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THE PRINCIPLE OF AUTHORITY AND THE CRITERIA OF ORTHODOXY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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In earliest Christianity, at the time when the apostles were alive and the documents of the NT were still in the process of production, the discrimination between true and false belief and teaching was a matter of living activity in the church. According to the testimony of the NT, even though Christians regarded the writings of the OT as their authoritative Scriptures,¹ they also accepted the teaching of the apostles as being invested with the Lord's authority. In Acts 2:42 we read of Christian converts who "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching."² The church is said, in Eph 2:20, to be "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone." Peter exhorts the readers of his second letter (3:2) "to recall . . . the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles." In his warning against the heretics, Jude wants his readers to "remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold" (Jude 17). Furthermore, Christians believed that the permanent activity of the Holy Spirit guided the church not only in matters of daily life but also in illuminating the believers in their understanding of the true meaning of both the OT Scriptures and the proclaimed deeds and words of Christ. God's leading and ruling in matters of Christian life and doctrine was exercised through the dwelling of the Holy Spirit

¹It must be observed that Jesus' use of the OT reveals that He regarded them as possessing divine authority. See, for instance, the pericope of the temptation of Jesus in Matt 4:1-11 and the Lord's saying in John 5:39. That both the apostles and the first disciples also held the Scriptures in highest esteem is expressed in such passages as Acts 17:11; 2 Tim 3:14-17; and 2 Pet 1:19-21.

²All Scripture quotations are from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

in the leaders of the church.³ This may be labeled the “pneumatic-charismatic” model of authority.

In early Christianity the general principle⁴ of authority found concrete expression in two criteria of orthodoxy.⁵

The Revelational Criterion of Orthodoxy

The revelational criterion may be regarded as the first criterion of orthodoxy in the history of Christian theology. The important fact which comes to the forefront is that the first Christians recognized that the legitimacy of their beliefs was based on divine authority. For them, this meant specifically that the Christian message had been delivered by divine revelation. When asked about their reason for holding to their particular beliefs, Christians answered with a “thus said the Lord.” Christian truth was defined by the authority of revelation, not by the logics of reason or by empirical evidence. Later, the principles of authority would find expression in the ecclesiastical criterion of orthodoxy, which shall retain our attention subsequently. It should be pointed out, however, that I count both the revelational and the ecclesiastical among the “traditional” criteria of Christian truth. In other words, they are the main criteria of “classical orthodoxy.”

The principle of religious authority is the general ground on which the criteria for distinguishing between correct and incorrect belief were established. The notion of authority was present in the conscience of the apostolic church, along with its awareness of the existence of God, from its very beginning. That the orthodoxy of a doctrine is defined on the ground of divine authority means that it is not defined on philosophical, scientific, or any other grounds. The early church’s acceptance of the authoritative nature of its beliefs and teachings should not surprise us if we keep in mind that, from its inception, Christianity was firmly

³This does not mean that the Holy Spirit did not also indwell each member of the Christian community.

⁴By “principle” I refer to the fundamental, primary, and general notion undergirding the criteria and norms of orthodoxy. In other words, principles are those essential concepts which may be regarded as the general frame or context necessary to understand the criteria and norms of Christian truth. To some extent, it might be held that the criteria and norms of orthodoxy are derived from those principles.

⁵When I speak of criteria of orthodoxy, I have no specific technical philosophical usage in mind. By “criterion” I merely intend to designate that which enables one to decide whether a doctrinal proposition is true or false. In this way, the criteria of orthodoxy are related to the question as to the basis on which a particular doctrine is affirmed to be true or false (orthodox or heretical). I use the term in the broad sense of the ground, basis, or means of judging Christian doctrines as to their legitimacy. In brief, “criteria” are here understood as those general and abstract areas of reality where the elements which guide the believers in their testing of Christian truth are grounded.

rooted in its self-understanding as a religion of revelation rather than a system of philosophical speculation or a scientific theory of the world.

