Church Authority and Private Judgment[1]

By The Rev. D. F. Horsefield

CHURCH Authority *and* Private Judgment. . . . "It all depends," as the learned Judge would say, "on what you mean by *and*". St. George *and* the Dragon means that the two cannot permanently co-exist; one most presently liquidate the other. Conservative *and* Labour means that one or other must be in the ascendancy, but that their different approaches have broadly the same goal, and on fundamental issues they will collaborate even if they do not coalesce. Marks *and* Spencer means (I presume) a partnership of complementary ideas for the common good. The first example indicates antagonism, the second balance of power, the third an intimate partnership.

Now it would be the easiest thing for me to say—as you all want me to say—that one of the glories of Protestant Churchmanship lies in the maintenance of the ultimate supremacy of Private Judgment, led by the Spirit and based on the Word of God, over all forms of external authority. Very well: now I have said it—not indeed merely because you want me to, for such a motive would be quite contrary to my cantankerous nature—but because I believe it to be true. But I do not see how we can confer on that rather trite remark—unless any member of the audience wishes to controvert it. But I remember—for my own admonition—that when Micaiah, the son of Imlah, once delivered an address before an audience almost as distinguished as this, he too began by saying exactly what he knew they wanted him to say; but he shortly went on (urged thereto, be it noted, by the Chairman of the gathering) to say something quite different, and much less acceptable, for which he was unceremoniously hustled off the platform. And I am fairly certain that if Micaiah had been a candidate in a modern Parliamentary election he would inevitably have forfeited his deposit, because of a certain strain of tactless obstinacy that ran through his character and evinced itself in his public utterances.

I suppose that I am expected to develop my remarks partly against the background of the proposed Draft Canons which for so long have been, and certainly ought to be, in the centre of much of our thinking, as they may well be the cause of much of our disquiet. I find, both in the Convocations of the Provinces and throughout the Church as a whole, a steadily-waning enthusiasm—or I might put it more strongly and say a steadily-growing distaste—shared by almost all, except a few legalists, for the whole process of Revision. I am not now raising the question of the wisdom, or the urgency, or even the necessity, of the work: that is a different matter from recording the feelings with which we engage in it. This distaste is certainly not confined to any one school of thought: if Evangelicals fear the opening of the door, Anglo-Catholics dread the clipping of the wings: certainly as far as the latter body is concerned, as the implications become clearer, so

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the anxiety deepens; they are suspicious of that selfsame Church Authority which provides half the title of this paper: and I think I ought to say that whatever may be the effect on the Church in its corporate aspect, as far as personal practice is concerned the individual Anglo-Catholic would be no less gravely affected than the individual Evangelical if the drafts were approved in their present form. Notice that I am not speaking of the balance of doctrine in the Church as a whole—that again is a different matter: I refer merely to the compulsive effect on the specific actions of the individual minister. The anxiety felt by instructed Evangelicals has reference to the safeguarding, in its official formularies, of the Protestantism of the whole Church of England: and this fact (and I believe it to be a fact) reveals the curious but significant situation that we Evangelicals who dislike a great deal that is associated with the Revision of the Canons, do so in fear lest some of them may affect not so much our personal actions as the *ethos* of our Church: that is to say, in that regard we stand, and rightly, for Church Authority rather than for Private Judgment.

I say "rightly"; for, surprising though it may appear to some, I believe that this is an integral part of Evangelicalism. For myself, I hold not that the Evangelical doctrine is a legitimate or desirable element in the Church, but that it is in fact the true doctrine of the Church of England: and that I am a loyal and stalwart Churchman precisely because I am a determined Evangelical. If I had my way, there would be no antithesis between Church Authority and Private Judgment: but whereas the individual Roman Catholic is taught to think (in so far as he thinks at all) as the Church bids him, I should turn it the other way round and say that the whole Church should maintain the opinions and declare the doctrines that my private judgment avers to be the Truth.

Now all that is by way of exploring the ground. A parenthetic note is perhaps needed here: that we speak a good deal about "Faith and Order", as a convenient division, but it should be remembered that in the minds of many, the two are (rightly or wrongly) not wholly separable, and Church Order is to them—at least in measure—a matter of the "givenness" of Faith.

