

The Authority of the Bible Today

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The Problem: I would like to deal with this problem from a specific point of view, i.e., as a problem linked up with that which we call indigenization or contemporizing of the Christian message.

To some extent we are all fed up with the idea of indigenizing or adjusting the kerygma. Too much has been said about it. Nevertheless, there is, or course, some truth in that concept. We rightly came to see that a piece of writing, as well as an oral message, has authority only in so far as it has a bearing on a particular situation. Words in themselves have no authority, written or unwritten. The authority involved has to do with the communication of certain concepts or series of thoughts or, perhaps better, a certain truth, to a particular situation. A sacred text, a Bible verse, a phrase, gets its authority the minute it catches on, is responded to negatively or positively, when it is experienced as relevant to the situation and leads to a 'yes' or 'no'.

This idea of transferring the authority from the words to a life situation may seem dangerous to many. The Greek word for authority may give a clue here. The word for the thing we are after is *exousia*, *ex + ousia*, meaning that which comes from life, which has its ground in being itself. *Exousia*, consequently, has to have its foundation and confirmation in real life situations.

After 2000 years of experience one would think the Church knew quite well how to bring out the authority of its message, and its scriptures, by contemporising them, indigenising, making them relevant, to the new situation. The problem is, however, that adaptation to a life situation means adaptation to a changing situation. There is no cultural situation at a standstill, in our time less than ever. It would be much easier to discuss the way one tried, or did not try, to indigenise in the past, in the second, fifth, or sixteenth century, because the past has in a way come to a standstill. It is fixed and documented in writing in some way. We can tell how basic biblical concepts were actualized, made relevant in a past situation. If the authority, e.g., of the Bible, is dependent on the response to it in a life situation, as we think it is, we have no ready-made answer for our own situation, as it changes culturally, politically, socially. Who then, dares to speak, unless he is a prophet?

The Word Made Flesh

In my opinion we should start by considering the incarnation. The idea of God revealing himself in an incarnation is not limited to

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Christianity, but the specific Christian doctrine of incarnation is that God in His infinite wisdom, after a long time of preparation, chose a specific time, a specific cultural setting, a specific political situation, where He could reveal Himself to man once for all in a way understandable to man. God was made man, which means that He came into our midst to talk to us in human language, using words, gestures, symbolic actions etc., that we understand. This complete immersion into a life situation, a very particular, definable, life situation, is what gives authority to what was said and done by Jesus, i.e., makes it authoritative for us.

In this connection it is important that God entered human life completely, from conception to death, not only partly. Nothing that belongs to human life was left outside. We cannot deal with the doctrine of incarnation here, but the important fact is that the revelation of God Himself in Jesus Christ means that the supreme truth is conveyed to us in human life, in the history of a man. The divine truth is revealed in human words, using human thoughts and concepts in a human culture situation; and not only human, but a particular cultural situation, that of Palestine in the years 0-33 of our chronology. This might seem to many to be a limitation. How could that which is infinite be revealed in that which is finite? How could that which is in itself inexplicable be explained in human thoughts and words? How could the mysterious redemption of man from sin be acted out in the death of one man in Palestine nearly 2000 years ago? And still, this is what we are up against.

'Time was fulfilled' meant that the time God had waited for since the beginning of the world and which He had prepared for centuries, had come; a situation where all that which was needed for God to reveal Himself was available; the most suitable situation, in culture, language, religious advancement, political and social progress.

A Revelation in Human Words

The coming of Jesus Christ had been prepared since the very beginning. And a more definite step, humanly speaking, was taken when God selected one of the semitic tribes in the Arabian desert to be His own people. Out of this people the Messiah, the Redeemer, was to come. This people was systematically prepared for its role in the history of mankind. God chose prophets and pious men to talk to His people. Already in this we see something of what it means that God reveals Himself in the human. These prophets and holy men, conveying a message from God, had to use language, lines of thought and illustrations available in their setting, that could make the divine message intelligible to their fellowmen.

Let us take it from another point of view, namely the creation story. We all know that there are parallels to the biblical creation story in the surrounding contemporary religions. I think we are right in stating that a pattern well known to people in those days has been used. This does not exclude divine inspiration from the story. Without this point of connection with the surrounding culture nothing could have been said at all. We would miss the point, however, if we stopped at this discovery of a relationship with existing creation stories.

The important thing is that the biblical creation story conveys a new message. We know, e.g., that the sun, moon, and stars were considered divine beings in the surrounding cultures and therefore worshipped. In the biblical story, however, we find that words used for celestial bodies are words that clearly indicate created things. The sun is called a 'lamp', a created thing, nothing divine. And it is said that God 'pasted' the stars in their places. They are only 'things' put in their places by the one and holy God.

