

## Authority in the Church

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At this present moment of crisis, there is hardly a more important issue for us to address than that of authority in the church. It is certainly true that God's people need to keep returning to the question of authority. The legacy of the rebellion in the Garden of Eden ensures that even those who have tasted God's extraordinary generosity and mercy too readily assert their own opinions and preferences as the measure of all things. We too bear the marks of the Fall in our thinking and in our behaviour and so a re-examination of what is in fact operating as the authority in our lives together is always necessary. It is also true that the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in the West, has witnessed a more general crisis of authority. However it might be explained, even those caught in the midst of it admit that authority at almost every level has been undermined. Christians would no doubt want to suggest that the social consequences of turning away from the gospel of Christ are simply becoming more and more manifest. What was once hidden under the veneer of 'Christendom' is now out in the open for all to see. Cut off from the living God, all claims to authority become suspect.

Yet the current Anglican struggle is not just another example of human beings insisting on the right to determine good and evil for themselves (though it is that). And it is more than simply a particular instance of a wider cultural trend, a more general debate about authority in the world at large (though this too has had its impact). Precisely because this is a struggle taking place within Christian congregations, within dioceses and within the fellowship of the Anglican Communion, the issue has a particular character. The question of authority in the church takes us to the heart of what it means to be a church and in the context of our own history, what it means to be Anglican. Put simply, to those who confess Jesus as 'Lord' authority is not an incidental or peripheral matter. We have to take seriously the possibility that our own thinking and practice has been compromised by selfishness and by drinking more deeply than we realised at the world's watering holes<sup>1</sup>. For this reason it is important to begin by returning to the distinctive character of the Christian church.

**The church, its Lord and his word**

The church is a work of God's grace in Jesus Christ. That is to say, through the proclamation of the gospel of Christ, God calls men and women to himself and to each other. The church is God's work, not simply a human social construct. It owes its existence to God's activity of addressing human beings with 'the gospel concerning his Son' (Rom. 1:3). The church is a work of grace, neither a recognition of our worthiness nor a reward for our achievement. As God's undeserved mercy is demonstrated in the make-up of each Christian gathering and as that mercy unites men and women in the truth of the gospel who would otherwise be at war with one another, God's wisdom is on display in the heavens (Eph. 3:10). Above all, the church's focus and entire reason for being is Jesus Christ, the one who secured our salvation from the judgement we deserve and who gives us new life. He is the one before whom every knee must one day bow (Phil 2:10). It is the recognition of his unassailable lordship which brings glory to God. The church does not exist for itself or even for the world. It is the linchpin of the Father's eternal plan to bring all things under the feet of the Son (Eph 1:22). God himself gathers men and women around his Son with the word of the gospel and by the convicting and enlivening work of his Spirit. This gathering purpose of God is indeed an ancient one. It is prefigured throughout the Old Testament. In line with this purpose God calls Abram to himself and builds a nation from his family (Gen. 12:1-3). The initiative is entirely God's, an inexplicable mercy from Abram's perspective. What is more, it is effected by a word which God speaks, a call God makes, a promise God delivers. Abram's response is to believe God, to trust in God's goodness and to rely on God's power to accomplish what he has promised (Gen. 15:6). Centuries later, as Abraham's descendants assemble as a congregation at the foot of Mount Sinai, the archetypal Old Testament expression of what it means to be church is in full view: those whom God has redeemed come together to listen to him and respond to his mercy in the way that he directs (Ex. 19:2-20:22). The speaking God is once again on centre stage. Living as the people of God, as individuals but most importantly for our purposes as the gathered people of God, means listening and taking seriously the words which God speaks. It means faith issuing in obedience. Later Old Testament congregations have this same character, whether it be the gathering before the Temple on the day that it was dedicated by King Solomon (1 Kings 8) or the assembly in Jerusalem after the return from exile (Neh. 8). God has gathered his people and the shape of their life together is determined by the words which God has spoken.

