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THE TYPES OF AUTHORITY IN CHRISTIAN BELIEF

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This presentation is limited to an exposition and estimate of the chief types in which authority has appeared in the church, to which are added one or two fundamental suggestions.

The first type is naturally that of the Roman Catholic church. Authority here was a gradual growth. At the outset no one could have foreseen the ultimate result, yet the claims of a series of bishops of the early church of Rome, not seldom men of the greatest administrative ability, whose assumptions were favored by circumstances, grew at length into the acknowledged supremacy of the Roman see. This supremacy gradually took the place of the state and subordinated every government to its own law and end, and this claim now extends to every interest of every individual whenever and wherever the church sees fit to exercise its prerogative. Naturally it centres in the ideas and beliefs which concern religion. Its essential peculiarity is that between the hierarchy and the laity a great gulf is fixed across which the laity as such cannot pass. The hierarchy has means of knowledge of which the laity is deprived; it alone can interpret the Scriptures; to it alone has the deposit of tradition been committed; it alone has the right to enforce its judgments of truth and duty. Thus the hierarchy is in possession of a secret which it can share with no other, which it is a sacrilege for that other to seek for itself. The claim contains two further assumptions, that of infallibility and that of concentration in one official person. Infallibility means that authority covers every single relation of life where the church wills to exert it. Concentration in one person means that authority has to find some individual in whom it completely dwells and through whom it may be perfectly exercised. The distinctive quality must not be overlooked: to all save the hierarchy the authority is external, absolute, and final.

When Protestantism was organized in distinction from the Roman Catholic church, it became marked by three different attitudes toward the principle of authority, as found in experience, in the Scriptures, and in the reason.

Luther and those who were immediately associated with him found in their experience of the grace of God in Jesus Christ the immediate authentication of all their religious convictions. Whatever did not square with that experience, no matter whence arising, could not be true. Luther did indeed find in Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone, and in the gracious and forgiving words of Jesus, that which spoke with sweet and convincing power; but not everything in the Scriptures was of equal authority over either his conscience or his thought. Calvin knew of no Scriptures which could be appealed to if the mind was not quickened by the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. In the hidden court of the individual consciousness was heard that divine voice to which nothing external, such as church or creed or both, could add either truth or cogency. The authority was that of God or Christ or of the living Spirit, and not that of man. Luther with his great confession at the Diet of Worms stands with Socrates before his judges at Athens, with Jesus before Pilate, with Savonarola before his enemies at Florence, obedient to the inner voice of his experience. That, and that alone, which had created the experience of the Christian man and was essential to that experience was of paramount authority. Naturally, whatever was grounded on individual experience was liable to the danger of particularism and undue subjectivity, was too much at the mercy of emotion, lacking in universal applicability.

It was precisely this liability which led the Scholastic Reformers to assume another attitude toward authority. Feeling the need of some common standard to which to appeal, recourse was had to the Scriptures. They had renounced the authority of the church as such, and, confused by the differences which seemed irreconcilable in individual experience, they turned to the Scriptures as that which lay back of both church and experience, by which both were to be tested. Thus the oft-cited words of Chillingworth fairly represent the Protestant position: "The Bible and the Bible alone the religion of Protestants." This

position was, and has continued to be, one of grave difficulty; it centred in two questions, first, as to just what the Bible is, and secondly, as to the interpretation of it. To meet the difficulty concerning the Scriptures various expedients were resorted to. It came at length to be asserted that the vowel points of the Hebrew text were directly inspired by God and hence were trustworthy and authoritative. This proving inadequate, it was affirmed that not the Scriptures as we have them in any extant text but only the original autographs, when interpreted in the sense intended, were inerrant and infallible. But though this claim were allowed to be true, yet since the original autographs are hopelessly inaccessible, it is not worth while to attempt to disprove the position. Still further, though the Scriptures were admitted thus to be inerrant, yet this view would require an interpreter equally inerrant and infallible, and also the universal recognition of such an interpreter as inerrant and infallible. But such an interpreter has not appeared in the Protestant church, or, if he has, neither Lutheran nor Reformed nor Arminian nor any other branch of the church has acknowledged him. The attempt to set the Scriptures over against the church as an ultimate authority on the basis named is therefore futile. If the Scriptures are authoritative, the authority is relative and consistent with such incompleteness as actually characterizes both the Scriptures and all interpretations of them.

