

The Authority and use of the Scripture Today.

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'Power' has been defined as the ability to make one's own values and aims accepted by others; the ability to influence others; the ability to limit another person's alternatives of behaviour. 'Authority' is commonly understood as the *legitimate* use of such power.¹

Considered in itself the authority of Scripture will not change or diminish in the course of time, as it proceeds from the power of the Almighty itself. However, as authority necessarily terminates in society, and thus in human persons belonging to a specific age and culture, the authority of the Scriptures will also greatly depend on the changes affecting society in a particular age and culture. The question: 'What is the authority of Scripture today?' is therefore a very relevant one. We might paraphrase it as meaning: 'How can Scripture influence people of our own age?' It is this aspect that I would like to discuss, restricting myself to a few salient points and to phenomenological observations.

I believe that the crisis of authority in modern society is an important factor that should not be overlooked. Added to this, we find that modern secularism seems to reject the very idea of a Revelation as such. In spite of these negative factors, or perhaps in response to them the Gospel seems to be stirring many Christians in a new 'Holy Disquiet'. To these points I will add a few suggestions regarding the pastoral use of Scripture in our own times.

The Crisis of Authority

Research on attitudes among youth has amply demonstrated that present day society is undergoing a crisis of authority. The reasons for this crisis have to be sought in the sociological changes taking place.²

First of all, in our times, more than ever before, people are flooded by a *multiplicity of contradictory statements and opinions*. Through the modern means of communication, people very soon learn to see that the same event can be reported on in different ways, can be

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¹ See e.g. the discussions by M. Weber on power and authority in *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 1947, Engl. Tr. Talcott Parsons, Glencoe, Ill.

² My data in this section are based on the research study on *Western Youth and the Future of the Church*, published by the Pro Mundi Vita Centre in 1970 (ser. no. 33; Spin. Brussels).

understood in different ways and may lead to opposing views. Every opinion is to some extent relative. This basic possibility of *contradiction* is the first reason for the shaking of confidence in authority.

The second reason lies in *the conflict between avowed aims and the reality of life*. Education, for instance, promises a preparation for life, but in actual fact most subjects taught in secondary education have no direct bearing on the real problems of life, on economics, politics and human relationships. A similar conflict is experienced between the licence promoted by modern society in films and novels on the one hand, and the public defence of morality on the other hand. To modern youth it often seems that society does not know any more what it wants, and authority virtually stands for the maintenance of that society.

The third reason for a crisis in authority is a *renewed appreciation of the individuality and liberty of every person*. Freedom in every respect, with regard to the choice of one's life-partner, with regard to one's profession, or the exercise of one's religious convictions, are values accepted everywhere. On the other hand, conventions, traditions and the 'establishment' are being discredited. Authority, which is often experienced as a curtailing of freedom, finds it more difficult therefore to justify itself.

This attitude towards authority undoubtedly has also had an influence on the authority of the Bible. Paul Tillich draws attention to this in a sermon on Jesus' authority. Having introduced Jesus' discussions with the chief priests on His authority (Luke 20:1-28), he observes:

Jesus, as well as His foes, acknowledge authority. They struggle about *valid* authority, not about authority as such. And this is what we find everywhere in the Bible and the life of the Church.

Paul fights with the original disciples, including Peter, about the foundations of apostolic authority. The bishops fight with the enthusiasts about the leadership in the Church.

The popes fight with the princes about the ultimate source of political authority.

The reformers fight with the hierarchs about the interpretation of the Bible.

The theologians fight with the scientists about the criteria of ultimate truth.

None of the struggling groups denies authority, but each of them denies the authority of the other group.

