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# *The Reconstitution of Authority*<sup>1</sup>

JAMES I. PACKER

## **Captatio Lectoris, and Challenge to the Reader**

The following discourse was written to a title given me as part of a thematic sequence chosen for a conference at which various Christian traditions were represented. It has a confessional quality and a persuasive purpose, which I do not try to hide. It aims to show three things. The first is the nature and excellence of authority in general, and of the authority that historic Christianity, following Scripture, has ascribed to the Creator in particular. I wanted my hearers to become enthusiasts for authority, and spoke accordingly. Second, my paper tries to pinpoint some of the fundamental ways in which the Western thought world has turned from God's authority. Third, I state my view as to what sort of Christianity might under God be able to re-establish its authority in the world of today and tomorrow. This part of the discourse is programmatic, which means that it bites off more than it can chew and invites others to ally themselves with the author in a continued chewing process. I hope that the programme outlined will commend itself to all readers of *Anvil* as a timely agenda for all who seek the glory of the Triune God who reigns, speaks and loves; I will confess that I think it ought to. Therefore, as the young Ellery Queen would issue a Challenge to the Reader near the end of each detective story, so I issue a challenge to my readers at the outset of my exposition; and my challenge is not, as with Mr. Queen, can you see who did the murder? but, can you see what you and I ought to do about the deadly state of things that drift from God's true authority has produced? What steps should those who maintain a conservative theology and a Bible-based, Christ-centred, Spirit-sustained devotion take by way of evangelistic and nurturing counter-thrust against the barren, burnt-out modernity of these cataclysmic days?

I should add that this *cri du coeur* of mine has been revised — to its benefit, I hope — in the light of discussion at the conference itself.

## **The Nature of Authority**

We are to give our minds to the theme of authority, in the context of our conference subject, the hallowing of life in this secular age. I expect that in regard to authority most of us are really ambivalent: our

enlightened, Christianly taught heads tell us that we should be for it, and that there is no hallowing apart from it, while our fallen, late twentieth-century hearts remain suspicious and evasive of the whole idea of it. We had best begin by trying to get into clear focus what we mean by authority, both in general and specifically in Christianity; then perhaps we shall be able to raise a little more enthusiasm for the idea of life under authority than we can muster now. To this end I offer five perspectival points, as follows.

(i) Authority is a *relational* notion; it signifies superiority or dominance. To have authority is to have a right to rule and a claim to exercise control. Authority is expressed in directives and acknowledged by compliance and conformity. The word 'authority' is used both abstractly for the commanding quality that authoritative claims have, and also concretely for the source or sources of those claims — 'the authority' or 'the authorities'. In both usages the thought of rightful dominance remains central.

The kinds and sources of authority are various. All human beings are involved in a number of distinct spheres of activity, each with its own way of talking and using words — what Wittgenstein called its own 'language-game'. The notion of authority appears in most, if not all, of these, but with applications and shades of meaning that are determined by the nature of the 'game' in each case. Thus, for instance, documents and authors are 'the authorities' for scholars; statutes and past decisions are 'the authorities' for lawyers; parents and schoolmasters are 'the authorities' for children; umpires and rule-making bodies are 'the authorities' in sports; critics and academics are 'the authorities' in the art world; and governors, judges and law enforcement personnel are 'the authorities' in relation to our own social behaviour. In each case the basic idea is the same, but the orchestration, so to speak, of the authority-theme and the way that the authority is exercised differ in detail from the other cases. Unique also in this way is the Christian understanding of the authority of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who in the oneness of triunity exercises divine lordship over our lives.

Authority is a subject that in one form or another is often discussed. This is done in order to find out, or sort out, what factors in our milieu should determine our attitudes and actions. The final goal of all our discussions is to ensure that right decisions, properly reached, do in fact get made: decisions, that is, in which the appropriate principle of authority is respected as it should be. For authority, as I have said, means dominance, and one recognizes it by submitting to it. Authority is essentially a matter of something or someone being over you, to direct you; authority, in other words, is what you are *under*, and comply with. Whenever we credit anything with authority — a textbook, a ruling, a document, a word from this or that person — we are saying that in its own sphere it is decisive, more or less, as a guide

to what we should say and do. And, contrary to much popular belief in these out-of-joint times, acceptance of authentic authority in this way is something natural and gratifying to us; we look for authority outside ourselves because deep down we know we were made for authority-relationships, and that being under authentic authority is part of our human fulfilment. 'You have that in your countenance', says the Duke of Kent to King Lear, 'which I would fain call master.' 'What's that?' asks Lear. 'Authority', says Kent.<sup>2</sup> Men seek true submission to true authority because it is human nature to want it, and real frustration not to find it. That is why the subject of authority is of such perennial interest, and is explored and debated so much.

