

# The Authority of the Church.

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THE great authority<sup>1</sup> of the Church in the secular order during the medieval period was the outward counterpart of an almost unquestioned inward authority in its own distinctive life. It was this latter authority which was called in question by the Reformers, for to them it seemed to be the result of a false and dangerous development which had secularized the very concept of church authority. The sixteenth century dispute in Christendom was concerned with the nature of church authority, of which the Reformers believed they had a better account to give than their opponents. Some words of Barth are relevant to this issue. Speaking of the word Protestantism, he says, "this word describes the polemical character of the true Church, but it does not exhaust the conception of the evangelical church. It protests against man, who would fain set himself in the place of God, and against justification by works, for we do well to reflect that as early as the sixteenth century this protest was directed, not only against Rome, but also against the fanatics."<sup>2</sup> The exigencies of controversy caused an arrested development of the reformed understanding of the Church and its authority so that Brunner can justly say "the question of the church is indeed THE unsolved problem of Protestant theology."<sup>3</sup> It is against this background of 'indeterminate' theology that we have to consider the authority of the church.

The church is not a voluntary association for the cultivation of spiritual life formed by those who share this interest, neither is it a club, but the result of the choice and calling of man by God. The *ecclesia* of God is the company of the elect, that is of those who have been called out from the world by God and, having heard that call, have responded to it, in faith. It is the continuation of the Old Testament Qahal which designated Israel a people chosen of God, through whom He desired to fulfil His purpose in the world. Since Israel according to the flesh repudiated the Messiah, the Christian congregation became the true Qahal of God, the new or renewed Israel.<sup>4</sup> The setting of the mission of Jesus is the people of God and only in that context can His person and work be understood. The Church, then, is not a human creation, it is not a building made with hands, but a community constituted by God into which man is admitted as he learns faith in Jesus. "The Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."<sup>5</sup> The response of saving faith involves the incorporation of the believer into the holy community of God. No one can have Jesus without His church, for it is a part of the Gospel itself. The given-ness of the church is necessarily involved in the given-ness of the Gospel and is not the result of any inevitable human propensity to join together on a common basis. One of the characteristic words of the New Testament is the word *κοινωνία* which cannot be fully rendered by the English word 'fellowship'. It signifies the sharing in a common life whose source is the saving acts of God. The book of

the Acts of the Apostles is concerned to show that this *κοινωνία* is something altogether new, originated by an act of God at Pentecost. As Lionel Thornton has put it—"The Christian life is in part a shared response to God, and again that joint response is called forth by the gracious acts and gifts of God of which we are fellow recipients."<sup>6</sup>

It is at this point that we may begin to define the authority of the Church. The act of becoming a believer is not a solitary event, but through it we are united to God and to our fellow believers. It is because the church is the place where the Word of God is proclaimed and heard that there is any possibility of our becoming Christians. The worshipping community in which the Word of God has free course to be glorified is the historical connecting link between the Jesus of History and every period of time and every individual. It is the distinctive, indispensable means by which Christian life is created and maintained. It is for this reason that in the opening chapter of the fourth book of 'The Institutes of the Christian Religion', Calvin laid so much stress on the Church "as our Mother,"<sup>7</sup> and that Luther wrote, "the Church is the mother that gives life to and nourishes every Christian."<sup>8</sup> No one becomes a believer save through a message communicated to him by others.<sup>9</sup> This human word is never the ground of faith but it is always the cause of faith when it is given by God the capacity of reminding other men of the reign of God, of His grace and of His judgment.

The saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ always meets us through historical means. This mediated immediacy is such that it can bridge the gap of the centuries. It is found only in the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of sacraments which are acts of the church. As Karl Barth put it, "Jesus Christ lives by the tidings about Him being proclaimed and heard. This is His life on earth."<sup>10</sup> He lives then in His church and is known *there* by faith and not outside. That is to say, Jesus Christ does not live and is not known in such a way that one could seek Him but shun His people, or love Him but despise His people. Christianity is an individual but never a private matter. The Christian faith as a divine-human thing must exist in the world in some visible form and the Church is that form in which it exists. So to quote Barth again, "One can be a good citizen without belonging to a political party. One can be musical without belonging to a choral society. But one cannot hold the Christian faith without holding it in the church and with the church."<sup>11</sup>

