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Scripture, Tradition, and Authority in the Life of the Early Church

HERBERT T. MAYER

Among the many theological topics being discussed in the church today, none is potentially more helpful — and more complex — than the related topics of Scripture, tradition, and authority. What role does each of these basic concepts play in the work in the parish? In the ecumenical movement? How do they relate to each other?

These topics were the object of considerable thought in the first six centuries of the church's history. Several helpful suggestions and points of view developed in this period can contribute to our own un-

This article is the second in a series titled "Reading Programs in Theology," inaugurated in the October 1966 issue (XXXVII, 9) of this journal under the sponsorship of the Department of Continuing Education of Concordia Seminary. The series is designed to provide reading courses in various areas of theology. It will offer brief introductions to limited fields of theological study together with a recommended bibliography for further study by individuals or groups. Reprints are available. In its first two weeks of operation over 325 persons enrolled in this program. Enrollees are entitled to purchase the books discussed in the course at a 15% discount through the seminary store. For more information, interested persons may contact Dr. David S. Schuller, who heads this department. A new course will appear each quarter. The accompanying study guide on "Scripture, Tradition, and Authority in the Life of the Early Church" was prepared by Herbert T. Mayer, managing editor of this periodical and chairman of Concordia Seminary's Department of Historical Theology prior to his current sabbatical leave.

derstanding and appreciation of the proper role of Scripture, tradition, and authority.

The first Christians were as authority-conscious and authority-hungry as many are today. A number of interpretations of the nature of authority were available to them from the various cultures which they knew and in which, in many cases, they had grown up. From the Jews they learned the authority of sacred writings; from the Greeks and the Syrians they learned subjective and mystical patterns of authority; from the Romans they learned the importance of tradition for a healthy society. All three types are represented in theological thought in the early centuries. But there was another dimension of authority that the Christian church instinctively accepted and made the basis of its life: the authority of the person of Jesus of Nazareth, whom they confessed to be the Christ of God.

I. THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS THE CHRIST

The writers of the New Testament and the influential thinkers of the early church make very plain their affirmation of the centrality and the absolute authority of Jesus the Christ. He is *Kyrios*. There is none other beside Him.

But this simple and sincere confession at once raises several questions. How does the ascended Christ communicate His authority? Does He do this mediately or immediately? Or does He do this in both ways? How is His authority transmitted

to succeeding generations? How does He speak authoritatively to new problems and conditions? How does the church recognize His voice among the many that are speaking?

The questions are many; the manifold answers of the early church are all designed to affirm the lordship of Jesus.

II. THE SACRED WRITINGS

The early church found an important ready-made answer to part of the question of the nature of theological authority in the sacred writings of Judaism, either in the form of the shorter Palestinian list of Old Testament books or in the longer, more popular Alexandrian list. The writings that make up the New Testament began to emerge as an authoritative factor in the life of the church in the years 80—90. Clement of Rome, writing in 96, appeals to the authority of 1 Corinthians and Hebrews—as well as to some apocryphal books and to some that have not yet been identified. The conscious and formal creation of canonical lists of the new Christian writings began about 140, sparked by the writings of the heretical teacher Marcion and of the great orthodox teacher of the second century, Irenaeus of Lyons, France. The complete list did not become fixed and generally accepted, however, until the last quarter of the fourth century.

From the perspective of faith, Lutheran Christians affirm that the Holy Spirit guided the development of the canon so that the canon is His creation rather than the creation—and thus also the property—of the church. From the perspective of history, however, the scholar sees the church drawing up and fixing the New Testament canon over a long period of

time. In the documents of this era, two criteria of canonicity are very evident: apostolic authorship (or endorsement) and ancient acceptance by the church. A third criterion seems to be employed by some writers: the Christocentric character of the documents.

The development of the canon effectively excluded from the church a large body of writings that are called heretical. It also undergirded the concept of apostolic authority. Thus the canon profoundly shaped the developing theology of the church by serving as the norm by which doctrine and practice were evaluated.

But two other factors interacted with the sacred writings: interpretative method and formal statements of the orthodox faith. The Old Testament, in particular, presented vexing problems of interpretation. It was generally agreed among the fathers that the Old Testament was a Christian book and should be interpreted in such a way that the interpretation pointed directly to Jesus Christ. Some of the fathers allegorized large portions of the Old Testament to achieve this end; others found many types of Christ and the church in the Old Testament.

