

SCRIPTURE, TRADITION AND AUTHORITY IN THE SECOND CENTURY

BRUCE SHELLEY, Ph.D.

Jesus Christ is the supreme authority for all Christians. There has never been any doubt about this fact in the historic church. As the incarnate Son he taught as one having authority (Mark 1:22). He cast out unclean spirits (Mark 1:27); he forgave sins (Mark 2:10); he modified the provisions of the Law (Matt. 5:21, 27, 33); and he claimed that he would be man's final judge (John 5:27) — all on the basis of his own divine authority. Standing at history's mid-point, the period of the incarnation, and at history's end, the second advent, he sums up in himself God's purposes for humanity.

During this age, the period between the incarnation and the parousia, God grants to relative authorities a claim upon man's obedience. In the civil realm he has given power to earthly rulers (Romans 13:1-2). In the functioning of the church he distributes a measure of authority to leaders (II Cor. 10:13). And for the teaching of the church he has called and endowed select men called apostles (Acts 1:8, 21-22).

Christian theology during this time faces a double task. It must "hold fast the form of sound words" (II Tim. 1:13) and it must witness of Christ "unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). By preserving and propagating the first century message, it fulfills an apostolic ministry. By going into all the world in every age, it carries out a catholic mission. If it is to be true it must preach the Word; if it is to be relevant it must speak to the times. Christian theology is thus a blending of the changeless with the changing.

The classical "protestant" approach to authority, while not ignoring the development of doctrine, tries to anchor theology in the changeless by emphasizing the apostolic witness of Scripture. The "catholic" approach to authority, while professing to be truly apostolic, underscores the *magisterium*, the living authority of the church. Hence the problem of Scripture and tradition. A brief statement of these two positions will afford us a perspective in the consideration of second-century views of doctrinal authority.

The "protestant" position, classically expressed, for example, in the Westminster Confession of Faith, asserts that Scripture is the rule of faith and practice for Christians. The authority of Scripture, which calls for faith and obedience, depends neither upon the testimony of men nor upon that of the church. God, who alone is Truth, is its author and its witness. He, by a work of the Holy Spirit in our minds and hearts, persuades us of the divine authority of the Bible.

Though the Scriptures speak with this authority, they do not eliminate the need for ordering some circumstances of church life, such as matters of worship and church government, according to the light of "nature" and Christian prudence. In a word, there is a legitimate place for ecclesiastical tradition. Only let the church constantly bring its practices and customs to the test of Scripture so that if any prove contrary to Holy Writ they may be abandoned.

Nor does the authority of Scripture eliminate the ministry of gifted teachers of the Word. All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor clear to all. Only these things which are necessary for salvation are clearly presented. Therefore God has given to some men within the church the gift of teaching the truth of God. By explaining difficult passages in the light of clear ones, these teachers mean-

ingly minister the Word. But their infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture remains Scripture itself.

The Word, so interpreted, is that canon bequeathed to the church of all ages by the Lord and his apostles. The determination of which books and how many of them carry divine authority was a long process; but the important thing to understand is that when a decision was rendered it came, not from councils or Popes, but from the faithful everywhere submitting to the apostolic character of the writing. The books were not so much the product as the basis of the churches' decision.

The "catholic" position represented by *The Catholic Encyclopedia* article on "Tradition and the Living Magisterium" asks the Protestant, "By what right do you rest on Sunday, not Saturday? Or, how can you consider infant baptism as valid? In short, do you not have certain practices which are not strictly biblical? There must be a place given to tradition." The Catholic believes that the Bible is the Church's book. Its canonicity and its interpretation must be by the Church. The Bible simply does not carry with it the guarantee of its divinity, its authenticity or its meaning. These must come from some other source, the Church. Therefore, the believer must make an act of faith in the intermediary authority between the Word of God and his reading.