It is clear as the Old Testament unfolds that each of these expressions of God's gathering purpose are merely shadows pointing to something extraordinary in the future. The congregation of Israel, for all its significance, is only an anticipation of what God will do in the last days. The earthly ministry of Jesus begins with a new gathering word, the announcement of the kingdom and the summons to follow the Christ who has come (Mk 1:15). The disciples who hear and believe come together to form the first genuinely Christian congregation. Called by Jesus to repent and believe, they gather around the Son to hear the words he has received from his Father (Jn 15:15). At every point throughout the Gospels the words which Jesus speaks are inextricably bound to the work which Jesus came to do. In

fact, again and again we see that the words he speaks are the means by which he does his work. 'My son, your sins are forgiven', he says to the paralysed man (Mk 2:5). 'Lazarus, come out!', he demands, standing outside the tomb of the man who had been dead for four days (Jn 11:43). 'Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit', he cries at the point of his death (Lk 23:46). In the ministry of Jesus too the speaking God is on centre stage. God is gathering his people and shaping their lives by the words he has given to his Son, words which can never be separated from the salvation he came to accomplish.

Of course, the gathering words of the gospel are not simply the words Jesus speaks but words the Father gives to others which speak about Jesus, who he is and what he has done. It is the confession of Jesus as 'the Christ, the Son of the Living God', with all this implies for how we are to respond to him, which is the rock upon which Jesus himself says 'I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it' (Mtt. 16:13–20). Critical in this connection is the fact that this confession is not the result of human reflection or institutional consensus. In the first instance this is something given to Peter, revealed to him by the Father himself. In other words, from the very beginning the Christian church is constituted and nourished by a word which it receives as a good gift from God. The church has no power or authority over this word but must continually submit to it and as it does the gathering purposes of God are seen to triumph. A departure from this word is very literally an undermining of the foundations which would call into question the identity of the church and empty its message of all authority. What is more, such a departure is both tragic and perverse for there is 'no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12).

The apostolic proclamation of Christ and the implications of his lordship is bound from the beginning to the Old Testament which Jesus himself endorsed throughout his ministry. Together they constitute the word of God which calls the church into existence, nourishes it in faith, and determines what is appropriate in the light of God's mercy and the coming judgement. Just as Jesus himself stands as the fulfilment of the Old Testament scriptures, he stands as the source of the New Testament. His commission of the apostles and his promise to them that the Spirit would bring to their remembrance all that he had said to them (Jn 14:26) is what generates this final part of the Christian canon. The apostolic writings are Scripture too and are recognised as such from the first generation onwards (2 Pet. 3:15–16). Here is the word which God has delivered to his people in the last days.

What we might distil from this admittedly sketchy account of a biblical theology of church is a core truth that needs constant emphasis, not least in times like ours. At its heart the Christian church exists and can only continue to exist as God gathers men and women around his Son by his word and in his Spirit. Of course, in reality none of these elements can be isolated from the others. It is never genuinely a gathering around God's Son without his word or apart from his Spirit. We are given no other access to Jesus but through the Spirit-inspired Scriptures. You simply cannot honour the Lord and ignore his words. Nor are you

following the leading of the Spirit if you tamper with these words. The Scriptures, the word of God as we have it, cannot be separated from Christ either. As Jesus himself said of the books of the Old Testament 'they bear witness about me' (Jn 5:39). Some contemporary methods of reading the Scriptures fail at precisely this point: they treat them as imaginative literature without paying due attention to the way they testify to Christ. In contrast the Bible itself constantly points beyond itself to the reality of the risen Christ. No church is taking Scripture seriously if it fails to acknowledge unreservedly his unique lordship. Again, neither Christ himself nor the word God has given us which speaks of him can be separated from the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God is indeed the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8). It is the Spirit who breaks through the stubbornness of our personal rebellion to bring to bear the gift of faith. And this same Spirit is the one who superintended the production of the Scriptures so that what we have before us is in fact what was breathed out by God (2 Tim. 3:16).

In other words, the church, strictly speaking, has no authority of its own. Rather, it lives under the authority of the word of its Lord<sup>ii</sup>. Whatever responsibilities are exercised by members of a congregation or by denominational office bearers, these are directed and circumscribed by the teaching of Scripture. Even during the lifetime of the apostles there were those who sought recognition as Christian leaders while making subtle adjustments to the teaching of Scripture. Some aspects of the apostolic testimony were apparently unpalatable or inconvenient. Some institutional or social allegiances apparently had a prior claim. However, the apostles were insistent that the word of God is not malleable nor is the discipline of Christ simply adaptable to social consensus. The teaching of Scripture is a word of grace and redemption which confronts as well as comforts, it calls for repentance as well as faith. Indeed, in both of these pairings, one is not really possible without the other. Furthermore, every teacher within the churches, even the apostles themselves, was to have their teaching and behaviour tested against the teaching of Scripture. It was right and good that the Bereans responded to Paul's teaching by searching the Scriptures to see if these things were so (Acts 17:11). Paul did not hesitate to challenge Peter when he wavered on an aspect of gospel truth (Gal. 2:11-14). The stakes were simply too high. You must not meddle with the word of God. The life and health of the church depends upon it.

