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Authority in the Early Church

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A discussion of the question of authority in the early church suffers at the outset from a problem of definition which is peculiar to that period. Put simply, the question is: When can the early church period properly be said to have begun? One answer is that it began at Pentecost and continued through the New Testament and post-New Testament periods at least until the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century. This solution has the merit of being all-embracing, which naturally permits the greatest freedom of interpretation. It also corresponds most closely to the way in which Christians of that period saw themselves, which is a matter of no mean importance. Nevertheless it has become customary, in circles affected by modern scholarship, to posit a development within the first century or so after the resurrection, from the apostolic church as constituted in the wake of the pentecostal experience towards a more institutional structure which was fully established by the end of the second century. To biblical scholars, the early church means primarily the apostolic foundation before, or, if the limits of the New Testament are to be respected, including the rise of the so-called 'early catholicism'. It is now usual, in fact, to admit that a structured church organization *does* make its appearance on the pages of the New Testament, though there is considerable resistance to the suggestion that this occurred during the ministry of St Paul or with his approval.[1] 'Early catholicism' is usually regarded as a post-Pauline development (or innovation) and the New Testament writings in which it appears—the pastoral epistles, the catholic epistles and Luke-Acts—are correspondingly relegated to the period after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Whether this is a fair assessment or not must be left to the New Testament scholar to discuss. Suffice it to say here that there is no hint of such a development in the post-apostolic writings, all of which assume that the structure of church government in place was that established by the apostles, or at least, on their authority. But if 'early catholicism' remains a somewhat debatable notion, there can be no doubt at all that the apostolic age definitely came to an end towards AD 100, and that the loss of living memory as a link with the

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earthly ministry of Jesus produced a new and potentially dangerous situation for the young church.

A crisis of authority

The crisis of authority emerged in the second century in what can only be called a struggle about the sources of Christian teaching and their nature. Today we would call this the hermeneutical debate, and it was of the utmost importance for the whole future of Christianity. The first question concerned the historical roots of the new faith. In the ancient world authority was vested in antiquity, and the older a document was, the more prestige it possessed. Hence the insistence, by Justin Martyr and others, that Moses was older than Plato and even Homer, and that the Greek philosophers had cribbed their best ideas from the Pentateuch.[2] Christianity suffered from its novelty and lack of tradition. Various Christian writers tried to turn this handicap into a virtue by emphasizing the radical challenge which Christianity made to an obviously inadequate traditional order, but none went as far as Marcion (d. 144), who actually dismissed the whole of Judaism as a corruption of true religion and an unworthy antecedent of the new faith. Such a radical approach provoked a reaction, and the Jewish roots of Christianity were reaffirmed. The authority of the Old Testament as the true philosophy took such strong root in Christian thinking that by the time of Augustine it had become virtually the standard textbook in matters of cosmology and history as well as in philosophy and religion.[3]

The second question concerned the use of reason as a tool for theological reflection. This problem has remained with us in different ways down to the present time, but in the second century it was related directly to the interpretation of Scripture. Valentinus (fl. c. 130) maintained that the Bible could not be read as fact but only as myth, and that the literal sense concealed a spiritual meaning which was accessible only to the enlightened. This theme became very familiar in later history and is still very much with us. It was accepted by Origen and others who allegorized the texts, and also—in a very different way—by the Reformers, particularly by John Calvin with his insistence on the *testimonium internum Spiritus sancti* as the *sine qua non* of true interpretation. Why then, was Valentinus un-acceptable? The answer seems to be that he regarded the literal text as false, and a bar to understanding. As far as he was concerned, the apostles were trying to *conceal* the mystery (quite rightly, as far as Valentinus was concerned) rather than *reveal* it in a way which could connect with human minds. The main body of the church recognized then, as it does now, that the written Word is invested with an authority appropriate to its mode of being; that is to say, that it provides fixed, documentary evidence for Christian claims and beliefs.

The Spirit is essential for true understanding and application of this deposit of faith, but he works only in accordance with it, not beyond or beside it, so that the place of *reason* is firmly established within the context of Christian faith.

