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FOREWORD

Although the phrase “crisis of authority” has developed almost the status of cliché, the phenomenon to which it refers is nonetheless very real. We are clearly living in a time when the foundational values of Western civilization have eroded to a dangerous degree. This development, auguring the descent of a new Dark Age, presents the church with both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is that Christians no longer may merely assume that the momentum of Western Christendom will continue to provide an environment favorable to Christian faith and life. The church is challenged to re-examine and perhaps totally to rebuild a foundation capable of supporting free and faithful lives.

Yet, the erosion of traditional values also offers the church an opportunity to commend Christian faith to those who, in Isaiah’s words, “grope for the wall like the blind.” In unparalleled fashion, the present situation calls for the church to demonstrate the relevance of Christian faith. These essays are presented toward the end of encouraging Christian reflection regarding the many issues associated with the loss of authority in the wider society and in the church.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE IN THE RESTORATION MOVEMENT

By Tony Ash

I would like to discuss the Bible's authority as I think it has been understood in the Restoration Movement. Furthermore, these comments should not be taken as the conclusions of an historian who has explored all aspects of the movement, but only as questions for further consideration.

I think that churches of Christ today are really a schizophrenic people, with not just two but a number of different personalities. One of the best ways to illustrate this is to ask you to look at the congregations in the town where you live, and to realize what a diversity we have under the umbrella of the "Church of Christ." There are strengths in the fact we can be a brotherhood and still tolerate this diversity, but I also think it creates some very real problems for us.

In large part, I think this diversity is caused by different understandings of the authority of Scripture. Few, if any people in the church today would deny the authority of the Bible. But we do find people who disagree markedly about who we are and what we are doing. Yet people holding these varying points of view staunchly affirm they are

taking their positions upon the basis of Scripture. “A” says, “I go by the Bible, and “B” says, “I go by the Bible,” but “A” and “B” aren’t going the same way. Therefore there must be some difference between the two in their views of the Bible. I suspect when the Restoration Movement began, in the times of Barton W. Stone, Thomas and Alexander Campbell, that their view of the Bible was largely the standard Protestant view of that day. There really was no occasion to challenge that aspect of Protestant thought. That view would probably come close to seeing the Bible as something like a code of laws. Any statement in any part (within reasonable limits) could be taken as an authoritative guide for Christian people.

Some of these things were set forth by Thomas Campbell in the Declaration and Address. I want to quote a short section from Bill Humble’s comments on the Declaration and Address. In his book, The Story of the Restoration, Humble writes:

By “express term” Campbell meant a direct command, and by “approved precedent,” he meant New Testament examples. Campbell also believed that the New Testament taught by inference, but he did not believe that truths known only by inference should be bound on the conscience of others. Here, then, is one of the key concepts in Thomas Campbell’s formulation of the restoration principles--whatever is not expressly authorized in the New Testament either by command or example cannot be a test of fellowship. Here is the way Campbell put it, “nothing ought to be received into the faith or worship of the Church, or be made a term of communion among Christians, that is not as old as the New Testament.”

Thomas Campbell believed that the New Testament was a divine pattern for what God expected the Church to be in every age. He described the New Testament as “a perfect constitution for the worship, discipline, and government of the New Testament Church,” and a perfect rule of faith and practice for its members, just as the Old Testament had been for the Old Testament community (p. 20).

There may have been a break in this principle, as the Protestant world understood it, when on August 30, 1816, Alexander Campbell gave his famous Sermon on the Law. He spoke at a Baptist Association meeting, and his sermon hardly looks like something written on the back of an envelope while listening to the speeches that morning. Actually, there is evidence that Campbell may have worked out these views as early as 1813. In his Sermon on the Law, he said that the Law of Moses is not binding on the Church, and that the Church goes by the New Testament, not by the Old Testament. Whatever Campbell meant by what he said in 1816, I think the common interpretation of it in years since has been that we are not an Old Testament people, and that we are really not terribly interested in the Old Testament.

A few years ago I surveyed the literature in the Restoration Movement from 1870 down to 1950. Three things were done with the Old Testament in those years. First, the stories were told for their own sakes. Secondly, the stories were used to illustrate New Testament principles, as did J. W. McGarvey when he used the story of Elijah to illustrate his sermon on prayer. Thirdly, Old Testament prophetic passages were used for their predictive value as evidences of the divine inspiration of Scripture.

People in the Restoration Movement have said that the Old Testament is not authoritative in the same way as the New Testament. To us that is a very familiar concept but for people in 1816 it was almost heretical. Numerous charges were hurled and a number of people were very upset with the view of the Old Testament that derived from Campbell's Sermon on the Law.

Then, toward the end of the last century, there was a division in the brotherhood. We have usually said that churches of Christ were one of the two groups not to divide as a result of the Civil War. But the truth of the matter, as David Edwin Harrell points out in his two-volume Quest for a Christian America, is that the Civil War promoted feelings and created a matrix which made doctrinal issues divisive that might otherwise have been handled amiably. This can be documented with regard to the Missionary Society controversy.

Tolbert Fanning, appearing before the Society in 1859, said on behalf of the southern brethren, “We don’t agree with this.” But he added, referring to Christians north and south, “We are one people.” Quotations from Fanning following the Civil War, after the Missionary Society had passed pro-northern resolutions in 1861 and 1863, show him changing significantly. They reveal considerable rancor toward northern brethren. This bad feeling from the Civil War interacted with theological and other sociological factors (e.g., urban/rural differences) to create division in the church. Issues were the Missionary Society, instrumental music, elegant church buildings, paid ministers, and full-time ministers. Debates over these issues developed a point of view that has characterized churches of Christ to the present day, viz., the conviction we are to be guided by the examples in the New Testament. Examples tell us what way to go and what to do in being Christians. Furthermore, it was advocated that when Scripture is silent, there is no authority. Thus the effect of silence is to be prohibitive. Whatever is not allowed is prohibited.

I suspect these ideas about examples and silence were in the Restoration Movement from the beginning, as part of the understanding of the authority of the New Testament. But I also suspect someone should study this further to see if they were applied in any consistent way. If one looks at the literature from the Christian Baptist in 1813 down through the beginning of the Civil War, one finds references to this kind of thing, but no one was trying to make application to every aspect of the church's life. However, when the controversies arose after the Civil War, these arguments were used in debate by brethren, particularly in the South, and they eventually came to assume an almost semi-canonical status, and were thus extremely important in the movement from that time on.

But we also see, in the latter part of the last century, a significant change among northern brethren in their views of the nature of the Bible. This took place, as churches became more sophisticated, wealthier, more urban, and as young men pursued graduate studies in religion, at Yale, Harvard, the University of Chicago, and other leading educational institutions in the country. There they were exposed to different ideas. When they returned to the churches, their influence gradually came to be felt. New perspectives were adopted regarding the nature of the Bible. One result of this was that some people completely left the early understandings of the Restoration plea while others still clung to it but with different emphases. Finally, in 1906, there was a religious census which officially recognized what had been happening for a number of years. Churches of Christ

(largely in the South) were seen as a separate body of people, and so to the present day.

I suspect that the viewpoint of southern churches (who were led by David Lipscomb and the Gospel Advocate) was fairly well insulated from the kind of thinking that had come into the northern churches largely through educated ministers.

If you would look at the literature in churches of Christ from 1906 through 1950 (which I see to be another watershed), you will generally find a uniform point of view. There is little exploration and little change as far as basic convictions about the authority of the Bible are concerned. Perhaps the formula which best expresses our view of the authority of the Bible is that the Bible teaches us by command, example, and necessary inference. (To be sure, some of us have never quite figured out what “necessary inference” is. We always say, “I’m not sure what that one is, but I know what command is,” and then we add various adjectives to command. We say “approved” command, or “approved apostolic” command, and have a whole number of ways to describe that.)

