Authority in the Church in the New Testament Period

DONALD CAMERON

Some fifty years ago T. A. Lacey wrote a book on authority and began with a chapter headed 'The Meaning of the Words'. The opening sentence reads thus: 'We speak of Authority in two distinct senses, which should not be confused, for confusion here is a cause of much misunderstanding.'[1]

It could be submitted that the problem was underestimated, the Oxford English Dictionary giving eight shades of meaning to the word 'authority'. Lacey's point, in warning us to distinguish between the various senses in which the word 'authority' is used, reminds us that there is an inescapable preliminary task in any discussion on authority, namely what we mean when we use the word.

A little reflection, with or without the aid of dictionaries, gives two general uses. First, there is authority in the sense of power, authority to enforce compliance or obedience. Second, there is authority in the sense of power to influence or inspire.

Within these two divisions various lesser categories may be identified. The authority may be active and may intervene; it may be passive and exist as an authority to which appeal is made. Authority may be personal, attaching to an individual or an office; it may be impersonal, existing in written form embodied in a constitution or a statute.

Within the Christian community the discussion, and maybe the confusion, is intensified by theological and ecclesiastical allegiances of a powerful kind. Lacey's warning needs contemporary attention: 'Senses . . . should not be confused . . . confusion . . . is a cause of much misunderstanding.'

Thus, in considering authority in the New Testament period, endeavour will be made to identify the sense in which the word 'authority' is used when it is found in the New Testament, and also when we seek to identify the nature of the concept of authority in the larger world from which the New Testament came.

Authority in the world of the New Testament

As with every society, the world of the first century, in which the

events described in the New Testament took place, knew its own particular sources and its own special patterns of authority. Before all else there was the *imperium*, voted initially to the emperor for certain fixed periods and later voted to him on a more permanent basis on his accession.

Flowing from and dependent upon the Roman power, whether *de jure* or *de facto*, was the authority lying in Roman officials such as in the New Testament narrative, e.g. Quirinius or such client kings as the Herods. Authorities such as these represent the secular power in the world of the New Testament and were given theological place, first by Jesus in his own teaching (Mark 12:13 ff.) and in personal encounters with such powers (John 19:11). This line of thought is continued by the apostles, as the first communities sought to understand and articulate their own place in, and relation to, secular authority.

Within Judaism itself, concepts of authority existed that were peculiarly its own, part of its own religious as well as its secular history. Awareness of the nature of these authorities, and the recognition that was given to them, is necessary for a reasonably clear understanding of the New Testament narratives and letters.

The place of the Jewish community within the Roman Empire as a whole has been the subject of much study and forms part of every general introduction to the period. Leaving aside the essentially secular positions of those such as the Herods, Archelaus, Philip the Tetrarch, etc., attention should be given to the place of Jewish sources of authority seen in offices such as that of the high priest, assemblies such as the Sanhedrin, recognized teachers such as Nicodemus or Gamaliel, and charismatic figures such as John the Baptist, and, if it be so allowed, Jesus himself.

Considering the society in which the story of the gospels is set, and putting to one side the Judaism of the Dispersion, there can be observed within the 'gospel' world a complex pattern of authorities existing in a framework of strong and deep tensions. The institutional authorities of Judaism, running downwards from the Sanhedrin and the high priests to the local synagogue authorities, lived under, and were in part dependent upon, Roman power. The tension between Jewish and Roman structure underlies the gospel narratives and is seen throughout them. The picture given to us in the gospels is enlarged and underlined by contemporary sources. However, Palestinian Judaism was a partly secular, partly sacral community. A figure such as John the Baptist or Jesus of Nazareth was a challenge to authority in his own society. Yet that society by its own traditions was open to the influence of, and direction from, the individual whose authority was intrinsic, personal and to whom no office attached. The figure of the prophet defied institutionalization, and the sense of both authority and acceptance attached to the formula 'Thus saith the

Lord', left an open door into patterns of authority within the Jewish community.

Also, behind high priest, Sanhedrin and charismatic figure there existed authorities that were of another kind—those of Scripture, law and tradition. The gospels are, apart from anything else, a record of first-century Jewish religious controversy, albeit written from within the circle of one of the disputing groups. The controversy centred on the encounter, debate and discussion between Jesus and his fellow-Jews. This debate was conducted under the silent aegis of authorities to which appeal might legitimately be made by all parties. Scripture, law and tradition were not always distinct concepts in the Judaism of the first century, but that there was an authority within this corpus of ideas to which appeal might confidently be made, there is no doubt.