Forced and fanciful exegesis often resulted. Similar methods were applied in increasing measure to the New Testament after 225. It is furthermore quite evident to the scholar as he studies the early Christian writings that Biblical interpretation was often influenced by the writer's theological convictions. For example, Tertullian of North Africa, who experienced a radical change in his theological position, in this later phase can interpret a portion of Scripture in a way that is completely different from his earlier interpretation of that same text in order to harmonize the

passage with his new theological convictions.

Tertullian also spelled out most clearly the principle that for most Christians has governed the understanding of the relationship between Scripture and exegesis. He defined, clearly and concisely, the Christian faith—the "*regula fidei*"—as it had to be believed in order to be saved. Then he insisted that no exegetical interpretation of Scripture could contradict this rule but also that any interpretation could be held (and that any question could be asked of the Bible) so long as it did not move beyond the *regula*.

Tertullian's formulation of the rule was very brief; it was, in fact, not much longer than the Apostles' Creed. It contained the chief teachings about the Father and the Son, with a one-phrase reference to the Holy Spirit. The author's aim was to capture only the nucleus, the "mind," of Scripture. "This rule, taught (as it will be proved) by Christ," said Tertullian, "allows no questions among us, except those which heresies introduce and which make heresies."

III. TRADITION

At this point we have discovered three factors that interact and affect each other in the area of theological authority: Scripture, exegesis, and tradition, as contained, for example, in the rule of faith. Does tradition become the norm of Scripture, as we seem to have suggested above? What is tradition? What is its rightful place and function in the life of the church?

The Greek word for tradition is found several times in the New Testament. Usually it has the meaning of a verbal noun and should be translated as "authoritative handing on." The "hand-on" is Jesus Christ, as the context either explicitly in-

dicates or implicitly suggests. The content of the tradition in this technical Christian sense is the person, sayings, and works of Jesus Christ. In some instances it also includes the ethical standards and demands of the faith. In the postapostolic fathers the handing-on more commonly is done by the apostles rather than by the Lord. But the apostles are thought of as links in an unbreakable chain that runs from God to Jesus the Christ to the apostles and thus to the church. *Paradosis* or *traditio* gradually become technical terms for the deposit of the truth, the *regula fidei*, rather than for the act of authoritative teaching and transmitting. Some of its original dynamic meaning is lost as the church settles down to a long life in this world.

The fading of the hope of the immediate *parousia* led to the increasingly careful definition of the tradition in various *regulae* and creeds. The appearance of heretics further accelerated the preparation of creeds and enhanced their position of authority within the church. Councils, too, spoke authoritatively in the form of longer credal statements. These confessions were invariably drawn up in opposition to heresies and in the endeavor to speak to people in contemporary and relevant fashion. Thus every confession of the church is conditioned, at least in its phraseology, by the situation of its time. This has prompted some scholars, teachers, and pastors in the church to ask questions about the authoritative role of ancient, temporally conditioned creeds and confessions in the modern church. (This vexing question is discussed more fully in some of the literature listed below.)

IV. THE HOLY SPIRIT

What can be said of the relationship between Scripture and tradition in the

church? Before an answer can be suggested, a further authoritative factor must be introduced: the person of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament clearly describes the important work of the Spirit of God in creating acceptance of and understanding of religious truth. While the church historian has no equipment to demonstrate scientifically the activity of the Spirit, the records of the church point to the continuing role of the Paraclete as Guide and Teacher of the church.

There appears, then, a threefold interplay of basic authority factors in the life of the church: Scripture, tradition, and the Holy Spirit. The early church carefully sought to maintain the primacy of Holy Scripture while recognizing the crucial and indispensable role of tradition in preserving and handing on the apostolic doctrine. At times, it seems, some fathers (Irenaeus, for example) assign equal roles to Scripture and tradition in the task of preserving and communicating that which is greater than either: God's saving Word, Jesus Christ. In the interplay of Scripture and tradition, the key role is played by the Holy Spirit. He alone can create the understanding and acceptance of Scripture and tradition, and He alone can teach the church how to confess God's saving Word in a new creed or confession. The internal testimony of the Holy Spirit is a key authoritative factor in the church's life.