But if the authority is split in itself, which authority decides? Is not split authority the end of authority? Was not the split produced by the Reformation the end of the authority of the Church? Is not the split about interpretation of the Bible the end of the Biblical authority? Is not the split between theologians and scientists the end of intellectual authority? Is not the split between father and mother the end of parental authority? Was not the split between the gods of polytheism the

end of their divine authority? Is not the split in one's conscience the end of the authority of one's conscience? If one has to choose between different authorities, not *they* but *oneself* is ultimate authority for oneself, and this means: there is no authority for him.³

Secularism and the idea of Revelation

According to the traditional concepts prevalent in Christianity, revelation meant 'God speaking to men'. To describe this concept in biblical terms⁴: Almighty God, who lives in the heavens above the heavens, has spoken to man through His mediators the Prophets. In the course of time, God sent His only-begotten Son, who was born into the world as a child of Mary, and thus, as the God-man, became the most tangible possible self-manifestation of God: 'The Word became flesh'. The revelation given by God through His prophets and especially through His own Son, was expressed in writing in the Holy Scriptures. These Scriptures, however much written under the instrumentality of man, should be considered therefore the very word of God himself.

This traditional view of revelation and inspiration has been undermined by our modern scientific world outlook. To the men of old, the world in which we live was a strange mixture of the secular and the Divine. God's presence and direct intervention was seen in natural events, in supposed miracles and in the acquisition of new knowledge. A God speaking through human mediators, the incarnation and the inspiration of the holy writings seems to be part of this ancient mythopoeic thinking.⁵ This all the more so because of our present-day knowledge of comparative religion. In practically all major religions we find the conviction that God has spoken through holy men, that God has manifested Himself in various forms, and that God's word has found expression in sacred writings. There is no need for me to elaborate this theme, as I suppose that other lectures at this Conference will have elaborated this point.

I am aware of the many attempts on the part of Christian belief and Christian theology to answer this objection.⁶ However, it is

³ P. Tillich, *The New Being*, SCM London, 1964, pp. 85f.

⁴ I have not restricted myself to the strictly biblical terms but adopted the formulations of traditional Christian confessions.

⁵ B. Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, Allen and Unwin, London 1957; G. Sgcseny, *Die Zukunft des Unglaubens*, List Munich 1959; O. Flake, *Der Letzte Gott: Das Ende des theologischen Denkens*, Rütten und Loening, Munich 1961; W. Wneken, *Abschied vom Christentum*, Szcsceny Verlag, Munich 1963.

⁶ Among the many, cf. Vidler, etc. *Objections to Christian Belief*, Constable, London 1963; J. B. Cobb, *Living Options in Protestant Theology*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1962; H. Cox, *The Secular City*, Macmillan, New York 1965; J. Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung*, Kaiser Verlag, Munich 1962; see also the series: *New Frontiers in Theology*, Harper and Row, New York, Vol. I, 1963: Vol. II, 1964.

my conviction that a comprehensive and convincing answer has not yet been found or at least has not yet been sufficiently accepted everywhere. As a result, there is real confusion among many Bible students and theologians. In spite of their continuing belief and readiness to respond to God's self-revelation, they are unable to cope with the theoretical justification for revelation and inspiration in our secularised world. College students will tell us: 'The Bible is out of date. Like all the other sacred books of the world, the Bible presents a view of the world that no longer fits our society. Religion with its stress on miracles, divine interventions, revelation and divinely dictated writings simply belongs to the past'.⁷

This secularist objection to the Bible is perhaps the greatest factor undermining the authority of the Scripture today. I would simply like to observe this as a fact. The Bible will lose its hold on believers if we do not formulate a convincing answer to this objection. Let us agree to the fact that, in spite of all our good will and the intense efforts by so many scholars, we are still basically groping in the dark and looking for a renewed insight that will integrate our faith in a personal and self-revealing God, into our modern view of the world. Until this has been achieved, the authority of Scripture will necessarily be waning.

However, there is a consoling observation that we can make. As so often in the history of Christianity, living Christian faith has preceded the theological understanding that should accompany it. Also in our times we find a renewed response to the Biblical message, which may point to better things to come in the Christianity of the future.

The Gospel and Holy Disquiet

The present crisis in Christianity, caused as it has been by the changing sociological and ideological structures of mankind, has at the same time also its roots in a renewed understanding of the Gospel as the norm of perpetual self-criticism and the cause of lasting holy unrest. The characteristic Christian of today turns away from man-made beliefs, customs and practices, and tries to put himself once more under the immediate influence of Jesus' authoritative words.

