

THE BIBLE AND THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

By D.W.B. Robinson

THE quest for authority is the quest for God. How may we submit ourselves in the daily course of our lives and especially in the corporate life of the Church, to Him who is the author of all truth and salvation, as well as the author of all being?

There can be no doubt - for all who accept the truth of the Bible - that the instrument of God's authority is His Word. "God said, Let there be light: and there was light." (Gen. 1:3). "For He spake, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast." (Ps. 33:9).

Throughout the history of God's dealings by covenant with men in the Old Testament, the Word of God which is the instrument of His authority is found in the mouths of human messengers whom He has designated. Nothing is more striking in the whole record of revelation than this biblical assertion that words spoken by sinful men may be, according to God's will, nothing other than the Word of God Himself, and be submitted to with perfect confidence as the very instrument of God's authority. "Among the many noble endowments with which God has adorned the human race, one of the most remarkable is, that He deigns to consecrate the mouths and tongues of men to His service, making His own voice to be heard in them" (Calvin, Institutes, IV.5).

Now Moses was the great prophet of the Old Testament, and steward over all God's household there. It is not therefore surprising to find, as he enters on his prophetic ministry, an elaborate explanation of this phenomenon. In Exodus 4 we read: "And Moses said unto the Lord, Oh Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since Thou hast spoken unto Thy servant: for I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue. And the Lord said unto him, Who hath made Man's mouth? or who maketh a man dumb, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? is it not I, the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt speak." (cf. 6:28 - 7:2).

This is the form of authorization which all God's spokesmen received. The testimony of Jeremiah is especially clear: "Then the Lord put forth His hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put My words in thy mouth: see, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, and to destroy and to overthrow; to build and to plant" (Jer. 1:9,10).

It is at once apparent that when we speak of the authority of the prophet we mean in fact the authority of God, exercised instrumentally through His Word placed by the Author in the mouth of His servant. The words of the prophet are thus the words of God, and must be heeded as coming out of God's mouth. It naturally becomes vitally important to beware of counterfeits: "Thus saith the Lord of Hosts, Hearken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you; they teach you vanity: they speak of a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the Lord." (Jer. 23:16).

So the true prophet's authority is not his own, but that of the Word in his mouth. We may note something further: the actual force or power which the Word exercises - its coercion - is not a coercive power in the hand of the prophet. How, in fact, did Jeremiah "pluck up and break down"? How did he "build and plant"? It was not by his physical strength nor by his administrative authority. His only activity was the utterance of the Word placed in his mouth by God. A prophet himself may be (as Jeremiah was) put in a dungeon, or carried off into Egypt: he may be fed with

bread of affliction and water of affliction; but the word he speaks is nothing other than the Word which goes forth out of the mouth of God; it accomplishes that which He pleases and prospers in that to which He sends it (Isa., 55:11).

When we read the New Testament we are confronted by one who is Himself called the Word of God and who is invested with the whole authority of God both in speaking and in performing the good pleasure of the Father. The plenitude of the Spirit rests on Him. It is not merely that the Word of God was an utterance in the mouth of Jesus Christ; He was the Word, both in its utterance and in its power. The prologue of St. John's Gospel marks the wonderful progression of the Word of God: the Word which was in the beginning by Whom all things were made; the Word which came to Israel by the prophets, rejected by the nation but making the believing remnant sons of God; that Word became flesh, full of, or fulfilling, the grace and truth (chesed wa'emeth) of God.

In acknowledging the identity of essence of the Father and the Word we should not, however, overlook the oft-repeated assertion that authority is conceived of as "given" or "committed" to the Son. "All authority in heaven and earth is given (edothé) unto me" (Matt. 28:18, cf. John 13:3, 17:2). It is further indicated that, when the purposes of salvation are complete, this authority or rule is yielded up again to the Father (1 Cor., 15:24,28). This bold truth emphasises that the lordship and authority of Christ is not an authority apart from, or even parallel to, that of the Father. When you acknowledge Christ, it is God Almighty you acknowledge. When you submit to Christ's kingdom, you enter the service of God Most High. No man comes to the Father but by the Son.