The third question concerns the finality of the apostolic witness. Granted that what the apostles said was authoritative, did their successors have the right to add to the original deposit? The second generation of church leaders, it must be said, continued the apostolic ministry along similar lines, with remarkably few references to the apostolic writings as authoritative. It is no accident that Clement of Rome, Ignatius and Polycarp, all of whom had close connections with one or more of the apostles, composed letters to the churches in the best Pauline manner, though it is somewhat more surprising to find them speaking with much the same authority.[4] It was only after the death of Polycarp (AD 156) that difficulties began to surface, particularly in Asia Minor, where the Johannine influence was strongest. As early as 171, it seems, there arose in Phrygia the phenomenon of Montanism, which in one form or another was to challenge the church for a generation. Montanus and his followers are usually pictured as charismatics in revolt against the increasing institutionalism of their time,[5] but it is probably more accurate to set them in the context of the hermeneutical debate. Montanus advocated the 'new prophecy', i.e. the continuing revelation of the Holy Spirit as in apostolic times, and his followers placed his sayings alongside the Scriptures as the Word of God. This raised the question not only of the canon, but of the status of post-apostolic utterances claiming to have the immediate authority of the Holy Spirit. In this respect it is interesting and important to notice that Tertullian, whose sympathies with the Montanists are well known, did *not* regard their sayings as canonical Scripture, even though he treated them with great respect. Indeed, Tertullian is the first Christian writer to regard the apostolic age as definitely over, and to quote the writings of the apostles on a par with the Old Testament Scriptures *as a matter of course*. Furthermore, the fact that he could do this without argument shows that the apostolic writings must have been regarded as Scripture even before his time. Of the post-apostolic epistles and writings, however, we hear almost nothing, apart from a couple of references—one of them quite damnatory—to the *Shepherd of Hermas*.[6] Tertullian knew that a line must be drawn and he drew it quite clearly: the apostolic writings possessed an authority which the letters of their successors did not have. To that extent, therefore, both he and the early church in general recognized that the apostolic office had not been transmitted, even to the second generation.

It is now fashionable, particularly in certain Anglican circles, to regard Scripture, tradition and reason as parallel authorities within the broader framework of Christian faith, and to trace this triad to the

second century. It is as well, therefore, that we understand the context in which a writer like Tertullian used terms like *traditio* and *ratio*. Tradition referred to practices (not beliefs) which existed in the church alongside the written deposit of faith. From the dogmatic standpoint they were essentially *adiaphora* and their authority derived from usage or custom (*consuetudo*). Furthermore, their function was to illustrate spiritual and moral truths in terms radically intelligible to people immersed in the concerns of everyday life. An example of tradition was the veiling of virgins: Scripture obliged a married woman to cover her head, but this custom extended to the unmarried as well, and was enjoined because it was a fitting expression of female modesty.

Furthermore, the principle by which this tradition was justified was that of *ratio*, which is not 'reason' in the philosophical sense, but a legal device, well known to Roman law, by which the principles of a statute could be applied to circumstances unforeseen at the time of enactment.[7] By this means it became possible to adapt the teaching of Scripture to changing circumstances or, as in this case, to apply it more widely, without undermining its authority. Therefore, while it may be true to say that Tertullian did not advocate *sola scriptura* in the Lutheran sense (and would it not have been anachronistic if he had?), it is equally wrong to suggest that he regarded tradition and reason as parallel authorities, particularly in matters of *faith.*

The authority which Tertullian evidently possessed is all the more interesting in that there is no solid evidence to indicate that he ever held office in the church. Jerome believed he was a presbyter, and many modern writers have taken this for granted, but from his writings it appears that he wrote from outside the organizational structure of the church, and it is now thought most likely he was a layman. What implications does this have for our understanding of the hierarchy? In particular, what gave a layman the right to pontificate with such authority *and acceptance*, even by a classically 'high' churchman like Cyprian?

Orders and ordination

The question of orders and ordination in the early church period is one of the most difficult to resolve successfully. In particular, the office of the presbyter eludes precise definition, and seems quite certainly to have undergone some considerable development in the course of the first five centuries. In the New Testament he is equated with the bishop, although there is a tendency, particularly in the pastoral epistles, to single out the latter as an individual in charge of a congregation. On the other hand, the author of 2 and 3 John is described as 'the elder' (*presbyteros*), and the general identification of this John with the apostle would indicate that a presbyter enjoyed no less exalted a position than a bishop in the life of the church.

One difficulty, of course, is that a *de facto* organizational structure was certainly in place some time before it could be said to have established itself *de jure*; we must learn to look behind the words *episkopos* and *presbyteros* and try to discover the realities which they represented. The picture which emerges is one in which two types of leader can be found: those with responsibilities limited to a particular congregation, and those with a travelling brief, whose authority was recognized elsewhere. Only the latter can be said to be true successors of the apostles, since only they were concerned with the whole church. In the New Testament, Timothy evidently came in this category, though unfortunately nothing is known for certain of his subsequent movements. Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch were in a similar position, though perhaps some of their influence was due to the sees which they occupied. But Polycarp of Smyrna was an important figure whose see was relatively minor (at least in later times), and the same is true of Irenaeus of Lyons.

