

THEOLOGY OF THE WORD

Lecture III

The Word and the Church

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We have now to consider the important matter of the authority of Holy Scripture. Having received the canon as the Word of God, the Church has to know what is the basis and extent of that authority, because the canon of the OT and NT is norm for all preaching, teaching and for doctrinal and confessional formulations.

First of all we must examine the authority of the NT. Since this is presupposition for the authority of the OT, we must deal with the OT after our consideration of the authority of the NT is complete.

Our consideration of the NT canon and the problems associated with it and the way in which the Church must face those problems, have indicated that the authority of the Bible is not that of the book as such. The very difficulty of the borderline and edge of the NT canon makes it difficult simply to say: "it is written". Luther and his immediate successors were quite right when they stressed that the true basis and extent of a rightly understood authority of Holy Scripture is the gospel and its kerygma of Christ. For that reason we cannot regard the Bible as a book of law, a fact which Luther saw clearly and which no denomination has emphasized so strongly as the Lutheran. For the Roman Church and the Calvinistic denominations the Bible is also a book of law and that is why the demarcation of the canon is so important for them. There is a stress there on Scripture as a book of moral codes and doctrines. We have seen that the Lutheran Church alone has not officially defined the canon. We must consider this in greater detail.

The authority of the NT is the gospel, the fact that its writings proclaim Jesus Christ as Saviour, and preach the free grace of God. Of course this presupposes the Law and its declaration of our guilt. Only those who have been struck low by the Law can understand the significance of the gospel. Law and gospel are indissolubly bound together and it is in this togetherness that the NT has the basis of its authority. This togetherness is important, because it indicates that we cannot see either in separation from the other, which means that the Law is not to be seen as a legalist code for our thought and life, but as revelation of God's will, which holds us responsible before God and declares us guilty and points beyond itself to the gospel. This is what we mean when we say: the authority of the NT is none other than the authority of Christ through whom and in whom God deals with us. It is not the formal authority of a book as such, but the authority based on the gospel content of the whole of the NT. It is this gospel which binds all NT writings together into a unified chorus in which each writing bears testimony to the gospel. This is not a unity which ascribes equal value or importance to these writings. What is less clearly gospel is, as it were, carried along by what is most clear, and it is this oneness of thrust which constitutes what we may call the infallibility, the inerrancy of the NT writings. Hence single texts and thoughts would not be singled out to make them to bear the weight of authority. They are authoritative in the context of the total witness of the gospel.

This authority of the NT is confirmed by its power to awaken faith in the hearer. Hence we cannot first say: I believe in the Bible, and then: I believe in Christ; the authority of the Bible cannot be determined prior to, or independently of, the authority of the gospel. This was the mistake of Lutheran Orthodoxy which first stressed the inspiration of the Bible, with God as author, and then with this a priori approach ascribed authority beforehand to the total content of Scripture. The idea

was, that the fact of inspiration was to be a priori the basis for authority. So another foundation was placed alongside of Christ, a foundation for Christ, the inspired book. But the Bible does not lead us to faith in Christ by first of all forcing upon us its truthfulness. Its truthfulness is Christ himself, truth is a person according to the gospel of St. John, not an 'it'. Faith in Christ comes into being in hearing the witness to Christ, it does not in the first place rest on the letter of the word. So the experience of the Bible's authority as gospel confirms the inspiration of the Bible as the Holy Spirit's book.

We should likewise refrain from basing the authority of the NT on the fact that the apostles were inspired. We should note that the term 'apostle' is vague and unclear and not limited to the Twelve. James and Jude were later rated as apostles as brothers of the Lord, Paul had to struggle for years to get recognition as an apostle. On any account, we have seen that a number of writings are post-apostolic, not 'genuine', as they were called. Many resisted this description, because it was felt by them it would undermine the idea of authority. We have stressed how ultimately content was decisive not necessarily authorship. So we may say that because the gospel is proclaimed in its fullness in the NT, it is norm for all on-going oral proclamation in the Church and for all doctrine.

This on-going proclamation becomes richer and more comprehensive as the years pass by and the truth it presents in its many facets, Christ himself, confronts us ever more clearly and fully. But whatever new insight about Christ comes to us, must be an act of entering more deeply into the gospel of the NT, it must be valid interpretation. All that is necessary for our salvation is told us completely in the written word. This is its sufficiency.