We are not interested in the exegesis of the story at present. We just want to know in what sense there is any authority in this piece of tradition. The words themselves, I think we agree, can have no authority in them. Neither the words, nor the combination of them are holy or anything like that. They are ordinary words and phrases, often used in the surroundings. They are taken out of life itself and spoken back into that situation, delivering a particular message that is most relevant. They bring out a challenging truth, they point to a certain fact. If this particular fact, in this case the fact that sun, moon, and stars are 'things' in the hands of the supreme God and nothing more—if this fact comes out clearly, the text has authority. It is taken out of a relevant life situation and spoken back relevantly into a life situation.

It is, however, first in Jesus Christ that the final and full revelation is given. But, again, this revelation means the use of human thoughts and concepts, symbolic actions, ways of worship, etc.

Jesus had to explain who He was, and He did so by using words from the Jewish tradition, Son of Man, Suffering Servant, Messiah. He talked about the Kingdom of God, the coming Judgement, etc., to explain divine realities. At the same time as these terms convey a basic idea of what He wanted to explain, He reinterpreted them and gave them a new context, first of all by relating them to His suffering, death and resurrection. If we want to know what is meant by 'son of Man', 'Messiah', etc., we have to know the background of these technical terms. On the other hand, they will remain meaningless if we neglect the new interpretation of them which we have in the pattern of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The concepts became flesh in a life situation. The authority, the convincing power, comes *exousia*, from a historic event.

To explain the fellowship that exists between Jesus and those who belong to Him, Jesus used a well-known meal fellowship pattern, which is unintelligible without the Jewish history and tradition. And, still, it has a completely new meaning or a fuller, or fulfilled, meaning in the new context Jesus gives to it, in His death and resurrection.

As for Jesus' teaching, I think it is a striking fact, that what has impressed and been felt as authoritative by people far outside the Christian ranks is the Sermon on the Mount and the parables, and in both cases real life situations are so close at hand that one can nearly smell them. This is what gives them such an authority, they have *exousia*, a confirmation in life.

The Handing on of the Message

The disciples of Jesus were sent to teach men everything that Jesus had taught them. Immediately the problems are there. Everybody knows that the handing on of a message to somebody means an interpretation. Very seldom will it be possible just to reproduce what one has heard. Jesus usually used Aramaic in His teaching, although I would think that He used the current language, Greek, also. Anyhow, a literal translation does not exist and the disciples, once outside Palestine, had to explain the gospel in Greek as well as in various Aramaic and Syrian dialects.

All translation is an adaption. There is an Italian saying: 'a translator is a traitor'. If we accept that what has authority is not words or sentences, however holy they may be considered, but the kerygma, the message they convey, and that this kerygma is relevant only in a life situation, how, then, shall we transmit the message from one situation to another without making it less relevant than it was originally, without making it less authoritative?

In the beginning the gospel was not something written. It was an orally proclaimed message. If you want to proclaim something, you have to use words and thoughts and concepts that mean something to the listeners. You cannot speak in Greek without thinking in Greek. This means that thoughts and philosophic concepts are taken over with the language. You cannot avoid this, and it is better to face it from the very beginning. The problem of translating 'incarnation' in the Indian context is well known. But you have to, and you must use words and concepts that mean something in the Indian setting. At the same time you have to reinterpret the words used so as to give a new message, a message with authority.

Paul was, it seems, one of the first to adapt the gospel to the Greek setting. He found not only the words, but the whole life of Jesus so relevant, that this became the final authority for everything he said or did. He decided to know of nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified. In a way it was easy for him as he knew Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek fluently and had one foot in each of the two cultures. Still, he had to make decisions in every new situation. How to explain the glad message? Paul introduced a number of new words and expressions taken over from the Greek tradition, such as *soter* (saviour), *mysterion* (mystery, sacrament), *metamorphosis* (transformation), and he used words like *evangelion* (glad message, gospel) and *Kyrios* (Lord) with pre-Christian associations. Such an innovation is also the use of *agapé* (love) as a synonym for Christ in 1 Cor. 13. In doing this he brought out the authority of the message and people accepted its authority.

Already many of Paul's fellow Christians looked upon him as traitor. It looked like a new gospel. Later on many scholars have accused him of hellenising the original message. Sacramentalising, mysterialising are words that have been used. Some will say that of the simple teaching of Jesus there is nothing left in Paul. It is a new religion. Is this accusation fair? I think that we can say today, after three centuries of critical studies, that Paul gives the same message as Jesus,

but in a new form, adapted to the Greek context. Jesus instituted the eucharist in the context of a Jewish meal. The table fellowship really meant something to the Jews and to fit this sacramental rite of the eucharist into that context was most meaningful. In Corinth, however, people evidently did not understand the meaning of table fellowship, and so Paul is brave enough to separate the meal from the eucharist and request the people to have their meals in their houses and then come together for the sacramental meal. A decisive change, no doubt, necessary in that setting. Can we say that he ruined the meaning of the eucharist? No, I think we agree that to non-Jews he made the meaning of the sacramental rite clearer.

