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Authority, Scripture and Tradition

Professor Torrance is Head of the Department of Systematic Theology in the University of Aberdeen and (inter multa alia) is Convener of the Church of Scotland's Panel on Doctrine. The following brief reflections are a by-product of ecumenical discussions in which he is engaged.

The Reformation, in its concern to reform the Church and her theology, took its stand on the Bible as her sole criterion—on the principle of *scriptura sola*. But the legitimate reply of the Counter Reformation was, 'Yes, but how do you interpret Scripture? Do you not require the authority of the Church and her *magisterium* to determine the meaning and truth of Scripture, and to safeguard the Church from a pluralistic individualism?' Sensitive to the importance of this question, Calvin wrote the different editions of the *Institutio* to indicate how he felt Scripture should be interpreted, raising the matter of authority, Scripture and tradition in his Dedicatory Letter to the King of France in 1536. He saw that formally four issues cannot be separated: (1). the text of Scripture itself, (2). the question of methods of interpretation, (3). the role of tradition—the Fathers of the Church, (4). the question of our criterion—*regula fidei*, *analogia fidei*—using the Apostles Creed to give a Trinitarian structure to the 1559 edition. If this was his formal procedure, his material principle was *sola gratia* understood in terms of the Person and Work of Christ as the *scopus* of Scripture—the twin doctrines (a). that 'all parts of our salvation are complete in Christ' and (b). 'union with Christ our Head'.

Ten years after Calvin wrote his letter to the King of France, the Church of Rome defined its attitude to the authority of Scripture at the Council of Trent. The doctrine and ethics of the Gospel are given in a *written and unwritten tradition—in libris scriptis et sine scripto traditionibus*. The Church stands under the authority of Scripture and tradition.

This has again become a living issue in our day with the rise of modern biblical criticism and the ecumenical movement.

(1). The 4th World Conference on Faith and Order in Montreal in 1963 took up the question. After the first meeting of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948, it became

increasingly apparent that there were deep divisions in the Reformed churches, stemming from their differing traditions which moulded (tacitly at least) their interpretations of Scripture.

(2). The Second Vatican Council in its statement on *Revelation (Verbum Dei)* raised the whole question as to how to interpret Trent.

(a). The common tradition in the past was that there are two main sources of revelation, Holy Scripture *and* Tradition. But it was pointed out that at the Council of Trent, a first draft in a preparatory schema had said that the truth of the Gospel was contained 'partly' in the one and 'partly' in the other. But then this *partim-partim* was replaced by a simple 'et'. Did this mean the same thing? If so, then this was the doctrine of 'two sources' of revelation, as in the conservative Roman tradition of Cardinal Bellarmine.

(b). Other modern theologians like Rahner, Geiselman, Congar, Küng, Tavad have rejected this view as 'uncatholic' and 'external'. Trent, they have argued, deliberately replaced the *partim-partim* by *et* to say that all evangelical truth is in Scripture. There is only *one* source of Revelation, the one Gospel of Jesus Christ which comes to us through both Scripture and the apostolic tradition.

This latter interpretation is decidedly a movement towards a Reformed position, with its stress on the once and for all revelation of God in Jesus Christ, on Christ as the Lord of Scripture and tradition, that the living Word comes to us in the Spirit through a living Bible in a living Church.

Of course, big questions remain. In what way does Revelation come to us through tradition? There are right ways and wrong ways of interpreting this, and this is where the ecumenical debate lies today.

Two things are important for us here in the Reformed tradition, in this debate within the Roman Church.

(1). Christ is only truly known, through the Holy Spirit in the sphere of the Spirit, within the Church. Christ gives himself to be known in the evangelical experience of the Church. 'We comprehend with all saints. . . .' This for us is the element of truth in the Roman contention that we require the Church for a true understanding of Holy Scripture, that we might comprehend together the love of God. But this needs careful interpretation.

It is one thing to say that only through the Holy Spirit do we apprehend Christ and the Gospel through the Holy Scriptures. It is another thing to identify our formulations of the truth with the Truth itself. This is the enormous significance of the statement

made by Pope John XXIII on 11th October 1962 that 'The authentic teaching of the Church is to be studied according to the methods of study and the modes of expression of which modern thought avails itself. The substance of ancient doctrine held in good faith is to be distinguished from the formulations in which it is clothed'. The Truth as it is in Christ is one thing, but the Church's formulations may be another.

Again it is one thing to say that the Church is the sphere of the Spirit of truth ('. . . who leads us into all truth'), or to say that the Church is possessed by the Spirit. It is another to say that the Church possesses the Spirit and therefore possesses the truth in herself.

Again it is one thing to say that only in evangelical experience do we truly apprehend Christ by faith—that is the element of truth in the thought of an *unwritten* revelation (*agraphon*). It is another to say that the task of theology is to read off the mind and experience of the catholic Church and to regard doctrines as simply statements of what the Church does believe. That was the road of the churchly Schleiermacher in Protestantism. There is a difference between the Christ of the Church's experience and the Church's experience of Christ, which is so often influenced by extraneous sources, as in aspects of mariolatry.