We are bound to notice also that the authority given to the Son in virtue of His work on earth and his consequent exaltation, has a peculiar relationship to the Church which is His body. "All authority has been given unto me ... Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you" (Matt., 28:18-20). "And God put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him to be Head over all things to the Church" (Eph., 1:22).

We may now turn to the terms of our subject more precisely: "The Bible and the Authority of the Church."

It is desirable, in talking about the authority of the Church, to have some agreement about the nature of the Church and its function. Indeed, discussion of our subject is constantly bedevilled by failure to observe that the word 'Church' is often used in senses other than those which can claim the support of the scriptures. Even in the course of a brief discussion, we are apt to slip quietly from one sense of 'Church' to another in our usage. The difficulty in talking with Roman Catholics on this subject, for instance, is due not so much to any difference of opinion about the inspiration and authority of the Bible as to a quite different concept of the Church. Among Reformed churchmen themselves the authority of the Church is sometimes treated as a term for the authority of ministers or the authority of Councils, and there is usually a failure to ask the most basic question, whether the Church as the Church can ever rightly be thought of as possessing authority. For upon whom is the authority of the Church supposed to be exercised? Upon those outside it? Upon its members, that is, upon itself? We must certainly ask what we mean by the Church before we can talk about its authority.

I must here admit to a difficulty I feel in regard to language used about the Church in many Reformed (though not only Reformed) writings. The language I refer to may be found in Calvin and many of his disciples, and also in our Reformed Anglican formularies.

Calvin, for instance, says: "I have observed that the Scriptures speak of the Church in two ways. Sometimes when they speak of the Church they mean the Church as it really is before God ... In this case it not only comprehends the saints who dwell on the earth, but all the elect who have existed from the beginning of the world. Often, too, by the name of Church is designated the whole body of mankind scattered throughout the world, who profess to worship one God and Christ, who by baptism are initiated into the Faith; by partaking of the Lord's Supper profess unity in true doctrine and charity, agree in holding the Word of the Lord, and observe the ministry which Christ has appointed for the preaching of it." (Institutes, IV.I.7.) A little later Calvin summarizes his view of the visible Church thus: "The Church universal is the multitude collected out of all the nations, who, though dispersed and far distant from each other, agree in one Truth of Divine Doctrine, and are bound together by the tie of a common religion. In this way it comprehends single churches, which exist in different towns and villages, according to the wants of human society, so that each of them justly obtains the name and authority of the Church ..." (IV.I.9).

Now it does not seem to me in fact to be the case that the Scriptures use the term 'church' (ekklesia) to mean the whole body of professing Christians scattered throughout the world. The invisible Church, the Church "as it really is before God", is certainly in Scripture, and the Church in this aspect is certainly thought of as comprising men from all nations and all ages; so too the single churches, "which exist in different towns and villages", are frequently spoken of in the New Testament. But the idea that there is a world-wide or ecumenical Church, made up of single Churches, does not appear to me to have biblical support. Certainly there are ecumenical concepts in the New Testament, such as in the preaching of the Gospel to all nations and in all the world, and in the relation of unity that exists or should exist between the Churches of separate localities. But the highly significant term 'church' (ekklesia) has connotations which do not and cannot apply to anything but an assembly or meeting. Locality and meeting are essential to the New Testament concept of the Church. Even the Invisible Church, the Church "as it really is before God", has its locale "where Christ is", and it is properly called the ekklesia because it is the assembly of those who meet, not on earth but in the heavenly places, with Christ in the midst (cf. Heb., 2:12, 12:23). But though believers throughout the world, or "in every place", are alluded to in the New Testament, they are not collectively given the character of an ekklesia, much less of the ekklesia. (It is perhaps significant that not one of the texts adduced in the Westminster Confession to support its definition of the world-wide visible Church, contains the word 'church' !)