But in the 1950’s some things began to happen in churches of Christ that have produced profound change in the last 30 years. Our schools began to offer graduate degrees in Bible. First, I understand, was Pepperdine. Very soon after that were Abilene Christian and Harding. Young men received their doctorates. Some of these men have stayed with the church and have made great contributions. But we have also paid a terrible toll in the loss of some of our brightest and more promising young men.

As a result of this educational emphasis, we have explored and thought through many things in the past three decades. Thus we have come to the point where we are today--characterized by schizophrenia. One question to which we are obtaining different answers is--“What kind of book is the Bible?”

Let me raise some questions for you to consider. What kind of reality lies behind the Bible? Is it meant to be seen like a book of law? Is it a document in which we turn to the appropriate page, paragraph and sub-paragraph to find the rule for a particular life situation? Is this what the authors of the Bible intended? Is this what God intended? Or is the Bible a different kind of a book that we deal with in other ways? Do all parts of the Bible bear their authority in the same way? Are the law of Moses and the ten commandments authoritative in the same way as the Psalms? How do we account for the fact that the ten commandments come from God while the Psalms are prayers going from man to God? Do we deal with this material the same way we deal with Proverbs? Do we deal With the Prophets the way we deal with the Book of Ruth?

In the New Testament, do we see the Sermon on the Mount speaking to us with the same authority as an example of Christian behavior or church life in some chapter of Acts? Do we deal with Acts the same way we deal with a letter written into a particular local circumstance, and even containing personal references? Do we deal with all parts of a given letter in the same way?

I am saying, essentially, that we have many different kinds of literature in the Bible. As we consider the Bible as an authoritative volume, shouldn't each of these different kinds of literature be evaluated in its own terms as to the nature of its authority? What is more authoritative within the Bible and what is less? Or should we say there is no more and less. The Bible is level. Every statement bears as much authority as every other. Or should we say that rather than seeing the authority just in a book, we must look to see from whence each word comes--from Jesus, or Paul, or John, or the author of Job, or Moses, or David, etc.? Are all these at the same level, or should some kind of distinction be made? Did Paul expect every word he wrote in his every letter be received like the Decalogue or like the Sermon on the Mount?

I hope you won't read things into these questions I don't intend. I am simply urging that people who are really serious about the Bible must honestly face issues like these. If we take the Bible to guide our lives individually and in the church, and if we are a Bible-centered people (and this is one of our strengths) then we can't ignore the need for this kind of examination of the authority of the Bible.

Now let me narrow this down and briefly discuss two issues that have been of special concern in the Restoration Movement. The first of these is the examples in the New Testament. What do they teach us? In the orphan home/Herald of Truth controversies of the mid-forties, we had a whole spate of articles and books on "when is

an apostolic example binding?” I remember when every periodical you opened had a chart or charts with circles and lines trying to prove someone’s view of when an example is or is not binding.

Milo Hadwin, a student at Abilene Christian a few years ago, wrote a Master’s thesis on this question. He concluded no apostolic example, by itself, is binding. We are not bound by examples standing alone, but are bound by commands and by commands only. Most people don’t know about Hadwin’s work, but it has been published by Firm Foundation. In terms of “traditional” brotherhood thought, this is, I think, an explosive document. So there is now among us a volume which is saying our view on examples is open to challenge. We need to look again at the issue. No one will say every example is binding. We have tried to say “These are” and “These aren’t,” and to tell why. Hadwin has said, “Let’s say none are and see where we end up, and see if that isn’t more biblical.” This issue, in my opinion, has something to do with our schizophrenia.

The second issue is the silence of the Scripture. Is it prohibitive or permissive? I don’t know of anyone who has made a study of this issue comparable to Hadwin’s work on examples. Some graduate student ought to make this a project. He could examine the concept that silence is prohibitive, as it has developed historically among our people, to see whether it is taught in Scripture or whether it is an interpretative method that we have imposed upon Scripture. Has the Bible made this an authoritative principle or have we? Have we forced the Bible to fit into our own mold at this point?

Both of these questions deal with matters which are intrinsic to our traditional plea. Some of the answers that could be reached might be shattering to certain of our traditional understandings. Now I don't think that we ought to shatter traditions just to shatter them. But on the other hand, these thoughts are being thought, and these discussions are going on in living rooms, in church classes, and elsewhere. We need to face up to these problems. There are matters here that must be thought about.

Out of all of this, then, my call is for honest examination. It is not a call to depart from the Bible. It is a call for a re-evaluation of the nature of Scripture in order to understand what God put there. It is a call for discussion, but not for over-reaction or for castigation.

THE AKEDAH: A ROOT EXPERIENCE AS AUTHORITY FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD

By Allan McNicol

At the outset, I would like to bring to your attention an observation made by Eric Auerbach in his monumental study of narrative Mimesis.¹ Auerbach discusses the episode in Genesis that scholars designate the Akedah or what is called in other circles “The Testing of Abraham” (Gen. 22:1-19). According to Auerbach, in this narrative there is a marvelous suggestive capacity that “serves to indicate thoughts which remain unexpressed” in the actual literal account of the story.²

To my way of thinking, Auerbach’s observation is a clue which when followed can lead us anew to the sense of awe and appreciation for these stories that has been apparent among the people of God.

This leads me to my basic proposal. That is, through following the clue of an observance of “a deep sense of the unexpressed” and other similar literary features, we come to see that biblical narrative has a configuration that develops its own distinctive attitude toward reality. The more we study the individual figures in the biblical story, the more we realize that these accounts which involve individual figures only make sense

when we see that they are part of a Gestalt or unity which envelops the individual figure and the particular story. This configuration will often serve to transcend and transfer the particular story into the framework of a total Story which gives focus to the basic description of reality implicit in the narrative, and provides ultimately a glimpse into the world of the eternal. I realize this is a powerful claim. In the following comment, I will attempt to substantiate the argument. To do this, we must go back to Genesis 22.

The Model for Understanding Biblical Narrative

At the outset, reading along in Genesis 22:1, we come to a very simple direct account, “after these things, God tested Abraham, and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here am I.’” In this economy of statement, as Auerbach points out, from the beginning, through the reading of the narrative we are led suggestively beyond the mere contemplation of the literary development of the figures mentioned in the story. By means of an awareness of a deep sense of the unexpressed in the story we move into new territory. We are forced to ask, “What is the locale for this confrontation between Abraham and God?” The text is silent. We are in the realm of the unexpressed. “What is God doing talking to Abraham?” Again, there is no answer in the text, “Why did God test Abraham?” He may have had his reasons, but the reader is never told. We are simply left to wonder.

Furthermore, if we look specifically at the information about Abraham, it is equally sparse. We are told he must go to the land of Moriah. However, nothing is said about the

circumstances of the divine visit to him. “Did God come in a dream?” Perhaps it was at night. We are not sure. “Did Abraham immediately recognize the call or was it a dawning realization?” Again the text is silent. In just two short verses, God appears to Abraham, tells him to take his only son to the land of Moriah and offer him as a human sacrifice on one of the holy mountains. There must be more to the narrative than that. Who is this God that comes and tells people to offer their first-born son of promise as a human sacrifice?

The subsequent narration of the story follows in similar vein. The unexpressed elements, if anything, become more dominant as the story continues. The economical framework of the narrative is a constant feature of the story. Abraham travels for three days, but we know nothing about any incidents that happened on the way, and certainly there is no discussion of Abraham’s inner thoughts, as Auerbach says:

The journey is like a silent progress through the indeterminate and the contingent, a holding of the breath, a process which has no present, which is inserted, like a blank duration, between what has passed and what lies ahead.³

When they get to their destination only enough details are given to highlight the deep suspense of Abraham’s test. Abraham gives Isaac the wood to carry to his slaughter. Dialogue between the two is sparse; only enough to produce an almost unbearable sense of suspense. Isaac makes the pitiful observation, “Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”

Yet even granted this high sense of drama in the story, the reader still is led beyond

the description of the occasion to the conviction that what is not expressed is potentially more important than what is expressed. Abraham and Isaac are themselves but then again they are more than themselves. For, unexpressed in this particular story, but known to the person who understands ‘the biblical Story,’ is the fact that Abraham not only faces the prospect of the death of his son, but also the obliteration of the people of promise. Here we have a man called upon to make a decision that truly has eternal consequences. Abraham is more than an ancient nomad. He is a man who is called upon to make an ultimate decision to obey; in his case, either to fail to keep the command of God or obliterate the people of promise.