Jesus and authority

Into this world of authorities, sacred and secular, passive and active, of many kinds, Jesus came, recognizing some and rejecting others. However, Jesus was rapidly credited with his own authority. He taught with authority (Mark 1:27). He has authority over demonic forces (Mark 1:27). He assumes authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:10, etc.). His authority is recognized by Gentiles (Matt. 8:8ff.). His authority is a matter of controversy (Mark 11:28ff.). He will not openly disclose its source (Mark 11:33). Explicitly he places himself above the Sabbath (Mark 2:28). Implicity he assumes power to re-state, indeed to rewrite, the Decalogue (Matt. 5:21, etc.). He notes the authority attaching to the secular though Gentile power (Mark 12:17) and indeed allows it to be of divine origin (John 19:11). Finally, and weighted with great significance for the new community, the Matthean presentation of the resurrected Christ sees him as the supreme authority in both heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18), an affirmation which became part of the new faith (Rev. 2:27).

Jesus, in his recognition of authorities in his world, notes, as mentioned above, the authority attaching to the secular though Gentile power. The attitude of Jesus to authority within Judaism can be discerned from the study of the gospel narrative. He makes little or no comment on the place of priest or pharisee, only on their abuse of responsibility or influence, or their destruction of Israel's traditions as given by God (Mark 7:13). For Jesus, Scripture remains a court of final appeal in any dispute (Mark 12:24); the words of Scripture are of divine origin (Matt. 19:4,5). Of equal significance is that aspect of the gospel narrative in which it becomes steadily clearer that Jesus sees his own mission as being set, and indeed determined, by the Old Testament writings. Messiah, king and servant, are the Old Testament concepts which are both the framework of his life and which direct its outcome (Mark 9:12, Matt. 26:24). In his own temp-

tation it is Scripture which is his guide and defence. The gospel narratives, viewed as a whole, present to us a transformation and interpretation of Old Testament imagery, but also give us that aspect of the message of Jesus which sees the images of the Old Testament as setting a course which his own life is to follow. What was written of the Son of Man was for him to reinterpret but also to follow.

Jesus accepts the place given to Scripture in his own religious tradition, yet, while accepting it, both transforms and transcends it.

It must be noted that behind these lines of thought lay concepts upon which such lines of understanding depended. Within the common religious tradition which Jesus and his fellow-Jews shared was the concept of divine kingship, the supreme authority of God. This fact, though perhaps obvious, needs to be stated explicitly. Jesus proclaimed the actuality of the kingdom of God in a new way (Mark 1:15, etc.), restating the supreme sovereignty, its universal scope and its specific relation to his own person. This last aspect of his teaching, if not hidden, was indirect and implicit. The concept is re-presented in Jesus' appropriation to himself of the Son of Man designation, and particularly that part of the Son of Man imagery in which the universal and eternal kingship of Daniel 7:13,14 is linked with the person of Jesus in Mark 14:61,62. John runs parallel to the synoptics, as is seen in Jesus' prayer in John 17:2. The implication of universal kingship, seen in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem with its overtones of Zechariah 9:9,10, is also within this realm of thought. It is these strands of word and act that find their conclusion and triumph in Matthew 28:18, 'All power is given . . .'

The new community

Our knowledge of the new community called together by Jesus and grounded in resurrection faith is scanty. Our knowledge of what we might describe as its own self-awareness is less so. The debate about its Christology, if such a word can be used in what is a somewhat anachronistic sense, continues. Acts, in its records of Peter's preaching, sees Jesus not only as Messiah but also as Lord. Despite debate over the use of such language, Cullmann presents a New Testament position without qualification. 'There is no reason at all', he writes, 'for contesting the fact that the very earliest community called Jesus "Lord".'[2] The significance of such terminology in the Jewish religious milieu in which the Jerusalem church lived and grew, cannot be overstressed. The Old Testament background and the divine associations of the word are noted in the relevant article in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.*[3] For our present purposes, the claim of the risen Christ that all power was his, was given articulate force in the title *Kurios* as applied to Jesus. From him, now resurrected, all other authority derived such power as it

might have and such recognition to which it might be entitled. However, Jesus risen was also Jesus ascended. His presence was ministered to the church in a new way by both the presence and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. But the temporal figure to which authority now attached was that of the apostle, who emerged as a figure of varying distinctiveness in the growth of the community.