The question therefore is: How do we do justice to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit *and* the doctrine of the Church in our Reformed churches in speaking about *scriptura sola*?

(2). The principle of *scriptura sola* must not blind us to two things: (a). the fact that there is a tradition within Holy Scripture itself, and (b). that we all, whether we acknowledge it or not, do interpret Holy Scripture in terms of our differing traditions, be we Presbyterians, Anglicans, Baptists, etc.

What do we mean by 'tradition'? We must distinguish three things. (1). There is 'tradition' in the singular (with a small 't'), the general category, meaning the *process* of handing on, transmitting from person to person, region to region, one generation to another. Here it is a movement in which something from the past is transmitted to the present which receives it and hands it on to the future. Many factors enter into this, the culture in which we live, the concern for Christian mission and education. As such it can be a good thing or a bad thing, good if the concern is the spread of the Gospel and the renewal of the Church, but bad if we confuse tradition with a rigid traditionalism which can lead to atrophy and decay, where we are enslaved by 'the traditions of men'.

(2). There are 'traditions' in the plural (again with a small 't'),

where we speak of our 'differing traditions', meaning the resultant phenomena of the process of transmission, the characteristic self-understanding of the separate traditions. So there arise different denominations, with their confessions, liturgies and practices.

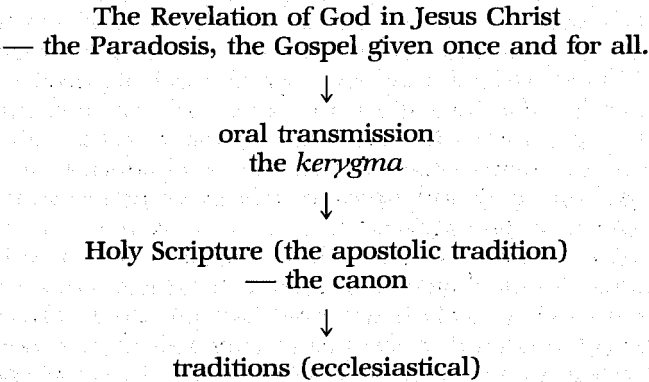
(3). There is the *One Tradition*, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The different traditions look beyond themselves to what they have in common in Jesus Christ, and which (whom) they seek to hand on through the Spirit in the mission of the Church. In this sense 'the Tradition' is what the different churches bear witness to in common when they point away from themselves to what they are *in Christ*. It is in this sense that the New Testament uses the Greek words *paradosis* ('tradition') and *paradidonai* ('to hand on' or 'hand over'). So Paul says in 1 Cor. 15:3 'I have handed on to you (*paredoka gar humin*) that which I have received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures . . .'. The Tradition is what Paul received and handed on—Christ and his crucifixion, the Word of the resurrection. So also he speaks of 'maintaining the tradition I handed on to you' (1 Cor. 11:2). Again he says 'the tradition handed on to you came to me from the Lord himself' (1 Cor. 11:23).

The Tradition has its source in the Triune God himself, coming to us from the Father, through the Son in the Spirit. So our Lord says in Matt. 11:27 'All things are delivered to me by my Father' (*panta moi paredothe hupo tou patros mou*). No man knows the son save the Father, and no man knows the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him'. Christ delivers to the Apostles what he has received from the Father—the Spirit and his mission. He fulfils his mission in the Spirit by his life, death and resurrection and then through the Spirit gives himself and this Gospel to the Apostles to be proclaimed to all nations. The same word is used of the Father handing over the Son to be crucified on the Cross. In his 'betrayal' (*paradosis*) he is handed over to death.

This *Paradosis* (the Gospel) is testified to in Holy Scripture. Christ gives himself and his teaching to the apostles, who preached Christ and the Gospel by word of mouth, 'handing it on' to others orally and giving it to us, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in *written form* in Holy Scripture. There was thus oral tradition before there was scripture. Holy Scripture is the written tradition (*paradosis*). The same notion of 'handing on' tradition occurs in the Old Testament. 'This word shall not depart out of your mouth, nor out of the mouth of your children . . .' is a repeated injunction in old Israel. So our Lord speaks of an authentic tradition of Moses and of 'the traditions of men' which

obscure it. 'You have made the Word of God of no effect by your traditions . . .'.

We can see therefore that there emerges a clear order in Scripture and the history of the Christian Church:



In this way, on a Reformed view, the Gospel comes to us 'through Scripture and tradition'. Is this the meaning of the Tridentine 'et'?

Two points must be asserted here.

(1). Christ remains the Lord of tradition. ('You have heard . . . Moses . . . but I say unto you . . .') Christ gives himself anew to people in all ages by the Holy Spirit within the Church. The *actus tradendi* is the work of the Holy Spirit. Hence we are related to Christ in a twofold way, horizontally across the centuries by memory (*anamnesis*), and vertically by the Holy Spirit in communion. There is a 'mediated immediacy' in or relation to Christ. This is fundamental to any proper doctrine of apostolic succession, eucharist or mission.