As for the term "authority," while it is filled with a multitude of meanings,⁶ it is used in this paper as "a relational word which signifies the right to rule. It is expressed in claims and is acknowledged by compliance and conformity."⁷ In this sense, we may consider that God's right to rule in doctrinal matters (His teaching authority) was acknowledged by the first Christians, who were willing to relate to Him reverently and recognized Him as their ultimate authority. Indeed, Christianity has traditionally claimed that all authority comes ultimately from God.⁸

The early church, however, was not without doctrinal controversies. The diversity already evident in the first century C.E.⁹ originated some theological differences which at times caused conflicts between the contending parties¹⁰ (see 1 John 4:2b-3; cf. 2:18-19). In view of these controversies, the question necessarily arose concerning the specific authority which might determine "right" doctrine.¹¹

The situation of a church which was organized in accordance with its faith in the leading activity of the Lord through His Spirit during the so-called short span of time prior to His return, could not remain unchanged when every individual Christian was claiming the guidance of the Holy Spirit while holding beliefs that

⁶For many, the idea of authority is colored with negative images. See Gregory G. Bolich, *Authority and the Church* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982), 1. It is associated with arbitrary, despotic, capricious, and absolutist rulers. It is thus identified with "authoritarianism," namely, that corrupt form of exercising command that demands submission which "cannot be justified in terms of truth or morality" according to J. I. Packer, *Freedom, Authority & Scripture* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1981), 16. Not a few think that authority is immediately related with, and necessarily opposed to, the idea of freedom. For them, this makes authority despicable. On the other hand, A. D. J. Rawlinson attempts to prove that a synthesis between authority and freedom is both possible and necessary. See A. D. J. Rawlinson, *Authority and Freedom: The Bishop Paddock Lectures for 1923* (London: Longmans, Green, 1933).

⁷Packer, 15.

⁸Cf. Jack Dominian, *Authority* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1976), 7.

⁹The existence of such a diversity seems to be undisputed even by evangelical NT scholars. I. Howard Marshall, for instance, asserts that the only valid point in Walter Bauer's thesis is that there was a variety of belief in the first century. I. Howard Marshall, "Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earlier Christianity," *Themelios* 2 (1976), 13; cf. Daniel J. Harrington, "The Reception of Walter Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* during the Last Decade," *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (1980), 292.

¹⁰Variety of belief does not necessarily mean that conflict has to arise. Nevertheless, when such variety goes beyond mere pluralism into open contradiction, and a central teaching of the church is challenged, thus threatening the spiritual stability and the very existence of the community of faith, the categories of true and false teaching become relevant.

¹¹See Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Scribner, 1951, 1955), 2:138.

at times were contradictory with those of his or her fellow believers (see 1 John 4:1). The pneumatic-charismatic model of authority, then, did not seem to be suitable for settling the controversies which sprang from such contradictions. The necessity of a concrete court of appeal or specific authority able to settle the doctrinal conflicts which at times threatened to divide the church became obvious. Some urgent questions arose: Who was to judge among differing opinions? Who was to decide the legitimacy of an alleged Spirit-led instruction? In brief, these questions express the concern as to “the norm” which was to define who was right and who was deviant.¹² The issue was not whether or not Christian beliefs were based upon divine authority. For the first Christians the problem of authority was confined to what, in the view of some, is called “mediate authorities,”¹³ which may also be identified with what I call “norms” of orthodoxy.¹⁴

Agreeing on an authoritative norm which defines true Christian doctrine and prescribes religious belief can be considered one of the most disturbing problems arising from the issue of distinguishing between right and wrong doctrine. It can also be regarded as the fundamental theological issue concerning the structure of the orthodoxy-heresy antithesis, particularly at the inception of Christianity. For some people, the issue of religious authority, placed in center stage from the beginning of the Christian theological reflection, is at the heart of most, if not all theological questions in our own time.