If this observation is correct, the attempt to seek for a true authority in an ecumenical "Church" is a fruitless effort. Indeed, we should consider whether the same must not be said in regard to a national or denominational 'church'. For such bodies are not churches in any New Testament sense of the word, and should not fulfil the functions or enjoy the prerogatives of an ekklesia in matters of authority. Such organisations are, of course, of considerable value. They are instruments voluntarily devised for the mutual recognition and help of groups of local churches. The degree of uniformity of faith or order which they promote may facilitate the exhibiting of the true marks of the Church in each local Church which adheres to the organization. However, the national or denominational 'Church' cannot actually create those

marks of the Church. Only insofar as the local Church itself produces them - whether in conformity to the rule of the denomination or spontaneously - are such marks actually present. It is instructive to observe that Calvin himself, when he comes to discuss the notes or marks of the visible Church, clearly has in mind their presence in a local congregation, notwithstanding his more general definition of the Visible Church as a world-wide body (cf. Article 19 of the 39 Articles).

Perhaps, then, a definition of the Church such as is given by Archbishop James Ussher will serve us best. In reply to the question, "Are we then to acknowledge one Church or many?" Ussher replies: "One alone, as there is but one Lord, one Spirit, one Baptism, one Faith. However ... there is a begun and a perfect Church. For the Church of God is one in respect of the inward nature of it; having one Head, one Spirit, and one final state: but outwardly, there be as many Churches as there be Congregations of Believers knit together by special bonds of order for the religious expressing of that inward nature. Yet, though there be many Visible Churches, yet there is but one Catholic and Universal Church; of which not one shall be lost, and out of which not one shall be saved." (The Sum and Substance of Christian Religion, 1702 p.168).

The Church, then, is the gathering-together, the assembling, of believers unto their Lord. "Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20). "Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church" (Ignatius, Smyrneans 8:2). How does such a gathering-together come to be? It takes place through men hearing the Word of God in any place, and believing it. The Church is created by the Word of God, and the ministry of so preaching the Word that men become a church is the ministry of an apostle ("Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the preaching of Christ." "And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach except they be sent (apostellein)?") The Word draws men together, and together they express their faith in confession, prayer and praise; together their minds are enlightened as the Old Testament is expounded in the light of the Gospel (Rom., 1:1-6, 16:25-27); they receive the apostolic testimony to Christ and the resurrection; they receive also the apostolic traditions concerning Christian behaviour and the ordinances of their common life; they exhort one another in faith and love in the Lord's Supper and in the ministries of the various members.

When we consider the Church in this way, it is manifestly improper to speak of the authority of the Church at all. Rather we must speak of the authority of Christ, the authority of the Word of God, over the Church. Looking a little closer, we see that the authority of the Word, and therefore of Christ, is exercised first by the apostle whose preaching of the Gospel saved men and added them to the Church, and also is exercised by the Old Testament scriptures to whose promises and adumbrations the Gospel is shown to conform and which it fulfils. We may add also the traditions laid by the Apostles on all the Churches in the form of particular ethical injunctions or principles of conduct.

Authority then - the authority of Christ - lies altogether over and above the Church and its members. Such authority is in no sense "the authority of the Church". The Church is subject to His Word in everything. This obedience is expressed by submitting to the Apostle who brings the Gospel, by submitting to the Old Testament scriptures, and by submitting to the "pattern of teaching" which includes and conjoins baptism and the Supper of the Lord (Rom., 6:17).

Many Christians today, while quite willing to acknowledge the absolute authority of the Word of God over the Church and while agreeing that the Word of God finds its perfect expression in Christ, are not willing to identify the Word of God with the words of the Bible, and are not willing to regard the Church as subject to the Bible. The view is often expressed that the Bible was in fact the product of the Church, and that the Church itself is the continuing vehicle for the expression of the mind of the Spirit and therefore of the Word of God. The Bible may be regarded as part of that Word in the past, but in its interpretation as in its original production it is subject to the Church. According to this view, the Bible is, in fact, subject to the authority of the Church, since the Church, rather than the Bible, is the effective instrument of God's Word among men.