In biblical Christianity, as in the Old Testament, authority belongs to God the Creator, and therefore to his Word — that is, his communication to his rational creatures, verbalized in both the indicative and the imperative moods, and particularized in relation to each person to whom it is sent. The nearest human analogues to this are the authority of legislation enacted by an absolute ruler, and of orders issued by a supreme military commander, for in both these cases what is uttered is at the same time what the person in authority *said* (on the occasion when the laws or orders were first given) and also what he *says* in the present moment (since his laws, or orders, continue to apply to everyone who stands under his authority here and now). Nor are these analogues merely the illustrative fancies of latter-day theologians; on the contrary, they are themselves matters of revelation, inasmuch as in the Pentateuch God appears explicitly as legislator and commander in his royal covenant with Israel, and this perspective is maintained throughout the Old Testament and prolonged into the New. One of the most impressive biblical testimonies to the authority of the Word of God is Psalm 119, where all save one of the 176 verses speak explicitly or implicitly of due response to what the psalmist variously calls God's word, words, precepts, statutes, law, promise, testimonies and ordinances, which spell out his ways and his righteousness, that is, his revealed will for mankind.

How the Word of God reaches us today, and how its meaning and message to us are to be discovered, are questions to which we must return; at present, I simply ask you to note that what is finally authoritative for Christians is and must be the Word of their God, the Creator, the triune Yahweh — the Word addressed to them by the Father, whose children they are through adoption and grace, and by the Son, Jesus Christ, to whom all authority in heaven and earth has been given, and by the Holy Spirit, who speaks both to the churches and to all of the individuals who make them up. That God the Creator (as distinct from any human group, individual or idea) has final authority over all to whom he relates is beyond question, and we should realize that all Christians really know this, so that when they

debate whether Scripture or church tradition or individual opinion should be supreme they are not asking whether we should take our cue from God or from men; they are trying, rather, to see how the authoritative Word of God comes through to us. If discussion showed that any position taken on this question did in truth leave us listening to men rather than to God, that very fact would be seen by all as discrediting that position. What remains in dispute today is whether particular positions do actually lead us to treat as God's word what is really only man's word; and this is another matter to which we shall return. For the moment, let it just be said that all Christians know that it must be God's authoritative Word that teaches and leads them, however many disagreements and controversies they may have among themselves as to what this authoritative Word is.

(ii) Authority is a *chameleon* term, changing its quality, nuance and tone — its colour, one might say — according to the frame of reference in which it appears. The basic distinction here is that sometimes it corresponds to the Latin *ius*, which means coercive and executive authority that must be recognized because it is legally held, and sometimes to the Latin *auctoritas*, which means persuasive and pedagogic authority that ought to be recognized for moral reasons, that is, reasons of truth and holiness. Authority is a word that oscillates in use between these moral and legal poles, with more being made of the moral basis of claims when they are not backed by power of enforcement than is ordinarily the case when they are. Thus, when authority appears in contexts coloured by legal considerations and sanctions, its claim may well appear to be merely extrinsic, since the only thought being highlighted is that what is directed had better be done since it is backed by a big stick. It is in situations of this type that civil laws that have a moral base are sometimes displaced by laws that have none, and might is sometimes guilty of masquerading as right; and thus legal and moral authority get out of step with each other. But the authority of moral claims is intrinsic, and when authority is spoken of in a moral context, what is meant is that particular lines of belief and action ought to be followed simply because they are the dictates of truth and right, or fittingness, and as such are our duty, whatever the law may say or do. Thus, for instance, it could be maintained that any legal authority that authorizes abortion on demand lacks moral authority, while the obligation to protect personal life prior to birth as well as after it, an obligation whose moral authority is surely unquestionable, is not under those circumstances being backed by legal authority. The point being illustrated is that moral authority is principled, and can always be justified by appeal to what is true and fitting; legal authority, however, is pragmatic, and can be manipulated in non-moral ways by those who hold the power. It is important to see this distinction clearly, for in actual use the word authority rolls around between its two poles of reference in a most

confusing way, and the temptation to take the line of least resistance by assimilating moral to legal authority and thus settling for moral relativism is often very strong.

But we should now note that in the authority that biblical Christianity ascribes to God, the two aspects of which we have spoken, the legal and the moral, the authority of right and the authority of power, do in fact coincide in the way that is theoretically proper, for here the authority of executive power backs up the authority of moral perfection. Both by right of ownership, as Creator, and also by right of his own truthfulness and holiness, the God of the Bible claims unqualified moral authority over us when teaching us what to believe and do; and this same God has full power, both in present providence and in future final judgment, to bring to an end active disbelief of and disobedience to his Word whenever he chooses to do so. His Word has thus extrinsic as well as intrinsic authority, and as there are no grounds for conscientious appeal against it, so no one has power to defy it further than God himself permits.

