

Chapter Two

Authority in the Church

One of the fundamental questions people ask as they seek to understand their experience is: “Is what I think it is true?” If I say that the earth revolves about the sun rather than the other way around, I can rightly be asked how I know that is true. In this case, I would appeal to scientific observation, requiring hypothesis, experimentation and proof. This would be my authority. Not everyone has the time to test every statement as to its truth, and furthermore, not every claim to truth is subject to scientific verification. There is no way that by sense observation, for example, I can prove that it is wrong to tell a lie. I have to appeal to another kind of authority.

This leads to the question of religious authority. How do I know what people say God is like is true? What is my authority? The Roman Catholic Church for most of its history has been refining the idea that when the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, speaks *ex cathedra* (literally “from his chair” or “throne”) on matters of faith and morals he is infallible. This was finally defined at the First Vatican Council in 1869-1870. Classical Protestantism — i.e., Lutheranism and the Reformed tradition — has taught from the sixteenth century that the individual reading his Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Radical Protestantism has relied more on the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. These three positions are answers to the question: What is my authority?

None of these positions represent the answer of the Anglican Communion, although all three can find representation among us.

For the classical Anglican point of view on authority we can turn to the enigmatic figure of Richard Hooker (1554-1600).

Hooker was reared near Exeter in England and was spotted early as a bright young man. He studied at Oxford, was ordained, and spent most of his life preaching and writing. Apparently he was not the kind of person that stood out in a crowd and he probably made a dull dinner partner. Isaac Walton even averred that his wife, Joan Churchman, was rather dowdy. Hooker himself was appointed to several livings — i.e., received the income of a parish as vicar — but never occupied them, staying rather in the London area or near Canterbury in order to serve the controversial needs of the Church of England.

No matter what his personality might have been, Hooker was the supreme apologist for the Elizabethan settlement. Briefly, the Elizabethan settlement refers to the principles by which Anglicanism was established independent of the Pope. Anglicanism does not think of itself as “founded” by Henry VIII (1491-1547) or even by Elizabeth I (1533-1603). As Hooker did, we think of the Church of England as the Catholic Church in England, separated from Roman jurisdiction when Elizabeth I became queen in 1558. Elizabeth followed her half-sister, Mary (1516-1558) who had restored the Church of England to Roman rule after their half-brother, Edward VI’s death. The question that faced Richard Hooker was to state clearly what that meant for the Church in England to be separate from Rome.

Hooker answered this question in a running controversy with those persons in England committed to the Reformed tradition, of which John Calvin (1509-1564) was the progenitor. Calvin was the most astute theologian of the continental reformers. He shaped a theology and church polity which was clear and appealing to sixteenth century northern Europeans, including many Englishmen. His followers in England were known as the Puritans, the same people who settled in Massachusetts. Our problem as American Anglicans is that our culture holds the Puritans as heroes. To the Church of England they were defectors and even sometimes heretics.

This conflict in points of view is illustrated by the story a bishop of my acquaintance recounts. His son came home from school one day following the traditional Thanksgiving festival. My friend was startled to see him dressed as a Pilgrim Father. He remarked, somewhat in jest, “Why are you dressed as the enemy?” The little

boy, justifiably confused having thought his father would be proud of him, burst into tears.

Hooker as well considered Puritans the opposition, if not the enemy. We cannot go into all of Hooker's thought at this point, but it is important to understand what he said about authority. The Puritans taught that the Scriptures provided a certainty that transcended all other certainty, including reason, which reason they wished to confine to "science" (i.e., all forms of human learning). They believed that the Scriptures must be read for themselves and devoid of subsequent interpretation, namely, tradition. Hooker's answer to this was that the Scriptures were read apart from reason and tradition and were subject to all kinds of private interpretations, which would of necessity be biased.

Hence, Hooker articulates for Anglicanism its answer to the question of what is our authority. Our authority is the association of Scripture, tradition and reason. Subsequent commentators have spoken of this as a "three-legged stool." If one removes a leg, any leg, the stool topples.

The threefold nature of authority — Scripture, tradition and reason — is not original with Hooker; but sixteenth century Anglicanism felt no compulsion to make claims of originality, since it conceived of itself as the continuing Catholic Church in England. This same notion of authority can be found in the teachings of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), a prominent theologian. It is certainly consistent with Augustine (354-430). It is, in fact, how any theologian — including those who argue against it — thinks. The theologian consults the texts, he sees what others have said, and he concludes in the light of the present understanding of reality what is the reasonable interpretation.

The balance of this chapter is a commentary on this principle of authority.

First, I wish to begin not with Scripture, but with what is most controversial, namely reason. Lest the reader concludes that the centrality of reason contradicts the point made about thinking with the left hand in the previous chapter, it needs to be understood that reason is more than that of analysis or logic. It refers to the power of the human mind to discern truth and this can be intuitive as well as rational.