The third attitude of Protestantism is that which finds the source of authority in the human reason. Rationalism proposes, first, to test the historical documents and all alleged facts of Christianity by the same criteria which are applied to other so-called historical and literary phenomena; secondly, to interpret the Scriptures by the same standards which are valid for other books; thirdly, to verify traditional beliefs by the same canons which are suitable to other beliefs. The fundamental position here is that all documents and all existing beliefs have had their origin not in a supernatural sphere but in the mind of man, that they contain therefore nothing extra-human, and that they are amenable to human reason. Only that is revelation in which truth is actually disclosed. If there is mystery, this signifies that revelation has not yet taken place or is only partial. Whenever

revelation occurs, it is marked by these signs: it is the "revelation of something which can be construed by the mind, which is conveyed to it in terms of human thought, which can be expressed in coherent propositions." Thus the revelation is not external but internal, not absolute but relative, not complete but progressive, to, because in, the mind of man. No dogmatic propositions which involve a supposed truth above or contrary to the reason can coerce or bind the intelligence. The authority lies therefore in the truth, and in the truth only so far as known.

These, then, are the four chief historical types under which authority has presented itself: the authority of the church, the authority of experience, the authority of the Scriptures, and the authority of the reason or truth. Each has occupied a large place in the development of religious belief, and probably each has never been more sharply defined or more widely influential than now. Even in the Roman Catholic church, where one would least expect it, authority of immediate experience, authority of the Scriptures, and authority of the reason contest the field with the absolute authority of the church, and the strength of the Modernist movement shows that the end is not yet. On the other hand, among Protestants one sees that the authority of the church is in many circles becoming more effective in the determination of belief.

A further analysis of the forms of authority here sketched shows that it is of two kinds: that which attaches itself to the church and the Scriptures is external; that which belongs to experience and the reason is internal. The authority of the church and the Scriptures is complete and final, while that of the reason and experience is more or less partial and progressive.

In addition to the forms of authority already indicated is yet another which is destined to play a large part in the immediate future, the view advocated by Professor Rudolf Seeberg in Germany and Principal P. T. Forsyth and D. S. Cairns in Great Britain. This characterizes the so-called "Positive Theology," the starting-point of which is the "primacy of the given." Revelation is marked by an objective content. In and by means of the cross of Christ God's personal redemptive relation to the world

was changed once for all. In this fact Christian experience finds its creative source. Yet we come to this neither by the Scriptures as infallible nor by historical criticism but by present-day experience. Since this implies that the supernatural exists today, it lays a foundation for the supernatural in both the New Testament period and in the New Testament itself. Our faith is not something which we share with Christ as directed to God, but it is directed to Christ in whom God reconciled himself to men. The authoritative element in Christian belief is thus the changed attitude of God toward the sinner, which authenticates itself in the sinner's experience of God's grace or reconciliation traced to the deed of Christ. Not dogma, therefore, but a deed, not the Scriptures as such, but a fact enshrined in the Scriptures, not a truth offered to intelligence nor a mystery offered to faith, but an experience of God offered to man for acceptance and verification.

The theories thus outlined serve to indicate the large place which authority has made for itself in Christian belief. We may now seek to evaluate these in part in the order in which they have been presented. That no one of these theories has been able to hold its own to the exclusion of all others does not prove the falsity of all of them, but possibly only that while each contains a partial truth, it requires to be supplemented by the rest and perhaps by still other conceptions. No idea held for so long a time and by so many people is wholly false. While neither age nor common consent is a sufficient criterion of truth, yet, on the other hand, no belief is wholly wrong which has been cherished by large bodies of men and over long periods of time. Not alone in the present has the Spirit of Truth been active, guiding men into all the truth. Our business here is a sympathetic inquiry into the deeper meaning of these attitudes of mind.