And yet Abraham held fast to the integrity of his commitment. Is it any wonder that the later Jewish interpreters saw in the strength of Abraham’s faith not just another example of stubborn persistence to get the job done on the part of a fellow human, but an example of courage, trust, and tenacity that was of eternal worth? Since Abraham’s faith was not made of the stuff of this finite existence, it warranted a similar response in kind from the Eternal One. So the act of Abraham in binding Isaac to the wood (Akedah) was deemed to have eternal consequences. R. Benaihi, a Second Century A.D. rabbi, in awe at the strength of this faith of Abraham, said “At the Exodus the waters were cleft because Abraham cleaved the wood.”⁴ In later Hebrew liturgies Abraham’s faith was regarded as having such importance that the following prayer was said in times of distress:

I have done thy word with joy and have effected thy decree and
now, when Isaac’s children come into a time of distress,

remember the binding (Akedah) of Isaac their father, and listen to their prayer, and answer them and deliver them from all distress.⁵

Abraham's faith has eternal worth. It was always available to be invoked on behalf of the oppressed. This leads us back to note the conclusion of the story about Abraham's test. In the story, the ram is found and Isaac is spared. The intensity of the narrative drama is broken. In keeping with the majestic quality of Abraham's faith, God responds with a similar intense commitment. Not only is the ram provided in place of Isaac, but we also learn from Genesis 22:16-17 that there was an additional response from God in making the promise stronger.

By myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this, and have not withheld your only son, I will indeed bless you.

This promise, in turn, serves as a basis for the later Israelite claim, that in fact, God shows the same quality of faithful unremitting love for his people as demonstrated by the ancient patriarch in Gen. 22. Abraham was never more human when he carried out his fateful decision to go to Moriah. But at the same time, his commitment and faith intersect to such a degree with the trustworthiness and purpose of the Divine One, that we come to understand in this act the world of the eternal. Through Abraham's faith we, the people of God at a later time, come to know what it means for the Divine One to be faithful toward us.

As we have seen, this narrative account of Abraham's test left a lasting impression on the people of God. In reading the great narratives of the Hebrew tradition, we see that

accounts like the Akedah, and other experiences such as the Deliverance at the Sea constitute a series of “root experiences” in the history of the people of God that lay claim on all our subsequent experiences. Abraham’s test is far more than a yarn that stimulates our interest intensely for a little while, and then afterward we put it down, and thirty minutes later we have forgotten all about it while we await to be stimulated by another similar experience. There is an intrinsic authority or power within this narrative account that unveils a reality beyond itself. Accounts like these have always been understood by the people of God as the true representation of reality. This story of an historical figure which mediates the claims of the Absolute One is, in my view, the essential genius of biblical narrative.

As one example of this root experience being able to lay a claim upon later generations, we need to go no farther than to look at Paul’s reflection upon the Akedah. Here was a man steeped in reading Hebrew Scripture through the insight of Messianic faith. Is it any wonder that in Romans 8:32 he utters the following words:

He (God) who did not spare His own Son but gave him up for us all.

That is to say, in the spirit of the same faith with which Abraham acted, God has given his own Son Jesus. Abraham’s faith had lasting benefits for his children and Isaac’s children. But God’s love in Christ, in the context of Romans, has positive benefits for the whole human race.

That is what we mean when we intend to say the Akedah is not just an idiosyncratic story stuck away in an obscure part of the Old Testament. Rather it has an integral relationship with the biblical narrative manner of representing the Divine Order; it contributes to the configuration of the total Christian Story. We are thrilled when we encounter in the life of Abraham the story of a man who in the course of his everyday existence shows such a strong spirit of faithfulness. We stand in awe when reading further in the Bible that in fact Abraham's faith was ultimately a figure of the Divine faithful love for us. In this insight, by no means is there any intention to demean the Abrahamic account. On the contrary, his life is not annulled but confirmed by this newer and deeper meaning given to it. For indeed, it is the essential claim to authority on the part of these biblical narratives that in the course of the totally free actions and responses of Abraham, Moses, David, and ultimately Jesus, the Divine purpose is accomplished. This stakes out and invests a unique importance in the narrative stories of the Bible. They point to something that always was and will be and we ignore their authoritative claim over us, the people of God, only to our ultimate peril.

Biblical Narrative and the Question of Authority Today

Notwithstanding the continual power of the Akedah to lay claims upon our lives, it would only be fair to say that for many, even among those who wear the name Christian, such narrative accounts frequently register little response and are no longer replete with

power. Instead of invoking awe, a biblical story like the Akedah raises for many people questions about the historicity or morality of the incident. Did Abraham actually offer his first-born as a sacrifice? How could a loving God ask a man to sacrifice his son? What has happened to our perception of this story? Does it truly have a vital role to play in Christian faith and experience today?

Of course we are not the first generation to be bothered by this state of affairs. In fact, if we look back over Western religious history of the past couple of centuries, we will notice that a lot of ink has been spilt on this subject. In fact, the erosion of the ability of the Bible to serve as the authoritative guide for the destiny of human life has come about because biblical narrative, by and large, no longer persuades men in Western society intuitively that it represents the true picture of reality.

A little bit of history is in order here. Hans Frei has written a very interesting book published in 1974.⁶ Unlike most books published by academicians, its basic thesis should be made known to a wider audience. Frei has argued that since the period of the dominance of Christianity in the early Middle Ages down until the Age of Enlightenment (1660-1770), people in Western Europe and colonial America operated within a society with a single vision of reality. This vision had its basis in the biblical Story. This Story figured a world of one temporal sequence, and this world could be discovered through the reading of biblical narratives literally; that is to say, whenever you have a historical reference in a biblical narrative story, it happened, and the literal depiction of that

happening in some way coincided with the meaning of the narrative account.⁷

The content of this world depicted in the biblical Story is so well known that it needs to be rehearsed here only in the broadest details. God created the world in seven literal days. Creation was good, but distortion (sin) came into the world through Adam. Rebellion increased, until finally God selected a covenant people to follow him and to carry out his purposes in history to redeem it. Starting with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Israel), and highlighted by the deliverance of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, the giving of the law of Moses, the establishment of the state under David, the purposes of God were finally brought to complete fruition in the coming of Jesus Christ (God-man) who embodied God's way most truly. Ultimately, in the future, God's purposes will become triumphant in human history in the return of Jesus and the final judgment with its separation of the righteous from the wicked and the new creation of the heavens and the earth.

This Story starts in Genesis 1 and spans the whole Bible to Revelation 21-22. It involves dozens of biblical books and hundreds of narrative accounts. But it was one Story. In pre-Enlightenment times, for the European this Story was factual history. "It told it as it is!" It was the only history. The histories of other ancient tribes and cultures, apart from the biblical narrative, were irrelevant. All the believer needed to do was to place himself in the appropriate place in the scheme of the Story (between the first and second coming of Christ) and he had the satisfaction that his life had total meaning in

reference to the past historical order and a definite hope for life everlasting at the second coming of Christ.