There is, however, a great difference between the Reformed understanding of the Church as the place where faith is born and the Catholic conception of submission to the church embodied in the person of the successor of Peter, or some mystical consensus fidelium.<sup>12</sup> The church we have said, is a community called into existence by God and, therefore, no man can be its master. It is governed by a transcendent authority, none other than the Lord Himself.<sup>13</sup> It cannot be ruled by an individual or an assembly or by officials. Jesus Christ rules the Church for He has been given to be "the head over all things to the Church which is His body".<sup>14</sup> It was He who said, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" which means that He is Lord both of the church and of the world.<sup>15</sup> The sovereignty is in the hands of Jesus Christ Himself and there is no sovereignty of man which may

thrust itself into the place of Christ. There has been no delegation of authority by Christ into the hands of any man or group of men in such wise that Christ has withdrawn from the active ruling of His church.<sup>16</sup> The church is not divine revelation which has been institutionalized nor is it an organization which has obtained possession of the Gospel or of the Word of God so that it is master of these things. It cannot dispose or administer the will and the grace of God for He has not resigned to it His will, His truth or His grace in the form of a definite sum of super-natural powers. God has spoken and still speaks to the church and in the church, but He has not resigned His voice to the church so that the voice of the church can be identified with the voice of God and so possess an independent divine authority. It was this kind of church authority which was repudiated by the reformers since it gave to man a sovereignty which by right can only belong to Jesus Christ. This form of Christian titanism is a constant temptation to the church, Roman or Reformed, and leads inevitably to a grievous distortion of faith. To contest for the recovery of apostolic faith in its purity and power meant an insistence on the maintenance of this clear distinction between the church and her Lord and their respective authorities. In Barth's picturesque phrase "God remains the Lord of His own House."<sup>17</sup>

Thus the church lives, not by virtue of any self-generating power of her own doubtless originally bestowed upon her by her Lord, but by being under the governance of that Lord who is her life. He is not, therefore, nor ever can be an assured possession which she is able to take for granted, but is only possessed by faith in such a way that He retains His sovereignty over her and in her.<sup>18</sup> In speaking of the church as the minister of the grace of God to the world we can never speak in such a way that the church or any organ of its life replaces Christ. This was why the Reformers laid so much stress on the "Crown rights of the Redeemer" and the consequent destruction of all those elements of traditional Christianity which seemed to them to invade the honour of Christ the King. A sentence from Calvin's Institutes—"Christ is the only master of the church" might well stand as the text on which the whole work is a commentary.<sup>19</sup>

If then, Christ always remains the master in His own house, the house of faith into which the elect, the called and chosen, enter; if He is alone the Sovereign of the church, do we then speak of the church as His Kingdom? Is it to be identified with the Kingdom of God so that we may say with Augustine "The church even now is the Kingdom of Christ and the Kingdom of Heaven"?<sup>20</sup> There can be little doubt, as Bishop Headlam has pointed out, that this conception, though spiritual and philosophical in Augustine, had a far-reaching influence in building up the Medieval church as a world power<sup>21</sup> which succeeded only too well in obscuring the Lordship of Christ in the Church. The statesmen and ecclesiastics who built up the imposing fabric of a 'respublica Christiana' found in this identification the spiritual justification for their work.

The Kingdom of God, the reign of God in and over a fellowship of redeemed men is the end, the eschaton of all human history of which only God knows how it is to be realized. It will be His act completing the purpose of Creation in Redemption and giving meaning and fulfil-

ment to the whole process.<sup>22</sup> This kingdom is the hope of the Church as it was of the prophets. It is a living, working reality in human history and yet not realized.<sup>23</sup> The Church has been constituted by the fact that the Kingdom of God has drawn near in the coming of Jesus Christ. But we still live in time and not in eternity and the kingdom is still veiled from our eyes for it is not being and will not be realized in history.

If, then, the Kingdom is the hope of the church, the two cannot be identified and the Church can only be understood in the light of that End which is beyond herself. She is not her own end and this is one of the most significant differences between Roman and Reformed Christianity. The Church is always the church under the Cross,<sup>24</sup> the community of the redeemed who are still sinners but who, by their membership in the church, testify that they "desire" "a better country."<sup>25</sup> The church is an eschatological community since it came into being at a decisive moment of reference to the eschaton and since it lives in hope and expectation of that Kingdom. Its character and, therefore, also its authority point beyond itself to something which is yet to come. It is a community which has had a foretaste of the Kingdom since in its life the powers of the age to come have already entered into the world. It is the place of God's beginning of a new chapter in the life of mankind in Christ. The eschatological act of full redemption has been brought into the present not in completeness, but proleptically as a foretaste, an earnest. So we may speak of the church as a pledge of the Kingdom, of the common life of the church in Christ as a foretaste of the life of the kingdom, and of the achievements of the grace of Christ as the earnest of full redemption. In Brunner's fine phrase the church is "the earthly historical veil which conceals the Kingdom."<sup>26</sup> This time in which we live, this time in the life of the church, is the time between the Ascension and the Return of Jesus Christ, so that the church is a between-the-times community. By its life and by its speech it points on to the fulfilment of its confident hope, while already it enjoys a foretaste of the powers of that age that is to come. The prayer of the church is "Thy Kingdom come" so that the church never resigns itself to the status quo, but having an expectation which is real longing, stands in the world as the place where already the saving activity of God is at work.

