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CHRIST'S AUTHORITY AND OURS

Any Christian account of authority rightly begins with the statement of the resurrected Jesus recorded in Matt. 28:18, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.".

Christians recognize the authority of Christ to be absolute; no less is implied when they proclaim him to be Lord and Son of God. But it is noteworthy that in all the gospel tradition Jesus did not impose his authority on others in an absolute manner. In fact, he explicitly condemned the rulers of the Gentiles who exercise authority by lording it over their people, imposing authority from above. (Matt. 20:25; Mk. 10:42) Those condemned equated authority with personal power. Christ, on the other hand, did not dictate; instead he taught and persuaded. (Cf., Mk. 1:21f.)

As teacher, Jesus was mediator, and authority is essentially mediation. Mediation requires three elements: 1) the thing mediated (truth); 2) the person mediating; and 3) the person or persons receiving the mediation.

If, among the ingredients we have mentioned, the person mediating is emphasized at the expense of the truth to be mediated, authority is identified with the personal power of the mediator, so falling under the condemnation of Christ. If, on the other hand, the mediator functions because of his knowledge of the reality to be mediated--that is, its being or truth--then he is an authority because he speaks from that reality, mediating it in a manner consistent with the truth to be known. (The Greek word for authority is $\dot{\epsilon}\xi c\upsilon\sigma\iota\alpha$: it indicates that authority rises "from" or "out of" ($\dot{\epsilon}\xi$) the essence or being ($c\dot{\upsilon}\sigma\iota\alpha$) of the thing to be known.)

That Jesus did not impose his authority on people in an absolute manner is evident throughout the gospel tradition. As a first instance we may notice the characteristic way he taught by parable. Parables are simple stories of particular events from which the story-teller is completely removed; the subject matter itself speaks to the hearers in a decisive way, lighting their lives in circumstances they recognize to be similar. The concreteness of the stories is important; parables are not reducible to abstract truths or principles.

The use of miracles by Christ in the apostolic tradition is also significant. Although Christ's miracles cause wonderment, the tradition as a whole never reduces them to wonders ($\tau\epsilon\rho\alpha\tau\alpha$). The miracles are primarily

signs (σημεῖα) indicating something beyond themselves; they are sometimes called "powers" (δυνάμεις), but they are not displays of power for its own sake. They signify, and so teach, the power of God who is love.

At the moment of his betrayal by Judas, the earliest Christian community saw Jesus refusing to assert his authority by power alone; thus we read that he refused to call the legions of angels from the Father for his defense. (Matt. 26:53)

Most significantly of all, and qualifying everything that has just been said, is the sense in which the resurrection was the beginning of the whole gospel tradition. All of the Gospels, and indeed the entire New Testament, were written in witness to Jesus as Lord after the resurrection and because of the resurrection. Here is the primary Christian instance where ~~the~~ being *or* ~~and~~ reality ~~of the Lord~~ itself justifie~~s~~ *spoken* words about ~~the Lord~~, *it*--even Jesus' words. Had Jesus not risen from the dead his words would have carried no more authority than those of any other human being. But he did rise from the dead, and the reality of that truth enlightened and authorized all that he had said before his death; so it is that the gospel tradition is post-Easter in its origin and intention even when it describes pre-Easter events. Even the authority of the teachings of Jesus had to await their justification from the reality to which they referred. But once the authority

of Jesus as teacher was shown by the resurrection, truth
was seen to have spoken so uniquely through him that the
mediator was accepted as the thing meditated: we say that
God became man and we call the event the Incarnation.

Since all authority has been given to Christ, Christian
authority is found in individuals when the Spirit of Christ
is found in them. Christians become mediators of Christ
in the inner quality and holiness of their lives when his
reality shines through them. His truth justifies and
authorizes them; thus authority in the root meaning of the
term (ἐξουσία) is present. (Cf., Venice Statement, #3-4.)