The Roman Catholic theory of authority at its best embodies two principles of permanent value. One is that of the social unity of believers. The individuality of the Christian life is a priceless truth. Each man shall bear his own burden, and every one of us shall give account of himself to God. But this is only half the truth; we are also members one of another. The church long ago made this an article of its faith, but only in our day have

both psychology and ethics shown why it is that self-consciousness and personality are possible only in the social group. Secondly, this unity does not mean identity of function. On the contrary, the functions of the church are, as the apostle declared, of the greatest diversity. The more highly organized the community, the more diverse the functions. Yet all functions are not equal, although all may be equally necessary. By virtue of wisdom or power or goodness, some men are, and indeed must be, leaders. Some must teach, some must care for the common interests, some must minister to the needy out of hearts of love. And the correlate of this is also true; some must be taught, some must accept and obey the rule of leaders, some must welcome the good which others bring. This is evident in every stage of historical human life and appears to lie in the nature of things. So far as one can see, there is no possibility of this condition being outgrown. Wherever there is leadership of any kind, there must be some degree of assumption, of responsibility, of authority. Nowhere is this more clearly evident than in the case of Jesus. He spoke with authority because *he* could speak in no other way. The apostle Paul issued serious and urgent commands to the Corinthian church, but he had no alternative. The great bishops of the early church had to assume, and to execute, great tasks for which they were set. In the mediaeval period among untrained and unorganized peoples the church had to teach and rule with authority often rigorous and exacting. In her claim of infallibility which finds a voice in the Pope of Rome, and in the impassable gulf opened between the hierarchy and the laity, the Roman church has fatally overstepped the rightful bound of authority. Yet even this does not militate against the idea that with her present constituency it would both impair her high ministry and threaten her very existence, were she in a day to renounce all her singular claims and proceed to establish a pure democracy among her adherents. And this has its measure of truth in the Protestant church.

The Protestant theory which found the source of authority in the Scriptures was a position of great strength. It singled out from among the three sources affirmed by the Catholic church—the Scriptures, tradition, and the interpretation of the church—

the fountain-head of all doctrine and belief. If Protestantism had to choose any book as the source of authority, it was fortunate in its selection of the Scriptures. Moreover, we who preach still find here an inexhaustible mine of texts, religious, ethical, social. Still in our theological seminaries exegesis and Biblical theology are studied seriously with the aim of ascertaining the thought of God. Still the prophets illumine the pathway into the deepest problems of the personal life; still the psalmists reveal to us the divine secret of struggle, aspiration, triumph, and peace; still the letters of the apostle to the gentiles are unique and unsurpassed in great thoughts, tender sympathy, profound insight, and Christian judgment called out by the exigencies of experience. Here, too, is our most authentic description of our Saviour's life and deeds, our most authentic account of his words and his self-revelation of the Father. And if he is what our faith postulates and our love responds to, then the documents in which he is enshrined cannot fail to speak to us with a finality found nowhere else. It is still true, as Coleridge said, that the Bible "finds" us at greater depths than any other book. After historical criticism has done its legitimate work—and no impediment must be placed in its path—the Scriptures will continue to offer the supreme revelation of God and his purpose of redemption, of Jesus Christ as his Son, and of man's ideal destination to individual and social redemption.

The reason why many have sought the source of authority in experience is not far to seek. Authority derived from the church or from the Scriptures is necessarily external; it has therefore an element of remoteness. At best it is at the outset second-hand. It may be valid for others; how can I know that it is valid for me? But of that which arises in individual experience one has not the same doubt. There is such a vividness, an immediateness, a cogency, a convincing and compelling power, that no argument is required to persuade nor external measure to enforce it. The mystic asks for no outer proofs; all his evidence is within. Prophets upon whom the Lord's hand was heavy, or who beheld the Lord on a throne high and lifted up, needed no council of men to substantiate their message. One key to the entire theology of the apostle Paul is his experience on the Damascus road.

No one can understand Augustine's theology who is not familiar with his *Confessions*. Large portions of the Christian church ask for no other proof that Christ is the living and all-sufficient Saviour than the fact that he has saved them from their sins. Any theory of authority which ignores experience as at least a proximate source of belief is lacking in one essential element of reality. There may be danger of subjectivity, individualism, even fanaticism and separatism, but the danger must be accepted and met by suitable means.