This eschatological nature of the church in its relation to the Kingdom has obvious significance for the sociological need of our time and shows that there can be no possibility of any attempt to return to the medieval method of an articulated hierarchy administering a carefully co-ordinated system of law. The church is not the Kingdom already realized but points beyond itself to the Kingdom. When the Kingdom is come, the church will exist no longer. Its authority in this sphere is the authority of a community which testifies to a confident hope arising from the present activity of the powers of the age to come.

If Christ is the Lord of the church which is a community awaiting full redemption, and no human sovereignty, however expressed, may usurp His position, we have to ask how that dominical sovereignty is exercised? There has not been, as we have already argued, any surrender of authoritative sovereignty by the Lord to the church, or to any order therein, so that the authority which the church does exercise

is itself subject to the authority of the Lord. In the Roman Church there is no appeal from a pronouncement of the Holy See to Christ because the voice of the Pope is so identified with the voice of Christ that failure to hear the voice of the Holy Father means inability to hear the voice of Christ. Hence, as Barth has shown, there is no opportunity for the lordship of Christ to become concrete in the church, "to get its proper play".<sup>27</sup>

Reformed theology begins at this point—man must in no wise usurp the authority of Christ in the Church. So Calvin asserts, "It is the right of Christ to *preside* over all councils and not share the honour with any man. Now I hold that He presides only when He governs the whole assembly by His Word and Spirit."<sup>28</sup> This involves a serious attempt to avoid the spiritual and theological dangers of theocracy. The church may, and indeed must, speak and act—she must make decisions, affirm truth and deny error and this can take place in no other way than in the formulation of resolutions and in confessions of faith. Such decisions and confessions are never mere table talk, nor do they carry the authority of learned and plain men in such a way that they minister to edification without obligation. Creeds and confessions have authority because in them the church is speaking under a sense of responsibility to the Word. So in our time the churches on the continent have again become confessing churches as they have confronted militant paganism, because they have been zealous for the sovereign lordship of Christ. Important as such confessions are, they neither increase nor diminish the authority of the Word, nor can they set up any new doctrine which goes beyond the Word of God. They are not, in principle, free from error, but as attempts to make clear first to herself and then to the world her faith in Jesus Christ, they are part of the church's service of the Word. In this way they may become a worthy sign to remind future generations of the truth once known, but they are not to be regarded as the attempt to make absolute the piety or the theology of any given time. They possess no such static authority and only have binding power in so far as they testify to the Word. Their purpose is to serve as a genuine reassertion of the testimony of the apostles and the extent to which they do this is the measure of their authority. In the possibility of appeal from them to the Word of God are to be found both the due limits within which such confessions may be drawn up and prove of service, and also the place in which the sovereignty of Christ is made concrete in the church.

When we turn to consider the subject of dogma and the discipline of dogmatics within the church, we find the same dangers, the same authority and the same limits within which dogmatics are effective. The testimony to Jesus the Mediator has always been accompanied by an intellectual formulation of its message. That formulation is not itself the faith, nor is it to be identified with the Word of God. It is what happens when the Church cross-questions herself about that faith by which she lives. It is a function of faith which operates within the Christian church but as it is also "a part of the work of human knowledge"<sup>29</sup> it can never be binding in conscience. Its significance is chiefly negative, with the aim of protecting the message of the Gospel from destructive misunderstanding. Christian dogma has again and again acted as a kind of breakwater to keep out the invasion of a false

intellectualism into the church's life. It is concerned to remove the misunderstandings and perversions against which the Gospel has to contend. Hence in every period in the history of the church it is a task which needs to be done afresh, for although the Gospel changes not, the misunderstandings which confront it differ from age to age. "Dogmatics as such, does not inquire what the Apostles and prophets have said, but what we ourselves must say, on the basis of the Apostles and Prophets."<sup>30</sup> Thus dogmatics of to-day will seek to make its position quite clear over against a religion of immanence or of evolution. By means of thought, faith is able to carry on a discussion with unbelieving error. But the discussion must not be confused with faith nor dogma be identified with that which it is there to conserve. It exists for the sake of the proclamation of the Christian message and its authority depends upon the measure of success it achieves in creating room for the Divine Word to have free course.

