

Scripture in Tradition

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I

NO prophetic scripture allows a man to interpret it by himself" (II. Pet. 1:20). For many Christians this is a hard saying. It may be a commonplace that Scripture is a norm for faith and practice. But what we forget so easily is that this norm—law and prophets, Old Testament and New Testament alike—took shape within a community and expresses the concerns and standards of that community. Yet it is beyond question that Scripture originated within the community of Israel, Old and New, and that it exists to testify to the community's fundamental faith. It is addressed to believers in community, and the community is the place where we must listen to it if we expect to hear its real message. When we approach the problem of biblical authority, then, we cannot help asking at the outset how that authority is related to the authority of the believing and witnessing Church itself, and whether it is shared with other organs of authority within the Church.

We may usefully start by reviewing the essential facts, about which there is fortunately little room for serious argument. While it may not be possible to describe in full detail the respective roles of oral tradition and written document in the development of Scripture as we know it, it is clear that the Hebrew Scriptures are the term of a long process of crystallization of tradition within the community of the Old Covenant, and that their various elements are meant to bear witness in different ways to God's covenant with Israel and to the faith believed and the life lived by his people within that covenant. Similarly, when the New Covenant has been sealed in the blood of Christ, the Christian witness to God's re-creative act is formulated in a communal tradition, and it is this tradition, first communicated by word of mouth in the apostolic proclamation of God's wonderful works in Christ, that is written down, edited, collected, commented upon, in Gospels, Acts, Epistles, Apocalypse. The process is lucidly described by K. E. Skydsgaard:

If we are . . . to ask how the gospel of Jesus Christ was heard and spread in these first times, the answer must be: through oral tradition where those men who had been especially commissioned as apostles proclaimed the message to those who followed them. Through many years there was preaching and baptism and celebration of the Eucharist before the congregations received a collection of the gospels and apostolic letters as a permanent expression of the voice of the apostles from the early days when foundations were being laid.

From this brief and summary presentation, it will appear that there was actually a time when the tradition truly played a very essential role, not only in the periphery, but in the very center of the Christian life. The congregation was, as Luther at one time said, not a 'pen house' but a 'mouth house'. Before there was scripture, there was oral tradition; before there was a New Testament,

there was a church; before men wrote, they spoke, they confessed, they baptized, and they held Holy Communion.

In the midst of this living, oral witness, in the midst of the life of this early church, our New Testament arose. . . . Scripture was the deposit of the apostolic voice which was heard in the primitive church and behind which stood the living Lord himself.¹

The problem of the relation between the living community and the written monuments of its tradition emerges directly enough from all this, but two further observations may sharpen our awareness of it. On the one hand, the first, prescriptural tradition of the apostolic Church appeals to something already written and venerated, the Scriptures of the Old Testament, as an accepted element in its total witness to Christ. Thus we have the concept of "scripture" ready-made for the Church to take up in the formation of a new canon. On the other hand, the very nature of the New Covenant in Christ points to the reality of a fellowship with God, more perfect than that enjoyed by the "fathers." Thus, in assessing the role of Scripture in the Church, we shall have to allow for the new significance of the latter as the Spirit-filled community, bearing corporate witness to God's truth. "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear" (Acts 2:32f.). Such a claim suggests that the primitive Church's fairly explicit idea of biblical authority is matched by a strong sense of the living witness and authority of the Spirit in the Church, which gives new meaning to inherited concepts of oral tradition.

The real trouble starts when we attempt a theological interpretation of the situation which I have just been describing. Granted that the canon represents a writing-down of the substance of the apostolic tradition or proclamation, just how exhaustive or exclusive is this definitive record? How far, for instance, has the Church inhibited itself from any further exercise of doctrinal authority, by acknowledging the New Testament writings as a unique canon? Is the biblical witness to be thought of as in some sense "over the Church?" Does this particular embodiment of the apostolic witness possess sole authority, to the exclusion of all other exercise of apostolic authority in the Church? None of these questions can be answered simply on the basis of our brief historical survey. Rather, we shall need to reflect theologically on the nature of the Church and its institutions, and to ask more particularly how the primitive Church's consciousness of its essential nature was reflected in its accounts of the communication of Christian truth. Then, against this background, we can attempt a fresh appraisal of the Church's developing institutions.