As Frei points out in his major finding, all of this came apart with the Enlightenment, especially belief in the biblical narrative stories as literal historical facts. As one may well surmise, the causes for this dramatic change in the consciousness of European man were diverse and it is not necessary here to retrace this complex history so adequately handled by Frei. Yet, one basic development that took place during this period, I think, is worthy of our consideration at this time. One of the contributions of the Enlightenment was the development and growth in concern and understanding for other cultures. Certainly the Enlightenment philosopher was interested in all peoples.⁸ To think that the history of only one people (Israel) was relevant for study, according to Enlightenment historians, was myopic, irrational, and downright anti-human. All histories and cultures should be studied as part of the general humanistic analysis of the human cultural condition. But when this was done, for many, Israel's history looked like the history of just another Near Eastern tribe of people and so things started to come apart. Why should one accept the explanation of Israel that the world had its beginning though the agency of its peculiar deity Yahweh? Were not the various accounts of the more ancient Babylonians equally worthy of a hearing? And why should we accept the biblical account of Adam and Eve being the first humans as having more authority over and against analogous accounts in the Babylonian, Egyptian, or Chinese cultures?

Furthermore, if we give up insisting on the uniqueness of Adam and Eve, how does one talk about sin and an ultimate need to redeem the human race? And if the fall is questionable, do any of the later biblical narrative texts read as a history of redemption have any meaning? Under these and similar assaults, the whole pre-Enlightenment structure of biblical “Story” as a description of ultimate reality collapsed in much of Western society.⁹ The history of theological studies in the West since the end of the Enlightenment may be viewed, according to Frei, as a search to recover this lost pre-Enlightenment power and authority of the biblical Story.¹⁰

Aside from those who act as though the Enlightenment never happened, it appears to me that biblical scholarship and theological studies have attempted to retrieve the pre-Enlightenment power of the biblical story by focusing on either the historicity¹¹ of the Story or by focusing on the meaning¹² of the story apart from its historicity. In my view, this enterprise results in steering the theological ship into Scylla or Charybdis rather than between them.

As we have already learned in our study of the Akedah, we understand Abraham as a human historical figure. The Abraham and Isaac incident is historical. It is the same way as Martin Hengel has said of Jesus’ portrayal by the Gospel writers; “for all their religious concern, they set out to depict the activity and the suffering of a real man and not a phantom figure.”¹³ And yet we do not understand the actions of the historical figures in the Bible correctly unless we see them in the total configuration of meaning generated

both in their own unique stories, the total Christian Story, and our own particular story as members of the people of God who are founded upon, defined by, and live within the parameters of the biblical Story.

By holding history and its meaning together in the context of the acceptance of the Christian Story which authoritatively defines the present ‘remembering’ community today, we are able to appropriate anew the power and authority of biblical narrative and steer the safe course between the Scylla of equating the meaning of a biblical narrative with its mere historicity and the Charybdis of reading a biblical story for its meaning devoid of its historicity. In proper focus, the characters in biblical narrative are never so historical and so real as when they are seen as figures of the world of the eternal.

Footnotes

- ¹ Eric Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953). Akedah is the Hebrew word for binding. As a technical term, it refers in biblical literature to the binding of Isaac by Abraham in Gen. 22:9 and as a metaphor for the whole story of Gen. 22:1-19.
- ² Ibid., p. 11.
- ³ Ibid., p. 10.
- ⁴ Quoted from the rabbinic literature Mekilta be-Shallah 4 by Nils Dahl, The Crucified Messiah and other Essays (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1974), p. 152.

- ⁵ Targum Neofiti, Gen. 22:14 noted by Dahl, Crucified Messiah, p. 151.
- ⁶ Hans Frei, The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).
- ⁷ Ibid., pp. 1, 2.
- ⁸ Peter Gay, The Enlightenment: An Interpretation--The Rise of Modern Paganism (New York: Random House, 1969), note especially pp. 279-308.
- ⁹ Frei, op. cit., p. 16.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 11.
- ¹¹ Since the Enlightenment there has been an approach to biblical narrative by some scholars who accept a biblical narrative as true only when the account can be proved to have happened. The meaning of a narrative text is equated with its historicity. The question that precedes any discussion on biblical narrative, for these scholars is, did it happen? This approach has found itself in difficulties. From the rationalist apologetes of the eighteenth century down to the present "God Who Acts" school, it is obvious that historians have a problem. Their methodologies have never been sufficiently precise for them to agree on "what happened."
- ¹² Those who follow this path are in a similar position to those who base their theological position on "what happened." In the nineteenth and twentieth century, meaning in narrative was made dependent, almost always, on some cultural or anthropological model. Yet these models change continually with the passing of the years.
- ¹³ Martin Hengel, Acts and History of Early Christianity, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 19.

RECOVERING THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH: A SERMON

Text: Matt. 10:1-15

By James Thompson

A well-known theme through literary works and plays has been the question: What would Christ have to do with Christianity? Behind that theme there is the almost universal admiration of Jesus, for Jesus is practically immune to criticism. It has been said that Jesus never had a better press or fewer enemies. He is claimed by a remarkably diverse spectrum of movements and ideologies. He is given high respect even by other religions. The reminders that Jesus remains highly admired are to be seen even in our popular music and our movies.

But would Christ have anything to do with Christianity? If it is true that Jesus never had a better press, this admiration does not extend to the popular view of the church. The usual criticism is that those who speak for him do not follow him, for they are more interested in their own kingdom, power and glory than in the authority of Christ. In one of the most compelling pieces of all literature, one writer imagined a return of Christ to the earth where an all-powerful, authoritative church was angered by his presence. The one who claimed to speak with his

authority finally said, “Go and return no more.” In the popular Broadway play, The Deputy, Rolf Hocchuth pictured Christ’s “deputies,” or “representatives,” as making every moral compromise in order to maintain their own power. Last year I came across a little poem entitled, “The Uninvited Wedding Guest,” which conveyed this sense of distance between Christ and those who speak for him.

The ladies bow in the cathedral bare-shouldered, even in prayer
coquettish and photogenic; While the men, burdened with the affairs
of commerce, look discretely at their wristwatches.

Softly as in the movies hums the liturgy for the festival of wealth and
elegance. Only one whispers softly, “Blasphemy!” The Lord. Alone,
he is totally ignored.

The poem suggests that the church can lose its way. The church may respect the words of Christ and admire him, but not follow him. It may even stand in a position of power and influence without submitting to the authority of Christ. For the author of the poem, the church was the place of power and elegance. Jesus Christ would have nothing to do with that kind of Christianity.

Would Christ have anything to do with our Christianity? I suggest that it is the responsibility of the disciples in every era to return to the words of Jesus in order to discover what he wants us to be. Our text tells about an incident in Jesus’ life where he summoned his disciples and gave them their job description. We are to recognize ourselves in those early disciples, for Jesus is speaking to the disciples in every age. Long ago in Matthew’s gospel we have read about “disciples,” or

“pupils,” whom Jesus called to be with him. Then we are told that Jesus gave an extended lesson on the lifestyle of the disciples. And on another occasion, we read about would-be disciples who came, saying, “I want to follow you” (Matt. 8:18-22). But only now, in the tenth chapter of Matthew, do we see what he wants of them--and us.

The Authority of Christ

“And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity.” The most striking fact about this statement is that Jesus “gave them authority.” It had been Jesus who had spoken “with authority, and not as the scribes” (Matt. 7:28). He had dared to speak on God’s behalf in declaring the holy will of the sovereign Lord. Others recognized that he spoke and acted with authority. A Roman centurion observed his authority when he came to Jesus asking for help for a gravely ill servant. “I am a man under authority,” he said, and he knew that authority involved being able to have one’s orders observed. “Only say the word,” said the centurion, “and my servant will be healed” (Matt. 8:8). He recognized in Jesus an authority that he had not witnessed before. It was the authority to act and speak for God.

At no point was the authority of Jesus more apparent than in Jesus’ call, “Follow me” (Matt. 4:19; 9:9). Those who left their occupations acknowledged his authority over their lives. There is also a claim of authority when Jesus sent his disciples out on the

mission recorded in our text. The whole chapter resonates with commands; Jesus speaks with authority to the disciples whom he sends out to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” They are told that life in his service will be immensely costly. It will involve risks and dangers. It will even separate disciples from their families and jeopardize their peaceful existence.