It is when the relationship is reversed and dogma is confused with faith that the devastating evil of an arid intellectualism descends upon the church and a human authority usurps the dominion which by right belongs only to the Lord. Then faith is corrupted by orthodoxy and the wall of defence destroys that which it was erected to defend. The disaster arises not from dogma itself, which is a necessary procedure in the church but from the fact that a false and aspiring authority has identified the intellectual expression of the truth as it is in Christ with the Word of God. Faith is then turned into doctrine and scholasticism dominates the church. This was what happened in the reformed churches in the later sixteenth century, thus reproducing the false authority of doctrine in the Roman Church; so that divine truth became mixed with human error and falsity under the pretext of jealousy for the divine honour.<sup>31</sup> All that we can do is to try to express the Word of God in the purest form of doctrine we can find, recognising always that this procedure itself must stand continually under the reforming judgment of the Word and is, therefore, a work which must be continually renewed. The purest expression of the doctrine always remains distinct from the Word and is not to be confused with the Word. God may speak through doctrine that is less pure than it might be<sup>32</sup> and it may be that He will not speak through the purest doctrine. That is to say the Word of God is never at the disposal of man—God remains the Lord in His own house. It is not a Word which can be manipulated according to choice but a living personal challenge which stands over against the theologian in judgment. Dogma has significance and, therefore, authority as witness, in that it points to something behind and above itself—the Word with its constant ethical challenge. So soon as it becomes fossilised into a concrete word, an object for consideration, then dogma oversteps its limits and usurps the place of Christ.

It will perhaps be well if we were to speak here of the place which tradition may have in interpreting the Gospel. The attitude of Rome is quite unambiguous in the matter. "We receive with sentiments of equal piety all the books as well of the Old as of the New Testament," declared the Council of Trent, "and also the traditions relating as well to faith as to morals, inasmuch as coming either from the mouth of Christ Himself or dictated by the Holy Spirit they have been pre-

served in the Catholic Church in uninterrupted succession." We may ask by what standard this tradition is to be measured? If it is equally authoritative with the Bible itself, is it because it not only confirms the Word of the Bible but also that the Bible needs such confirmation, or is it because it supplements that Word? Such a position can only be maintained logically by the emergence of the teaching office as a third source of revelation. This is what has happened in the ascription of an infallible teaching authority to the Pope. Only in this way can tradition be regarded as a second source of revelation, in addition to the Scriptures. Here is a clear instance of the self-apotheosis of the church, of the construction of a human idol which is worshipped as Christ.

The Reformers faced with this distortion of church authority placed the Church firmly under the authority of the prophetic-apostolic Word of the Bible. This was the limit of its authority and this was to be the test of any tradition which might be received. Does tradition bear witness to the Word of God declared in Jesus Christ or does it conform to that Word? Here is a barrier erected between tradition and Scripture which signifies that Another and not the Church, is the Teacher of the church. To say this does not imply that church tradition has no authority, for it is not possible to make a simple appeal to the Scriptures while ignoring the experience of the church with the Scriptures. Impoverishment of life and mutilation of faith are the inevitable results of such a proceeding. Moreover, the fact that the Scriptures need exposition, which task is performed as proclamation in the Church, demands for tradition a relative authority. In this way we recognize that the Spirit has been at work in the church before us and our Christian life, born and nourished in the Church, is the proof of this. It is not possible, except by denying the reality of our own Christian calling, to overleap the centuries and immediately link up with the Bible again. It is not agreement with the Father and Councils as such, that is demanded of us, but respect and obedience to their voices in so far as they testify to the voice of God, from whose utterance their speech is ever to be distinguished. Holy Scripture is the criterion of our study of the Church's past and what contradicts Scripture is to be rejected. The obedience which is demanded of us towards the Church's past can be comprehended, says Barth, under obedience to the Fifth commandment—"honour thy father and thy mother"<sup>33</sup> and this is a limited and relative authority since we must obey God more than mother or father. Nevertheless there is an obedience due to mother and father and this we owe also to the church's past expressed in tradition.

We have followed the argument so far because we began by asking how the sovereignty of Jesus Christ was exercised in the church. Creeds and Confessions, Dogma and Tradition are all functions of the church, decisions of faith which she is bound to make. But they are not acts of a church which has been endowed with divine authority in such a measure of divine resignation that her words cannot be distinguished from the Word of God and are, therefore, binding in conscience as that Word by its nature must be. On the contrary, the significance of such acts is the bearing of witness to the self-revelation of God in Christ, the pointing beyond themselves to something or rather Someone

who is their sovereign. There is appeal from a creed, a confession, a dogma or a tradition to the Word of God, and all these things need to be brought under the scrutiny of Jesus Christ the Living Word. Their authority, which is real and living, depends upon the validity of their testimony to Him.

We have now to try and come to grips with this question of the exercise of sovereignty in the church, that is, its government by Jesus Christ through which it was created. How does the church learn to refrain from usurping the position of Christ and look to Him as her living Head and Governor? The answer is that she can do this in no other way than that in which she comes to know Jesus Christ Who came in the flesh. We know Him through the testimony of the Apostles and the witness of the prophets whose function is now fulfilled in that of the Apostles. The church is always faced with the question, "What is true church?" since there is ever present the possibility that it may decline into false church even though it preserves an outward orthodoxy. This is a question of true and false authority and one which is always to be welcomed by the church, for it is only as it confronts this challenge that it can know itself as 'true church'. In facing this question we shall be able to make a decision in the problems of the development of the historical forms of church life.