Authority as grounded in reason has its rightful advocates. "Truth" is here the watchword; truth is the ultimate authority. It requires no validation; its force is neither derived from nor enhanced by decrees of councils; it is not more true because found in the Scriptures, and its authentication does not depend on the fluctuating fervency of experience. It shines by its own clear light. It points the way and there is no alternative but to follow. The position has been taken that every man, even the Roman Catholic, is ultimately a rationalist, that is, that the final court of appeal as to whether there is a God, or a revelation, or an infallible church is the private judgment of each individual. This would be true if as a matter of fact every man exercised his private judgment, if every man had arrived at his belief concerning God, revelation, and the church by a process of reasoning, leading from a state of indifference or doubt to positive conviction. But this is no more true than that the foundation of the empirical state is the "social contract." Even among Protestants not one man in a thousand has the idea of God or revelation or his particular church as result of a course of reasoning. Nor is one man in ten thousand a Protestant even because he has balanced the arguments pro and con for Protestantism as against Roman Catholicism or the Greek church. Partly by imitation, partly by custom, partly by acquisition of a self-unconscious habit, we grow into the beliefs by which we live. We find ourselves possessed by these, and then perchance look round for the authority by which to justify them. On the other hand, those who discover their final authority in the rational principle, or truth, occupy a perfectly impregnable position, so long as they deal with the abstract. The moment, however, they push into

the concrete, trouble begins. Pilate's question without its despairing sneer asks itself afresh, "What is truth?" And the answers, instead of a rational unity, are a medley of confused voices. If one may refer to the actual positions of those who maintain that truth is the final authority, instead of coming upon agreement in their ranks, one is distracted by the most conflicting and even mutually exclusive declarations as to what truth is. There is no unanimity as to the historical and literary phenomena on which Christianity is based, nor as to the interpretation of these phenomena; rather is there a wide and contradictory divergence of view. While, therefore, as a principle the statement that truth is the final authority remains unchallenged, its application is subject to well-nigh insuperable difficulties. At best it is an ideal toward which we strive rather than a goal already reached.

The position that authority resides in something "given" in Christianity deserves serious consideration. Its two chief excellences are, first, that the ultimate reality of Christianity is not conceived apart from experience, since present-day experience involves the supernatural and hence guarantees the truth of God's redemptive action; and, secondly, experience is not divorced from the historic deed of God in Christ, since experience is explicable only with reference to this deed. Thus authority is grounded partly in experience and partly in that by which it is created, namely, the data of the gospel. It is safe to say that no notion of authority can ever be adequate which ignores its relation to a living experience, for only in experience does its full value emerge. On the other hand, the theory under consideration answers to the demand that authority have an objective basis also. Moreover, it is not indifferent to the New Testament as containing the authoritative record of the objective basis or divine deed, although it is not necessary to interpret this divine deed in the way proposed by the advocates of this theory. The essential claim of Protestantism is thus preserved, that the New Testament is the supreme depository of God's purpose of grace in Jesus Christ, and therefore the ultimate authoritative source of our knowledge of redemption. It is, however, to be noted that the "datum," or the "given," in Christianity does not stand over

against the human mind as something contrary to the reason, or as above the reason, or as mystery insoluble yet accredited by the reason and therefore to be received. It is indeed a mystery, but only in the Pauline sense—a reality once hidden but now become manifest and therefore known. Accordingly authority attaches itself not to an inscrutable secret but to a divine deed, which evinces its essential nature in every man's experience of the forgiveness of sins, and becomes ever more luminous with the unfolding of that experience.