It has been said that we are a people who are allergic to authority. Paul Minear has written that we have an instinctive negative reaction to the word “command,” for the very notion of obeying a command raises hackles. Today it is universally held that freedom is a supreme value and that assertions of authority destroy that freedom. Even Jesus, who is universally admired, is not often obeyed. The lifestyles and ideologies which wish to praise him are not eager to obey his commands.

There is a very strong possibility that the church which sings the praises of Jesus is not inclined to obey him. Jürgen Moltmann has written that any talk of discipleship has been the “stepchild” of Protestantism. We have been uncomfortable in dealing with those hard sayings of Jesus which tell us that discipleship involves a life of obedience to his authority. We prefer to allow the discussion of discipleship to be taken over by fanatics, while we take comfort in his assurances of divine favor. We admire him, but we are disturbed by the claim of authority which dares say to us, “Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

But there is something in our text even more astounding than his claim to authority. It is the fact that he “gave authority to them.” They were not only sent out on a

mission; they were invited to share in the authority to speak on behalf of God! Jesus had much to do with this kind of Christianity. He chose a community to speak and act with his authority--to be, in fact, his “deputies” on earth.

We are that community. Our text reminds us that the church has been called into service to speak with authority. Jesus has called his disciples in all eras to share in the harvest, for which the laborers are few. He takes seriously our role in his mission, and he has paid us the supreme compliment of giving the church the authority to act on his behalf.

If we are a generation which is allergic to authority, imagine the reaction which any talk about an authoritative church will evoke! Many will accept the authoritative Christ in some vague way without accepting the authority of the church. There is the popular impression of churches as institutions determined to increase their power and glory, never capable of admitting their own failures. But this is not the kind of authority Jesus had in mind, for it was authority, and not power, which he placed into the hands of the disciples. They spoke with the authority, not of a sovereign, but of an ambassador. Their authority was only that which had been delegated to them in carrying forward the work of Jesus.

It is the task of an ambassador to faithfully reflect the tone, demeanor, and goals of his sovereign. His authority is genuine as long as he speaks and acts in a way that accurately reflects the intentions of the one who holds power. This is the authority which has been placed into the hands of the church. It is not absolute authority, but the

authorization to carry on the work which Jesus had begun.

Heal Every Disease . . .

The ambassadors of Christ are sent out with the specific authority over unclean spirits, so that they might “heal every disease and every infirmity.” It is that kind of work for which Jesus is remembered. “And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people” (Matt. 4:23). Those who knew little of his teachings knew him as the one who touched lives. He was never insulated from pain. Indeed, it has been said that wherever he went, the place looked like a hospital ward.

That world seems far removed from us. But I am certain that this picture of Jesus presents a continuing challenge to the church. It is always tempting to admire him at a distance rather than to follow him where there is pain. It is also tempting to focus our mission elsewhere. But he has given us the authority to be present where there is pain. He has much to do with that kind of Christianity.

And Say, The Kingdom of God is Near . . .

He gave us the authority to do more than relieve suffering. He saw those sheep without a shepherd, and he sent his disciples to share the good news with them. “Tell them, ‘the kingdom of God is near,’ said Jesus. That is, “Tell them that God is present, and that he offers hope and joy for aimless lives.” It was the message that Jesus himself

had proclaimed. Now the disciples were authorized to declare it.

The popular impression of the church is that we are a people who are always listening and repeating what someone else has already said. The church through the centuries has followed popular trends and movements in an attempt to “keep up” with the relevant slogans. Indeed, there is the temptation to be embarrassed about a proclamation that sounds a note that is not already being heard elsewhere. Could it be that the proclamation that the “kingdom of heaven is near” really makes a difference in anyone’s life? Or could it be that this one proclamation is one that we really find worth declaring?

As I reflect on the disciples who were sent out on a mission, I am impressed by a community which was utterly convinced that its message was worth telling. I am impressed by disciples who had a certainty that those who were like sheep without a shepherd needed to hear a clear voice with a sense of direction. When you recall their willingness to deny themselves for that clear message, you recognize that this simple proclamation gave the community its direction and reason for being. The community had the authority to proclaim.

But what has happened to the church’s authority to proclaim? Our temptation has been to turn inward and to give up on proclamation. We turn proclamation over to others because we are uncomfortable seeing ourselves as people with an authoritative word. But do we not live in a society which has countless people “like sheep without a shepherd?” We watch in amazement at the following gained by practically anyone who speaks with

authority. The growth of the cults in our own times suggests that there are people who are “like sheep without a shepherd.” They are looking for an authoritative message.

To his own disciples, Jesus said, “Do not go into the way of the Gentiles” (Matt. 10:5). There is no such restraint on us, for he sends us into our communities and neighborhoods with the declaration that the kingdom is near. The church lives by its mission to proclaim. Jesus has much to do with the Christianity which does not lose its way.

Credible Messengers

There is the need for more than a credible message. There is such a thing as “moral authority,” which is to be seen in the character of the messenger whose personal life is consistent with the message. “Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff.” The disciples had been liberated from the gods of this world. No longer did they need the securities on which others build their lives, for the disciples had learned to “seek first the kingdom.” Now the disciples’ priorities are clearly in evidence in their freedom from material things,

The church can only speak with authority for Christ when it is willing to pay the price of discipleship. We can scarcely declare that the kingdom is “like a treasure” if we have paid no price to have it.

The Names of the Disciples Were . . .

I must concede that this description of the authority of the church is difficult to

accept, for the church is incapable of living up to the responsibility which this authority involves. Those who criticize disciples from within and without will always have an easy task, for we are very inadequate ambassadors. We tremble to think what authority has been placed into our hands. He has both complimented and challenged us when he sent us on our mission.

Can we live up to this authority? When we return to the story and recall the names of those who were sent on a mission, it occurs to us that most of them are nothing more than names to us. Those who are known to us are remembered primarily for their failures. But for some reason, he called them and gave them authority. He gives authority also to us.

What does Christ have to do with Christianity? He calls us, places his authority in our hands, and sends us to do the work which he began. Too often we have, like the earliest disciples, misused the authority which he placed in our hands and lost our way. But he continues to summon us and send us out with full authority as his ambassadors.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR CHRISTIANS

By Paul Watson

When Christians read in II Timothy 3:16 that “all Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable...,” we certainly understand “Scripture” to include the thirty-nine books we commonly call “Old Testament.” But in what way or ways these books are “profitable” for “doctrine” or “instruction” we are much less certain.

This uncertainty about the Christian use of the Old Testament is nothing new. Marcion, the first major heretic of the Church who was expelled from Rome c. 144 A. D., settled the issue for himself and his followers by rejecting the Old Testament entirely. Marcion did this in large part because of his reading of the Old Testament’s picture of God as a jealous, wrathful Being responsible for the Creation of this imperfect world. While no such radical solution is explicitly suggested in Christian circles today, the Old Testament generally suffers from “benign neglect,” which may amount to an implicit rejection of it:

Before we hastily pick up stones to cast at this “heretic,” let it be said that the questions raised by many Christians today about the Old Testament betray a sympathy for Marcion, whose attractive teachings gained a considerable popular following in the second century and even later. The God of the Old

Testament, we still hear today, is a God of wrath, the stern, severe Judge whose judgments fill men with terror; on the other hand, the God of the New Testament is a God of love, the kind and merciful Father who treats his children with patience and forgiveness. Or, it is said, the God of the Old Testament is understood anthropomorphically as a kind of glorified human being; the New Testament, however, abandons such theological naiveté and affirms that “God is a Spirit.” The God of the Old Testament is a warlike Being who satisfies Israel’s nationalistic pride by slaughtering his enemies; the God of the New Testament, by contrast, is not bound by nationalistic limitations but is concerned for the universal brotherhood of man.¹

Even when we try to use the Old Testament in our teaching and preaching, we do so gingerly and with a high degree of selectivity. The prophetic passages pointing to the coming of Christ are selected, while the great body of prophetic material on such topics as social justice, nationalism, and worship are passed over. Except for an occasional quotation from Proverbs, the wisdom material is generally left untouched. And in the more popular narrative material, the full humanity of many of the characters--Abraham’s duplicity over Sarah, Joseph’s smugness, Joshua’s militarism, David’s lust, Ezra’s chauvinism--leaves us vaguely uncomfortable.