Hooker believed that the cosmos was an unfolding of the mind of God in a hierarchy of orders or structures. This means that all of creation participates to a degree in the mind of God, including

humanity. The reason of God reaches into the mind of humanity or is placed there like a "seed." To abide with God is for God's grace to illumine our reason until it fully participates in the divine reason. This is found in Greek philosophy, and is clearly stated for the Christian in the fourth century by Gregory of Nyssa (330-395), who says our guardian angel is a brother to our intellect. Paul apparently had this in mind when he wrote, "My knowledge now is partial; then it will be whole, like God's knowledge of me." (I Corinthians 13:12). This is all a way of saying that the created order reflects the mind of God, which is discernable to human reason.

Hooker argued this as any person of his times would beginning with the nature of God and moving then to humanity. God is a reasonable creator, he said, and therefore this is evident in what he creates. We today turn this around and say that the mind is the only way we have of transcending our own personal limitations and of making contact with God. In fact, the first thing we attribute to God is mentality. We conclude that God thinks. In this way we begin with humanity and move to God, but like Hooker we believe that by means of our reason we participate in the mind of God.

This is the basis for what is called natural theology. Natural theology holds that humankind can know God to a degree by observing nature, i.e., creation (including ourselves). It is the basis for believing that non-Christians have a certain knowledge of God. It is the reason why Anglicanism does not reject the human sciences, such as biology, geology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, as sources of the knowledge of God. The general principle is, we believe, that there is a continuity between nature and supernature. It is not to say that by the power of our reason we can come to a saving (i.e., one that makes us whole) knowledge of God. Revelation is necessary, as we shall see. Furthermore, we are brought into relationship with God by divine initiative, not by our efforts. The natural world in our thinking is not set over against the divine world. There is no radical discontinuity between God and his creation. Another way of putting this is to say that, contrary to the Reformed tradition, we emphasize the immanence of God as well as his transcendence.

This commitment to reason is perhaps most evident in our attitude toward the "free market place of ideas." Tests of orthodoxy, heresy trial, censorship of thought and such are generally alien to the Anglican ethos. Our belief is that a sincere pursuit of truth, done collaboratively, ultimately opens us to the mind of God. It is a

spiritual exercise, to which God speaks for those willing to hear. For example, if I pursue rationally the study of psychology I believe that it will ultimately lead me to a deeper knowledge of God.

Secondly, in regard to the Scriptures, I will want only to speak to their authority in association with reason and tradition.

God's revelation is his self-disclosure. The best analogy of God's revelation is what occurs between two lovers. It is a personal sharing at the deepest possible level. Paul speaks of the relationship between Christ and the church as the relationship between a husband and wife (Ephesians 5:23-33). The Bible is the church's book and is the record of the personal revelation of God to humanity. The canon of Scripture — i.e., the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament, the fourteen of the Apocrypha and the twenty-seven of the New Testament — is the canon not because of any intrinsic quality of those books, but because the church says it is the canon.

The word "canon" comes from the Latin, meaning something by which you measure (e.g., a twelve-inch ruler). So the canon of Scripture is the standard, prescribed by the church, by which the belief of the church is confronted and measured. It is the normative source for understanding God's revelation. What is essential to comprehending God's ways with humanity is there. All Christian teaching and reflection begins there. This is why the Anglican Church has always taught that nothing should be taught contrary to Scripture.

To say that nothing should be taught contrary to Scripture is very different, however, from saying that only what is in Scripture shall be taught. Often Protestantism implies, if not expressly affirms, the latter. This is particularly a problem when Scripture is thought to transcend reason. People get into all kind of binds. Some handle snakes and drink poison on the authority of the later ending of Mark's Gospel, while others will not allow the use of pipe organs in worship because the Scripture makes no mention of them. A more subtle effort is the attempt to develop a New Testament form of church government, such as Hooker's adversaries claimed to do (i.e., Presbyterianism).

Scripture for the Anglican is a fundamental source of authority for the church; but apart from reason it is dangerous. It becomes the mirror for the misdirected person to project his or her own opinions and give them the authority of God. The sin of schism is the result.

Thirdly, the Scripture must also be read in the awareness that everyone embodies his or her past and community, that is, their tradition. We cannot escape it. Hooker was skeptical of Puritan individualism, which seemed to miss this truth. The reading of Scripture is something to be done collectively in the light of the tradition. In fact, one way of thinking of the Scriptures is as normative tradition.