Another way of putting this is to say that any secondary authority which might be exercised within the churches is always 'the authority of obedience'. It is never legitimate where it stands opposed to, or in isolation from, faithfulness to word of the church's Lord. Furthermore, the exercise of this authority of obedience is shaped by the character of the Lord who 'loved the church and gave himself up for her' (Eph. 5:25). As Jesus insisted when some of his own disciples were seduced by a worldly view of power and authority, 'whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' (Mark 10:43-45)

Legitimate authority within the churches is:

FAITHFUL: obedient to the word of the church's Lord

SERVING: demonstrating the self-sacrificial character of the church's Lord

### **Authentic Anglicanism in submission to the word**

Against this background, it should be no surprise that the foundational documents of Anglicanism, the Thirty-nine Articles, the Book of Common Prayer and the Homilies, all insist on the supreme authority of Scripture<sup>iii</sup>. As an important aside, it is critical that we turn to these documents for the voice of authentic Anglicanism, and not succumb to the nineteenth century's preference for Hooker over Cranmer. A preoccupation with Hooker's so-called three legged stool of Scripture, tradition and reason — particularly when combined with philosophies of 'progress' and 'development' which owe more to Hegel than they do the New Testament — takes us on an entirely different trajectory from that of our formularies. I suggest that confusion at this point is one of the longer term causes of the mess we find ourselves in today. But in our formularies the written word of God stands over all other claims to authority rather than alongside them and the health of the church is seen in obedient faith rather than in the search for a new synthesis.

The regular orders of prayer in the Book of Common Prayer were structured around a program of consistent and systematic exposure of the congregation to the whole of the Bible. The Anglican liturgical commitment to the unadorned reading of Scripture has very deep theological roots. In the first place it enshrines the principle of the clarity of Scripture. The congregation must have direct access to Scripture rather than approach it solely through the interpretation of the church or any individual. With faith in God, the indwelling Spirit, and access to all of Scripture and not just a single part, Tyndale's ploughboy as well as the scholar can approach the reading of each text confident that he will hear and understand what God has said to his people in the last days. Secondly, this practice testifies to the place of Scripture in the life of the church. Cranmer and the other founding fathers of the Anglican tradition understood that the teaching of Scripture is the means by which God rules his church. Here is the authoritative perspective on life in the world in the wake of the resurrection. Here is the challenge we must receive and the comfort we so desperately need. Here we have access to the mind of God, As Luther had written so memorably, 'the soul can do without anything except the word of God'<sup>iv</sup>.

A similar perspective can be found in the Book of Homilies. The very first of these model sermons contains one of the most memorable pieces of Anglican prose.

"Let us diligently search for the well of life in the books of the New and Old Testament, and not run to the stinking puddles of men's traditions, devised by man's imaginations, for our justification and salvation. For in holy Scripture is fully contained what we ought to do, and what to eschew, what to believe, what to love, and what to look for at God's hand at length."

This homily is in fact a celebration of Scripture as a 'precious gift of our heavenly father' 'the heavenly meat of our souls' and 'the words of everlasting life'. But it goes on to answer the suggestion that the Bible is too difficult to understand and that our ignorant reading may lead us into error rather than truth. In this context Cranmer provides us with the closest thing to an official Anglican statement on how to read and understand the Bible.

"And if you be afraid to fall into error by reading of holy Scripture, I shall shew you how you may read it without danger of error. Read it humbly with a meek and lowly heart, to the intent that you may glorify God, and not yourself, with the knowledge of it: and read it not without daily praying to God, that he would direct your reading to good effect; and take upon you to expound it no further than you can plainly understand it [...] Presumption and arrogance is the mother of all error; and humility needeth to fear no error. For humility will only search to know the truth: it will search, and will bring together one place with another; and where it cannot find out the meaning, it will pray, it will ask of other that know, and will not presumptuously and rashly define any thing which it knoweth not. Therefore the humble man may search any truth boldly in the Scripture, and without any danger of error. And if he be ignorant, he ought the more to read and search holy Scripture, to bring him out of ignorance."