So everything must be determined by the Scripture as norm. The Church has the on-going proclamation, it has a theology which reflects on the gospel, it must give its answer to the hearing of the gospel, it must do so in dogmas and creeds and confessions. Here the Church may express its answer in the use of new concepts, it may think new thoughts in its theology, it may make decisions which are not explicitly mentioned in Scripture. But whatever is new, must stand the gospel test, all theologians must be ready to undertake to teach the gospel as proclaimed in the Bible.

The authority of the NT has its basis in the original and first witness to Jesus Christ, which is given us in that NT. But as our Theses of Agreement remind us, "the holy writers whom God used, retained the distinctive features of their personalities (language and terminology, literary methods, conditions of life, knowledge of nature and history, as apart from direct revelation and prophecy)". The witness to Christ is an example of that fact and, to repeat, is a reminder of the incarnation of the word of God. The witness to Christ is not in a vacuum, but embedded in the concrete background of Palestine Jewish Christian and diaspora Jewish Christian and missionary proclamation of the first century. This means that the apostolic proclamation is canonical for our proclamation as original witness. But its specific local, geographical historical, cultural context, is not absolute in its authority for us. That aspect is simply the first instance of the contextualisation of the gospel, followed by endless instances throughout the centuries, right down to our time. If we remember that a basic task of theology is the contextualisation of the gospel, then we may say that the gospel is presented to us in the NT as theology. There is no gospel as such. Wherever it is and was proclaimed it was expressed in a theology. The gospel and theology cannot be separated, not in Jesus, not in Paul. But we can distinguish between the two. The theology of Mark is different from that of Luke, from that of John, from that of Hebrews. Of course in and under all this variety is the unity of the one gospel message. But we cannot iron out all this variation to present one single NT theology. We must allow the variations to stand and to distinguish between the un-changeables of the gospel and the various theologies in which it is presented. In this sense the NT points to a

freedom within authority and reminds us that those first writers did not receive a gospel in the fixed form of a dictation which then they slavishly passed on word for word, letter for letter, but they received it as a living, existential, oral word which claimed them, each in his own way, in his own place, in his own context. And he passed it on in his own thoughts and words and theology. And in and behind it all, was the Holy Spirit. God's word is not bound to the historical forms which it entered. So we are called to the binding authority of the gospel, and to the freedom from its theologies to our own theology. In this sense we practise historical, critical exegesis.

The question arises: where do we draw the line between the eternal gospel and its theological context? It is always a fear that what we declare as time-bound theology, is in fact part of the gospel itself. Of course the opposite may also occur, namely, that in the name of the gospel we retain theologumena as essential elements of the gospel. This drawing of the line is above all the task of the theologians, but a hard and fast rule is impossible. Theology in every age attempts to express the eternal gospel for its day and here decisions are necessary, and the theologian must be held responsible for the outcome. Here answers naturally vary and theologians disagree. And they may make and often have made frightful mistakes which and must be challenged and the appeal made to the eternal gospel itself. This is not an easy task but is inescapable, because the gospel seeks to be contextual.

But a warning is again necessary. The authority of the NT which is at stake, cannot be manipulated in such a way that the original theology is made to be a doctrinal law, and the original and contextual moral exhortation cannot be used as a necessary moral law in the Church. The Church must look for the significance of the unchangeable gospel in the context of our time in doctrine and ethics. This is how we should understand the passages in which Paul goes beyond the word of Jesus to formulate his own exhortations in the difficult context in which he found himself, and he claimed to have the right to do so by appealing to the Spirit of Christ (1 Cor. 7:40). God continually leads his Church into situations and problems on which the NT has not given an authoritative word.

The context of the gospel may also have left its mark in the NT by the inclusion of elements which are not in accord with the gospel, e.g. Paul's negative assessment of marriage in 1 Cor. 7. Here the Church must take a critical stand, or rather allow the gospel itself in the written word to perform the critical function. This is part of the freedom of the gospel in the Bible and must warn us against a legalistic biblicism. A mere formal "it is written" will not help us here.

We must now proceed to survey briefly the authority of the OT within the Church.