¹²We must note that the expressions “concrete court of appeal,” “specific authority,” “mediate authority,” and “norm” are used synonymously.

¹³Besides the authority of God, which is traditionally recognized by Christians as final, some authors have spoken in terms of “mediate authorities,” i.e., some “critical tools” used to judge among conflicting theological positions, such as the Bible, church tradition and teaching, the inner experience of individual believers, and philosophical reasoning. See Dennis M. Campbell, *Authority and the Renewal of American Theology* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1976), 2. Campbell, 3, correctly points out that “Christianity has never been of one mind with regard to mediate authority for theological thought and ethical prescription.” These mediate authorities are the ones that Rupert Davies wants to replace with the concept of “witnesses” to the supreme authority of Jesus Christ. His argument is that, since Christ Himself is the supreme authority for the Christian, what we need are “trustworthy witnesses” rather than “unimpeachable authorities.” See Rupert E. Davies, *Religious Authority in an Age of Doubt* (London: Epworth, 1968), 219 and passim. In brief, to put it in Auguste Sabatier’s words, “The diverse religious orthodoxies differ as to the form or the seat of authority; some put it in the Bible, others in the Church; but they are in accord as to its nature. All of them claim that the authority which they have constituted within themselves is the expression of a divine authority.” Auguste Sabatier, *Religions of Authority and the Religion of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 16.

¹⁴I use the term “norm” to designate specific and concrete standards over against the more general and abstract nature of a criterion. In this usage, norms are regarded as concrete expressions of a given criterion. Norms are tangible, explicit models or patterns against which a particular doctrine can be measured in order to verify its orthodoxy.

At this point it may be profitable to examine the problem as to the norm which was to define correct doctrine through the testimony of the apostle Paul. He is significant not only because he often found himself confronted by religious opponents but also because his corpus of writings is sufficiently large to be used for this specific purpose. His case may be considered as an illustration of the dilemma of the early church regarding who was right and who was deviant.

In referring to the experience of Paul, I address what may have been the first movement toward the development of "classical orthodoxy," namely, the recognition of the apostles as the bearers of a reliable and authoritative tradition,¹⁵ and hence of their teaching as the norm of Christian orthodoxy.

When Paul's authority (which was not final but mediate) was disputed in the churches of Galatia, Christian believers faced the dilemma of to whom they were to listen, to Paul or to his opponents? This in turn implied a more basic question: What was the criterion by which their claim of authority and correctness was to be assessed? Paul's answer involved the revelational criterion. The rightness of his doctrine came from its origin in the Lord's revelation.¹⁶ He indeed claimed divine endorsement for his teachings: "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ" (Gal 1:11-12).

One may suppose, however, that the apostle's opponents, those "false brothers [who] had infiltrated our ranks" (Gal 2:4), claimed the same divine origin for their own teaching.¹⁷ To what or to whom could Paul appeal as a norm for the

¹⁵The notion of tradition as a technical term needs some definition. In the language of the NT (e.g., Luke 1:2; 1 Cor 11:2,23; 15:3; 1 Thess 2:13; Col 2:6; 2 Pet 2:21; Jude 3) and of the Apostolic Fathers (e.g., Pol. Phil 7:2; 1 Clem 7:2; Did 4:13; Barn 19:11), the term conveyed the idea of "transmission" (παράδοσις), i.e., authoritative delivery. By "tradition" the Apostolic Fathers usually meant doctrine which the Lord committed to the church through His apostles, irrespective of whether it was handed down orally or in writing. See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 30-31; cf. Bultmann, 2:119-27. More recently, tradition has denoted the body of unwritten doctrine handed down in the church, in contradistinction from the Scriptures, as indicated in the Council of Trent, "Decree on Apostolic Tradition and Holy Scriptures." See Henry Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari from the 30th ed. of Denzinger's *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, rev. Karl Rahner (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1957), 783.