As convincing and compelling as the holiness of an
individual may be, however, a person is able to live the
authority of Christ only as he or she belongs to a com-
munity of faith. Christians believe that individuals are
saved as they become members of God's own people, a chosen
race, a holy nation; Christians know the church as the
New Israel called into existence by a New Covenant between
God and human beings. (Cf. I Peter 2:9) The Father who
sent his only-begotten Son into the world is a God who
has entered history in one specific way and place rather
than another; and it is only by accepting the uniqueness
of God's revelation in Christ that one is able to be a
Christian.

All of this means that no one can be a Christian by

himself or herself alone; individual identity in Christ
depends on a communal memory, a vocabulary, and a discern-
ment which precedes the believer, locating him or her in
his relation with God and making him dependent on the ex-
perience and witness of other people. The Bible, for ex-
ample, became a canon of books by communal acceptance,
                as such it
and/is the normative record of the original apostolic
witness to Jesus as the Christ.

An individual in his or her life of faith cannot
help but depend upon a community of faith, but what is
faith? We may briefly define the term as "openness to
God," a simple definition to be sure, but one inclusive
enough to convey the fullness of its meaning even in
the thought of Paul. "Faith" so defined is obviously a
life to be lived, not a proposition to be repeated.

When faith is considered in this basic manner, the
problem which confronts us is how to maintain the open-
ness it requires at both the individual and communal levels.
The need for openness to God in our individual lives is
obvious enough; the quest for such openness is one way
of describing our on-going spiritual pilgrimage. But
there must also be a lived openness to God on the part
of a community if that community is truly to be a community
of faith. Such openness is perhaps most obviously seen as
a community gathers in worship, but the whole life of a
community of faith must in some manner exhibit openness

to its transcendent and mysterious Source.

A primary reason for the difficulty we are describing is the fact that both individuals and communities express themselves in propositions, and, as they seek to preserve the identity of their common experience through the passing of time, the temptation persists to reduce their lived openness to formal propositions. The latter do not change and consequently are a great help in establishing identity through time--an identity especially important when adherence is in question to a past revelation accepted as an unchanging norm.

A tension thus arises between what is commonly called "faith" and "religion." "Faith" is the lived openness to the mysterious and transcendent ultimate reality to which we have just referred, while "religion" refers to the necessary elaboration in human terms of an originating revelation. Jacques Ellul has offered many penetrating insights into the tension we are presently describing, and he has found many of the same elements in it that he found in his famous analysis of technological society. For example, even though a revelation in itself may be utterly personal, its human elaboration is found to contain impersonal, even mechanical elements. Conceptually elaborated structures of belief and codes of ethics tend to become institutionalized and self-perpetuating precisely as political power does; of itself such power tends to multiply, centralize, and universalize. It tends to exercise absolute authority

in the name of complete certainty, demanding unquestioning

servitude, and offering absolute condemnation to those who

differ from it.

Such an analysis of the self-perpetuating nature of

institutions does not deny that formal expression and

organization are necessary for human beings; it rather

points out the dynamic which constantly occurs within the

church considered on the one hand as a self-transcending

community open to God's mysterious presence, and on the

other hand as an organization whose institutions are the

repository of past experience, but which is self-perpetu-

ating rather than self-transcending in its treasure. The

question at issue is how to keep the authority of the Ulti-

mate as the authority of faith instead of letting the

authority of the organization become ultimate.   Put in

different words, we need to insure that the authority of

faith is the authority of the Ultimate and not the authority

of the organization.

It is important to stress again--and constantly to

keep in mind--that all churches seek the mean between

these extremes. The danger is two-fold. The presence of

transcendent Mystery in itself alone immobilizes individuals

and communities allowing them to say nothing in human terms.

Such moments are necessary for our religious lives, supply-

ing nothing less than the origin and context for religion,

but speech and direction must issue from such mystical

silence or God's purpose in placing us in the world is

contradicted. The other danger consists in making an

acknowledgement of the mysterious origin and context of religion, but then going on to reduce the Mystery acknowledged to formal, · abstract statements about it.