1. *Church Authority and Private Judgment in Matters of Faith.* I was walking the other day through the streets of a Parish which has always stood, and stands to-day, for a quite uncompromising Protestantism: here week by week from the pulpit is proclaimed the sovereign Grace of God, the cardinal doctrine of Justification by Faith, and the right of every man to a direct approach to his Maker. Within a stone's throw of the church there stand two other buildings on opposite corners of the street; one is a tabernacle of Elim Four-Square Gospellers, the other a conventicle of Jehovah's Witnesses. Now both these sects—the one eccentric, the other blasphemously heretical—claim and maintain the rights of Private Judgment over against Church Authority; they both deduce (by whatever tortuous unreasoning) their mutually contradictory tenets from the pages of Holy Scripture, and both stand for doctrines which we hold to be in the one case unbalanced and in the other utterly false. In face of these facts, we may well be thankful that in the Thirty-nine Articles,

as well as in the Church Catechism, we have a Church Authority—the authority not of compulsion but of wise because Scriptural guidance—on which we both should and can rest our confidence. Evangelicals hold, then, that in matters of faith and fundamental doctrine, the authoritative teaching of the Church, so long as it is itself based on the teaching of the Word of God, is a safeguard against misinterpretation, corruption, and heresy : we cannot avoid that conclusion, and we ought rather to rejoice in declaring it.

2. *Church Authority and Private Judgment in Matters of Order.* In Public Worship, we, more than either the Modernist or the Anglo-Catholic, delight to recognize, and to submit to, the authority of " the form in the said book prescribed " : just as I hope that in our general administration we accept the standards of the Canons Ecclesiastical of 1603-4, so far as they are not nullified by developing custom or subsequent legislation. We believe our Prayer Book to be scriptural (for that is always and in everything our final criterion), we find it to be orderly, we feel it instructive, devotional, edifying and stimulating ; we are neither dissenters from its doctrine nor nonconformists to its practice. But I believe that we are challenged on that very ground : most of us would like (probably most of us in fact indulge in) a modicum of elasticity in the conduct of Divine Service ; and it is a matter for consideration as to how in this regard Church Authority and Private Judgment can be harmonized.

The proposed Draft Canon XIII makes indeed a rather guarded proposal : I have no doubt that it will be subject to a good deal of amendment, as it has been of criticism. But negative criticism unaccompanied by a corresponding positive proposal (a favourite device of a certain type of both political and ecclesiastical controversialist) is always unhelpful and not seldom cowardly : and it would help greatly if as an alternative to this proposed Canon, some specific suggestion were made to cover (e.g.) those who omit the third of the Long Exhortations at the Holy Communion, or the Athanasian Creed on the appointed days, or who insert additional prayers after the Third Collect, and yet wish (as I wish) to remain in full loyalty to the Declaration of Assent, as well as to close the door against unlicensed deviationism.

It will be noted that in this last paragraph I have introduced into our deliberations something which might be considered strictly extraneous : for, inasmuch as the Book of Common Prayer is a Schedule annexed to the Act of Uniformity, it could be argued that it is the fruit not of Church Authority so much as of secular legislation ; although it should be remembered that it was accepted by the Convocations before it came before Parliament, and that even in 1662—and certainly when the English Prayer Book began to take shape—the dichotomy between Church and State was much less sharp than it is to-day. But, having thus admitted the supervisory (and, as we saw in 1927 and 1928, the overriding) power of the State, it is proper to ask, " Where then is the fount of Church Authority, properly so-called ? " It is of course tempting to reply *tout court* " In Holy Scripture " : and there can be no manner of doubt that this is fundamentally the right answer. But Jehovah's Witnesses make the same appeal—and make

it with a conviction as ineradicable as it is wrong-headed : and I suppose all heretics from Hymenæus and Philetus onwards would make a similar claim. *That* answer then (it appears) while essential as the only *foundation* of either Faith or Order, is not the complete structure ; for while on the one hand no building can be rightly erected on wrong foundations (and other can no man lay than that is laid), is it not a fact that the strength and exactness of the foundation does not necessarily ensure of itself either the correct form or the final stability of the superstructure ? Surely (as St. Paul recognized) something of responsibility remains still, both in judgment and in action, to be shouldered by the builders: " Let every man take heed," said he, " how he buildeth thereupon ".