¹⁶Since Christianity came into the world as a religion of revelation, it is of its *esse* to claim a supernatural origin for its message. Its ultimate source lies in Jesus Christ as the climax of God's revelation (see Kelly, 29).

¹⁷Jaroslav Pelikan observes that "the heretics were no less implacable than the orthodox in claiming that only their position was the correct one." Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, The Christian Tradition Series, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 69. This fact may explain why Bultmann holds that an appeal to a revelation directly accorded by the Lord or by the Holy Spirit "could only make the

correctness of his teaching in this situation? Since the logical answer, namely, “to the teaching of Jesus Christ,” seemed to be the answer of his opponents too, Paul’s argument was that his preaching of the gospel had been accepted by those who were apostles before he was (Gal 2:6-10; cf. 1:17) and who also had received their message directly from the Lord. In effect, fourteen years after his first visit to Jerusalem to see Peter and James, in response to a revelation, he had gone to those “who seemed to be leaders” in Jerusalem and privately “set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles” (Gal 2:2). The apostles recognized that Paul’s teaching was in harmony with what they had received from the Lord, and therefore, it had the endorsement of God’s authority (Gal 2:7-9). The matter of Paul’s authority was thus settled in apostolic collegial agreement. This means that a new criterion of orthodoxy was emerging very early in the history of the church. I call it the “ecclesiastical criterion.” This term underlines its collegiate, corporative, or associate nature. It must be pointed out that revelational and ecclesiastical criteria were not opposed but worked along the same lines.¹⁸

The Ecclesiastical Criterion of Orthodoxy

The importance of this incident can hardly be overestimated. It should be noticed, first, that Paul did not receive his authority through apostolic succession, though it was recognized by the college of the apostles. The implicit notion of an apostolic college, which included such diverse views as those of Peter, Paul, James, and John (Gal 2:9),¹⁹ discarded the individual authority of any of the apostles as the only or superior norm of Christian truth.²⁰ This should be an

problem all the more delicate and the embarrassment all the greater.” Bultmann, 2:138.

¹⁸What needs to be underscored here is that the Christian truth was not seen as entrusted to one individual alone, but to the whole *ecclesia*.

¹⁹On this matter, see F. F. Bruce’s relevant study *Peter, Stephen, James, and John: Studies in Early Non-Pauline Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

²⁰Edwin Hatch notes that the mainstream church found it necessary to lay stress on an “apostolic consensus.” All parties within the church agreed as to the need of a tribunal, he observes, but the problem was that each party had its own, i.e., each made its appeal to a different apostle. The Gnostics, for instance, built upon one apostle or another. Thus Basilides preferred to follow a tradition from Matthias (see Hippolytus *Refutation of All Heresies* 7.8.1 [ANF, 5:103]); the Naaseni traced their doctrine to James (Hippolytus *Refutation of All Heresies* 5.2.1 [ANF, 5:48]); and Valentinus was said to be a follower of Theudas, who was a pupil of Paul (see Clement of Alexandria *Stromata, or Miscellanies* 7.17.1 [ANF, 2:555]). Origen explains the origin of Christian heresies (i.e. parties) not as the result of factions and strife, but of following individuals who admired Christianity while holding some discordant views (Origen *Contra Celsus* 3.12 [ANF, 4:469]). Conversely, Hatch points out, the Catholic tendency stressed the unity of the apostles; their tradition was not that of Peter or James or John but of “the twelve.” See Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church: The Hibbert Lectures, 1888*, 2d ed., ed. A. M. Fairbairn (London: Williams & Norgate, 1891), 316-17.

example to follow even in our day, when diversity of opinion arises in the church. In 1889 Ellen White addressed this issue in a morning talk in Chicago:

That another holds a different opinion, should not stir up the very worst traits of your nature. You should love your brother, and say, "I am willing to investigate your views. Let us come right to the Word of God, and prove by the law and the testimony what is truth."²¹

In the second place, the juxtaposition of direct revelation and mediated tradition²² as sources of authority was unquestionably the reality in the life of the early church. In fact, Paul himself appeals to some teachings which, it seems, he did not receive through direct revelation but through the channel of human tradition (1 Cor 15:3-7). This tradition had its origin, however, in God's Revelation, namely, in the Christ-event.