This view misunderstands the character of the Bible, and does not even perceive that by recognising a canon of Scripture the Church commits itself to the claims which Scripture makes for its own character.

We think of the Bible as comprising the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament books were well established as "the Holy Scriptures" and regarded as "the Oracles of God" before any Christian Church existed. They were already the yardstick by which the Christian Gospel could be measured and even in which the Gospel could be read (Rom., 16:26, Gal., 3:8). Nor were the Old Testament Scriptures believed to be the product of the Israelitish Church. Law, Prophets and Writings alike came from the mouth of God and were received by the congregation. There is no suggestion in the Old Testament that any of its components emerged from 'the life of the believing community.' We should not be misled by the reconstructions of biblical criticism, in seeking to ascertain what Israel thought the character and origin of its Scriptures to be. The Law was written by the Finger of God, given by God to Moses, written by him in a book and committed to the people (Ex., 24:4,7, Deut., 31.) The Prophetic writings did not originate in the community: they were for the most part spoken and written to a disobedient and gainsaying people. Jeremiah 36 is most instructive. When the first edition of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah was delivered and read to the head of the Church, he destroyed it without a qualm.

We cannot think of the New Testament being the product of the Church any more than the Old. For the New Testament consists - as second-century Christians were well aware - of 'Gospel' and 'Apostle.' The 'Gospel' or 'The Fourfold Gospel' (as Irenaeus calls it) is essentially that which "having first been spoken through the Lord, was confirmed unto us by them that heard" (Heb., 2:3). Indeed, the expression "the Scriptures and the Lord" (hai graphai kai ho Kurios) is virtually equivalent in the second century to another term "the Scriptures and the Gospel".⁺ The Church did not produce the Gospel: it received it. Likewise the Church did not produce the Word of the Apostle. It came to the Church with the adjuration that it be received as the Voice of the Spirit to the Church. (I Thess., 1:5, 2:13).

The question of the canon does not enter the matter. The extent of the Scriptures of the New Testament may never be as certain a conviction as the character of 'Gospel' and 'Apostle'. What we are here concerned to emphasise is that the Word of God which He put into the mouth of Moses, of the prophets, of the wise, as well as of the Apostles and prophets of the Lord Jesus, has, by God's own providence and direction been written in sacred Scriptures, and those sacred Scriptures delivered to the congregations of His people, invested with Divine power to make men wise to salvation, full-grown in Christ, and perfectly equipped for every good work (2 Tim., 3:16,17.) The Church is altogether dependent on the Bible.

⁺ See Harnack: Origin of the New Testament (E.T., p.7.)

It remains to consider three types of activity which are customarily thought of in connection with 'the authority of the Church': the preaching of the Gospel, the Ministry of Elders, and Church discipline. In each we shall inquire whether it is proper, and if so to what extent, to speak of these activities as part of the exercise of 'the authority of the Church.'

1. First, the Preaching of the Gospel. Is it proper to speak of the Church preaching the Gospel to the unconverted? Is it the responsibility of the Church to engage in missionary work, and does it exercise its authority thereby? We are not here speaking of the constant proclamation of the Word of God, including the Gospel, within the congregation. Every true Church must, of course, continue to stand in the Gospel (I Cor., 15:1-3), and the one essential mark of its genuineness is its constant proclamation of, and submission to, the apostolic kerygma both in preaching and in the use of the sacraments. But who is responsible, in the economy of God, for going out and preaching to the unconverted? There is no doubt that in the New Testament this is the responsibility of an apostle. Not merely one of the Twelve, but apostle in the wider sense of "authorized preacher" as reflected in Romans 10:15. Are such apostles 'authorized' by the Church? There are "Apostles of Churches" in the New Testament (e.g., 2 Cor., 8:23), but these are not preachers. There is no sign in the New Testament of the conferring of the authority of the Church on an apostle. The key passage is Acts 13:1-3 with 14:26 and 15:40. Paul and Barnabas are both Apostles. Paul owes his authorization to a "revelation of Jesus Christ" and is emphatically not authorized by Man or by the agency of men (Gal., 1:1). We do not know that Barnabas would have made a claim so strong as that of Paul, but he nonetheless is said by Luke to have been "sent out" (ekpempsein) by the Holy Ghost. What is the function of the Church in the matter? Three responsibilities of the Church are listed:

