

Truth and Authority

1. Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.

'I am the way, the truth and the life', says the Lord (sandwiching the word truth between words carrying a dynamic sense of movement and growth). He sends out the apostles with his authority (Luke 10, 16 'He that hears you hears me'; Matt 28, 19-20 'All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ...'). The gospel message is to be received not as the word of man but as the word of God (2 Cor. 4, 5; 1 Thess. 2, 13). Those whom Christ sends are his empowered ambassadors (2 Cor. 5, 20). Even where the apostle has no commandment of the Lord he has the right to give strong moral advice (1 Cor. 7, 25) and is to be accounted steward of the Lord (1 Cor. 4, 1; Titus 1, 7 of the bishop). The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the head corner-stone (Eph. 2, 20). So the church is the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3, 15) as itself resting on the one foundation of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3, 11). The presence of Christ by the Spirit in and with the Church is a continuing gift to his people, 'guiding into all the truth' (John 16, 13). So the promise to the Church is that built on the rock it will withstand all the powers of evil (Matt. 16, 18). In the epistle to the Ephesians the Church, which is one, holy, catholic and apostolic, is an essential part of the eternal plan of God for the salvation of humanity in Christ. The society which is to bring unity to mankind in Christ must itself be one, this unity being both given and an objective of continual striving. The glory of the Head of the Church (Col. 1-2) is participated in by his Body which is therefore one (Eph. 4, 4), even in face of much empirical evidence of separateness (as between Jewish and Gentile believers, Eph. 2). The apostles derive their authority not from a democratic consent of the community but from the Lord of the Church who has given them power within the community to build up (2 Cor. 10, 8). The power of the keys, primarily to give rulings on moral issues, is entrusted by Christ to Peter (Matt. 16, 19), to all the apostles (John 20, 23), and to the whole church (Matt. 18, 18); and the New Testament never determines which (if any) has theological priority, for in Christ all are one.

2. *fomy* The 'truth' is the salvation of man in Christ, of which the Church is the witness and guardian. Therefore the Church has to safeguard this truth against all attempts to transfer the gospel in ways which prejudice this salvation; e.g. by a doctrine of Christ which sees in him neither fully man, in solidarity with the human race, nor the very presence of the Creator acting to redeem his own; or by a doctrine of man which either regards man as irredeemably depraved or as needing hardly more than a little firm exhortation and better education. Heresy is not mere error, from which no man is immune, but a chosen rejection of the decision of the Church as a whole necessarily taken to safeguard the truth of redemption in Christ and of the rational and moral understanding of this redemption transmitted in the continuing history of the Christian society.

3. The organs of authority for reaching decisions are first the holy scriptures as the primary witness to the work of God in Christ and 'the springs of salvation' (Athanasius, Ep. Fest. 39, PG 26. 1437); the summary of the basic essentials or doctrinal pattern given in the Rule of Faith, the shape of which is intimately akin to the creed confessed in baptism; the tradition of the liturgy; the ministry in continuity and unity with the apostolic commission of Christ, and the common consensus of believers. The work of individual theologians contributes greatly to the general understanding of the tradition of faith and life to which Scripture, creed and liturgy are standing witnesses, and formally defined doctrines may owe much to their exploration of the treasure entrusted to the Church in the 'deposit' of

faith (1 Tim. 6, 20; 2 Tim. 1, 14 shows that this deposit is not a rigid or static set of conceptual propositions!) Nevertheless, the ultimate authority does not lie with the individual theologian, however great he may appear to his successors. A characteristic of some of the greater theologians (e.g. Augustine) is a continued asking for criticism and correction and an abhorrence of being treated as an 'authority' in the sense of someone whose reputation and standing leads him to be believed without scrutiny of the reasons for his judgements. The freedom of the individual theologian is at times in tension with the mind of the community, especially if it appears to challenge the conservative forces socially inherent in the preservation instincts of officials of an institution. Nevertheless, the tradition of theology, like holy scripture in the image of Gregory the Great, should be a river in which lambs may walk and elephants may swim (Moralia in Job, prefatory letter to Leander).