But that, argues the "catholic", is as it ought to be. God never intended Scripture to be the sole authority for faith and practice. He gave to his Church certain other revealed truths which complete those from the Bible. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) called these "unwritten traditions from the apostles." But in more recent days, since the Vatican Council (1870), the Roman Catholic looks upon tradition less in terms of unwritten apostolic teaching and more in terms of revealed truth living in "the mind of the Church," or preferably in "the present thought of the Church in continuity with her traditional thought." From the many obscure and confused formulas out of the past the teaching office of the Church, called the *magisterium*, adopts the true and rejects the false. Thus tradition has a double meaning for the Catholic. It is both the divine truth coming down to the present generation in the "mind of the church" and its guardianship by the organ of the living *magisterium*, which is for Roman Catholics the episcopate headed by the Pope.

Both unwritten tradition and the Bible come under this guardianship. The Church through the *magisterium* determines the canon, specifies the rules for interpreting the Bible, and even restricts the use of the Bible and its publication if it considers "the endless discussion" and "the abuses of every kind" a danger to the faithful. Thus the final authority in the Catholic position is the living voice of the Church. It not only presents the truth, it also imposes it upon the faithful.

The Roman Catholic doctrine of tradition, which amounts to a theory not unlike continuous inspiration, permits the Church to develop and impose teachings which have no basis in Scripture. When the bodily assumption of Mary was promulgated in 1950 it was imposed upon the faithful as a binding dogma even though it was devoid of any biblical support. Clearly from this instance it is not necessary for the Roman Catholic Church to base its dogmas on Scripture. It is enough that Mary is full of grace and free from the curse of sin. The dogma, it is argued, is part of the total theology of Mary and intimately linked with the idea that Christ and Mary are inseparable. This is sufficient.

Thus the Bible can be ignored or overridden in the name of the living *magisterium*. Is this not proof of the statement: whenever another source of knowledge is placed alongside Scripture as being of equal value, Scripture is eventually relegated to the background?

The sharp difference between the "protestant" and the "catholic" approach to the norms of doctrine is clear. To one the church is under the Word; to the other, the Word is under the Church. We must now ask, To what degree does the second-century witness support or refute either position?

An extended glance will reveal that the second century is not a "protestant" period as some evangelicals understand that term. With a few important exceptions, evangelical Protestants (in contrast to liberal Protestants, who have surrendered the supernatural character of the Bible) are not characterized by the "churchmanship" which appears in the early centuries. In attempting to be contemporaries of our Lord and his apostles, they tend to minimize the importance of that community in which the Bible is authoritative. They take little or no account of the church in history. But the Bible is not the Koran or the Book of Mormon. It did not come down directly from heaven. Both the writing of the New Testament and the process of determining the canon took place within the living experience of the church, a fact "catholics" are quick to point out.

No one acquainted with the facts will deny that tradition was chronologically prior to the New Testament Scriptures, provided that it is made clear that it is *apostolic* tradition which is prior. Tradition in the sense of "handing down" the truth of God was at first oral. Only later did it include the writings of the apostles alongside the proclamation of the *kerygma*. The convert's acceptance of the Christian message was expressed in a baptismal confession which formed the nucleus of the faith. This too was practiced from the earliest days of the church. Thus the gospel message and the baptismal confession in the life of the church and in the experience of the individual Christian preceded the apostolic writings as a standard of truth.

In addition, the church had her ordered life and worship before her writings. The dictum that "it is the controversial which is discussed, the accepted which is assumed" applies especially to the silences of the New Testament concerning the sacraments and the ministry. Though we know very little about early liturgical (if we do not think of that term too narrowly) practices, it is enough to indicate that some simple liturgy preceded the apostolic writings. Such practices must have informally exerted an influence upon the minds of believers in matters of doctrine. Certainly the gospel was visible from the first in the baptism of believers and in their subsequent fellowship around the Lord's Supper.

But, perhaps most important of all, the acceptance of the books of the canon themselves took place within the worshiping and witnessing community. While it cannot be doubted that the test above all others for the canonicity of a book was its authorship or sponsorship by an apostle, it would be misleading to suppose that this was the only consideration. That Christian books were used in public worship by Justin's time is clearly stated by the Apologist (I Apol. 67); and at least by Origen's day the use of a book by the churches supported its claim to canonical status even when its apostolic authorship was not accepted. The response of the churches, while not determinative, did count for something.