Several misunderstandings of the nature and role of Scripture, tradition, and the Holy Spirit have been present in the church, and they have been defended by appeals to the early fathers and the New Testament. They include: (1) The pious individualistic enthusiasm that waits exclusively upon the immediate hearing of God's

will; (2) an analogous type of waiting on the part of a large group, which results in the exaltation of tradition; (3) the insistence that *sola Scriptura* means either that Scripture is completely self-interpreting or that there is one infallible hermeneutical system. The 16th-century reformers did not mean this by *sola Scriptura*, as a study of their use of the fathers makes evident.

V. THE BISHOP

One other aspect of ecclesiastical authority occupied the attention of the early fathers: the role of the bishop. The New Testament emphasis on the pastor's responsibility for "guarding the deposit" was continued by the pastor-bishops of the early church. Thus Ignatius sees the person of the bishop as the most practical guarantee of continuing orthodoxy. Irenaeus argues that the orthodoxy of his own theology is assured by the fact that it agrees with the doctrine handed down by the Roman bishops from Peter and Paul to Eleutherus, his contemporary. Scholars have pointed out that Irenaeus is not arguing for the supremacy of the church at Rome but rather for the personal link that the bishop of a community founded by an apostle provides with the original tradition.

Cyprian advances the argument of Irenaeus and states, "It is particularly incumbent upon those of us who preside over the church as bishops to hold this unity firmly and to be its champions, so that we may prove the episcopate also to be itself one and undivided."

From these seeds the concept of the teaching magisterium of the one holy church, as represented in its bishops, and of the supremacy of the Roman bishop in the West grew quite rapidly.

VI. SCRIPTURE, TRADITION, AND AUTHORITY TODAY

This brief survey indicates only the broad outlines of development in the first centuries and the general nature of the questions being asked again today concerning the relationship of Scripture, tradition, and authority in the church.

Helpful reading on several aspects of this complex subject is found in the books listed below. The first group lists paperbacks and other items that may profitably be purchased for one's own library. The second group contains several standard works, some of which are out of print. The third group includes some of the more important source materials from the early centuries.

GROUP I

Bruce Shelley, *By What Authority*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965. \$1.95 (paper). A good introduction to the topic at the hand of second- and third-century theologians.

Oscar Cullmann, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr*. Philadelphia: World Publishing Co., 1962. Paper. Though not specifically addressed to the discussion of Scripture and tradition, the book contains significant statements on Petrine primacy in relation to ecclesiastical authority.

Kurt Aland, *The Problem of the New Testament Canon*. London: A. R. Mowbray, 1962. 90 cents (paper). A brief, stimulating discussion of the history of the New Testament canon and the implications of the historical nature of the canon's development for its authoritative place in the church today.

Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament*. Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1961. A stimulating discussion of the authority of the Holy Spirit in the first and second centuries.

Roland Bainton, *Early Christianity*. New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1960. \$1.25 (paper). Pages 34—48 and 132—150 contain an excellent popular introduction to the nature of authority and the related question of discipline.

The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma of the Church, papers presented at a theological consultation between Roman Catholic and Lutheran scholars held at Baltimore, July 6—7, 1965. Washington: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1965. Excellent descriptions of many of the key problems and an analysis of contemporary Roman Catholic thought on this issue.

"Fourth Faith and Order Conference, Montreal, 1963." Available in mimeographed form from Concordia Seminary Book Store. A full discussion of the current views of the chief non-Roman Catholic churches.

R. P. C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church*. London: SCM Press, 1962. This is the best survey of thought in the first four centuries. It contains excellent chapters on the New Testament canon and on the role of liturgies and rites in the preservation and transmission of the tradition.

GROUP II

Ellen Flesseman-Van Leer, *Tradition and Scripture in the Early Church*. Assen: van Gorcum, 1954. Written from a semi-Barthian orientation, the book represents one of the best studies of the topic.

John Lawson, *The Biblical Theology of St. Irenaeus*, 1948. A detailed study of the problem as treated by St. Irenaeus.

Walter Burghardt, "Early Christian Exegesis," *Theological Studies*, XI (1950), 78—116. A good concise introduction to the practices and problems of exegesis.

GROUP III

See the reference to Roland Bainton's work in Group I.

The best collection of sources in English is contained in the volumes of *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press). The writings of Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Irenaeus in Vol. I and those of Tertullian and Cyprian in Vol. V are germane to this topic.

Sections I and III in Ray C. Petry, *A History of Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962) contain short selections from some of the material in Vols. I and III of the *Library of Christian Classics*.

St. Louis