

## THE AUTHORITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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*I. Introduction*

The problems of the interpretation and the authority of the New Testament have always been closely related. It has been possible to profess acceptance of New Testament authority but to use such a system of interpretation that the New Testament itself becomes secondary and its message never bursts out spontaneously and freely but is allowed to run only along carefully guarded canals. So different schools of thought within the church have argued for hundreds of years about the right method to use and about which methods are most true to the New Testament itself. <sup>1</sup> We have now moved into a much more fluid situation in theological debate than there has perhaps ever been before. Previously the lines of battle were more or less clearly drawn. There were accepted norms, even if different interpretation of those norms, and Scripture, church and reason battled with each other for the last word. In the last few years however two particular factors have changed the whole scene. First there is the growth of religious pluralism. This has many implications, and in some cases involves the denial of the uniqueness of Christianity, while in others it means that the Bible or the New Testament are not treated as norms. Related to this is the growth of ecumenism. Even where churches or individual Christians have not been concerned with denominational union schemes, they can no longer fail to be aware that ways of approaching the Bible can no longer run along purely denominational lines. At almost every level of understanding and interpretation denominational boundaries are largely irrelevant and it would be quite anomalous in these days for serious Bible study to be carried out in exclusive groups of, say, Anglicans or Presbyterians.

The second factor is the emergence of a whole range of problems facing the church, because they are also facing humanity, which seem, at least at first sight, alien to the world and the message of the Bible. The whole cast of modern thought tends to be man- and experience-centred and some will go only very reluctantly if at all to God and the objective truths set out in the Bible for help and guidance. Those who do go to the Bible will often find that there is nothing there which can be applied direct to the situation in question. As James Barr has put it:

"The locus of the authority question has shifted. The critical question is no longer 'What was said back then?' but 'What should we say now?' The centre of the authority crisis . . . lies in the present day . . . The sense of doubt . . . arises from a concentration on that which is closer to the present-day-decision as against that which is more remote."<sup>2</sup>

The importance and difficulty of understanding and applying rightly the authority of the Bible in the situation can readily be appreciated.

The Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches, at their meeting at Boldern near Zurich in October, 1968, suggested that there were six major question areas which could be divided into smaller or subsidiary questions.<sup>3</sup> They were as follows:

(1) The question of priorities within the Bible itself and its relation to the community which produced it.

(2) The question of diversity within the Bible.

(3) The question raised by changes of world-outlook since biblical times and by our temporal distance from the biblical situation.

(4) The question of relations between past and future in respect to the authority of the Bible.

(5) The question of the relation between biblical authority and other kinds of authority.

(6) Questions of the use, function and application of biblical material.

The purpose of this chapter is to cover approximately the same ground but in a slightly different way. First of all we shall discuss the question of the meaning of authority. Then we shall examine the problems of interpretation and authority within the New Testament, paying special attention to those which arise from the use of the critical methods described in previous chapters. Finally we shall deal with the problems of interpretation and authority today.

## II. *The Meaning of Religious Authority*

The whole question of authority has become a major issue in almost every sphere of present-day society. There has been something of a swing in many areas from the objective to the subjective. Attempts have been made to distinguish between "authoritarian" and "authoritative" as epithets for the process involved. The first term would indicate that facts had to be accepted and commands obeyed however unreasonable they might seem simply because the source of authority had said so. The second is taken to mean that facts are accepted and commands obeyed because they commend themselves to those to whom they are addressed. With the spread of education and man's supposed "coming of age" the "authoritative" model has far wider approval in most areas of life today than the "authoritarian".

The meaning of "authority" when applied to the Bible or to other sources of religious information or instruction is likewise taken in different ways.<sup>4</sup> Barr uses the terms "hard" and "soft".<sup>5</sup> He defines "hard" authority as meaning that the Bible has authority before it is interpreted and that that

authority is applicable generally. This type of concept has normally been prevalent in the understanding of biblical authority, particularly in the West. This may be partly connected with the Roman legal tradition which has had such a great influence in many aspects of church affairs. "Soft" authority on the other hand suggests that authority comes after interpretation and application and is limited to passages where an authoritative effect had in fact been found. He commends this idea, with its more personal and religious connotation, of a passage that has "spoken to us with authority", as a correct description of the way in which many people in fact become convinced of the authority of the Bible. But he goes on to conclude: "When carried beyond this, however, and given the *logical* status of the *ground* for belief in biblical authority, it is manifestly wrong" (his italics).

The Christian faith is full of situations where complementary truths need to be held together. This is basically because of the involvement of God in human affairs and the possibility of having two levels of explanation of the phenomena. So we can conceive of Christ as divine and human. We can also understand the sacraments as having both a divine objective aspect and also a human subjective one, providing a grace-faith reciprocal. It is not difficult to extend this to the principle of authority. Jesus is referred to as speaking or acting "with authority" (*exousia*) (Mk. 1:22, 27; 2:10 etc.) This authority is something which commended itself to those who encountered him, because he had made no formal claims to divine authority which they had heard and accepted.<sup>6</sup> But for those who have accepted Jesus as God incarnate there will also be an objective authority about his teaching. They will naturally tend to maintain that there is no incompatibility between the two and that his words have authority because his person has authority. The difficulty arises when the teaching of Jesus in some field does not commend itself to the hearer. If he is a believer in Jesus' unique position he will have to choose between the two types of authority. It is at this point that the concept of "soft" authority will be found not to have made sufficient allowance for human sinfulness and blindness and the true way of the disciple is to wrestle with the saying of the master until it can be seen to mean something in his own experience.