(2). Our 'traditions' are in this way subordinate to Holy Scripture, under the judgment of The Tradition, of Christ the Lord of tradition. This is the Reformed insight and emphasis.

The formulation of the Canon in the early Church was thus the Church's affirmation of the once and for all revelation of God in Christ and, at the same time, her rejection that the truth is *in her*. It is *in Christ*. It is for this reason we have to make a distinction between (a). *the Apostolic Tradition*, the Apostolic witness, which is our New Testament and the foundation of the Church, and (b). *the ecclesiastical tradition* deriving from it and subordinate to it. This may be the tradition of bishops and presbyters (or threefold ministry?) but which is not in the prime sense, the tradition of the Apostles as eye-witnesses. When the Church drew

up the Canon it was making precisely this distinction. On the one hand, she wanted to preserve the Apostolic tradition from being lost or misinterpreted, regarding it as the norm for all faith and practice. On the other hand, she was humbly subordinating herself to the authority of Holy Scripture, so that the Norm was not herself, not ecclesiastical tradition, but the Gospel. On the one hand she affirmed her faith in the once and for all revelation of God in Christ and the once and for all apostolic testimony to Christ. On the other hand she rejected the view that the Truth was in herself, but rather it was in the Christ to whom she bore witness. The Canon means that the ecclesiastical tradition (however important and necessary) is subordinate to and not coordinate with Holy Scripture.

This does not mean that the Church is subsequent to Scripture! The Church is the sphere of the divine self-disclosure, and has been so in all ages, in old Israel as well as the new—indeed since the dawn of creation. Certainly, she is called into being by the Word, stands under the authority of the Word, lives by hearing it (as the *ecclesia ex auditu*) and bears witness to it. She is the recipient of revelation, appropriates it, interprets it and hands it on in oral and written tradition. But although Scripture thus comes out of the bosom of the Church, it does not derive its authority from the Church but from the Christ to whom it bears witness.

There is clearly a hierarchy of authority in the life of the Church. To ask someone, What is your authority for such and such a statement? is to imply that there is a higher court to which appeal is made. So when the Church makes a theological statement, she sees herself standing under the authority of the creeds and confessions of the Church, and these in turn as standing under the authority of Holy Scripture. In the Reformed tradition a distinction is sometimes drawn between the non-binding authority of the confessions and fathers of the Church and the binding authority of Holy Scripture as the apostolic foundation of the Church. This raises of course the enormously important question as to how we interpret Scripture. When we ask the further question, But what is the authority of the Bible? the answer is, not the Church, but the God who speaks to the Church in and through it. Within the Church, as led by the Holy Spirit, we seek to comprehend with all saints of all ages the love of God in Jesus Christ who is the Lord of the Church. We stand under the authority of Scripture, under the authority of Christ.

Just as we distinguish but not separate 'tradition' from The Tradition, so it is important to distinguish but not separate what

we might call 'Truth of Being' ('T') from 'truth of statement' ('t'). By Truth of Being we mean God himself as the *summa veritas*, Jesus Christ the living Truth. It is this Truth we seek to formulate as truly as possible in our dogmatic confessional statements and in our preaching, as we humbly submit our minds to Christ.

The fundamental question is how to interpret the relationship between the Truth and our formulations. There are two dangers. The first is 'nominalism', of identifying our formulations of the truth with the Truth in some absolute manner, of confusing truth of statements with Truth of Being. This is the danger of both rationalistic Protestant fundamentalism and Tridentine nominalism, which evoked the statement of Pope John XXIII. It is also the source of sectarianism, where the acceptance of others is conditional upon their acceptance of the prescribed formulations of the truth. The other danger is 'relativism', where statements are detached from their ontological grounding in Christ and then attached to our own subjective piety, as the outward mythological expression of our own self-understanding. This was the road taken in Protestantism by Schleiermacher and Bultmann and 'The Myth of God Incarnate' theologians. It is also the road taken by certain radical Roman theologians in reaction to the older Tridentine nominalism. In such subjective relativism there is a damaged, broken relationship between 'truth' and 'the Truth'. When this happens, truth disappears and is replaced or redefined as 'myth'.

How do we understand the relationship between the Church's statements and the Truth of God, the Truth as it is in Christ? Against the danger of nominalism and rationalistic fundamentalism, we have to say that truth of statement and Truth of Being 'are not to be confused'. Against romantic pietism and the individualism of Protestant liberalism or radical existentialism, we must say they are 'not to be separated'. This is analogous to the way in which John Calvin (following Pope Gelasius) sought to interpret 'This is my Body'—the relationship between the bread and the Body of Christ on the model of Chalcedon, of the hypostatic union.

The task of theology and the teaching office of the Church is to be true to the Truth as it is in Christ, to whom the Church is bound as the Body to the Head, and in this way in humble obedience and under the guidance of the Spirit to formulate the Truth in dogmatic and confessional statements.

There is thus a twofold authority—The Authority of Reality and the subordinate authority of the Church's formulations. The supreme instance of the latter is surely the Nicene Creed.