- a) To separate for the Holy Ghost the men whom He has called to the Work;
- b) To identify itself with them by laying hands on them;
- c) To commend them to the grace of God for their ministry.

We can only speak of the authority of the Church in such a procedure at the great risk of derogating from the sovereign authority of the Holy Spirit in controlling and directing the work of evangelization. In reality, the Church has but recognized and submitted to the authority of the Spirit and the Word (see Acts 13:1,2). The Church has not conferred either its own or the Spirit's authority on the Apostles. It has "separated" them (aphorizein), "let them go" (apoluein), "commended" them (paradidonai). This last term is of special interest. For it is also used of the Church handing on the Gospel which it first received (paralambanein). Just as the Church, in receiving and handing on the Gospel, does not thereby authorize the Gospel but submits to Christ's authority, so in separating Apostles and commending them the Church does not confer authority on them but submits to the authority of Christ who Himself calls and sends them.

Of course, any action emanating from any body of people acting in agreement may, in common usage, be said to carry the authority of that body. One cannot exclude actions of a church from this ordinary designation. Churches and synods of churches today constantly exercise authority of this variety and expect it to be recognized by other bodies in society with which it rubs shoulders, as well as by its own members. But such authority is no more (or less) God-given than the authority exercised by any other organization or society acting according to its own rules. Moreover, the Church wears this aspect of 'secular' authority in all its corporate actions, whether

the action is buying property or ordaining ministers. It is therefore the more important for us to distinguish authority of this secular order from the authority proper to the activity of the Word of God in the salvation of mankind. In this latter sense, the Church does not exercise authority even in the ordaining of ministers or apostles: it acts as servant, not as master.

Only God can give authority to preach His Word. Does He give it mediately through the Church, as the Roman doctrine claims, or immediately by the Holy Spirit through His Word in the heart of those whom He calls to preach? If the latter is the case, the Church can only recognize the authority of Christ. Its own act of recognition (i.e., its own 'authority'), is neither the authority of Christ nor the means of conferring the authority of Christ on the preacher.

Let us take the apostle's task a stage further. As a result of his preaching, men believe and a church comes into being. The new church finds itself under authority which it receives through the agency of the Apostle. He 'hands over' to the Church the Gospel, the Old Testament Scriptures, and the traditions which belong to the 'obedience of Christ' (Acts 20:32, I Cor., 11:2, 15:3, Eph. 4:20, 21, Col. 2:6, 7). In another sense, he 'hands over' the Church to this total paradosis, which includes the Scriptures as well as the Gospel (Rom., 6:17). This is how he brings the Church under the Lordship of Christ. Thus the Apostle is said to be "set first" in the Church, i.e., he exercises the primary ministry therein. He lays a foundation on which others will build. Now, does the authority thus exercised by the Apostle over the new Church come from the church which 'separated' him, or does he bring the new church under the authority of the separating church? The New Testament contains no suggestion that the responsibility of the Church at Antioch extended beyond the act of 'separating' the Apostles. No authority was claimed by Antioch over Lystra, Philippi or Corinth.