A rider to this is that ecclesiastical decisions and declarations, and certainly individual theological opinions, have no divine authority binding our consciences save as they can show themselves to be faithful echoes and sound applications of the Word of God. Divine authority for faith and life belongs to God's Word alone.

(iii) Authority — meaning here, moral authority in particular — is a *teleological* concept, one that relates to the finding and fulfilling of all that is involved in being human. As there does not seem ever to have been a time when mankind did not believe in some sort of a future life, so there does not seem ever to have been a time when individuals did not think of their own existence teleologically, in terms of a goal or set of goals, a *summum bonum* to be aimed at, a good life to which the wise man aspires. Nor, it seems, was there ever a time when ideas of moral authority and of human fulfilment in these terms were not in some way linked together. In today's secular world, social, political and economic strategies, whatever their legal authority, can only claim moral authority to the extent that they make for what sociologists and ecumenists refer to as the *humanum*, the truly human state of life. Biblical Christianity, speaking from its unashamedly other-worldly standpoint from which it sees this life as the journey home and the future life as home itself, proclaims the vision, adoration and enjoyment of God, in perfect righteousness with fulness of joy and love, as the true *telos* of man, and sees the worship of God as the central activity upon which to all eternity the rest of the *telos* must be predicated. Now if worship and godliness were not integral to our happiness, the moral authority of God's summons to both would be in question, for commands whose fulfilment goes against the well-being of those commanded are to that extent morally disreputable (think of Jim Jones's command to his followers to take poison). But the

Christian claim is that because of the way we are made, the more wholeheartedly and thankfully we submit to God's authority, the deeper will be the personal fulfilment into which we come. Thus, under the gospel, duty and interest coincide. In heaven our fulfilment will be complete, partly because there our acceptance of God's authority will be complete too. Here on earth we are called to move towards that goal as far and as fast as we can, by doing the will of God from our hearts.

The New Testament idea that embraces this fulfilment is *freedom*. Jesus says: 'If you continue in my word . . . the truth will make you free. . . . If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8:31-36). The paradoxical truth, which only Christians have ever known, is that God's service is, and increasingly proves itself to be, perfect freedom. Whereas the Western world, at least since the French Revolution, has seen freedom as essentially a matter of breaking bounds and abolishing restrictions and hardships, in other words, as essentially freedom *from* this and that, Christians have always seen it as essentially a restoring of freedom *for* something — namely for the worship of God and the practice of godliness. Certainly, Christian freedom begins with deliverance *from* something evil, namely, the guilt and power of sin and the bondage to self that sin has brought; but that is only, so to speak, the underside of freedom. In essence, Christian freedom means freedom not to do wrong, but to do right; not to break the moral law, but to keep it; not to forget God, but to cleave to him every moment, in every endeavour and relationship; not to abuse and exploit others, but to lay down one's life for them. Freedom for such service and self-giving is beyond the capacity, even the comprehension, of fallen human nature, so we should not be surprised if the world is unable to recognize it as freedom at all. We ourselves only come to know it as the gift of the risen Christ, who on earth was the exemplar of it. But whereas the world finds that its idea of freedom as throwing off all external constraints leads only to restless and disillusioned bitterness, Christians know in their bondservice to their Redeemer an inward joy, peace and contentment, which conclusively prove that this is indeed the *telos* of man begun. Under the authority of the Father and the Son alone are true freedom and fulfilment found. But under that divine authority the fulfilment that is true freedom, and the freedom that is true fulfilment, become increasingly real for every disciple, and this fact provides a full teleological vindication of the moral authority of God's commands in the gospel.

(iv) Authority — meaning, still, moral authority in particular — is *increased by love* on the part of the authority-figure in the authority-relationship. Though love, by its very nature, is not self-seeking and is not expressed towards others as a means of strengthening one's claim on them, that is the effect it has. Obligations to one's parents or

spouse are binding anyway, but become more so when the parents are caring and empathetic and the spouse affectionate and devoted. So too our obligation to honour and obey God is binding anyway, just because we owe our very existence to him; yet it is vastly increased by his having so loved the world that he gave his Son to die so that whoever will might live, and by his having actually saved from sin and death us who believe. In both Testaments God's relation to his people is more than that of a great king to his subjects; it is also that of a father to his children. His royal covenant is a family covenant too, and his steadfast love is the faithful affection of a heavenly parent. Biblical writers appeal to God's love in redemption to show us the authority of God in making his claim on our obedience, as well as to stir us to respond to it: 'I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God . . .' (Rom. 12:1). Love ennobles the beloved, and response to God's authoritative claim by one who knows how God loves him will be felt as privilege, dignity and delight. Thus life under God's authority comes to be experienced not as a demeaning misery, but as an enriching joy, and the more complete and self-abandoning our submission, the deeper our joy will be.