The reception of the OT canon, which was virtually complete and closed at the time of Jesus and the apostles, posed no problem for the early Christian Church since it read the OT in accordance with the teaching of Jesus as the promise of the Messiah, now fulfilled in the person of Jesus as the Christ. The OT was reinterpreted in this light. Is this reinterpretation valid for us, especially if we note that the OT has its own special historical context? So we are called to state what is the basis for the authority of the OT in the Christian Church. Also this authority has to be examined in its relationship to that of the NT. Does that authority apply to all OT writings, is it on the same level as that of the NT? For us this will mean a critical assessment of the OT writings, using the gospel as criterion. By way of introduction we can immediately note one important point: Luther and our Lutheran Confessions quite rightly point out that the OT Law, the moral and cultic and criminal and civic codes, are meant by God for the Jews only. Quite apart from the critical attitude of Jesus, we must say that it is irrelevant for Christians, not meant by God for them. Of course the moral code is binding for all of us insofar as it expresses the will of God that is valid for all peoples the purely

human elements, not the Jewish elements. Naturally these latter elements are also not valid for Jews who have converted to Christianity. In this whole area, then, the OT has no authority for Christians, even though it is Word of God. We must consider this aspect of the authority of the OT further.

The authority of the OT is determined from the critical stance of the gospel and hence from the content of its message. As in the case of the NT, this function of the gospel test must be undertaken in such a way that the law-gospel relationship, of which we spoke earlier, is the touchstone of such a test.

Using this approach we can say that the authority of the OT for the Church, as an authority of word of God, is to be seen in its message of the one, true, living God, in its assessment of man in relationship to God, and in its attitude to the world, the nations, to history, as revelation of God's will and plan, and in all these things in the way in which its thrust is towards Christ.

The OT confronts us with God as Lord. There is no difference in this matter between the OT and Jesus' teaching about his 'Father'. Therefore in general, the NT presupposes the message of the OT regarding God. What the NT adds is, that in Christ ultimate salvation has come for all people.

The OT discloses to man the true situation in which he finds himself before God, and so indirectly awakens in him the yearning and hope for a saviour.

For these reasons the OT is a necessary preparation for the NT, also in the work of mission among heathens. The way to the NT is necessarily via the OT.

The OT is the deposit of the story of the faith of the OT people of God and the record of how God led that people towards the threshold of the gospel in Christ, especially in leading it away from its bondage to national, particularist, legalistic and empiricist misunderstandings of God's will for it. The OT has not merely authority because it is a record of God's self-disclosure to the people of God, but also because it is an outline of the growth of the faith of that people under the guidance of God. In many respects that experience of faith on the way to freedom from the bondage of false ideals, is still a way that has significance for Christians because in every stage of that way, God reveals himself as the Lord who guides his people beyond all those stages towards Christ.

There is the bondage to nationalist aspirations, falsely identified with God's will for his people. This people knew itself to be a chosen people and they saw evidence of that in their growth, their success, and in the end they understood this to mean victory over other hostile nations. Their disasters, and the message of judgment through the prophets corrected much of this and they realized that their relationship with God was based on moral, not natural considerations. God can shatter his people in judgment.

As a result the hope for a Messiah and Saviour is cleansed and freed from political hopes. The same applies to the concept of the kingdom of God. In place of a nationalist imperialism there arises the insight that all nations are called to acknowledge God as Lord (Is. 2:45). After the exile many of these false particularist notions re-appeared and we get two religious movements in Israel, two kinds of prophecy of the Spirit and the flesh, irreconcilable. And as we approach the NT with its gospel we know that Jesus had to cope with this difference of hope as he faced Pharisees and Zealots, who represented a nationalist, particularist line that goes back to passages like Is. 14,2; Is. 23, 18; 45, 14ff; 50,5ff, and finally brought him to the cross. This cross is rejection and judgment over those false hopes, expressed as word of God, but as warning for us in the light of the gospel.

Such passages have no authority for us, and they certainly express with more than usual clarity the humanity of the Scriptures.