The principles which are applied to the authority of Jesus may also be related to the record of the teaching of Jesus which we have in the Gospels and to the New Testament as a whole. It is on the grounds of its relation to some aspect of their spiritual experience that most Christians will begin to accept that the New Testament is authoritative. But once they begin to go deeper into their faith and to study the New Testament further they will find difficult passages which do not immediately ring true. The adoption of the "soft" authority principle would lead to the neglect or rejection of such passages and very likely to the unbalancing and impoverishment of their spiritual lives. But to submit to the "hard" authority of the New Testament does not mean the abdication of the use of the mind. It involves an approach of humble expectation that God can speak through the whole of his word. It implies the willingness to enter into dialogue with the most difficult parts of

the text in the expectation that their true meaning will not yield itself lightly either to intellectual understanding or to spiritual experience. The grace-faith reciprocal will be found in the approach to the Scriptures as to the sacraments and what is accepted as the word of God will still need to become the word of God to the one who has ears to hear. If in one sense this may be described as "hard" authority, in another sense it is also something far deeper than that. For the Bible is not just a collection of commands to be obeyed. As the Christian grapples with the text of Scripture he will find that through it the living God encounters him and shapes and guides as well as judging and testing him. To him what is accepted as the word of God will bit by bit become in his experience a word of God directed to him and his situation. It is here that the "New Hermeneutic", rightly used, helps to add a new dimension to some of the rather arid theories of biblical authority which have sometimes prevailed in the past.<sup>7</sup>

### III. *Interpretation and Authority Within the Bible*

Any careful student of the Old Testament soon realises that, whatever critical view of the origin and date of its documents is adopted, the material contained in it was written down over a considerable period of time and that what came later very often depended in one way or another on what had come before. There can therefore be discerned in the Old Testament a continuing process of interpretation and application of truths already received in the light of new situations experienced for instance by the prophets. The prophets claimed to speak with authority ("Thus says the Lord") and they both added to the sum of God's revelation and also re-directed the thrust of what others had said or written before. We are justified in seeing in some sense a progressive revelation in the Old Testament and with that goes the implication of the need for continuing re-interpretation within the biblical tradition itself.

The very earliest Christians had as their scriptures simply the Old Testament and it is clear that for all its immense and indeed indispensable value it was not sufficient for the revolutionized situation in which they found themselves. God's revelation in the Old Testament had been partial and piecemeal. His revelation of himself in Christ was complete and final (Heb. 1:1f.). This meant that a whole new way of understanding the Old Testament had to be developed because the person of the Messiah revealed in the human form of Jesus of Nazareth, incarnate, crucified and risen, became the central reference point.<sup>8</sup> It was not said that the Old Testament had no meaning in its original context, but all the stress was now laid on its meaning for those "upon whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor. 10:11). To read the Old Testament now was to read it without the veil of misunderstanding or partial understanding that there had been before (2 Cor. 3:12-18). Further things were revealed in Christ which had not been revealed in the Old Testament, but the new treatment of many themes which had been dealt with in the Old Testament indicated a shift in the locus of authori-

ty. The Old Testament *per se* no longer had direct authority over the people of God. It was Christ to whom all authority was given in heaven and on earth (Mt. 28:18).

The best known example of the way in which the teaching of the Old Testament was reinterpreted in Christ is to be found in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7). In this collection of teaching various precepts of the Law are taken and given a fuller and deeper meaning in the light of Christ. There is a shift from an external authority over actions to an internal one over thoughts and motives. The contrast of "it was said to the men of old" with "but I say to you" makes it plain that the claims of Christ came higher than those of the Old Testament. But the general thrust of the teaching is found in the concept of fulfilment, which involved not the demolition of what had gone before but the giving to it of a new depth of meaning never previously recognized.<sup>9</sup>