Where the word is used in the gospels, it is either used in what seems to be a generic sense (e.g., Luke 11:49; John 13:16), or in the plural as a description of the Twelve, perhaps read back as a means of reference from their later positions. The significance that was attached to the apostles, both individually and as a group, is seen in Acts 1, which narrates the process of making up the full number of the Twelve following the defection of Judas. Judas' replacement is a necessity (Acts 1:22). The required qualifications are personal association with the risen Lord during his earthly ministry, from the time of John's baptism until the ascension, and being a witness of the resurrection. However, the apostles as a company of twelve move from the forefront of the Acts narrative after Pentecost, though the apostle as such remains a unique centre of authority. It would seem from Galatians 1:19 that there were only two apostles in Jerusalem at the time of Paul's visit. Certain individuals move into positions of recognition—Peter, John, James, among others. However, the 'office of an apostle' remains unique, as indicated by the use of the word *apostole* in Acts 1:25.

The apostle is, before anything else, an apostle of Jesus. As Jesus is sent by the Father, so are they sent by him (e.g., John 20:21). The narrative of the fourth gospel sums up the implications of the synoptics. The authority of the apostle is dependent upon Jesus. Their presence is of its own kind, and indeed indispensable for the existence and growth of the early church. The apostles bear the personal commission of the risen Lord to whom all power is given. They occupy a unique position in the whole history of salvation. Rengstorf goes further when he speaks of 'the radical change in the world situation which consists in the fact that the risen Lord had appointed men his representatives.'[4] This is a very powerful judgement.

Viewing the New Testament as a whole, the apostle who moves to the centre and who finally dominates the stage from a theological point of view, is Paul. He does not fulfil all the qualifications of Acts 1:22, but claims without doubt to be a witness of the resurrection. His apostolic consciousness is based upon his encounters with Christ on the road to Damascus.

Much has been written on the apostolate as a whole and the apostolate of Paul in particular. In recent literature we note Lightfoot's 'The Name and Office of an Apostle' in his commentary on Galatians,[5] Rengstorf's article in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*,[6] relevant chapters in von Campenhausen's

Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power.[7] Detailed, if at times, speculative analysis is given by Schütz.[8] These works indicate the significance and the extent of the debate. Many points are unresolved and the discussion continues.[9]

The unresolved points may be set aside and the positive conclusions considered. Paul saw himself as a resurrection witness (1 Cor. 9:1) set apart for the gospel (Rom. 1:1), an apostle despite all challenges (2 Cor. 11:12); touching his authority he allows no contradiction (1 Cor. 4:14-20). His judgement is that of one instructed by the Spirit (1 Cor. 7:40). His example he offers for instruction, and he confidently lays it open to challenge (1 Cor. 11:1). However, the tension between liberty and authority which we sense throughout Paul's letters is seen, for example, in the manner in which Paul both asserts and limits his own authority. He does not comment where, he judges, liberty should prevail (1 Cor. 7:6; 7:35; 2 Cor. 8:10). A further illustration of this tension between liberty and authority is seen in the Thessalonian correspondence, where we see 'plea' (1 Thess. 2:7 and 11) and 'command' (2 Thess. 3:14) together in the one context. The authority, however, is not abandoned or diminished; it is an authority expressed in tenderness and care.

Our understanding of Paul's concept of his own authority is helped by consideration of Schütz's conclusions. His book, though complex, helpfully emphasizes the concept of 'the gospel' in relation to Paul's understanding of both his commission and his authority. For Paul, though commissioned by Christ and granted a vision of the risen Lord, the gospel as such remains an integral part of his own authority. It is inseparable from his own commissioning and place as an apostle. Schütz concludes that, for Paul, the gospel is, at its centre, 'a word, such as, the word of the Cross'.[10] It is outlined in the opening verses of the letter to the Romans. The gospel has its own intrinsic authority in every sense of that word (1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Cor. 2:14-16).

We should note, in conjunction with this viewpoint, Ellis' judgement:

> Paul's own authority plays a much larger role in his epistles than is usually assigned to it. A few times it is of a very much qualified nature, but for the most part it is asserted with no indication of being anything less than absolute. He does not often state its basis, but it appears to arise from his firm conviction of guidance from the Holy Spirit and from his authority as an apostle.[11]

In consideration of all the foregoing comments on Paul and his apostolate, it must be constantly borne in mind that he saw such authority as he had as deriving from and dependent upon Christ and the gospel, which neither he nor anyone else was at liberty to alter (2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 1:8,9).

There was, however, another source of authority which has already been referred to in connection with the ministry of Jesus and which Paul also recognized, and that was 'the Scripture'. It has been helpfully pointed out by Ellis that 'Paul's use of the Old Testament cannot be understood apart from his attitude towards it.'[12] The whole of this section in Ellis' book is relevant. He writes; 'All his important doctrines are buttressed by an appeal to his Bible . . . In his view of the OT, the apostle is in agreement, not only with Christ but also with the whole of Judaism and the early Church.'[13] The argument is worked out by Ellis in considerable detail and with equal force.

