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Lifelines: Church and Authority

Throughout our lives we are constantly, in a host of different ways, exercising and obeying authority. Authority is a form of power, moderated by responsibility. In a vacuum of authority, as human beings, we are likely to exercise power competitively, struggling to further our own interests or the interests of our immediate group no matter what the cost to others. The conferring and recognition of authority implies that some person or group is trusted to exercise power in a responsible way. The exercise of power without moderation is coercive; the exercise of *authority* invites cooperation.

Since authority is a form of power, it may be exercised in ways that make for freedom or restraint. The enhancement of freedom for one individual or group may well necessitate the restraint of another individual or group. The task of the government in any state is so to exercise authority that the good of the whole people is maximised, and the power of those who would inhibit that good, whether from within the state or without, restrained. The police, the military and the judiciary have authority conferred upon them to this end. The power of the state is not unlimited. It is moderated by the extent to which the state, no matter how repressive, is recognised by its own citizens, and the extent to which other states recognise the legitimacy of its government. Most importantly, the power of a government may be limited by its accountability to the constitution (which, in a 'free' state can be tested in law) and to international law. In this sense the authority of the law moderates the power of the state.

The Christian sees humankind as endowed with power in creation. Humans have genuine freedom to exercise power for good or ill. Nevertheless, power comes from God. It is not sufficient – it is idolatrous solely to see power as immanent within humanity. The transcendent origin of power implies transcendent responsibility in the exercise of power. For the Christian, the first and fundamental step in ensuring the use of power for good is the *recognition* of the authority of God (by whom the law and the power of the state is given) over and within creation. For Christians, such recognition turns upon the recognition of the authority of God exercised 'without remainder' for the good of humankind and of the whole of creation in Jesus Christ.

The authority of Jesus

According to the NT, Jesus is 'the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth' (Rev. 1:5). Jesus is the one who bears faithful (authoritative) witness to the Father: he knows of whom he speaks. The authority with which he teaches is demonstrated in his characteristic 'Amen', in the power by which he heals, in the ready recognition afforded him by the common people. By the resurrection, though humiliated in his suffering, he is shown to be exalted as *Kyrios* (Lord). In his confrontation with Pilate, he is shown to represent the power of truth – to which even the political authorities of the world are subject (John 18:36-7). The authority of Jesus is the authority of the 'kingdom of God' in which God alone rules.

It is this authority – the authority of the faithful witness – which is mediated by the church in the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). Like Jesus, the church can do nothing on its own, without the authority and the power of God at work in and through it. Unlike Jesus, the church, as an earthly institution, composed of highly fallible human beings, is constantly prone to error and wrongdoing. As long as it remains true to what it has received of Jesus Christ, as long as it remains open to the Holy Spirit to hold it in that truth and to lead it to deeper understanding of that truth, it will not teach erroneously. It is maintained in truth by fidelity to Scripture and to the tradition of authoritative teaching based on Scripture, by the faithful administration of the sacraments, by the faithful exercise of ministerial authority, and by following the example of the saints. In each of these ways the *koinonia* of the church is maintained as a participation in the life of God the Holy Trinity. Through this participation, the church, like its Lord, can exercise authority in those areas where God has given it competence and responsibility.

How does it do this? The fidelity of the church to Scripture is vital. It is the church itself which, by accepting the canon as such, *has recognised* the OT and NT as its 'rule of faith', the 'faithful witness' to Christ according to which it must teach. When it acts and teaches in accordance with the Scriptures it acts and teaches with authority; when it departs from scriptural teaching and practice, it must be re-formed in accordance with the Scriptures. The principle is simple; the practice is highly contentious. Amongst Christians, there has been constant debate and conflict about the interpretation of Scripture and the practice of the faith. Hence the need for councils in which the church as a whole can arbitrate between competing interpretations, and the development of a tradition of authoritative conciliar teaching. The first such council, which provides the conciliar model, is usually reckoned to be the 'Jerusalem Council', convened to resolve the dispute as to whether circumcision (i.e. the keeping of the Mosaic law) is a prerequisite for salvation. Significantly, the verdict is introduced with the words, 'It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to *US...*' (Acts 15:28). The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which is usually recited at the eucharist, is a brief conciliar summary of the authoritative teaching received by the church in the first four centuries, and is one of the creeds that has remained authoritative for the church in subsequent ages.

Authority in the church

The authority of the Church in administering the sacraments is the authority of Jesus. In baptizing and celebrating the eucharist, the church follows the example and the command of Jesus. In rehearsing the words of institution at the eucharist the church follows a tradition which Paul records as coming from the Lord: 'For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you...' (1 Cor. 11:23). These words encapsulate the understanding of authority which permeates all that the church teaches and does: it is the task of the church to be a 'faithful witness' to all who will receive that witness. The missionary and interpretative task for which the church has responsibility is one that calls for 'creative fidelity'.

Authority and oversight

One of the central tasks for those who exercise ministerial authority within the church is to promote and at times formally to adjudicate on this 'creative fidelity'. It is the whole church that must remain apostolic by its fidelity to the apostolic task (proclaiming the gospel) and the apostolic witness (as preserved in Scripture). There are some within the church who, in succession to the apostles, are authorised to exercise 'oversight' over local churches. They play a distinctive role in maintaining the whole church in apostolic truth. The historic Christian Churches of East and West claim that there has been a succession of bishops, who, by their communion with one another, and in the truth, have maintained communion in truth with the apostles and with Christ. The Reformers of the sixteenth century claimed that the church had failed in fidelity to truth and needed to be re-formed about the gospel. In this re-formation, the succession of bishops was sometimes broken and the practice of episcopacy discontinued. What remained unbroken was the church's communion in the truth of the gospel. There is in current ecumenical discussion an emerging consensus about the ministerial responsibility of the bishop within the church's communion, and the authority of the bishops together as they work to build up the unity of the whole body in truth and love (cf. Eph. 4:16). Only on the basis of their communion in the one apostolic faith do bishops teach and act with authority.

The church has frequently sought to exercise power in its own interest. It speaks and acts with *authority* when it bears 'faithful witness' to the authority of Jesus Christ and the power of the Spirit. Such witness must be the witness of a united body: power-struggles bring disunity. The church can only be truly united according to the will and the way of God. It speaks and acts with authority when the whole body is represented in its words and actions. To be authoritative it must be truly catholic. In recognising and receiving the authoritative witness of those saints who have most faithfully borne witness to Christ, it will be renewed in holiness. In none of this can there be coercion. Paul said of his preaching at Corinth that it was 'not with plausible words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God' (1 Cor. 2:4-5). In God's hands power and authority become one: they are exercised 'without remainder' for the benefit of humankind. The crucifixion bears 'faithful

witness' to that. So long as the church exercises the power of God by the means of God it will speak and act with the authority of God, bearing 'faithful witness' to the love of God in and for the world. In so doing, it will be truly apostolic. It will take its place in responsible, and at times critical, cooperation with the authority of the state, so that both church and state may be subject to the liberating authority of God.

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For those interested in pursuing this subject, the following further reading is suggested:

Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Final Report*, SPCK/CTS, London 1982, pp 49-98.

House of Bishops Occasional Paper, *Apostolicity and Succession*, General Synod of the Church of England, London 1994.

S. T. Coleridge, *On The Constitution of the Church and State according to the Idea of Each*, Dent, London 1972.

The Anglican-Lutheran Consultation on Episcopacy, *The Niagara Report*, Church House Publishing, London 1987.

S. W. Sykes, ed., *Authority in the Anglican Communion*, Anglican Book Centre, Ontario, Canada 1987.