4. The normal functioning of authority as guardian of truth in the Church, in the special sense described above, takes place within the local church, in the diocese or the province (or the natural unit of community which may be determined by national and linguistic factors). But to preserve mutual brotherhood and a common mind, Christians need to meet from time to time in conference and in particular bishops, to whom special responsibility is entrusted, in synod. Exceptionally a great issue in doctrine requires decision at the level of a widely representative council, in rare cases at a world-wide or 'general' council. The ancient church understood that if scripture or creed or liturgy leaves a major matter unclear, there is authority in the general judgement of the universal church, which will even be assisted towards a clearer apprehension and statement of a disputed doctrine as a result of controversy about the true interpretation of scripture. Nevertheless conciliar definitions are seen by the Church Fathers (1) as saying No to new errors, never Yes to new truths; (2) as reexpressing in better or clearer language what has been (explicitly) said from the beginning; (3) as open to possible review by the judgement of later councils. Augustine (de Baptismo ii.3.4) observes that clarity may not be achieved quickly in a complex question. And the ultimate acceptance by the faithful is the sign of truth in the Church. Hence the rejection of councils such as Ariminum 359 or Ephesus 449 which were not accepted at Rome but otherwise seemed to lack no element, juridically or otherwise, necessary to an ecumenical council. The confirmation by Rome, as by other great sees, is a vital part in the process of reception (and in antiquity was understood more in this sense than as a strictly juridical act).
5. Athanasius repeatedly affirms that orthodoxy is more a matter of intention than of mere formulae; not however in the sense that orthodoxy is a wholly subjective attitude or aspiration, but rather that permanence in the truth is not secured by repeating identical words, since words derive their various meanings from usage within different communities. Athanasius discovered painfully at the council of Alexandria 362 that theologians in different traditions can use directly contradictory terms and mean the same thing.
6. The nature of the authority attaching to general councils in the patristic age is not easily defined in precise focus. The councils of Nicaea 325 and to a lesser degree Chalcedon 451, decisive for the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, soon come to be looked back to as sacrosanct. The other great councils joined with them to constitute a kind of canon, at first of four, then enlarged to seven, a number further extended by the Latin West but not by the Greek East. Yet the difference in this respect is more external and technical than integral and structural, and there can be artificiality about the honorific epithet 'ecumenical' of general councils. The ancient church does not think even of the greatest councils as organs of hierarchical authority somehow 'standing above' the Church, any more than it thinks of the Church as 'standing above' holy scripture. The task of councils is to articulate the

truth on which dispersed local churches agree in continuity with the apostolic faith. They are not like modern democratic parliaments deciding by majority votes; on fundamentals they seek unanimity in faith. Only with rare exceptions were vain attempts made to achieve uniformity in liturgical uses or discipline (e.g. clerical celibacy).