Thus we see the apostle and his role as being unique in the early church and of profound significance as a unique extension of the authority of Christ. It must also be noted that the apostolic office as such as limited to the first generation and is not an ongoing ecclesiastical office. Yet the apostolic authority in one sense remained through the letters which survived. Thus, Schütz comments: 'The later Church was fundamentally correct in incorporating Paul's particular and contingent letters into a framework of universal authority . . . The spiritual framework assumes that they are part of a larger meaning of Gospel.'[14]

To summarize, Jesus, risen and Lord, is the sole, supreme authority in the community which was to bear his name. He himself recognizes and gives due place to temporal authorities, ecclesiastical and secular, and gives his own *imprimatur* to such authority as Scripture was to hold in the early church. The apostle stands unique as an extension of the authority of Jesus, and apostolic words carry their own authority, even if the problem of their application remains unsolved. But to this difficulty we shall later return.

The emergence of church order

The New Testament documents present us with lineaments, but no more, of some kind of church order which emerges as the New Testament churches move through the decades and extend geographically across the face of the world of the first century. However, the degree of certainty that can be achieved in understanding statements made in this field is slight, and the degree of permanence of the situations described is not clear. Principles of government and leadership in an undefined form emerge, and with that government and leadership there is associated a degree of authority.

At this point reference should be made to the Jerusalem discussions and the subsequent letter referred to in Acts 15. These proceedings and the letter appear to be 'authoritative'. Yet what guide they leave for the future is uncertain. Such authority as the decisions

had was linked with the participation of the apostles. The actual decision was related to local and transient needs. Given the passing of the 'apostle', no identical assembly may occur again.

Turning now to the matter of office and leadership, attention must first be given to the concept of 'gifts' as we read in, say, 1 Corinthians 12:27 ff., or Ephesians 4:7 ff. In the first passage, the skills and capacities within the congregation are seen as a donation of the Holy Spirit. Ephesians looks at a wider canvas and sees such gifts as part of the victory of Christ the ascended king.

The many attempts that have been made to define a process, whereby earlier and more mobile forms of ecclesiastical life settled into a formal order, do not appear to be conclusive. Yet the emergence of certain 'offices' can be noted, particularly that of the elder, who appears first in Acts in the Jerusalem church, but who is given a clearer and more defined role in Paul's farewell address at Ephesus. Here the role of eldership is described under the image of 'shepherd' and 'guardian'. The concept of authority would attach to both of these offices.

The first letter of Peter sees the elder as being partly identical with the image of the shepherd. It may be assumed from 1 Peter 5:3 that some sort of disciplinary authority attached to this role. The elder is to be honoured, presumably in a role of leadership amongst other things. We note references also to other patterns of authority, e.g. 1 Thessalonians 5:12 and Hebrews 13:17. Difference of opinion exists as to whether we are in a 'period of informal and voluntary leadership',[15] or in a more structured situation. So Hort argues that 'it can hardly be doubted that elders are meant.'[16]

Thus, despite the lack of definition, it would seem clear that eldership within the church was part of the apostolic pattern. It was to be for order and for service. The pattern of authority was based on ministry, i.e. the service of God and the church. This point cannot be over-emphasized. The concept of leadership and authority taught by Jesus as the mark of the new community (Luke 22:24-7) and exemplified by him in his own life and death, was also that of leadership, service and authority to be followed in the community. We note this principle worked out in the New Testament documents as office, gift, function and service interplay.

The pastoral letters do not extend the principles already outlined. More detail as to suitability is given (1 Tim. 3, etc.), both as to the required stability of Christian life and adherence to a norm of faith (1 Tim 3:9; Tit. 1:9). In the pastorals, authority attaches to office such as eldership, but the office is dependent both on gifts and their recognition.

As mentioned earlier, attempts to trace a clear and organized pattern of development are unconvincing. Much that is written on this subject—and the literature is very considerable—often tells us as

much about the tradition of the writer as it does about the development of Christian life in the first and second centuries. There is no sure and certain path to be traced between ministry and authority as we see it in the New Testament, and later patterns of ecclesiastical life as seen, say, in the writing and the ministry of Cyprian. Even where some churches, for example at the time of Reformation, have sought to return to Scripture alone as the basis for ordering church life, the results do not always seem to sit easily on the foundations of the New Testament.

Conclusion

To sum up, we see the new Christian community launched in history, living under the supreme authority of Christ. That authority is manifested in a number of ways. It is seen in the Scriptures which the church received from Israel, the Scriptures which were to become the Old Testament. Such Scriptures were to be seen and interpreted in the light of the gospel.