A forerunner of this new understanding of the Scripture as cause for holy unrest may be seen in Kierkegaard (1813-1855). He was one of the first to develop what he might call the theology of 'disquiet'.

Just as a fisherman, after he has set out his nets, brings movement into the water to drive the fishes towards the nets and thus to catch more; just as the hunter employs a group of drivers to encircle a part of the forest and to make them drive the wild animals to the place where he is ready to shoot them, so God himself tries to catch those who want to receive His love by means of disquiet among men. Christianity is disquiet of the

⁷ The value of down-to-earth presentations of the problems such as given by J. Robinson (*Honest to God*, SCM, London 1963) and J. Pike, (*A Time for Christian Candor*, Harper and Row, New York 1964) is that they have brought the problem into the purview of theology from the angle of the 'ordinary man'.

strongest intensity and the greatest extent; one cannot imagine a disquiet greater than this; it strives to bring man's existence to disquiet until man's deepest kernel has been affected, until everything is blown up and everything has faded. Wherever someone becomes Christian, there disquiet will be present and wherever someone was Christian in the past there disquiet can be shown (11, 2:8, 29).

'Spirit is disquiet: Christianity is the deepest kind of disquiet brought about in existing structures, as we find written in the New Testament. However, many Christians have made Christianity into a reason for complacency, 'so that we may enjoy life fully' (11, 2a 317)⁸.

In his book on *The End of Conventional Christianity* by Dr W. H. van de Pol, the author describes how the various pillars of conventional Christian belief and practice have been questioned by theology over the past 50 years. He shows that, apart from outside reasons leading to the re-appraisal of true Christian values, there has been in the movement itself a genuine core of renewed understanding of Scriptures. Also in its most radical form of the 'God is Dead Theology', there remains in reformed Christianity a final and irrevocable appeal to the authority of Jesus' challenging words.

'Among many Christians there is a strong conviction that the decline of conventional Christianity is just as unavoidable as the death of God in our secular society. This conviction itself rests on the belief that conventional Christianity with its official bourgeoisie morals has become in fact a radical negation of the message of Jesus of Nazareth. Pierre Berton who wrote a book *The Comfortable Pew* at the invitation of the Anglican Synod of Canada, and who sold already more than 100,000 copies of it, was led by this conviction about conventional Christianity to break with any Christian church. But he does not want to break with the Jesus of Nazareth. Conventional Christianity and the preaching of Jesus are being contrasted with one another ever more. This is expressed also forcefully in the exceptionally rich and captivating book of Werner and Lotte Pelz *God is No More*.⁹

What is true of theology, also proves to be factual in the life of many ordinary Christians. In an analysis of the renewal of Christian faith among intellectuals of Europe, Simon Jelsma contrasts the complacency and self-assurance of conventional Christians with the new attitudes of reformed Christians. In his exposition he claims to be especially led by the experience among Roman Catholics in Holland. When describing these young intellectuals, whom he calls the 'rebel Christians' he writes as follows:

⁸ H. A. Van Munster, *Kierkegaard, Een Keuze Uit Zijn Dagboeken*, Het Spectrum, Utrecht 1957, pp. 174ff.

⁹ W. H. van De Pol, *Het Einde van het Conventionele Christendom*, Romen en Zonen, Roermond 1967, p. 74 (Engl. transl. my own).

The rebels discover a world full of questions, responsibilities, challenges, risks and expectations. They want to live and work in this dynamic world. They rise and make ready to leave the old, dilapidated building of the past. Tents and camping equipment are taken for the journey. Before them they see the endless desert. At the other side of the horizon they know there will be the promised land. God is a story. Every day they have to rise again and continue the journey. While walking on the track they sing and pray. At night they make camp as possibilities allow them. They dream of new perspectives, of liberation, of happiness, of the end of a reign of terror. From day to day they have to seek oases, new wells, food for one day. The weather and the colour of the sky change and keep changing. Life means for them living in open space and being always on the move. The security of enclosure no longer exists.¹⁰

By becoming again 'the desert church', the Christians of today make themselves once more totally dependent on the Word of God. The very crisis which, at first sight, seems to undermine the authority of the Bible today, would therefore also seem to become the providential background against which the true function of God's word may be re-established in our age.