By intention, we all want the mean between the extremes. An individual or church which says anything has to some extent avoid the first danger we have describ d; the most likely danger to occur in the lives of individuals and churches is the second. Who has not found himself guilty of saying too much? · Words are easier to produce than deeds. And since churches are organizations, the tendency towards organizational self-perpetuation through institutions (the latter sometimes being a synonym for bureaucracy!) is obvious. To confine ourselves to the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches, it might be observed that the besetting sin of Anglican Churches as Churches is to say too little-- and frequently for the wrong reason--and the besetting sin of individual Anglicans is to say too much--frequently for the right reasons! On the other hand, many feel that the Roman Catholic Church says too much as a Church and that frequently within it individuals say--or are allowed to say--too little.

In one way or another we all have trouble with words, and since I was asked to say something about infallibility in these remarks, I will now, as an Anglican, turn my attention towards that word and the use of words that way. In doing so, instead of looking at a specific theologian

or conciliar definition, I would like to set up a model to illustrate the thrust of the type of argument I find most frequently employed in explications of infallibility. I will set up a typology and let you judge whether or not it is typical.

A usual explication of the infallibility of the church begins with the abiding presence of the Spirit in the church. Because the Spirit abides in the church, it is argued, ~~usual~~ the church is led to the unerring (infallible) proclamation and (re)formulation of the gospel, the revelation once for all given to the saints.

I believe there is a sense in which that statement must be true, and in its truth every Christian should accept it. If the statement is false, there can be no in-dividual salvation in Christ, for we only know Christ within and by means of the community of faith, as we indicated earlier. If there is no unity between Christ and his church we cannot know Christ.

Accepted in its truth, however, the claim of the church's unerring ability to proclaim and formulate the gospel does not go as far as many people mistakenly believe. The claim does not, for example, mean that the church can in any way add to the truth of revelation; in reformulating the gospel the church must only clarify what has already been given to it. That is why the apostolic witness recorded in Scripture

is normative for all subsequent proclamation and clarification. Clarifications of revelation made by the church may have "lasting value," as the Venice Statement puts it (#15), but because human words can never capture or exhaust the divine Word, certain types of human reformulation of the faith are theoretically without limit. The unerring, lasting value of conciliar clarifications of the faith comes from excluding human accretions to--and intrustions into--the gospel, rather than finally formulating the gospel, as the Venice Statement also indicates. (Venice #19)

But there is still more to be said. It seems to me that our model argument begins less with a clear axiom from which conclusions can be deduced than appears at first glance; upon closer analysis, the opening statement about the Spirit's presence in the church is less a point of departure than itself a subject for inquiry. We should ask what it means for the Spirit to "abide" in the church. In what manner is he present? Then instead of arguing that "because" the Spirit abides in the church certain consequences follow, it would be more accurate to

say that "in-so-far as" the Spirit abides in the church certain consequences result. Finally, we need to inquire into the nature of the revelation or faith or deposit which was once for all given to the saints.

Do not Christians believe that the ultimate revelation of God to human beings is a person, Jesus the Christ? The person is called God's Word, but the fullness of the Word is the person not the propositions he utters, or which are spoken about him. The fact that the Spirit abides in the church is significant because it is the Spirit of Christ sent from the Father, a mark of Christ's own divinity, who is given to the church. Since, we have seen, all authority has been given to Jesus and since Jesus gives his Spirit to the church, how the Spirit abides in the church is dependent on how Jesus is the Son of God. How God is in the church is dependent upon how God is in Christ, so, as should be the case in a religion which believes in an incarnate Lord, questions of ecclesiology are ultimately dependent upon questions of Christology.

All authority is Christ's to be sure, but how do we know Christ? To say that God became man or that the Word became flesh means that somehow God entered our world becoming wholly contextual with us. In Christ our reality totally opens on the "more" of God. But how can that be expressed?

The two possible answers to that question are "by

propositions" and "by symbols." Propositions are formal,
analytic and abstract in nature, aiming at conceptual clarity.
A symbol, on the other hand, is more evocative than formally
analytic; it is concrete rather than abstract; and it relies
on images rather than concepts.

The propositional and symbolic modes of discourse we
have just described illustrate two types of Christology
found in the life of the church. The attempt to describe
how God was in Christ can be made by using either propositions
or symbols. (The fact is that a combination is necessary,
but for long periods of time symbols were not regarded as
a unique manner of signification, and were reduced without
remainder--or were thought to have been so reduced--to
propositional statements. Think of the scholastic manuals
of theology found for centuries in the Western Church.)