II

The basic presupposition of any adequate theological discussion of the nature of the Church is the concept of the Body of Christ. Unless we

1. Kristen E. Skydsgaard, *One in Christ* (Philadelphia, 1957), pp. 59-61.

apprehend the continuity of God's purpose and action in Christ and his Church, we shall miss the deepest meaning of the Church's life. I suggest that to think of the Church as Christ's Body is in the first place to interpret it sacramentally, as the creaturely but divinely formed embodiment of God's gracious action, analogous to the humanity of the incarnate Word. More exactly, it is to think of the Church as sacrament of Christ, enshrining the very life of the God-Man in its visible common life. As deity is enshrined in manhood in Christ, so the divine-human Lord tabernacles in his Church—not indeed in precisely the same mode, but in what Thomist philosophers have taught us to call an analogy of proper proportionality. From this it follows that the Church, in its life and action, neither repeats what Christ has done once for all nor performs an essentially new and different function. Rather, in the power of the Spirit it represents and applies Christ's divine-human action for the redemptive incorporation of human persons into Christ. It also follows that the divine purpose is accomplished in the Church through active human response, just as the divine work of redemption was carried out through the human obedience of Christ, and that this response involves outward, visible, fleshly realities, which reflect the fleshliness of Christ's life of obedience and redemptive sacrifice.

In the light of this fundamental doctrine of the Church, we shall expect to find the definitive revelation in Christ represented in the Church through a corporate human response, concretely embodied in patterns of action and social institutions. Our problem, of course, is to find out what these institutions are and to see how they are related to each other in the Church's corporate life. The right approach to the problem is not easy to determine, but it seems clear enough that we must go beyond a direct study of "Scripture," "Tradition," and related terms as they appear in the New Testament and other early Christian writings. For one thing, the New Testament Scriptures can scarcely be a factor in the New Testament's own account of the Christian revelation and its transmission.² But every primitive Christian institution presents the same kind of problem; coming as it does from the early phases of the community's growth, much of our relevant material tells us more of act and procedure than of fact and institution, even if fundamental institutions do appear in rudimentary form. It looks, then, as if at least a cursory examination of the early Church's functional description of its living response to the divine truth would be part of our task. Such a study would certainly teach us something about the primitive Church's understanding of its calling to make known the manifold wisdom of God, and in this way would help us to penetrate more deeply into the meaning of Christian institutions. And perhaps we should also come to see a bit more clearly how some of these institutions took shape as the divinely ordained instruments of the Church's essential functions.

If space permitted, we could profitably undertake a fairly extensive study

2. II Pet. 3:16 is the only clear reference to New Testament "Scriptures" in the New Testament.

of the vocabulary of the New Testament. The primitive Christian use of such terms as *kerygma*, *euangelion*, *martyria*, *homologia*, *paradosis*, and their cognate verbs, would tell us a good deal about the early Church's self-understanding. For the present, however, we shall have to limit ourselves to one set of terms, as a sample of the whole. Since the concept of "witness" is one of the most comprehensive of the lot, I propose to look at the New Testament use of the words, *martyrein*, *martyrs*, *martyria*, and *martyrion*. Although the language of "witness" is most extensively used in the Johannine corpus (including the Apocalypse), it plays a sufficiently significant part in other strata of the New Testament literature to justify the hope that its principal occurrences in the New Testament will tell us enough to meet our immediate needs.

The primary *martyrs*, the pattern of all true witness, is Christ himself. In him the divine truth, the object of all witness, is incarnate in its fullness, and he bears his own witness to it in act and word. He is "the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead," and "the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation" (Rev. 1:5; 3:14). He bears witness to heavenly things, which he has seen (John 3:11ff., 31ff.). He came into the world "to bear witness to the truth" (John 18:37), and "in his testimony before Pontius Pilate [he] made the good confession" (I Tim. 6:13).

Christ is not, however, alone in his *martyria*. The divine purpose to which he witnesses both prepares his way and sustains his witness. The Father himself testifies through the works which bear the marks of the divine presence and power (John 5:31ff.; 10:25). In and after Christ's glorification the Spirit bears witness to him (John 15:26), in union with the visible witness of water and blood (I John 5:7ff.). Moreover, through the inspiration of the Spirit the Scriptures of the law and the prophets testified to Christ before his advent (John 5:39; Acts 10:43; Rom. 3:21; Hebr. 7:17; 10:15), and at the end of the prophetic line John the Baptist came "to bear witness to the light" (John 1:6ff.). Finally, in the fullness of time, the Christian fellowship bears witness to what it has seen and heard.