The Church then has to come to terms with the facts of her origin in the testimony of apostles and prophets. To be a church which can make proclamation of the Word of God she has to be Apostolic. This has been an unvarying note of true Catholicity, of genuine church existence and makes a dividing line between us and those who would reject the apostles in favour of the findings of historical criticism.<sup>34</sup> To be apostolic means that the church must stand in some definable relationship with the Apostles who were in Calvin's words<sup>35</sup> "to be the first architects of the church and to lay its foundations throughout the world." "Ye are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the chief corner stone."<sup>36</sup> It was because the Reformers were convinced that other foundations had been laid for the erection of their contemporary church that their "protestant" labours were directed to its re-establishment on that one foundation beside which there can be none other, the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus as the chief corner-stone. The crucial issue here concerns the meaning of apostolicity.

There can be no doubt that the authority of the Apostles was of fundamental importance in the life of the early church. "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you . . . that ye may have fellowship with us"<sup>37</sup> gives us the key to the understanding of this apostolic authority. St. Paul on more than one occasion found himself obliged to defend his gospel or to enforce his injunctions by reminding his readers of his apostleship. "Am I not an apostle"<sup>38</sup> is the question he presses upon the Corinthians. Through all his epistles runs the note of conscious responsibility because he had been called out to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God.<sup>39</sup> Behind this lies the tremendous sense of mission with which the whole Christian errand began. An ἀποστολος is essentially a man sent with a mission to accomplish. "As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you."<sup>40</sup> Luke says that



those whom the Lord chose to be the bearers of His message, the witnesses to the proximity of the kingdom, he also named 'apostles', His sent ones.<sup>41</sup> Does all this require us to suppose that in its origin the church was an organized 'legal' institution with duly appointed rulers who already exercised a formal judicial function in the power of binding and loosing? If so, then a succession in hierarchical office within the church, exercising a divinely given *magisterium* would be the principal function and the criterion of apostolicity. When, however, we examine the New Testament to see whether this is the picture, there are three important facts to be noticed.

First of all, the word apostle is used in three different ways. An Apostle is one of the twelve chosen and commissioned by the Lord Himself, so that *οἱ ἀποστολοι* is practically a synonym for *οἱ δωδεκα*. In the opening words of several of his epistles, Paul seems to confine the word apostle to fairly narrow limits, although wider than the twelve for he was included although "as one out of due time." "Paul called to be an apostle and Sosthenes our brother." "Paul called to be an apostle and Timothy our brother."<sup>42</sup> The word is also used with a wider connotation to include some of the leading men of the early Church who were performing apostolic work in fulfilling the commission of evangelism. Thus in Acts,<sup>43</sup> "the multitude of the city was divided and part held with the Jews and part with the apostles" where Paul and Barnabas are the men in question. In Philippians<sup>44</sup> Epaphroditus is spoken of as "my fellow worker and fellow soldier and your apostle." Thirdly, there appears to have been an even wider use of the word *ἀποστολος*, perhaps to indicate something that could be said of an individual, who without being one of the twelve, yet had something in common with the twelve as witnesses of the Resurrection and bearers of a ministry. Thus Paul speaks<sup>45</sup> of Andronicus and Junia who are of note among the apostles and in Ephesians he says in a general way that God gave some to be apostles.<sup>46</sup> The meaning of this use of the word apostle in the wider sense survived in later times, for Hermas in describing the fourth course of his mystical tower, says that it consists of forty who are apostles and teachers of the preaching of the Son of God,<sup>47</sup> while Eusebius, commenting on Paul's account of the Resurrection appearances of Jesus says, "there were very many apostles indeed in imitation of the Twelve."<sup>48</sup>

In the second place the nature of the apostolic authority was undefined. The twelve owed their general pre-eminence to their close companionship with Jesus in the days of His flesh,<sup>49</sup> to the privilege of being witnesses to His Resurrection, to the fact that they had been sent forth to preach by Jesus Himself in His earthly life, and to the fact that they had received authority over devils. The record of their activity contained in the book of the Acts seems to be the logical counterpart of these privileges. Except for the close companionship with Jesus many others shared these privileges, besides the twelve. But there are no grounds for supposing that a strictly circumscribed group of Apostles possessed a divine prerogative obtained by no-one else and so possessed an authoritative leadership in administering a divinely sanctioned law. We have no record of the apostles exercising this kind of hierarchical rule. When Paul is given the gift of the Holy