This combined evidence—oral preaching, liturgical practice and tests of canonicity—indicates that the Bible was in some sense the church's book. This fact raises certain questions: Has evangelical Protestantism, particularly in its American expression, made enough room for history? Do we have an adequate doctrine of the church? Is there no legitimate place for tradition? We shall return to these questions after considering to what degree the second century was "catholic" in its view of authority.

The witness of the second century conflicts with the "catholic" position at four points: 1) tradition, 2) succession, 3) canonicity, and 4) exegesis.

In regard to the first point, if the uses of the word *paradosis* (*traditio*) suggest anything, it is that the early church did not think of tradition in terms of "the mind of the church." Its united witness is that the tradition, which is normative in the church, is apostolic. There is no suggestion that the rule of faith or the early confessions contained any doctrine not also found in the Scriptures. And the idea that tradition "completes" the Scripture is nowhere to be found.

Whatever influence the liturgical tradition may have exerted upon doctrine, such tradition had no authority for anything ruled out by Scripture.¹ Both Irenaeus and Tertullian, who were the first to use *traditio* in the sense of ecclesiastical traditions, make this clear. An ecclesiastical observance may be established provided that it is agreeable to God (*The Chaplet* 4). If it lacks Scriptural warrant then good reason must be assigned for it; but if it is contrary to Scripture it must be abandoned (*On Fasting* 10). Clearly by Irenaeus' time apostolic tradition and Scripture were coterminous.

Secondly, the "catholic" often cites the episcopal succession to which Irenaeus and Tertullian appeal as evidence for the Church's guardianship of the Bible. That a succession argument was used is not questioned. The argument was the only weapon readily available with which to meet the Gnostic claim to a secret and unwritten tradition. But the testimony is a two-edged sword. While it does indicate Irenaeus' and Tertullian's "churchmanship" and the prestige of the Church at Rome, it was primarily a means to an end; namely, to determine which message, Gnostic or orthodox, was apostolic. The argument does not imply, as A. C. Headlam long ago pointed out, any succession by ordination.² No doubt the bishops were ordained, but there is no idea that the validity of their ordination depended upon their place in the succession or that the succession depended upon any spiritual gifts received at ordination.

Only later was continuity of teaching, the second-century argument, replaced by the identity of the authority, the "catholic" argument, and by the theory that the Pope was the successor, not of the apostles, but of Peter.

Alexandria, representing another principle entirely, shows that the argument was far from universal. There succession meant a series of teachers in the church rather than a list of bishops. Apparently the succession argument served best as an antidote to the Gnostic peril in the West. But even there it had its limitations. It assumed the orthodoxy of the presbyters and it had nothing to say about conflicts between "apostolic sees" themselves. Such deficiencies led in time to its abandonment in favor of synodal action.

In any case, the second-century argument, designed to determine which teaching was apostolic, was not thought of as a source of information which supplemented the Scriptures. Hegessipus, Irenaeus and Tertullian nowhere suggest that teachers in the episcopal line delivered any truth other than that found in the canon. Orthodox "tradition" was either raw material which became Scripture or the explication of what was contained in Scripture. It was the Gnostic who used the "catholic" argument that the truth of Scripture cannot be understood by those ignorant of a secret tradition independent of Scripture and who thereby made unwritten tradition the ultimate authority for doctrine.

Thirdly, that which we know of second-century writings which were independent of Scripture strongly supports the unique priority of written apostolic tradition

rather than affirming the presence of unwritten apostolic tradition. The apocryphal literature rejected by the early church shows that by the middle of the second century would-be authors of lives of Christ had no other trustworthy contact with the apostolic witness than through the Gospels and other New Testament works. Moreover, even within orthodox circles the "mind of the church" was subapostolic in some important respects. Recent investigation has shown, for instance, how the generation following the apostles failed to grasp the Pauline doctrine of grace. And yet the selection of the twenty-seven books that now comprise our New Testament give the greatest place to Paul. Thus the reception of the Pauline corpus as canonical set the doctrine of justification by faith forever before the church by lifting it out of the quagmire of the "mind of the church."

