nothing but a right to yield obedience unto the commands of Christ, in such a way, by such rules, and for such ends, as wherein and whereby his authority is to be acted.” In a later chapter the same point is made: “the rule and government of the Church are the exertion of the authority of Christ in the hands of those to whom it is committed, that is, the officers of it; not that all officers are called to rule, but that none are called to rule that are not so.” (Cf. *The True Nature of a Gospel Church* by John Owen, ed. J. Huxtable, p. 40ff and 51.) I am not sure how many Congregationalists—or Baptists for that matter—would now accept that version of the authority of the Eldership!

The Church, then, has no authority other than that of its Lord; and it only has that authority when it acts in His Name. That said, I should want to go on to claim that in so far as the Church and its tradition can be shown to be a witness to Christ not only are we to accept it, we are utterly bound by it and to it. We may only reject ecclesiastical tradition and seek to refashion it when we can claim to be doing so in order to make its witness to Christ more clear. This I take to be, broadly speaking, the explanation of the controversies of the Reformation. The Reformers desired to be faithful to tradition, and claimed that their work was in the interests of better preserving that tradition, marred as it had come to be by the mediaeval Church. So in the work of the Reformation we see continuity and disruption; acceptance and alteration; a reverence for tradition and an even greater reverence for truth.

The point is illustrated immediately we ask such a question as, "why do we accept the Canon of Holy Scripture?" Your Papist and his fellow-traveller in the Church of England appear to be satisfied with some such answer as: "Holy Church has spoken." That does not satisfy us; and I suppose that our answer would be that so far as our understanding of Christ takes us, this conciliar decision was right, and that we accept it on that account. We recognise in the Holy Scriptures, thus defined by conciliar decree, an invaluable and necessary witness to Christ; here is part of Christ's provision for his Church. But I suppose that it is at least possible—though very far indeed from being probable—that, should the Holy Spirit declare to us a better understanding of what the Canon of Scripture should be, we should hold ourselves ready to act upon that leading. That, I think, makes plain our attitude to what the "Catholics" call tradition, their view of the authority of the Church, often spelt, of course, with a capital T. We recognise its authority, not because it is the Church's Tradition, but in so far—and only in so far—as it makes Christ's authority operative.

That, however, is by no means all a Congregationalist has to say about the authority of the Church. I realise, of course, that there is this difference *inter alia* between Baptists and Congregationalists: there is no necessary reason why Baptists should follow this or that Church order, while Congregationalists have it as their *raison d'être* to bear witness to a specific type of churchmanship; it would be possible to maintain your testimony about Believers' Baptism in the context of episcopacy, presbyterianism, or independency, whereas Congregationalists could only quit their present position either at the cost of admitting that their historic witness was totally mistaken, or had now become irrelevant or unworkable, or at the opportunity of bearing

witness to the essential truths of Congregationalist churchmanship within the wider context of a united Church in which those truths were generously mingled with others no less essential. Yet it is true that Baptists have—if I may say so—very wisely preferred a congregational form of Church order; and so far Congregationalists have not been too enthusiastic or very unanimous about their “walking out” with the Presbyterians! So it is by no means irrelevant for me to ask in this context what I take to be a very important question: what of the Church Meeting and its authority?

I have heard the Church Meeting spoken of in such terms as to make me fear that having at the Reformation been delivered from an infallible Church, and at some later date not so precisely defined from an infallible Book, I had fallen into the intolerable tyranny of an infallible local congregation! That would have as little to be said for it as an infallible Pope! When we stress the importance of the local Church Meeting and its authority, what do we mean? Not that any group of Christians, banded together as a Church, is sure to be right; it has as much chance of being right and wrong as any similar group of Christians, either in Church Meeting, Presbytery, or Assembly. Nor do we account our local Churches an illustration of the benefits of democracy and majority rule. Our Church Meetings have authority, in so far as they are authoritative at all, when and only when the local Church believes itself to be led to such and such decisions by the great head of the Church; and so the true authority of the Church is the same essentially as the true authority of the Bible—the authority of Christ Himself. Church Meetings, like General Councils, may err; but when they rightly interpret the mind of Christ their authority is immense. John Owen, with more logic and more courage than many of his spiritual progeny, would have argued further that exactly the same authority belongs for exactly the same reasons to the decisions of a group of local Churches in a synod, and that each local church would be bound by a synod's decision in so far as that decision was recognisably the guidance of the Spirit of Christ.

CONSCIENCE.

As I pass to speak of the authority of individual conscience, let me set side by side two quotations, one famous and the other more than half-forgotten, though it is just as important; both refer to other matters than the particular one upon which I want to focus attention now, the absolute importance of each man's own faith, his own decision, and his own responsibility.

First, John Robinson's famous words to the Pilgrim Fathers, as he bade them godspeed; “ I charge you before God and His

blessed angels, that you follow me no further than you have seen me follow the Lord Jesus Christ. If God reveal any thing to you by any other instrument of his, be as ready to receive it as you were to receive any truth by my ministry, for I am verily persuaded that the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of His holy Word. For my part, I cannot sufficiently bewail the condition of those reformed Churches which are come to a period in religion and will go, at present, no further than the instruments of their reformation. The Lutherans cannot be drawn beyond what Luther saw. Whatever part of his will our God has revealed to Calvin, they will rather die than embrace it; and the Calvinists, you see, stick fast where they were left by that great man of God, who yet saw not all things. This is a misery much to be lamented."