A problem is however raised by this. The Sermon on the Mount is presented by Matthew as a collection of sayings of Jesus. Many scholars have questioned the authenticity of some or even all of them. Does such a questioning affect their authority? Some of the issues concerning the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus have been discussed above.<sup>10</sup> While scholars like Jeremias and the Scandinavians Riesenfeld and Gerhardsson have done much in recent years to support the belief that we have a reliable tradition of the teaching of Jesus, others have been more sceptical. While it is important that we should know whether there is a good case for the evangelists' recording faithfully the substance of the teaching of Jesus, it can hardly be claimed that the issue of authority is greatly affected by whether isolated sayings are considered to be *ipsissima verba* of Jesus. It was presumably in the providence of God that the incarnation took place in an age without electronic recording devices and the modern Christian would have been very hard pressed to wade through the millions of words used by Jesus in public teaching had he had access to them. Further in order to understand them he would have to be acquainted with Aramaic (as well as possibly Hebrew and Greek). The attempt by scholars to push back as far as possible to hear the authentic voice of Jesus is a perfectly proper and indeed a praiseworthy one. Yet it must be confessed that we cannot avoid the presence of the New Testament writers as mediators to us of the teaching of Jesus. They, or those who were responsible for their oral or written sources, selected, edited and translated the sayings of our Lord and apart from them we cannot hear his voice at all. If they can be shown to be men of honest intent who were well placed to be in touch with the teaching of the incarnate Jesus, we may feel that they have given us faithfully the general sense of his teaching.<sup>11</sup>

This discussion has led us to the point where we can see that not only do Jesus and the New Testament writers interpret the Old Testament in a new and authoritative way, but that there is a process of interpretation going on within the New Testament itself. If the interpreter in some way has authority, we must ask who the interpreter is? The Christian of New Testament times would not think that it was simply the human agent who recorded the

sayings of Jesus or explained them in some other context. He would think of it, when rightly done, as being the work of the risen Jesus through his Holy Spirit. If the word of the Lord Jesus could come in this way to his disciples, its authority could hardly be less than that of the words which he spoke in his Galilean ministry. It is of course a real possibility that the Gospels as well as the Epistles contain such words. Redaction-criticism<sup>12</sup> has reminded us again of the importance of the evangelists and their creative contribution. If they were indeed writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it makes no difference to the authority of their writings whether their creative editorial role seems to be small, as is probable in the case of Mark, or large, as in different respects it is with the other three evangelists. It would be very naive to think of the evangelists as simply writing down all they know. The problem of the inspiration of the evangelists as creative editors of their material is not substantially different from the problem of the writers of the Epistles as interpreters of the Christ event.

The fact that the early Christians regarded the death and resurrection of Jesus as being central to their faith carries with it the inevitable corollary that explanation of these things after they had occurred could not be given by the incarnate Christ. While scholars disagree how much Jesus taught about these things beforehand, all agree that he could not have explained them fully if only for the reason that the disciples, brought up in Judaism with very different messianic expectations, could not have understood properly. While Jesus apparently gave certain terms and categories (such as "Son of man" and "servant") by which his death and resurrection were to be interpreted, it is the New Testament writers who are left to expound things more fully. What is often implicit in the Gospels, because a Gospel is a special literary form centred round the telling of a story about Jesus of Nazareth, is much more explicit in the Epistles. Can we therefore say that the Epistles are the interpreters of the Gospels?<sup>13</sup> This would be something of a half-truth, particularly when it is remembered that most of the Epistles were probably written before most of the Gospels. It would be better to see the writers of the Epistles as having much greater liberty than the evangelists. They were not bound by the form of the story but were free to apply the truths of the revelation of God in Christ according to the particular needs of their readers or hearers. They could concentrate on systematic doctrinal teaching or on moral and spiritual application according to need. They were also free to refer in a much fuller way to the activity of the risen Christ through his Spirit in the church. Epistle and Gospel were meant to go hand in hand but the former is given no authority over the latter in the canon of the New Testament.

Here we are brought face to face with the problem of diversity within the New Testament. The formation of the canon was a recognition of the fact that there were different interpretations of the Christ event current in the apostolic church. If it were possible to have everything understood "in the flat", then presumably only one Gospel would have been necessary, for in that a full and final interpretation of the ministry, death and resurrection of

Jesus could have been given. Instead of that we have four preserved for us, three of which cover a great deal of the same ground and yet frequently give different emphasis and interpretation, as anyone using a synopsis can soon discover. If we turn to the Epistles we discover what has looked to many scholars like a straight confrontation between the teaching of some of the Epistles of Paul and the Epistle of James. If the extreme ideas of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, which had such currency in some circles in the nineteenth century, have largely been abandoned, there is today an increasing interest in the concept of diversity in the New Testament. The major work in this field has been concerned with the period just after the New Testament<sup>14</sup> but now the questions are being pushed back into the canon itself. It is an observable fact that all spontaneous movements, political or otherwise as well as religious, if they are to endure must acquire some sort of institutional form. It is not therefore surprising to see that the unstructured Christian life of the apostles and earliest disciples in due course developed into the increasingly rigid form of the catholic church. Many Christians have seen this as a process of corruption and decline in which both the word and the Spirit came to be stifled. Lutheran scholars have often gone further than this and have seen in some of the attempts to organize the church in the New Testament the spectre of *Frühkatholizismus* or early catholicism.<sup>15</sup> Against this tendency, which they see particularly prominent in the writings of Luke and in the Pastoral Epistles, they set what they believe to be the authentic New Testament note which is found in the genuine epistles of Paul. It is possible to approach the problem in a more constructive way and to see two approaches to theology and to life in the biblical writings from very early times.<sup>16</sup> The faith of the New Testament can be shown to be greater than any one man's ability to experience and express it fully. A truly balanced Christianity will contain emphasis on word, Spirit and church and even if the resultant product comes out rather differently in different parts of the New Testament it is hard to deny that they are all present in one way or another in all the canonical writings. It is true that the writing of a New Testament theology now requires a proper distinction between the sources and an indication of the differences of emphasis involved, but there is still such a thing as a New Testament theology.<sup>17</sup> Even the division between Palestinian and Hellenistic Christianity may have been greatly exaggerated.<sup>18</sup> It is not really such an exercise in hermeneutical gymnastics as is sometimes suggested to find compatibility as well as diversity between the theology of Paul and that of John or even James.