Within the new community the apostle, the unique human figure commissioned by Christ himself, emerged as another, yet complementary, form of authority. Thus the concepts of the Old Testament, the gospel and the apostle constituted, albeit in an embryonic form, the canon of the later church. In a different category the church also saw the existence of authority connected with a form of church order, but without details prescribed.

Thus the church is to live under the authority of its Lord, an authority made known through the Scripture and given living relevance by the Holy Spirit. Christ, as such, is ever-present in the church, guiding and leading and giving clarity and force to the scriptural word. However, to state that principle is only to reveal a series of problems of a quite different kind. The question must be asked: To what extent do the Scriptures prescribe or simply describe? Do the apostolic mandates apply to the church in every age and time? The question has to be put, both in relation to what might seem to be things of little consequence such as covered heads in church, to graver and more immediate problems such as the nature of Christian marriage, and it is a question for many churches today.

The task of understanding the scriptural word, and then applying it to one's own time and place, remains a permanent task for the church in history. The Christian communities of our own time and throughout history have recognized the Bible as a unique source of authority through which the supreme authority of Christ is exercised. Such concepts lie within the dogma of the Church of Rome and the churches of the East as well as in the Confessions of the churches of the Reformation. Yet to recognize this authority and to apply it to the question of one's own time is no easy task, as many Christians are

painfully discovering today.

Looking from the world of the New Testament to patterns of ecclesiastical authority in the churches of later ages, we do not readily see a direct connection. Earlier we noted the following points which appear to be beyond debate in a New Testament view of the church. First, the community is in receipt of the gifts which issue in the first instance from the ministry of Christ. Then, linked with these gifts, there is the concept of authority within the local church, the authority based on gift attached to office and to which due recognition must be given. Each generation of Christians, if not always building on what has gone before, must be ready to learn from the past and to pay such attention as is due to the wisdom of earlier days. Many of the questions we seek to answer now have been put and responded to before. If we cannot always agree with the answers, we may learn something from the attempts.

On the matter of authority generally, as well as in specific areas, the New Testament appears to close with certain questions answered and with others left open. The resulting problem will need to be considered by each generation. We live in a time when Christianity encounters other cultures with their own heritages. Our debates on matters such as authority are not within a closed Christian cultural context. The whole matter of authority runs very wide, touching standards of personal behaviour as well as the ordering of our churches and, at the deepest level, the nature of the gospel we preach and seek to obey. One of the urgent tasks, and perhaps the most important, is to determine what are the questions to which we have definite answers, what are the questions we may legitimately hope to solve, and what are the questions which we must leave open with a just recognition for difference of opinion between Christians.

The task is not a single one. There is the task of exegesis, of discovering what the original writer meant, and in so doing recognizing that the meaning is not always fully recoverable. There is the task of discernment, of seeking to separate the transient from the permanent, of moving from the symbol to the thing symbolized, from the image to such reality as the image is meant to convey. There is the task of reasoning and deciding, of determining enduring principle from instance and contingent situation. There is the task of application, of applying the permanent, the real, the enduring to the new circumstances which the Christian community will always meet in its pilgrimage. The past will have much to teach us. We study the past, as Bishop Ramsey has put it, not to discover the old but the eternal. Yet to be indebted to the past is not to be bound to it. Fresh light will be given for new circumstances and for new questions. The church lives in tension between confidence in revelation on the one hand, and humility in our understanding and application of it on the other.

Yet we must never let pass from the centre of our thinking that it is God's purpose to enlighten and not to confuse, to disclose and not to hide, and in that our confidence must rest.

THE RT REV. E. D. CAMERON is Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of Sydney, Australia.

NOTES

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2 Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (ET, SCM, London 2nd ed., 1963) p. 208.
3 G. Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* 10 vols. (ET, Eerdmans, Michican 1964-76) vol. III, pp. 1086-95.
4 ibid., vol. I, p. 436.
5 J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (Macmillan, London 1890) pp. 92-101.
6 *TDNT,* vol. 1, pp. 407-47.
7 Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries* (ET, Adam and Charles Black, London 1969).
8 John Howard Schütz, *Paul and the Anatomy of Apostolic Authority* (CUP, London 1975).
9 c.f. Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the New Testament,* 3 vols. (Paternoster, Exeter 1975-78) vol. I, pp. 126-37.
10 Schütz, op. cit., p. 281.
11 E. Earle Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh 1957) pp. 29-30.
12 ibid., p. 20.
13 ibid., pp. 20-1.
14 Schütz, op. cit., p. 282.
15 James Everett Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St Paul to the Thessalonians* (T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1912) p. 193.
16 F. J. A. Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia* (Macmillan, London 1897) p. 26.