A propositional understanding of Christ, we suggest,
leads to a propositional understanding of the authority
of the church. But with the new and renewed appreciation
of the uniqueness of religious symbols--recognizing that
they convey true although non-propositional dimensions of
reality--certain formalistic expectations inherited from
previous epochs should be recognized for their inadequacy,
and so should the type of authority they foster.

The great images of faith, the inexhaustible symbols
of Christ's nature and role among us which nourish, support,
and lead us--resurrection, Lord, Son of God, *Son of Man*, Savior, Redeemer

ascension, to take but a few--have a symbolic richness and comprehension which cannot be reduced to abstract, formal statements. They are concrete, moving images in time, as Jesus himself and our lives are in time, rather than static structures which can be more clearly discerned in abstract terms. The use of parables by Christ has a direct affinity with the symbolic Christology we are describing, while the essentialism of certain theological manuals, as we have just indicated, offers a splendid example of propositional Christology.

Symbolic images have the wholeness and mystery of persons about them, and so, precisely because of their ambiguities, are more adequate vehicles for the mystery of God's revelation than are formal propositions. The manner in which such images transcend propositions is analagous to the way God transcends our world; thus symbols help keep us open to the transcendent Other.

The manner in which we can best apprehend Jesus as the Son of God is a permanent criterion for the type of certitude and clarity we can expect of the church--his mystical body in the world. Jesus and our understanding of him are the source of everything Christian, and con- clusions originating in him as their premise cannot contain more clarity than their source.

Granted that we cannot clearly understand how Jesus is Son of God, we believe it is possible conceptually to indicate the importance of the finite, human world in the

light of the use God has made of it in the revelation of his Son. Statements about faith and morals can and must be made because of the use of the finite by the infinite, but the finite must never become ultimate in the statements. A revelation is a revelation precisely because in it the finite is shown to be contingent and totally dependent on something beyond itself; that is an existential truth and its acknowledgement should be more than merely formal. Human dependency on God must be operative in everything Christian; it must, for example, determine the way a revelation is given, presented, passed on, and evaluated. Only under these conditions can God's authority be dis-covered in human lives and in the church.

Returning to the typology we suggested, an illustration of it can be found in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Vatican II:

> The body of the faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy One (cf. 1 Jn.2:20,27), cannot err in matters of belief. Thanks to a supernatural sense of the faith which characterizes the People as a whole, it manifests this unerring quality when "from the bishops down to the last member of the laity" it shows universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. (#12)

It is from such a statement about the infallibility of the church as a whole that Roman Catholic theology proceeds

to justify and explicate the infallibility of the Pope. Accordingly, before proceeding to the papal doctrine, we should highlight the principal contentions in the quotation we have made.

Reference to the universal nature of the church should be especially observed: it is the faithful as a whole who cannot err; the "supernatural sense of the faith" which prevents error belongs to the People as a whole; and it is further stated that the unerring ability of the church is manifest when there is universal agreement "in matters of faith and morals." Infallibility is willed for the church, then, only in its entirety and only in the area of faith and morals. Infallibility, as should be well known by now, is operative only in restricted circumstances about a restricted subject matter.

Turning to the infallibility of the Pope, many helpful clarifications have been made in recent years by Roman Catholic theologians. Some of the clarifications have resulted from the work of Vatican II and some have come from a more adequate understanding of Vatican I. Whatever function and role the Pope has in the Roman Catholic Church is now accorded to him because he is the Bishop of Rome; he is thus placed firmaly within the Church and within the college of his fellow bishops. It is then maintained that the Bishop of Rome, only as head of and in union with the college of bishops, voices that infallibility which belongs to the

church as a whole.   Inability to err is not a personal

power he possesses.

As we have indicated, such explications are helpful and

encouraging. Definitionally things are in good order. The

difficulty which remains for some lies not in the realm of

words but in process. Infallibility describes a function;

it has to do with the way people act in making judgments.