#### IV. *Interpretation and Authority Today*

While it is possible to reach a measure of agreement about what happened in biblical times, drawing conclusions from that for application to the situation today is a much more complicated and controversial task. We have to deal with questions about norms, about the status of the canon,

about the development of doctrine, about primary and secondary issues, about cultural transposition and about the actual application of the New Testament to the situation of the church and of individuals today.

### 1. THE IMPORTANCE OF NORMS

Disputes in the past have often been concerned with the use of norms and in particular the way in which the norms of Bible, church and reason have been defined and related to one another. Today there has been a good deal of questioning whether there are or ought to be any norms at all when it comes to the outworking of Christian principles in the modern world. As Barr points out, the ideas of "authority" and "norm" are closely related<sup>19</sup> so that this is one expression of the movement against any external authority. Amongst proponents of the view that the quest for norms is a false trail is D. E. Nineham.<sup>20</sup> In an unpublished paper to the Durham University Lightfoot Society entitled "The Dogma of Normativeness" (a title which he toyed with but did not use for his John Rylands Library lecture) he described the quest for norms as "Judaistic" and therefore an affront to the freedom of the gospel. The standpoint adopted by Nineham is strongly criticized by H. E. W. Turner.

"The argument that the quest for norms is a false trail in principle ignores the vital importance of the givenness of God. An unmitigated theological pluralism leads at once to a theological relativism which would make all theological statements possible with an equal chance of success or failure. This would mean the end of Christianity as we or anybody else have understood it."<sup>21</sup>

Turner goes on to state that "freedom does not mean unlimited openness and any possible 'Judaism' lies not in the quest for or possession of norms but in certain ways in which they can be used or abused." He refutes Nineham's attempt to force the dilemma, "either unrelated norms or no norms at all," and points out that the givenness of God is a related givenness.

It is certainly difficult to convince those who argue that there are no norms. In the end one can only show that a world-view which makes sense, though not providing slick answers to every problem, and a present religious experience which appears spiritually satisfying are both linked to the historical person and activity of Jesus Christ. Thus he is in some sense a norm for both doctrine and experience and the documents which witness to him and which have always been accepted by his followers are also in some sense at least normative. In the end conviction will only be brought if those who accept this live it out in all aspects of their thought and conduct. The sort of approach which Nineham advocates tends to be much more effective in demolition than in construction.

### 2. THE STATUS OF THE CANON

If there are to be norms at all in Christian theology, few have ever denied that the Bible should be at least one of them. At times it may have been sub-

ordinated to the church or to reason, but it has still been counted as a norm. This means therefore that to certain writings, now ancient, a special status is ascribed and they are collected into a canon which marks them off from other contemporary or later writings. There have in the past been relatively minor disputes about the contents of the canon (Should Esther or 2 Peter go out or should Barnabas or Hermas come in?) but now the whole idea of a canon is under attack. *Is Holy Scripture Christian?* asks C. F. Evans in the provocative title of a book in which he argues that the concept of a holy book may not accord with the faith to which that holy book itself bears witness.<sup>22</sup>

We find this same point being made by Nineham when he quotes an eminent English theologian as referring to "the curse of the canon" and of R. H. Lightfoot's remark to him that the production of the first gospel may have been "the first serious failure of nerve on the part of the infant Church".<sup>23</sup> Nineham himself draws back from a full-scale attack on the idea of a canon because his spiritual experience is refreshed by returning to the Bible, but he does not believe that this justifies any dogma of normativeness. Barr draws attention to "the accidental nature of the process which led to the formation of the Bible as we know it".<sup>24</sup>

Barr confesses himself not to be convinced by the arguments used but asserts that they have opened up the discussion in a potentially fruitful way. Those who believe in the providence of God may well also believe that there was nothing accidental about the formation of the canon even though it did not happen in a neat and tidy way. After all, the crucifixion is a particularly clear example of the way in which human limitations and even human sin can be overruled to fulfill the purposes of God in history.