7. Among the local churches the ancient Fathers held the churches of apostolic foundation in special respect, and particularly the church of Rome where the apostles Peter and Paul suffered martyrdom. It was wise custom from early times to consult the Roman see on difficult questions of doctrine (Innocent I in Aug. ep. 181-182). From the mid-third century onwards, and especially from Damasus (366-384), the Petrine text of Matt. 16 comes to be quoted at Rome (or by controversialists elsewhere who needed Rome's support) as providing the scriptural ground for this special position. Hence Leo the Great's Tome of June 449, issued as an authoritative pronouncement in virtue of the Petrine office and, in Leo's eyes, making the eastern emperor's ecumenical council superfluous, and certainly making synodical debate of its content wholly inappropriate (ep. 82; 90; 93-94). The Tome is less important in doctrinal respects than as a milestone in Roman authority since Leo sees Roman primacy as merging with an ultimate authority in dogmatic definition. Not only the Greek bishops at Chalcedon but Leo's Western bishops at Milan or in Gaul accept it, however, not because Leo has promulgated it but because on examination they find it orthodox (ep. 68; 97).
8. Parallel with this is Augustine's treatment of the Petrine text which he never interprets of Rome. To Augustine, one becomes a rock by true obedience to the word of God (c. Faust. 22.90), which is to share in the communion of saints which does not fail (ep. 53. 2). Accordingly Peter, in Matt. 16, is representing the whole Church. This in no way implies that Augustine does not hold the Roman see in warm regard as a great source of authority. A delicate judgement may therefore be discerned in the fact that the Formula of Hormisdas, by which in 419 the Eastern episcopate was required to recognize the primacy of Rome as a condition of restored unity after 34 years of schism, does not exactly ground this primacy on Matt. 16, but cites the text in juxtaposition with the claim that Rome has never departed from orthodoxy, which is to 'follow the decisions of the fathers in all things'.
9. The ancient church did not use the words infallibilis and infallibilitas which are twelfth-century coinage. That the fathers held firmly that God's truth declared in Christ is preserved in the Church is not in the least in doubt, but they do not express themselves in the language of infallibility. This does not mean that they regard defined doctrine as a hazily uncertain or relativistic or subjective matter. The function of definition is to guard, as best human words may, the redemption which Christ has achieved and which is mediated to, in, and through the Church of apostolic faith and tradition. Questions remain, however, whether or not the mediaeval introduction of the concept of infallibility potentially or actually altered the balance of the patristic notion of truth to which the Church is bound as guardian and witness; whether or not the new term (which did not achieve entrance to any conciliar definition before 1870) is to be interpreted wholly within the earlier framework of scripture and tradition in which the responsible directing and defining authority must operate; and even if that is so, whether or not in the twentieth century it is a convenient term to express what Christians ought to say and to continue saying.
10. The definition of papal infallibility at Vatican I is notorious for its restraint and subtlety. Its wording at first sight might suggest (and it was so interpreted by many Catholics in and after 1870) that the pope's authority to define doctrine binding on the consciences of the faithful is absolute, personal, and separate; standing above the Church as a whole and all the episcopate. The formula is anti-Gallican (and anti-Constance) in insisting on the pope not being subordinate to a general council or even

perhaps (but this seems much less certain) to the ultimate reception by the faithful. Yet its limiting clauses confine the exercise of this prerogative strictly to matters of faith and morals where there can be no question of legitimate options being left open to any true catholic and where he speaks as teacher of the universal church evidently on doctrinal issues where it is indispensable to protect the deposit of faith. No infallibility attaches to any utterance of the pope as a private person, not even as a highly placed dignitary of a venerable and ancient see. As the matter was left in the incomplete council of 1870, the impression was inevitably left that other bishops had a deeply subordinate, perhaps even directly dependent authority, with hardly a theological function exceeding that of the chorus in a Greek play. The stress of Vatican II on collegiality goes far towards adjusting the balance.

11. The limitations written into the 1870 formula (which Newman saw as a major defeat for the 'insolent and aggressive faction' that had called for the definition, hoping for something far less restrained which would cover the Syllabus) go with the vagueness of some essential terms. The pope's infallibility is defined as identical (or coterminous) with that of the Church; yet the infallibility of the Church has never been the subject of authoritative explanation or precise definition even at Trent, and except possibly for the clause ex sese non autem ex consensu ecclesiae it is not perfectly clear that a careful and unmilitant Gallican could not live with the decree; Newman had reason to be amazed that Döllinger (with almost all the Catholic professors in German universities) was unable to accept and associated himself with the Old Catholics. The definition declares that in some sense the Pope may speak per se and can be infallible (if all the other conditions are fulfilled) and therein lies the only genuinely new element in the 1870 decree. There is some *prima facie* ambiguity whether ex sese is true only of the strictly juridical power or whether this independence theoretically extends to the content, relieving the Pope of obligation to consult. The clause is generally understood today only in the former sense.
12. The difference between Newman and Döllinger (Janus) revolves round the relevance of historical fact to the truth or interpretation of the 1870 definition. Döllinger thought of the silence of the Fathers on the subject; of Liberius' compromise with Arianism (much politically, little dogmatically, it could be said); Zosimus on the Pelagians; Vigilius' frequent tergiversations on the Three Chapters; Honorius' imprudent and hasty support for Monoenergism; or Eugenius' decree of 1439 that the correctio instrumentorum constitutes the matter of the sacrament of orders. Döllinger saw these blunders as simply refuting papal infallibility. Manning may have thought them irrelevant. Newman did not. His private letters (and the published 'Letter to the Duke of Norfolk') show that he regarded such historical facts as necessarily interpreting the meaning of the 1870 decree (e.g. Letters xxv p. 198; xxvi pp. 112, 198); in other words as elements which must further qualify the apparent (but not actual) absolutism of the language.
13. Newman appreciated the political circumstances of Pius IX which made the definition expedient. But that is not to say that Newman welcomed the fact of the definition. He thought enforcement would encourage merely nominal adherence and therefore secret infidelity. He feared that a definition issued when its necessity was not apparent would create a precedent for further definitions when necessity was even less apparent (Letters xxv p. 192). He distinguished carefully (with Perrone) between inspiration as a positive idea and infallibility which is negative (xxv. p. 309; xxvi p. 171), and very justly rebuked Littledale the Anglican controversialist for attacking a view of Papal Infallibility which was a mere man of straw (xxv p. 170), much as Bishop Christopher Butler has censured the witty but hasty Salmon on virtually identical grounds. Even fairly optimistic lists of 'Infallible' acts of definition by popes suggest that they are at least agreed to be rare, as is