Further, there is the bondage which is empiricist, that is, the assumption that God's relationship with his people, his blessing, his grace, his love, his judgment, his rewards can and must be recognized in obvious earthly, empirical results in one's own life, in the family, in the nation. Success, health, the gift of children, possession of the holy land, victory over enemies, honour; and conversely, sickness, death, the absence of the gift of children, defeats, subjugation by national foes; these are all seen as evidence of God's wrath or good will. Relationship with God and earthly reward or the lack of it, are closely intertwined. It is a materialisation of that relationship. From the angle of this attitude, we must understand the so-called vengeance psalms, or the psalms in which the writer praises his innocence (Ps. 5, 8ff; 17, 3ff; 18, 21ff; 44, 18ff and Psalm 26.) The assumption is, that there are the innocent and the sinners, and closely connected with this division the naive thought that pain and suffering must not come to the "innocent", but only to the "sinners". The book of Job is the classical writing in which Job's three friends wrestle with this empiricist understanding of God's rewards and judgments. Job flatly rejects this understanding and the book ends in praise of the inscrutable God whose rewards and judgments are so often beyond man's comprehension. Ps. 16, 9ff and Ps. 73 are further examples of a break-through, away from the materialist understanding of God's rewards. In the light of the gospel such OT passages cease to have authority for us, and again are evidence of the earthen vessels in which God's word comes to us. Matth. 5, 45 reminds us of the fact that God permits his sun to rise for the benefit of those who are good and evil (cf, Acts 14, 17). The kingdom of God is not a future, ideal, empirical, this-worldly state of affairs, which even now is in the making, but it is an other-worldly, divine, eternal entity, beyond and above history, and yet at hand.

Finally there is the legalistic bondage. The OT does know of the gospel of forgiveness, of the mercy and grace of God. But that gospel is still caught up in a legalistic bind. Again the psalms are good examples of the togetherness of a consciousness of being a sinner, and yet of being able to impress God with one's own righteousness and goodness. Again, it is the claim to be "innocent", "blameless", not "sinner", Ps. 38, 4 and 38, 21. This is understandable in the light of the overwhelming importance of the Law without the full gospel. In the light of the Law those who fear God are seen as separate from those who "despise" the Law. This means that the Law has not been understood in the radical way in which Jesus interprets it in the Sermon on the Mount and so sin and forgiveness are not seen in depth. Sin is still single deeds which can be distinguished from the basic moral direction of the pious. The realisation is not yet, that man's basic moral direction is revolt against God. So the grace of God cannot be understood in its NT sense, as that creative gift of God which engenders real repentance, covers iniquities and creates the new heart. This means that it is not the repentance of the pious that is a condition for God's grace, but rather that God's grace is the presupposition for the genuine repentance of the sinner. There are, however, exceptions in the OT where the legalistic nontext is broken. Psalms like 51 and 130 make no claim to personal righteousness and are called Pauline psalms by Luther.

Once again this legalistic understanding of grace and forgiveness has no authority for us in the light of the gospel, of the teaching of Jesus, and of Paul in his letters to the Romans Galatians.

These various bondages do, however, have real significance for us, not only as being expressed in word of God, but rather, just because they are so expressed as reminder that we, too, are on the way. None of us can claim that such OT remnants are not to be found in us. Our lives proceed from Law to gospel, from sin to righteousness. The vengeance psalms reflect so much of what ought not

to be found in us, and drive us into the arms of Christ. So the OT is a preparatory book, a book of beginnings, a book in which we discover ourselves, our weaknesses, our sins.

But, of course, the OT can also be a danger for us. We have already noted movements that are evident there which resisted the Holy Spirit's work in leading God's people away from their false ideals and theology. Especially the latter end of the OT history of Israel is a falling away from the deep insights given by God to the prophets. And some of the last OT writings to move into that canon no longer reflect the word of the great prophets and ultimately, as we saw, bring Christ to the cross. So indirectly they prepare us for Christ.

To sum up: in the OT we hear in a very clear way the word of God and the word of men, and in it all, as always, God's word is set alongside that of men, but in and through it. God's self-disclosure in the OT comes to us in all the trappings of a Jewish history of religion. So we hear the voice of God and the voice of men, God meets us there and claims us, and human beings pour out their hearts before God within all the limitations of the particular stage of the story of faith in which they just happen to be.