One of the strongest reasons for treating the biblical documents as Scripture is found in the concept of their being witnesses to the saving acts of God.<sup>25</sup> But this particular concept is criticized by Barr, who has devoted much of his work to showing the weaknesses of the methodology of the modern "biblical theology" school.<sup>26</sup> He concludes that "in general, then, the possession of proximity to the historical events is an ambiguous quality and it does not of itself validate the status of the existing Bible as theological norm for today."<sup>27</sup>

Barr likewise follows Evans in rejecting the argument that the New Testament derives its authority from the apostles. "The idea that the writings are holy scripture because they are 'apostolic' seems therefore to depend on legends, semantic misunderstandings and erroneous extensions of valid truths".<sup>28</sup> The argument given here is rather brief and seems somewhat facile. It fails to take into account much of the recent work which has been done on the idea of tradition in the New Testament, particularly that of Riesenfeld and Gerhardsson. But it does remind us that we can have no cut and dried proof that all the New Testament documents were written by apostles or by their companions. We have again to admit that the evidence is incomplete and to resort to what many would believe to be a proper assumption, that the God who had gone to such lengths as he did to reveal

himself in Jesus Christ for the salvation of mankind would also see to it that a basically reliable record of that revelation was available for all to whom it was addressed.<sup>29</sup>

The problem is that in practice we use the canon selectively. The difficulty is not just that some like Charles Gore go to Paul for preference and others like William Temple to John. It is that for many Christians whole books are practically neglected. K. Aland has drawn attention to this in his important monograph, *The Problem of the New Testament Canon*.<sup>30</sup> He shows that the canon proceeded from the Christian communities rather than being imposed by ecclesiastical authority and that the *regula fidei* had an important role in determining its contents. He asserts that the twenty-seven books of the New Testament canon will not be bettered by any extension though not all the competing documents have survived. Modern demands are always for reduction and in practice the canon is undergoing a reduction and narrowing. He suggests that there are three possibilities open to us. We may accept the situation as it is, or we may try to formulate principles by which we can select from the formal canon to make a new actual canon or we can accept the official canon and see that it is made real by using it all. As a Lutheran he favours the second course of action. But Luther was at his weakest when dealing with the canon and it is unlikely that any new canon could be widely agreed now. It may be that the early church was less naive than is often supposed in its principles of selection and what has been so widely accepted and used for so long should not lightly be overthrown. Barr on the other hand points out that we cannot really change the canon today.

“... formation of scripture and canonization of scripture, are processes which were characteristic of a certain time, a certain stage in the life of the people of God. We are in fact no longer in that stage, it is a matter of history to us, and even historically we are not too well informed of the arguments and categories which were employed.”<sup>31</sup>

There are then strong arguments for keeping the canon as it is and seeking to understand it more seriously.

### 3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTRINE

It is possible to take the Bible as a norm in the sense that it gives us the raw materials of the Christian faith but to hold a theory of the development of doctrine which renders its authority very much secondary to that of the church in successive ages. Newman's “Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine” is a classical statement of this position. Hanson points out that he had to abandon the idea that the consubstantiality of the Son had always been taught in the church as a *disciplina arcani*. He demonstrates the attractiveness of the idea that the contemporary church in each age can correct the decisions of the church in ages before. “People whose historical consciences cannot accept the old theory can readily accept this one”.<sup>32</sup> He goes on to criticize Newman's approach and shows how the Bible ceases to

be the norm of faith. "Indeed, the Bible becomes less and less relevant as the progress of history leaves it further and further in the dim past".<sup>33</sup>

If this approach leads to the development of doctrine which is contrary to that revealed in the Bible or to the making of assertions about supposed historical events without any evidence from the Bible or other contemporary sources, it seems to stand self-condemned. On the other hand it has to be admitted that the doctrines of the incarnation and the trinity cannot be read straight out of the New Testament. It was necessary for the theologians to grapple with the phenomena of the New Testament and then try and formulate some systematic statement of orthodox belief. The great majority of the church's leaders and thinkers have accepted for centuries that the formulations were correct. Yet the formulation of the creeds and their acceptance as subsidiary norms has also recently come under attack. Turner shows the importance of the work of systematization and the making of a coherent whole.<sup>34</sup>

There is nothing absolute about the creeds and there is no *a priori* reason why the contemporary church should not seek to restate the doctrines which they contain in more modern thought-forms. Indeed this is the task of the church in every age in its role as "a witness and a keeper of holy Writ". Perhaps Hanson is over-optimistic when he asserts that the Ecumenical Movement will be the means by which we come to a full understanding of Christianity. "The Holy Spirit has given the Church a norm of faith in the Bible, but only a united church can fully understand that norm."<sup>35</sup> This process of understanding and formulating is of course something quite different from that of adding to the faith of the Bible and of providing for the Bible a framework of interpretation which will not let it stand as it should in judgement over the church. The very fact of the number of questions that are open now is itself witness to the failure of the church at any period in history to provide a scheme of biblical interpretation which will satisfy the church at all subsequent times.