These convictions will find expression again in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion. Here there is no careful balancing of Scripture, tradition and reason but an unambiguous declaration of the authority of Scripture to which the church remains entirely subject, since these words are the words of our Lord. Article VI, 'Of the sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for salvation' emphasises again the place of Scripture in the life and thinking of the Christian.

"Holy Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the faith, or be thought requisite as necessary to salvation."

'Not read therein, nor [...] proved thereby' — this is no minimalist statement. It leaves room for argument from the Scriptures rather than simply a quoting of texts. And yet it is clear that Christian faith and life is ordered by this good gift that God has given. A later article, Article XX, 'Of the Authority of the Church' makes clear how the church relates to this gift.

The Church has power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority in controversies of faith: and yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God's word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another. Although the Church be a witness and keeper of holy writ, yet, as it ought not to decree anything against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce anything to be believed for necessity of salvation.

The authority of Scripture as God's word written circumscribes all other claims to authority. There are things the church may not do precisely because this word stands over it as the

rule of the church's life. There is a way of reading the Scripture, elevating diversity to the level of outright contradiction which is simply disallowed. The unity of Scripture, stemming from its origin in God but reinforced in particular by its focussed testimony to Christ, is the presupposition of all faithful reading<sup>v</sup>. The ancient practice of the analogy of faith, comparing passages of Scripture and letting the clear and unambiguous passages provide guidance on how to read those passages which are less clear is reaffirmed. There is no need to interpose an authorised interpreter between the Christian and the biblical text. Just so, there is no need to construct an elaborate theory of reading or impose a carefully reasoned set of hermeneutical principles, well-intentioned though they may be.

## Conclusion

The Anglican formularies take seriously the nature of the church as constituted and governed by the word of God. Authentic Anglicanism tests all things by the teaching of Scripture and so all other claims to authority must be considered contingent and circumscribed at best. Where obedience to the word of God in thought or practice is lacking there is no genuine authority at all. In the final analysis this must be so because Scripture is the word of the church's Lord. The confession at the heart of the Christian church's existence is that 'Jesus Christ is Lord'. This is also why any such contingent and circumscribed authority within the churches must bear the stamp of Christ's character. Coercion is entirely out of place. Insisting upon personal allegiance and loyalty is thoroughly inappropriate. For he who served us even to death provides the model for all leadership and authority amongst his people.

We cannot afford to allow attention to be diverted from him by whom and for whom and in whom we exist<sup>vi</sup>. Once again, this is why the question of authority in the church and in the Anglican communion is a matter of critical importance. It is not an incidental matter. By this question we are brought to the heart of who we are as disciples of our Lord.

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<sup>i</sup> '... we share a common belief that the Church has tended to operate with a secularised conception of authority in which merely political conceptions have overridden a theology grounded in the power and grace of the gospel; rooted, that is, in the way God meets us in Jesus' life, death and resurrection.' C. E. Gunton & D. W. Hardy, 'Editors' Introduction', in *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community* (ed. by C. E. Gunton & D. W. Hardy; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), p. 6.

<sup>ii</sup> 'When we look at the church in this way, it is manifestly improper to speak of "the authority of the church" at all. The church has no authority. The church is subject to Christ's authority

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in everything.' D. W. B. Robinson, 'The Authority of the Church', in Donald Robinson: Selected Works: Volume 1 Assembling God's People (ed. by P. G. Bolt & M. D. Thompson; Sydney: Anglican Church Record, 2008), p. 300.

<sup>iii</sup> 'This position of the supremacy of Holy Scripture above the Church is fundamental to the Church of England.' W. H. G. Thomas, *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-nine Articles* (1930; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 127.

<sup>iv</sup> Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1521) [LW 31, 345]

<sup>v</sup> 'Unless we can think that Scripture is readable as a whole, that it communicates a unified outlook and perspective, we cannot attribute doctrinal authority to it, but only to some part of it at the cost of some other part. The authority of Scripture, then, presupposes the possibility of a harmonious reading.' O. O'Donovan, *On the Thirty-nine Articles: A Conversation with Tudor Christianity* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1986), pp. 56–7.

<sup>vi</sup> 'The decision in favour of a Church of obedience as opposed to a Church that is self-governed is necessarily and unavoidably imposed upon us by the fact that the Christian Church cannot reflect on its own being, or live by it, without seeing itself confronted by the Lord, who is present to it as its real Lord, with a real authority which transcends its own authority. Its Lord is Jesus Christ. He has called it into life and He maintains it in life. In Him it believes. Him it proclaims. To Him it prays.' K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 576.