(v) Authority — meaning here, executive authority in particular — must be distinguished from *authoritarianism*. The distinction is crucial, for most complaints about authority in the human community turn out to be against authoritarianism in fact. Authoritarianism is authority corrupted, degenerated, gone to seed. It appears when the submission demanded is not justifiable in terms of truth or morality. Any form of human authority can go bad in this way; be warned! You see authoritarianism in the state when a regime uses power in an unprincipled way to maintain itself. You see authoritarianism in churches when leaders claim control of their followers' consciences. You see it in high school, university or seminary when you are expected to agree with your professor rather than follow the evidence of truth for yourself. You see it in the family when parents direct or restrict their children unreasonably. That such experiences leave a bad taste and prompt scepticism about authority in all its forms is sad, but not surprising, and undoubtedly bad experiences of this kind have fuelled the flames of today's reaction against authority all over the world. But — and this is the only point I would make here — God's authoritative claims upon us, being justifiable in terms both of truth and of morality, are not authoritarian in the least. As has already appeared, God's law corresponds to created human nature, so that in fulfilling his requirements we fulfil ourselves; and the gospel of Christ and his redeeming love answers to actual human need as glove fits hand. So all our responses to God make for our own good, and no touch of authoritarian arbitrariness enters into his exercise of authority over us at any stage.

These five points form the groundwork for what I have to say. My main argument now follows.



## The Demise of Authority

Our theme, the reconstitution of authority, presupposes that authority has broken down. Indeed it has; we know that all too well. Once the Christian outlook had authority for the entire Western world, giving purpose, perspective and coherence to all branches of human endeavour and imparting a positive value to each individual's personal life. That has now become largely a thing of the past in the countries that once called themselves Christendom, and many facets of the paganism that Christendom displaced are now reappearing. The philosophical and cultural shift that has taken place can be quickly indicated by the following analysis.

(i) Recognition of divine revelation as a guide to truth has been replaced by a commitment to rational self-sufficiency.

What happened here, in a process starting with the freethinkers of the Renaissance and coming to completion through the Enlightenment and the evolutionary era of the past century and a half, was that human reason, understanding its role in terms of Protagoras' maxim that man is the measure of all things, dissolved away the mystery of the God who speaks. Whereas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries virtually everyone had valued the teaching of the Bible as revelation, by the eighteenth century rationalism had become the Western world's approved intellectual technique, and the claims of Scripture were becoming suspect. Though all save the Deists still allowed that revelation supplements reason, it was assumed that revealed religion would be rationally intelligible in the manner of deistic natural religion, and only those elements in the biblical message that could be justified as reasonable in those terms were taken seriously. Then a watershed was passed: rationalism, after being challenged by Hume, reasserted itself in Kant's critical philosophy, but on a basis that excluded all possibility of God using language to communicate with men. So Scripture was at once downgraded: from being viewed as God's instruction it came to be re-classified as a compendium of human thoughts, feelings and impressions about God, the relation of which to God himself was problematical. This remains the mainstream view of world Protestantism, and in recent years it has made its mark on Roman Catholic Bible work as well. With it should be linked various other manifestations of man's trust in reason during the past two centuries: the positivist secularizing of historical study, whereby dogmatic anti-supernaturalism and methodological insistence that there are no unique events combined to rule out in advance any historical apologetic for Christianity; the secularizing of natural science through the use of mechanistic and evolutionary models, which either barred the Creator out of his world or absorbed him into it; the utilitarian secularizing of morals, which put man's gratification in place of the will of God as the supreme principle of

right action; and Freud's use of clinical reason to instil distrust of theoretical reason, and to diagnose Judaeo-Christian religion as an unhealthy neurosis that needs to be cured by giving up belief in the Creator. Put all these developments together, and the extreme difficulty that thoughtful modern Westerners feel when confronted with the historic claim that Scripture is revealed instruction from God becomes understandable. No authority is recognized any more in the historic view.

(ii) Trust in divine providence as a guarantee of harmony and meaning in the cosmic process has been replaced by a sense of chaos triumphant.