Second, some words of the great John Owen on the Church as a voluntary society: "Persons otherwise absolutely free . . . do of their own will and free choice coalesce into (the Church) It is gathered into this society merely by the authority of Christ; and where it is so collected, it hath neither right, power, privilege, rules, nor bonds, as such, but what are given, prescribed, and limited, by the institution and laws of Christ. Moreover, it abides and continues on the same grounds and principles as whereon it was collected, namely the wills of the members of it, subjected to the commands of Christ. This is as necessary unto its present continuance in all its members as it was in its first plantation. . . . No man can by any previous law be concluded as unto his interest in such things; nor is there any general good to be attained by the loss of any of them. None, therefore, can coalesce in such a society, or adhere unto it, or be in any way belonging unto it, but by his own free choice and consent. . . ." (*True Nature* p. 61).

By the authority of individual conscience, therefore, I hope I shall be understood to mean that personal autonomy and choice which recognises and accepts truth, that personal factor which enabled St. Paul, for instance, to speak of the Gospel both as something which he had received, which existed before and independently of him, and also as "my Gospel."

It is sometimes said, of course, that this third "secondary" authority is reason; and the claim is made that whatever the truth of the Gospel may be must commend itself to reason, which means as often as not some individual person's reason. I do not, let me say, share in that apparent derogation of reason which is so disastrous a feature of much modern theology—and philosophy, for that matter, too. Debtor as I am to Karl Barth, I cannot agree what I suppose he teaches about *analogis entis*; not least because it seems to deny what Paul teaches in the first and second

chapter of *Romans*; yet I am convinced that it is a mistake to talk as if reason were the chief and distinctively human characteristic of mankind, which is in fact an inheritance of Graeco-Roman civilisation and culture which, as I think, we have accepted too unthinkingly. I believe that Emil Brunner's attack on such abstract thinking in the first series of his recent Gifford Lectures (especially that on *Personality and Humanity*) is well founded; and therefore I suppose we must accordingly reject the notion that the only aspect of man which matters is the divine reason dwelling in him, which would mean, surely, that "it is . . . an abstract, impersonal, general principle . . . which makes men human" (op. cit. p. 94); and we must realise that "the Christian concept of personality . . . is the call of God, summoning me, this individual man, to communion with him" (*idem*).

The bearing of this on our discussion of authority I take to be this: Christ and His Gospel are not addressed to the reason alone, but to the whole individual personality. It is a challenge not to the reason alone, but also to the will, the emotions, and whatsoever else it may be of which we are compact. To use Brunner's words again: "a divine *I* calls me *Thou* and attests to me that I, this individual man, being here and being so, am seen and called by God from all eternity" (*idem*). So the challenge of the Gospel comes to me not, as so many theologians and philosophers seem to think, in the form, "Will you accept this as true?" That is only part of the matter. The real question is: "What think ye of Christ?" It is a question of total commitment to or a total rejection of Christ; and that is the whole crux, I suggest, of the problem of authority. And, surely, it is here that we see how that treatment of individual reason as if it were the measure of all things, which finds its classic expression in the Enlightenment and its *reductio ad absurdum* in the more recent writings of the Bishop of Birmingham, is nothing more than a misunderstanding and a perversion of that utterly and intimately personal relationship in which every man stands to the course of all authority.

SOME CONCLUSIONS.

I have tried to show that however we come to this problem of authority we are confronted with the authority of Christ Himself, and that all "secondary" authorities are valid and useful and really authoritative in so far, and only in so far, as they reflect and make effective the one supreme authority. On that basis let me table in conclusion, with almost no comment or expansion, some conclusions which follow from it.

The deepest religious conviction and assurance are known by those who are aware of no tension between these three

“secondary” authorities. When a man’s personal convictions are in harmony with the witness of Scripture and the *consensus fidelium* he knows real certainty. This is to know with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge. The historic and the social nature of Christianity alike require that personal conviction should be at one with the faith once for all delivered to the saints and the common experience of all else who have found salvation in Christ. It is when the Bible, the Church, and the believer say one thing that the authority of Christ is most surely acknowledged.

I should claim, too, that authority is absolutely personal; and therefore I have the deepest suspicion of theologians, philosophers and scientists who want me to think that the truth of the universe can be expressed in abstract or intellectual terms. I think it is mistaken theology to think of revelation propositionally; and I like it no better when philosophers and scientists want me to find the final truth whose authority I must acknowledge in ideas. This may estrange me from some orthodox and almost all modernist theologians; but I can only declare my belief that true authority is always personal authority, and that in the Gospel the God-man confronts me with all his immense authority. It is always personal, never abstract, never simply rational or emotional.

Finally, I should claim that the logic of this is that there can be no final external standards of authority, and therefore no final external security. It is the besetting temptation of us all to try to find some “secondary” authority which will appear to afford us sufficient security to screen us from the ordeal of personal encounter with Christ himself; the Bible, the Church, even our personal convictions. But there is no such external security, nor can there be, valuable as such “secondary” authorities may be, and, I believe, are. My picture of the true believer is not of a comfortable recluse who can discourse about what the Bible says, what the Church teaches, or, worse still, “What I think”; but, rather, of one who, knowing all that the facts can teach him, not neglecting what his fellows have learned, nor without convictions of his own as well, gets on with the job of living in constant response to the ever-present Christ, seeking to understand and obey, to trust and to serve him to whom all authority in heaven and earth has been given.

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