#### 4. PERMANENT AND TEMPORARY FACTORS

While there have always been major philosophical problems in supposing that revealed facts about the nature of God or his action in Christ could be changed, it is much easier to suppose that there are secondary matters where there could be development from age to age. Within the New Testament itself we find for instance the "Apostolic Decree" of Acts 15. This was something formulated and promulgated by the leadership of the church as a result of a top-level conference, but the evidence of the New Testament writings as a whole is that its effect was decidedly limited. It was a ruling about practice rather than doctrine. The Pauline churches came to live under grace rather than law but did not think themselves to be overthrowing the authority of the Old Testament. They were recognizing the temporary nature of the approach to the Law under the old covenant. It is interesting to note that nowhere in the New Testament is there made explicit a division

between the moral principles and the legal and ceremonial aspects of the Pentateuch but the whole life-style of the churches indicated that most Christians had taken the point that there was a difference between them. There is therefore no *a priori* reason for supposing that ethical instructions given to individual churches or Christians in the New Testament were supposed to have universal validity in that form. The precise application of the story of the rich young ruler (Mk. 10:17–22) to every Christian would seem to be a recipe for chaos, though every one should face up to its basic moral challenge.<sup>36</sup>

The question of church order is now also treated by most scholars as a secondary question. It is true that Paul tries to impose some measure of conformity upon the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 11:16; 14:33–36), but he never treats this as of fundamental importance. The diversity in church order between the Pauline churches and that at Jerusalem suggests that there is no one given form of order and ministry in the New Testament which is valid for everyone everywhere.<sup>37</sup> To say this does not mean to deny that there are important principles connected with the organization of the church and the ordering of its ministry and sacraments, nor to deny that serious error can occur in these areas and that the best possible pattern should be aimed at. But it does mean that we have passed the day of sterile inter-denominational quarrels, with each side trying to justify its position as the exclusively right one by an appeal to Scripture.

The possibility of development in the field of ethics or church order is made possible by an understanding of the need for cultural transposition between the world and the church of the New Testament and the world and the church of today. The most often quoted example of this concerns Paul's injunctions about headdress in 1 Corinthians 11. Most twentieth century Christians do not find excessive difficulty in understanding that the principle underlying this can be applied to dress today, in whatever way is appropriate to the national or local conditions. Again it seems likely that the New Testament writers by and large accepted the social and political conditions of their day but taught such radical principles of love and of the dignity of man that in the end society would be transformed by this teaching. A particular social order provided the framework in which they practised the Christian life, but they did not have the opportunity of shaping the legislation of professedly Christian states.

There is, as Barr points out, a great danger in "cultural relativism". This would mean "a marked passivity of Christian faith and theology in relation to whatever happens to pass current in the culture of our own time".<sup>38</sup> The New Testament would lose its authority if it could not stand in judgement over the democratic ideals of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants as much as over the tyranny of Herod or of Nero. The principles of human nature, human conduct and human relationships do not change from age to age and the New Testament principles are available for translation into our situation.

Does the principle of translation into twentieth century terms allow for demythologization? The subject has been more fully treated above,<sup>39</sup> and

one must agree that there is an urgent need for translating the gospel into present-day terms. This is very different from listing what modern man can and cannot believe, which is often more a statement of what some theologians with a certain philosophical background can and cannot believe. A true demythologization of something like the ascension, showing the real truth which was being expressed in the biblical language and relating that to modern thought and knowledge, does nothing to diminish the authority of the New Testament. To rewrite the whole gospel story to fit our own contemporary prejudices is a different matter altogether. We should rather, in dialogue with the Scriptures, allow them to help shape our presuppositions.<sup>40</sup>

Many of the issues mentioned above find their crystallization in a problem currently facing many sections of the Christian church. Should women be ordained to the presbyterate? While some frankly ignore the biblical evidence as irrelevant to the contemporary church, those who take the New Testament seriously have to grapple with the issues above. What does the New Testament actually say about the ministry of women? Is it a primary or secondary matter? Does the Pauline discussion of the order of creation in relation to the question make it an issue of theological principle rather than of church order? What sort of cultural transposition do we have to make and is it so great that we may almost have to demythologize the biblical doctrine of creation? Has the development of understanding which eventually brought freedom to slaves also now grown ripe for the freeing of women from any restrictions on their ministry? In what sense do we talk about views being "scriptural" or "unscriptural"? Does the matter have to be instanced or commanded in the New Testament or is it simply sufficient that it is not forbidden? Can those who claim that genuine pentecostal phenomena ended with the apostolic age at the same time claim the pattern of the apostolic church to be normative for women's ministry?<sup>41</sup>

### V. Conclusion

Since the religion and science controversies of the last century intelligent Christians have been learning increasingly to see that God works through all sorts of means for which some explanation other than divine action may also be given. There is no longer any need to posit a "God of the gaps". If this is true both in matters of doctrinal and historical truth and also in ordinary Christian living, there should be no great difficulty in applying the same principle to biblical criticism. If the careful literary and historical study of the Bible suggests that it came into its present form in certain ways which are explicable at the human level, that does not mean that it is not also the word of God. While some solutions of critical problems would be hard to square with any theory of the inspiration and authority of the Bible, the majority are neutral. The discovery of the role of the early church or the role of the evangelist in the compilation of the Gospels makes them no less authoritative than if they had all been simply a verbatim record of what Jesus said and did. A fearless attempt to interpret the New Testament cor-

rectly will do more to strengthen than to undermine its authority.<sup>42</sup> For the authority of the Bible comes home most clearly to us when we understand it as fully as we are able to do. This understanding is built up for the church as a whole by the work which scholars and devout Christians have done in trying to grapple with the true meaning of the text and its application in each generation. The New Testament has the authority of a once-for-all revelation which witnesses to a once-for-all redemption, though the church has always found that, in the words of John Robinson (one of the Pilgrim Fathers), "The Lord hath more light and truth yet to break forth out of His holy word." Nonetheless the church has been given a basic norm by which to guide and shape her life and which will act as a judge if she neglects it.