One or two further aspects of authority require consideration. The first is its bearing on personality. The earliest form of this arises in the relation of children to parents and contains all the elements which emerge later in more explicit diverse forms. From the first unreflecting response of the child to the natural and inevitable authority of the parents on through his submission to the sovereignty of the state in the whole circle of civic relations embodied in school and other spheres of action, the influence received by him from the church in its Bible instruction and varied ministries, his acquiescence in the indeterminate social conventions (the more effective the less they are codified), his beliefs and judgments, which he has in great part uncritically reproduced from the beliefs and judgments of others—in all these experiences are to be seen the operation of authority, and that too wholly in the region of personal relations. This reliance upon personal authority is universal and shows that it is partly instinctive and partly self-conscious. Its psychological basis is twofold: imitation, and the impossibility of any one's verifying for himself all the contents of his knowledge. Most of our fundamental and cherished beliefs have already become an integral part of our consciousness before we come to reflect upon them, and these abide with us, revealing their presence and power in the great moments of our experience. We have, moreover, to depend upon others for the larger portion of our more ultimate conceptions of the physical world and the facts of practical life. Reasons why we accept testimony of particular persons vary with each of us; temperament, sex, general habits of thought and feeling, groups of interest in which one has continually lived, special past experiences, family and social traditions, more in-

timate associations, indeed numberless influences to which one yields but of which one is self-unconscious. We have thus a deep, ineradicable tendency to believe other persons and to believe most in those who, other things being equal, are good. We believe what they say, and, more than this, we believe in them. They create confidence in us, and we are content that it should be so, even if we cannot fully explain to ourselves the final ground of our confidence or wholly vindicate its content to others. How it is that Jesus effects his unmeasured power of teaching and of redemption in the souls of men I but partly understand, but this I know, that to those who freely open their consciousness to him there is no limit to his revelation of God or of the ideals of individual and social life which he makes and will make to them. There is a secret here, but it is the secret of personality. Ultimately the highest authority resides in the highest person.

Another aspect of authority lies in its teleological import. We believe, not because we have proved and not because any one else has proved. We often believe in spite of proof, although not in spite of all proof. Nor does our belief depend upon Bishop Butler's balance of probability. Our great beliefs are the answer of our entire personality to the total reality of things. The particular belief may be fragmentary but it is not thereby discredited. If we are to live, some things must be true. Paradoxical as it is, we do not create our deepest beliefs, rather are they created for us. Augustine's position is forever true, "Faith precedes knowledge." We are, for instance, theists not because, but one may say in spite of, or at least irrespective of, the common theistic proofs. One after another these have been shown at the bar of pure reason to be baseless, yet theism as a conviction was never so vital or deeply rooted as today. This only means that because our great beliefs cannot completely justify themselves in logic, they are not therefore discredited. As they have arisen from the necessities of life, so life will justify them. There is in belief and in experience a prophetic element. Partial it may seem to be, but it is an integral part of an infinite whole which is indestructibly immanent in it. In the ideal and not in the actual, in the future and not completely in the past or the present, in the whole and not in any fragment, in the inevitable outcome of

the moral order and not in any momentary stage of it, in God and not in man, lies the ultimate authority for our belief in virtue, redemption, and the immortal certainty of conquest in the divine struggle for existence.

From this point of view light is cast in various directions. First, it discloses why, if authority begins as dogmatic assertion, external coercion if need be, it cannot remain such; it exists not for itself but that later it may renounce itself as "might." It disappears as force that it may reappear as impulse and obedience of the free spirit to the divine ideal. In other words, authority is not external and static, but developmental and functional. This is possibly the severest criticism to be passed on the notion of authority in the Roman Catholic church. If, moreover, one seeks in the Christian experience of any man or age the authority for his belief, one must not separate this from its teleological significance. "That apart from us," said the ancient writer, "they should not be made perfect." The Scriptures are authoritative not simply as a book with a revelation closed and sealed, but as the living word of God interpreted in the light of God's unfolding purpose of grace resplendent with the promise of consummation. There is indeed authority in the reason, not as an isolated notion or idea, but in so far as it partakes of the eternal Logos which permeates and enlightens the whole world. There is a "given" element in Christianity which is authoritative, but its ultimate meaning is found not in itself but in that to which it points—an earnest or pledge of a completed redemption.

The ultimate source of authority in Christian belief is the personal consciousness of Jesus Christ in his disclosure of the character and redemptive purpose of God, which is the creative and informing spirit of the Christian church, the central element and all-determining principle of the Scriptures, the organizer and ideal of Christian experience, the divine light which illumines the reason, the datum without which Christianity would not be.