The story here is that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries virtually everyone believed in the reality of God's sovereign providence and the final triumph of his purposes, and accordingly took in their stride the experiences of pain, frustration and waste of which their days were full, often to overflowing. Eighteenth-century rationalists, however, felt it necessary to dispel the mystery of the God who rules even where there is no sign that he is ruling, and to try to demonstrate the harmony of all things under his sway. Leibniz's attempt to show that despite the Lisbon earthquake this is the best of all possible worlds, is the best-known product of this purpose. Soon, however, belief in the essential harmony of things became detached from Christian belief and was given an optimistic secular development in its own right. Examples of this are Adam Smith's belief in a hidden law of economic harmony, which ensures that the endless battles between producer, seller and buyer will turn out in a way that promotes the best interests, economically speaking, of the entire society; Rousseau's belief in the *volonté générale*, the 'general will' indicated by a majority vote, a will that drives unerringly towards the best interests of the group as a whole; the rhapsodies of romantic poets like Wordsworth on the harmony of nature, and of man with nature; Marx's dream of the utopian classless society that would emerge from the inevitable revolutionary process; et cetera. These were secular attempts to maintain the Leibnizian belief in harmony and meaning without belief in Leibniz's God. Twentieth-century developments, however — two world wars; the genocide habit; the nuclear nightmare; the ecological nightmare; the Frankenstein-monster of our technology; the apparent permanence of third-world poverty and famine; et cetera — have knocked the bottom out of this secularized optimism. Artists, the sensitives of society, now show us community life as simply chaotic. For reasons given above, there is no inclination to return to faith in the Bible as revelation, or in the God whom the Bible reveals, the God of inscrutable providence whom we meet in the book of Job. Some have explored the compromise proposal of a finite limited God, but many more, it seems, have given up faith in God's providence entirely, and now cite the fact of evil as the chief objection

to theism. Put these things together, and the extreme difficulty that thoughtful modern Westerners feel when confronted with the historic Christian faith in the meaningfulness of things becomes understandable. Here, too, no authority is recognized any more in the historic position.

(iii) Acknowledgment of biblical absolutes has been replaced by a relativist approach to religious truth and moral values.

This was plainly an inevitable development once the credentials of Scripture as revelation were rejected, and we need not trace out the stages by which it took place. It is more to the point, for our purposes, to take a long, hard look at the mental attitudes that this development has produced both in society and in the churches today. These include moral permissiveness; maximum tolerance, if not indeed actual glorifying, of deviant behaviour; an ethic of self-realization, built on denying the category of sin and affirming that whatever is, is right, because it is natural; a weakening of family ties and family nurture, due to lack of agreed standards for one generation to pass on to another; a working assumption that all religions are essentially the same, and an unwillingness to allow that biblical Christianity could be in any sense final; and a deep and often resentful disillusionment with all actual authority-claims, whoever makes them. Authority has thus been interiorized, in the sense that today's sceptical rebels against external authority-systems are obliged to set up their own insights, thoughts and urges, such as they are, as the decisive guide for their living. It is not so much that folk think themselves to be very wise as that they see nothing else they can do: regarding all external lights as so many accidental and arbitrary relativities, they have only their own inner light left to follow. Thus there come to be as many authorities as there are individuals, and community life reverts to the way it was in the days of the judges, when everyone did what was right in his own eyes, and practical pluralism was the ethos that held sway. Nor can we expect any of this to change as long as relativist views of Christianity's doctrinal and moral absolutes continue to dominate. Relativism is the real seed-bed of the post-Christianity of our time, and the authority of the faith cannot be re-established till this source of dogmatic denial of absolutes has been uprooted.

I am not, I hope, a blind traditionalist, wanting only to turn the clock back; but I do not see how the authority of the God who rules, speaks and loves can ever be re-established without these trends being somehow reversed.

### **The Reconstituting of Authority**

So we come to the existential question: can we conceive a strategy for restoring the authority of Christian faith and morals in the modern West, with a view to the re-hallowing of personal and community life

under God? The Humpty Dumpty of conviction that erected the culture now dissolving all around us has had a great fall; can the king's men ever hope to put Humpty Dumpty together again? Not being a prophet nor a prophet's son, I shall not try to guess what the future may hold; but as one who is professionally required to try to be a theologian, I shall devote this final section of my paper to specifying three conditions without which, as I judge, any present day attempts to restore the authority of Christian faith are bound to fail, and that for two very good reasons. The first reason for failure is: because it will not in that case be the full and authentic Christian faith that we are commending, but a genuinely arbitrary reduction of it to a form that really ought to be dismissed as culturally relative. The second reason for failure is: because it is in any case impossible to commend reduced Christianities convincingly. The idea that the less you take it on you, as a Christian, to affirm and defend, the easier it will be to affirm and defend it, is totally mistaken. Versions of Christianity that have been de-supernaturalized, de-doctrinalized and de-absolutized get torpedoed by the following dilemma: if you believe as much as this, why do you not believe more? But if you believe no more than this, why do you not believe less? This dilemma exposes their arbitrariness, and the realization of that arbitrariness annuls the authority to which they laid claim; for it exposes them as so many private ideas of what Christianity ought to be, in contrast to what it actually is in its biblical and historic form. To discourage us from hankering to go this way, when in fact there is no road this way, and to direct our attention to the only procedure that, in my view, holds out any hope of restoring the true authority of the true faith, I venture now to make the following claim: that restoration of the authority of Christian morals is only possible through a restoring of Christian belief; and a restoring of Christian belief is only possible if, *first*, the full content of that belief is put forward; and, *second*, the full principle of authority in Christianity is affirmed; and, *third*, the full interpretation of Scripture is welcomed. These are the three *conditiones sine qua non* to which I referred a moment ago. Let me speak to them in order.

