

HOW DOES THE CHURCH PROCLAIM THE WORD?

[Bp. of Pretoria]

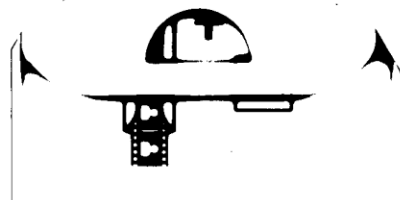
The Word of God comes before the Church; the Church is subordinate to the Word. (\*) But the Church has the mission of proclaiming the Word. She has to preserve and guard the message that has been entrusted to her. The question therefore arises: how are we to maintain the supremacy of the Word of God over the Church, while at the same time according to the Church a permanent responsibility for watching over and proclaiming the Word?

1. The Church is subordinate to the Word of God because, called together and constituted in the first place by the Word, she remains throughout her history an expression of the same Word. The entire pattern and structure of the community of the Church retains the imprint set upon it at the beginning. In and through the Messianic society of His disciples and apostles, Christ speaks to the world. The Word of God is the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, addressing Himself to human persons, and calling them into communion with Himself. This communion of persons, expressing itself in words and deeds, is the sign in the world of the presence and activity of the Word.

2. The Church therefore proclaims the Word by being the Church. God is made known to the world by the apostolic exercise of charity. The word 'charity' is the word most frequently used in the decrees of the Second Vatican Council, called to make the Church a more effective sign among the nations. The emphasis in the same decrees on the apostolic action of the laity also serves to make clear the way in which the Church must continually

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(\*) VCII, de Revelatione, 10, de Ecclesia, 12.



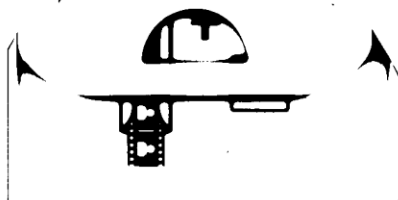
make known its message.

3. Not doctrine, but life, is the Church's principal way of bearing witness to Christ. But the Word of God can be known in human terms and spoken in human words, and the problem which faces us, after this reminder of our context, is the manner in which human words are to be used by the Church.

4. The fundamental difference at this point between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church lies in the notion that the Church's proclamation of the Word is unfailingly guaranteed by God. This difference appears whether one is talking with Anglicans who take the sixteenth century as their classic, formative period, or with those who look back to the seventeenth century. Bishop Jewel or William Whitaker had two points of reference for the discovery of true doctrine: Holy Scripture and the individual conscience, enlightened by God.

The sum of our opinion, wrote Whitaker, is that the Scripture is  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\pi\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$ , that is, hath all its authority and credit from itself; is to be acknowledged, is to be received, not only because the Church hath so determined and commanded, but because it comes from God; and that we certainly know that it comes from God, not by the Church, but by the Holy Spirit. (W. Whitaker, Disputatio de Sacra Scriptura, 1588, p. 200. Parker Society edition, p. 280).

Thomas Stapelton, the English recusant theologian with whom Whitaker was debating, held, on the other hand, that there are three points of reference:

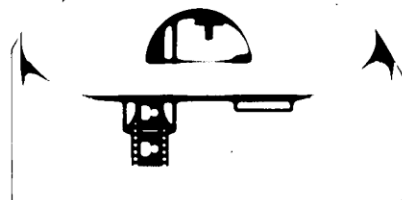


Holy Scripture, the individual conscience, and the Church. Together, these three lead us to the Word of God.

The Word is Christ himself: outside the Scriptures, but not outside Christ; other than the Scriptures, but not other than Christ. Today Christ and Christ alone is the sole foundation of the whole Christian religion which we are to teach, beyond which no other foundation can be laid. (Opera Omina, Paris, 1620, I, 513).

Stapleton taught that under the new Covenant, the Word of God was written in men's hearts; it was not correct to identify the Word with Scripture or to say that Scripture alone was the dwelling-place of the Word. The living Word was, rather, to be found in the heart of the whole Church agreeing everywhere in one faith.