We have the three first gospels in a written form sometime round about 60-70. As we know, they are almost identical and the semitic setting is clear. Mark is somewhat less Semitic than Matthew, adapting to Roman customs and practices. Luke, again, is definitely more cosmopolitan in his outlook and some theologians have said that he has catholicised the gospel.

In John, however, the same story is told, but in a completely different way. It is the same message but all in new thoughts, expressions, symbols and key-words. Perhaps, if we were given the gospels of Matthew and John to read for the first time, it might be that we would not see any connection between them. It is only after a long time of use of them both, that we see the deep conformity in spite of outward dis-similarities. Because we know the Man they point to and know that He is so complex, do we see the unity of these two documents. It is because they make Jesus so relevant that we recognise them as authoritative and not just samples of diversity and confusion.

Evidently it took John a very long time to put the whole thing in a new shape suitable for the public he had in mind. It seems as if he was thinking of those within Judaism who had developed a tradition somewhat different from that of the Pharisees and Rabbis, like those belonging to the Damascus brotherhood or the Qumran group. At the same time the gospel has been worked out very carefully to meet the danger of a certain sort of gnostic thinking that threatened the original message in many parts of the young church. To me it seems possible that John could use material from Jesus' private teaching for this purpose.

It is a new form, though the opening passage, the Logos-hymn, is famous, and it is a masterpiece. It takes up the O.T. concept of the Word of God but uses it in a way that connects it to a number of philosophical and religious systems of the surroundings. First of all, though, it is connected with the history of Jesus, the mystery of incarnation and the death and resurrection pattern. All the lofty ideas used or referred to are brought down into reality, a real life situation, to get *exousia*. Did John betray the gospel? I think we must agree that this form of the gospel with its invitation to a deep meditation on themes like life-death, truth, life, etc., has been a true treasure to the church. We know about its significance in the Indian context. This points to the other side of the idea of authority; it has *exousia* from the new situation because it is found relevant. There is no authority without a 'yes', an affirmation, from the context into which it speaks.

Returning for a minute to Paul, we may think of his letter to the Colossians. There were some reports about some new thoughts in circulation in that area, threatening to hide the central part of the gospel. Paul takes up the terminology and structure of thoughts of this cosmic speculation and puts the Christ-event right into the centre of these speculations and thus leads the Colossians back to a sound doctrine of the centrality of Christ in the creation of the cosmos. In Philippians Paul is able to express the self-sacrifice of Christ in his famous kenosis-hymn in a form that is more relevant than ever. In this way he is able to give a new dimension to the central doctrines of the Christian faith. It is nothing new, of course, just another way of presenting that which was told from the beginning. The revealed truth is fitted into a new context and thus not only preserved but even enriched and given new authority.

The Limits of Words

It is quite clear that the teaching of Jesus Christ not only can be, but has to be translated into new situations, new languages, be explained with the use of new structures of thought. In an ordinary Sunday morning service the preacher has to adapt the original message in a new situation. He indigenises by translating it into the new context, if it is to be understood at all by the listeners and experienced as authoritative. A sermon in Chicago and in a far off village in India will deal with the same theme but use different words, illustrations and lines of thought. Jesus Christ did not, however, come only to talk about God and the divine truth. He came to do something. And we all believe that what He did for us is in the end the decisive thing. Without His death and resurrection the gospel is empty. It is no gospel, *evangelion*, at all. This action, the suffering, death and resurrection, cannot be indigenised or adopted in the same sense as above because it was an action that happened once and that cannot be repeated. The meaning and significance of this action is so decisive for us that even the slightest misinterpretation of it will be disastrous. The gospel, the glad message, as such, can only be understood in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even the moral teaching of Jesus is in the end empty without this fact.

This death and resurrection pattern has, therefore, been transmitted from generation to generation in a different form, not in words but in the two sacraments of the Church, instituted by Jesus himself.

On the whole the Church has been very bold in presenting the gospel in new forms. As for the sacraments of baptism and holy communion, though, she has been very conservative. And rightly so. These two sacramental actions preserve the most important fact in the history of man. The baptism, the dying, being drowned, with Christ and raised up again, resurrected with Christ. The deepest symbolic meaning of this sacrament has, of course, been spoiled in the Western tradition. However mishandled, sometimes only a wetting of the forehead, the church has not given up the sacramental act itself that incorporates man into the death and resurrection of Christ.