First, I urge that the authority of Christian faith cannot possibly be restored unless *the full content of that belief is put forward*. Let me try to persuade you of this by asking some questions.

(i) Should we not be proclaiming the *God* whom Paul announced at Athens and delineated more fully in Romans? — eternal, sovereign and free; wholly independent of his creation, though every creature depends on him entirely for everything, in every moment of life; omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent; a just judge of sin, yet a merciful Saviour of sinners; a God of holy wrath, who in love propitiated his own anger against erring humankind through the reconciling death of his Son, Jesus Christ? If we suppressed any of these notes, or projected instead the finite, limited, evolving God of

process theology, would it not be a drastically reduced view of God that we offered? — one that could not, in fact, support the expressions of worship and doxology with which both Testaments abound? Again, should we not be proclaiming the ontological Trinity, which the great body of expositors down the centuries have seen to be implied by what the New Testament says of Jesus and the Spirit? If we settled for any of the brands of neo-Unitarianism that our age has so plentifully brought forth, would we not once more be offering a drastically reduced theology, in which the mediating work of Jesus and the new-creating work of the Spirit could not but be something less than the New Testament says it is? And what authority could attach to such arbitrary diminishings of biblical faith?

(ii) Should we not be urging the *incompetence* of our minds, partly because of our creaturehood and partly because of our fallenness, to disagree with, or improve upon, the account of God that is given in the biblical record and spelt out in the mainstream Christian tradition? Should we not be saying, as classical Lutheran and Reformed theology said before us, that apart from the enlightening of the Spirit, who illuminates to us the truth and wisdom of the Scriptures, our twisted, darkened minds will never know God at all? — not because nature, history and conscience do not, in fact, reveal God, as Karl Barth once seemed to be saying, but because, as Calvin classically explained at the start of his *Institutes*, the perverted minds of men in Adam resist the entrance of the divine light that shines forth from created things and turn it more or less into darkness, and are never able actually to see God, at whom they are looking, till they humbly accept instruction from Scripture. Should we not in this way be seeking to resolve at the level of principle the much-disputed questions of correct theological method, and of the significance of the dialogue — in itself something that is really needed — between Christianity and other faiths? Can we otherwise avoid the *faux pas* of, once again, reducing Christianity?

(iii) Should we not be insisting on the *supernaturalness* of the Christian life and the Christian church? Should we not be challenging the all-too-common assumption that there is no more to new birth than new behaviour, no more to entering the new life than turning over a new leaf? Should we not be echoing Wesley's insistence that new birth is a dynamic, creative act of God, not explicable in terms of anything that went before in a person's life, understandable only as an incorporation into, and thus an extension of, the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ himself? Again with Wesley, should we not be urging that church attenders who have no testimony to supernatural power in their lives, enabling them to practise Christlike virtues of which they were previously incapable, may well be 'almost Christians' who are not quite Christians yet, and still need to be born again? Furthermore, should we not be echoing the Puritan insistence that the church is, in idea at least, the company of the regenerate, and that its

worship and fellowship must always nourish this divine life through the power of the Holy Spirit? If we sanctioned the idea that Christians are just nice guys, and the church is just a specially uplifting type of social club, should we not be drastically diminishing Christ's Christianity? The manifesting of supernatural life carries authority in a very obvious way; the proclaiming of supernatural life may have authority, too; but what authority could ever attach to a version of the faith that scales down the supernatural work of God in Christians and the church and reduces it to vanishing point?

(iv) Should we not be pointing to the *personal reappearance of Jesus Christ* to renew all things as the one sure and certain hope for the Christian, the church and the world? We shall be wise not to embrace too confidently any of the current rival opinions about the circumstances that will precede and surround his *parousia*, but in an age of threatening catastrophe we shall surely be far from wise to suppress this central New Testament theme, and far from faithful if we try to explain it away. What authority will or should attach to a version of Christianity that obscures the fact that the Creator is going to have the last word in his own world?

These few sample questions suffice, I hope, to illustrate the sort of lameness and incoherence to which reduced Christianities lead, and so to justify my conviction that Christianity can only come to men today with the authority of relevant divine truth when the full content of biblical belief is put forward. The reduced Christianities at which I have been tilting were produced yesterday by old-style liberals intoxicated with the moonshine of their own cultural optimism; today, with that cultural optimism a thing of the past, they seem no better than a bad hangover, to be got rid of as soon as possible.

