

THE REDEMPTIVE AUTHORITY OF CHRISTA Working Paper

Anglican/Roman Catholic Commission. S. Africa.

A: THE AUTHORITY OF GOD

Authority, according to Scripture, comes from God who is Person. He creates, and he communicates with people: hence authority and relationships are complementary. God shows that he is the only source of all authority, which is an expression of his being (Exodus 3:14).

At Mount Sinai the full power of God's authority is revealed to the Hebrews in a terrifying experience below the mountain peak. But the aim is to establish a loving relationship, which is realised in: 'I am your God: you are my people'. This Covenant was intended ultimately for the nations, for God's world.

God's authority is rejected when God's love is rejected. Israel experiences its rejection of God's love in terms of breaking the Covenant. Israel now experiences God's love as wrath. In this wrath God does not abandon Israel forever but invites it to return: He remains its liberator.

Israel begins to learn that God is powerful, that He demands exclusive loyalty, since He is holy and faithful Himself. Israel learns that the gods of the heathen are but idols and that its God is the creator. His authority in fact extends beyond Israel to all mankind.

Through Israel's own experience of being powerless and unable to exercise authority or build a community without God, it was led to a greater knowledge of God as all-powerful. Israel, who begins by knowing God as its liberator, comes to see Him as the creator of the cosmos, liberating it from chaos and sterility. He crowns his creation by making man 'in his own image' and immediately gives him freedom and authority in the exercise of his stewardship over creation. Man is forbidden to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but he is still free to obey or disobey the prohibition. Authority from the beginning rests upon the person of the author of life, of life livable - God Himself. God's authority is not authoritarian but is designed to establish a loving relationship, and calls for a free acceptance and response.

When God's community, Israel, is established, He is the sovereign of Israel. He is Israel's lord, husband, master,

shepherd, and there is no other. Israel responds to God and becomes the royal priesthood (Exodus 19:6). Corporately and ideally Israel exercises, proclaims, attests God's rule, offers sacrifice and teaches God's Torah. Similarly, Israel performs the function of a prophet corporately, by proclaiming God's message to the nations.

Within Israel God's authority is delegated in various ways, changing from time to time. Charismatic authority - dependent on a specific claim to have been called by God Himself, or on a special endowment from God Himself, is the greatest testimony to God's own freedom and His authority, and witnesses to the fallibility of Israel. Priests were hereditary in Israel. Their functions show the nature of their authority. They performed the cultus and interpreted the Torah to the people. The king was not simply a secular ruler. He represented God to the people and the people to God. Generally speaking, authority is exercised by prophets, priests and kings for Israel to God and for God to Israel.

It is therefore all the more amazing that the revelation of the rôle of the servant in Isaiah sets the rôle of authority in sharpest relief. In obedience to God's authority and as expressing it, the servant does not dominate: he serves, he evangelizes, he heals, he is disgraced, he suffers, he dies (Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12). If this is how God's servant exercises his authority, then what does it say about God Himself, about Israel, about authority figures within Israel?

'Law' is a poor translation of the Hebrew 'Torah'. 'Torah' and its parallels reveal the whole relationship of God and man. The written Torah is the expression of the revelation and derives its authority from the person of God. Jesus came not to do away with the Torah but to fulfil it. He claimed authority to interpret the Torah because it was His Torah in two senses. First, He and his Father had made it and He knew its meaning far better than anyone else could claim to know it. Secondly, the Torah was intended for man, and Christ is man. Hence Jesus shows that He is true living Scripture and tradition. He is the Word of God. He fulfils and interprets all Scripture.

B: THE AUTHORITY OF CHRIST

God sent Christ into the world to redeem it. Christ was given authority by the Father to reveal God's loving purpose for men, and to liberate the world from the power of evil and mankind from sin and death. By His life Christ shows to all

men the Father's design for every human life: Christ's power is always redemptive because it sets men free to realise their destiny as sons of God, and reconciles them to Him and to one another. It is with power that Christ preaches and teaches; that He forgives sins, heals the sick and casts out demons; that He rebukes the forces of nature; that He commissions and empowers the Twelve and the Seventy; that He charges His Church to proclaim His gospel to all nations.

Christ's response to the Father's authority is that of perfect obedience culminating in His sacrificial death. His obedience is a reproach (or offence) to the disobedience of all other men against which the wrath of God is proclaimed. For God is holy and righteous as well as loving; Christ is Lord as well as Servant; and the authority of His kingship commends the obedience of men. It is only by accepting Christ's authority that men are made truly free by Him whose service is perfect freedom.

Christ's authority, like the Father's authority from which it derives, is self-authenticating, designed to win men's freely-given response of obedience. Already in the Gospels Christ has to condemn distorted patterns of authority. (Matt.:23, Mark 9:33-37.) Christ reveals His authority through His willingness to accept suffering, rejection and death. It is in the setting of service that Christ claims to be Master and Lord (John 13:12-15).

Christ is the Head of His Church which He appointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the agent and instrument of God's purpose in the world.

C: THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH

Christ's work was authoritative in two senses: (a) He was commissioned, authorized, sent by the Father Himself to fulfil the Father's will in accordance with the Scriptures; a sending that was the incarnate expression of His own divine nature; (b) within Him the unifying, healing, liberating, reconciling power of God's Spirit was at work.

After His resurrection, which is the divine vindication of His authority, the Lord commissioned His disciples to go out and teach all nations. As the Father had sent Him, so He now sent them. They therefore had the authority of being commissioned and also the authority that derived from being empowered by the Spirit, who at Pentecost was visibly poured out upon them. The Spirit enabled them to fulfil their commissioning by a) enlightening their minds so that they

could understand and preach Christ's message, and b) giving them authority in the sense of dunamis by being powerfully active through them, and c) being the source of inspiration behind the New Testament which witnessed to their faith and which would forever be invested with his authority.

The Church's authority therefore derives from Christ's commissioning and from the active presence within it of the Spirit, the latter giving life and substance to the former. This Spirit unites the Church to Christ its head so that not only in its actions but also in its being it shows forth to the world the authority of its living Lord by being His Body, the reconciled and reconciling community. From the Church's communion of life with the Father and Son in the Spirit there spring certain qualities of life (truth, holiness, love worship, life, peace, harmony, unity) which reflect the Lord's redemptive will and activity.

Thus the Church is commissioned to preach the gospel. However, it cannot do so except under the guidance of the Spirit. It is by the Spirit present in its life that the Church has accepted the uniqueness of the Scriptures and is helped to understand them. It is by the Spirit's guidance of the Church that its creeds, beliefs and decisions regarding God's will for particular times and places are recognized as possessing authority.

Thus the Church is commissioned to proclaim the truth. Her function is not merely to impart information but to be the effective instrument of God's reconciling power. This too she can only do through the Holy Spirit. Her sacraments are therefore authoritative acts, offering God's grace here and now.

The Church is meant to proclaim what she herself is - a community of reconciliation. This requires a day to day ordering of the Church's life for which it needs and is given authority.

The Church is not above its Lord. Hence its authority is revealed to the world also in its willingness to serve and to suffer.

However, the Church is not a passive instrument of the Spirit's activity. It is made up of individuals who vary in the degree of fervour and sincerity with which they respond to the demands of their membership in the Body of Christ. Thus the Spirit's guidance and assistance is not a guarantee against the entry of error and sinfulness into the Church's life, because the Church is in the flesh as well as in the Spirit.