evident from the small number admitted even to be serious candidates in the older classic discussions, such as that of Dublanchy in Dict. Theol. Cath. VII (1922) who considers thirteen possibles (starting with Leo's Tome whose authority depends in some sense on Chalcedon). Reflection on these older lists shows that significance may need adjustment as time passes. Even when Dublanchy wrote many still claimed the Syllabus to be an infallible utterance, a view which Dublanchy then recorded with respectful doubt. There is today a general impression that the definition of the Assumption of the Virgin qualifies.

14. A consequence, not easily foreseen in 1870, of the definition of Papal Infallibility has been to diminish the standing of papal encyclicals which, though fallible, are taught by virtue of the 'ordinary magisterium' (cf. Humani generis which has to emphasize the authority such encyclicals ought to enjoy). The debate surrounding Humanae Vitae has obviously raised far wider questions than the moral truth of that courageous document. The controversy may run the risk of obscuring the fact that a 'fallible' utterance (i.e. without the conditions laid down for an infallible definition) may yet be truly spoken; that is perhaps only another way of saying that 'infallibility' (if the word is to be used) is a function of truth, not vice versa.
15. Anglican theologians of the Reformation period regard it as agreed that the whole church cannot err in fundamental doctrines necessary to salvation because of the promise of Christ (e.g. Laud, Conference with Mr. Fisher xxi.5). On the other hand, they become prickly when appeal is made to the infallibility principle to defend practices that they believe to need amendment. (One document submitted to Trent in 1547 defends communion in one kind as practised for 300 years and so beyond critical discussion because of the Church's incapacity to err: Acta VI: iii 3 p. 28). The acutest seventeenth century discussion of infallibility, that of Chillingworth (facile princeps, the prime antagonist in the Grammar of Assent even when not mentioned), is polemical and trenchant with the tone of a man wanting to justify his own reconversion to the Church of England; but the matter of his arguments is not disposed of by psychological explanation of their manner. He did not think that in logic actual infallibility could attach to propositions resting on human testimony (and anticipates Lessing in the sharp disjunction of universal truths of reason and contingent truths of history). He urges that we should be content, confident in the goodness of God, with that practical certitude reached by converging probabilities rather than 'overcall the hand'. Chillingworth hated coercion in any form, and thought talk of infallibility voiced by official authorities of the Church could give a dangerous over-confidence, rigidity, exclusiveness, and intolerance that lulled the indolent, penalised integrity, and led to insincerity and persecution. Infallibility language, combined with exclusive claims to possess the truth, is for Chillingworth irreconcilable with the intellectual freedom of the honest devout inquirer. But he had no objection to affirming the infallibility of the Church if meant in the same sense as that of Laud.
16. Article XX of the XXXIX Articles affirms that 'the Church hath ... authority in controversies of faith', excluding power to contradict scripture or 'so to expound one place of scripture that it be repugnant to another'. No formal Anglican statement answers the question who is authorised to speak in the name of the Church and to determine what the truth is. But the common attitude expressed, e.g. in Richard Field or Laud, is either expressly conciliarist (with admiration for Gerson!) or in terms of multiple authority, a dispersed but not silent consent or disapprobation, combined with the strongly Augustinian assumption that the assent given to the teaching authority is inextricably bound up with the power of that authority to commend, from scripture and primary tradition, the individual truths being defined as a necessary part of the gospel.