Two Protestant Approaches to the Old Testament.

In the development of Protestant Christianity, two broad approaches to the Christian use of the Old Testament have emerged. The first, represented by Lutheran theology, stresses the discontinuity and contrast between Old Testament and New. This view would emphasize that with Jesus and the Gospel, something radically new was happening in human history. God was entering history in a bold and unsuspected new

way. Thus when the voice speaks from the cloud at the Transfiguration, “This is my beloved Son, Listen to him,” the clear implication is that the old voices are to be quieted while this new, clear, authoritative voice of the Son is to be singularly followed.

Other New Testament material would seem to support this view. For example, the Pharisees, who are the best heirs of the Old Testament tradition, are rejected in the gospels and “publicans and sinners” accepted in their place. When Hebrews 10:1-4 speaks of the Law as a “shadow” and of the imperfection of the sacrificial system, it is only being realistic and honest about the superiority of the New over the Old. But the primary support for this general assessment of the Old Testament is taken from the apostle Paul. Both in his personal conversion from Saul the Jew to Paul the servant of Jesus Christ and in his writings (e.g. Gal. 3:13: “Christ bought us freedom from the curse of the Law”), Paul would seem to be stressing the break between Old and New.

What then, one may ask, is the worth or place of the Old Testament in this view? Those who stress the discontinuity between Old and New would not, like Marcion, deny the canonicity of the Old Testament. But, they would say, the Old Testament shows man his limitations, even under the best of conditions; while the New Testament shows man his possibilities, in Christ, even under the worst of conditions. In the words of one prominent advocate of this view, we must read “Old Testament history as a history of failure, and so of promise.”² In other words, the Old Testament may be enlightening; but only the New Testament is redemptive.

The second basic Protestant approach to the Old Testament stresses the continuity

and similarity between Old and New. This approach, typically held by Protestants in the Reformed traditions, sees the New Testament as God's second covenant with mankind. It is a universal covenant; and as such it supersedes but does not invalidate the first covenant. The key word perhaps for this view is "fulfillment"; and a key passage is the statement of Jesus in Matthew 5:17, "Do not suppose that I have come to abolish the Law and the prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to complete" (NEB).

Other New Testament support for this view is not hard to find. Jesus in many passages depicts his words and deeds as being in true continuity with "the Law and the prophets" (as opposed to the words and deeds of the Pharisees). Many quotations from the Old Testament are cited in the New to point to Jesus as the One who had been anticipated from of old. The apostles argue in Acts that the early Christian community is not a new religion but the logical continuation of Judaism. Even Paul, cited so frequently by adherents of the "discontinuity" view, can say, "If you thus belong to Christ, you are the seed of Abraham, and so heirs by promise" (Gal. 3:29).

In this view, therefore, the New Testament does not signal a new beginning that represents a repudiation of the old way, nor is it a correction to a breakdown or failure on the part of the old. It is rather the expected, intended outcome to the story of redemption that began with God's call of Abraham. Indeed, God's story is one story with two parts: It begins with Abraham and continues throughout the Old Testament in part one, and it ends with Christ and the Church in the New Testament in part two.

The Old Testament and the Restoration Movement

It is not the purpose of this essay to evaluate these two major Protestant approaches to the Old Testament, except to say that each approach has both strengths and weaknesses. What is of greater concern is the way the Old Testament has been viewed and used by those of us in the Restoration Movement. It seems a fair generalization to say that in the Restoration Movement neither of the two views outlined above has predominated to the exclusion of the other. Some specific ways in which Old Testament texts have been appropriated include the following:

A. Type/Antitype. In this approach, an event (or a series of events) or an institution or even a person prefigures in some way a New Testament counterpart. This “prefiguring,” however, is not even hinted at in the Old Testament itself but only is made clear with the appearance of its New Testament analog. One example is that of the Tabernacle prefiguring the church. Another, used by Paul himself in 1 Corinthians 10:1-5, has the Exodus prefiguring baptism and the rock from which God provided water for Israel prefiguring Christ. This type/antitype approach has the value of appropriating the Old Testament materials in a fresh, new way for the Christian faith. But it also has two serious drawbacks. The first is the almost inevitable tendency to ignore the original meaning and significance of the Old Testament text and to fail to hear it fully in its own historical setting. The second problem is a lack of controls. How does one keep this method in check and keep it from soaring into fanciful speculation? Thus, this approach

needs to be used with great restraint.

B. Fulfilled Prophecy. Frequently the prophetic books of the Old Testament are combed to find predictions of some event in the life of Jesus or, less frequently, of the church. Of course, the New Testament regularly cites the prophetic literature in just this manner (e.g., the gospel of Matthew). Thus, for example, the early church could hardly read of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 without thinking of Jesus. Yet here again restraint must be exercised. Perhaps the greatest danger is the temptation to de-historicize the prophets by interpreting them solely as predictors of the future and thus failing to hear them as spokesmen to their own generations. Closely related to this danger is the tendency to be arbitrarily selective in choosing for preaching and teaching only those prophetic texts which can be taken as pointing to Christ.

C. Moral Examples. Another common use of the Old Testament is as a storehouse of character-figures, both good and bad, who can be called upon for sermon illustrations. Think, for example, of how often poor Uzzah (II Samuel 6:1-11) has been cited as an example of the swift and sure retribution of God for disobedient humanity. As with our first two examples, the New Testament can and does use the Old Testament in just this way, e.g., citing Elijah as a man of fervent prayer (James 5:17). Yet here also there are pitfalls to avoid. One such danger is the same de-historicizing tendency seen before. To return to Uzzah: It may not be inappropriate to cite Uzzah as an example of the punished lawbreaker. But if this is the only way we use II Sam. 6:1-11, we have not heard the full message of that passage as regards David's effort to bring the ark to Jerusalem. Indeed,

one could well argue on the basis of vss. 8 ff. that the passage has at least as much to do with David's anger toward and fear of God as it does with God's anger towards Uzzah, if not more.

D. Eternal Principles. Not unlike the "moral examples" approach, the "eternal truths" approach would cite those Old Testament passages (particularly in Proverbs) which seem to encapsulate eternally valid statements of divine truth. Thus, "He who spares the rod hates his son" (Prov. 13:24). New Testament precedents for this approach can be cited also, e.g., Jesus' quotation of Deuteronomy 8:3 that "Man shall not live by bread alone" (Matt. 4:4). But one can no more use the proverbial or legal material recklessly than he can the historical or prophetic material, as seen in our previous examples. This means, for example, that the wisdom statements were not meant to be taken only as isolated nuggets of truth but also as part of a larger system of good and righteous living which demanded that the "wise man" know which aphorism to employ on which occasion or in which situation. Thus the good or wise father must not only discipline his children but must also be generous to them (Prov. 13:22).

Observations and Suggestions

The very fact that no one single method of interpreting the Old Testament has prevailed in the Restoration Movement is almost surely a credit rather than a liability. This, together with our commitment to "the whole counsel of God," should enable us to use the Old Testament more frequently and more appropriately than in the past. To that

end, the following suggestions are offered.

1. First and foremost, we must always bear in mind that the Old Testament is Scripture. Exactly how it is Scripture and thus authoritative for us may challenge our thinking; but that it is Scripture cannot be debated.

2. This in turn means that the Old Testament must be used, and used frequently and regularly, as Scripture. This has such specific and practical implications as the selection of Bible school curricula and sermon texts. Our reading of the Old Testament and thus our familiarity with it must be increased.