Those of us who have been called to the Sacred Ministry declared at our Ordination our determination to " teach nothing as required of necessity to eternal salvation but that which we are persuaded may be concluded and proved by the Scripture ". You will note that the form of this declaration sets three modifications as against an " absolute " declaration such as would pledge us to teach " nothing but that which is written in the Scripture ".

1. " To teach nothing as required of necessity to eternal salvation " : presumably in our further teaching of those who have already been brought to embrace that salvation we follow the precepts of the Epistle to the Hebrews and go beyond the confines of minimum necessity—" Leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection, not laying again the foundation. . . ."

2. " That which you are persuaded " : here private judgment enters in to assess the validity of deductions ; this creates the difficulty at which I have already hinted and to which I shall advert again in a moment.

3. " May be proved by " is obviously broader than " is set forth in " ; it connotes some kind of exposition, derivation, and synthesis. It is perhaps needless to cite cases indicating that we do in fact avail ourselves of these modifications in our preaching and teaching ; it is debatable, for example, whether or not the Rite of Confirmation, and the threefold Ministry, are specifically enjoined in the Bible : anyway, I do not think that in our teaching about these we should be likely to exclude from the possibility of eternal salvation all those who reject them ! And even if you were to do no more than go through the several clauses of the Nicene Creed, you would find therein statements which are not quoted *verbatim* from the New Testament, nor even set out in it in formal terms, and which may not (in isolation from one another) be severally essential to salvation ; but which nevertheless we are persuaded may be concluded and proved by the Scripture, and which we teach as Truth.

But we must not shirk that same difficulty, consequential on the exercise of Private Judgment, to which I have already twice referred. What about—for example—the two Dominical Sacraments ? We hold them—in the words of the Catechism—" as generally necessary to salvation " : but the Quakers, and the Salvation Army, can find no sure warrant in Holy Scripture for such necessity, and therefore deny

it. Conversely, certain sects hold that Baptism is valid only if ministered by total immersion ; which we in our turn deny, whatever we may think of the symbolic value or practical desirability of the Rite so administered. Yet adherents of these bodies claim, as we do, that their assertions, and their denials, may be proved from Holy Scripture : can we resolve the problem ? The famous Vincentian Canon, alas, has little validity to-day ; for I fear that there is hardly anything that among Christians is " *semper, ubique, ab omnibus* ".

I must be quite blunt here in saying what I believe to be true : that this is where the tradition of Church Authority comes in : by which I mean the steady and coherent *corpus* which we may call the " deposit of faith " as embodied, regulated and formulated by and in the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, traceable directly to, and drawing its authority from, the Scriptures of Truth. We assert the continuity of the Church—our Church—from the earliest days : and as a corollary to that assertion we claim (in Article XX) that " the Church . . . hath authority in controversies of Faith "—an authority which we cannot concede—certainly in a like degree—to any other Christian body without landing ourselves back in the very dilemma from which we seek to escape. And we reinforce our position in the words of Article XXIV, " Of the Traditions of the Church," by declaring that " whosoever by his private judgment doth openly break the traditions and ceremonies of the Church which be not repugnant to the Word of God " (notice again and always that saving and determining clause) " and be ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly ".

It seems clear then (and here is really the nub of the whole matter) that the function of Private Judgment is not to formulate independent doctrine, but rather to evaluate the sources, and the validity, of that very Church Authority which loyalty reciprocally bids us acknowledge. But it is probable that (unless our Churchmanship is a matter merely of tradition—unless, that is to say, we are C. of E. because we do not happen to be anything else) such an evaluation was made before we committed ourselves to full and active membership of the Church at all. Our Church is a voluntary association (humanly speaking, that is) : and, having considered the basis of the authority to which we have submitted ourselves, our further business in the exercise of our Private Judgment is (in this regard) threefold : to study the channels through which that authority is mediated ; and to contribute as best we may to its strengthening ; which having been done, the further duty remains of acceptance of its discipline.