It occurs at the level of full, human experience, not at the

level of propositions and definitions, but that, we have

seen, is the realm of "faith," not "religion." We are back

at the tension which exists between lived openness to the

transcendent mystery of God and the self-perpetuating nature

of the church as an institution.

How are we to resolve this tension?

The first thing which must be said is that such a

resolution is impossible if it is thought that the tension

can be made to go away. The tension, as we indicated

earlier, is part of the human condition. The tension, in

other words, has the reality of our world, and in our world

we believe there is but one way to make progress in the face

of it. The first thing we must recognize, as most theologians

do, is that the infallibility of the church basically and

empirically depends upon the indefectibility of the church,

that is, on the church's lasting nature and inability to fail.

But I believe we must go further.

The claim that the church is infallible is not true by

definition; nor is it a purely formal statement with the

nature of a mathematical axiom or definition. To claim
that the church is infallible is to make a claim about
material reality. The claim has a content going beyond
its words and so must be capable of some kind of empirical
content and verification if it is reasonably to be accepted
as true.

I contend that, seen in the full light of the world,
the dynamic of/life of the church is precisely the same
in regards both to indefectibility and infallibility.
Looked at empirically, in other words, I believe that in-
fallibility is reducible to indefectibility with no remainder!

If faith is not to be reduced to either credulity or
fantasy, it must be subject to some kind of verification in
the course of history, and the only nondefinitional, histor-
ical verification for infallibility is indefectibility.
Indefectibility, in fact, is the lone empirically operative
criterion for the truth of Christianity; that is why, as
Paul put it, if Christ has not been raised from the dead
then we of all people are most to be pitied. (I Cor. 15:19)
A given theory of infallibility may formally save itself by
referring to an "apriori" or "implicit" consent of the
church when pronouncements are made which are said to be
binding, but only time will tell whether or not the consent
is actually present or mistakenly claimed to be present.
History furnishes us with examples of councils which were
called to be general (ecumenical) and which were not so
accepted by the church; and there have also been councils
not representative of the whole church which turned out to

accepted as general. The Council held at Constantinople in 381, now known as the Second Ecumenical Council, was convoked as no more than an Eastern general synod, while among councils which were convoked to be general but did not become so are the Imperial Synod of Sardica (343), Arles (314), and Ephesus II (449).

We have seen the correlation held between universal acceptance by the church and the infallibility of the church in Lumen Gentium. We believe that identification to be a sound one, for in it the oneness required of the community may be seen as the analogate of the oneness of the Truth in which Christians believe. Universality of acceptance is a test for the persuasive force of Truth; it is a way that the power of Truth can be shown to be more than one individual's perspective. In the realm of faith, universal acceptance plays a role analogous to empirical verification by different researchers in science. It is the way truth speaks in its name--here in God's name-- rather than in the name of a human being alone, and that is precisely what should happen according to the root meaning of "authority."

Before concluding it must be acknowledged that "univeral consent" is not always easy to determine. Heretics and dissenters have existed throughout the church's life, and sooner or later some criterion other than claimed "openness to God" must be employed to determine who is within a visible

community and who is outside of it. A community must be one thing rather than another if it is to have any meaningful identity in the world. But such problems are empirical problems and can be decided on an empirical basis. Our concern has been to show that, as frequently developed, "infallibility," for all of its formal precision, has no verifible, empirical connotation which can establish its truth. Thus, even with its attendant difficulties, a church in via should not expect more than indefectibility and the type of infallibility which is verifiably reducible to it.

As the resurrection was to the teaching of Jesus, so universal consent is to the teaching of the church. (Resurrection:teaching of Jesus::universal consent:teaching of the church) Over neither the resurrection of Christ nor the universal consent of the church do we have personal control; in each instance a reality independent of us speaks to us, and, as a consequence, authority cannot be reduced to human power lording it over others.

Would it be too much to say that the church should desire nothing more than indefectibility and the assurance of truth it entails, since Christ's rising from the dead is his indefectibility--and we can do no more than live in him? After all, Jesus' resurrection, not his opinions about the authorship of the psalms or the time of the parousia, is the sole guarantee of our salvation in him.

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