You have there the foundation and support of the Christian religion, which Christ has laid, and in it you listen to Christ Himself speaking, you believe His teaching and you assent to His witness to the truth (Ibid., I, 515). The old Church of Christ, the judgment of which has been held in regard by later generations, believed, grasped, and understood the Scriptures. Its faith, tradition and doctrine were either taken from Scripture or else in agreement with it . . . All of us embrace the sacred Scriptures, but when it comes to deciding what the divine Scriptures teach, it is (more) fitting that the whole ancient Church should teach me . . . (Ibid., I, 509).



Because the Church was the Temple of the Holy Spirit, its judgment could be relied upon, just as the individual, led by the Spirit, could be certain of his faith (Ibid., I, 795).

These quotations from Whitaker and Stapleton illustrate the divergent paths taken by English Christians in the sixteenth century. The separation runs along the same lines today. The point of view adopted by Whitaker was that taken up, for instance, by J. R. W. Stott in his address to the Keele Conference of Anglican Evangelicals. (Guidelines, 1967, 41-66). Other Anglicans are closer to Richard Hooker, who was more prepared than his predecessors as Anglican apologists to assign authority to the Church as the means by which we are led to Scripture and the guide by which Scripture is to be interpreted. After Scripture and reason, said Hooker, came the Church:

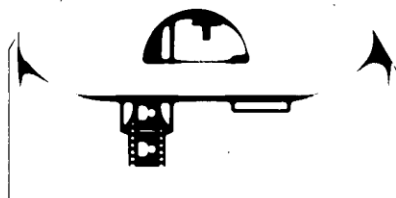
That which the Church by her ecclesiastical authority shall probably think and define to be true and good, must in congruity of reason overrule all other inferior judgments whatsoever. (Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, V, viii, 2).

This distinguishes Hooker from the Puritans and, at first sight, appears to bring him nearer to Roman Catholics. But, as C. S. Lewis has pointed out, "the appearance is deceptive."<sup>1</sup>

Richard Hooker grants to the Church a place in his scheme of things as a human institution, venerable and acceptable as other human institutions are, but not as the unique People of God, filled with the Spirit, and able to declare His Word with authority. He was a traditionalist, rather than a believer in living tradition as Roman Catholics have understood it.

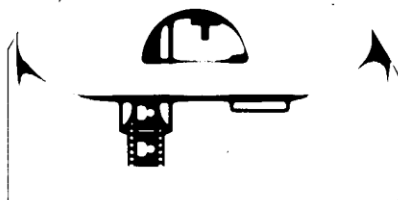
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<sup>1</sup> Oxford History of English Literature, iii, 1954, 455.



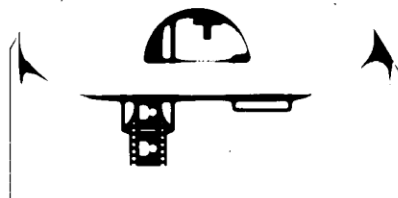
5. I hope that this summary statement of three separate points of view has not over-simplified the situation. It remains now for me to attempt to say something from within my own tradition which may help us to move towards reconciliation. I am seeking a way of justifying to Whitaker, Hooker and others, the excessive deference which Stapleton and those who are of his communion accord to the Church.

The Church's presentation of the Word of God to the world - its doctrine - has a threefold structure. The same Word is proclaimed as kerygma, taught as catechism and studied as theology. This three-fold structure goes back to the activity of Christ Himself (Matt. 4:17; Matt. 5-7, 13-18; Matt. 13:10-16, 20:17, 18), which was continued in the work of the Apostles (Acts 2:36-38; Heb. 5:11-14; 6:1-3; Heb. 6:1) and in the early Church (Clement of Alexandria, The Exhortation to the Greeks, The Tutor, the Stromata). This three-fold process of communication, in which God uses human words, is sustained and guided by God, because it is needed to bring about man's salvation from sin and death (VCII, de Revelatione, I). To claim for the kerygmatic, catechetical and theological activity of the Church a divine warrant is not to put humanity in the place of God, but to subordinate man to God; it is a declaration of man's need of grace. The assistance of the Holy Spirit is given to the Church first of all that men may be converted by hearing the Gospel, secondly that they may learn to walk in the way of the Gospel, and thirdly that their minds may be filled with the knowledge of God. The pronouncements of the extraordinary magisterium - Popes and Councils - as of the ordinary magisterium - the Bishops throughout the world - are in their intention and formulation primarily kerygmatic and catechetical. (VCII, de Ecclesia, 17, 23; de Activitate Missionali, 9, 38). So are the teaching activities of the presbyters and lay people in union with the bishops (VCII,