Paul in Galatians 2:1-10 makes a passionate assertion that even the Church of Jerusalem (which possessed unique privileges as the original repository of the blessings of salvation (ta pneumatica) to which all Gentile churches were debtors) added nothing whatever to the authority he possessed as an Apostle of Christ. Few considerations were more important to Paul than the maintenance of a right relation between Jewish and Gentile Christianity as embodied in the relation between Jerusalem and the Churches of his own mission. It is therefore the more remarkable that the question of authority is completely absent from Paul's entire discussion of the relationship. It is, of course, true, as recorded in the Acts, that Paul delivered the decrees decided by the Jerusalem Church to the keeping of his Galatian churches (Acts 16:4). But in the light of the Epistle to the Galatians we cannot for a moment regard this action as implying an acknowledgement of the authority of the Jerusalem Church over the Galatian churches. The explanation of Paul's action can be deduced from the very narrative of Acts. The injunction to keep the decrees is part of Paul's own paradosis to his Churches (paredidosan autois phulassein ta dogmata ta kekrimena ktl). The decrees in fact represented the acceptance by the Jewish believers at Jerusalem of the mind of the Holy Spirit as it had already been revealed to Paul and others (cf. Acts 15:8) and as Paul had already by his own apostolic authority laid it on his Churches. It is thus not fanciful to suppose that the words of the Jerusalem letter, "it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us" were an acknowledgement of what the Holy Ghost had already revealed to Paul and Peter; it was not a claim that the Jerusalem decision was there and then a decision of the Holy Ghost.

We conclude that the Church, in the New Testament sense of the gathering together of believers in any place in the name of the Lord Jesus, does not have direct responsibility for, nor authority in, missionary work. Such responsibility and authority is given by the Holy Spirit to apostles or missionaries whom He calls, in the same manner as He called prophets in the Old Testament dispensation. The Spirit may choose to send an apostle independently of a church's approval, or He may call the church to associate itself with the apostle. The rôle of the church from which the apostle may come is, first and foremost, to pray the Lord of the Harvest to send forth labourers into His harvest, and then to recognize and attest the authority of the Spirit in the call of the missionary, and to join in fellowship with those whom God is sending forth (Phil. 4:15, 3 John 5-10). The rôle of the Church which is established through the apostolic ministry is to accept and submit to this same authority.

2. We come secondly to consider the Ministry of Elders in the Church.

The regular government of New Testament churches was by presbyters, though the precise form of the local presbyterate may well have differed from place to place. The ministry of the Elders was the ministry of episcopé or oversight. Two questions arise:

- a) What kind of authority is inherent in such episcopé ?
- and
- b) Is the authority of the episcopate (i.e., the presbyterate) the authority of the Church ?

From a large number of New Testament passages it appears that the chief responsibility involved in 'oversight' or 'presidency' of the Churches was that of teaching and admonition. Many of the general terms employed are not explicit, such as 'preside' (proistemi), 'take care of' (epimelein), labour (kopian), 'tend the flock' (poimanein), 'exercise oversight' (episkopein), 'take the lead' (hegeisthai). The specific duties mentioned of Elders are related to 'speaking and teaching' (en logō kai didaskalia) and the words used are 'admonish' or 'warn' (nouthetein), 'exhort' (parakalein), 'reprove' or 'rebuke' (elegkein), and the like. Indeed, apart from laying hands on Timothy (I Tim., 4:14) and praying over and anointing a sick man who calls for them (James 5:14), we know of no other certain function performed by Elders which may be said to belong to their own peculiar ministry. There are, of course, occasions on which Elders act representatively on behalf of the whole body of their Church, as when they received the relief sent up from the Church at Antioch (Acts 11:30), and when they expressed the mind of the "whole Church" following the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:22. (Perhaps Elders representing the Church are implied in Matt. 18:17). On such occasions - and it may be we should include even James 5:14 and I Tim., 4:14 among them - we may speak in a popular but not a biblical fashion of the 'authority' of the Church being exercised by Elders. Such 'authority' is incidental. But the authority exercised by Elders in fulfilment of their proper ministry is not the authority of the Church: it is the authority of the "faithful word" by which they teach, exhort and convince the gainsayers (Titus 1:7-13). This authority is exercised upon the church, and does not originate in it.