One is always inclined to ask the modern Roman Catholic why any canon was established at all. If the church is not under the Word, then why is a Word necessary except to add to those "formulas and monuments from the past" which provide the raw material for forming today's "mind of the church." What kind of "rule" is it which does not rule? What sort of standard is it which is not standard? As Oscar Cullmann argues, if the fixing of the canon had been carried out on the assumption that the Church's living *magisterium* should be set alongside or above the canon, then the reason for the creation of a canon becomes unintelligible.³

But can it be argued that the establishment of the canon itself was by the living *magisterium*? The Roman Catholic position regards canonicity as "the correlative of inspiration, being the extrinsic dignity belonging to writings which have been officially declared as of sacred origin and authority."⁴ If by "officially declared" the Church of Rome means either conciliar action or papal decree then there is no historical evidence for such action in the second century when at least twenty of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were accepted as canonical. Whatever may have been the motives behind it the approval of these books came from the scattered assemblies themselves, not from Popes or councils whose voices are conspicuously silent.

Only two councils could possibly be claimed by Roman Catholics for this "official declaration." In 382 Pope Damasus summoned Jerome, the noted biblical scholar, to Rome to participate in a council of eclectic character. From this council came a list of books corresponding to our present New Testament. But this council was in no sense ecumenical and the principle of the canon had long before been established and the books been in use.

The other council is the Council of Trent which gave in Session IV, 1546, the most explicit statement of the Roman Catholic canon to this day. The fact that the statement came after 1500 years of church history causes no particular problem for the Roman Catholic. John Henry Newman argues in his *The Development of Christian Doctrine* that "from the first age of Christianity its teaching looked toward those ecclesiastical dogmas, afterward recognized and defined." Often only after considerable time do such teachings become "so pronounced as to justify their definition."⁵ Hence, whenever the definition of the canon came, its promulgation by the Church guaranteed the papal guardianship from the beginning—evidence to the contrary notwithstanding.

Fourthly, in regard to exegesis, this authority of the Church carries over to the interpretation of Scripture. The Pope must have been the authoritative interpreter of Holy Scripture in the second century because the Vatican Council in 1870 declared it so. But no such evidence is forthcoming from the second-century witnesses. Admittedly, Rome, according to Irenaeus and Tertullian, was the leading

voice of the apostolic tradition; but these Fathers nowhere suggest that this prestige carried with it any gift of infallibility. On the contrary, in his case against the Gnostics, Irenaeus makes a special point of the Bible's clarity concerning the major doctrines of the faith, the very point made by the Westminster Confession.

In the end the problem of Scripture and tradition, the problem of authority, merges into the wider problem of the nature of the church. The Roman Catholic considers the Church the Body of Christ. His divine life is a continuing reality through the organs of continuity, the sacraments and the ministry. Dispensed through divine teaching and through sacramental grace, this life belongs to that divine order established in the incarnation of the Son of God. Each succeeding generation receives it through properly ordained bishops, successors of the apostles, and especially through the Pope, the successor of Peter. This hierarchical institution founded by Christ in Peter is infallibly guarded from error by a special grace exercised by the Pope when he speaks *ex cathedra* (officially) on matters of faith or morals. Under these conditions, whatever the Church declares must be right because the only test of right is what the Church declares.

The evangelical Protestant views the church and its authority from the central and controlling authority of the gospel. He must believe everything in the degree in which it is essential to the new life created by that gospel. Thus the church, insofar as it is expressive of the good news of salvation and itself created by the power of it, shares in its authority. So it is with the ministry. It is an office not an order. Being drawn from the gospel and created to serve the gospel, it is above all a ministry of the Word.

Is the evangelical committed to an unqualified biblicism? Is there no place for "tradition" in any sense? If in unwritten tradition the church is not addressed but is in conversation with itself, as Karl Barth puts it,⁶ is that conversation valueless? Must the evangelical be a rebel against the communion of saints and 2000 years of spiritual history?