de Presbyterorum ministerio et vita, 4; de Apostolatu laicorum, 1). It is the whole Church, 'from Bishops to the last layman' which has received the promise of freedom from error in faith, in order that the mission of the whole Church may be truly carried out. Theological speculation is not given the same guarantee. Although it is focused on the mystery of Christ, independence on the light of the Holy Spirit, it represents man's word in response to God rather than the substance of God's Word and therefore cannot be accorded the same authority and respect. The Church only calls upon the results of theological reflection when they are needed to safeguard some part of the message of Christ or to clarify its catechesis.

The documents drawn up by Councils are directed towards keeping men's minds fixed upon the entire scope of God's Revelation. They are not substitutes for the living Word of God, Christ Himself, or for the written and inspired Word, Holy Scripture. They guide the mind in its reading of Scripture, rather as a Table of Contents enables one to see at a glance the scope and emphasis of a book. They must always be read in the light of Scripture and never interpreted in a way which is out of harmony with Scripture. Only very rarely do they attempt to define the meaning of a text in Scripture, which always stands as the essential context and guide to the full meaning of dogmatic decrees. Without Scripture these decrees would lack solidity and substance. The inspired Word of God feeds our faith and devotion in a way no conciliar decrees can ever do. Our belief in the contemporary testimony of the Church follows naturally on our belief in the continuing and abiding reality of the New Covenant. And this contemporary mind of the Church can never cut itself loose from Scripture. It dwells



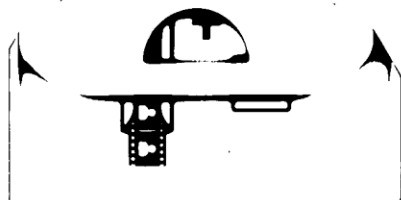
continually upon Scripture as its central point of reference and channel of divine teaching.

When the Church expounds a particular point of its doctrine or practice, it does so with reference to the central mysteries of faith and in order to guide men's minds towards them. The Apostolic Constitution Indulgentiarum doctrina, of January 1st, 1967, may be taken as a case in point, one which can hardly be avoided in any ecumenical discussion. The doctrinal introduction to the Constitution expounds the revealed doctrine on which the discipline of indulgences is based: sin and its consequences, the solidarity of mankind both in Adam and in Christ, the communion of Saints, the authority of the pastors of the Church and the need for sincere conversion if we are to be saved and made holy. If a man thought of nothing but gaining indulgences, his piety would indeed be warped; if a man gains an indulgence in the way the Church means him to, then his devotional life is in true harmony with the revealed Word of God.

Definitions of doctrine concerning Our Lady must be seen in the same way. A piety which centered itself exclusively on these doctrines would have lost the true balance. But, properly understood, these doctrines are a way of preaching the central affirmations of the Church's kerygma, for they demonstrate the effects of God's victory over sin and death through the Cross of Christ. The Church looks towards Mary because it sees in her the effect of receptive submissiveness to the Word of God.

6. An attempt to relate some of these remarks to our previous discussions and to the recent Evangelical statement at Keele may be helpful.

i. "Anglicans are convinced that the only dependable evidence for the events of divine revelation is to be found in Scripture" (Professor Fairweather,



Proposals, Gazzada, 1967, p. 8). Catholics would agree, where the details of the original historic events are concerned. But if these events are to be seen as divine revelation, they need the corroborative evidence of the continuing existence of the Church. The Church, called together by the Word, is part of the Gospel. If it does not now exist, then an essential part of the evidence has now been destroyed.

ii. "When Anglican theologians undertake to develop a theory of ecclesiastical authority in matters of faith, they tend to correlate very closely the collective voice of the episcopate and the consensus fidelium, so as to avoid any suggestion of the inherent infallibility of councils." (Ibid.) In that case, they are coming very close to what the Second Vatican Council had to say, or to what Thomas Stapleton in the sixteenth century had to say, for that matter, when he taught that revealed truth is grounded in the whole Church,

in the consent of peoples and nations in the general and public profession of the faith, which has great force of authority in commending anything to our belief, as well as in the Bishops and Pastors to whom Christ gave authority to teach.<sup>1</sup>

Even a Bishop has to start at his mother's knee and on the benches of the classroom.