"To tradition" means to pass down from generation to generation within the community the church's lore, that is, her understanding of God's ways with humanity. The tradition is the product of the ongoing reflection by the church of her experience of God, and consequently it is a living, changing body of thought. It was out of this reflection that over a period of maybe three hundred years the canon of the Bible emerged, and the continuing tradition remains the context in which the Scriptures are to be interpreted.

The canon is misunderstood if it is not seen within the patterns of thought from which it came. This not only applies to what preceded the writing of the books of the Bible, but as well as to the contemporary struggle to express the community's experience and the unfolding of the implications of the canon in the centuries that followed. Hence the tradition is integral to the interpretation of Scripture.

By implication we do not believe that God's revelation of himself ends with the closing of the canon in the fourth century. The Scriptures remain normative, but God continues to reveal himself and his will in a manner that enlarges upon what is found in the Bible and in a way that is consistent with the church's understanding.

This is apparent when we think of the great dogmas of our faith. For example, there is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. No where in the Bible does it teach that God is three persons in one nature. This understanding came several centuries later. The great Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries gave birth to the doctrine that Christ is both God and man in one person or hypostasis. The meaning of the word, "hypostasis," in New Testament times was the opposite of what it meant in the fifth century, when it came to describe the person of Jesus.

In fact, it may well be that there was always a piece of the church's teaching which was carried by the tradition alongside the Scripture with no explicit mention in the text of the Bible. Here we are on more tenuous grounds; but I suspect that Christian ascetical

teaching as well as the church's belief in Christ's presence in the Holy Eucharist are examples. Such areas of our belief are too much a part of the life of the church from the very beginning not to have been a part of the oral tradition all along.

There is a certain imprecision about this threefold authority which has consistently bothered students of Anglicanism. The question arises how the interaction of Scripture, tradition and reason is orchestrated to produce anything resembling an authoritative statement. The answer Anglicanism classically gives is that this is the responsibility of the church's councils. Where the church gathers to reflect on the Scriptures, in the light of the tradition, to conclude what is a reasonable position is what we mean by a council.

What constitutes a church council? There is no doubt but that we start with the four ecumenical councils of Nicea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451). Possibly there were two or three more. An ecumenical council is representative of the whole church. Such a council in our view has not been possible since 1054, when the church of the East finally broke with the church in the West. Since the Reformation in the sixteenth century an ecumenical council has been even more unlikely, unless like the Church of Rome one claims to be the whole church.

Yet Anglicans have continued to gather in council. The General Convention of the Episcopal Church speaks for this branch of the Anglican Communion. The Lambeth Conference, gathering every ten years and consisting now of all Anglican bishops with jurisdiction, abjures any legislative authority, but it is given authority in many ways by Anglicans throughout the world. Curiously enough, Anglican teaching in a subtle manner takes the statements of the Roman Catholic Second Vatican Council (1961-1965) as authoritative. Perhaps this is because what makes a council authoritative is the consent of the faithful to what it has declared, regardless of what that council does or does not claim for itself.

In an admittedly imprecise and sometimes clumsy manner Anglicanism sees the interaction of the threefold authority of Scripture, tradition, and reason as operating in a conciliar mode, which is ultimately a collaboration of the whole church. It is a bit like authority within the family. Somehow it rests within the parents, although not without input from the children. Not every statement made bears the same authority, and one comes to know in an intuitive way how to tell the difference. What is authoritative is what is

accepted as reasonable by the whole family. One wishes for greater clarity, while knowing that such clarity would beget tyranny. Therefore, we are uncomfortably thankful for the authority as it is and accept what is vague as the price of freedom.

There is no question that this is "muddy." For example, as a member of the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church, I participated in four debates from 1977 to 1980 over whether the Episcopal Church should join the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights. For some it appears that if one opposes joining it means they support a constitutional amendment against abortions. It happens that I am one who believes no one has the "right" to have an abortion, but I am equally against a constitutional amendment. Both the ideologues have a clear position who support the Religious Coalition on the grounds that a woman has a right to do with her body as she wishes, as do the pro-life group who argue that every abortion is murder. A more appropriate outlook, consistent with what has been said by Episcopal church councils, is that they are both wrong. The Anglican position is "muddier." No one has a right to an abortion, it says, because there is a real question about the rights of the unborn human, but there can be circumstances (e.g., rape, obvious deformity, age of mother) where an abortion is the lesser of two evils and is therefore the morally correct course to follow.

Clarity of authority should not be expected — in fact, it should be suspect — when we are attempting to make clear the infinite mind of God for the finite minds of humankind. When Anglicanism is true to its concept of authority, this apparent hesistance to say, "Thus saith the Lord!" — only to have to spend the next hundred years subtly qualifying "what the Lord said" — is not a sign of weakness, but evidence of strength and wisdom.

What is
Anglicanism?

Urban T. Holmes III