1. *How is the authority of the Church ministered* ? This is not really an easy question—because we combine order with liberty in a way which makes codification difficult. Roman Catholics have their Pope, Methodists their Conference, Salvationists their High Council ; and so on : where do you look for authoritative pronouncements on matters of Faith and Order in the Church of England ? Not to the Lambeth Conference, for there the representatives of the Church of England are in a minority—at the Conference of 1948 two-thirds of the Bishops attending were not members of our Church ; and in any case

that Conference exercises no control and wields no power. Our own regular "Bishops' Meetings" similarly are purely advisory and consultative, and as a rule no statement is issued. We have, however, our Convocations and Church Assembly; and to these bodies I must for a moment direct your attention. Let us remind ourselves immediately that all their decisions are both in theory and in fact subject directly or indirectly to parliamentary control and always directly to the Royal Assent: and that in both bodies the majority of members are elected by the Church which they represent, and serve. Any talk about "going behind Parliament" on the one hand, and (on the other) of dictatorship by officials, is not in accordance with the facts. But I would make two comments by way of criticism.

(a) I believe that the Church of England is the only branch of the Anglican Communion in which representatives of the Laity do not regularly sit in Synod with those of the clergy. This defect—and it is a grave one—is at present being examined by a strong Commission with a view to its rectification; my forecast is that some fairly drastic proposals (in spite of constitutional difficulties) will presently be forthcoming. But in the meantime members of the Laity should remember that participation in Synodical Government is a very much more serious matter than sharing in routine administration; the House of Laity of the Church Assembly has found it a good deal less easy to debate the Canons than to consider the Budget, and it is the urgent duty of the faithful laity to reach at least the same degree of theological competence as is the proud possession, for example, of the laity of the Church of Scotland.

(b) I do not think that the House of Laity of the Church Assembly adequately represents the laity of the Church. This is, of course, a defect which arises partly from the manner of free election, whereby only those who voluntarily "stand" can be elected; but the root of the trouble goes deeper, and I do not see how it can be remedied. Membership involves absence from home, three times a year, for a minimum of four days each time, besides whatever may be devoted to Committee work, which is even more exacting, as it is usually more productive; the ordinary professional and business man, or weekly wage-earner, just cannot face it; and an analysis recently undertaken of the age and occupational range of Assembly members was not at all reassuring. But the problem has been discussed over and over again by the Standing Committee, and we can find no solution that does not raise more problems than it solves; and this criticism must therefore be dismissed for the reason which I adduced earlier, viz., because it is not accompanied by any constructive proposal for correction of the fault.

2. *How can Evangelicals best make their contribution* to the strengthening of Church Authority? The Ritual prosecutions of the last century indicated at least a definite attempt to uphold the authority of the Church: I do not advocate a return to these methods, but I must suggest three ways in which, in my opinion, we can best make our influence felt in Church affairs to-day.

(a) Primarily, I think, by pastoral faithfulness. During a recent inspection of a certain Theological College, my colleague remarked to

me with a note of sadness, " This place turns out better priests than pastors " ; the best thing that we can do to strengthen Church Authority is to maintain the pastoral and parochial ministry of the Church, dispensing with equal diligence the Word and the Sacraments, visiting incessantly, praying with and for our people, and contributing to the whole Church that special quality of devotion which is the fruit of humble and loving study of the Bible. This ministry calls for the constant exercise of Private Judgment in a degree not possible to those who are bound by ritual and ceremonial: I would beg for a truce to controversy, and a renewed determination to follow the better way, and so to let our light shine before men that they may glorify our Father Which is in Heaven.