3. Studying and seeking to understand the Old Testament in its own historical particularity is also important. This we have tried to do to a great degree with the New Testament, learning about Roman politics and Greek philosophy and Jewish customs in an attempt to understand the New Testament more fully. The same effort must be made with the Old, even though this takes into view a much greater span of history than that of the New Testament. Such an effort will enable us to appreciate the Old Testament texts in their original setting and will help guard against the de-historicizing of these texts noted above.

4. Similarly, we need to become more familiar with the various types of literature in the Old Testament. As the period of history represented is longer, so the literary types are more varied in the Old Testament than in the New: historical narrative, legal injunctions, prophetic speech-forms of a wide variety, wisdom sayings and dialogues,

devotional poetry, apocalyptic visions, and the like. Appreciation of this literature as literature will contribute to our understanding of it as Scripture.

5. Finally, we need to come to these Old Testament texts afresh, listening carefully and closely and expecting to hear God speak therein. This means not only hearing the Old in light of the New, but also hearing the New in light of the Old. It also means that no part or parts of the Old Testament may be singled out for our hearing to the exclusion of the rest. No major characters - Abraham, Moses, David - to the exclusion of the entire cast. No limitation of any type of text--prophetic, wisdom, narrative, legal, poetic, or whatever--to the exclusion of the rest.

These suggestions are certainly not intended to be definitive. But it is hoped that they will be suggestive and will stimulate us to listen anew to those ancient Hebrew writings as being in fact the inspired word of God.

Footnotes

- ¹ Bernhard W. Anderson, ed., *The Old Testament and Christian Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 3.
- ² R. Bultmann, "Prophecy and Fulfillment," in *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. C. Westermann (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), p. 75.

THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS, OR THE JESUS OF AUTHORITY?

By Michael R. Weed

Even under the best of circumstances authority is a notoriously difficult issue to discuss. But in a time when the prevailing climate of opinion finds the very concept of authority suspect--raising images of external impositions, arbitrariness, and “authoritarianism”--the difficulties are compounded. Yet it is precisely for these and related reasons that it is important for Christians to reflect on the nature of authority--particularly on the nature of authority in Christian faith and life.

We all find ourselves living under and responding to a variety of different authorities. Even those who purport to “do their own thing” simply set themselves up as their own authority--they do not live without authority. At any rate, the authorities before which we find ourselves are variously and complexly interrelated. Any serious discussion of authority must to some extent take account of this fact and attempt to cast light on the whole structure of authority--both descriptively and normatively. What, for example, are the different authorities acknowledged? What are the different kinds of authority? How are they interrelated? Where is Christian authority in all this? Where should it be?

Discussions regarding religious authority and particularly biblical authority tend to suffer from the fact that they too often occur among those who share the same basic assumptions and differ only in minor details. Consequently, conversations seldom examine the foundational issues regarding the nature and function of authority. Further, they generally do not take account of the different ways that authority is seen within the Bible itself. Thus such discussions and their assertions that the bible is authoritative seldom wrestle with how it is authoritative, much less examine whether there are different kinds and levels of biblical authority. Nor do they address the question as to how biblical authority relates to other authorities.

In order at least to attempt to step outside the limitations of much intramural argument regarding authority, I want to begin these comments rather far afield from biblical texts or explicit theological considerations regarding more narrowly defined concerns with authority in Christian faith. Subsequent to this, I will attempt to relate my initial comments to religious authority. Finally, I will draw some tentative conclusions which appear to deserve further consideration.

Authority

When we turn to reflect on authority in general, most of us will agree with Hannah Arendt that “we find ourselves in a constant, ever-widening and deepening crisis of authority.”¹ This crisis has spread from the realm of the polis into traditionally pre-political areas such as the family, child-rearing, and education. Here authority has always

been accepted as a necessity--both from the point of view of the child, whose needs and helplessness seem to demand it, and from that of society, with its need for order and continuity between generations. We might add that the crisis has also spread to or is reflected in voluntary associations--whose continued existence is always fragile at best--and especially has it spread to religious communities.

Arendt observes that before we can speak of anything so ambitious as recovering or regaining authority, we must first understand the nature of authority. More precisely, we must see what it was and-by implication--what it never was. Failure to do this work carefully will not serve us well when, in desperation, we turn to inadequate views of authority.

In defining authority, Arendt states that the “hallmark of authority is unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey.”² Further, because authority is always associated with demands for obedience, it is understandable that it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or coercion. Consequently, she argues, considerable confusion has arisen regarding such terms as power, strength, force, authority, and violence. This confusion is symptomatic of careless speech, to be sure; but beyond this it belies a fundamental conviction that the most crucial question is simply who, in the final analysis, really rules whom? In this manner, authority comes to be defined by phrases such as “command sanctioned by force.”

According to Arendt, this definition is wholly inadequate and indicative of the contemporary problem with authority. She argues that, by contrast, authority actually

precludes the use of external means of coercion, stating that “where force is used, authority itself has failed.”³ By way of illustration she notes how parents actually undermine their authority by treating children in a brutal or tyrannical fashion.

Further, however, she argues that authority is also eroded or destroyed by persuasion.⁴ Persuasion, working through a process of argumentation, presupposes some form of equality. Thus Arendt concludes that the foundation on which true authority rests is neither the power of those in command nor is it common sense. Rather, she insists, authority rests on the hierarchy in which the office, institution, and person are acknowledged as authoritative.

Authority, in the first instance, resides in human relationships--whether formal or informal, the latter including institutions--that are regarded as legitimate by the communities to which we belong. Each of us is a member of several communities, and within the context of these we variously acknowledge the legitimacy of different “authorities. “ It is to these acknowledged authorities--authoritative institutions and their representatives--that we often appeal when our actions or their propriety is questioned.

For example, one may be asked, “By what authority are you doing that?” And one may reply, “I work here.” or, “It’s OK; I’m a doctor.” Or, “I’m her father,” or even, “the Bible says . . .” In each such instance, the answer legitimates the action by virtue of appealing to some commonly recognized institution, office, social role, or relationship--some accepted authority.

Further, these various authorities and the communities in which they emerge and

function are usually arranged loosely and knit together by more general loyalties and values. These broader allegiances underlie and support the many lesser communities of which we are a part. Obviously, to the degree that our commitments compete or are even contradictory, we will be divided both among and within ourselves.

Although divided loyalties and competing authorities can exist almost anywhere to some degree, they exist in profusion in modern pluralistic societies. In pluralistic societies there is a radical shift from cultural homogeneity to cultural heterogeneity. With the dissolution of the underlying vision of reality that provides cohesion and direction, many competing centers of value emerge. Individuals ally themselves with various communities based primarily on narrowly defined self-interest. A society thus becomes a Hobbesian nightmare, an unstable amalgam of various groups vying for power and “rights” with little or no sense of overall purpose or direction.

In this climate the most widely acknowledged authority becomes that of civil law.⁵ But the law itself undergoes a radical change. The purpose of the law becomes less and less that of enhancing the common good and securing those underlying values which unify and direct society. Harvard Professor of Law Harold Berman writes”

Law is now generally considered--at least in public discourse--to be simply a pragmatic device for accomplishing specific political, economic, and social objectives. Its tasks are thought to be finite, material, impersonal--to get things done, to make people act in certain ways. Rarely, if ever, does one hear it said that law is reflective of an objective justice or of the ultimate meaning or purpose of life.⁶

Accordingly, society becomes increasingly marked by litigation as law, devoid of any

overarching vision of reality, becomes the basis of all our relationships. These, in turn, are reduced to the form of legal contract.

Further, as law comes to be measured solely by pragmatic standards rather than those of truth or rightness, it evokes little respect from those whose self-interests it does not directly serve. Consequently, the authority of the law increasingly appears to rest in the threat of coercive sanctions--in short, force. We do well at this point to remember Hannah Arendt's caution against equating force and authority. Obviously different authorities are invested with amounts of power to execute their designated responsibilities. But it is inaccurate and misleading to assume that force is the foundation of authority. Certainly it is because of the legitimacy and nature of the police officer's authority that he wears a weapon--but the weapon itself is not the basis of his authority.