By the time of Irenaeus, however, the roving apostolic ministry had given way to a more settled pattern. The bishop was quite definitely the leader of the local community, with a number of presbyters and deacons (to look after material affairs) as his assistants. This pattern of ministry, which was to become classical, nevertheless differed in many respects from later practice. It is especially necessary for Anglicans, who like to boast of the 'historic episcopate', to realize that they possess nothing of the kind, at least in so far as a diocesan bishop cannot be compared with the bishops of the second or third centuries. These were much more in the nature of team rectors, or even simple incumbents, as can be seen from the fact that only they would normally celebrate the eucharist and preach.[8]

As the focus of the local community, the bishop wielded great power and influence. As early as Ignatius of Antioch, we read that his place in the church was analogous to the place of Christ, and that he should be accorded the respect due to our Lord.[9] To the modern reader, such comparisons must sound a trifle exaggerated, or even blasphemous, but it did not appear this way in ancient times. On the contrary, such affirmations were essential if the office of the bishop were to be properly understood. As far as Ignatius was concerned, the role of the bishop was primarily symbolic and theological. No Christian was expected to honour another man for his own attainments, but only because he represented Christ, and because his chief purpose was to illustrate, by precept and example, what it meant to be an imitator of Christ. The notion that a bishop might prove unworthy of this high calling does not seem to have occurred to Ignatius, but the problem soon arose and by Origen's day it was notorious.[10] The answer, then as later, was that the bishop was a representative of Christ, whereas the Christian was called to worship the Saviour himself.[11] As a result, it was possible to ignore a bad bishop, and seek

spiritual instruction and refreshment from anyone to whom God may have given such a gift.

The prevalence of such an 'irregular' ministry can only be understood if we accept the principle that bishops were symbols of the presence of Christ without being the sole channels through which grace was mediated. The essentially open character of the church's spiritual life was preserved more or less intact until the fourth century, when two factors intervened to affect a change. One was the tendency to ordain any gifted layman: Ambrose became a bishop in a day in 374. Similarly, Augustine was ordained and consecrated with remarkable speed after his conversion, and the pattern became for a time familiar.[12] Simultaneously, however, the most active and dedicated church members felt the attraction of monasticism, and it was within the cloister or cell that the primitive spiritual freedom – hedged about with rules, of course, but relatively independent of the bishop—remained the longest. The end-result was that the secular clergy and the laity came increasingly under the bishop's control. The legalization of Christianity and subsequent mass conversions caused a revamping of the ecclesiastical structure along the lines of civil government—the word 'diocese' was borrowed from secular administration—and the familiar system by which episcopal duties were increasingly devolved to presbyters became established as the norm.

In its fundamental guise, there can be no doubt that the office of the bishop was held, in the first instance, to belong primarily to the individual congregation. Only later were attempts made to transcend the particular and discover the universal episcopate: not a person, or even a synod, but a concept in which each individual bishop shared. This idea, with its overriding concern for the spiritual unity of the church catholic, was first developed by Cyprian of Carthage in the middle of the third century. Cyprian held a view of episcopacy reminiscent of that of Ignatius, though he seems to have developed his thoughts in much greater detail, at least on (surviving) paper! The election of the bishop, carried out, as always, with the direct participation of the whole church, laity included, was one of the most important acts of the congregation's life. At his consecration, the bishop received a share in the episcopate, which entitled him to the honour due to Christ but also enjoined on him the responsibility of the shepherd for his flock. The bishop may have been the monarch of his people, but he was also their supreme servant and the one who took the fate of his church on his head, especially in times of persecution. Cyprian certainly knew what he was talking about: he himself was martyred for his faith, and he regarded this as no more than the expected thing.

Episcopal and synodical authority

How far did Cyprian's concept of the episcopate translate itself into

synodical action? In theory, of course, all the bishops would be led to unanimity on matters of spiritual importance, and in this way a consensus based on love would prevail. The attempt of the bishop of Rome to pull rank as the successor of Peter was therefore duly condemned by Cyprian at a great council of the African Church.[13] Of course it need hardly be said that Cyprian himself entirely dominated the council, not indeed by force, but by the overwhelming superiority of his intellect and personality. What could not happen in theory took place in practice, and the need for some kind of precedence, if only for the sake of order, was finally acknowledged and instituted in the so-called 'pentarchy of patriarchates'. This took shape at the Council of Constantinople in 381 and ranged the major bishoprics in order of seniority as follows: Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem.