The Bible has been given to us to provide eternal principles and not as a direct solver of current problems. If it is rightly accepted as a norm its principles will be seen to bear on contemporary situations and it is one of the sad facts of the present church scene that there seems to be little understanding of how to apply biblical teaching.<sup>43</sup> All the tools at our disposal must be used to elucidate the original meaning of the text, but there is needed in addition an understanding of the contemporary world, not just from a secular point of view, but with reference to the way in which the Spirit is working. It is very rarely the scholar sitting isolated in his study who discovers anything really fresh in the message of the scriptures. The task of understanding and application needs interplay between evangelist, pastor and layman in the world on the one hand and theologian on the other. The individual Christian should be able to go to the New Testament and find "a command, a promise or a warning, an example to follow or an error to avoid".<sup>44</sup> But he will do this, not by reading the Bible in isolation so that he fails to contextualize what he has read, but by engaging in study of the text and discussion of its meaning with other Christians also. The authority of the New Testament, rightly understood, will never be fully experienced in this life. But if Christians approach it desiring to hear the voice of God speaking to them they will find that the Spirit takes the word in the church and makes it for them something living and active. Only by those with such an attitude can its true authority be found.

## NOTES

1. See above, ch. 2.
2. *Interpretation* 25 (1971), pp. 36f. Cited in J. Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London 1973), p. 37.
3. These are set out by J. Barr in "The Authority of the Bible - A Study Outline", *Ecumenical Review* 21:2 (1969), pp. 135-150.
4. See the discussion of the concept of authority by E. Jüngel, G. Krodol, R. Marle and J. D. Zizioulas in *Ecumenical Review* 21:2 (1969), pp. 150-166.
5. *The Bible in the Modern World*, pp. 27-29.
6. For a fuller discussion of the authority of Jesus see H. von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries* (E.T. London 1969), pp. 1-11.

7. See above, ch. 16.
8. Cf. C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London 1952); R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (London 1971).
9. Cf. Robin Nixon in a forthcoming symposium on morality and law "Fulfilling the Law – Law and Liberty".
10. See above, ch. 10.
11. D. R. Catchpole refers on p. 167f. to two verses whose authenticity seems to be in doubt. As far as Matthew 18:17 is concerned, there need be no difficulty in seeing "Gentile" and "tax-collector" as terms for typical outsiders which could have been used by Jesus here and in 5:46f. It is part of the paradox of grace that heathen and sinners are those who respond to the Gospel. Matthew 23:2f. has always presented more problems, particularly in the first phrase of verse 3. Jesus could have spoken such words to discourage antinomianism and at the same time to lead his disciples to a deeper understanding of the real meaning of the Law. There is similar teaching in 5:17–20 which leads on to the profound dealing with attitudes in 5:21–48. The meaning might be "Do whatever they tell you, but not in the way they do it." The statement of their "not doing" followed by examples of their "doing" indicates some sort of paradox. In verse 23 the practice of justice, mercy and faith (cf. Micah 6:8) is shown to be the true observance of Pharisaic legal teaching (cf. Luke 11:42 where not neglecting legal observance is also referred to). Matthew is a careful writer and should be allowed a measure of consistency even where there is paradox. He must have been as aware as modern writers of the difficulty of the saying (unless we have missed its meaning altogether). That apparent difficulty provides in itself some evidence of authenticity. It prepares the way by contrast for Jesus' last charge "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). For fuller discussion, particularly of the importance of context, see Robert Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition*, (Cambridge 1975), pp. 173ff.
12. See above, ch. XI.
13. As does E. J. Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (London 1959), pp. 57f. His attempt to make Romans and Galatians the touchstone of everything in the New Testament needs a more convincing rationale than he provides.
14. See W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (E.T. London 1972). His thesis is discussed critically by H. E. W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth, A Study in the Relations between Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Early Church* (London 1954), pp. 39–80. See also A. A. T. Ehrhardt, *The Framework of the New Testament Stories* (Manchester 1964).
15. Cf. E. Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today* (E.T. London 1969), pp. 236–251.
16. See F.J. Leenhardt, *Two Biblical Faiths, Protestant and Catholic* (E.T. London 1964).
17. See E. Käsemann, "The Problem of a New Testament Theology", NTS 19 (1972–73), pp. 235–245; R. Morgan, *The Nature of New Testament Theology* (London 1973).
18. Cf. I. H. Marshall, "Palestinian and Hellenistic Christianity: Some Critical Comments", NTS 19 (1972–73), pp. 271–287.
19. *The Bible in the Modern World*, p. 23.
20. "Wherein lies the Authority of the Bible?" in L. Hodgson (*et al.*), *On the Authority of the Bible* (London 1960), pp. 81–96; "The Use of the Bible in Modern Theology", BJRL 52 (1969), pp. 178–199.
21. *The Churchman* 86 (1972), pp. 166–173.
22. C. F. Evans, *Is "Holy Scripture" Christian? and Other Questions* (London 1971), p. 35: "If it was the case that religious models, and especially the Old Testament, were in the end too much for Christianity, so that a time came when it was no longer possible to say, 'These are writings which have belonged from the first to our movement, they are the best we have and they have recommended themselves', and one could only say 'This is holy scripture', does it follow that this is of the nature of the case, and that the church has always to think in this way?"
23. D. E. Nineham, "The Use of the Bible . . .", pp. 197f.
24. *The Bible in the Modern World*, p. 43: "The acceptance of books as canonical did not proceed on the basis of theological considerations which we could share today, but on the