(b) Secondly, let us not neglect pure scholarship. Most (though not all) of the really great modern commentaries, or even volumes on general Biblical Theology (which ought to be the special domain of Evangelical Churchmen) emanate from either Nonconformists or Anglo-Catholics : here again the fruits of the researches of those whose private judgment, while disciplined by Anglican formularies, remains unfettered by a close system of compulsory belief, ought to be more prolific than I think they are ; and their cultivation would enhance the Authority of the Church over the minds of men.

(c) Thirdly, I call on you all to take a positive and active share in Church Government ; and particularly (via your Diocesan Conferences) in Convocation and the Church Assembly. I assert that Evangelical influence in these last-named bodies is far greater than our numerical strength would indicate, and it is steadily growing ; that Anglo-Catholics more and more are actively wanting to understand our views and to make use of our contribution : and that the future is full of opportunity and encouragement. The wonderful change in the " climate of opinion " in the matter of the Church of South India during the last few years, culminating in the decisions taken last July, is evidence enough of this fact, for which we may humbly and joyfully thank God. But I must be honest enough to say also that whenever a sense of ineffectiveness comes upon us, outnumbered as we still are, from time to time, it is ascribable not to ourselves alone : and here I speak deliberately and with a full sense of responsibility. There are those who, doubtless with a sincere desire to strengthen Evangelical witness, in fact sadly weaken it by dividing ranks that ought to be united ; if I may wickedly misapply the title of this paper, they seem to prefer to enjoy the liberty of Private Judgment in factious criticism of their own representatives rather than to share the responsibility of participation in the exercise of Church Authority, from which they rigidly stand aside. I fear I must go further and say that a few even appear to watch with a kind of greedy suspicion for the slightest signs of delinquency, instead of using the eagerness of fervent charity to hearten the labours, and pray for the right guidance, of those of us who bear the burden. Let all who can, and will, help us, do so—for we need them badly : let those who will not, at least refrain from giving expression to judgments which are necessarily based on imperfect knowledge, and which may well weaken the hands of those who carry the load : and let them rather give themselves continually to prayer

on our behalf. But on the other hand I gratefully acknowledge the regular, faithful and informed support, in prayer and action, accorded by so many Evangelicals to their Proctors in Convocation. I believe that many feel that they can be more usefully engaged in their own pastoral work, and in prayer for and advice and encouragement to their representatives (the two must go together) than in active participation in the work of these central bodies. I know more than one leading Evangelical who has thus made the decision not to seek membership (contrary to personal preference) for the sake of the Kingdom ; and such men, following the example of Aaron and Hur, are doing perhaps the greatest work of all.

But there is no real reason why Evangelicals should not be the dominating influence in Church Authority, as they are the possessors of the vital doctrines : and I hope that all will from now on recognize the duty devolving on every loyal member of the Church to take a real part—certainly indirectly and in most cases directly—at whatever level of the Pyramid of Representation—in its Government. What nonsense it is to say that if Anglo-Catholics are in the majority in certain official bodies, Evangelicals cannot participate until the situation is altered ; that is the kind of Looking-glass remark that the Red King might have made as he slid down the poker, but it gives small encouragement to those of us who are trying to redress the balance. Besides (for myself) I believe that the place to inveigh against unscriptural teaching is not (as so many seem to think) in gatherings such as this, or in writings which will probably not be read by those with whom we dispute, but in those very circles where the whole range of Churchmanship is represented, and where consequently discussion can be sustained and witness sincerely, charitably, and firmly borne in the ears of all.

3. *The Final Duty of Loyalty.* I end where I began—with the relationship between Private Judgment and Church Authority, both based on Holy Scripture, both seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, both fortified and directed by the thoughts, studies and pronouncements of our contemporaries and our predecessors ; including in that later term alike the decisions of ecumenical Councils, the writings of the Fathers, the massive learning of the Puritan Divines, and the illuminations of saintly expositors of the Sacred Word. The Church that wields the authority is the congregation of those faithful men whose private judgments are—or should be—the elements of which that same authority is composed : ideally there should be no conflict between the two since the one is the aggregate of the other ; and the ideal will become the actual in proportion as the will of each individual is wholly submitted to Him Whom the Father gave " to be the Head over all things to the Church which is His Body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all ".