If our final authority is God, who reveals himself through the gospel, then we must recognize the authority of the church, created by and the herald of the gospel. Salvation is into a family, a kingdom, a body, and a church. The soul truly humbled by the good news of salvation will not think of limiting God's truth to his own small experience. Furthermore, complete rejection of tradition is an impossibility. Any one who will carefully examine his own denomination will find certain characteristics which fail to rally explicit New Testament support. But isn't that what one would expect in any religious group which takes seriously history and human need?

G. L. Prestige makes a distinction between the early Christian use of tradition as *paradosis* and as *didaskalia*.⁷ The former was especially associated with apostolic truth. The latter denoted an accretion, enlargement and confirmation of the faith. Any religious movement which operates within human affairs and is not concerned solely with individualistic mysticism will develop its own *didaskalia*. What of Sunday Schools, missionary societies, Easter and instrumental music in worship services of our own day? Must these be jettisoned as "unbiblical"?

At the same time we cannot assume that every development or enlargement of the faith is a healthy one. If Christianity is true, it is because it has received an unchanging gospel. While the church ought to translate the biblical message into the language of the day, it must recognize that while doing so it is not binding future generations of believers to its testimony in the same way the apostles bound future ones to theirs. If the church is to have its proper sphere of authority it must

not usurp the authority of Christ and his Word. "Our Savior is our authority," writes P. T. Forsythe. "Our mediatorial Christ leaves no room for a mediatorial Church."⁸ The continuing life of the church is set under the authority of the Word of God, mediated by the unique ministry of the apostles.

But how does the evangelical Christian avoid replacing the personal Pope by a paper one? Is the finality of the Bible in any sense compatible with the Lordship of Christ? It is. The gospel through which the believer confronts Christ is uniquely expressed in the Bible. The appeal to divine truth in the Scriptures during the second century can be explained in no other way. Instead of obscuring Christ, as the church has often done, the Bible reveals him. This is because the writers were more than "eminent Christians." They were heralds of God's truth, unique instruments of God's self-disclosure. And the Spirit who revealed the truth to them bears witness to that truth in the hearts of believers.

Thus Word, Spirit, and church find their proper place. The Spirit is the teacher; the church is the taught; and the Word of God is that which is taught.

Only by the recognition of the proper place of each of these can evangelicalism counter the competitive claims to men's allegiance. Is the Gnostic crisis, created by the blending of a professed adherence to the Bible with the preaching of "another gospel," forever dead? No, in her *Science and Health* Mrs. Eddy claims, "As adherents of Truth, we take the inspired Word of the Bible as our sufficient guide to eternal life."⁹ Is this not revived Gnosticism? What can simple biblicism say? Will not debate with the modern cults end in a draw, each side professing endlessly to give the true interpretation?

Second-century Christians would label modern cultic doctrines perversions of the gospel which created the church, of the truth professed in baptism and of the rule of faith everywhere believed by the faithful. In a word, cultic doctrines fail to meet the test of apostolic tradition. But tradition in this sense is not to be looked upon as a continuous source of truth alongside the writings of the apostles. This tradition is Christianity itself, a legacy from the apostles, embedded in all the organs of the church's institutional life. It is, at the same time, the purport of Scripture, and a guide for proper exegesis of its details. Where this message, the gospel, is preached and visibly presented in the sacraments (or ordinances), there is the church and all truth necessary for eternal salvation.

Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary
Denver, Colorado

FOOTNOTES

1. Irenaeus' *Epistle to Florinus*, Eusebius, E. H., V. 20, 6.
2. A. C. Headlam, *The Doctrine of the Church and Christian Reunion*, p. 126.
3. O. Cullmann, "Tradition," *The Early Church*, p. 92.
4. G. J. Reid, "Canon of the Holy Scriptures," *Catholic Encyclopedia* III, p. 267.
5. Chap. IV, Introduction.
6. *Church Dogmatics*, I, 1, p. 118.
7. *Fathers and Heretics*, p. 5.
8. *The Principle of Authority*, p. 372.
9. M. B. Eddy, *Science and Health*, p. 497.