In the third place, the private *nihil obstat* on the one hand, which Paul's teaching received from "those reputed to be pillars" and, on the other hand, the objections to his preaching by those whom he regards as "false brothers" (whose position had influenced Peter's conduct—Gal 2:11-16), both witness not only to the diversity that existed in the early church but also to the necessity to define the latitude of an acceptable variety of doctrine.

Finally, but not of minor importance, it is clear that God desired this meeting of Paul with the other apostles, even though the contents of Paul's teaching remained unchanged, and the distribution of the missionary territory was not modified. The purpose of the assembly was not to introduce changes in doctrine or church missionary strategies but to grant Paul and the other apostles assurance: God was indeed leading all of them in the same way. Only in mutual consultation could this assurance be reached.

The Teaching of the Apostles as a Norm of Orthodoxy

In the case just mentioned, one discerns that in consonance with, and in addition to, both the principle of authority and the criteria identified thus far (revelational and ecclesiastical), a concrete norm of orthodoxy had come into focus, namely, the teaching of the apostles. The documents of the NT, as well as extracanonical writings of the first two centuries, witness to the widespread acceptance of the authority of the apostles through whom the Lord's will was

²¹Ellen G. White, "The Test of Doctrine," *Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald*, 27 August, 1889, 259.

²²This refers to the leadership-of-office pattern of church authority. This model of authority is represented in the NT by the appointment of bishops or elders to be pastors and overseers of the local congregations (see Acts 14:23; Phil 1:1).

regarded to have been expressed. As far as the noncanonical writings are concerned, one reads in 1 Clem 42:1-2: "The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus, the Christ, was sent from God. Thus Christ is from God and the apostles from Christ."²³ Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, ranks the apostles with the Lord in Magn 7:1: "The Lord did nothing without the Father (either on his own or by the apostles)." He admonishes in Magn 13:1, "Make a real effort, then, to stand firmly by the orders of the Lord and the apostles."²⁴ Likewise the letter of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, to the Philippians (6:3) exhorts: "Let us 'serve him with fear and all reverence,' as he himself has commanded, and also the apostles who preached the gospel to us."²⁵ It is hardly surprising, therefore, that about 200 C.E., Serapion, bishop of Antioch, stated that "Peter and the rest of the apostles we accept as the Lord."²⁶ The idea that the church's message rested upon the apostles' witness of Christ was more fully elaborated by Justin's time.²⁷

The authority of "the twelve"²⁸ remained unquestioned even after their death. This is attested, for instance, by the fact that the earliest known Church Order, the *Didachē*, bears the title, "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles." Due to the authoritative status reached by the apostles, their teaching was logically regarded as the fundamental norm of correct Christian belief.

The NT Canon as a Norm of Orthodoxy

Apart from the question of apostolic authority, Paul's case might be regarded as an illustration of a further step in the development of classical orthodoxy. It seems clear that Paul's authority had rapidly become widely recognized, at least in the churches founded by him (1 Cor 9:2). Those early believers who had accepted the apostle's gospel (1 Cor 15:1)²⁹ soon faced a dilemma concerning the authenticity of his letters. Already in Paul's lifetime there seems to have been some writings falsely attributed to him in which he reputedly rejected some teachings as incorrect (see 2 Thess 2:1-5). Paul was not alone here. The fact that several Christian documents were attributed, at times falsely, to other apostles, witnesses to the authoritative status that the latter had reached among the churches. Since Christians regarded the teaching of the apostles chosen by Jesus as

²³Cyril C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 33.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Serapion, *Libro de Evangelio Petri* (PG, 5:1373, 1374).

