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## **THEOLOGICAL METHOD AND AUTHORITY**

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Once, when Jesus was teaching, the chief priests and elders came to him demanding to know by what authority he was preaching and teaching. They had previously asked John the Baptist similar questions and, living as they did in a theological age, these questions naturally reflected theological concerns. Although our age is not as concerned with truth in precisely the same way it is nevertheless crucial to the study of theology that we should be certain of the things that we believe. John tells us that he wrote his Gospel so that we might believe and have confidence in the faith. And this is the case because one of the most essential things in matters of religion is that we have certainty. The reason for this is religion generally and Christianity in particular speaks to us, not of the things of this world, but rather of things that belong to another realm. Christianity speaks to us of life after death. It speaks to us of eternity and God and heaven. It tells us of Jesus the co-eternal Son of God. It tells us of death and of how we are to prepare for the world that lies beyond this one. It reminds us that we must be holy and loving and forgiving. It tell us that we must love our enemies because at the resurrection of the righteous all will be put in its proper place by the Creator and Judge of the universe. And it necessarily follows that in order to have this knowledge we are dependent upon testimony. In other words we need (to use a theological term) *revelation*.

But where can this revelation be found? Let it be said at once that the Christian Church in all its rich variety and diversity in both the East and West for two millennia has, almost without exception, taught that the Scriptures are infallible and are nothing less than the very word of God. So revelation is found in Scripture. But where did this understanding come from? Well, in the first instance, it was nothing less than the attitude of Jesus Himself to the Old Testament. For Jesus what Scripture said God said. It was natural then that His disciples believing Him to be the Messiah also adopted His view of the Old Testament. In due course this became applied to the New Testament as well; Peter writing in his second epistle that we have “the words of the prophets made more certain” than the “voice that came from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love...” Therefore we should not be surprised that even the official Roman Catholic view as enshrined in Vatican II asserts that the Scriptures which were “written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit ... have God as their author” and therefore must be acknowledged as being “without error”.

It is also the theological position of the Church of England. It is ratified on numerous occasions in the Book of Common Prayer and is articulated by Richard Hooker in many places. This is important to know. As Hooker is regarded by western Anglicanism as unquestionably the greatest Anglican theologian, it is useful, as far as readers of *Cross†Way* are concerned, to have him so unambiguously championing a mature and reformed doctrine of Scripture. Hooker argued that as Scripture was inspired by God it could not err. This was because

“God himselfe can neither possibly erre, nor leade into error. For this cause his testimonies, whatsoever he affirmeth, are alwaies truth and most infallible certaintie. Yea further, because the things that proceed from him are perfect, without any manner

of defect or maime; it cannot be but that the wordes of his mouth are absolute, and lack nothing which they should have.”

In all theological debate and discussion then it is vital for all of us to keep this high doctrine of Scripture ever before us. It is also important to remember that the recent attacks on this view from those within the Church are only being waged by a minority and, bearing in mind the long history of the Church that has consistently witnessed otherwise, we are on unshakeable ground.

Having said this however one must admit that such a view is incapable of answering all the questions that might arise. To be sure if all accepted such a doctrine much of what passes for theological debate in the Church of England would be deemed superfluous and almost immediately be ruled out of court. Nevertheless, sometimes questions arise on which Scripture is silent. As a classic example one could take the questions that emerged in England during the 1580's and focused attention on matters of Church order. As is well known, many had fled England during the persecution of Mary's reign. Many found refuge in Geneva and came under Calvin's influence. Impressed by his church polity, promptly, on arrival in England they began to agitate for the abolition of the episcopate claiming it had no warrant in Scripture. Of course this is true. But on the other hand, the defenders of bishops retorted, has there ever been a Church established that did not have bishops? Furthermore looking at the Scriptural evidence on both sides it could only, in fairness, be deduced that Scripture was silent. Given this situation how does one proceed? By what authority can one make a judgement? How can one take the safest course of action? A direct appeal to Scripture, so useful in confirming other vexed questions, seems to offer little help in this particular area. The answer that the Reformer gave was to look at the Tradition.

It is a great pity, but this appeal to tradition seems to carry little weight with evangelicals these days. This was certainly not the case in years gone by nor was it the case at the height of the Reformation. Luther for instance deeply felt the charge that he was breaking with historic Christianity. The Catholics at the time were constantly taunting the Reformers that what they were presenting was novel, unheard of and unique. Luther wrote that such a charge was a blow “that really strikes home”. He was tormented by the thought that he was in error and that he was opposing the Holy Catholic Church. On what basis then did the Reformation proceed? Broadly speaking the Reformers carried out their programme on two fronts; they appealed first of all to Scripture and then secondly to the teaching of the universal primitive Church. As Calvin was to write, “we teach not an iota that we have not learned from the divine Oracles; and we teach nothing for which we cannot cite as guarantors the first teachers of the Church, prophets, apostles, bishops, evangelists, Bible expositors.”

Returning then to the question of episcopacy the English Reformers were able to reply to Calvin's disciples in a number of ways. First of all they readily agreed that the Presbyterian eldership was a valid form of ministry. In its basic tenets it was sound, Scriptural and fair. But this did not mean that all Churches had to adopt their order. Indeed the Church of England refused to do so because they saw no compelling reason. The ancient threefold order was well tried and in existence from the earliest days of Christianity. Moreover, the Reformers realised that an appeal to tradition could only settle matters on which Scripture was silent. It could also be invoked to curb the excesses of fanciful exegesis. This, I believe is particularly pertinent for us. Let us assume that some learned academics and clergy are able to come up with an interpretation of biblical evidence that seeks to encourage Christians to abandon long

held and cherished beliefs. A perfectly adequate response would be to ask if such views had ever been held in the Church at any time in its history. Hooker would argue that those whose hearts are so possessed by unique and novel opinions ought to be extremely suspicious of their motives. He argues that “singularity” ought to be deeply suspect. For if such opinions had come from God He would have revealed them not just to a select esoteric few but to all. For Hooker it was simply a matter of humility, believing and trusting that God had not left anything out of His sacred deposit of Truth that had not already been made clear to the whole Church.

This twofold appeal, first to Scripture and then to the long continued practise of the Church through the running centuries, is a well tried theological method that we could do well to re-appropriate for ourselves. If we did so, a map would be given to us in our present difficulties and by using it we would be walking in the paths blazed for us by our Evangelical forbears.

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