3. This brings us to the third consideration, the matter of Discipline in the Church. Do Elders exercise coercive discipline in the Church? Does the Church itself exercise authority in the matter of discipline?

We must be careful not to assume disciplinary functions on the part of Elders without clear evidence. Despite the Jewish precedent, Christian Elders are nowhere in the New Testament called "rulers" (archontes), and Jesus deliberately told would-be leaders of His community that "exercising authority" (katexou iazein) and "lordship" (katakurieuein) were marks of Gentile administration and were not to appear among Christians (Mark 10:42, cf. Matt. 23:6-11). Episcopo is apparently not coercive leadership. What is more, in the many passages which deal with the treatment of false teachers and evil livers, very much is said about rebuking or opposing, about being wary of such people, about avoiding the company of such; but singularly little that could be construed as involving coercive action by Elders or by the Church as a whole against such people. More than once Paul has to justify the presence of such people within the Church even while he deplores it. There must be factions in order to show which members are sound in the Faith; (I Cor. 11:19); every large establishment has its dishonourable vessels (2 Tim., 2:20). In due time, if these people do not repent, God will remove them, or their going out from the congregation of their own accord will provide proof that they are no true part of the body of believers (I John 2:19).

The powerful charges to Timothy and Titus personally in regard to erroneous teachers or evil livers do not extend beyond admonition with the Truth. It is the whole congregation which is enjoined to "note", "beware of", "turn away from", "withdraw from" and "avoid" such men. It is the responsibility of the congregation - informed by right teaching - to be alert to such subversion and to express disapproval of such men by withholding normal intercourse with them, and to mourn on account of the sinner and his sin (I Cor. 5:2).

In the case of the incestuous man mentioned in 1 Cor. 5, Paul's exhortations, "Purge out the old leaven ... Put away the evil man", are quotations from the Old Testament and are directed primarily towards effecting a change of heart in the Corinthians with regard to their tolerant attitude towards sin in their midst. Once this change of heart has been achieved, how is the sinner to be dealt with? These exhortations may not have a direct application to this, but, like the other Old Testament quotation, "Thou shalt not muzzle the ox", may point a principle. How the principle is to be applied must be gathered from elsewhere in the New Testament, where the treatment of the sinner is by indirect and individual, rather than by direct and judicial, sanction. God, not the Church, is the avenger of aggrieved Christians. If the Church will but mourn, "he that hath done this thing" might be taken away from them (I Cor. 5:2). Paul, with the Church, delivers him unto Satan as the executor of God's judgment (I Cor. 5:4) by the authority of the Lord Jesus. This is by word, not by deed. We must be content to say: "The Lord rebuke thee", and not exceed the prerogatives given us (Jude, 9).

Our modern conception of excommunication takes much of its significance only from the organizational structure which we have imposed on the Church (i.e., the gathering together of believers). This situation allows non-scriptural sanctions to be imposed by way of discipline, while weakening to the point of extinction the true New Testament sanctions which arise spontaneously from the alertness of every member of the congregation to the quality of life and belief of those with whom he associates as a Christian.

Thus, in the matter of godly discipline, minister and people have complementary tasks. The minister must so teach the Word that the character of true Faith and Life will be manifest to all. This may involve rebuking the unruly and calling upon the congregation to take heed of them. The responsibility then devolves on the whole congregation. "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly ..." (I Thess. 5:14, cf. Rom. 15:14, I Cor. 5:4, Col. 3:16). The fountain and source of all this authority is not finally the congregation nor the minister, but the Word of the Living God alive with the energy of his Holy Spirit. For the New Testament Churches this Word was found in the teaching of Jesus, in the proclamation of the Gospel, and in the exhortations of the Apostles, as well as in the Old Testament Scriptures. This same Word is for us and for our Churches found in the Bible.