²⁷See, for instance, Justin Martyr *First Apology* 66.3 (ANF, 1:185); idem *Dialogue with Trypho* 103.8 (ANF, 1:251).

²⁸Bultmann, 2:105, 139, points out that the title "apostle" (a sent man, a messenger), which originally was accorded to all Christian missionaries, was narrowed down to include only "the twelve." Paul was the only exception to this restriction.

²⁹For references to Paul's gospel ("my gospel"), see Rom 2:16; 16:25.

normative, their writings as well as those of their closer collaborators³⁰ came to be considered, especially after the death of the apostles, as the normative source of Christian doctrine.

However, other questions arise: Which among the apostles' writings were to be regarded as genuine and holding apostolic authority? Which ones were authentic apostolic documents? This particular predicament would further increase from the second century on as the struggle between the mainstream Christian body and the marginal groups became more intense. Due to the authoritative status of the apostles, the authenticity and canonicity of the apostolic writings became almost synonymous.³¹

Before the existence of an officially sanctioned NT Canon, Christians were increasingly confronted with the issue of identifying the books which were to be accepted as normative. The available historical evidence shows that at first there was no unanimity on this point among the various centers of Christianity.³² In the gradual process of the formation of the NT Canon, which took place essentially during the second and third centuries C.E., the criteria for recognizing the

³⁰E.g., Mark and Luke.

³¹John Knox, *Criticism and Faith* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury 1952), 66-67.

³²According to the synods of the late fourth century, the exact shape of the canon of the NT still remained imprecise until the beginning of the fifth century. Theodor Zahn, "Canon of Scripture," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 1908 ed., 2:399. For the different lists of NT documents regarded as canonical by early Christian communities, see Adolf von Harnack, *The Origin of the New Testament and the Most Important Consequences of the New Creation*, trans. J. R. Wilkinson (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 1-114, especially appendix II: "Forerunners and Rivals of the New Testament" (ibid, 169-83). See also Alexander Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament*, 2d ed. (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1954), 137-220; Oscar Cullmann, *The Early Church: Studies in Early Christian History and Theology*, ed. A. J. B. Higgins, trans. A. J. B. Higgins and S. Godman (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 39-54; Robert M. Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 148-80; Werner Georg Kümmel, ed., *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. A. J. Mattill, Jr., 14th rev. ed. (Nashville and New York: Abingdon, 1966), 334-58; Hans F. von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 147-268; Bruce M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977); and Charles F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament*, 3d ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 235-69.

canonical books as such³³ seem to have been both authenticity and apostolic origin, as well as the liturgy of the church and the content of the books themselves.³⁴

In this way, simultaneously and in correlation with the emphasis on the doctrine of the church as apostolic, another norm of classical orthodoxy was naturally developing with the fixing of the list of the neo-testamentarian documents regarded as the definitive standard of Christian doctrine.

The importance of recognizing a corpus of writings as a norm of true belief can hardly be exaggerated. In fixing and accepting the NT Canon, the church³⁵ was officially setting the boundaries of what it had already acknowledged in practice as the written source and standard of legitimate Christian doctrine. Since the church had accepted a written norm, its beliefs and preaching, not to mention its liturgy, structure, and practices—in general, its whole life—were bound to be constantly checked by that standard. Besides, and of utmost importance for our study, delineating the limits of the NT Canon meant that the living and Spirit-led activity of discernment of correct teaching would progressively give place to the doctrinal authority of a set of sacred writings. To be true, this set of writings was believed to contain the kernel of the very same apostolic, living proclamation and teaching.³⁶ This means that the principle behind the establishing of the NT Canon was that the tradition of the apostles was regarded as normative for all subsequent tradition of the church.