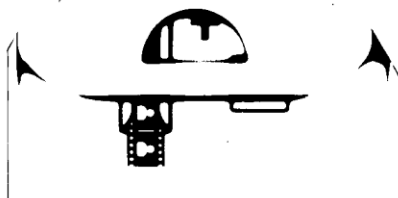
iii. "We cannot accept the Catholic position that what the Apostles primarily reflected and voiced was the mind of the Church."

(J. R. W. Stott, Guidelines, p. 58)

This is not the Catholic position. The Catholic position is what Mr. Stott goes on to describe as that held by Evangelicals: "the Apostles claimed to be the commissioned representatives of Christ, and to speak, not to the world in the name of the Church, but to both the world and the Church in

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<sup>1</sup> Opera Ommia, I, 764



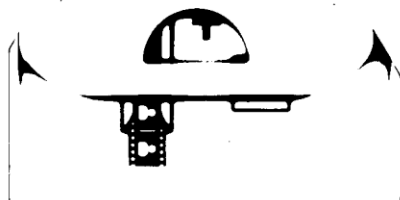


the name of their Master. . . . We know nothing of Christ but what the Apostles have given us. " (Ibid. )

iv. "The truth of God is neither what you or I think, nor what the Church teaches, but what the Spirit says to the Church through the Word. " (J. R. W. Stott, Guidelines, p. 63).

The New Testament dispensation is ruled and guided by the Holy Spirit. Without acknowledgment of this fact, we cannot understand how the Church proclaims the Word. But why these distinctions? It is impossible to know what the Spirit says to the Church through the Word unless we know what we think and what the Church teaches. It is precisely in the coincidence and interplay between the individual and the community of the Church that the voice of the Spirit is heard. The Spirit and the Word do not exist in some sort of Barthian state of airy suspension, meeting the circumference on which we move only at some unmeasurable tangential point. The Spirit never leads us away from the Head and other members of the Church; the way towards becoming a distinct individual, by the power of the Spirit, is also the way towards communion and relationship. We do not know what we think unless we have learnt what the Church has to teach us.

7. Finally, it is worth noting that the Second Vatican Council has closely related the freedom of the individual to the Church's proclamation of the Word. The Church's obedience to Christ's command in Matt. 28:19-20 excludes any coercion on the part of men in religious matters (VCII, de Libertate Religiosa, 10). The Word of God demands man's willing, free and entire assent, an assent which no human authority can command. (Ibid., 3). Ultimately, the full extent of human dignity and liberty are known



from revelation, not from reason. The methods by which the Gospel is taught to men must not infringe the liberty which the same Gospel declares. To preach the word effectively, the Church relies only on the power of the Word (Ibid., 11.). Christian men have often denied this in practice; but in fact the preaching of the Word both demands and creates liberty.

This does not diminish the task of the Church in the service of the Word. It increases its responsibility for the authentic formulation of revealed truth and watchfulness over the way in which it is communicated. The theologian has to make sure that heavy human burdens are not added to the easy yoke of the Gospel. The pastors of the Church have to safeguard their autonomy and independence from secular pressure. Faithful Christians have to widen the extent of their personal freedom through the study of God's Word and obedience to it. The Church is never bound in every detail of its life by what has gone before, but is constantly renewed by the action of the Spirit, who bestows His gifts to each one individually as He wills (1 Cor. 12:11. Cf. VCII, de Ecclesia, 12; de Apostolatu Laicorum, 3). Any account of the Church's proclamation of the Word of God must include a reference to this state of freedom, engendered by the Word. The last word must be left with the Spirit, who tells us that human words will be for ever incomplete; the authority of the Church does not usurp the authority of God, but expresses it. It declares man's need of God; its steadfast security is God's saving answer to that need.

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