Ghost it is through the laying on of hands by a certain disciple who is not an Apostle and otherwise unknown. There does not appear to be the need for any apostolic check on the admission of people into the Christian community or any apostolic rules for such admission which all local communities were obliged to respect. When Peter is called to account for his conduct in eating with the Gentile converts, there is no assertion of apostolic authority either by Peter or by the Apostles generally, but merely an attempt on the part of Peter "to carry the whole body with him by patient explanation of the circumstances and considerations belonging to the case."<sup>50</sup> In the crucial instance of the Jerusalem council, the letter sent from the council to the brethren in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia lays no stress upon the position or authority of the apostles and of the elders associated with them. As Hort put it, what is sent is a strong expression of opinion, "more than advice and less than a command . . . a certain authority is thus implicitly claimed. There is no evidence that it was more than a moral authority but that did not make it less real."<sup>51</sup>

In the third place there is no evidence of any attempt by the apostles, whether the twelve or a wider body, to appoint legal successors. The authority they possessed as the special intimates of the Lord, as pre-eminently His witnesses, was not the legal authority of an hierarchy. There was no prerogative given them for transmission. The apostolate formed a regulative centre exercising a moral authority such as every missionary with a young church must possess. Perhaps this was why Calvin<sup>52</sup> could speak of it as an extra-ordinary office occasionally raised up in other epochs "as God has done in our times to form churches where none previously existed." The apostolate was an office whose function was to do that which is done *ἀπαξ* in the church.<sup>53</sup> The authority and position of the Apostles died with them in its personal form.

There was no authority possessed by the apostles in virtue of their position and which guaranteed their testimony as the truth. The Testimony is not authoritative because it is apostolic testimony but it is testimony which points away from man to Jesus Christ and His unique authority which constitutes them apostles.<sup>54</sup> The uncertainty we have found in the attempt to define the New Testament limits of the apostolate and the apparent irregularity of Paul's call to the apostolate serve as continual reminders to the church that the apostolic testimony is testimony to a God who is Lord over apostles also and reserves His freedom to work where and as He will even in independence of apostles. Apostolicity then, will be the mark of a church whose testimony to Jesus Christ is the same as that of the Apostles. If we ask what means we have of knowing what the testimony of the Apostles actually was, we are not left in any doubt since the Apostles left us in the Holy Scriptures their testimony to the life, death, resurrection and ascension of their Lord in order that we might separate the Church of Christ from any synagogue of Satan. As Forsyth put it<sup>55</sup> in a brilliant phrase, "that precipitate of their message, that fixed capital of their divine industry was their real successor", and again, "the real successor of the apostolate was not the hierarchy, but the Canon of Scripture written to prolong their voice and compiled to replace the vanished witness."

The canon of Scripture controls the church in its life and witness in a fashion analogous to the authority exercised by the apostles in person in the early years of the church—that is by virtue of its testimony to Jesus Christ.<sup>56</sup> It does this, not because it possesses any prior guarantee of catholicity, still less of infallibility, bestowed upon it by the church or even by the apostles, nor because it is itself the Revelation and therefore authoritative, but because it is the deposit of apostolic testimony. The acts of God, to which the apostolic testimony bore witness, created both the church and the Scriptures. The fact that unbelief can still persist when confronted with this Scripture reminds us that it is only a token of revelation.

The canon of Scripture is not authorised or created by the church but recognized by it and the church is then bound by what it has recognized. The word *κανων* in the first three centuries was applied to what was recognized as apostolic and stood for the “*regula fidei*.” Only since the fourth century has it been applied to Scripture—the list of books in the Bible—recognized as apostolic.<sup>57</sup> We lay stress on the word recognized for it does not imply a superior authority on the part of the one who recognizes but an acknowledgment that what stands over against him as canon of Scripture has an independent authority—it may even be an authority over him. Thus for instance, the 1921 Act of Parliament which regulates the State’s attitude to the Church of Scotland, recognizes the spiritual authority and independence of the Kirk. It acknowledges an authority which it can neither bestow nor take away. Thus the church acknowledges the canon as the apostolic testimony to Jesus Christ, and in so doing it acknowledges that, in so far as Scripture is the Word of God it is the measure and the standard, in short the controlling authority over the church. The church recognizes this authority of Scripture for no other reason than that here God Himself has spoken of Himself, and still by His Spirit confronts with Himself, the man who reads in faith. Apostolic testimony, whether spoken or written, is only true testimony in so far as it brings hearers and readers under the *κρῖσις* of the living God in Jesus Christ. “It is the canon because it has imposed itself as such upon the church and invariably does so.”<sup>58</sup>

But the Scriptures are not self explanatory, neither are they a series of proof texts or a collection of rules. They require exegesis and it is the duty of the church to expound these writings and to find in them the materials for her proclamation. This does not, however, deliver the Scriptures into her hand or give her any authoritative power over them. They still remain the regulative canon of her life, since in the very handling of them the church is brought under the *κρῖσις* of Jesus Christ. Moreover, the church has the duty after every exegesis, of making clear to herself the difference between text and commentary and of letting the text speak again and again without restriction, so that she may experience the authority of the “*successio apostolorum*” in their testimony to Jesus Christ.