Within the Christian fellowship, the primary witnesses are the "apostles." or specially commissioned preachers of Christ, whose witness is closely linked to the witness of the Spirit. "When the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning" (John 15:26f.; cf. Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; 4:33; 10:42; 22:15; 23:11; I Cor. 15:15). By signs and wonders the Lord himself bears witness to the word of his grace, spoken by the apostles (Acts 14:3). An eyewitness bears his testimony to the reality of Christ's death (John 19:35), while the seer of Patmos witnesses to the vision of his coming in glory (Rev. 1:1f.; cf. 19:10). More generally, those who have seen and heard bear witness to the total manifestation of the Word of eternal life (I John 1:1-4) in the sending of the Son to be the Saviour of the world (I John 4:14). In turn, this testimony is confirmed in the life

and experience of the whole community (I Cor. 1:6), and the "good confession" in which Christ bore witness to the truth is reflected in the good confession of Timothy and of all Christians who acknowledge and follow "the apostle and high priest of our confession" (I Tim. 6:12f.; Hebr. 3:1). While one text refers specifically to the writing-down of the testimony (John 21:24f.), several point to its living embodiment in the faithfulness of Christians through suffering and death (Rev. 2:13; 11:3, 7f.; 12:11; 17:6; 20:4; Acts 22:20). We can hardly overlook the support given to a Christological view of the Church and its witness by such a recognition of the witness borne in the very life and death of Christians, whose sufferings in the flesh "complete what remains of Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col. 1:24). The truth which became flesh in Christ not only speaks through the witness of the apostles but also enters into the flesh and blood of all who receive that witness.

In all this we have at least a sketch of a complex divine-human action of *martyria*. On the one side, God, the heavenly Christ, and the Spirit, and on the other side, Christ's words and works, the water and the blood, the law and the prophets, the Forerunner and the Bride, the apostles and martyrs, are portrayed as bearing harmonious witness to truth as it is in Jesus. The divine witness is, so to speak, the inward and spiritual grace of which human witness is the outward and visible sign. And while that outward and visible witness finds its centre in Christ the incarnate Word, the Church, with its apostles and its martyrs, its prophets and its Scriptures, is an integral part of an indivisible whole.

While this brief essay in elementary word-study still leaves us without a clear definition of the role of the New Testament in the Church, it must at least have made it plain that the New Testament does belong to the Church by theological right, and not simply by historical origin. Once we have caught even a glimpse of the Church as Christ's Body, united to him in being and action and bearing witness to his truth, we shall never be able to think of the New Testament as something external to the Church and passively received by the Church. On the contrary, we shall see the New Testament as part of the Church's witness—perhaps a uniquely authoritative part, but still a part.

III

We must now look again at the way in which the Church's witness found institutional embodiment, and more particularly at the place of the New Testament in this institutional development. To start with, we should observe that at the beginning of Christian history authority within the witnessing community belongs primarily to persons rather than to books. The principal agents of the primitive Church's witness are the apostles, and the medium of their witness is oral *kerygma* or *paradosis*, which (we should also note) seems to have found its first formal expression in quasi-credal statements rather than in "Scripture." It is true that we not only find a bit

of the *kerygma* written down by way of reminder (I Cor. 15:1-5), but also possess two quite early allusions to the writing-down of the story of Christ (Luke 1:1-4; John 21:24f.). But we can hardly argue from such slender evidence for the existence in the primitive community of any serious notion of Christian Scriptures, especially since we have to set on the other side the incidental and non-oracular character of the bulk of the New Testament.³ "So then, brethren," St. Paul writes, "stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter" (II Thess. 2:15). The new and living teaching of the apostolic Church is given in personal communication, sometimes oral, sometimes written, and we have no reason to suppose that even the written tradition is thought of as "Scripture" in any technical sense.

As for the primitive Church's use of the only Scriptures it possessed—the Scriptures of the Old Covenant—it seems fair to say that the possession of these documents did not seriously affect the primacy of "apostolic tradition." However great the Church's reverence for them may have been, and however important they were to prove as a precedent for a "New Testament," their effective authority was significantly qualified by the way in which the Church interpreted them. When the teachers of the New Testament Church appealed to the Old Testament as a witness to the Christian Gospel, the testimony to Christ which these Christians discovered was not something that any casual Jewish reader was likely to find in his Scriptures, whatever the methodological similarities between rabbinic and Christian exegesis. On the contrary, as St. Paul puts it in a statement of what he clearly regards as essential theological principle, "to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away" (II Cor. 3:14). In other words, if there is a witness to Christ in the Old Testament, it is not perceptible in the "letter," "carnally" read, but must be identified "spiritually" or, as we might say, "typologically." But this amounts to saying that the apostolic Church only found what it regarded as an adequate understanding of its Scriptures by way of a principle external to the literal, historical meaning of law and prophets. Early Christians had no illusions about the perspicuity of Scripture apart from Tradition!

The real basis, then, of the primitive Church's faith is the direct experience of the chosen witnesses. "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us" (I John 1:3). It is obvious, however, that the disappearance of direct oral report will have presented a serious problem. Papias provides a famous example of what must have been a widespread reaction to the new situation. "I did not think," he writes, just at the point when direct testimony is irrevocably passing over into hearsay, "that I could get so much profit from the contents of books as from the utterances of a living and abiding voice".⁴ Nonetheless,

3. The author of the Johannine Apocalypse did take his writing very seriously, but this is characteristic of the apocalyptic *genre* as such.