Proclamation of the scriptures in the Pastoral Ministry

From the above considerations, it will be clear that today, more than ever, the minister of the Word will have to spend all his energies on conveying the central message of the Bible itself. Fidelity to God's word requires the ability to distinguish the ever-present and ever-relevant demand of God, from what is passing and time-bound. The message of Scripture should be disentangled from religious concepts that are contrary to our modern scientific outlook or which have a theology of God and man that is unacceptable to contemporary society. This 'demythologization' will have to be done. As we have to do it without doing an injustice to the revelation of God itself, this may prove a difficult task. Let us openly admit the difficulty even while proclaiming the Word.

The too literal understanding of God's word has always been opposed to the proclamation of the Word. However, this archenemy of the message is still going abroad. It is true that 'all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness', (2 Timothy 3:16), but this does not mean that pious thoughts and admonitions can prejudicially be deduced from meanings external to the mind of the original authors. Fidelity to what the Scriptures want to say, and to what God wants to say through them, should be the fundamental law of proclaiming Scriptures in our day.

¹⁰ S. Jelsma, *Kerk in Opstand*, Zomer, Wageningen 1969, p. 88 (Engl. transl. my own).

By way of a simple guideline to the minister's preaching the Word, I would like to enumerate the following approaches that may, in my opinion, safely be followed:

(a) *Reading the Scriptures*

Here I have in mind especially the public reading of Scriptures. When doing this reading, we have to bring out as well as we can the meaning intended in the passage. While reading, we may intersperse comments that elucidate the passage, while carefully distinguishing our own interpretation from the words in the Scripture itself.

(b) *Recounting the History of Salvation*

As the Scriptures basically contain a testimony to what God has done, both under the old dispensation and under the new, our proclamation of God's message will necessarily contain the recounting of God's deeds for man. This proclamation could be a simple announcement of the fact (simple narration) or be linked with reflections of what the message of these facts is for our own times. (The so-called multiple reflection technique).

(c) *Biblical personalities*

God always intends to achieve a personal relationship between Himself and man. The Scriptures record God's dealings with individual men to set a pattern of what He intends to do with men today and what kind of response He is requiring from us in our own situations. Biblical personalities portrayed for this reason contain therefore valuable lessons for us.

(d) *Biblical themes*

The understanding of who God is and what He wants for man was evolved in the Scriptural writings in the form of literary and theological themes. As these themes are truly uppermost in the mind of the authors, they may well constitute the direct contents of parts of our proclamation.

(e) *Direct exposition of a text*

The attempt to penetrate into the full meaning of a given text, from its historical background, its literary origins and its theological contents, and its evaluation for our own times, will remain one of the principal tasks of the theologian today. Although such reflection and theology will necessarily contain subjective elements, they form an essential part of our proclamation of God's word. For the Word of God is to be re-thought and re-translated in terms of the 'inner language' of modern man.

(f) *Biblical prayer*

The Bible is also a school of prayer. Not only does it contain many prayers that could be exemplary for the Christian, but it also instils an attitude of worship and recognition that can truly form the

basis of the Christian's approach. Moreover, Christian prayer being in its essence a response to God, the Scriptural writings will naturally lend themselves to the formulation of new and relevant Christian prayer.

Authority may be defined in terms of influence exercised on the thoughts and decisions of others. If the true message of the Bible can be made relevant to our present society, it will regain its true authority by influencing it anew to an understanding of life and existence in which a rightful place will be given to God and His revelation. To make the Scriptures regain this authoritative influence, will to a great extent depend on the translational skill of the ministers of the Word. Renewed theological insight as well as a proper understanding of the process of communication must go hand in hand in making the Bible relevant to the man of today and tomorrow.