Further the fact that the Scriptures are written, has this significance that they stand over against the church as a “concrete authority with a singular aliveness of its own,”<sup>59</sup> an authority which means that the church is not left to conduct a monologue with herself on themes

springing out of her own life. But the written canon confronts the church, speaking, judging, controlling, above all, signifying, that the church lives, not by virtue of any authority residing in itself but in obedience to a Lord who has spoken. It is God the Holy Spirit who truly expounds the Scriptures and makes their words His contemporary Word.

To speak of exposition of the Scriptures in the church leads naturally to some consideration of the ministry in relation to the authority of the church. We begin with the proposition that the ministry is given to the church and not a human device or construction, "He gave some apostles, some prophets and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ."<sup>60</sup> The church then does not create ministry. It can neither give nor take away the things that make a good minister of Jesus Christ, for these come from God on high. There is, therefore, no ministerial magisterium which was at the disposal of the apostles and which by ordination is legally handed on from age to age.

His twelve apostles first He made  
His ministers of grace,  
And they their hands on others laid  
To fill in turn their place.

The final result of such a conception is to identify the Church with the ministry in such a manner that the lay congregation is almost an embarrassment—or a regrettable necessity to enable the ministry to perform its functions. It opens the door to a clericalism in which the church is the clergy and can only fulfil its functions in the secular order under the guidance or, more frequently, the direct leadership of the clergy. Part of the blame for the failure of the medieval experiment lies in the fact that it was a clerical and not a church effort. Despite the existence of reformed churches for the last four hundred years the practical identification of the Church and the ministry persists in the popular mind, so far as it knows anything at all of a Christian ministry. This can be seen in the frequent use of the phrase "he is going in for the church" meaning that he desires to be ordained, and in the almost universal phrase "Why does not the Church give a lead" where the church means the bishops and other leading members of the ministry.

The ministry, like everything else in the life of the church, is under the sovereignty of Christ, and its work of proclamation, whether in Word or in Sacrament, is for the purpose of setting forth Jesus Christ who is the content of the Apostolic testimony. An apostolic ministry implies not a succession of office but a real identity of testimony and its authority is bounded by that testimony and is effective in the measure that it reproduces apostolic faith within the church. The ministry is not the lord of the church. The word of Paul expresses its function when he says "Not that we have lordship over your faith, but are helpers of your joy, for by faith ye stand."<sup>61</sup> But we ought to recognize the spiritual fact that the church will be largely what its ministry makes it. The ministry is handling the re-creative Word of God and as an institution it is a gift to the church like the preacher's power. The man to whom is committed this ministry is neither the mouth piece of the church nor its chairman nor its secretary. The church

members will not hear in his speech the echo of their own voices, since he is not their servant but the servant of the Word and apostle to the church. It is as servant of the Word that he serves the church. His function in the church is a necessary means by which all its members are enabled to hear the Word of God and live the true Christian life. In so far as he is obedient to the sovereign Lord of the church who called him and gave him testimony to speak, the minister of the Word exists as part of the church's effort to acknowledge Christ alone as her Lord. The ministry is given to the church and not at her disposal but ministers are appointed by the church. It is this human disposition and authority, a necessary though subordinate part of the life of the ministry, which can be handed on in ordination. A man must be lawfully sent<sup>62</sup> as well as divinely called to this office and the authority of the church in this matter is what Forsyth called "a selective power,"<sup>63</sup> to discriminate between the claimants to prophetic respect and scope. The church provides the personnel for a function already created by the Word of God, and to quote Forsyth again "what does come from the Church is the recognition of an authority it cannot confer and the provision of an opportunity."<sup>64</sup> The authority of the ministry is drawn from the Word else the message would not be a message of the Word to the church. What is derived from the church is the opportunity of the ministry.

If then we attempt to sum up in a sentence the authority of the Church here briefly considered in its diverse aspects, we should say that the church as the earthly body of Christ is a secondary token of revelation pointing beyond itself to the revelation of God in the flesh of Jesus Christ.<sup>65</sup> That revelation is a mediated immediacy, for God meets us through historical means and principally through proclamation and sacraments which are themselves tokens of Jesus Christ. The Lord rules the church through its obedience to the Word of the Apostolic testimony deposited in the Scriptures and only through such obedience can it acknowledge truly the sovereignty of its Lord. The Church in this sense, though conditioned and secondary, is none the less indispensable for Christian life. The present earthly body of Christ is a body of humiliation as was His fleshly body and its effective authority will depend upon the extent to which in bearing testimony to Him it creates the opportunity for Him to exercise His authority upon modern man as He did upon His Apostles.