Returning to the phenomenon of the law, we may note that law is, in the first instance, a social fact. Laws emerge within human communities. They are created and obeyed within human communities. Laws give explicit and public recognition to the claims and expectations to which social relationships give rise. It may be argued that authority seems to be a social fact as much as--if not actually before--it is a legal fact. In this regard, political authority, and its dependence upon forms of assent, may be more reflective of the nature and function of authority within human communities than is civil law in its present role.

Yet behind our many changing laws lies the Law. And although we cannot deny that laws are created in communities, the Law resists being reduced to consensus or

caprice. If the Law merely reflects the State's will, or the will of the court--however good either may be--the Law is ultimately capricious. But could it be that the Law reflects, however dimly, something "other than itself"? Does its authority have roots in moral sentiments and notions that are related to some greater structure of accountability and a more encompassing world of meaning? It is this issue that the present crisis of authority inescapably raises.⁷

Nearly 2,400 years ago Plato, writing The Republic during the decline of the Greek polis, was looking for a basis of authority in which the compelling element lay in the relationship and actually existed prior to the issuance of commands. Truth itself--discovered by the philosopher, in Plato's view, in the bright sky outside the shadow world of the cave in which humankind resides--provides the compelling ingredient of which this authority is composed.⁸

Whatever difficulties are associated with Plato's views, he correctly grasped two things regarding authority. First, he saw that authority must ultimately be linked to something "outside the cave"; i.e., it must be ultimately based on or related to some transcendent reality. Second, the nature of such authority must be, in large part, self-validating, or able to evoke trust and compliance for its own sake.

Authority in Theological Perspective

Clearly these concerns (shared, I might add by a number of contemporary jurists) bring us to the theological dimension--whatever language is used to express it. It is the

Christian confession that there is a depth-dimension or transcendent reality from which human existence derives its ultimate meaning and purpose. Further, it is the Christian experience not that the philosopher has climbed out of the cave and discovered the light of truth. Rather, the light of truth has entered into the world of shadows and darkness and has disclosed ultimate reality to be personal and purposive.

The Gospels tell us that, unlike the scribes and rabbis of his day, Jesus spoke as one having authority (Mark 1:22). He did not cite various justificatory authorities to corroborate his words. (And one assumes that his authority did not reside in his air of self-confidence, his impressive elocution, or his persuasive manner.) Jesus' words simply carried the weight of truth--they rang true.

Let me suggest that the authority of Jesus is a wholly different kind of authority than "justificatory" authority. Jesus' words carry the authority of reality breaking in on our fantasies and illusions--an authority like that which the world we awaken to each morning exercises as the morning sunlight dispels the dreams and illusions of the night.

Jesus' words illuminate the mind, evoke trust, and impel actions. His authority is not one that limits or constrains human freedom; precisely the opposite is the case. Jesus enables a panoramic and richly nuanced vision of reality--one in which we experience the very ground of existence to be both personal and faithful to the creation. Jesus' authority is that of one who both founds and confers freedom. He frees us from the limitations and illusions of our diminished realities and from the tyranny of those countless pseudo-

authorities which confer neither freedom nor life.

At this point it is extremely important to note that Jesus does not just disclose a strange other world; he occasions a perceptual revolution in our everyday world. That is to say, he does not merely supplement but otherwise leave intact this world. This would lead to some form of gnosis or truth held--however sincerely--but unrelated to the everyday or life-world. We do not become visionaries moving in the mist at the edge of mundane reality. Rather, Jesus occasions a “permanent revolution” in which all that is familiar in our world is being viewed from a new angle of vision,

Further, I think we can detect at least two stages or dimensions of the perceptual revolution to which Jesus gives rise. In the first place, Jesus de-centers our life-worlds and exposes both their selfishness and idolatry. He exposes the false absolutes and pseudo-authorities which guide our commitments and values from one day to the next. And this is not a once-and-for-all accomplishment but an on-going process. The State, for example, is not the source of the law--it possesses only limited and derivative authority. Christ, not Caesar--not the flag nor the marketplace--is Lord. Thus the authority of Jesus is one with a dismantling or even a destructive dimension in that it relativizes all other authorities, claims, and allegiances.

But the impact of Jesus goes beyond relativizing other authorities; it also reorders or rearranges our allegiances and commitments. False absolutes are not just destroyed but may also be subordinated and recommissioned as our life-worlds are realigned. The State, while not the source of the law, is the servant of the law and is ordained by God to a

legitimate if limited role of maintaining order and promoting justice.

In short, the authority of Jesus is not unlike the authority of light shining into darkness, illuminating familiar terrain in a new way and enabling one to walk with new confidence and direction. It occasions a new way of being in the world by providing one with a new vision of the world and of the frontier with transcendence from which it receives its ultimate shape and purpose.

Concluding Observations

Finally, on the basis of the foregoing, I want to make three observations regarding authority in Christian faith and life. First, the authority of Jesus (and I would suggest the Bible as well) does not appear to be, at least in the first instance, due wholly to its appeal to our canons of logic.⁹ In fact, if this were the case, revelation would become subservient to criteria for truth which we already possess. Rather, faith precedes understanding; one believes in order to understand. I suspect that no amount of argumentation will induce one to accept the authority of Jesus (or the Bible) if his life and words do not commend themselves and evoke acknowledgment and allegiance. Or, in the language of John's gospel, it is to those who come that it is given to see! Faith is given to disciples, not to spectators or disputants.

Consequently, I think we would understand much more about the authority of the Bible if we paid more attention to its function in ordering the moral life--forming character and guiding conduct--rather than attempting to derive abstract and intellectual

theological systems from it.

Second, it seems to me not only possible but probable that the church may lose authority as it gains influence and power. The latter invariably tend to reflect Christians forming various misalliances which entail allegiances to authorities who are ultimately pseudo-authorities. Further, they bespeak a misunderstanding of the nature and source of ultimate authority, viz., the assumption that real authority resides in the hands of the prestigious and the powerful .

Finally, I would argue that the Christian message is not a word which is authoritative only within the Christian community. It is the word of the Creator, and the degree to which it is felt to be alien is indicative of the degree that humankind lives “east of Eden.” Nonetheless, it has shown itself powerful and capable of “breaking through” in history and is, as Paul states, the word of God and not the word of men (1 Thess. 2:13).

To the extent that there is a “crisis of authority” in the church and in the lives of Christians today, I suggest that this is not simply because the Christian faith has become impalatable. Rather, attempts to minimize the strangeness of God’s claim and to augment and buttress its authority with other “authorities” betray entanglements with idolatrous allegiances to lesser authorities. Our challenge is to rediscover and open ourselves to the true authority of Jesus.

Footnotes

- ¹ Hannah Arendt, "What Is Authority?" Between Past and Future (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), p. 91.
- ² Hannah Arendt, On Violence (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969), p. 45.
- ³ Arendt, "What is Authority?", op. cit., p. 93.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ See James Gustafson, "Authority in a Pluralistic Society," The Church as Moral Decision Maker (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970), p.51.
- ⁶ Harold J. Berman, "Law, Religion, and the Present Danger," Worldview, Vol. 22, Number 9 (September, 1979), p. 48.
- ⁷ Not surprisingly, one finds interest in natural law foundations of civil law in Japan and West Germany, both nations with costly experience with the positivistic view of law. In this country Harold J. Berman (see note 6 above) is a leader among those contending for a vital interrelationship between law and religion.
- ⁸ Plato, The Republic (New York: Vintage Books), pp. 253 ff.
- ⁹ I am arguing not that revelation is contrary to reason, much less that there is no absolute truth. I am only suggesting that the individual's reason is not as rational as we assume and that each of us has a limited view of the Absolute. Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, Reason Within the Bounds of Religion (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976).

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