In the same way the Church has never given up the celebrating of the eucharist, where the death and resurrection of Christ is re-presented, made present anew, and man, by eating the bread and drinking the wine, is united with Christ and actually partaking with Christ in his death and resurrection. There have been many abuses connected with the celebration of the eucharist, it is true, but in spite of all, the church has preserved the sacrament itself for nearly 2000 years.

So far, the Church, even if it was in a desert, with no water available at all, would use the last drop of water brought, rather than try to express the incorporation into the Body of Christ in a different kind of action. And although one could think of celebrating the sacramental meal with other elements than bread and wine, something more indigenous perhaps, the Church has stuck to the institution of the Lord. Even in places where bread is not used and wine a completely unknown drink, the Church preferred to import these elements. I think this conservatism is guided by the Holy Spirit. There is a limit to indigenisation, adaptation. God has chosen a particular time and culture for His revelation of Himself and this fact must be preserved in the Church. If we want to be Christians we cannot avoid this link to the Semitic setting, because God chose it from the very beginning of the world. The kerygma, the *evangelion*, gets its authority, its persuasive power, from a situation in life, a specific event in history.

The Authority of the Bible

So, as for the Bible, it has no authority at all, in itself. That is, its words, phrases, sentences, stories, have no authority above words, sentences, etc., in general. Nor are they holier than other ordinary human words. The authority is rather in that which the words point to. The Bible has authority only in so far as it reveals and brings out the truth, the fact, which the words aim to reveal. The truth, the fact itself, is not a question of words, holy texts, etc., but an event in history, the God Incarnate, the Saviour and Redeemer. The writings we call the Bible, have authority in so far as, thinking first of the O.T., they reveal the history leading up to this decisive event and thus make it possible to recognize this event as decisive and inevitable. They have authority because they bring out the ultimate significance of history as preparation for God's saving action in Jesus Christ. In the same way the N.T. writings reveal the historic event that decided the future of the whole world by witnessing to the event itself and the effect it had on a real life situation.

Although we translate and continually retranslate the texts, and thereby put them into a new context, which also means, to some extent, a new interpretation, we still preserve the original texts and educate people to be able to read those texts in their original. This we do in order to keep as close as possible to that situation around which the history of the whole of mankind, yea, the whole cosmos, turns. This point in history, selected by God, will forever be the central point of revelation. As the authority is not to be found in those texts, in the words used, but in the historic event they witness to, the original texts will have more *exousia*, more of the decisive life situation than

any translation. This is why the Bible comes very close to being a sacrament, unveiling as far as possible the God-chosen historic event, in its true setting but, as a sacrament, leaving finally the mystery as it is, something beyond words.

The canon process in the early church was a process by which the Churches recognized writings that called forth this decisive historic event in such a way as to provoke a response, i.e., made it relevant. Included were the basically narrative synoptics and Acts, but also the writings giving hints as to how to preserve the authority of the message, the *evangelion*, by adapting it to new life situations, thus making it relevant and challenging.

As for the limits of the canon, it seems to me to be necessary to assume a divine guidance of the process, if any specific authority is to be recognized in these writings; the Spirit at work in a historic process. Nevertheless I would like to put the authority of this collection of scriptures called the Bible, not somewhere up in the blue, but, as has been stressed, throughout this paper, in real life. The life process itself confirms the authority of the Scriptures. The authority in these Scriptures is to be located in their ability to witness, to reveal, by making understandable and relevant, the Christ event, God's saving action in history. The Bible consists of writings collected for this purpose, writings that have proved able to reveal Christ. The authority is constituted by, not the words, phrases, sentences, used, but the remarkable fact that Christ is recognized, heard, seen, felt present, through these writings.

This was not clear from the beginning. They all had to get their authority confirmed from life, *ex ousia*. Some of them had to be tested for centuries before it was clear that they could be used as canonical writings.

There were some highly valued writings in the early church that were used as canonical in parts of the Church. Somehow, they did not stand up to the test. Some of them are actualized now and then, like Didache, Hermas, Shepherd, the Letters of Ignatius, and the church is inspired anew through them. Nevertheless they remain on the other side of the canon line.

Of the canonical writings quite a good number have come under serious attack at times, John, James, II Peter, Jude, the Pastoral letters, Revelation. Sometimes the whole of *Corpus Paulinum* has been characterized as a new doctrinalised religion. Not so many years ago Kaesemann said that Luke had catholicised the gospel and he could not believe in the God presented in Luke.

Somehow this criticism has not been successful. These scriptures won't get their authority from theologians at their desks, but from life itself, *ex ousia*. Even in the midst of all denominational splits the canon has been left remarkably untouched. The reason, it seems to me, is that these splits are about theories and words out of context, whilst the Bible, by the guidance of the Spirit, is about a historic event, Christ.