<sup>1</sup> This paper assumes that Christians agree in acknowledging that the Church possesses authority. Its purpose is to try and define the limits of that authority. It should be noted that "Reformed" is here used, not in its technical meaning of "Calvinistic" but to imply those who stand in succession to the general reforming movement of the sixteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> *Credo*, pp. 197-8.

<sup>3</sup> *Divine Imperative*, p. 523.

<sup>4</sup> Galatians vi. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Acts ii. 47.

<sup>6</sup> *Common Life in the Body of Christ*, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> *Inst.* IV 1. 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in *Revelation*, ed. Hugh Martin and John Baillie, p. 299.

<sup>9</sup> I Corinthians xv. 3, 11, cf. *Paul and his Predecessors*, A. M. Hunter, pp. 14-18.

<sup>10</sup> *Knowledge of God and Service of God*, p. 153.

<sup>11</sup> *op. cit.* p. 155.

<sup>12</sup> cf. "Not Scripture alone, nor the original deposit alone, nor the continuous teaching of the Church through the Christian centuries alone but the union of all three in the earthly representative of our Lord. That voice of the Church for

which we look is not of the East without the West or of the West without the East ; it is not of England without Rome or of Rome without England : it is not of the first century by itself or the fourth or the eighth or the sixteenth or the twentieth : it is not of any particular place or any particular time. It is in regard to both time and place, properly universal." *Darwell Stone—Churchman and Counsellor*, F. L. Cross, p. 353.

- 13 *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. H. Kraemer, p. 419.
- 14 Eph. i. 22-23.
- 15 Matthew xxviii. 18.
- 16 *The Mediator*, E. Brunner, p. 226.
- 17 Quoted on p. 76 of *The Nature of Catholicity* D. T. Jenkins.
- 18 On this and allied paradoxes of Christian thought and life see Reinhold Niebuhr *Beyond Tragedy*.
- 19 *Inst.* IV. viii. 1.
- 20 *De Civitate Dei* xx. 9.
- 21 *Doctrine of the Church and Reunion* A. C. Headlam, p. 147.
- 22 *The Nature and Destiny of Man* Reinhold Niebuhr. Vol. II. *Human Destiny* pp. 50-52, 297-8.
- 23 *The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man*. R. Otto pp. 135-137 and many other places.
- 24 Barth *Credo* p. 121.
- 25 Hebrews xi. 16.
- 26 *Divine Imperative* p. 526.
- 27 *Doctrine of the Word of God* (E.T.) p. 109.
- 28 *Inst.* IV. ix. 1.
- 29 *Doctrine of the Word of God* (E.T.) p. 17.
- 30 *ibid.*, p. 16.
- 31 *Human Destiny* (Gifford Lectures, Vol. II) R. Niebuhr p. 225.
- 32 Brunner *Divine Imperative* p. 528.
- 33 *Credo* p. 181.
- 34 Jenkins *op. cit.* p. 32.
- 35 *Inst.* IV. iii. 4.
- 36 Eph. ii. 20.
- 37 I John i. 1-3.
- 38 I Cor. ix. 1.
- 39 I Cor. i. 1.
- 40 John xx. 21.
- 41 Luke vi. 13.
- 42 Col. i. 1 ; II Cor. i. 1 ; Phil. i. 1.
- 43 Acts xiv. 4.
- 44 Phil. ii. 25.
- 45 Rom. xvi. 7.
- 46 Eph. iv. 11.
- 47 Simul ix. 15, 16, 25.
- 48 H.E. 1 : 12. 5.
- 49 Acts i. 21.
- 50 Hort, *Christian Ecclesia* p. 58.
- 51 *ibid.*, pp. 83, 85.
- 52 *Inst.* IV. iii. 4.
- 53 *The Ministry in Relation to Spiritual Gifts* : H. J. Wotherspoon p. 208.
- 54 *The Nature of Catholicity* : D. T. Jenkins, pp. 28, 55.
- 55 *The Church and the Sacraments*, P. T. Forsyth, p. 59.
- 56 cf. Articles VI and XX in B.C.P. and similar statements in other Reformed Confessions.
- 57 Barth *Doctrine of Word of God*, p. 113.
- 58 *ibid.*, p. 120.
- 59 *ibid.*, p. 118.
- 60 Eph. iv. 11-12.
- 61 II Corinthians, i. 24.
- 62 Article XXIII of Articles of Religion, Article XIV of Confession of Augsburg.
- 63 *The Church and the Sacraments* p. 127.
- 64 *ibid.*, p. 128.
- 65 cf. A. M. Ramsey *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* p. 120.