The authority of the OT is therefore above all determined by its content in the light of the gospel and hence to some extent that authority is limited. Formally, the canon itself has the same problems that we noted in the case of the antilegomena in the NT canon. The Jewish synagogue was not at all sure about the inclusion of the book of Esther, the Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes. The quotation from these three never occurs in the NT, and Luther's view of Esther is utterly negative. We have also noted the problem of the OT apocrypha.

Calvinism has generally adopted the view that because a writing is in the Jewish canon, which the Christian Church adopted, therefore it is word of God. Not the word itself and its content determine canonicity, but canonicity determines what is word of God.

All this brings us back to the initial concern in this lecture, the question of authority of Holy Scripture. In general, examining the NT and the OT, we have seen that, following Luther, we see authority not as based in the purely formal approach to the Bible as canon. Authority, we said, is not based on the belief in the book, but rather in its content, which is Christ.

This remark is aimed against the conception of scriptural authority as developed by Lutheran Orthodoxy. Its understanding of the authority of the Bible is tied up with its teaching on inspiration. Instead of remaining with Luther and basing that authority on the witness to Christ in Scripture, the Orthodox theologians postulate the super-natural book of doctrine, which is the inerrant word of God, not only in its central spiritual concerns, but also in the fine details of historical and this-worldly matters, without any fallibility in word or expression. The mystery of the divine-human incarnate word is not enough, the miracle of a divinely guaranteed sacred codex is necessary. Not simply certainty, but security is desired. In this way the existential, personal, claiming authority of God is changed to a given object which can be proved. But nowhere does the NT demand to be so understood. The point is that in this way the gospel is covered up by a postulate, a theory, which is legalistic and secular and undermines the living authority of God.

We have noted in a previous lecture that at the back of all this is an unbiblical, Jewish, medieval, concept of inspiration which lifts the holy writers beyond their stance in history. Their immediate or mediate closeness to the first witness to Jesus is irrelevant. And, to repeat, the incarnate humanity of the Bible is thus denied. Inspiration absorbs revelation.

All this means that the historical context of Scripture is denied. Certainly the holy writers know themselves to be moved by the Holy Spirit, but they do not maintain a special inspiration, a special event, as the basis for their writing. Certainly we must speak of inspiration, but in the sense that through the writers there is witness to Christ, and that the Holy Spirit is behind and in all this, and that we therefore have the Bible as the Holy Spirit's book, as we have so often said. For no one can witness to Christ except by the Holy Spirit. And here is the basis for all authority, the gospel. Inspiration in the NT is reception of the message and the proclamation of it, in oral proclamation. Then we get the written word in living connection with the original oral word. Orthodoxy isolates the written word from the prior oral word. In both cases, the oral, and the written word, the Holy Spirit is present.

The postulate of an inerrant book in all matters on which that book speaks, and hence of its authority in all these spheres, forced the Orthodox theologians to isolate the process of writing. And they went further. Only the original text is inspired, and so inspiration and inerrancy cannot apply to the translations, nor can they be used as basis for church doctrine. Certainly the original text has an advantage, not because it is specially inspired, but because of its greater closeness to the original message of the gospel.

According to the teaching of the Lutheran Reformation, the witness of the Holy Spirit is a thrust towards and for the gospel, which presupposes the Law. In hearing this Law and gospel, we are confronted with, and experience the authority of God. The Orthodox emphasis on the book as such transfers the significance of the word of the Holy Spirit from the creation of an I-Thou relationship with God in Christ, to an I-it relationship with a book. This leads to the claim that the book has absolute authority in the totality of its statements. In this way the real meaning of the work of the Holy Spirit to create faith in the offer of the gospel is darkened. On any account, this misunderstanding of the Holy Spirit's work as establishing a priori the authority of the book is a theological claim, a theological opinion, a theologoumenon, certainly not a dogma of the Church. More and more the Orthodox dogmaticians attempt to under-gird their theory about the book, by appealing to external criteria which are meant to impress us and to prove the holiness of the book. This is disastrous, because now human reason and logic are the criteria for the absolute divinity of the book. So the understanding of revelation and its authority is intellectualized, and the word becomes a series of propositions and doctrines and faith is the acceptance of these propositions as correct, without query. That is the beginning of rationalism.