A historical-theological analysis of the development of classical orthodoxy shows that the controversies between parties claiming to hold to the truth³⁷ served

³³Both the fact that the church had to recognize its authoritative Scriptures through a process which lasted about four centuries and the considerations presented so far in our main text and footnotes, pose the old problem of finding out whether it was orthodoxy that selected a canon of scriptures or whether certain scriptures shaped orthodoxy. In other words, it must be decided which proposition is correct: either “the church created the canon” or “the Scriptures created the church.” In the understanding of conservative Protestants, the idea that the canon is not the product of the church means that it was not the church as a human community which attributed inspired value to some writings. In their view, the church was led by the Spirit to recognize the intrinsic inspired nature and authoritative status of those writings.

³⁴In connection with the last criterion, i.e., the content of the books, R. M. Grant observes that the fact that the Gospel of Thomas, for instance, was not treated as canonical indicates that the bulk of early Christian theology was not Gnostic. Grant, 180.

³⁵From what has been discussed above, it should be clear that by “the church” we mean the whole community of Christian believers, not merely its leaders. This is the sense in which I use the term in this whole section dealing with the NT canon.

³⁶This apostolic, living proclamation and teaching can also be technically referred to as the “living tradition” of the apostles.

³⁷In addition to the controversies concerning the apostolicity of Paul, we can mention the controversies between those who later began to be called orthodox, Catholic Christians in their confrontation with syncretistic Gnosticism, sectarian Marcionism, enthusiastic Montanism, and the like. Interestingly, the Montanist movement (c. 175 C. E.) advocated

as the catalyst for the emergence of the two related norms of Christian truth which we have identified so far, namely, the teaching of the apostles and the canon of the NT.³⁸ These norms may be regarded as the concrete expression of the revelational criterion of orthodoxy. They are indeed the first norms of orthodoxy clearly identifiable in the history of Christian theology and, as such, they may be considered the authoritative original sources³⁹ of the Christian message.

We cannot overlook the fact that the establishing of these two norms means that in their proclamation and teaching the early Christians looked back to a unique event in the past, namely, God's revelation in Jesus Christ.⁴⁰ The revelational nature of the Christ-event and the authoritative witness of the apostles to Christ were regarded as so fundamental to the Christian message that a retrospective attitude, a constant "return to the sources," in the church's definition of correct belief and teaching was considered as the essence of the kerygmatic dimension of its mission.

The possession of a written norm of Christian truth had at least two important consequences. First, the unalterable nature of a written source of doctrine made it possible for the church to have a reliable tool for checking its own orthodoxy and orthopraxis.⁴¹ To the extent that the church would indeed submit itself to the normativity of the apostolic witness as recorded in the Canon, the latter would outrank it in authority. This statement brings to the foreground the question of the church's authority. A second consequence of having a written norm of orthodoxy is precisely that the authority of the church and the authority of the canon of Scriptures found themselves in a state of potential tension. The latter was openly manifested in the Tradition-Scriptures controversy at the time of the Protestant Reformation.

The authority of the Scriptures (which, the church confessed, had been recorded under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) and the authority of the church (which Christians regarded as derived directly from the Lord and assisted by the charism of the Spirit) set up two seemingly contradictory criteria for the definition of correct belief and teaching. That these criteria are not necessarily contradictory

the revelational criterion by contending that a new period of prophecy had already opened, against the mainstream church's position, which regarded the age of revelation as closed with the death of the last surviving apostle, and the canon of the NT as completed.

³⁸This refers to the list of NT documents regarded as legitimately containing the teaching of Jesus and the apostles.

³⁹The expression "original sources," even though redundant ("source" already has the semantic connotation of origin), is intended to designate the historically or chronologically primordial sources of Christian doctrine.

⁴⁰"The mark of all orthodoxy is that truth has been given somewhere in the past," remarks Kenneth Cauthen, *Systematic Theology: A Modern Protestant Approach* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1986), 16.

⁴¹This meant that the risk of being found faulty when measured against that norm was an open possibility for the church.

may be demonstrated theoretically. The challenge remains for us to demonstrate in the life of the church that they can really work together.