Second, I urge that the authority of Christian faith cannot possibly be restored unless *the full Christian principle of authority* is put forward.

Here we must distinguish two distinct questions. If, first, we ask: from what source is knowledge of God's work, will and ways finally and definitively to be drawn? — the correct answer, in my view, is: the Bible. I cannot here deploy my reasons for thinking that this is something that Christ and his apostles clearly teach, though the case (which I have spelt out fully elsewhere) does, in fact, seem to me unanswerable. Suffice it to say that with Calvin, I believe that God himself convinces Christians that Scripture is his authoritative word of instruction, and with Wesley, I believe that this entails its inerrancy (for it was Wesley who wrote: 'will not the allowing there is any error in Scripture, shake the authority of the whole?' and 'if there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth.')

And it is worth observing, as we are speaking of Wesley, that it was he who verbalized the practical aim and method of Bible study in the following unforgettable sentences:

I am a creature of a day . . . I want to know one thing — the way to heaven. . . . God Himself has condescended to teach the way. . . . He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. . . . I sit down alone: only God is here. In his presence I open, I read His book; for this end, to find the way to heaven. . . . Does anything appear dark and intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights. . . . I then search after and consider parallel passages. . . . I meditate thereon. . . . If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach.<sup>4</sup>

But if we ask the different question: what is the principle of authority in Christianity? — it seems to me that an adequate answer must link together all the following things: the overall claim of God upon us as our Creator and Redeemer; Jesus' requirement that his disciples submit to the God-taught teaching of the Jewish Scriptures (our Old Testament) and of the apostles (our New Testament); the work of the Holy Spirit interpreting, authenticating and applying the canonical written word; the givenness and finality of the gospel message; and, as a pointer to where God's authority is found, the witness of the historic church to what Christian faith and life actually are, the witness that has traditionally been called tradition. For the principle of authority has to do with three things together — the truth by which we live; the loyalty under which we live; and the way in which we come to appreciate both — and it is accordingly wrong to separate the divine authority of Holy Scripture and its gospel from that of the Christ who reigns or the Spirit who interprets and authenticates, or from the authority, human in my view, yet pointing to the divine, of the church that experiences and witnesses. For authority belongs not only to God's truth, but to his means of making that truth known to us also. The ecumenical and pastoral importance of seeing this point is, I think, considerable, and it seems to me that because of our inherited preoccupations with Bible-versus-church and Bible-versus-private-opinion debates it is not always seen as clearly as it needs to be. The historic Protestant habit of playing down the role of tradition as a guide to understanding Scripture and, as Barth said,<sup>5</sup> as preliminary exposition of it is understandable in the light of history, but has nonetheless been decidedly unhelpful at this point.

My thesis, then, is that the fully Christian procedure in this matter of authority is appeal to a trustworthy and trusted Bible as the means of our learning in fellowship the way of life from our trustworthy and trusted Saviour through the illuminating interpretative ministry of the trustworthy Holy Spirit, fruit from which should be sought and will be found in the church's long heritage of faith and life; and I do not see how God's people can ever hope to present a united and convincing witness to the world on any other basis.

Third, I urge that the authority of Christian faith cannot possibly be restored save as *the full interpretation of Scripture is welcomed*. Here, so it seems to me, is where most of the action is in present-day discussion about the Bible. Broadly speaking, there are nowadays in the theological world three main types of interpreters.

(i) There are those, Protestant and Catholic, who uphold the church's historic belief in biblical inspiration. These conservatives mean by interpretation applying to ourselves the doctrinal and moral instruction of the Bible, read as a historically structured, self-authenticating and self-interpreting organism of revealed truth. Patristic expositor-theologians like Chrysostom and Augustine, and Protestant expositor-theologians like Calvin, Owen, Matthew Henry, Charles Hodge, William Hendriksen, and the great, if strange, Karl Barth, have gone this way. It is essentially the approach that Brevard S. Childs calls 'canonical', and defends as such.<sup>6</sup> (Childs, like Barth, declines to ground the instrumentality of Scripture in mediating God's word to his people on an inspiration that entails the inerrancy of Scripture as given; but Barth, at least, invariably treated Scripture as inerrant in every aspect of its witness to God's facts and their meanings, and he who does this cleaves in practice to the method we are describing here, even if his theoretical account of it falls short and his theology raises other problems.)