4. *Ap. Eusebius, HE, III, 39, 3.*

as time went on greater attention was inevitably paid to the written record, as the most complete, explicit and reliable embodiment of the apostolic *paradosis*. By the last quarter of the second century we have evidence for the existence of an almost complete New Testament collection, acknowledged as an authoritative repository of the apostolic witness.

Our evidence also suggests, however, that other repositories of that witness were still recognized. Side by side with the apostolic Scriptures, our most articulate informants place the apostolic rule of faith and the apostolic Bishops in the apostolic Churches. Irenaeus, for example, not only testifies to the fourfold Gospel, but also emphasizes the unity of faith maintained in the Churches apart from the written Word and appeals to the continuous witness of the apostolic Churches, embodied in the succession of their chief pastors and teachers.⁵ This kind of evidence seems to point to two conclusions. (a) The same age which testifies to the canon of apostolic Scripture also claims authority for the apostolic Church, and more particularly for its apostolic Ministry. (b) The writers of this age do not so much as hint that the canon, once defined, will exclude all exercise of authority by this second inheritor of the apostolic witness and commission. On the contrary, they insist that the apostolic Scriptures must be interpreted in the context of a larger apostolicity, from which they are essentially inseparable. The real basis of the Church's faith remains the witness of the apostolate in the Church, and this witness has more than one organ of expression.

When we reflect on the historical development of "apostolic" institutions in the Church in the light of our theological apprehension of the Church's life and witness in Christ, it becomes exceedingly hard to justify any extravagant exaltation of Scripture "over the Church," even by the most skilful ringing of the changes on the theme of the "Word of God." The Word of God who is Jesus Christ, the God-Man, is indeed over the Church, as the Head of the Body. But Christ has united the Church to himself by his Spirit, and through the same Spirit he guides it into his truth and maintains it in the truth. Beyond question, the biblical "Word" is one of the creaturely means through which the Spirit of truth speaks to the Church and preserves it in the apostles' doctrine, but it does not follow that it can rightly be treated as the exclusive means to this end, let alone separated from the Church in which it took form. No doubt there is a sense in which not only Scripture, but also credal rule of faith, sacramental signs and ministerial order, are over the Church, in so far as they represent an apostolic heritage to which the faith and worship and polity of the ongoing Church must be consistently faithful. Nonetheless, all these primary Christian institutions are given to us in and with the Church, whose common life they help to form; they have no meaning apart from that common life; and no one of them can be exclusively elevated above the corporate structure of the Church. To set one of them over against the others, instead of seeing them as a functional whole, is to ignore the lessons of the Church's primitive historical develop-

5. Cf. Irenaeus, *AH*, I, 10, 1-2; III, 1-4; III, 11, 8.

ment, while to lift any one of them out of its proper place in the Church's common life is in effect to separate the Church from Christ its Head, who speaks to it in its Scriptures, renews its life in its Sacraments, and orders it by its Ministry.

If, however, we emphasize the churchly context of Scripture and its interpretation, we are bound to try to say how we understand the exercise of the Church's expository authority. I suggest—there is no room to do more—that we must explore the way in which the apostolic witness in Scripture and Creed is complemented by the apostolic commission of the Ministry, and primarily by the authority of the episcopate. Here is an institution which embodies a living apostolic commission and, perpetually renewed as it is through the incorporation into it of living persons, uniquely meets the need for a "living and abiding voice." It was this above all that gave the Ecumenical Councils their theological significance as authoritative interpreters of the apostolic witness. Difficult as it may be to determine the details of its working, I do not see how we can help affirming this corporate authority of the bearers of the apostolic commission in the exposition of the apostolic Scriptures.

But are we not in danger of subjecting history to dogma, once we make such an admission? On the contrary, I suspect that it is a too simple and exclusive biblicism that is most likely to try to find all its favourite dogmas expressed *totidem verbis* in Scripture. For my part, I have no sympathy with any attempt to read developed Catholic dogma into the New Testament text. I am simply suggesting that we should follow the analogy of the New Testament Church's treatment of the Old Testament, and look for the Godgiven sense and direction of Scripture in those crucial themes of the New Testament message which have found a continuation in the Catholic Creeds and other expressions of the Church's living mind. In one way or another, all of us who recognize the authority of that strange and diverse compilation which we call the Bible are going to do our best to find the unity of the Spirit beneath the diversity of the letter. Which, then, is better: to impose our private visions of unity on the diversity of the text, or to rely on the guidance of the Paraclete in that fellowship of the Holy Spirit through which God has given us the lively oracles of the New Covenant?