basis partly of geography and the rivalries of the major churches in ancient times, partly of historical accident, partly of sheer fantasies or falsehoods, through which books were attributed to 'apostles'."

25. As R. P. C. Hanson puts it: "The Bible is the record of revelation, and this record takes the form of historical witness. It constitutes testimony to an unique activity of God, to an unique course of events which happened to an unique people, and finally to an unique Person. This is what causes the uniqueness of the Bible; what constitutes its uniqueness is not the form or forms of the Biblical literature, which are in fact most of them to be found in many other literatures and cultures as well, but its subject." (*The Bible as a Norm of Faith* (Durham, 1963), p. 7; cf. *Tradition in the Early Church* (London 1962), pp. 213-224).

Similarly Turner states: "The Bible then is the primary norm not only as the earliest, the most complete, the most wide-ranging in time and space record of God speaking, God acting, but also as containing within its pages the words and acts of God which bring salvation. It is the record in word and deed of salvation history" (art. cit., p. 168).

26. *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford 1961); *Old and New in Interpretation. A Study of the Two Testaments* (London 1966).

27. *The Bible in the Modern World*, p. 81.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

29. The problem of pseudonymity has been discussed above (see ch. 5). It would create considerable difficulties to suppose that a document whose title was deliberately intended to deceive the church about its authorship should be accepted as Holy Scripture. On the other hand, there are literary conventions which are not intended to mislead contemporary readers of documents, and if it could be convincingly shown that such had been used in the title of a "wrongly ascribed" New Testament document, there is no reason to exclude it from the canon on that account.

30. *The Problem of the New Testament Canon* (London 1962). Cf. E. Schweizer, *Neotestamentica* (Zürich/Stuttgart 1963), pp. 208-210.

31. *The Bible in the Modern World*, p. 154.

32. *The Bible as a Norm of Faith*, p. 16.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

34. Art. cit., p. 170: "This the New Testament itself, which is more concerned with spearhead thrust than with lateral roundedness, did not itself undertake. The drawing of the appropriate doctrinal inferences and their thinking together with each other in an appropriate thought-context was a subsequent but indispensable task. To do it justice the church did not hurry over its task, kept firmly in touch with the Bible throughout (biblical commenting went on side by side with philosophical theology) and did not overdefine. It had the advantage over later ages in undertaking the task together and reaching its result through a confluence of different approaches and traditions, though not without dispute or acrimony. Its unity was not seen as incompatible with diversity. It was fortunate too that a set of philosophical co-ordinates were available which formed a common universe of discourse between the church and its secular contemporaries."

35. *The Bible as a Norm of Faith*, p. 23. For the idea of a continuing revelation to be tested by reference to the Christ of the New Testament, see E. Schweizer, *op. cit.*, pp. 211f.

36. The action of the youthful Origen serves as a warning. For the problem of ethical diversity in the New Testament, see J. L. Houlden, *Ethics and the New Testament* (Harmondsworth 1973).

37. Cf. W. D. Davies, *A Normative Pattern of Church Life in the New Testament - Fact or Fancy?* (London 1950).

38. J. Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*, pp. 46f.

39. See above, ch. XV.

40. See above, ch. III.

41. For literature on the subject see: K. Stendahl, *The Bible and the Role of Women, A Case Study in Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia 1966); *Why Not? Priesthood and the Ministry of Women*, ed. M. Bruce and G. E. Duffield (Abingdon 1972); *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood* (Church Information Office, London 1972); *Evangelicals and the Ordination of Women*, ed. C. Craston (Bramcote 1973).

## NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION

42. G. E. Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (London 1970).
43. See J. D. Smart, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church, A Study in Hermeneutics* (London 1970); B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (London 1972). Nineham confesses to not seeing any relevance to the present situation in many passages of the Bible (art. cit., pp. 181f.).
44. The things which users of the Scripture Union notes are encouraged to look for when reading the Bible.

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*Best read:* Funk, *Language*; Robinson and Cobb, *New Hermeneutic*.

#### CHAPTER XVII

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*Best read:* Barr, *Bible*; Ladd.