(ii) There are those, Protestant and Catholic, who view Scripture as witness to God by godly men, who, though they thought wrongly of him at some points, thought rightly and profoundly of him at others. The fallibility of the witnesses, which some highlight and others play down, is universally allowed for, and arguments are constantly being mounted from the coherence of this or that assertion with the main stream of biblical thought to justify accepting the assertion as true. The (curious?) basis of this reasoning is that the Bible as a whole can't be wrong, though individual contributors to it can. However, tracing out the historical growth and coherence of biblical testimony is an important exercise in its own right, and it is all gain that expositors of this school work so hard at it, however little the scepticism that sets them going may seem justifiable. These moderns mean by interpretation distinguishing true views of God and life from the rest of what is in the Bible — isolating its core, essence, overall thrust or central witness, as they would say — and applying to us what they have selected. Their canon of truth and wisdom is thus narrower than the canon of Scripture, and their decisions as to which biblical assertions to discard and which biblical absolutes to relativize are bound to seem arbitrary both to colleagues who, operating on the same principle, make different decisions, and to those who allow weight to the claim that (not some but) all Scripture is God-breathed. The approach I am describing is essentially that of the temporarily derailed 'biblical theology' movement, of which Childs wrote: 'One of the major



factors in the breakdown . . . was its total failure to come to grips with the inspiration of Scripture. The strain of using orthodox Biblical language for the constructive part of theology, but at the same time approaching the Bible with all the assumptions of liberalism, proved in the end to cause an impossible tension.” Sadly, the large ecumenical community of scholars who still follow this method seem not to see the intrinsic oddity of what they are doing when they pick and choose within the Bible; but it is, of course, always hard to discern oddity in what has come to be an accepted communal activity.

(iii) There are those, mainly, though not invariably, Protestant, for whom the New Testament (the Old is a separate problem) is a culturally determined verbalizing of ineffable existential encounters with God. These interpreters make two assumptions. The first is that God does not communicate with men through language. The second is that biblical thoughts about relations with him are ‘mythological’ constructs in the sense that they function not as windows through which we watch God at work and so learn his ways, but as mirrors in which we see reflected the minds of the men whose encounters with God the myths objectify. What we learn from this is precisely their ‘self-understanding’ — which, indeed, we may then come to share as our living, though voiceless, Creator similarly encounters us. This is the well-known theme of Bultmannian hermeneutics, on which busy scholars have rung many changes in our time.

Now my contention here is that the full meaning of Scripture can only be found by adhering to method (i). Methods (ii) and (iii) fail, either by relativizing or by outrightly denying things that Scripture presents as revealed truth; thus they fall short of achieving a full interpretation of God’s message in the text. Not that they attain no truth at all. They embody grains of truth that exponents of method (i) must not forget — that Scripture is no less human for being inspired, for instance, and that its verbal form is conditioned throughout by cultural backgrounds very different from our own — but as alternatives to method (i) they fail in the way described. Where they dominate, neither the Triune God nor the gospel of Christ nor God’s moral will are likely to be clearly known, and elements of the biblical message will inevitably be suppressed. Faithfulness, fruitfulness and, I think, authority depend on the church adhering to method (i) — which means, among other things, that we all must stop retreating from the bugaboo of an untheological inerrancy and once more embrace the whole Bible as the written Word of God, to be interpreted on the assumption that it neither misinforms nor misleads. Only so, in my view, can our testimony carry the full authority of God, and gain full authority with men.

Such, then, as I see them, are the intellectual *sine qua non* conditions of any reconstitution of the authority of Christianity in our time. (With the moral conditions of any such reconstitution I do not attempt

to deal here.) I am saying that we shall have to put our own house in order theologically before we can expect modern men to want to come and live in it — and since our house, as I called it, is really the house of God himself, this is surely a major matter. Whether God will pour out his Spirit to revive his church and make the world listen to its message in our day we do not know; what we can know, however, is what would have to happen within the church in order for that message to be authoritatively spoken, and a credible reconstitution of divine authority be set before the world. It is to this that I have addressed my paper, and to this, I judge, that we all need most urgently to give our minds.

## NOTES

1. This paper was first presented as a lecture at a transdenominational, Methodist inspired conference at the University of Notre Dame in November 1982 and was published subsequently in *Cruix*, the journal of Regent College, Vancouver in December 1982.
2. W. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, I, IV, lines 27–30.
3. N. Curnock, ed., *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, standard edition, 8 vols., Kelly, London 1909–1916, VI, p 117.
4. H. Sugden, ed., *Wesley's Standard Sermons*, 2 vols., Epworth, London 1921, I, pp 31–32.
5. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1.2., T and T Clark, Edinburgh 1956, pp 620–60.
6. Bevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, Fortress, Philadelphia 1979, pp. 69–83 and exegesis in his commentary on Exodus, Westminster, Philadelphia 1974. James Barr attacks his approach in *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism*, OUP, London 1983, Appendix II, pp 130–66.
7. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, Westminster, Philadelphia 1974, p 103.

**The Reverend Dr. James I. Packer** is Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Regent College, Vancouver.