17. Accordingly: In the gospel of Christ, that is the deposit of faith, God has entrusted truth to his Church as guardian and witness. To preserve this truth from corruption he has given norms of tradition in scripture, liturgy, creed, the consent of the faithful expressed in various ways, at decisive moments by councils, sometimes by bishops acknowledged to have special responsibility. These norms are often strongly conservative forces. Yet if the living truth in the Church is to be preserved, it also needs contemporary restatement, lest theology become fossilised in obsolete metaphysical frameworks. Therefore the progressive exploration of the deposit of faith by theologians is no less necessary to the guardianship and witness of the Church. This critical task makes possible the recognition of the historical conditioned setting of both ancient and modern dogmatic statements. The task of interpreting the gospel to the present time necessarily drives theology back to its sources, through the classical definitions of tradition back to holy scripture itself as direct witness to the truth of God in the Church of Christ. This does not mean, however, that the theologian standing within the Church will start thinking about the Trinity or the person of Christ de novo on the assumption that Nicaea and Chalcedon are now irrelevant, negligible, or even so culturally conditioned by ancient metaphysics as to be quite misleading and mistaken. The Christian teacher prays rather that he in the twentieth century may be granted preservation from grave error not less than that which he believes to have been granted in the past, and may likewise receive no less critical a reception at the hands of the faithful. 'Domine Deus ... quaecumque dixi de tuo, agnoscant et tui; si qua de meo, et tu ignosce et tui', is a timeless prayer.

18. Confidence in the preservation of truth within the Church arises from the act of faith and obedience to God. The certitude of faith does not hang upon some universality of experience common to the whole Church but on the objective authority of God who is truth, who in Christ has revealed himself as the way, the truth, the life, and who has promised an unfailing guide, the Holy Spirit. No individual Christian is thereby guaranteed immunity from error in both will and deed, nor is any local Church. The empirical church militant here in earth is not at every moment and in all places perfectly attuned to the Spirit; and faith does not require us to say that every word spoken in the name of Father, Son, and Spirit is necessarily authentic in the sense that it transcends the frailty, ignorance, transitoriness and sinfulness of the human condition. We have this treasure in earthen vessels. Yet to put faith in God through Christ is to trust in the truth and to know that, despite all uncertainties, mistakes and blindnesses, the truth of God, which is the gospel, will not fail.

19. This working paper, the inadequacies of which are painfully present to the writer, fails specifically to propose language by which papal infallibility could be spoken of in some way that members of ARCIC might conceivably begin to knock into shape and to make their own. As an Anglican I do not fear difficulties of principle inherent in the imprecise notion of primacy, but would of course instinctively see primacy and infallibility as very distinct themes. Paralysis at this point is probably induced

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principally by the intimate psychological (not necessarily logical) link between (a) the affirmation of papal infallibility and (b) the claim that those in communion with the see of Rome have an exclusive status, within tragically fragmented Christendom, as the Church that Christ founded. Somehow we need to disentangle the inconvenient and emotive language of infallibility from authoritarianism, rigidity and exclusiveness (associations which have made papal claims seem so impossible to the Orthodox churches), and simply to see the thing, demythologised, as a rather powerfully orchestrated way of affirming (i) (which is non-controversial) the objective character of divine truth entrusted to Christ's holy catholic church, the fullness of which truth is corporate and universal rather than private, individual, or partial; (ii) (which past history has surrounded with emotional dynamite) a gift of divine assistance to the 'successor of St. Peter' in the Roman see which may enable him not only to speak to the universal church in time of bewilderment or painful division or other urgent necessity a word of clarity and faith, but also may, under certain conditions and severe qualifications, negatively prevent him from formulating positive truth in a way which would be permanently disastrous.