The main reason for the pentarchy was administrative, and the cities were ranked according to their importance within the Roman Empire. Jerusalem was exceptional, being included only because it was the site of the first church founded on the day of Pentecost. Constantinople was a newcomer, being raised to second place only because Constantine had made it the imperial capital in 330. Rome objected to its new status, partly because the Byzantine Church was not an apostolic foundation and partly because it feared for its own primacy, and did not finally ratify the council's decision until 1215! The main reason for this was that the see did not have an apostolic foundation: Rome was already moving in the direction of the Petrine claims, the 'false decretals' and the spurious Donation of Constantine.

What authority did the five patriarchs have? To each was assigned a geographical area over which he was to preside, but the nature of his authority was never very clear. The Roman patriarchate, in particular, was a vast, unwieldy area which soon fell to the barbarians and became largely uncontrollable. The Spanish Church went its own way, instituting what amounted to a conciliar system of government. The admission of the *filioque* clause to the Creed at the Third Council of Toledo in 589 is but the most famous instance of a decision taken without reference to Rome. It was not until c.1014 that the 'mother see' followed suit, and the intervening centuries witnessed the struggle between Charlemagne and the papacy over this issue.[14] The British Church, cut off from Rome in the fifth century, when papal sovereignty was far from securely established, went its own sweet way without any sense of loss or deprivation; only when Roman missionaries reappeared in the seventh century with a more developed sense of papal supremacy did any conflict arise.

These examples demonstrate that there was no binding sense of loyalty to a patriarchal see such as later became the norm, particularly during the western Middle Ages. Even matters of doctrine

could be decided locally as the need arose, and it is not at all clear how far the Oecumenical Councils and their decisions were accepted beyond the imperial frontiers. For the word 'oecumenical' did not mean 'universal' in the absolute sense, but only in the relative sense in which the Roman Empire was described as the 'oecumene'.

The authority of the Council of Nicaea in 325 derived initially not from the church at all but from the emperor, and imperial ratification was always regarded in Byzantine times as an essential mark of a council's ecumenicity. On the other hand, it cannot be said that Constantine decided the outcome independently of the general feeling of the church. Subsequent emperors would indeed claim this authority, but they would meet with undying opposition from bishops and monks, and no emperor was ever able to impose a lasting policy on the church which went against popular feeling.

The rule of faith

But who determined what popular feeling was? Why was Athanasius right and everybody else wrong? Here it is not enough to speak merely of the authority of a particular see. Bishops could and did fall into heresy; even Rome, for all its purity in matters of doctrine, could not claim total exemption here.[15] Behind the authority attributed to particular sees, and fundamental to the thinking of an Athanasius, lay the concept of 'orthodoxy', which is where true authority lay. Orthodoxy began life more as a notion than as a fixed creed, and as such it can be found in the pages of the New Testament. The idea that there was a right way to think about God, Christ and salvation—with the corresponding implication that there was also very much a wrong way—goes back in fact to the teaching of Jesus himself. It is not the least salient feature of his earthly ministry that he was constantly obliged to correct his disciples' misconceptions. Similarly the apostles were always berating various congregations for their failure to understand some aspect of the truth. Nor is it possible to excuse (or condemn?) St Paul's anger at the activities of the Galatians, for example, as an overreaction to a legitimate expression of spiritual pluralism.[16]

Once this point has been accepted, it no longer matters greatly whether fixed confessional formulae are to be found in Scripture or not. The 'rule of faith' (*regula fidei*) was above all an *idea* which subsequently found various forms of expression in what look like proto-creeds. As an idea, the *regula* had a specific function in the minds of early Christians, a function which was understood and used by Tertullian and the Latin Fathers even more than by their Greek counterparts. The term in fact was well known to any student of Roman law; a *regula* was a short summary of the contents of a statute, and in legal terms it possessed the same authority as that

statute in so far as it faithfully reproduced the spirit of the original.[17] This neat device made it possible to consult the whole corpus of Roman law without reading every word on each occasion, and it greatly speeded up the conduct of business. One can see immediately the relevance of this to Christian teaching; the *regula fidei* provided a short summary of scriptural teaching by which doctrine could be measured, though its own authority rested on that of the underlying text.

This understanding of the *regula* is crucial if we are to make sense of the decisions taken at the fourth- and fifth-century councils. Nicaea (325) approved of a creed which rapidly spread to all the orthodox churches and became known as the Faith of the 318 Fathers. Constantinople (381) is supposed to have done the same (the Faith of the 150 Fathers) for the creed which we still call Nicene, though it is impossible to prove this; the first certain mention of this creed was at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Meanwhile the Council of Ephesus in 431 had specifically forbidden the composition of a creed other than that of Nicaea (318 Fathers), thereby adding a new element of complication.

How should we interpret the ban of Ephesus? In the eastern churches, it has been argued that Ephesus specifically canonized the Faith of the 150 Fathers, thereby making the later addition of the *filioque* clause to that creed invalid. The western churches, however, have not accepted this view, either because they have allowed to the bishop of Rome the right to add to the creed, or because they have recognized the complexity of the historical situation and accepted a) that the creed envisaged at Ephesus was that of the 318 Fathers (now no longer in regular use by any church), and b) that by 'another creed' (*hetera pistis*) was meant primarily a contradictory doctrine, not an elaboration of the *regula* as already received. The fact that Chalcedon, barely twenty years later, obviously interpreted the meaning in this sense, makes the western view the more likely of the two.

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We thus have a picture before us of a church governed primarily by Scripture, with subsidiary creeds elaborated according to the specific principles of reason and tradition. Clerical authority depended for its support on adherence to this deposit of faith; a bishop could not appeal to his position or to his consecration by the laying-on of hands as a guarantee that he stood in the apostolic succession. Similarly a layman like Tertullian could wield an influence greater than that of a bishop, simply on the strength of his claim to represent the authentic

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tradition. It is true that a tendency towards clericalization can be discerned even in the third century, and this tendency became much stronger as the church acquired legal status. But this trend never established itself as the dominant one in antiquity, and even when it eventually triumphed, enough remained of the older order to make revolt and reformation both necessary and desirable.

What can we learn today from the experience of the early church period? First, it is useless to rely on claims to the 'historic episcopate' as a guarantee of orthodoxy and continuity. Not only is the modern episcopate different in character from its primitive counterpart, but it did not possess such an authority even in ancient times. By the same token, it is impossible to accept the notion of 'primacy' as having any significance beyond the purely honorary. The five patriarchs did not claim an authority to decide matters of faith and discipline, which remained the responsibility of synods and councils—a practice which still obtains in the East. If the primates of the Anglican Communion claim to stand in this tradition, they must be careful not to go beyond what the evidence warrants. In any case, the Lambeth Conference cannot be regarded as a latter-day Chalcedon.

But if the claims of the hierarchy and the ecclesiastical establishment are weak, those of Scripture and the creeds are strong. The idea that the Bible should rule the church is not popular today, when leading scholars in the field are immersed in their own mythology of cultural relativity, but it is a concept which would have seemed perfectly in order to all the Fathers of the church. If the Anglican Communion is genuinely interested in standing in historical continuity with them, it is this point which will come to the fore in discussion. Only a scriptural church and a confessing church has any real claim to stand in the apostolic succession of the first five centuries. Let us pray that not only our leaders but our congregations and people at large will recover this sense of their heritage, and seek to apply it to the task of reformation and reconstruction today.

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NOTES

1   See e.g. H. F. von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries* (A. & C. Black, London 1969) pp. 55-123.
2   The first person to suggest this was in fact the Jewish philosopher Philo, d. AD 50.
3   cf. e.g. Augustine, *City of God*, XI-XII.
4   Curiously, this fact probably argues in favour of the authenticity of 2 Peter, which is frequently dated to the early second century. Writers of that period felt no obvious need to use an apostolic pseudonym.

5 On this see G. Bray, *Holiness and the Will of God* (Marshall, Morgan & Scott, London 1979) pp. 54-63.
6 *De pudicitia* 10,12.
7 See Bray, op. cit., pp. 113-16.
8 A custom still preserved in certain parts of the Greek Church, cf. e.g. T. Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Penguin Books, London 1963) p 146, 253 et passim.
9 Ignatius, *Eph.* 6,1; *Magn.* 3,1; *Smyr.* 9,1; *Pol.* 6,1.
10 See Campenhausen, op. cit., pp. 252-3.
11 ibid. pp. 253ff.
12 But Photius' sudden elevation to the see of Constantinople in 864 was condemned at Rome as irregular.
13 *Sententiae LXXXVII Episcoporum*, ed. H. von Soden, Göttingen, 1909, pp. 247ff.
14 cf. R. Haugh, *Photius and the Carolingians*, (Nordland Pub., Belmont, Mass. 1975) pp. 45-90.
15 cf. the famous case of Honorius I (625-38) who supported the Monotheletes.
16 A minimalizing attitude of this kind mars the work of J. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, (SCM, London 1977).
17 See Bray, op. cit., pp. 97-104.